

# **AUNTIES IN ACTION: SPEAKING LOUDER THAN WORDS**

Rural Women Developing Social Capital

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## **Women Raising Funds and Spirits**

Thesis submitted by  
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in June 2005  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Education  
James Cook University

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## **Contributions of Others**

I, the undersigned, am the sole researcher and author of this thesis. No other person or persons made significant contributions to the writing.

Editorial guidance contributed by Robert Bams Drs. and Bruce Hodding MA.

Financial contributions were made by the Government of Canada, the Government of British Columbia, the School of Education at James Cook University, and the Nanaimo branch of the Altrusa Club.

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## Declaration of Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H891).

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## **Auntie Louella**

### **Thinking Outside of the Box**

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## **Auntie Jenny's give-away**

To my Aunties Sandy, Judy, Jean, Pricilla, and Kay for your loving care.

To my "aunties" Marge Dewar, Louella Channel, and Linda Bell  
for being my mentors.

To the children in my life who believe in Fairy Goddess Mothers.

To Mom and Dad and the whole "famn family"  
for sticking with me throughout my "hick studies."

To Wes  
for beachfires, fireworks, and the fire within.

To Kit and Malcolm  
for your gentle guidance and for believing in aunties right from the start.

To the many, many people at James Cook University and Malaspina  
University-College who took risks and worked hard so that this achievement was  
possible.

To Mary, Chris, Jaime, and many other sister-goddesses in Canada and  
Australia  
who cheered me on during my quest (you know who you are)!!

To Alan and everyone at the Orcas Society  
for inviting me to play with the pod.

To Bruce and Rob (with Joan) for diligent copy editing,  
and to Chris for bibilographic persistence.

To my fellow Scrabble players  
for encouraging the growth of new dendrites.

To Sylvia, Kilbeggan, and Wattle and Gum,  
for nurturing the lagerphonist in me.

And to that danged Fred J.  
for his pride in rural and vernacular ways.

Ω  
Hy'che que, siem

## Abstract

“Aunties” are grassroots women who actively develop social capital by encouraging social trust and reciprocity to flourish; unfortunately, the voluntary contributions of aunties are often taken for granted and seldom included in discussions of social capital or community development. This study offers an important alternative perspective to the notion that unpaid social care provided by grassroots women is insignificant, and it counters the discourse of decline in civic participation that is dominant in many Western societies.

From the data arose three themes to describe the experience of being an “auntie.” Specifically, aunties are particularly active in formal and informal aspects of society, aunties build relationships, connections, and networks; and they do this by creating common understandings amongst families, community members, and the professionals who serve them. In addition, aunties actively resist the social construction of women’s social caring as trivial, and they persist in countering discourses that diminish the capacities of rural people, their families, and communities. Some aunties perform small, individual, local acts of living and giving, such as helping a sick neighbour, while others are active in large, collective movements, at a national level, such as through Girl Guides or Country Women’s Associations.

This hermeneutic phenomenological study is based on interviews conducted with ten selected women in Western Canada and Northeastern Australia, as well as on material and cultural artefacts, on photographic evidence I gathered of aunties in the vernacular, and on my own experiences as an auntie in several rural communities. Interpretation of the data was informed by social constructivist, feminist, heuristic, and response-base theories, through which I endeavoured to establish the locus of expertise with the participants as well as with the researcher.

The actions of aunties are significant to the development of social capital because they build relationships and trust within the community, which in turn, can promote the development of social and economic capital. If local, grassroots community members have the opportunity to contribute to both formal and informal community development, then the capacity to create shared goals may lead to increased trust amongst locals and professional developers, and therefore enhance the

community development process. When grassroots people and professionals arrive at a common understanding of the value of informal networks and activities to the survival of small communities, then the gap that divides public from private needs and desires may be more readily bridged. In addition, if those who reside in small, rural, or remote community contexts have the opportunity to build safe and trusting relationships with other locals and with the professionals that serve them, then misunderstandings may be avoided and the community development process may be more successful.

Aunties contribute significantly to the development of informal networks and reciprocal relationships, and they engender social trust and warmth, which in turn increases the capacity of families, neighbourhoods, and communities to generate and accumulate social capital. Therefore, it is important to study the words and actions of aunties to learn who they are, what they do, and how they do it in order to support and encourage other people to likewise become active and engaged citizens.

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## **SECTION ONE**

### **Chapter One**

#### **Recreating Aunties in Action**

Aunties re-create families and communities with the resources at hand, and bring to fruition refreshing social activities that encourage growth and enjoyment

Re-create

a diversion, exercise, or other resource for relaxation and enjoyment  
to impart fresh life to; refresh mentally or physically

**Sorority Sisters Garage-Saleing for Scholarships**

**Duncan, BC**

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## **Auntie**

What does he do,  
when he comes  
to his auntie?

He sits down  
in a comfortable chair  
downstairs,  
and he's allowed  
to go to the 'fridge and  
get his own  
soft drink out and  
have a chocolate and  
tell me about his day....

"If you feel anger, just  
put what starts angry,  
put down

**'A'**

on that bit of paper and  
**scribble** it out.

Just little things that  
aunties do,  
while you  
drink your soft drink and  
eat your chocolate bar.

(27)

**Mary**  
**Sister of Mercy**

## Re-creating Aunties

“Aunties” is the name I suggest to describe grassroots women who significantly enhance the social capital available to their small or rural communities by performing ordinary, everyday acts of social caring; unfortunately, the contributions of aunties are often taken for granted by their families and friends, or are missing from formal discussions of community and social development. As a result, families and communities may fail to reap the full benefit of these women’s contributions to local culture, and other community members may miss the opportunity to likewise become active builders of social capital. I intend to and to impart fresh life, or **re-create**<sup>1</sup>, a collective understanding of aunties and their role in society as well as provide evidence that they are significant contributors to the social capital available to small and rural communities. I intend to examine roles, activities, and individual examples of women who could be described as aunties in Western society and to provide evidence that aunties are significant contributors to social capital in small and rural communities. I propose that aunties provide social care at an informal, grassroots level, which often fill the gaps in social and health services that are provided by more formal organizations or institutions.

For the purposes of this study, “social capital” refers to the presence of several conditions, including that citizens participate and are proactive in their communities; that trust and safety are the norm; that families and community members are connected; and that there exists an appreciation of diversity and of the value of voluntarily working together (Winter, 2000a, p. 35). Similarly, “social care” begins with commitment, passion, and vision (Cheers, 2004, p. 1) and refers to “all the arrangements through which people try to meet each other’s social, emotional, and material needs” (p. 3).

### Re-creating the Research Question

“Aunties in Action: Speaking Louder than Words” examines the experiences of ten particular women who actively provide voluntary social care to their families and communities by exploring the following questions:

What is the experience of being an “auntie” within a rural or small community?

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<sup>1</sup> See glossary (Appendix I) to explore the etymology of bolded words

What is it that aunties do?

How is it that aunties do it?

How do they respond, resist or persist with their actions?

The phenomenon of being an “auntie” is explored in this thesis by examining the experiences of ten rural women in Canada and Australia whom I suggest fill the role of “auntie” in their communities. The poem “Auntie” (p. 8) expresses the nuances of being an “auntie” that I seek to recreate in this research, and speaks clearly of the significance of the small, private acts that aunties perform. The meaning of the concept of “auntie” will be derived by clustering themes that arise primarily from the interview and photographic data collected, as well as from research literature and from the writer’s lived experience. The context of the study is restricted to small, rural, or remote communities in Western Canada or North-eastern Australia. In addition, the research is gender specific because it examines the phenomenon of being an “auntie” solely from a female’s experiences and perspectives. Tensions or conflicts that are evident at the outset and will be explored in the analysis include the invisibility of women’s unpaid work, the domination of masculine discourses and representations of social reality, and the impact of recent shifts in responsibility for social care on women who are civically active.

This study is conducted within certain limitations, including that the participants are all female, that some participants will have experiences that are “just like mine” while other experiences will differ enormously, and that all the women are active in small, rural, or remote community contexts. My own biases incline me to perceive the experience of being grassroots, rural, and an auntie as positive; however, I will endeavour to explore alternatives to these perceptions.

The research orientation is phenomenological so it focuses on exploring elements of “what” and “how,” rather than questioning “why.” The study is also hermeneutical because it explores the meaning of “being an auntie” by asking the respondents to share their own understandings of key concepts. During the interview, participants are invited to share specific instances of being an “auntie” and to explore in detail what aunties have actually done and how they have done it. In addition, response-oriented questions seek to illuminate how the participants respond, resist, and persist in their activities.

This study is significant because it contributes to the growing body of qualitative research into civic participation that has arisen since the International Year of the

Volunteer in 2001 by documenting informal community development activities that are carried out on a voluntary basis. The volume, diversity, and economic significance of the voluntary service of ordinary citizens have been identified mainly through quantitative analyses, and as a result, many qualitative aspects of voluntary social caring remain inadequately identified and poorly researched. This study seeks common, local, or **vernacular** knowledge about who some active citizens are, what they have contributed to certain Canadian and Australian communities, and how they have done it.

### Re-creating Aunties in Action

The title *Aunties in Action: Speaking Louder Than Words* assumes that aunties are particular women who share a commitment to provide unpaid service to other families and community members and that the discourses used to describe these women often misrepresents or devalues their actions. It is my proposition that the actions of the women in this study will indeed speak louder than the words that are used to describe them and will counter the dominant discourses that diminish informal social care and the women who predominately provide the care.

It is my premise that aunties have long been active as builders of social capital at a grassroots level. I see their words and deeds embedded in the everyday tales of the community, such as in ancient mythologies, in nursery rhymes, and historically as the village midwife, spinster, witch or crone figure (see Chapter Two). I also propose that aunties are recognizable members of contemporary western society and are evident in cultural icons such as Aunt Jemima (see Chapter Three). Likewise, I maintain that aunties are familiar figures in our own backyards who are busy organizing fundraising events, like the Beta Sigma Phi members pictured at their garage sale (p. 1), or sitting on local governing councils, or running the “tuck shop” at school sports day. In the following chapters, I encourage others to “make the familiar strange” and to **re-collect** or gather together their own memories of the daily comings and goings of aunties; to **re-cognize** and see in a new way those aunties who are active in our midst; and to **re-member**, or bring to mind again, what we already know about aunties.

It is my experience, however, that many social discourses tend to diminish or constrain the significance of the informal activities of aunties. As a result, opportunities for encouraging and acknowledging community and civic participation may be lost. I anticipate that this phenomenological study will provide a richer and deeper understanding of one group of citizens who are already active in small and rural

communities and to illuminate what is it that they are actually doing. In turn, I anticipate enhancing the capacity of community members, institutions, and social agencies to respond to widening gaps in the provision of social care.

### Re-creating the Format

Section One explores the concept of being an “auntie” in historical, contemporary, and data chapters. Chapter One is an introduction to the guiding concepts and central claims of thesis. Chapters Two and Three suggest a variety of roles and activities in which aunties may be active, including mythological, historical, contemporary, academic, and vernacular literature as well as in the production of cultural artefacts such as basketry, ritual, or social activities. From this section a glossary of terms encountered in Chapters Two and Three has been formulated to pique the reader’s curiosity, to explore the mutability of meaning in changing social contexts, and to provide a link to the etymology of key words I encountered in the process. The “auntie-cedent” that opens Section One contains a poem and short profile of each participant that is derived from the interview transcript, so that the reader can spend a little time with each participant and perhaps glean a sense of what is important to each individual woman in the study. Other selected passages from the transcripts are represented in poetic form throughout the thesis.

Section Two reviews the methods and theories around which the project and analysis were constructed, which were derived primarily from research literature in the social sciences. Chapter Five explores the methodological framework, which is hermeneutic phenomenology, while Chapter Six explores the theoretical framework, which is built from feminist, constructionist, and response-based theories. This section opens with an “aunt-eccdoté” that reveals the orientation of this “auntie-as- researcher” to the research question and to the interpretive process.

Section Three contains the data analysis in Chapter Seven, which draws on the respondents’ interviews to suggest some meanings of the experience of being an “auntie” by examining emergent themes and reviewing related literature. Chapter Eight then presents a summary of the findings of the study and goes on to propose **re-commendations** for future consideration.

Since the inception of the study, it has been my desire to ground the readers’ understanding of the phenomenon in their own experiential framework before others. Each chapter opens with visual and poetic cues in the hopes of stimulating re-cognition

for the reader and to remind them of their own encounters with aunties in the vernacular. A selection of photographs of women in a variety of community service activities in Western Canada and North-eastern Australia accompany the title page of each chapter. The photographs that I have taken as an amateur are intended to act as a visual reminder of the familiarity of “aunties in action” and to break the monotony of text by asking the pictures to “speak a thousand words.” In addition, each chapter section is prefaced with a poem derived from the participants’ transcripts, with the intention of bringing particularly poignant passages into relief.

### Re-creating Concepts, Contexts, and Conflicts

The concept of “auntie” that guided the study arose initially from re-creating my own experiences of being active in informal community development while living in several rural contexts. The associated concepts that arise from my own experience and shape the study include those of community and community development, of grassroots women’s activities, and of being rural. Many other concepts will also be explored, such as those that arose from the literature review process including social capital, civics and citizenship, women’s leadership, and unpaid work.

The contexts in which the study takes place are both physically and socially constructed. The context of gender is important because of the different patterns of volunteering reported for women and men and the different ways in which their respective civic activities are commonly re-presented by other community members. The contexts of living in a small, rural or remote community is important to the shaping of this study because of the particular and unique social and geographical challenges experienced by the participants in Western Canada and North-eastern Australia. These variables of gender, civic participation rates, and rurality are significant because they may enhance or hinder the ability of aunties to support human and social development in their respective community contexts.

Conflicts and tensions that have arisen from the data and the literature seem to include issues of grassroots women’s visibility and invisibility, of their recognition and taken-for-grantedness, and of the social and economic significance of women’s voluntary social care. Tensions are also evident in reconciling the needs of rural and urban communities, of maternal and paternal ways of being, of real and ideal social constructions of women’s unpaid work, and of personal and public aspects of community involvement.

Accurate information about the community service patterns of ordinary citizens is increasingly important as small and rural communities in both Canada and Australia face complex and inter-related issues. The political climate in both countries is becoming increasingly conservative, which is less likely to support a social justice orientation, and more likely to favour free enterprise and an economically determined society (Alston, 2002; Canadian Council of Social Development, 2003). The result in both Canada and Australia is the wide-scale devolution of social services from federal and regional governments back to “the community,” a move that assumes the active participation and goodwill of ordinary citizens. In the past decades, the professionalisation of communal support services such as care of the aged has replaced informal community caring, which has often resulted in a loss of confidence and alienation of community members from customary ways of knowing and caring (McKnight, 1995). At the same time, the pool of volunteers in small and rural communities who are available to act on behalf of “the community” is often limited and usually overextended. Changes in patterns of volunteerism also seem to indicate an overall decline or shift in civic participation (Price, 2002). Together, these shifts could create a net loss of community capacity, identity, or sense of control, which may lead to increased stress for rural families and communities (Alston, 2002). It is therefore important for community development and education professionals to understand which members of “the community” are being active and how they are doing it so that other citizens may be encouraged to become active as well.

Currently, many rural communities are experiencing declining populations and economies so that the remaining members are struggling to meet human, community and social service needs. My own experiences have taught me that the social construction of women volunteers in rural and small communities differs substantially from that of men, and. Similarly, feminist research shows that caring is widely perceived to be women’s work (Harding, 1987). For example, women who report formal volunteer activities are predominately active in health, education, and human services, while men report support to physical and recreational activities and are “often found in political and economic affiliated positions” (Park, 1996). Other gendered patterns of volunteering include that 54% of all reported volunteers are women and that women do volunteer more hours per year on average than men (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000) (For further discussion, see Chapter Eight). Based on the statistical differences in formal volunteering and on my own experiences as a volunteer in small

and rural contexts, it seems that the formal volunteering experiences of men and women differ substantially, and in response, I have chosen to constrain this study to the voluntary activities of women exclusively.

I present this study in the hopes that it will aid in enriching our common understanding of the significance of informal community service work. I aim to create awareness of the geographic and social contexts in which these services take place, and identify some of the tensions that may emerge in the process. I also intend to add breadth to the collective understanding of the experiences of women who are informal leaders and to add depth to our appreciation of how women who assume the role of “aunties” are responding to the challenges of shifting economic and social conditions.

### Re-creating Themes in the Literature

Within the social and community development literature there is a growing recognition of the need to acknowledge and understand the actions and words of those who engage in informal community development activities. Strong encouragement for this study arose when I encountered the work of Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) in their book *The Tradition That Has No Name*. Belenky et al. used a case-study model to examine grassroots community development of people, families, and communities in a variety of rural and urban settings. They encourage other researchers to examine the experiences of grassroots women leaders, stating that “because society seldom looks at women as leaders, we probably know even less about them than we do about grassroots women silenced by depression, and despair” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 22). The significance of studying individual women’s leadership experiences is also recognized in the field of psychology, where Pinkola-Estes declared that

there has been little to describe the psychological lives and ways of gifted women, talented women, creative women... we must be more interested in the thoughts, feelings and endeavours which strengthen women, and adequately count the interior and cultural factors which weaken women. (1995, p. 8).

This thesis can extend the work of other feminist researchers by looking at the details of ten individuals’ experiences in order to provide further depth and breadth to the collective understanding of the ongoing, unnamed tradition of informal social care. Herewith, I suggest the name of “auntie” to describe certain women who actively build social capital through providing informal social care to their families and communities.

Although the social aspect of community development is becoming more widely recognized, it is still dominated by the discourses of economics, as is evident in the

choice of the term “social capital” to describe community “assets.” Marilyn Waring (1999) examines the accounting system used to determine social policy by the World Bank, the United Nations and others, and challenges these accounting systems to recognize women’s unpaid work at home and in the community as having significant social and economic value. In economically determined societies, a political environment often exists in which grassroots, local, and vernacular activities can be overshadowed and displaced by the mass production of cultural and its artefacts. As an alternative, if rural and small community members could tap into all the resources available to them by identifying local, informal and less visible assets, then citizens may significantly increase the social and economic viability of the community.

Another significant issue in the present political climate is the devolution of government services and caring to “the community.” Many Western societies such as Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada are shifting towards political ideologies that value economic determinism and see “the welfare state as generally undesirable” (Ife, 1995, p. 5). At federal and regional levels, governments are seeking to reduce expenditures on human services and are increasingly relying on community-based programs to provide “services on the cheap” (p. 12), and this is “particularly true of the move from institutional care to community care for dependent people” (p. 12). When I hear the phrase “the community,” I wonder just exactly who is inferred by it and I herein suggest that aunties are among those figures who are.

One result of the devolution of services is an increase in pressure on families and local resources, whereby families may be rendered “utterly incapable” of meeting the demands for care “which they are increasingly being burdened with” (Ife, 1995, p. 11). Meanwhile, members of community organizations often take on the burden of care, and the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy questions the cost-effectiveness, social impact, and quality assurance of services being delivered by voluntary organizations “that might otherwise be provided by government” (Husbands, McKechnie, & Gagnon, 2001, p. 31). Likewise, a National Time Use survey conducted in New Zealand revealed how “the devolution of government services of care to the ‘community’ means an increase in unpaid activity by invisible workers” (Waring, 1999, p. xxxix ). I suggest that this study will provide some valuable insights into how some members of small and rural communities are responding to these shifts in community and social service provision.

There is also a significant gap in understanding how to respond to recent changes in patterns of volunteering in the Western world. This gap is evident despite the fact that the International Year of the Volunteer brought many new understandings and an increased appreciation of the role of voluntary community service activities in building “social capital.” Social capital is a widely used term that indicates the value of human capital and often refers to “connections among individuals – social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Recently, much social research has focussed on the changing nature of social capital and civic participation and the dominant perception is that “civic life has weakened in recent years” (p. 25). Some social scientists challenge this perception and propose that a “discourse of disadvantage” is arising in relation discussions (Alston, 2002, p. 3). Others posit that these changes are merely “shifts in civic engagement more than losses” in response to fluctuating opportunities, incentives, and “notions about the intrinsic worth of participation” (Price, 2002, p. 126).

A close examination of the experiences of those citizens who are actively participating may shed light on the changing nature of civic engagement and provide clues as to how to encourage and sustain such activity. If a civil society is comprised of “a vigorous citizenry,” then perhaps aunties are an important part of that citizenry, for in civil societies, “the key agent of influence and change is... the individual acting alone or with others to strengthen civic life” (Piper, 1995, p. 2). I propose that the acts of individuals working alone or in concert with others warrant a dedicated research effort. In Piper’s words;

If we are going to achieve... the building of a civil society... we need to... encourage knowledge and scholarship that will enable individuals to better understand themselves, their values and the roles they play as citizens... [and] in those areas that bear on legislation, public policy and social programming (1995, p. 6).

Social capital is also linked to the sustainability of small and rural communities, for where social capital is strong, there is a correspondingly higher degree of quality of life and of economic growth potential (Debertin, 2003, p. 1). However, in Australia, small and rural communities are facing many challenges to enhancing social capital, such as increased levels of unemployment and poverty, the withdrawal of government services, and higher rates of ill health and of aging populations (Alston, 2002, p. 1). As a result, in Australia (and I suggest in Canada as well) “rural people are becoming more socially isolated and alienated” (Alston, 2002, p. 1). This study seeks to provide

insights into how certain women contribute to building social capital and build ties among citizens in rural communities that are undergoing social and economic transitions. It is my hope that other communities facing similar challenges may be able to recognize and encourage similar contributions from their community members, and thus strengthen existing ties among community members and increase the available social capital.

### Re-creating Alternative Choices

In order to strengthen the ties that bind us, it is important to document alternatives approaches to community and social development and to study how diverse people create family and community networks. A recent study by the Brookings Institute suggests that “in order to have an innovative economy, you must first have a civil society - one that is tolerant, culturally diverse, and humane - that in turn provides the stimulus for creativity and innovation” (Piper, 1995, p. 4). Creativity and innovation are important elements in answering questions such as “What might be an alternative form of social provision... consistent with the newly emerging social and economic order?” (Ife, 1995, p. 11). Likewise it is important to identify common elements and successful local development processes (Lane, 1997, p. 335). It is my intention that this study of “Aunties in Action” will provide some insights to help develop a more civil society and that it will identify innovative approaches to increasing the capacity of small and rural communities to generate social capital.

Many families have responded to changes in social structures by forming alternative relationships among community members and neighbours that fill the gap where traditional family support is absent. Hence, another significant contribution that this study may make is to enhance the understanding of the importance of mentors in the lives of other community members, particularly children and youth. A recent study in the United States found that the presence of a mentoring relationship that provides “mutual caring, commitment and trust” can produce positive results in the lives of mentored youth (Generations United, March 2002, p. 1). These results include significant drops in the tendency to use alcohol or illegal drugs, in the desire to skip out of school, and in the likelihood of hitting someone else ( p. 1). I suggest that there may be a corresponding increase in community assets and social capital available to all members of the community if “both young and old seek meaningful relationships and positive interactions” (Generations United, March 2002, p. 1) through formal or

informal mentoring. I suggest that aunties and uncles are vital to this process because they act as role models, they provide community service opportunities, and teach others how to care for each other.

### Re-creating the Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study is limited or constrained in a number of ways, particularly in the data collection and selection process. In order to anchor the research close to my experience and to keep the project manageable, I have chosen to focus the study on the activities of only 10 particular women whom I selected primarily using a reputational approach.

Throughout the selection process, I endeavoured to choose women who were publicly known to be “deeply” involved and active in their communities at a grassroots level. I had intentionally not sought women whom worked quietly in the background, or participated infrequently in community service activities. Furthermore, I endeavoured to select women from a wide range of geographic, social, and economic circumstances, but can not claim to represent all women or all volunteers. This study is also limited to women who are active in small and rural community contexts, because the social construction and development of urban communities and neighbourhoods is significantly different. That is not to say that aunties and uncles are not active in urban settings, but that the ways in which they are active in rural and small town contexts differs significantly enough to warrant limiting the study (Falk, 1999; Snavely & Tracy, Mar., 2002).

I took the opportunity to collect data in rural communities in Western Canada and North-eastern Australia because the two contexts share many similarities and challenges in their rural livelihoods and lifestyles. This study is not intended to be a comparison or a contrast of the two contexts; rather, it is intended to show the familiarity of the phenomenon of being an “auntie” as an experience shared by women in similar Western societal contexts. The study is based on a “momentary snapshot” of some selected experiences of a few women, captured in a few brief encounters. The data, including the photographs, are not intended to encompass all aspects of the participants’ experience or re-present a “complete” picture of the phenomenon under examination. Rather, a collage of ideas, representations, and personal encounters is offered to provide some insights and to encourage a critical evaluation of the “lay of the land” in which aunties generate social capital.

The premises that I am assuming about the phenomenon of being an auntie include that women are oppressed by paternal assumptions about the nature of society (Waring, 1999) and that women's oppression is experienced differently in rural contexts than in urban ones (Teather, 1998, p. 209). I also assume that women's unpaid community work is important and that it is not well explored and is in fact often diminished in academic and vernacular literature (Belenky et al., 1997). I likewise assume that there is tension between aunties being visible and recognized by family, friends and neighbours, while at the same time being invisible and going unrecognised by formal community and social development institutions. I also assume that with any social phenomenon there will be tensions between the real and the ideal situations and between what people say and what they do, so that actions may indeed speak louder than words.

I have critically evaluated my own experiences as an auntie and have sought to identify aspects that may have influenced the framing of this study. In particular, the key concepts of grassroots, rural, community, community development, and the metaphor/metonym of "auntie" have been identified as central to my pre-understandings of the phenomenon. As a rural dweller and agricultural advocate, I have experienced the needs of the urban population taking priority over those of the rural. For instance, as the president of the students' council at a small, northern agricultural college I experienced elitism at the provincial level, when student representatives of the large, urban institutions positioned themselves as superior to the smaller, remote institutions. Likewise, in more recent interactions with other researchers, faculty, or post-graduates, I have perceived that my work is considered to be on the margins of "legitimacy" because studies of issues affecting rural communities are not perceived to be of great importance. (Even my own urban, scholarly siblings inquire as to how my "hick" studies are progressing.)

As a community organizer, I have experienced mainstream agricultural development movements that did not respect the lifestyles or livelihoods of the local, grassroots rural people. For example, as a member of an agricultural lobby group comprised of local commercial farmers, I found that the organization was not interested in supporting an emerging trend toward small-farm and specialty-crop development on Vancouver Island. This experience leads me to understand that, even within the rural community, the needs of grassroots members are often not well attended to.

Many other biases and assumptions have arisen from my experiences as a rural community organizer and have influenced the choices made in the research process. For instance, I chose to study aunties because I suspected that women are more active in the social development of communities than men are, and that the nature of women's community work and leadership is much less understood (Alston, 1998). I also suspected that grassroots movements can meet or voice the needs of a community in more authentic ways than many formal organizations or institutions can (Pini, 1998). In addition, I am biased by my own preference for living in small, rural, or island communities and by my commitment to naturalistic forms of agriculture and living close to nature. At the same time, I do not wish to construct an impression of rural living as idyllic or bucolic, and have endeavoured to include examples of a range of perspectives on the concept of "rurality."

I am aware also of being biased in my selection of the term "auntie" to describe the phenomenon under study. The metaphoric use of "auntie" was familiar to me because I had encountered the term and witnessed "aunties" in action in indigenous communities in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. I was also fond of the term because, as an immigrant to Canada, I have had "adopted" aunties (and uncles) who nurtured my love of rural and grassroots lifestyles. I recognize that my affection for the term "aunties" could lead me to idealize or romanticize the acts of the women rather than see the real, difficult, or uncomfortable aspects of the experience. I have endeavoured to construct a real (rather than an ideal) account of the experience of being an "auntie" and to highlight the persistence of many of the women during hard times.

### Re-creating Aunties

Aunties are significant contributors to the social capital of many small and rural communities, yet the actions of aunties are taken for granted or invisible to many community members and professionals. This study explores the concept of "aunties" and suggests a range of roles or activities in which aunties may be involved. Evidence is drawn from ancient myths, historical accounts, popular culture, and local media, and the subsequent claims discussed with reference to social sciences literature. I propose that aunties are important builders of social capital because they model alternative responses to recent shifts in family structures, provide an alternative to the discourse of civic decline, and take responsibility for devolved government services. I expect to

contribute to discussions of social capital and community development with this study, and anticipate inspiring other women to explore the experience of being an “auntie.”

## **AUNTIE-CEDENT**

an entryway into the thesis where the words and actions of the aunties who participated precede those of the writer/ researcher

### **antecedent:**

to go before in rank, place, or time  
the previous events in a person or an ancestor's life

## **Complete**

I am an organizer.

I have something

and it has to be

complete,

right from

A

to

Z.

It has to be

done

in

steps.

And I write

manuals.

I make sure that

if I am not there

to do the job

tomorrow,

somebody can take

my work

and do it.

I am proud of that

about me because

I know

that what I do

is complete.

(19)

**Allison**

**Rural School Mom**

## Canadian Aunties

### Allison is a Rural School Mom

Allison is a Rural School Mom (RS) who is active as an auntie in the local arts, dance, horse, and karate communities. For instance, Allison builds relationships and connections between families in her district by being active in her children's schools, by initiating a district-wide craft sale, by improving the quality of instruction in the children's 4-H Riding Club, or by organizing potluck suppers for the Karate Club. Allison's practice is to get organized, to do things in steps, and to complete what she starts. She seeks to create common understandings and build relationships between the rural residents of her district and the urban newcomers, but she is frustrated that the "social warmth" seems to have diminished over the 20 years she has lived there (12). She realizes that the warm community she used to know has changed, and she occasionally attends the turkey dinners at her church to try to hang on to that feeling. Allison has contributed significantly to building social warmth in her community by organizing dances at the local hall, by inviting local women to do crafts or trail ride together, and by redesigning a four-day children's Talent Festival for kids of all skill levels.

Allison has also made a difference to her community by creating opportunities for established and new members of the rural district to get together, form relationships, and create shared understandings of the connections that can develop amongst families and neighbours. She hopes that people recognize her contributions, although she does not seek reward nor wish to be in the limelight (See poem Eulogy, p. 298). When she meets challenges, she is learning not to take it all on as she once did, but to step back and take time out for herself.

Allison is active in many aspects of her children's lives, and is both a mom and an auntie to kids and families who participate in local arts, riding, or sports activities. Allison is committed to being involved with her children's lives, and declares that for her, "I have an internal need to do things.... I have to... feel that I'm contributing to something.... the best way to do it is to not complain about it but get involved and that is what I do. I just get involved, so it puts me in to a lot of different areas" (8).

## Community Service Work

You really need to start

With your family.

You need to start

with family,

and

being there.

You know,

Even with my cousins

and stuff.

Because

if there is a problem

we come together.

We have a family meeting...

It is different that way.

But I think *that's*

doing

that

Community Service Work.

(23)

**Fiona**

**Indigenous Community Nurse**

### Fiona is an Indigenous Community Nurse

Fiona is an auntie who is active on several rural native reserves as an Indigenous Community Nurse (ICN). Fiona increases the social capital of her community because she is deeply committed to the health of her large family and, through that network, she has built relationships and connections to other families in the district. She also created shared understandings about health care by developing community-based Health Teams and Health Programs on four native reserves. Fiona was inspired to do so while working as a nurse, because she witnessed the impersonal care that the children and elders of her community received in the district hospital. She also noted that many indigenous people had repeat visits because they did not understand how to care for their own health (3).

Fiona created an alternative health care system by working with governmental agencies at provincial or federal levels and by creating networks with other tribal administrators and health care professionals. Fiona and her Health Teams have made a significant difference to the lives of many families living on reserve because the teams also deal with social issues such as family violence or abuse (11). At a local level, Fiona's practice is to identify key people in each community to participate in the Health Teams and to keep in touch with family, friends, and other professionals who support her efforts. She implemented the health program by creating community events during which she delivers health education. For example, she hosted youth pizza nights, organized guest speakers and educational activities, or arranged family dinners, birthday celebrations, and camping trips with her nieces and nephews.

Having a large family network made it easier for Fiona in her professional role but she also found it difficult to "take that hat off" and shed the "government agent" role (11). Likewise, being related to two large clan groups made it hard for Fiona to escape inter-tribal politics and family rivalries. Regardless of these challenges, Fiona has worked creatively to share health and social education through her family and community networks. Being an auntie in her family has been an important starting point for Fiona's success as a community nurse because she considers that being active in her family is her way of "doing that community service work."

## **Re-sourceress**

Re-sourceress,

that's me.

Re-sourceress

at **large**,

getting smaller

every day.

I've got the

poverty kick-start diet.

I've just got to

maintain it....

The pay stinks

but

the rewards

are

endless.

(25)

**Simone**

**Re-sourceress at Large**

### Simone is a Re-sourceress at Large

Simone is an auntie who is active as a societal catalyst because she teaches others how to use the resources at hand to create rich and colourful lives. Simone is a Re-sourceress at Large (RL) who understands that the more resources she taps into, the bigger her colour palette becomes. Her practice is to keep connected to her social network, and as a result, she finds out exactly who to call, where to go, and what she needs for the task at hand (19). Simone has been active in her community as an advocate for the poor, as a peace activist, and as the originator of a women's menstrual-health network.

Simone has contributed significantly to raising the social capital of her community by creating a woman's collective to promote understanding of women's menstrual experiences and to produce and distribute cloth menstrual pads. Her work as a Moon Woman has significantly impacted others in the community because she builds connections through the "sisterhood" that she has formed, and this provides a training ground for other young women to become aware of "their own power when they come into their womanhood" (5). When she sells her pads at craft shows and festivals, she models her role as a re-sourceress and as a "goddess in real life" (5). When she meets a challenge, Simone has a tendency to 'make lemonade from lemons', and she tries to make the best with what she has got. Although she is "financially challenged", Simone feels rich because she is autonomous and does not have the "distraction" of owning and managing a "vast income" (16).

Simone has found that her re-sourceress skills have been vital to her success as a menstrual educator because she conducts most of her activities at an underground level. She realizes that when she discusses anything to do with menstruation, she became invisible to the "white male system" (6). The ability to disappear at the drop of a word has been an advantage to Simone because she knows that the invisible nail does not get pounded down. Being in an underground economy means that she will never gain recognition, but Simone is not active for what she can get out of it. Simone does what her heart tells her to do, and she leads a rich life knowing that she can survive as a Re-sourceress because "the pay stinks but the rewards are endless" (25).

## **Cyber-tribal Mother**

I'm a  
Cyber-tribal  
Mother

on the edge of  
the rainforest

doing what I can  
to protect her....

Cyber is just an  
e-x-t-e-n-s-i-o-n  
of the tribes...

And now we are  
starting to gain

UNITY

in the **big** sense.

(1)

**Bella**

**Cyber-tribal Mother**

### Bella is a Cyber-Tribal Mother

Bella is active as an auntie and a Cyber-Tribal Mother (CTM) in both real and virtual community contexts. Bella is involved at several levels in the community, including sitting on the board of the Women's Centre, running an awareness library, being a volunteer at charity bingo, and supporting other women and families over the Internet. She increases the social capital of her family through her cyber-community because she builds relationships and connections with people all over the globe. She sees the Internet as having a huge potential for "creating a web for the aunties" because it provides the opportunity for community activists to access a giant pool of knowledge that can grow expediential (19). In real time, Bella presents a role model for others with her everyday interactions, such as by making a significant comment when handing out bingo winnings, or by drinking water rather than soda pop like so many of the bingo players. It is her hope that she can motivate the women who play and work there to become excited about something other than "Under the 'B' – 15" (16).

When she meets a challenge, Bella recognizes the value of each experience, finds another way to go about her business, and realizes that "it's about the process" rather than the outcome (22). She knows that when a door slams in her face, another door will soon open. When she does get overwhelmed or spread too thinly, Bella recognizes that she is just one mortal woman with 24 hours in a day and she shuts down for two or three days. She reasons that if her computer is allowed to crash, she can allow her organic, carbon-based hard drive to crash as well (18).

Bella has made significant contributions to her community by creating an alternate understanding of how family and community relationships can be built and sustained in real time or in cyber-space. She builds social capital as a Cyber-Tribal Mother because the Internet weaves all the tribes together, which increases her capacity to take social responsibility for looking after the "youngins" and others in the "tribe" (11). Bella feels responsible to teach others how to tap into their joy, creativity, and spirituality in order to repay the "sweat equity fund" for the abundance in her own life (3).

## **Older women**

In the activist movement

I feel  
it's really important,  
the role of  
older women.

I saw...  
when you just make sure  
that you are  
not  
telling somebody  
what to do  
but  
working with them  
and  
being with them.

And they can see that.

I think that  
is what  
is most  
important.  
(19)

**Sophia**  
**Raging Granny**

### Sophia is a Raging Granny

Sophia is an elder auntie who is active in her community as a human rights activist, Food Bank volunteer, Wiccan priestess, and member of the Raging Grannies (RG). She is active at an international level as a non-violence resistance trainer, regionally as a peace activist, and locally by empowering grassroots people in her island community. She believes older women are important in the activist movement because they mentor, help, and empower the younger people by showing and not telling them what to do. Sophia prefers to actively do something for a cause rather than be the president of anything or donate money, and she is not afraid to speak out or to write a story, song, or letter to the editor about an issue (19). Sophia likes to get up early in the day, to keep informed by reading a lot, to spend time dining with family, friends, and neighbours, and to find creative expression through writing, painting, singing, walking, or attending Music and Witches Camps (15).

Sophia has created alternate understandings of the role of elder women in society through her activities as a Wiccan priestess and a member of the Raging Grannies. Sophia is highly visible and active in her small community despite the fact that she is a widow in her mid-70's living on a fixed income. Although she is a Wiccan priestess, she is respected in the community; for example, she was asked to lead a Circle Dance at the community Ecumenical Service after the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy. She realizes that some people are afraid of her because she is "pretty out there and diverse, and I speak my mind" (27), but as an older woman, she knows she has the responsibility to say and do things that she couldn't do before.

Sophia has been a peace activist for over 50 years, and she has had an impact on many people by teaching non-violent civil disobedience to environmental and social protest groups as well as to members of APEC (2). She is a member of the Raging Grannies, a group of elder women who dress in flowered hats and sing protest songs and who use humor to raise awareness of local or global threats to peace and the environment. Sophia has been arrested 9 times for her peace actions but has only been charged once, perhaps because of the public outcry: "You arrested grandmothers!" (24). Sophia does not seek glory or prestige for her efforts, but gets involved when she sees "something that needs to be done and needs somebody to do it" (12).

## **Necklace**

I was being targeted  
and being  
personally maligned  
during an election.

The group of them  
got together and  
they put in  
a couple of dollars  
and bought me  
a necklace,  
from the shop over there,

which represented  
courage and  
strength and  
stamina  
or something.

It didn't match  
anything I had

but I wore it every day.

(13)

**Jill**  
**Rainforest Mayor**

## **Australian Aunties**

### Jill is a Rainforest Mayor

Jill is an auntie in action at local, national, and international levels through her role as Rainforest Mayor (RM) in a productive forestry district that was suddenly included in a World Heritage conservation site. Jill represents the interests of the rural community to regional, state, and federal governments that manage the World Heritage Site in which her constituency is located, and she is active at an international level on the Wet Tropics Management Authority. Jill began her involvement in the community by contributing to her children's school, the hospital board, and Garden Club. However, she soon sought public office because she likes the "big picture" and she felt she could be more effective in local government (7). At a local level, she knows that informal ties to the grassroots members of the community are important because they "interlink" with her formal ties to the governance of the region (1).

As mayor of her rainforest community, Jill has made significant challenges to prevailing attitudes by demonstrating that women are capable of holding public office, despite the dire predictions made when she was elected. Over the years, Jill has suffered threats and intimidation from other civic leaders during debates and from the public during her campaigns (13). When she is challenged, she looks at the issue from a variety of alternative perspectives, persists in giving her point of view, and is prepared to make decisions that others don't necessarily like. Ironically, she is considered to represent the grassroots interests at state and national levels and by Conservative, Labour, and Green parties, although when at home, she thinks differently than the majority of her grassroots constituents (23).

Jill has made an impact by raising the spirits of her community despite the sudden unemployment and the resulting "victim" mentality that followed (10). She raises the social capital in this and other struggling forest communities by refusing to have a negative attitude and by creating shared understandings of the potential for new opportunities. Her experience has taught her that transition takes time and that it is an "accumulation of tiny things, which in my opinion, makes this a positive place" (13).

## **Mirror**

My son always says to me

“I don’t want to hear you  
whinge.

If you are going to whinge  
about it, don’t do it.

If you want to do it,  
don’t whinge.”

So I think it is a weakness,  
maybe that I have.

It is not

one of my  
strengths.

I think it is

hard to say  
no.

But I think, too,

age comes into it;

that gradually,

at some time,

you look in the mirror

and you think

“Oh, you are looking

a bit

tired, dear.”

(Laughter)

(7)

**Penny**

**Rural Community**

**Builder**

### Penny is a Rural Community Builder

Penny is a Rural Community Builder (RCB) who actively builds the resources of her remote district by contributing to several regional development initiatives. She began her community involvement as hostess of many community celebrations at her hotel, then was asked elected as a town councillor and, finally, deputy mayor for the shire. However, she left politics when she found that she could not get elected mayor, in part because of prevailing attitudes: “Yes, she’s doing a great job, but she is a woman” (2).

Penny is an active auntie who now participates as a volunteer on local, regional, and national boards that focus primarily on economic and social development for the remote region. At a local level, Penny coordinates the annual town festival and she holds a ministerial appointment on the district health council. At a regional level, she contributes to a Skills Network that provides job training to young people, she works with local indigenous communities to enhance education and employment opportunities, and she is a small business advisor to the regional development association. Nationally, she sits on the board for the National Trust and the federal employment board. In addition, she represents local and indigenous interests on an international advisory board that is examining economic development via portable abattoirs and live cattle exports (5).

Penny has made important contributions to her community by working with politicians and bureaucrats to understand the unique challenges faced by rural and remote residents. For instance, each year Penny invites bureaucrats from Brisbane to visit with people who live on remote properties that are sometimes 500 square kilometres or may have a driveway that is “40 miles, not yards... to the house from the road” (14). In her different capacities, Penny also encourages trusting and respectful relationships with indigenous people in order to create shared understandings of their needs and desires. Penny is sometimes overwhelmed with her responsibilities and finds herself “whinging” about being tired, but she continues because she loves what she does, is committed to the area, and wants to “put something back” into the community (7).

## **Family**

I'll say to these kids here,  
these aboriginal kids,  
the year 8 kids;

“A, where do you  
come from?”

Who is your tribe?”

I said to her in language,  
you know, and she told me

“X”

“Who’s your  
mother’s tribe?”

“X”

They’ll tell me, you know.

I’ll say to the other girl,

“Who’s your  
mummy’s tribe?”  
and they’ll say.

And all these white  
kids are sitting there,  
mouth open, like,

“They know all these things!

They’ve been told!”

And I said

“Family,  
to us,  
is very important.”

(11)

**Cathy**

**Indigenous Community**

**Liaison**

### Cathy is an Indigenous Community Liaison

As an Indigenous Community Liaison (ICL), Cathy plays an important role in developing relationships and facilitating interactions amongst teachers or staff at the regional state school and students or families on several indigenous communities. Cathy is an auntie who actively develops extensive informal networks with other professionals in the school, with family members, and throughout the local indigenous communities. Cathy's practice is to remain a neutral figure in the community in order to maintain the networks that enable her work to be done. She recognizes that her position as a traditional auntie or "mokai" amongst her clan gives her responsibilities and privileges to care for her extended family, and this honoured position enables her to gain the trust and respect of other community members (12). She meets challenges at home and in the classroom by knowing that it is the job of the "mokai" to do the hard work on behalf of the family.

Cathy makes significant contributions to her family and community by building support and understanding between the formal educational system, the traditional tribal system, and between professionals in the school district and indigenous families or students. She achieves this by challenging the non-indigenous students and teachers to develop an alternative understanding of the learning capacities of indigenous children. For instance, she draws attention to the fact that most indigenous children speak several languages including a sign language that they use on the playground (15). She also creates alternative understandings of indigenous culture by explaining to other educators that tribal law is still in practice on indigenous communities (7).

Cathy's role as school liaison is important because she makes a difference to the way in which many indigenous students perceive their future by utilizing contemporary and traditional skills to gain an advantage for her family and her people. She also demonstrates to other indigenous women in the community that they can create an alternative to the oppressive practices that have displaced women's power and knowledge since colonization. In addition, she teaches non-indigenous students in the school about the strength of indigenous communities and families by demonstrating that "Family, to us, is very important" (11).

## **One Step**

So,  
you know,  
it was just  
one step  
at a time.

As you were saying,  
how  
do you  
do these  
things?

Well,  
I don't know.

One step  
follows the  
next step,  
and  
away  
you  
go.

(35)

**Pauline**  
**Country Women's**  
**Advocate**

### Pauline is a Country Women's Advocate

Pauline is active as a Country Women's Advocate (CWA) in various rural and remote or "outback" communities. Since the 1950s, Pauline has advocated to create shared understandings of the health, education, and communication needs of rural families and rural women. She is an auntie in action because she lobbied to improve the educational opportunities for rural children, enhanced School of the Air programs, and established scholarships and special funds for isolated students. She supported rural learners by advocating for the opening of James Cook University, the Rural Education Research and Development Centre, and the only medical school in North Queensland (3). In addition, she improved communications for remote women by initiating the Country Women's Association of the Air over the radiowaves (6). When she meets a challenge, her practice is to take "One Step at a Time" and to regroup, rethink, and come at it again.

Pauline's contributions to her community are significant because she uses her advantage as a woman of education, means, and political influence to advocate for rural causes at a local, national, or international level. Pauline has been active in her local church, in the women's section of the National Party, and as a delegate to the World Conference of the Country Women's Association. She considers herself fortunate because her financial position allows her to remain active at an informal, grassroots level and to advocate or agitate for rural causes without being constrained by political or economic interests (19).

Pauline remains active close to her home because she is deeply committed to her family, to her faith, and to the various cattle properties that she helps to manage. She draws on her experiences on the cattle properties when she presents alternative perspectives on living rurally to politicians, bureaucrats, or urban dwellers (8). She likewise shifts the perspectives of other rural women when she points out that they know more about politics than the men. Indeed, the women deal with the hospitals, schools, stores, and freight companies in the course of managing the family and property: "The women used to get amazed... and of course they'd get quite confident. They did have something to contribute" (6).

## **You enter Humanity**

The Phillipinas were  
such strong woman,  
back in their villages.

Something  
happened to the  
American,  
Irish and  
Australian  
religious women  
who went there.

You couldn't go there  
and stay  
"knowledgeable."

When you went there,  
something happens to you.

You enter humanity  
or something.

You do become  
a sort of  
"auntie"  
in that  
beautiful sense  
that we are talking about.

(13)

**Mary**

**Sister of Mercy**

### Mary is a Sister of Mercy

Mary is a retired Sister of Mercy (SM) who actively nurtures informal relationships with families in the village where she lives. Mary's practice is to walk with and not ahead of others. She considers it a privilege to lead the life of a religious woman. Mary is an auntie in action who is deeply committed to the everyday people in her parish and she supports them with many small acts of giving in her daily life. As a child, she learned how to care for her family, neighbours, and the nuns in the nearby convent, who were all part of her extended community. For example, Mary was often asked to take soup over to "the sisters" or to run and pick up the laundry of an ailing neighbour, and as a result, she has never known any other way of being (4). As an adult, Mary understands the importance of attending to the little things in life, like offering to watch the children for weary mothers, supporting the elderly by phoning or visiting over a cup of tea, and knowing the names of all the families in her catechism classes.

Mary has made significant contributions to the community through her attention to the everyday needs of grassroots people and to those who live on the edges of society. Mary has faced many struggles of her own, and she meets life's challenges by praying, studying, being creative, and by finding rejuvenation through her relationships, because "People are my passion" (23).

Mary and other Sisters of Mercy have made a significant difference to the lives of grassroots people all over the world through teaching and preaching liberation theology (33). The sisters understand how important it is for individuals and communities to have a sense of pride in order to grow stronger. For instance, while in the Philippines, Mary and the other Australian nuns were profoundly changed when they witnessed the dignity, determination, and occasional disappearance of the local religious women during their struggle to overthrow the oppressive Marcos regime (33). This experience had a great impact on Mary, who passed on her understanding to future students and religious novices in Australia: "To go into another culture entirely and to go into it as a Jesuit student... it absolutely got into my bones, you know (10)... When you went there, something happens to you. You enter humanity or something" (13).

## **SECTION ONE**

### **Chapter Two**

#### **Re-membering Aunties in Action**

Aunties are “re-membered” when we bear them in our minds with affection and recognize their worth

#### **Remember**

to retain in the memory; bear in mind  
to recall to the mind with effort or determination  
to keep in mind as worthy of affection or recognition

#### **Hestia**

#### **Protectress of Home and Hearth**

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## Re-membering Aunties

**Aunties**<sup>2</sup> have been significant contributors to the social capital of communities in Western society since before recorded history; however, only fragments of their stories are evident in popular culture. Evidence of women's social caring is difficult to find because written and oral accounts of their activities have been largely devalued by the paternal discourses of Western society. Despite this, I have gleaned examples of aunties in action that were scattered throughout myths and fairy tales and were hidden between the lines of "his-story." The examples that follow are meant to be suggestive and not representative of the experience of being an "auntie" as I have come to understand it.

I sought to bring to mind again, or **re-member**, familiar stories of women whom I suggest exemplify the roles and activities of "aunties" in Western society. It is important to identify mythological and historical references because they serve as a reminder of the ancient roles and practices that give meaning to the concept of "auntie." The more that can be remembered about the actions of aunties, the richer and stronger the understanding of social caring may become, which increases the likelihood that social capital will flourish in the families and communities where aunties are found.

Some of the roles and activities that aunties partake in are common, informal, generally known, and **familiar**, as in being family knowledge. Some aunties conduct ordinary acts of living in familiar ways and places, while other aunties carry out unusual, remarkable and uncommon activities, often in uncommon ways. This chapter seeks to view aunties and their common activities from a "wondering" perspective in an endeavour to bring the 'background' of common community experiences into the 'foreground' of our collective awareness. Phenomenology is an appropriate methodology to help in remembering aunties because it seeks to 'make the familiar strange' by investigating common and unremarkable phenomena and by evoking a sense of wonder about what is ordinary, whereby "wonder means seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary" (van Manen, 2002a, p. 49).

Many aunties help to strengthen the community through actions that impact educational, political, religious, economic, and familial life. The act of nurturing community and human development includes providing the basics of safety, food, clothing, and shelter, as well as creating "relational nurturance, which requires...

qualities of cooperation, endurance, non-contingency, and behaviours governed by feelings and morality” (Gougeon, 1999, p. 6). Traeder and Bennett (1998) found that a consistent thread among the women in their study of aunts was “that they were willing to step in to care for a child when they were needed, and they all became part of that child’s family” (p. 19). I suggest that aunties can step in and care for a community in the same way, and as a result, familial ties can develop amongst community members.

Remembering, or calling to mind, aunties may raise the awareness of those women who have been creating social capital through their common activities since beyond the limits of recorded history, through **time immemorial**, across all cultural boundaries, and in multiple manifestations. I invite the reader to plumb the depths of their cultural memories and to recover knowledge, or **re-collect**, images of the women who acted as aunties in their lives. I want to evoke memories so that the reader can know something that they have perceived before by **re-cognising** aunties as everyday, **informal** community developers

#### Re-memembering our Aunties

The **traditional** term “aunt” (or the more familiar “auntie”) often denotes an individual woman who holds a significant position in the family or community, according to cultural custom or lineage. Some aunts achieve the role through their biological relationships, while other women are made a part of the family, or “honorary aunts,” yet are not blood-related: “For many people, friends become family. Family is a collection of people who pool resources and help each other out over the long haul” (Pipher, 1996, p. 44). Achieving the designation of auntie requires the investment of time, so that “she becomes real by the painstaking process of being there.... She may sometimes be barely visible, but it’s still important that she be there” (Cunningham, 1997, p. 11).

The honorary term of “aunt” can be a special title that shows the loving and respectful relationship that may exist among community members or families and which “indicates to the children that you are someone special to the family” (Traeder & Bennett, 1998, p. 51). In other cases, Traeder suggests that children themselves may “adopt” an auntie “of their own choosing (1998, p. 44). The term “auntie” can in fact be used endearingly to describe “Any benevolent practical woman who exercises these

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<sup>2</sup> See glossary (Appendix I) to explore the etymology of bolded words

qualities to the benefit of her circle of acquaintances” (*The compact edition of the Oxford English dictionary*, 1980, p. 142), or “a woman to whom one can turn for advice, sympathy, practical help” (*The Chambers dictionary*, 1993, p. 107). The designation of “aunt” is likewise described in Beecher’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*: “These universally useful persons receive among us the title of ‘aunt’ by a sort of general consent....They are nobody’s aunts in particular, but aunts to human nature generally” (in *The compact edition of the Oxford English dictionary*, 1980, p. 142).

The English word auntie is the familiar of aunt, which is derived from the Latin *amita* or *amma*. This Latin root is the basis for many nursery words including *amah* for mother; *amare*, to love; and *amicus* or friend, as in being amicable (*Houghton Mifflin Canadian dictionary of the English language*, 1982, p. 1506). Yet another source describes the obscure use of the term auntie as “an old woman, a gossip” and “a bawd or procuress; a prostitute” (*The compact edition of the Oxford English dictionary*, 1980, p. 142). A procuress is further described as “a female advocate or defender,” while bawd refers to a lively or bold woman (*Houghton Mifflin Canadian dictionary of the English language*, 1982, p. 113). Evidently, the social construction of the term “aunt” has shifted in meaning from a bold advocate and friend to an old gossip or prostitute, which reflects the changing social, political, and cultural contexts that have come to devalue women’s caring roles in society.

For the purposes of this study, the metaphor (or more correctly, the metonym) of “auntie” has been chosen to provide a common name for the women who carry out a tradition of grassroots community service. Metaphors and metonyms provide links to the things we know, and provide “the resource to understand ideas, events, and objects in terms of what is most familiar and well-understood” (Gibbs. & Wilson, 2002, p. 524). A **metaphor** provides reference to a known element in order to gain understanding of a dissociated element, while as a literary device, a metonym takes a whole entity and uses it to stand in for another, similar entity (Lakoff, 1980, p. 36). For example, “aunties” can be used to provide a familiar bridge from the role played in the family to the associated role played in the community. However, the use of metaphors and metonyms is not neutral, as they influence the ordering of some facts over others, carry with them embedded assumptions, and are value-constituting in their “sense-making” (Richardson, 1997, p. 45).

The choice to adopt the term “auntie” was made with the awareness of the value-constituting capacity of metaphors and metonyms, and of the power that resides in the

voice of the author of such literary devices. Metaphors can influence the interpretation of the facts presented in a research context, particularly if the metaphor is derived from a source outside of the primary data (Jameson, 1981 in Richardson, 1990, p. 20).

Nonetheless, metaphors are found throughout social science writing and are employed as a means to create shared meaning. In order to create shared meanings of key terms in the study, words such as “auntie,” were presented for discussion with the participants to establish the locus of expertise with the women participants (see Lakey; Nozick; Martinez-Brawley) rather than assuming the “expert” voice of the writer.

The activities of aunties can contribute a multidimensional richness to the lives of families and communities. Aunties have been found to act as advocates within the family (Traeder & Bennett, 1998, p. 48), as adult friends to children (p. 59), and as witnesses to the rites of passage such as weddings and graduations (p. 74). Aunts may act as mentors and role models (Traeder & Bennett, 1998, p. 96) who commit to friendships (p. 112) and to the community (p. 180). Aunts may also act as nurturers by staging gatherings of family and community members, by mediating disagreements (Cunningham, 1997, p. 15), and by being “defenders of the faith” through helping others “to be brave and balanced and humorous enough” to exercise their own gifts and talents (p. 75).

The relationships that aunties have with other families and community members are special ones, whereby their friendships are often not age-bound. Aunties can help children to gain their own perspective by showing them a different path and modelling alternative attitudes and choices (Traeder & Bennett, 1998, p. 118). Aunties may prepare children for adult relationships by demonstrating the skills that are needed “to get along with all kinds of people and not feel detached” (p. 122).

Many aunts support families and communities through providing unconditional love and acceptance while not being judgmental, treating others as equals, and demanding the same in return (Traeder & Bennett, 1998, p. 53). From this can grow trust, appreciation, and love (p. 117), so that some women reported that “they felt welcome to talk to aunties about matters they may feel uncomfortable talking about with... other adults in authoritative positions” (p. 135). Aunts may offer “acceptance, safety, and support,” or a different perspective on life (p. 81). At the same time, aunts may have to be disciplinarians or raise a difficult issue that needs addressing, so that at times, “there is nothing saccharine sweet about a real Aunt’s ‘being there’” (Cunningham, 1997, p. 15). Similarly, it is not proposed that all actions of aunties do

actual good for others by being **benevolent**. I recognize that, in some cases, the actions of aunties may be perceived of as having an ill will or being **malevolent**, depending on the cultural and historical context in which these actions are being evaluated.

### Re-memembering our Traditions

The nurturing of family and community is often achieved by aunties in small acts of living that take place in the details of common, everyday activities. These caring actions do not have to be big ones; we can create and enact important family traditions in the small acts of “consistent caring” (Bassoff, 1988, p. 63), that is, of being nurtured by people who are there for us over time and through the many shifts and evolutions of life.

In the last decades, there have been dramatic shifts in the attitudes and characteristics of Western society. Aunties are important contributors to the evolution of the next generation in many caring and significant ways (Traeder & Bennett, 1998, p. 72), which help to “shape our characters, our goals [and] our attitudes” (p. 15). In the United States, it has been suggested that “people turn particularly to community because the family is perceived to be weakening” and as a result, “the family is becoming less permanent and more transient because of the pressure of modern living” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 104). Sociologists have reported that American families have “begun to place greater emphasis on family traditions” and suggest that there is an increasing need for family connections (Bassoff, 1988, p. 63). Of late, the definition of family is broadening to include people who are committed and care about us, regardless of their relatedness: “Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family.... Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one” (Howard in Bassoff, 1988). I propose that aunties can play an important role in redefining families because they are committed to caring for others regardless of blood ties.

The tradition of caring for family, friends, and neighbours often goes unrecognised and unnamed despite being a common practice of women in many small and rural communities. Whether blood-related or not, aunts may play an important role in the lives of others, but unfortunately “We don’t often hear about the importance of these relationships” (Traeder & Bennett, 1998, p. 15). Likewise, Belenky et al. found that in modern technological societies we have “failed to develop a common language for articulating civic enterprises that nurture human and community development” (1997, p. 160) rather than focussing on generating commerce and profits. These

researchers fear that without a language for “articulating and reflecting on our experiences” as grassroots community builders, “people will not have a rich shared language” to speak of the tradition, and it “will not become part of a well-established, ongoing dialogue in the larger society” (p. 294). Although developing a common language is a slow process, it is nonetheless an important one, for “When a common language becomes available, it will help us get a better sense of how widespread this leadership tradition actually is – and has been” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 164).

### Re-membering Maternal Language

The lack of common language to articulate women’s community service experiences may arise from the fact that nurturing roles are often associated with mothering, and mothering is usually seen as irrelevant to public life and is ignored (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 160). However, biological parenting is not necessarily a prerequisite for maternal caring. Feminist Sarah Ruddick recognizes the term “maternal” to be a social construct and suggests that “Many women and some men ... express their maternal thinking in... working and caring for others” and asserts maternal practices and ways of thinking as a “revolutionary discourse” (1995), which is generally silenced. As such, it is a struggle for women to make their own viewpoint heard, even to each other and to themselves. Many women carry out this tradition of grassroots community service, yet it “does not have a common name used by ordinary people in everyday conversations” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 12). Belenky et al. posit that because women’s discourse is often silenced, “women who nurture the development of people and communities are carrying out a tradition that has no name” (1997, p. 38).

In their study, Belenky et al. found that many women can describe the caring tradition from their family and community experiences, and many knew countless exemplars by reputation (1997, p. 12), however, “because this tradition has no name it is difficult to realize that it is actually quite common” (p. 15). Despite being a nameless tradition, women’s grassroots community development activities have been described and recognized in a wide variety of terms. Informal female grassroots leaders in the United States have been called by various names, including othermothers, sisters, artist mothers, cultural workers and municipal housekeepers (Belenky et al., 1997). Likewise, in an Australian study, women leaders were described as acting in the capacity of architects, mediators, implementers, integrators, and motivators (Sorensen & Epps, 1996, p. 113).

Little is known about the actual experiences of women who play the role of auntie in the family or community, as “our culture doesn’t often acknowledge or celebrate our auntie relationships, whether those relationships be conservative, traditional, or on the unusual side” (Traeder & Bennett, 1998, p. 35). Neither is much known about the activities of aunts, for as Belenky et al posit, “because society seldom looks at women leaders, we probably know even less about them than we do about grassroots women silenced by depression and despair” (1997 p. 9). Clearly there is a need to describe and name the experience of women who provide informal community services to others.

Remembering aunts can begin by reaching back through time and recognizing aunts in a variety of social and cultural contexts. For instance, myths, stories, nursery rhymes, and other oral accounts can be mined for examples of women in formal and informal community-building roles. In addition, text-based historical records may reveal accounts of grassroots women active in Australian, Canadian, and other international communities, as well as in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. However, this survey is not intended to be comprehensive, but merely suggestive of the multiplicity and diversity of the roles and responsibilities that aunts assume to enrich communal and family life. Some of the examples discussed herein carry other family titles such as “mother” or “sister”; however, I suggest “aunts” as a familial title to denote the corollary role that mothers, sisters, grannies, and nieces can play within their extended families or communities.

#### Re-membering Myths and Folk Tales

For instance, aunts are important because they may remember and retell stories of local culture and can act as narrators of myth and legends. Women from all around the world tell stories as their way of saying “who we are, where we have come from, what we know, and where we might be headed” (Bonheim, 1997, p. 9). These women are the direct descendants of an ancient community of “holy people, troubadours, bards, griots, cantors, travelling poets, bums, [and] hags,” for whom “story is a medicine which strengthens and arights the individual and the community” (Pinkola-Estes, 1995, p. 17). Within the stories, myths, and commonly held knowledge of the community are embedded culturally coded characters that typify familiar, archetypal roles in society, including the Olympian goddess Hestia, who could be considered an archetypal auntie.

### Re-membering Hestia

Archetypal aunties can be found in classic Greek mythology, where Hestia is the Goddess of the Hearth and Temple, Wise-woman, and Maiden Aunt (Bolen, 1984, p. 107) (see p. 38). She was the eldest sister to the major Olympians, and voluntarily remained an unmarried woman, or **spinster**, all her life. For this, Zeus made Hestia first among the goddesses and gave her a place in the centre of the home (Zimmerman, 1964, p. 127). Her symbol is the hearth containing the home fires, which was found in the centre of every home, temple, council chamber, and city and here the living flame was kept "as a sacred fire that provided illumination, warmth, and heat for food" (Bolen, 1984, p. 107). Hestia is thus present at every meal, where she transforms the raw ingredients into nourishment (Marashinsky, 1997, p. 82).

Hestia's Roman counterpart was Vesta, and the Roman legions carried her sacred fire to the colonies as a link to the homeland (Stone, 1979, p. 379). The Vestal Virgins tended the eternal flame, and took sacred vows to embody the Goddesses' virtues of virginity and anonymity (Bolen, 1984, p. 107), much like Christian nuns do today. Vesta's obscurity is compounded by the fact that, as the chaste protectress of the household, the Romans and Greeks never gossiped about her and eventually her stories disappeared from the common discourse and her symbols languished over time (Zimmerman, 1964, p. 127). The spinster Vesta/Hestia is fitting as an archetypal auntie who nurtures family and religious life in the community because she personifies safety, comfort, belonging and commitment to home and community, along with chastity and anonymity.

### Remembering Women's Business

Myths and stories describing aunties in action supporting the physical and spiritual life of the family and community can be found in many contexts. Aunties acted as healers or spiritual guides, and shared their expertise born of experience and maturity. Particular women were responsible for teaching the younger women about certain aspects of family life including spiritual practices, the healing arts, cooking and nutrition, and the gathering and growing of herbs and food. Some aunties may have taught about menstruation, sexuality and sacred unions, or childbearing and rearing, as well being involved in guiding their sisters through the onset of menses and its cessation at the age of wisdom, as well as in performing death rites and rituals.

One example of how women's knowledge or "business" is being recovered by aunties and grannies comes from the women of the indigenous Ngarrindjeri people of South Australia. For the Ngarrindjeri, women's knowledge or "business" includes the activities of the "putari" or midwife, the knowledge of medicinal plants and foods (Bell, 1998, p. 540), women's sacred ceremonies, rituals (p. 529), and the stories, songs, myths, dances and designs that "belong to and are transacted by women" (Rose cited in Bell, 1998, p. 533). The Ngarrindjeri custom persists whereby women came together to share the task of educating the young women, for "aunties, nannas and grandmothers were more likely to be the teachers than parents" (Bell, 1998, p. 247) and

The sacred traditions of women are embedded in myths and stories, which often teach through the use of archetypes. Western society lacks the language to name and describe many women's traditions, nor to identify the women who pass them on. Nevertheless, I suggest that it is possible to identify archetypal aunties in such historical figures as the village wise-woman or the midwife.

#### Remembering Aunties as Wise-women and Midwives

Aunties have been active participants in keeping women's healing and caring traditions alive since time immemorial; however, these traditions have not always been nameless and misunderstood as they seem to be now. Aunties were among the village wise-women who were recognized as healers, midwives, or nurses whose services supplemented the common knowledge of first-aid most women shared like bandaging, making ointments, and the cleaning of wounds that (Labarge, 1986, p. 170). Even in early Christian times, the village wise-woman was still the commoners' doctor, being known as *hereria*, "one who gathers herbs"; *pixidria*, "keeper of an ointment-box"; and *incantor*, "worker of charms" (Walker, 1983, pp. 1076-77). Similarly, images of practicing midwives can be found in ancient Rome, where specific support roles were recognized, including the *obstetrix*, who delivered the baby; the *nutrix* or nurturer, who taught the art of breastfeeding; and the *cercaria*, who performed the birth rituals (Walker, 1983). Up until the 15th century in Europe, the traditional role of healer was filled by a continuum of local wise-women, many who were "virtually the only repository of practical medicine" (Walker, 1983, p. 1082).

The English term midwife arises from the Anglo-Saxon *med-wyf*, for wise-woman or witch (Walker, 1983, p. 654), and communities and families drew upon these "wise-women to assist the instincts of motherhood" (p. 657). The midwife was usually

a woman who was beyond childbearing herself, and “possessed experience, and a headful of lore, techniques and recipes for easing birth” (Smith, 1989, p. 13). From the Middle Ages onward, the practices of midwives came under much suspicion with the growing influence of the church, science and medicine. For instance, the handbook to the Inquisition states “No one does more harm to the Catholic faith than midwives” (Walker, 1983, p. 655). Despite resistance to remembering and reinstating traditional healing practices, midwives, wise-women, and healers have contributed greatly to the understanding of the human bodily experience.

### Re-membering Aunties as Healers

Aunties may be among the ranks of healers and midwives who practiced herbal medicine, set bones, delivered babies, and cared for the dying. Wise-women also acted as priestesses in pagan ceremonies and semblances of their roles remain in weddings, folk festivals and seasonal rites held today (Walker, 1983, p. 1081). Many pre and early Christian communities relied on wise-women to act as physical healers and spiritual guides for families and individuals.

The mythological high priestess or wise-woman in Greek mythology was Hecate, who is also known as the **Crone** or **Hag** (Walker, 1983, p. 366) and is the protectress of witches (*Houghton Mifflin Canadian dictionary of the English language*, 1982, p. 609). Crone refers to the elder wise-woman who retains her “wise blood” and so gains the wisdom and power to make her words come true (Walker, 1983, p. 199). She is also known as the Goddess of Wisdom and may be represented by Minerva, Athene or Medusa (p. 187). Contemporarily, crone often refers to a withered, witchlike old woman (*Houghton Mifflin Canadian dictionary of the English language*, 1982, p. 315), which is another example of how many terms that honoured wise-women’s knowledge are now social constructed as derogatory terms. Similarly, hag originally referred to a Holy woman, was synonymous with fairy (Walker, 1983, p. 366), and also referred to the Death Goddess (p. 367), represented variously as Kali, Cerridwen or Persephone. Contemporarily, hag is most often understood to be an ugly, frightful old woman, who practices magic and sorcery where it once referred to a goddess (*Houghton Mifflin Canadian dictionary of the English language*, 1982, p. 529). Whether named crones, hags, fairies or wise-women, the aunties who taught healing and spiritual practices to the community through oral traditions were soon to be challenged by the rise of highly specialized and text-based knowledge in the scientific era.

### Re-membering the Witch Hunts

The life of aunties who acted as healers and nurses in Western culture had changed irrevocably by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Medical and surgical practices were becoming more secular and the church was discouraging the study of medicine by members of its religious communities, while at the same time reducing the role of nunneries and abbeys as community infirmaries (Labarge, 1986, p. 171). Common practices became entrenched as specialties, and “the divisions between doctors, barber-surgeons... midwives and apothecaries began to sharpen” (p. 171). Soon women were being forbidden to heal at all (Walker, 1983, p. 1083), and by the 1420’s, both the English and the French outlawed the practices of “a wise-woman, lay sister in a convent, or midwife” (Labarge, 1986, p. 173).

Thus began a reign of terror that would last for over 300 years whereby many women healers, nurses, and midwives were persecuted as witches by the Church and by civic bodies. The term **witch** was originally synonymous with wise-women, but soon came to denote an “ugly vicious old woman” (*Houghton Mifflin Canadian dictionary of the English language*, 1982, p. 1470) who professes or is supposed to practise black magic or the black art (*The Macquarie dictionary new budget edition*, 1987, p. 465).

The persecution of wise-women became a widespread **witch-hunt** throughout Europe, so that “Any woman with exceptional talent was suspect: any woman who had acquired her knowledge through the oral tradition of women’s *domestic* healing was suspect” (Achterberg, 1990, p. 83). Informal leaders were equally vulnerable in the witch hunts, and many were punished for voicing opposition to the church or local government, or for thinking independently, while other women were targeted for the crime of living alone (Walker, 1983, p. 1080). The phenomenon of the witch hunts, or Burning Times, produced fear amongst the common people of Europe, as the ancient religions, belief systems, and practices were discredited and displaced by a new patriarchal and Christian order. In response, the daily practices of many women became secret and the teachings that had sustained family and communal life for centuries were carefully guarded.

I suggest that aunties were among the women who have been the teachers, mentors, and healers in mythical, historical, and colonial times. The rise of Christianity and the Scientific era devalued women’s healing knowledge and practices, and unfortunately, this dominant discourse was carried to the colonies and soon became the

norm in the “New World.” Nonetheless, aunties who were escaping oppression or were seeking adventure arrived in both Canada and Australia from Europe and Great Britain in many guises. Among them were aunties who had chosen a religious life and many of them played an important role in establishing family and community living in the British colonies.

#### Re-membering Aunties in Religious Service

Aunties may be found among the communities of religious women who were active in establishing the Christian religion in British colonies around the world. In North Queensland, and throughout Australia, the Sisters of Mercy educated, nurtured and encouraged the development of individuals, families and communities by offering educational, religious, and cultural guidance (Lillie, n.d., p. 1). For instance, the Sisters arrived in the port of Cooktown, North Queensland in 1888, shortly after the Palmer Gold Rush (Lillie, n.d., p. 7). There, they taught academics as well as music, painting, dancing, and deportment (p. 10) to both European and Indigenous girls (Alexander, 2001, p. 61). Other religious orders established a guiding presence in Queensland in the same era, including the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Advent in Townsville (“Sisters laid foundation,” 2002, p. 4) and the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brisbane (“Queensland's saints,” 2002, May).

Canada also hosted many religious orders, including the Sisters of St. Ann, which was established in Quebec in 1850. The new order quickly expanded into the Pacific Northwest following the Cariboo gold rush (Raab, July, 2000, p. 1). Initially, the sisters provided nursing care and nurses training in Victoria, but soon developed Catholic education institutes and missions throughout the Northwest and into Alaska.

Some aunties have been active in the British colonies as religious women who tend to the needs of families and communities through their everyday acts of community service. Other aunties responded to calls for community service in their newly-formed communities or became active in organizations and social movements in the budding colony.

#### Re-membering Aunties in Community Service

Women who acted in the capacity of aunties were also active in the New World as initiators of social services to the community, including health care, education, and cultural elements. Societies of immigrant women sprang up in many small and rural

communities and began to make significant contributions to the development of British colonies. Individually and collectively, aunties who were active in the community contributed significantly to the social and cultural development in colonies such as North Queensland by introducing “music, books, painting, amateur dramatics and a range of craft activities that helped gentrify humble homes” (Ohlsson & Duffy, 1999, p. 245). The photograph “Friends and Family Gathering at Bush Dance” (p. 53) provides a glimpse into the social warmth and trust that can develop amongst neighbours who gather to celebrate and mark important community events.

The establishment of schools, churches, hospitals, sports grounds, and cultural activities were “largely the result of the efforts of ... valiant pioneer women who held up half the sky just as they do today” (Tranter, 1999, p.5). Once a school was established, it often became the hub of community activities, including meetings, parties, dances, and celebrations (p. 5). In addition, individual acts of neighbourly support included helping out in times of need by chopping wood, milking cows, minding the children, and attending to the sick (Tranter, 1999, p. 4).

In the colonial era, many women came together to offer help and support to each other in times of celebration and of need. As the colonies grew into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their citizens were called to action by the “mother country,” and aunties were certainly among the women who volunteered their time and energy for wartime services.

### Re-membering Aunties in Wartime Service

Canadian and Australian women have responded in times of need such as in the two World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when many aunties volunteered their services at home and abroad. During the First World War, for example, the Australian Red Cross had over 82,000 volunteers working across the country who “met ships, transferred soldiers to convalescent homes and nursed them, provided soldiers with meals, and helped discharged servicemen” (Alexander, 2001, p. 115). When General Birdwood put out the call for socks for the troops, Australian women responded by knitting 1,354,324 pairs over the course of the war (2001, p. 115). Likewise, Canadian women were just as active in “knitting socks for soldiers, sewing and collecting clothing for war-torn countries, producing and conserving food, preparing gift baskets to send overseas, and raising funds to finance hospitals, ambulances, hostels and aircraft” (2001, p. 7).

During the Second World War, “aunties” were among those volunteers who did active wartime work in Canada, which was coordinated by the Women’s Voluntary

Services. Women performed a variety of services such as “ran day nurseries for the children of women employed in war industries, distributed ration cards, promoted the sale of war savings stamps and monitored inflation” (Status of Women Canada, 2001, p. 7). In Australia, the Voluntary Aid Detachments primarily provided nursing services, while members of the Red Cross and the Country Women’s Associations knitted socks, balaclavas and sweaters, and the Women’s Emergency Signalling Corps trained members as “wireless and signal telegraphists” (Alexander, 2001, p. 197).

Many women in Australia and Canada have become active in ways that have influenced the lives of others far and beyond the borders of their own communities and neighbourhoods. I suspect that aunties still fight to be included in decision-making roles and activities. The next chapter explores the roles and activities of aunties in more contemporary times, and examines their place in creating the vernacular culture of many small and rural communities and reveals how aunties remain taken for granted by mainstream society.

#### Re-capping Memories of Aunties

Aunts may be re-remembered and re-recognized as significant to family and community life through surveying the activities of individual aunts from ancient myth to the present day. The multidimensional roles that particular women played in the social, cultural, and spiritual development of communal and family life occurred in a range of formal or informal settings, and constituted an important contribution to social development. The examples given are not comprehensive but are given as representations of the voluntary activities of some women, drawn from a fragmented time line, and from a variety of cultural settings. At the same time, I am aware that the everyday experiences of many women, particularly those in the margins of mainstream society, are not readily available through recorded history. Aunties were familiar figures in many small and rural communities, and they can be remembered in multiple settings and timeframes doing a wide variety of common activities that support the social care and development of their families and communities.

## **Families and Friends gathering at Bush Dance**

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Paluma, Qld

## **SECTION ONE**

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Re-cognizing Aunties in Action**

Aunties are “re-cognizable” figures in the community because we know them  
from past experiences or have shared understandings about their roles and  
activities

in everyday life around us

#### **Re-cognize**

to identify from knowledge of appearance or character  
to know that something perceived has been perceived before  
to acknowledge the validity or reality of

#### **Aunt Jemima**

#### **In the Vernacular**

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**Women Weaving Community  
Yungaburra Tapestry Weaving  
Yungaburra, Qld**

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**Centenary Federation Tapestry Weaving  
Milanda, Qld**

## **Small Acts of Significance**

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## **Thrift Store Services Thriving**

**Volunteering at the Blue Nurses Thrift Store**

**Bowen, Qld**

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**Sorting donations to the**

**Society of St. Vincent de Paul Opportunity Shop**

**Bowen, Qld**

## Re-cognizing Aunties in Vernacular Culture

Contemporarily, “aunties” actively contribute to the local, **vernacular**<sup>3</sup> culture of their communities in both material and non-material ways, and it is important to **re-cognize** and acknowledge aunties so that other women (and men) can be encouraged to contribute as well. Aunties are ordinary, individual women who contribute to the social capital of their families and communities in extra-ordinary ways. Aunties voluntarily assume multiple roles in both formal and informal contexts; perform multiple tasks of social caring; enact everyday, small acts of giving; and often go above and beyond the call of duty to do so. I propose that these actions extend the concept of being an “auntie” beyond that of being a “volunteer.” Although there are similarities in their experiences, I do not claim that all volunteers would be aunties, nor that all aunties could be described as volunteers.

Aunties are familiar figures in grassroots and vernacular culture, so it is important to identify who they are and what they contribute to local culture in order to understand their capacity to construct or constrain social capital. One way in which I identified “aunties” was to look around several rural districts in Western Canada and North-eastern Australia and subjectively select photographic evidence that was suggestive (but not fully representative) of the kinds of roles and activities that aunties might engage in. In addition, I perused local media sources in such as society newsletters, locally published books, and community bulletin boards to identify situations where aunties might be actively photographed building local, vernacular culture.

Vernacular, when understood as a noun, includes the common, taken-for-granted material, visual, textual and non-material **artefacts** of the human experience of local culture, while as an adjective it qualifies a noun as being common and everyday (*Houghton Mifflin Canadian dictionary of the English language*, 1982, p. 1423). The term arises from the Latin *vernaculus*, which means belonging to the slave who is born of the masters’ house (*Etymological dictionary of the English language*, 1910, p. 689), so it denotes a domestic, native, or indigenous context. The use of a vernacular lens in this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of both the construction of social life

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<sup>3</sup> See glossary in Appendix 1 for etymological origin of bolded words

in small and rural communities and the response of individuals to bigger social processes.

This work is situated in rural and grassroots contexts, therefore many aspects of the thesis can be described as vernacular or “native or originating in the place of its occurrence or use” (*The Macquarie Dictionary New Budget Edition*, 1987, p. 448). The term “vernacular” is suited to this thesis because it speaks of the everyday, homely language of grassroots community members and it includes native as well as literary and learned sources (*Houghton Mifflin Canadian dictionary of the English language*, 1982, p. 1423). The data sets originate in Western Canada and North-eastern Australia, and thus mark the vernacular “here and now” (Garrett-Petts & Lawrence, 2000, p. 253) of these two particular localities. This thesis also uses a vernacular voice by including material and visual cultural artefacts such as signage, tapestries, baskets and photographs, which may in fact speak louder than the words used to represent the experiences of being an “auntie.”

Aunties contribute to the visual culture of their communities through “vernacular visibility,” or “everyday seeing,” which refers to the visual construction of the social world through acts of human display (Mitchell, Aug. 2002, pp. 178-179). I have incorporated aspects of visual studies because they provide different perspectives on the “detailed human accomplishments, which comprise the texture and tenacity of the routine organization of everyday life” (Williams, 2000, p. 88). Visual data will aid the phenomenological inquiry because it can render visible and make intelligible the mundane and ordinary actions of social beings (p. 82). I was drawn to the emerging field of visual studies because it suits my interdisciplinary tendencies and it encourages me to create artistic research. In this way, visual studies intend to construct a “new and distinctive object of research” and “rend the veil of familiarity... so that many of the things that are taken for granted about the visual arts and media... are put into question” (Williams, 2000, p. 179).

Conducting research through the lens of the vernacular can provide an important and stimulating “site for creative inquiry” (Garrett-Petts & Lawrence, 2000, p. 251). This perspective encourages the honouring of “‘vernacular culture’ (or indigenous expression)” and can help to “articulate the personal, the ‘genuine’, the authentic” (p. 251) as valuable components of the narrative of community. Attending to the vernacular voice is important because it is “no longer ‘at home’ within the dominant... languages of mass, popular and high art cultures.... it has no power... and must remain

apart from, and thus subordinate to, the dominant discourse” (Garrett-Petts & Lawrence, 2000, p. 253). However, the relationship between “vernacular and professional accounts of social reality” is being reassessed of late and, as a result, the vernacular voice is obtaining new significance in sociology (Williams, 2000, p. 74). This thesis explores the activities of aunties in community development through vernacular “everyday seeing” because this approach is more likely to value the “narrative potential” of visual culture and to treat both verbal and visual components as equal participants in creating meaning (p. 115).

The use of the vernacular lens in the thesis analysis has the potential to both enhance and constrain the construction of authority and meaning in this text. For instance, visual culture has the potential to be the “site for the construction and depiction of social difference” by the way that pictures can either visualize or render invisible such difference (Rose, 2001, p. 10). The seeing of the object also takes place within a “social context that mediates its impact” (p. 15) and visual interpretation often depends on the economies, disciplines and rules dictating how the spectator should react. For instance, the inclusion of photographs in a piece of scholarly work has the potential to embed assumptions of the photograph’s validity and reliability as data. Likewise, samples of media, material and visual artefacts were selected by the author, who may not select examples that are resistant to or challenge the premises of the thesis. Both the “representation and re-contextualizing of participants voices” (Williams, 2000, p. 77) are selectively shaped by the researcher, so that the vernacular tone may be either lost from or instilled into the data through the process of editing (Richardson, 1990). With this in mind, I consciously selected a broad range of vernacular artefacts in order to illuminate possible roles that aunties play in community and family life.

The following examples of aunties are drawn from material and textual sources and are intended to bring about a **re-cognition** that certain active women are significant to the informal development of local culture. The use of vernacular materials, photographs and textual data is part of an “emerging post-modern aesthetic, one that cojoins the material presence of language with both the arrested moment of visual representation and the flow of vernacular expression” (Garrett-Petts & Lawrence, 2000, p. 219). Material artefacts such as tapestries and baskets are included as examples because they contain the vernacular voice in both the visual stories that they tell and in the stories that often accompany the communal process of their making. In addition, I took a series of photographs throughout Western Canada and North-eastern Australia to

present momentary images of women whom I suggest represent “aunties” engaged in vernacular activities or roles in their community. Information gleaned from local, vernacular media accompanies the photographs to further stimulate recognition of aunties and to enhance the visual cues. In addition, photographs of text-based signage depicting community-building activities have been included as vernacular cultural artefacts of aunties in action.

### Re-cognizing Material Artefacts

Aunties are among the women who produce a wide variety of material cultural artefacts, and viewing the process through a vernacular lens illuminates how these activities can build culture in myriad ways. Qualitative and phenomenological researchers can turn to “material traces of behaviour” to gain important and different insights into experiences that are otherwise hidden from language (Hodder, 1994). Cultural artefacts can enrich the exploration of multiple, conflicting, differing, or interacting voices and can encourage the recognition of alternative perspectives (pp. 394-5). For example, in some contemporary Indigenous societies, particular women build vernacular culture through producing material artefacts:

The clay shapers, fibre twisters, picture makers, and storytellers... [have] always been important in Indian country.....There were voices to sing and speak, dances to make real the stories... there were hands that talked and drew and shaped.... And others might get the story as they watched the women weave it into the rug. (Green, 1984, p. 3)

Those community members who witness the weaving of the fabrics would “have to remember what their duties were towards the People because the rug told them every time they looked at it” (Green, 1984, p. 3).

Historically, artefacts have been constructed from a variety of materials, including “clay or reeds, in wool or cotton, in grass or paint, or words to songs” (Green, 1984, p. 3), while contemporarily, they take their form in “epic, history, tragedy, comedy, painting, dance, stained glass windows, cinema... novels... comic strips” (Richardson, 1990, p. 21; see also Bonheim, 1997, p. 16). Material artefacts are not a passive reflection but can be an active expression of the interplay of power and resistance in society, and, as Hodder suggests, material culture and its accompanying activities are “*necessary for* most social constructs. An adequate study of social interaction thus depends on the incorporation of mute material evidence” (1994, p. 395).

The vernacular narratives of individuals, cultures, and societies are present in artefacts derived from a variety of material sources that often express otherwise muted lived experiences. Weavings are an example of textile artefacts that convey both common and alternative discourses and tell the stories of the development of a particular community's local culture. For example, in contemporary MesoAmerica and in the Andes, textiles have been described as “eloquent texts, encoding history, change, appropriation, oppression, and endurance, as well as personal and cultural visions”(D. Bell, 1998, p. 87). It is particularly so with indigenous women, for whom “cloth has always been an alternative discourse. Only recently have we begun to listen” (p. 87). Community narratives have likewise been woven into baskets since before memory; however, “Until recently not much attention was paid to exploring the symbolic meanings embedded in baskets” (D. Bell, 1998, p. 88).

A contemporary example of the embedded meaning in some basketwork are the sister baskets of the Ngarrindjeri of South Australia. Two women contribute one side each to the sister baskets, so that “two identical coil woven pieces are sewn together and the pattern... radiates out from the navel-like core” (D. Bell, 1998. p. 57). In sister baskets, the family and the community are bound together by the very act of weaving. For the Ngarrindjeri, basket weaving is family weaving and family weaving is cultural weaving; they weave mats as they weave stories both sacred and secular. As the women explained, “with the weaving is the sharing time” (D. Bell, 1998, p. 542), which provides “a means of communicating, connecting and solving problems of present society” (p. 542). When women work together to represent their shared stories, the business of the community is likewise woven in the words that are exchanged during the process.

#### Aunties Do the Communal work

Women often shared the task of creating material artefacts such as textiles, baskets, and tapestries, and during the process, they shared the stories, burdens and triumphs of their families and communities. The narratives told are part of the passing on of knowledge, skills, and the sharing of communal resources, which constitutes a significant contribution to maintaining and building local culture and strengthening local communities.

As an example of how communal work creates community, the two tapestries presented at the start of this chapter (p. 53) were created by women of the Atherton

Tablelands in Queensland as a community-arts project. The Yungaburra Tapestry Weaving was a collaborative art piece sponsored by the Foundation of Australian Agricultural Women and the Eacham Shire Council as a community building initiative. The objective of the two projects was “to train rural women in areas of decision making and leadership skills.... It has created a bonding and fellowship amongst women who otherwise may never have met” (Bailey, 1999). With the help of the Tableland Social Spinners and others, 19 women took over 5000 hours to complete the scene that they had envisioned. In the neighbouring township of Malanda, another 11 rural women completed the Centenary of Federation Tapestry Weaving (p. 55) with the cooperation of the Queensland Community Assistance Program, the Eacham Shire Council, and the Malanda High School. Participation in communal work as a means of strengthening the bonds of a community has been a long-standing tradition amongst women in both North America and Australia, and may be a significant element in rural and small community development.

Strong local communities have also been developed by women who participate in more organized forms of community work, some of whom are responsible for the production and distribution of cultural artefacts, and some for their re-distribution, such as by those organizations running thrift stores and opportunity shops.

Contemporarily, thrift stores and opportunity shops circulate household and family tools and artefacts and re-distribute the proceeds through the volunteer work of many women. I sought women who typified the role of “thrift store ladies,” and the photograph on p. 57 shows volunteers at work in thrift stores run by the Blue Nursing Service and the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Bowen, QLD. The Blue Nurses operate in Queensland and are affiliated with the Uniting Church. Proceeds from thrift store sales help to fund the 13 hostels, 10 nursing homes, 4 day-therapy centres, 10 day-care centres, and pays the 433 registered nurses that the organization manages (*Year book Australia*, 1985).

The St. Vincent de Paul Society is the largest lay organization in the Catholic Church, boasting 900,000 members in 116 countries (“The Society of St. Vincent de Paul Townsville diocese,” n.d.). In Queensland, the society provides vital services such as “telephone counselling, home, hospital and prison visitation... and welfare assistance” (“The Society of St. Vincent de Paul Queensland,” n.d.). The State Council of Queensland also runs 100 Centres of Charity, or “op shops” as they are commonly

known, where clothing, furniture and households goods are available at a reduced price or given for free if need be ("The Society of St. Vincent de Paul Queensland," n.d.).

I suggest that many aunties are active in supporting thrift stores and relief or social aid societies that distribute material artefacts within the community. Studying the production and distribution of material and non-material cultural artefacts can give insights into how aunties might support the social and cultural development of families and communities. While they gathered and worked together, women often conducted important community business, which generated non-material artefacts such as celebrations, competitions, and rites of passage.

### Re-cognizing Non-material Artefacts

Some cultural artefacts are language based and work through rules of representation, symbolism, or communication, such as in literature, film, and on signage. However, much meaning arises from cultural artefacts that are mute and evoke specific memory traces or “sets of practices” within individual experiences (Hodder, 1994, p. 396). These individual experiences may come to have shared and common meanings, such as those associated with food, drink, or sport and many become saturated with local and social conventions (Hodder, 1994). Such social practices respond to class, status, and gender influence so their meanings are often implicit and covert; however, the study of non-material artefacts does allow “some direct insight into another lived experience...[and into] the implications of material practices, extending into the social and the moral” (Hodder, 1994, p. 399).

Social gatherings are important for strengthening social ties between community members, particularly for those who live in remote or isolated settings. Aunties offered their services in organizing, cooking, and cleaning up after these events and many such gatherings take place in small and rural communities across Australia and Canada. For example, the images on p.57 provide a glimpse into the social life of the small community of Paluma in North Queensland. The pictures show multi-generations attending a “Bush Dance” that was organized as a fundraiser for the Paluma Progress Society. Bush Dances have become a rural tradition in Australia, whereby community members gather together from far and wide to take part in “called” dances, accompanied by a band of old-world and homemade instruments.

I suggest that aunties have played a significant leadership role in orchestrating these and other important community gatherings, such as harvest festivals, weddings,

fairs, and carnivals (Smith, 1989, p. 25). These activities also provide important opportunities for conducting the social and moral education of the coming generation. For example, courting often took place under the community's watchful eye at festivals and celebrations, where "young people followed community patterns... in May Pole Dances, St. Valentine's Day observances, or other intersexual rituals" (p. 23).

Another example of a ritualized cultural artefact in which aunties are active is the institution of arranged marriages. In India, "aunts, who are called aunties, have always played an intrinsic and pivotal role" (Krishnan, n.d., p.1) in arranging marriages. Their task is a full-time activity that includes searching, matchmaking, and finally, arranging for the wedding itself. Aunties arrange marriages in a "complex, alchemical process" that remains within the "secret inner walls of their elite community" (Krishnan, n.d.). Contemporarily, Aunt Bijis, as matchmakers are called by Muslims, are being displaced by Internet chat rooms, personal advertisements and even by speed dating (Alvarez, , p. A10). Although these modernized practices are causing concern for more traditional parents, the concepts of matchmaking and courtship are changing and "assisted" arranged marriages are becoming more popular. Nonetheless, the activities of female leaders such as aunties continue to contribute to the perpetuation of local, vernacular culture by arranging events such as marriages, dances and festivals.

Aunties can be important contributors to the development of local cultural through organizing and supporting social or artistic activities. They may also found actively producing text-based and symbolic artefacts, which are significant transmitters of local culture.

#### Re-cognizing Text-based Artefacts

Many aunties have been involved in passing on valuable vernacular knowledge in the form of textual artefacts. A familiar literary artefact is the community-based recipe book, which was often produced by members of a local women's group. . Historically, housekeeping guides and cookbooks "put out by community groups, especially churches, filled an important gap" (D. Bell, 1987), especially for rural women who were new to the colonies, or for those isolated in remote regions. Community cookbooks are still relied upon in many households today because they include household hints and remedies along with treasured recipes, some of which have become an important part of family and community traditions. Cookbooks I have relied upon over the years include the "New Home Cookery Book" published by the New Zealand

Country Women's Institutes (*The new home cookery book*, 1956) and the post-war "United Farm Women of Alberta Cook Book" (*United farm women of Alberta cook book*, 1946). An example of an Australian equivalent could be the "Presbyterian Women's Mother's Union Cookbook" (in Bell, 1987, p. 33).

Some aunts also taught the next generation to cook, because oftentimes, the mother of the rural household was too busy to teach the family recipes, and the task was taken up by the "grandma or an aunt who had time to supervise the [children's] first attempts" (D. Bell, 1987, p. 35). Aunts are also an important part of a matrilineal literary tradition, which may be traced by following the transmission of religious and secular books from one generation to the next (S. G. Bell, 1982). Aunts are evidently active in passing on cultural artefacts and practices, whether they are in the form of baskets, dances, or a recipe for a good pancake.

A non-textual artefact that arises from the vernacular culture of the kitchen is "Aunt Jemima," who demonstrates how non-textual artefacts can be employed to create a caring family orientation in order to engender trust and confidence in a commercial product (pp. 54 & 66).

#### Re-cognizing Non-textual Artefacts

Not all cultural icons survive the test of time, and some come to be offensive as power relationships shift within society. Icons are a powerful part of a system of symbols that can manipulate the representation of human experiences in non-textual formats. The study of signs, or semiology, assumes that a sign stands for "something other than itself, and the people inhabiting culture busy themselves making sense of those signs" (Rose, 2001, p. 69).

One example of a controversial icon is Aunt Jemima, whose image is part of the vernacular culture of pancake breakfasts in many North American households (see p. 54). Aunt Jemima was actually a plantation cook in rural Louisiana in the 1850's. Her fluffy pancakes were so legendary that a flourmill bought up the rights to the recipe and took Aunt Jemima along to promote the product (Women's Institute, 2003, p.1). Over the decades, many women have portrayed Aunt Jemima at fairs, festivals and stores across the United States, all the while cooking, singing, telling



tales from the South (Crocker, 1996, p. 1) and perpetuating the image of Aunt Jemima as “warm, caring, motherly woman serving up delicious breakfast” (Women's Institute, 2003, p. 1)

Although Aunt Jemima’s image was very popular, by the 1920’s, many African-American people considered the icon offensive (Crocker, 1996, p. 1). Aunt Jemima was an unwelcome reminder of slavery because she wore the trademark bandana and spoke in vernacular dialect, and because she perpetuated the image of African American women as obese, dark skinned, and belonging in the kitchen (p.1). Nonetheless, the women who played the role of “Aunt Jemima” also challenged stereotypes of the day. For example, Rosie Lee Moore worked as Aunt Jemima for over 16 years, and she has been honoured as a model for African-American women because she was “treated well, particularly for a time when black women did not hold many high-profile positions” (Crocker, 1996). Contemporarily, there is lingering resistance to the stereotype Aunt Jemima presents, although the image is perceived by most Americans to be a positive one (Crocker, 1996). Overall, Aunt Jemima remains a vernacular cultural icon that symbolizes aunties as a source of warmth, comfort, and nurturing.

Another cultural icon that underscores the warmth associated with the metonym of “auntie” is the penchant for the British Broadcasting Company to be referred to as “Auntie BBC” (or Aunty Beeb). The term “auntie” has come to symbolize “an institution considered to be conservative or cautious, esp. the BBC” (*The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*, 1991, p. 71). Popular myth holds that the name arose with the director-general of the radio corporation, Lord Reith, who set limits on the subject matter by prohibiting “anything that could possibly offend his maiden aunt” (Inglis, 2002). The name has since been applied to both the Australian Broadcasting Company as Aunty ABC (Inglis, 2002) and the Canadian Broadcasting Company as Auntie CBC (Dedyna, 1998). As cultural icons, Aunty BBC, ABC, and CBC are examples of how the term “auntie” might denote comfort and safety in the vernacular language of many Western communities.

Signage can also be considered a cultural artefact and can give insights into how aunties might contribute to grassroots community development activities in vernacular contexts. For example, the collection of signs that I photographed in Northern Queensland includes vernacular signage such as the posters spotted on a community bulletin board in Chilegoe, Western Queensland (p. 56). These posters symbolize the activities of grassroots people who develop local culture through common experiences

such as dropping by the pub for a drink or going into the city for a shopping spree. These non-textual artefacts represent informal initiatives and activities undertaken by ordinary people to build a local culture.

I also photographed signage at a rest-stop in Home Hills, Queensland that invites travellers to pick fruit when in season. I included this sign because it is an example of how aunties might be involved in community development initiatives that are low key, inexpensive, and informal. Similarly, the sign declaring the Queens Beach Challenge tells of a collaborative project between the local shire and the state school. The project encourages children and families to take responsibility for conserving communal property by adopting the beach across the street from the school. These vernacular posters and signs suggest situations where the small acts of those involved far exceed the words used to describe them.

Images can speak louder than words, and for that reason, I wanted to include a visual element to complement the discussion of the roles and activities of aunties in vernacular culture. I wanted to extend the reader's engagement with the concept of aunties beyond the page by activating their memories and stimulating their imaginations with snapshots of aunties in action.

#### Re-cognizing Photographs as Cultural Artefacts

I wanted to stimulate the reader's appreciation of aunties by providing ample opportunity for readers to recognize that they probably already know many aunties or remember them from past experiences. I looked for familiar figures of women involved in common roles and activities that aunties might be involved in, such as Girl Guide leaders, Women's Institute members, and school volunteers. I realize that not all the women whom I photographed could be considered aunties, just as aunties are not absolutely bound to be involved in all the activities I photographed. Instead, it was my intention to provide a series of photographs that suggest situations in which aunties might be active with the intent that some images will stir recognition and memories of aunties for the viewer.

Photographs of have been taken throughout Western Canada and Northern Queensland as visual cues to trigger recognition of ordinary aunties and to enrich the narrative data in this study. Photographs can be understood as a form of vernacular expression that may interrupt, intrude upon, and resist mainstream culture and may provide a "cultural pause" in which to "reflect upon the normally invisible social,

historical, and cultural forces” at work in society (Garrett-Petts & Lawrence, 2000, p. 3). Many post-modernists recognize the value of visual arts in inter and multi-disciplinary academic studies because of its potential for “dislocating the written word from the page and reconceptualizing the perceived stasis of the image” (Bourdieu, 1965/1990, p. 218). Bourdieu posits that photographs have a narrative potential because they can contain traces of personal lived experience and may act as a “visual citation that leads out from the written word” (1965/1990, p. 220). Photographs may also take us back towards an oral tradition, in that the “frozen moment leaves out more than it captures, and thus alludes... to the larger, as yet unspoken narrative” (p. 244).

I propose that observing aunties in action in a multimedia fashion can enhance the exploration of the concept of “aunties” as creators of vernacular culture. Thus, in the following section, words will be combined with photographs of women whose roles and activities are indicative to me of aunties’ engagement in community building. This photographic essay is my amateur attempt to “capture as cultural artefact, representative actions or attitudes” (Bourdieu, 1965/1990, p. 265) of aunties in action. Images are referenced in the text and in the preface of this thesis, and are discussed in the following order: Recognizing Women’s Institutes, Country Women’s Associations, Girl Guides, and School Volunteers.

**Canadian Women's Institute Members**  
**Resisting genetically modified food**

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**Country Women's Association Members  
Providing Rest and Refreshment**

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**Yungaburra, Qld**

**Canadian Girl Guides/Girl Scouts  
and Youth Groups Parading**

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## **Australian Girl Guides Commemorating**

**ANZAC Day Parade**

**Cardwell, Qld**

**Wreath Laying at Cenotaph**

**Tully, Qld**

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**ANZAC Day Parade**

**Tully, Qld**

**Canadian School Moms Preparing Lunches  
for Sports Day**

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**Maple Bay, BC**

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**Australian School Moms Marching with Children  
Cardwell, Qld**

**Young Leaders  
Tully, Qld**

### Re-cognizing Aunties in Women's Institutes

Since 1897, rural women in Canada have been active in Women's Institutes (WI), which support grassroots women in the home or bush, on the farm, and in small towns across the country (Dennison, 1987). In the early years, involvement in the WI provided many women with the opportunity to participate in community decision making and public life "because their actions were merely extensions of their role as housewives, society was able to accept women's presence in community affairs" (Dennison, 1987, p. 54). As a result, Women's Institute members "have become part of their nation's popular culture" (Teather, 1996, p. 3). For example, in Canada, there are 1,521 branches of the Institute with over 23,000 members in 10 provinces (Women's Institute, 2003). The development of community infrastructure is a major focus of the WI and groups promote the construction of community halls, libraries, cemeteries, sewer systems, garbage disposal sites, and fire halls (p. 3). Members also advocate for improvements to railways, roads and other transportation and communication systems, and establish recreation facilities, playgrounds, landing docks, national parks and other public spaces (Teather, 1996). In addition, Teather found that many WI groups foster the development of non-material artefacts by working with drama groups, town bands and youth groups, which "helped considerably to keep up the morale of the people" (1996, p. 63).

Currently, Women's Institutes are the largest voluntary women's organization in the world and have an "unrivalled reputation as a voice of reason, integrity and intelligence on issues that matter to women and their communities" (Women's Institute, 2003, p. 1 ) Many branches are resisting the imposition of genetically modified foods into the Canadian food chain by lobbying at a local, provincial, and national level (Maroc, 1999). For example, the image on p. 70 shows members of the South Vancouver Island Women's Institute urging the board of the Cowichan Valley Regional District to oppose genetically modified foods at the provincial Select Standing Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries. I suggest that the WI members in this photograph are representative of the role that aunties can play in voicing the concerns of rural women or families, and in supporting similar women's organizations around the world.

Women's Institutes are also members of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW). This is the largest international organization of rural women, which adopts a "down to earth" approach to offering mutual support and practical help to over

90 million members in over 70 countries (*Welcome*, n.d.), including the Country Women's Association of Australia.

### Re-cognizing Aunties in Country Women's Associations

Another member of the Associated Country Women of the Worlds that aunties may support is the Country Women's Association (CWA) of Australia (*Welcome*, n.d.). The CWA has been active since 1922, and was an important player on the home front during World War II, when members made camouflage nets, balaclavas and socks for the soldiers (*History of Country Women's Association*, n.d.). Many rural women continue to serve their communities through the CWA, which is the largest women's organization in Australia and functions with 44,000 members in 1,855 branches located in primarily rural and remote communities (Foley, 1999). I sought to photograph a CWA organization in action in an effort to show a typical Australian women's group. Members of the Yungaburra Women's Institute are shown on p. 71 as they pose outside of their meeting hall, where the women serve tea as a fundraiser during the monthly farmers markets and at special occasions such as the Folk Festival.

Contemporarily, CWA members are active in supporting programs like the Royal Flying Doctor, Cancer support, Palliative care units and research into mosquito borne diseases (*History of Country Women's Association*, n.d.). In addition, they distribute National Rural Domestic Violence Information Kits, support the National Task Force on Crime, and sit on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (Foley, 1999, p. 24). The CWA also provides emergency Homemaking services, offers access to holiday homes for farm families, and operates hostels and restrooms in many cities that offer country women affordable, safe and friendly respite while in the city on business, pleasure, or for medical treatments (, p. 79).

Country Women's Associations and Women's Institutes work to serve the needs of rural women and families, while other organizations focus on supporting young women and girls in their development. Aunties could certainly be found among the ranks of the CWA and of other organizations, such as the International Girl Guide movement, which aims to mentor girls and young women, or the North American "4-H" program, which promotes rural skills for girls and boys.

## Re-cognizing Aunties as Girls Guides Leading

The Girl Guide movement is one typical organization that I identified immediately in which aunties might be active, so I looked for opportunities to photograph leaders and their troops in both Australia and Canada. The Girl Guide movement is the largest voluntary organization in the world for girls and young women, and it has encouraged non-traditional roles for women in leadership, service, and responsible citizenship. Since its inception in 1910, the Girl Guide movement has endeavoured to foster “initiative, self-reliance, resourcefulness and self-discipline” in girls aged 5 to young adults (*Girl Guides of Canada: Our program*, n.d.).

In Canada, Girl Guides have been recognized since 1910 and they currently have 176,000 members (*Girl Guides online: Our history*, n.d.). Similarly, the Australian Guiding Movement began in approximately 1912 and has grown to include over 100,000 members (*Girl Guiding/Girl Scouting*, 2002). At present, it is estimated that 10 million girls and young women participate in Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in 144 different countries, and that over 100,000 volunteers organize and implement guiding programs (*Girl Guiding/Girls Scouting*, 2002). One exemplary Girl Guide leader was world-renowned mountain climber Phyllis Munday, who in the early 1900’s pioneered the worldwide Lone Guide program in British Columbia for rural girls and young women who “lived on lonely coast islands, in scattered communities, in lumber camps, on farms and ranches, and in railway section houses” (Converse, 1998, p. 47). I propose that many women who volunteer to support Girl Guide and Brownie troops in their communities could typify the concept of “auntie,” and that the movement provides a broader context in which to examine aunties’ roles and activities.

On page 72 are shown both Girl Guides and Girl Scouts participating in a parade during Summer Festival in Duncan, BC, while p. 73 shows Girls Guides and Brownies as they are lead in the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) Day parades in both Tully and Cardwell in North Queensland. Although I do not claim that the leaders in these photographs are all aunties, I suggest it is more likely that aunties would be leaders in this and other youth organizations such as the local 4-H Club and the Big Brothers/Big Sisters Association.

Women who enact their role as aunties in youth organizations such as Big Sisters, 4-H or Girl Guides/Girl Scouts and other mentoring programs are part of the vernacular imagery of many small and rural communities around the world. Likewise,

the presence of volunteers in local schools is a familiar sight, and very often it is mothers who are involved in supporting extra-curricular activities.

### Re-cognizing School Volunteers

One very familiar place in which to find women contributing significantly to their communities is in the schools that their children attend. I suggest that in many cases, mothers act as aunties to other children in the school because the families become entwined by sharing responsibility for extra-curricular activities. (I am not proposing that all mothers are aunties or vice versa, but I do suggest that women who are active in their children's lives may become involved with other children and their families in ways that are like being an auntie to them.) For example, p. 75 shows a collage of volunteers working together to prepare lunches for students at an elementary school sports day. The women are busy as they cook hot dogs, prepare buns, count out freezies, and package the lunches for distribution to the classrooms. In Canadian schools, parents organize funfairs, accompany school field trips, help out on immunization days and coach or transport school teams" (Anderson, 2000, p. 6).

In Australia, parents contribute in similar ways, including fundraising and running and maintaining the 'tuck shop' where children can buy food and treats ("Queens Beach tuckshop gets upgrade," 2002, p. 9). Australian women are shown on p. 76 as they assist school children at the yearly Australia and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) Day services at Cardwell, Queensland. Volunteers were busy supervising the wreath laying, organizing children in the school choir, and escorting the children in the parade.

I suggest that the presence of mothers and aunties in the schools provides the students with opportunities to develop social skills and support networks outside of their family home. In addition, volunteers provide role models to encourage the children to participate in civic activities. For example, p. 76 also shows two young women demonstrating their leadership potential by representing their school at the Tully, Queensland ANZAC Day services. Aunties can act as role models to their own and other children by contributing to the social and cultural life of the school. Likewise, aunties can shift the understanding of women's role in society by taking on non-traditional roles and activities in the community.

### Re-capping Aunties in Vernacular Culture

The evidence I have gathered by exploring community activities around me suggests that aunties are familiar figures whom assume recognizable roles in contemporary society and that they contribute significantly to the vernacular culture of families and communities. I have sought to make the familiar strange and to create new understandings of the importance of aunties in building vernacular culture. I understand the importance of vernacular artefacts such as textiles, signs, and symbols, and amateur photographs to understanding the experience of being an “auntie,” so I have examined material and non-material artefacts for indications of the variety of roles and activities in which aunties engage. I understand, however, that my selection of evidence is biased by my pre-conceptions of whom aunties are and what it is that they do. Nonetheless, my intention is simply to bring to mind memories and to stimulate recognition of aunties in a variety of familiar contexts so that the reader is better prepared to recognize the experience of being an “auntie” within the respondents’ narratives.

## SECTION TWO

### Aunt-ecdote of this Auntie

This “aunt-ecdote” contains musings from my journals, as the aunt who is the creatrix of this story and it provides an intimate space for the exploration of the coming-to-be of the storyteller. This is where the muse runs free and the storyteller shows herself to be one with the story, to be both the words and the actions that bring the story to life on these pages. Here is a place for this aunt to “dote” a little, to add colour and light into the corners of the story. I hope that this aunt-ecdote may increase the transparency of the thesis and illuminate my subjective position as storyteller. In it are glimpses of the way I construct my understanding of the social world, and I hope to reveal something of the “aunt-ology” and epistemology that have shaped this study. This aunt-ecdote also gives some context to the methodologies and theories that are discussed in the chapters that follow, which comprise the rest of Section Two.

#### Aunt-ology and Epistemology of this Auntie

There was an inkling which stirred deep inside of me when I first encountered the concept of aunties as archetypal community builders. As I began to look around, I spotted aunties everywhere, doing familiar (common) things, in familiar places, in extra-ordinary (exceptional) ways. I recalled the image of my Auntie Louella (p. ix) as she rode on an elephant, in which portrays the spirit of many aunties I know who live their everyday lives in extra-ordinary ways. In this chapter, I seek to view aunties from a different perspective, and to “make the familiar strange” by encouraging others to recognize aunties in their daily lives. I invite the reader to plumb the depths of their cultural memories and re-collect the images of the women who have acted as archetypal aunties in their lives. As their familiarity grows, we can begin to *re-cognize* our aunties and acknowledge the depth and breadth of their role in building strong communities. Through the process of *re-searching* for this study, my own mind has been challenged to seek out and share my remembrances of aunties as they have manifested themselves in my life.

The idea to describe the women in this study with term “auntie” to came to me from multiple inspirations. I was partly inspired by my own enriching experiences with

my blood aunties (Kay, Judy, Pricilla and Jean), as well as with “adopted” aunties (and some uncles) (Auntie Louella, Marge and Mike, and Linda). I am informed by my own experiences as a blood related or adopted auntie and as fairy goddess mother to several young people (and many animals).

I realize that my “auntie” Louella Channell taught me to trust myself and to approach community development as a grassroots process that includes consultation and collaboration with the community. In my early years Marge Dewar and Mike Raines profoundly changed my life because they gave a skinny kid from town a chance to explore her ruralness and love of horses. The idea of including voices of First Nations women stems from my experiences living amongst peoples of the Coast Salish, Thompson, and Mauri nations. I was also taught by many indigenous Canadian people during my two years of First Nations studies, and through sharing some time with women of Australian Aboriginal descent. In my own women’s circle, my mentor Linda Bell taught me about being a teacher and about the importance of spirit and ceremony in creating community.

I have lots of experience as an auntie in my community through my involvement in teaching the Vimy Hall line dancers, initiating the Many Hands Make Light Work project, in organizing benefits, and in calling together clothes swaps. More formally I have the experiences of being involved in student politics, initiating the Cowichan Valley Smallholders, contributing to the Vancouver Island and Cowichan Exhibitions, the Great Taste of the Cowichan, the Healthy Communities and Visions 20/20 projects, as well as volunteering at the Cowichan Folk and Fringe Festivals or being the bubble lady at the Vancouver Island Children’s Book Festival.

The Many Hands Make Light Work project comes to mind as an example. The project began when it came to my attention that a number of families and single parents were struggling just to keep things together on a daily basis, not to mention getting the wood stacked for the winter. I organized several work parties, and throughout three seasons, friends gathered and tackled projects ranging from re-roofing cabins to rebuilding dog runs, from gardening to garbage burning, and from fence demolition to fence building. The biggest benefit that was reported to me was that the families no longer felt alone or unable to ask for help, nor did they feel overwhelmed by their lives anymore.

Despite many previous experiences of being an auntie in my family and community, I gained enormous insights during the research process, some from very unexpected sources.

I know that being an auntie can mean having your contributions taken-for-granted by others in the community. I think about the silver platter that I found at a local Thrift Store, which had been presented to Frances Kathleen Munroe upon her retirement after 43 years of “association with and service to the Fraser Valley Regional Library (1931-1976).” After 45 years of dedicated service, this woman’s name and face have been lost from the records of the library and perhaps the memories of her community, save for the artefact that I purchased for 70 cents that day. This platter is a stark reminder of the anonymity and invisibility of many women who have given so much of their time and energy to their communities. The plaque (price tag in place) is there amongst my books to remind me of those aunties who have gone before me and have now disappeared from view. Other aunties have disappeared from view but their stories live on because they lived their lives in ways that other, more dominant forces in the community found threatening.

I know that being an auntie is important work in the community and I also know that it can be dangerous work. I know that economic, political, and religious contexts have a profound impact on the capacity of many aunties to conduct their work unimpeded. For instance, I used to joke that if I lived in another time and place I would have been burned at the stake by now, but I now know deep in my bones the truth about how dangerous being an auntie can be. I discovered that in 1733, Jennifer (Janet) Horn was the last woman in Great Britain to be burned at the stake for “transforming her daughter into a pony” (Seth, 1969, p. 169}. Despite evidence of her “Devil’s shoeing,” her lame daughter was spared the fire because she was deemed to be “an unwilling victim of her mother’s witchcraft” (p. 169). The realization that many wise, strong, and vocal aunties like me have been persecuted over time gave me a profound understanding of my privilege, and reinforced the importance of our work precisely because it is threatening to those who wish to dominate.

As a gifted woman myself, I am interested in the endeavours of other strong women in my community. I count myself among the number of aunties who are active as *re-sourceresses*, storytellers, teachers, and caregivers, and I believe that our communities need us in order to thrive. Aunties; re-sourceresses; service angels; call us

what you like, we are the women, in our youth and in our wisdom, who create around ourselves an environment which encourages and nurtures those souls who share in our community. The keepers of the faith, we are: faith in the value of safe, nurturing spaces; in the importance of achieving both belongingness and self-love; and the necessity of community to fulfil these needs.

Aunties are not invisible to me, because I see them all around me, working right under my nose. These women are not anonymous to me, because they are familiar, and I recognize them and can call some of them by name. In my community, the network of aunties is strong, our resources are many, and we will continue to persist in creating strong communities and families.

I always thought that being an auntie was important because of what the experience brings to others in my family and community. However, having briefly experienced maternity this fall and having a brush of maternal instinct, I now know that what I do as an auntie is important for me. It is my maternal Discourse - with a capital D - my words, thoughts and actions are other-oriented in ways that are "auntying" rather than mothering.

I am proud to call myself Aunty Jenny, and I will continue to rabble rouse in my own way through conducting small acts of resistance to oppressive practices, and by encouraging others to do the same.

Hmm, what shall we call ourselves?? Angry Aunties perhaps? How about a troupe of Unruly Uncles? The possibilities are endless!! Kazoo anyone?

## **Chapter Four**

### **Re-searching Aunties in Action**

#### **Re-searching Aunties**

Aunties are “re-searchable” because their experiences can be diligently sought out and investigated from many angles and with multiple lenses

#### **Re-search**

diligent and systemic inquiry or investigation into a subject  
scholarly or scientific inquiry; to study thoroughly  
Old French to seek out or search again

#### **Historical Society Members**

#### **Researching Local Culture**

#### **Bowen, Qld**

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## Re-searching Aunties in Action

The qualitative research approaches chosen for this study are intended to produce rich and thick insights into some of the everyday experiences of aunties in Canada and Australia. The choice of phenomenology as the guiding methodology enables me to examine the ordinary and taken-for-granted in society and to understand those things that impact us as community members most ordinarily and directly (van Manen, 1992). A hermeneutic orientation within phenomenological methodology provides the opportunity to explore with the participants the meaning of key terms that frame the study. In keeping with feminist practices, this study is designed to establish the locus of expertise with the women themselves in order to illuminate the diversity of their experiences (Fonow & Cook, 1991b). I anticipate that a qualitative, study such as this can **re-search**<sup>4</sup> the phenomenon from many angles in order to establish the significance of aunties and their contributions to building social capital in families and communities. Like the members of the Bowen Historical Society (p. 86), I intend to study the phenomenon through examining various historical myths and cultural artefacts and seeking out diverse examples of aunties in action in contemporary society.

Various research practices (including some borrowed from the world of art) have assisted the systematic gathering and reporting of data in ways that achieve a richer understanding of this particular human experience. I concur with Salkind (1997), who characterizes high quality research to be based on the work of others, to be logical and tied to theory, to generate new questions, and to contribute to the betterment of society (p. 3). I adopted other criteria from the world of art, which include possessing refined sensibilities to read the subtleties of the world, an idea that is important and not trivial, imagination to capture the readers interest, and good technical skills to realize the goals (Eisner, 2001, p. 144). My understanding of research is guided by these characteristics and criteria, and I have endeavoured to make them visible in the reporting of the process. Indeed, until recently, the nature of research itself has been taken for granted by academics (Brew, 2001, p. 157), but in the emerging post-modern era, new perspectives are challenging old assumptions. I have joined the ranks of qualitative researchers who are searching to understand the shifting nature of

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<sup>4</sup> See glossary in Appendix 1 for etymological origin of bolded words

research and who are identifying “strategies that might enable them to produce different knowledge and to produce knowledge differently” (St. Pierre, 2002, p. 399).

I am also a practitioner in the field of community development and I desired to contribute in a pragmatic way to improve both practice and policy. Although qualitative research has traditionally been perceived to generate theories and provide “holistic” perspectives on common problems or behaviours (Swanson, 2001, p 225), it has been recognized of late that “there is a very practical side to qualitative methods,” which responds to matters of interest “in real-world settings in order to solve problems” (Patton, 1990, p. 89). Other researchers suggest that research concerned with human relationships cannot really “solve” problems but can perhaps provide temporary resolutions to dynamic life situations, which will in turn generate further challenges to be resolved (Eisner, 2001, p. 138). I anticipate that practical outcomes from this thesis may be applied to challenges arising in human and social service program planning, development, and evaluation, which may enhance our understanding of the taken-for-granted “social process” of nurturing and sustaining human relationships (Swanson, 2001, p. 233). It is my intention to construct “a contextual sea, rich in detail” (p. 225) to demonstrate the social aspect of community development, so that active citizens may be better-understood and supported by formal development processes.

I am likewise concerned with the position of the researcher, and I endeavoured throughout the thesis to make sure presumptions, facts, values, interpretations and theories that shape the research are made explicit (Kuzel & Engel, 2001, p. 127). Initially, I reviewed the literature from a critical stance to “get a better grasp on the phenomena represented by the concepts themselves” and so that I could “act as an informed consumer” (Morse & Mitcham, 2002, p. 1). As one who has first-hand experience of being an auntie, I am both an insider who shares taken-for-granted knowledge and common history with the participants in the study, and an outsider, separated from them by my position as inquirer and by my professional and educational training (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 48).

My experiences as a feminist and my interest in the social construction of community constantly inform my research stance. As a feminist, I have adopted a reflexive stance in order to “reflect upon, examine critically and explore analytically” the research process undertaken and to identify the assumptions that underlie the inquiry (Fonow & Cook, 1991a, p. 2). I am also aware that my pre-understandings of the experience have actively shaped the definition of what counts as a problem, what kinds

of questions are to be asked, and how I frame the discourse used to impart the findings (Brew, 2001, p. 84). I have tried to handle the process with a light touch, and to adopt a research stance of “one down-manship” (A. Wade, personal conversation Feb. 2001) by becoming a non-expert and assuming that the participants bring expertise to the project and by adopting “language that conveys the tentativeness of presently held views, initial questions, and orienting definitions” (Sandelowski, Holditch-Davis, & Glenn Harris, 1989, p. 78). I have always been concerned that the stories of the participants be the primary source of understanding of the phenomenon and the starting point to achieve the goal of co-creation of meaning (Eisner, 1981).

As I progressed from the Masters to the Doctoral level, I chose to follow a naturalistic process for the overall design, whereby I started with observations from my own life, as a basis for understanding the experiences of the respondents, maintained an holistic view, and remained open to emerging trends during the process. In this way, the project and its design seemed to unfold in a naturalistic way (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Naturalistic inquiry contrasts linear, experimental approaches to research by attempting to minimize manipulation and trying not to constrain the outcomes with predetermined categories (Patton, 1990, p. 43). However, what ideally occurs in inductive qualitative inquiry is seldom what actually occurs, and adherence to the initial design always becomes a “matter of degree” (p. 59). I tried to be flexible during the implementation process and to be tolerant of the ambiguity and uncertainty that arose. I tried to rely on my intuition, be patient with the naturalistic process and to “trust in the ultimate value of what inductive analysis will yield” (p. 62). As patterns emerged, I moved back and forth between verifying and elucidating themes in a “sorting out and putting-back-together process” (Hammersley, 1992, p. 60). In this way, “qualitative methods can be used both to discover what is happening and then to verify what has been discovered” (p. 60). These methods of discovery eventually lead me to formulate tentative meanings to describe the phenomenon.

I developed the research design to focus on the words and the actions of the participants because I wanted to examine both “perspectives and behaviours, recognizing that the later does not merely flow from the former, and may even be discrepant with it” (Hammersley, 1992, p. 165). It is important for researchers to recognize that all narrative accounts are biased, and that subjects “are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions... all they can offer are accounts... about what they did” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994b, p. 12). As a result, qualitative researchers (such as

myself) must endeavour to “deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience that have been studied” (p. 12). I assume then, that the actions of the aunties very often speak louder than their words. My research design must account for this discrepancy, and I part, I have done this by asking “what” and “how” questions that are intended to reveal details about the actions of the participants.

This is not to say that the words of the respondents (or the researcher) are not important, particularly as this is a hermeneutic study that explores meaning as it is mediated through language. When presenting the analysis, I have relied on the words of the participants’ over the text of the research literature, in order to deepen the connection between reader and respondent and to guide discussions of the concepts. In addition, my own hermeneutic process is recorded in an “aunt-ecdote,” (see p. 82), which is intended to increase the transparency of the research, to foster a personal connection to the writer, and to glimpse how I might make meaning of my experiences as an author and as an auntie.

Like many post-modern researchers, I seek to integrate research approaches that are diverse, are tolerant of paradox, and are comfortable with the “co-existence, juxtaposition, and interaction of multiple paradigms” (Hlynka, 1991, p. 28). I am also cognizant that the selection of multiple methods must be done carefully to ensure that the components are relevant and that they advance the understanding of the research question, and blend to enhance and not undermine the research process (Meadows & Morse, 2001, p. 195). I understand that post-modern researchers must seek alternative research practices because “if research is to avert a crisis and teach us how to live in a complex, confusing and uncertain world, it has to... free itself from old rigidities and give expression to its creativity” (Brew, 2001, p.29). However, I also understand that venturing into alternative research perspectives “lays the researcher open to a whole array of epistemological and methodological issues” that many are struggling to overcome (McGrath & Johnson, 2003). I must learn to struggle along with other qualitative researchers because “we are witnessing changes to our ideas about knowledge and knowing, while the implications of these in terms of research practice are only just now being felt on the margins” (Brew, 2001, p. 29).

### Re-searching From the Margins

I realize that the construction of this thesis challenges conservative ideas about knowledge and knowing, but I assert that unusual methods are necessary to research experiences that usually take place on the margins of mainstream society. New and creative research methods that connect the personal to the political are emerging for those researchers who conduct “research from the margins” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). The assumptions that underlie methods from the margins include that knowledge is socially constructed and informed by social interactions, that people experience the world differently and therefore hold different knowledge, and that knowledge is mutable and subject to differences in power, which may corrupt or monopolize its production (p. 26). In practice, research should no longer be generated “on” people from the margins, but “by, with and for” them (p. 27-28) and should encourage critical reflection and the formation of an inter-subjective relationship between the participants and the researcher.

Different methodologies will shape the way research data is gathered and interpreted; hence, choosing a methodology becomes a political process. I have sought methods that allowed me to maintain the respondents’ voices in the vernacular and achieve an authentic telling of their stories. At the same time, I am aware that the corruption of knowledge is unavoidable, whether conducting research or producing art, as “all forms of representation are biased” (Eisner, 2001, p. 140). I have adopted practices that attempt to focus “on the world from the standpoint of the margins, to openly recognize the experience... and to use it as a touchstone” (p. 65). I have worked with these touchstone experiences to create a representation of the phenomenon under study, kneading the data much as a potter does with clay.

### Re-searching as Art

Research is recently being recognized as an artistic process that emerges from both intuitive and inter-subjective knowing as much as from reason. Traditionally, research has been perceived of as a scientific process guided by rational and objective decision making. However, some researchers believe that art and science are intimately connected through the drives, rhythms, and motivations of “creativity in any realm, artistic or scientific” (Nisbet, 1976, p. 4). For the researcher/artist such as myself, engagement in the process “creates” meaning instead of “discovering” it, “rather like an artist creates a painting or sculpture, or a musician composes a piece of music” (Brew,

2001, 73). Artists and qualitative researchers alike are advised to engage emotion and perceptual freshness in order to make the experience palpable and to pay attention to the “nuanced quality of the particular” (Eisner, 2001, p. 137). I have endeavoured to combine art and research in order to encourage the reader to “slow down perception and invite exploration” (Dewey, 1958/1934, p. 325) as a way to “remove the veils that keep the eyes from seeing” (p. 325). Researchers can work to strengthen the links to art and literature, such as when examining the relations of

the individual to village, town, and city...[which can be] seen as vividly in the novels, dramas, poems, and paintings... as they are in the works of the sociologists from Tocqueville and Marx on. (Nisbet, 1976, p. 4)

I believe that social research can be linked to art because each can challenge and improve conventional knowledge; however, this involves risk and uncertainty for the producer, particularly as new techniques and understandings emerge. For example, Bayles and Orland assure the artist that making art is both a dangerous and revealing act, that the best that you can do is make art that you care about, and that you learn to make your work by making your work (1993, pp. 4 – 15). As a post-modern artist/researcher, I am also challenged because new ethical considerations of subjectivity are arising, wherein “The age of value-free inquiry for the human disciplines is over, and researchers now struggle to develop situational and transsituational ethics that apply to any given research act” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 12).

Post-modernists are beginning to break down traditional beliefs in objectivity and the authority of the researcher, the politics of method become visible (Eisner, 1988). It is now understood that there “is no clear window into the inner life of the individual” and that observations made by both researcher and participants are socially situated and are always “filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 12). Indeed, for several decades now, feminist researchers have struggled to free themselves of dominant social science paradigms, and “to create knowledge in a way that is emancipating and empowering to the participants involved” (Maguire, 1987, p. 103).

I have employed several methods to aid in this study of grassroots women and, and have focussed on highlighting “what” and “how” about their activities rather than “why” they do them. Certain methods I have used are conducive to researching with, and not for, those who live on the margins of society because they encourage intersubjective relationships between the researcher and the researched. Like art that

challenges dominant discourses, this study strives to expose the power relations embedded in the language of community, such as those that represent rural and grassroots people or initiatives as inferior to those found in urban contexts.

### Re-searching Post-modern Orientations

Assumptions about the nature of knowledge are being challenged of late by post-modernist and feminists. For example, the authority of knowledge claims is currently undergoing an epistemological reassessment as a result of the work of post-modernists such as Michel Foucault (in Rabinow, 1984). He asserts that “the universalising discourse of the Enlightenment has been displaced” by an understanding that truth is “a product of individual regimes... and thus inseparable from power” (in Hekman, 1990a, p. 175).

Many social scientists believe that researchers who adhere to Enlightenment assumptions have actively “limited freedom, underestimated man, and imprisoned ourselves in an imaginary cage” (Levin, 2001, p. 273). Other assumptions are being challenged, such as that nature is consistent; that objective truth exists, is rational and is grounded in evidence; that the researcher must remain detached from the research; and that research participants are seen as ‘objects’ separate from the research process (Brew, 2001, pp. 52-53; see also Kvale, 1996). Likewise, feminists realize that their practices “must be purged by postmodernism of Enlightenment, essentialist, absolutist and foundationalist tendencies” (Bodribb, 1993, p. xxvi), while others support the reconfiguration of discourses of power and knowledge through post-modernism because it “displaces and explodes the masculine discourse of domination” (Hekman, 1990a, p. 186).

Instead, feminist researchers are becoming comfortable with post-modern ideas that free will is a valuable human right and can not be guided by social scientific law; that partial answers, unexpected results, and unintended consequences arise from human actions and interactions; and that the complexity of human experience is both marvellous and beautiful (Levin, 2001, p. 277). I have endeavoured to be attentive throughout the research process to the possibility of unexpected results and unintended consequences, and to give authority in the analysis to the marvellous voices of the respondents rather than that of the researcher.

The authority of the researcher/reporter is also being challenged by new kinds of rules to guide social science research practice. New practices diminish the authority and

importance of the author and privilege the reader as a free agent and an active participant with their own “extraordinary power to define and create textual meaning” (Rosenau, 1992, p. 21). Likewise, the post-modern reader is no longer driven by the pursuit of absolute truth claims and the researchers’ role is shifting to one of creating intertextual relationships and understanding (p. 8). The realization that researchers can only describe some aspect of reality has set in (Brew, 2001, p. 55) and I understand that my task is now one of “interpreting and presenting one world to another, seeking common meanings around which collective action may be taken” (Lane, 1997, p. 335).

Like many post-modern feminists, I seek to create a balance so that my study affirms difference, gives the subordinated a voice, values local experience and meaning, and provides multiple opportunities for participation and acts of resistance (Lane, 1997, p. 338). Post-modern perspectives are well suited to the study of aunties in action, as post-modernists urge researchers to focus on the neglected, forgotten, insignificant, repressed, eccentric, marginal, and on regions of resistance (Rosenau, 1992, p. 168). Post-modern practices also aid in uncovering taken for granted phenomenon because they attend to the non-ordinary and non-obvious and examine what is overlooked, unsaid and “never overtly recognized” (p. 8). Likewise, the work of Foucault encourages me to stay close to the details in the participants’ narratives, as he advocates for the exploration of local, specific mechanisms of oppression that can generate resistance in response to specific instances of oppression (in Hekman, 1990a, p. 183). Post-modern feminists also urge researchers to explore everyday activities as sources of resistance, and to view individuals as capable of resisting pressures to conform to dominant cultures (Fonow & Cook, 1991a). The small acts of resistance explored in the interpretive section that follows may reveal specific responses to the women’s experiences and help to inform community development professionals about the significance of women’s community service activities.

### Re-searching Qualitative Orientations

A qualitative design is best suited for this inquiry into a social phenomenon because it enables me to identify and describe patterns as they are expressed through multiple realities, rather than aiming at “theory development” or the production of laws (Hammersley, 1992, p. 170). Qualitative research is also well suited to the investigation of aunties in action because it is “used to explore new or little known, previously unconceptualized or inadequately understood phenomena” (Morse & Mitcham, 2002, p.

5). Other aspects of qualitative research that fit well with this research project include the “doubt that any discourse has a privileged place” (Richardson, 1991, p. 173), the understanding that its focus is multimethod, its process naturalistic (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and its findings presented in a more literary style, which is “more descriptive and personal, emphasizing the participants’ language and including their unique assigned ‘meanings’” (Leedy, 1997, p. 108). Reflecting on my own experiences of being an “auntie” has led me to agree with Olesen (1994), who asserts that “the complexities and problems of women’s lives, whatever the context, are sufficiently great that multiple approaches via qualitative research are required” (p. 169).

I seek to make strange these familiar experiences of being an “auntie” in Western society so as to suggest the uniqueness and the familiarity of the phenomenon under study. Eisner urges qualitative researchers to “release us from the stupor of the familiar” and to “defamiliarize” and make fresh the phenomenon under study in much the same way that an artist might reveal the nuances and particularity of their subject (Eisner, 2001, p. 136). As an artist/researcher, I cannot claim to capture all the particulars of this phenomenon within the interviews or the photographs that I have collected, but I do hope to present “idiosyncratic views of individuals in a particular time and place” in my search for “plausible explanations” (Kuzel & Engel, 2001, p. 115) of the experience of being an auntie. I am aware that attention to “lay knowledge” and its context is foundational to good qualitative research (p. 123), so I have tried to maintain the vernacular “explanations” of the participants in the foreground of the study.

### Re-searching Feminist Orientations

As a qualitative researcher, I understand feminist practices to be most appropriate for this investigation because these practices encourage me to maintain a non-oppressive relationship with the participants, to produce knowledge that is not oppressive, and which is useful to the participants themselves. I am guided by Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1991) who assert that feminist researchers should develop a critique that challenges the dominant intellectual traditions while being reflective of their own emerging practices. As a social activist, I am also committed to the generation of change by challenging theory, by critiquing what seems natural, and by attending to “local meanings, changes over time, dominant and suppressed frames and contextual contradictions” (Fine, 1992). Likewise, Kvale sees feminist qualitative

research practices as a “means for changing the conditions studied” because they give priority to the moral and political in the everyday world of women and attempt to understand “the very lives and situations of women” (1996, pp. 72-73).

I have also critically examined the dominant discourses used to describe women’s everyday actions in the related literature. I assume that I can identify in the literature “deficiencies of alternative explanations” about the real life experiences of women (Hawkesworth, 1989, p. 351). I understand that despite developments of more inclusive language practises, it remains that “The real lives of women get lost in texts, leading to a relativist resignation that enforces the status quo in a world of inequality” (Kvale, 1996, p. 74). Along with many other feminist researchers, it is my objective to develop an “anti-oppressive feminist praxis” that challenges the complex and multiple sources of privilege and oppression in women’s lives by “combining personal and social change in a continuing and reflective process” (Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1994, p. 28). I believe that post-modern practices will allow me to develop such praxis while remaining close to the challenges and triumphs encountered in the participants’ everyday experiences.

I have adopted post-modern research practices because they are guided by the assumption that “truth” is subjective and not absolute, the relationship with the participants is inter-subjective, and because the authority of the author is diminished. In addition, the researcher is encouraged to stay close to the details of the data, and to seek the non-obvious nuances rather than seek grand theories. Likewise, qualitative research encourages me to make the familiar strange and to explore the inadequately understood aspects of life. In turn, feminists practices challenge the dominant perceptions and discourses of scholarly research as well as those of society as a whole. I have attempted to integrate post-modern, qualitative and feminist perspectives into this study, and found that they were all compatible with the Phenomenological perspectives and practices I was employing.

### Re-searching Phenomenological Orientations

This particular research into the “real” life problems encountered by women is based on phenomenological orientations and methodologies because phenomenology allows me to get close to the everyday experiences of aunties. Phenomenologists aim to understand the “nature or meaning” of the world as experienced, rather than as conceptualized or theorized about (van Manen, 1984, p. 37). Specifically, the intent of

phenomenology is to explore the “possibility of plausible insight” gained from direct contact with the world (p. 38), and also to “describe an experience from the participants’ point of view” (Leedy, 1997, p. 166) rather than from the perspective of the researcher.

Phenomenology is not intended to produce explanations, theories or provide cause and effect analysis, but rather it “appropriates and interprets meaning already implicit to lived experience as its truth” (Burch, 1989). I utilized phenomenological interviews to explore the participants’ experiences in life and tried to “articulate the pre-reflective level of lived meaning, to make the invisible visible” (Kvale, 1996, p. 53) while at the same time respecting that “the most important reality is what people perceive it to be” (p. 52). However, feminists warn that a focus on experience alone may not be sufficient to effect social change, for individuals may not hold sufficient knowledge to explain their situations or to free themselves of their social positioning in order to produce authentic data “which is unmediated by interpretation” (Maynard & Purvis, 1994b, p. 6).

Phenomenologists endeavour to reawaken a fuller understanding of the significance and meaning of the experience under study, and they are engaged in the search for the very nature or meaning that “makes a ‘thing’ what it is” (van Manen, 1984, p. 38). The assumption that commonly-understood essences are identifiable and describable is a basic premise of phenomenology; however, phenomenology is often misunderstood as being deterministic when in practice it is much more evocative:

the phenomenological inquiry is not unlike an artistic endeavour, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and eloquent. (van Manen, 1984, p. 43)

Several orientations to phenomenology have emerged since Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) first extended the work of Franz Brentano (1838-1917) to reconsider the nature of psychology as a rigorous science (Moran, 2000, p. 8). The basic philosophical foundation of Husserl’s phenomenology was descriptive and reflective (but not interpretive) and was based on the Cartesian assumption that “we can only know what we have experienced by attending to perceptions and meaning that awaken our conscious awareness” (Patton, 1990, p. 69). In order to describe and reflect upon the essential “life-world,” Husserl understood that the investigator must bracket any previously held beliefs or claims of science and turn to a “prior level of experience in which essences are more ascertainable” (Ashworth, Nov/Dec 1999, p. 708). The initial

work of Husserl lead to several orientations within Phenomenology, including transcendental, existential and hermeneutic perspectives (Levinas, 1998).

### Re-searching with Transcendental Phenomenology

Husserl eventually came to understand phenomenology as transcendental, whereby all knowing arises from consciousness, and through phenomenological reduction “pure” consciousness could observe the “transcendental ego,” or everyday consciousness, as a starting point of knowledge. Thus, “eidetic” reduction sought to explicate transcendental understandings of the essential, invariable, constant and knowable structures of the “life-world” (Ashworth, Nov/Dec 1999, p. 708). Husserl also explored Brentano’s concept of intentionality, whereby the meanings of things are understood to be actively constituted by “cognito,” or the consciousness of something (Levinas, 1998). I started this study by explicating my own “cognito” of the meaning of being an auntie in preparation for exploring how others may be conscious of a similar experience.

### Re-searching with Existential Phenomenology

Existential phenomenology, on the other hand, came to be more concerned with exploring the pre-reflective understanding of the life-world, prior to consciousness, and of applying phenomenological understandings to social sciences and sociology. Hegel (1770-1831), Heidegger (1889-1976), Schutz (1899-1959), and Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) all reach beyond Husserl to explore the embodied experience of living in the concrete world as a responding “being-in-the-world.” Social phenomenologists like Schutz and Luckmann (1973) examined the commonsense knowledge, constructs, and categories (known as one’s “stock of knowledge”) that are employed by each individual in order to “interpret experience, grasp the intentions and motivations of others, achieve intersubjective understandings, and coordinate actions” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, p. 263). They urged the researcher to seek similarities between individuals’ stock of knowledge and identify “typified” aspects of a phenomenon (p. 263). Typification occurs at a pre-conscious level for most people (Psathas, 1989, p. 109), and the “central medium for transmitting typifications” is language (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, p. 263), which constructs and conveys intended meaning. Therefore it is important for the researcher to incorporate strategies to lessen the likelihood of misinterpreting the participants’ intended meaning.

Existential phenomenologists utilize a form of bracketing to open themselves to understanding the meaning embedded in language. However, complete reduction was acknowledged as impossible, and Merleau-Ponty (1962) proposed that the ability to “set aside” is more likely to be developed than the ability to “turn away” or detach from our conscious pre-understandings. Instead, he resolved to describe actual life-worlds by setting aside “theories, research presuppositions, ready-made interpretations etc., in order to reveal engaged, lived experience” (in Ashworth, Nov/Dec 1999, p. 707).

### Re-searching with Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Likewise, in hermeneutic phenomenology, Heidegger (1889-1976) identified the difficulty of bracketing or separating the exterior world from interior human consciousness, existence, or being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962). For him, the nature of truth and being was not merely descriptive, but was interpreted through human awareness and transmitted through language, poetry or art (van Manen, 2000a). As all meaning is understood to be interpretive, reduction for hermeneutics is achieved through reflection on and making explicit one’s feelings, preferences and expectations, and by the adoption of a phenomenological “attitude” of attentiveness that is active throughout the research process (van Manen, 2003a).

The remainder of this chapter is formulated on the teachings of Max van Manen, whose work has informed my understanding of phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a research methodology. As a guide to practice, he suggests that researchers adopt the “two methodological impulses in phenomenological inquiry and writing,” which are the *reductio*, or attentive practice of thoughtfulness and mindful wondering about life, and the *vocatio*, or incantive, poetised telling that gives voice to an original singing of the world (van Manen, 1984, p. 39). I adopted these two impulses as guides after hearing van Manen discuss their application at a workshop (May 2003) that I attended through the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology (van Manen, 2003a).

### Re-searching Reductio as Method

Reduction, or “*reductio*,” describes the process whereby the researcher strives to “re-achieve” direct contact, or nearness, to the phenomenon as it is experienced, rather than as it may be conceptualised (van Manen, 2003a, p. 1). A related practice is that of “*epoche*,” or bracketing, in which the researcher strives to return to a pre-reflective level where existing interpretations and prejudices are “bracketed” from the analysis.

Reductio intends to “make intelligible the kinds of meanings that we seem to recognize in life as we live it,” however, no reduction can produce “true” reflections of the experience, since meaning structures such as language can “never fully imitate lived experience”(van Manen, 2003a, p. 1).

Although it is central to the practice of phenomenology, the precise meaning of epoche and reduction can be quite complex and confusing; however, van Manen proposes six common distinctions of reduction that are methodologically useful and accessible to the student of phenomenology (2000a).

The practice of “reductio” keeps the researcher close to the everyday experiences of real people, and invites descriptive and reflective analysis of the data. Heuristic reduction utilizes intuition as well as logic (see van Manen, 2003a; Polanyi, 1969; Patton, 1990), while hermeneutic reduction requires that the researcher make explicit any pre-understandings of the phenomenon under study (see van Manen, 2003a; Moustakas, 1994; Geelan & Taylor, June, 2001). Meanwhile, theories and abstractions are set aside when practicing phenomenological reduction (van Manen, 2000a), and in eidetic reduction, concrete, first person accounts are offered as possible understandings of the experience and not as absolute truths about the phenomenon (see van Manen, 2000a; Wade, 1997). Once “reductio,” or mindful attentiveness becomes part of the research process, then the accompanying practice of “vocatio” can give voice to the reconceptualizing of the phenomenon under study.

#### Re-searching Vocatio as Method

The practice of phenomenological writing challenges the researcher to develop both practical skills and reflective capacities. At times the difficulties encountered may be overcome by attending to style and form, while other difficulties arise from questions of meaning and interpretation, or from struggles with language, text, or words (van Manen, 2002a). Despite the availability of methodological and writing guides, for many phenomenological researchers “writing remains painful, difficult, disorienting... Like trying to find your way through darkness” (van Manen, 2003b, p. 1). Foucault conceives of the process of writing as profoundly transformative because with each effort he had to learn to “tear me from myself” and “not to think the same thing as before” (*Colloqui con foucault: Interview with duccio trombadori*, 1991, p. 32). He reports that he writes “precisely because I don’t know yet what to think” and considers himself “more of an experimenter than a theorist” (p. 27).

Many writers are encouraging experimental writing as a qualitative research practice. For example, Carver urges experimental writers to “Make it New” (1989, p. 24) by going to find out for themselves and carrying their “news” to others to awaken the reader and impart a sense of discovery. Similarly, Richardson explores the concept of “experimental representation” for post-modern researchers who violate traditional conventions about the position of the author in the text (Richardson, 1994, p. 520). She suggests that alternative forms of representation may include mixing genres, incorporating visual presentations, and deploying literary devices to create new and “evocative representations” (p. 521). Writing that is evocative “touches us where we live” so that the writer experiences the “self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation” (p. 521). Richardson also acknowledges that difficulties often arise for experimental writers and issues of subjectivity, authorship, authority, and reflexivity must be addressed in the process (p. 520).

#### Re-searching Re-presentation

The current crisis in the representation of knowledge arises from the post-modern understanding of knowledge as “a social construction of reality” that undergoes a “communal negotiation of its meaning” (Kvale, 1996, p. 268). Post-modern researchers/reporters are often challenged by the capacity of language to impart value, and many struggle with grammatical, theoretical and methodological issues during the reporting process (p. 270). The qualitative researcher must realize that narrative constructions are not neutral but are “multiple, contradictory, changing” so that the writer must choose amongst many “available cultural stories” (Richardson, 1997, p. 180). This realization can release the writer from the expectation of “getting it right” and may free them to experiment with a variety of ways to produce “differently contoured and nuanced” (Richardson, 1994, pp. 520-521) representations and interpretations.

Any representation that arises from subjective, interpretive analysis may be challenged in a number of ways. For instance, Denzin suggests that the author’s authority has no permanency because there are always “different versions of different... stories, even when the same site is studied” (1994a, p. 506). He also discusses how each individual writer’s style will result in different ways of “describing, inscribing, and interpreting reality” (p. 506) and variations of how the author represents themselves within the text (p. 507). He posits that no objective interpretation is possible in qualitative writing because “all texts are biased, reflecting the play of class, gender,

race, ethnicity, and culture” (Denzin, 1994a, p. 507) in the construction of both its form and contents. Other post-modernists present the challenge that writers in particular cannot represent an experience purely because in the act of being made text, the experience is constituted and positioned discursively (Smith, 1999, p. 100). Since there is no “one-on-one correspondence” between the object and its discursive concept or category, no one concept can “function purely representationally” (p. 103). Therefore, “We must always mean more and other than we mean to say/write” (p. 103), and I understand this to mean that our actions may have multiple meanings and will often speak louder than our words.

Standard conventions for writing sociological text have assumed that data gives rise to facts and information from which the researcher constructs independent, value-free findings. Conversely, post-modern qualitative researchers recognize the “lived, interactional context in which a text was co-produced” and understand that any written report will bear “the handprint of the sociologist” (Richardson, 1997, p. 140). Confidence may be gained by clearly supporting any knowledge claims or interpretations made with direct quotations from the researcher’s notes and the participants’ interviews; likewise, the researcher must make sure that any “theoretical discussions be traceable in the data” (Janesick, 1994, p. 214). The writer who stays close to the data has the opportunity to tell their story in a powerful and effective way that is more likely to be convincing to the audience (p. 215). Staying close to the data means selecting “thick descriptions,” which arise from the data to give rich insights into the context, intentions, meanings and process of an experience, and “out of this... arises a text’s claims for truth” (Denzin, 1994a, p. 505).

A good phenomenological writer, according to Max van Manen, will use transcript material in a way that enriches and gives depth to the understanding of the phenomenon (personal communication, May 5, 2003). Kvale (1996) suggests that the writer select only the best quotations, that these be conceptualized and interpreted, and that they be “rendered in a readable style” (p. 267) rather than in a rough vernacular form. He also suggests several criteria for selecting interview quotations including choosing ones that give the reader an impression of the interaction of the interview and others that exemplify support for the analysis (p. 265).

## Re-searching with Phenomenological Writing

Phenomenological writing is at the very heart of the research process and involves simultaneous researching, reflecting, reading and writing. van Manen says that writing is the “very act of making contact with the things of our world” (van Manen, 2000c). Its purpose is to orient the reader to wonder by adopting “a peculiar attitude and attentiveness” to the face of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). He goes on to say that although wonder is the starting point of phenomenology, the text itself must “speak” to us and “induce a questioning wonder” (van Manen, 2003c, p. 1). A phenomenological text can have a “voking effect” on the reader whereby they recognize the “root voice, sound, language [and] tone” of the text that tells the cognitive and non-cognitive meanings that are embedded in the writing (van Manen, 2003c, p. 1). van Manen encourages the researcher to engage in the “vocative dimension of text” as an integrated part of a phenomenological practice, and he suggests several literary “turns” to aid the writer in the process, including the vocative, revocative, evocative, invocative, convocative and provocative turns.

I have encouraged a vocative turn in this thesis by staying out of the way of the data, and letting it evoke images that create an “authentic” understanding of the experience, and I have also endeavoured to produce a multi-voiced text that resonates with a vernacular, vocative tone (see van Manen, 2003c; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 506-507). I have used anecdotes from my own experience as an act of discovery and to bring into close proximity my understanding of being an “auntie” and of being the researcher/ reporter. In this way, I hope to establish the experience as “immediately or unreflectively recognizable,” and thereby achieve a revocative turn in the writing (see van Manen, 2000c; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). To achieve an evocative turn, I have constructed a glossary that explores the etymology of words such as midwife, which are association with historical and vernacular accounts of the roles “aunties” play in families and communities. In addition, the use of the metonym “auntie” strongly embeds evocative meaning into the text. As a literary device, a metonym takes a whole entity and uses it to stand in for another, similar entity (Lakoff, 1980, p. 36); for example, “aunties” can be used to describe certain women who create connections and build trust in families as well as women who do so in communities.

An invocative writer uses poetic devices and alliterations such as “Anonymous Aunties in Action” to reveal a deeper sense of meaning and significance to the reader’s

understanding of an experience or social phenomenon (van Manen, 2000c). I have adopted the practices of Richardson (1997), who constructs poetry from particularly poignant passages in the interview transcripts; this representation style enhances the capacity of the words to invoke an emotional and moral response to the text, making the words more memorable. In addition, I have included photographs with the phenomenological text in an effort to “go beyond the words” and reveal a “moment of epiphany” (van Manen, 2000c). The still photographs bring a convocative turn to the writing, because they encourage the reader to understand what the expressed feeling is behind the text (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 367).

Phenomenological writing is profound and transformative writing, because it makes close contact with the story and touches the reader with the vernacular voice of the participants. However, when phenomenological writing is provocative, the writer must consider the potential for ethical dilemmas to arise. A good writer can bring about an epiphany for the reader and perhaps provoke social action, yet the researcher must understand his or her responsibility to conduct and disseminate their research in an ethical way. In an endeavour to report my research in an ethical way, in the next section, I will recount the practices that I applied during the data collection, storage, and interpretation phases.

### Re-searching Phenomenological Practices

The practice of phenomenology is not discussed to the same degree that its philosophical underpinnings are, and it is my understanding that students of phenomenology often struggle with the practical aspects of its application. However, some researchers hope that discussions and descriptions of phenomenological practices may encourage others to take them up and abandon the traditional “grand narrative” of modernists (Lyotard, 1986). Likewise, phenomenologists encourage others to adopt an “epistemology of practice” that is comfortable with tensions, seeks alternative narratives, and understands that “the human realm is fragmented and disparate and that knowledge... is a human construction without sure foundation” (Polkinghorne, 1992, p. 162). The epistemology of practice for this study has been guided by the work of Canadian phenomenologist Max van Manen (see van Manen, 1992, 2000a).

Applied phenomenology, or the phenomenology of practice, seeks to understand the application of the philosophy to the disciplines of education, nursing, medicine, psychiatry, psychology and midwifery (van Manen, 2002a). Likewise, I seek to

understand how to apply phenomenology to the disciplines of community and social development. There are several aspects of phenomenology that may present a challenge to the researcher seeking to understand its application. To begin with, phenomenology has its origins in both philosophy and the humanities, so the researcher must review literature in the fields of social science, history, psychology, literature and fine arts to inform their phenomenological enquiry (van Manen, 2000b, p. 1). The next challenge is to put into practice a complex set of methods and methodologies to facilitate the interpretation and application of bracketing, reduction or epoche and associated practices, for which the researcher needs both skill and creativity (van Manen, 2000b, p. 1). Interpretive scholarship and writing skills are required to analyse the narrative material, and skill in thematic analysis, hermeneutic interpretation, and linguistic reflection are required at this stage. Finally, certain “linguistic and interpretive sensibilities” must be engaged in order to develop the creative writing abilities required for good phenomenological writing (p. 1). I have met and overcome many of these challenges in order to produce this thesis. I have an increased respect for those who engage in Phenomenology and multi-disciplinary studies because it demands rigorous investigations that range far and wide while staying rooted in the research question.

### Re-searching the Research Question

I spent considerable time re-formulating, adjusting, and rewording the research question and the process helped me to clarify the purpose and identify the key elements in the study. I kept in mind the advice of van Manen (2003a), who suggests that the researcher should be guided by a question that “stands out in the sky like a bright star.” Indeed, the research question has illuminated my path and has kept me focussed throughout the process.

A phenomenological question should also engage the reader so that they cannot help but wonder about the phenomenon and be drawn to “question deeply the very thing that is being questioned” (p. 44). The research question for this project is: “What is the experience of being an auntie within a small or rural community?” I named the phenomenon openly in the question with the metonym of “auntie” because I wanted to pique the curiosity of the reader right away and lead them to ponder “Who are these ‘aunties’ and what are they up to?” and “How is their experience different because it is small and rural community context?” I broke down the research question into smaller units for easier comprehension and eventual resolution (Leedy, 1997, p. 55), and the

sub-problems that emerged were: “What is it that aunties do?” and “How is it that they do it?” I added further depth to the exploration by asking “How do they respond, resist and persist with their actions?” I am confident that the sub-problems meet the criteria set by Leedy (1997), who states that each question must be researchable on its own, must be clearly tied to the interpretation, and must add to the totality of the problem (p. 56). I endeavoured to design an interview protocol that will facilitate meeting these criteria and evoke insights and revelations.

### Re-searching the Interview Protocol

I chose to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the main source of data about the phenomenon because I desired to collect experiential information and to stay close to the actions and the words of the participants. I also chose to interview the participants because this practice provides me with an on-going opportunity to hone my communication skills, and to use my intuition and knowledge in an inquiry process that is much “closer to art than to standardized social science methods” (Kvale, 1996, p. 84).

I also wanted to conduct semi-structured interviews because oral histories and personal narratives are important to discovering what is missing from the dominant discourse of social history. Social scientists value oral narratives because they can reveal aspects of the daily life of the non-elite that are missing from the public record (Raleigh Yow, 1994, p. 13) and can reveal “ramifications of personal relationships that do not get told in official documents” (p. 15). However, there are limitations to conducting in-depth interviews, and Raleigh Yow cautions that the perspective shared by interviewees may be narrow, ethnocentric, or idiosyncratic and the account may not be accurate due to selective remembering and forgetting (1994, pp. 16-19).

It is my assumption that the process of remembering and forgetting during the interviews produced a narrative account of the “perception” of the experience rather than providing at any absolute “truth.” Perception arises from the union of intentions and sensations, and in phenomenology, it is the “primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52). Concomitantly, I assume that the women who participated in my study are “competent to perceive accurately and to make meaningful statements about those perceptions” (DeJong & Berg, 1998, p. 58). I am also aware that the possibility for multiple perceptions is never exhausted, and as new perceptions emerge on the “horizon,” it extends and “opens up many other perspectives” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 53).

I endeavoured to put aside my own perceptions and to regard the respondents as the holders of expertise about the phenomenon of being an “auntie.” For instance, when I described the study to the participants in the opening statement of the interview, I made tentative statements such as “I think there is something special going on, but I am not sure yet.” Similarly, I sought to adopt a position of “not knowing” by assuming a general attitude “in which... actions communicate an abundant, genuine curiosity” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992, p. 29; see also DeJong & Berg, 1998). D. McGee (personal conversation, Feb. 2001) suggested that I show curiosity and “not knowing” by explaining to the participants in the opening statement “I want to have a look around and see what other women have done... and listen to how they describe their activities.” However, Speer (2002) suggests that any attempt to minimize or control bias may “actually stifle the thoroughly social, contextual features of interaction” (p. 516). He further suggests that all interviews are “unnatural” because they are contrived and are subject to “powerful expectations about social science research fielded by participants” (p. 515).

One way in which I attempted to create a “natural” setting for the collection of narrative data was to design an interview guide using open-ended questions. This questioning style does allow for “greater flexibility and individualization” within the interview (Patton, 1990, p. 283). At the same time, rigidity was avoided by my using broad, open-ended questions that encouraged more than a yes or no response and gave the “narrator scope to develop the answer as he or she chooses” (Raleigh Yow, 1994, pp. 40-41). I also avoided leading questions by carefully choosing words and phrases to facilitate neutrality and clarity and by avoiding the use of emotionally laden terms (Raleigh Yow, 1994, p. 285).

I developed the interview guide to maintain close contact with the “experience as lived” (van Manen, 1992, p. 67), and I remained focussed on the task of asking “what is the nature of this phenomenon?” (p. 62). I designed each interview question to contain the elements of “What,” “How” or, on occasion, “Who.” I took these elements and engaged them in an “information matrix” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in order to extract interview questions directly from the research question.

The interview questions were further developed with ideas gleaned from reading many phenomenological interviews, and from a variety of interview techniques encountered in my studies and professional life. I began the actual interview with a brief statement about the research in order to raise the respondent’s curiosity, establish

them as the experts, and create some common understanding of the project. I then asked if they had “anything they would like to know about the project or me before we start?” in order to build some rapport and relieve any apprehensions they might have (Kvale, 1996, p. 128) and to establish that the respondent could feel comfortable with questioning me. I started the interview with some broad questions about the participants’ present lifestyle, outstanding achievements, and early life in order to warm them up to the topic and get the conversation flowing. I then introduced the first of several sections with a “Guided Grand Tour” question, which is designed to elicit details in a “verbal description of significant features of the cultural scene” (Spradley, 1979, p. 87). Prompts were designed along the lines of “Mini Tour” questions (p. 88) and were used to investigate smaller aspects of the experience, for example “How did you get yourself ready for this event?”

I was particularly cautious about embedding the key term “auntie” into the interview and did not want to assume that the respondents shared my understanding of (or enthusiasm for) the word. I used the introductory statement: “Auntie is the word that I have chosen to describe women who are active at what I would call a grassroots level and I am curious to see how other women respond to that word.” After exploring “the kinds of things that aunties do,” I posed the question “Is this a word that you could use to describe yourself?” to which a couple of respondents said no. and we went on to explore alternative titles such as sister and grandmother. I was pleased that some respondents were comfortable enough in the interview to reject the term, despite the fact that it was central to my description of the project. I was also unsure about claiming the title “auntie” for myself when speaking to the participants. In the end, I followed the advice of Allan Wade and Dan McGee (personal conversations, February 2001), and the example of Finch (1984), who, faced with a similar dilemma, “rapidly took a decision to come clean at the beginning of each interview” (p. 79). I assumed the role of one who was curious about my own experiences and perceptions of being an “auntie” and who set out to gain insight from the experiences and perceptions of others.

I also followed Kvale’s (1996, p. 127) advice to invite the respondent to pose questions or explore aspects of the concept that may not have arisen. I posed questions such as “Is there anything else that you feel is important to your role in the community that we have not discussed?” and I concluded the interview with “Do you have any other questions for me...?” This lead nicely to a period of debriefing with the

respondent, which provided an opportunity to “deal with issues... she has been thinking or worrying about during the interview” (p. 128).

In this particular study, issues and worries did not arise at the debriefing point, but surfaced once the participants were asked to review the transcriptions of their own interview. For example, the issues of voice and representation resulted in the elimination of three interviews and I believe that these issues took root in the process of participant selection.

#### Re-searching the Participant Selection

I chose the participants for the study using a combination of purposeful, maximum variation sampling and a reputational approach. Purposeful sampling “selects information-rich cases for in-depth study,” and a wide range of samples, known as “maximum variation sampling” (Patton, 1990, p. 184). Huberman and Miles also urge qualitative researchers to sample from a “range of activities, processes, events, locations and times” (1994, p. 441). In the “reputational approach” to participant selection, the process is guided by suggestions from other “knowledgeable” community members in an informal, conversational manner (Hunter, 1953). A reputational approach is appropriate for studies in small and rural community contexts because long-time residents and other “key observers” are asked to name individuals they consider to be influential people in the community, and “in towns and villages... people’s actions tend to be more accessible to open community scrutiny” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 188). Even though a reputation for influence is not an accurate indicator for actual influence (Wolfinger, 1960, p. 634), it is an appropriate selection method for this study because it is precisely those women who are *perceived* to be informal leaders that I want to study.

I have also gathered data samples from personal narration’s, from photographic evidence, and from material and textual sources. I have drawn themes from these “unique and diverse” samples in the interpretive stage and sought to identify “important common patterns” amongst the variations (Patton, 1990, p. 184). Morse and Mitcham (2002) suggests that the researcher continue to sample to the point of “redundancy” or saturation, when replication, confirmation and negative cases have been assured, and the researcher has considered thoroughly the depth and breadth of the study, the “quality of the interviews, and the appropriateness of participant selection” (p. 192). The sampling procedures and decisions that I made along the way changed as I became more familiar

with the topic under study, as my understanding of the methodologies became more sophisticated, and as challenges arose for me.

I did encounter some challenges that I believe were related to participant selection. The opportunity to interview two participants arose from an invitation to travel to Far North Queensland with the District Supervisor of Schools. He and the principal of the central school arranged for me to interview several women within the district whom they perceived of as “aunties”, three of whom were Indigenous Australian women. I was not sure at first about being given the principals’ office to conduct the interviews, because I did not perceive of the space as an ideal, neutral location, but did not feel strongly enough about it to refuse the privilege. I also felt uncomfortable because I was a non-indigenous Canadian researcher who the Indigenous Australian participants had never met nor spoken to and because I was on their territory and did not know the local, indigenous protocol. These and other elements combined to create a palpable power imbalance between the participants and myself.

Issues of representation and voice were embedded in the research relationship right from the start because the racial, social, political and cultural positions of the researcher, the superintendent of schools, the principals and the respondents were each constructed so very differently. Raleigh Yow (1994) identifies the “dominant-subordinate” relationship and “the possibilities of taking advantage of another” that are inherent in any interview situation (p.107). She also discusses the possibilities for race, social class, and culture to “impinge” on the interview situation (see also McGee, 1999; McGinty, 1992). I felt that all of these increased the power imbalance during my interviews with the indigenous women.

The first of the participants seemed to respond the questions willingly; however, the second participant often responded with short answers, and I noted that the interview seemed contrived. In the end, I was not able to use any part of either participants’ transcript because each participant is to review and freely edit the transcript of the interview to their approval before the contents can be used in the study. Unfortunately, I was not able to gain any response to the transcripts from these two participants, so in accordance with the “Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice at James Cook University,” I dropped the data from the project and destroyed any data associated with them.

I also had to drop the data gathered during an interview with another indigenous participant, who offered herself to me as an ideal “auntie” upon hearing about the project. However, when it came time to approve of the transcript, she could not conciliate the transcripts with her perceptions of the experience of being an “auntie,” nor could she reconcile the oral with the written record. Kvale identifies similar issues as the “deconceptualizing” of oral conversation into a “written mode of discourse,” which he considers makes an “impoverished basis for interpretation” (1996, p. 166). Conversations, on the other hand, provide the opportunity for clarification along the way, but upon transcription, they are “detemporalizing” and “frozen into a written text” (p. 167). In the end, I suggested that we withdraw the transcript from the project and relieve her anxiety, to which she readily agreed.

I proceeded to the interpretive stage of the project with interviews from ten women. I also had a collection of photographs that I had taken in both Canada and Australia, as well as a hodge-podge of local newspapers, brochures, and newsletters that I had gathered in my travels. These images and texts were incorporated into the analysis as a means to enrich and broaden the scope of the interpretation.

#### Re-searching with Photographic Data

I began to collect vernacular photographic evidence of aunties in action as a way to enliven my Doctoral confirmation seminar. I wanted the committee to interact with the images or to trigger a memory (Garrett-Petts & Lawrence, 2000, p. 220) or perhaps “invoke identification, and thus appeal to common themes” (p. 292). I also wanted to extend the data set beyond the “telling” of the 10 participant’s stories and include the “showing” of many other aunties being active in many other possible roles. I also included the photographs because they are part of the flow of vernacular culture and “vernacular expression,” and they can capture moments that are indigenous to a given community (Garrett-Petts & Lawrence, 2000, p. 220). I intended to offer a “moment of held breath, a cultural pause” that might bring reflection “upon the normally invisible social, historical, and cultural factors that shape what we... see” (p. 115). I incorporated photographic pictures precisely because they transcend the written and the oral formats in their ability to “speak a thousand words” and precisely because they are able to fix in time and space images of a representative “aunties.”

Visual culture (or studies) is an appropriate companion for sociology or phenomenology because it is an interdisciplinary field that “starts out” in the non-

artistic, non-aesthetic realm of “vernacular visibility” and of “everyday seeing” (Mitchell, Aug. 2002, p. 178). Photographs may aid researchers in understanding social life by “making the familiar strange” and awakening the viewer to the taken-for-granted visual constructions of culture (p. 166). “Visual sociology” employs a combination of traditional approaches to documentary photography and post-modern approaches to the “recording, analysis, and communication of social life” (Harper, 1994, p. 403), by which the interpretation of visual media can occur.

I recognize the bias inherent in my role as researcher/photographer because I can manipulate the context and production of the image so that “What a photograph shows us is how a particular thing could be seen, or could be made to look at” (Rose, 2001, p. 81). I likewise understand that there is no true value-free representation possible, and agree with Bourdieu, who posits that photographs are only “representational” to the point of being “true and precise enough to permit recognition” (1965/1990, p. 22). Researchers such as myself can critically analyse “representation” in photography by asking questions like “What is the image of? Who produced the image, when and why?” and “How do people use the image?” (Rose, 2001, p. 82).

It was my intention to take generic snapshots in a variety of settings that could have occurred in any number of small towns and rural communities across Western Canada or North-eastern Australia. I used “purposeful sampling” by taking advantage of public events such as festivals and parades to locate subjects, and I also utilized “intensity sampling” by seeking information-rich examples, such as school sports days and local markets (Patton, 1990, p. 171). I acknowledge that my sample is limited to women who are engaged in “typical” community service activities of mainstream, Western, middle-class society, yet at the same time, I am aware that “any particular purposeful sampling strategy may lead to distortion in the findings” (p. 181). I purposefully did not venture into any indigenous community events or gatherings with my camera because I did not want to infringe on the rights or the honour of my hosts, nor to enter into the ethical dilemmas that photographing indigenous women could raise.

I endeavoured to be respectful in my brief interactions with the women I photographed; however, I suspect that honour and fear of judgement are the reasons that some women refused to be part of a group to be photographed, while others made self-deprecating remarks such as “I hope I don’t break your camera.” In no situation did I

coerce anyone to participate in the individual or small group photographs, and written (and in one case verbal) permission was gained prior to the photo being taken. I also took some photographs from a distance of groups during public activities. I did not seek consent from these individual subjects, as I understood that the images arise from and belong to the public realm. Examples of such “public” photographs could be the Girls Scouts, 4-H and Big Sisters floats in the Duncan parade (p. 72), or the schoolgirls laying the wreath at the cenotaph in Tully (p. 76). Finally, in a few instances, photographs were supplied to me, such as with the Raging Grannies (p. 131) and the Cowichan Therapeutic Riding Association (p. 266), and credit is given to the sources in both cases.

I spent considerable time in critically assessing and selecting visual images for inclusion in a study. I chose to abide with the bias in my selection process, knowing that my choices would be based on my socially constructed, subjective judgement of dignity and honour, and on my sense of aesthetic appeal. Rose (2001) suggests adopting a strategy for assessing visual material that “takes images seriously” as products of their social context, that “thinks about the social conditions” and impact of producing visual images, and that considers the researchers’ “own way of looking at images” in a reflexive manner (pp. 15- 16). Likewise, the selection of artefacts of material culture to include in my interpretation was biased towards those archetypes, icons, and social activities which I have had previous experiences with, such as Aunt Jemima and community dances.

#### Re-searching with Material Artefacts

I chose to include material cultural artefacts in my study of aunties because the symbolic meaning of cultural artefacts can provide researchers with “material traces of behaviour” (Hodder, 1994, p. 395) that other sources do not. Artefacts can “get us close to lived experience” and can represent the everyday, mundane and “alternative perspectives” (p. 396). Material objects can also provide an “important and different insight” from textual or oral sources because “material culture is active” and is therefore “not simply a passive by-product of other areas of life” (p. 395).

Researchers who conduct a critical interpretation of material culture must consider the social and political context of the production and consumption of the artefact. They must apply appropriate social and material culture theory to their analysis (Hodder, 1994, p. 400) so that it becomes possible to “infer both utilitarian and conceptual meaning” from patterns of use (p. 399). Many material symbols can come

to have more than representational meaning and can take on abstract meanings that are “tacit and implicit,” are durable, and that are “continually being reinterpreted in new contexts” (p. 398). When experiences and sets of practices are shared, the material symbols that represent them “can come to have common evocations and common meanings”(p. 396). I gathered common cultural artefacts such as collective cookbooks, words such as “spinster,” and women’s weavings because within their common meaning they can evoke “multiple and conflicting voices” and can be interpreted as “forms of silent discourse conducted by women” (p. 395). It is my intention that the inclusion of such material artefacts will contribute depth and breadth to understanding the experiences that are common to being an “auntie.”

#### Re-searching with Ethical Considerations

I desired to create an ethical research process that gave priority to the words and the welfare of the participants. Researchers who adopt feminist and post-modern qualitative practices that have an “emphasis on multiple realities and researcher interpretation” are facing new challenges as a “nonsystematic approach to ethical issues” emerges (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 289). As ethical issues have emerged for me, I have tried to create transparency by undergoing a “clear and explicit reporting of data and procedures” (p. 439). (A full discussion of the criteria for verification of data trustworthiness will be conducted in Chapter Seven.)

I understand conducting research is a value-laden process, and I have become “attuned to making decisions regarding ethical concerns” while allowing for “the possibilities of recurring ethical dilemmas and problems” (Janesick, 1994, p. 212). I endeavoured to harm no others in the research process by practicing compassion, nurturance and an ethics of care in making any moral decisions (Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988). For example, I withdrew two of the transcripts from the interpretive process because of ethical considerations and the third in consideration of the difficulties the respondent was experiencing in reconciling the transcript of her interview. In all three cases, I eliminated the electronic and paper copies of the transcripts and erased the audiotapes of the interviews.

I worked systematically to do what was required of me by James Cook University in order to conduct ethical research with human subjects. I carried out my research under several Australian codes of ethical conduct, including the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) code and the National Health and

Medicine Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines, which inform the Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice at James Cook University (JCU) (2000).

For example, the “Statement of Human Experimentation” of the NHMR Council guides James Cook University’s Ethics Review Committee (2003) and I abide by Principle 5 of the statement, which sets out that “... the researcher must at all times respect the personality, rights, wishes, beliefs, consent, and freedom of the individual subject. The Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice for JCU (2000) also guided me, as it emphasizes that the researcher must maintain high standards of professional conduct, conform to accepted ethical standards, ensure the safety of all those associated, and observe confidentiality (2000, p. 3). My research also adheres to the principles set out in the JCU Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (2002), which include principles of consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding; of respect, recognition and involvement; and of benefits, outcomes and agreements such as free and informed consent. Finally, I adhered to the principles of the AARE (1998), which states that the consequences of conducting research must “enhance the general welfare” and be for the “development of human good,” and that the project must hold respect for the “dignity and worth of people” while posing “no risk of significant harm.”

#### Re-searching by Data Collection

I was personally responsible for the collection of all data, and I adhered to Principle 8 of the NHMRC statement by assuring that, prior to interviewing or photographing any individual “free consent of the subject be obtained” (2003). I issued an information page (set out on JCU letterhead) to each interview participant that contained contact information for the researcher and the research supervisor as well as “sufficient information about the purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconveniences, and discomforts of the study” (2003). In the information sheet, the purpose of the study was described and the length of the interview was projected. It also stated that the interview would be recorded on audiotape, which would be transcribed later by a “professional, confidential transcriber.” The participants were also invited to work with me to ensure removal of “any information that may identify you, may cause discomfort for you, or may compromise your position in the community.” I explained to the participants that they would have the right to delete from, add to or completely withdraw the document, as well as to check that the transcription was accurate and to generally “edit for errors” (Raleigh Yow, 1994, p. 108).

When I returned the transcriptions to the participants for review, I also invited (but did not require) them to reflect on the data and to identify “any themes, patterns or metaphors that are evident to you” and I encouraged them to “share some new insights or understandings.” This offer provided the participants with the opportunity to debrief from the experience again and to provide feedback to me on further understandings of the phenomenon. Once all the editing had been done, I obtained verbal or written (emailed) permission from each participant that she was satisfied with the transcripts as they now stood and that she gave her permission for the analysis to proceed.

I strove to achieve confidentiality and anonymity for the participants even though I acknowledge that these are ideals, and I discussed this dilemma with the participants. I acknowledged to them the difficulty of maintaining anonymity in small communities because “Pseudonyms and disguised locations are often recognized by insiders” (Christians, 2000, p. 139) and because “Local people can nearly always tell (or will assume) who is being depicted” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 293). Nonetheless, all participants agreed to take part despite the risks of being identifiable in the study.

The creation of social research can result in both benefits and costs for those individuals involved. On the one hand, the participant may benefit because the “storying of experience provides persons with a sense of continuity and meaning” (White and Epston, p. 12). No individual participant received direct payment or other benefit for participating in the research, although following the data collection trip up Cape York, I mailed a book to each school library in thanks for their hospitality.

On the other hand, van Manen warns that phenomenological studies can create discomfort, anxiety, guilt, or self-doubt as well as hope, moral stimulation, insight, or thoughtfulness (1992, p. 162). I was aware that although some respondents may be “lead to new levels of self-awareness” during conversational interviews, others can be lead to lingering “anger, defeat, intolerance” (p. 163). The information sheet that I assembled did identify to the participants any “demands, risks, inconveniences, and discomforts of the study” (2000, Principle 8) that I could anticipate, such as unwanted publicity or sanctions arising from the dissemination of findings, being offended by the researcher, or suffering unanticipated long term effects (Merriam, 2002b, p. 180).

I laid out the risk strategies to help cope with potential issues, including efforts “to assure anonymity,” to “debrief and discuss the interview experience,” and to assure that the participant “be referred to a supportive agency in your own location if undue

distress results from your participation.” Nonetheless, this project qualified as “Experimental Category 1” with James Cook University, which indicates “... no, or insignificant, psychological distress or physical discomfort. No deception involved and no invasion of privacy” (2000, p. 9).

In the information sheet I also described how the findings might be used for both publication and public presentation and stated that I had the right to use the data for a “minimum of five years following publication of the Doctoral thesis.” I have sole authorship of the thesis as primary researcher and was not assisted substantially by any other person (2000, p. 5). My dissemination plan includes submitting articles to at least two peer reviewed journals, presenting the findings of the study at two research conferences, and hosting a public showing of the photographs, poems and some sample artefacts that are discussed in the thesis. Finally, after reporting the findings to “a research audience of experts in the field of research” (p. 8), I intend to present the work in the public media as a trade book or as magazine articles, and to present the findings to local community groups.

#### Re-searching with Informed Consent

The consent form that each participant signed contained information about the purpose of the study and about my intentions for the findings, and also stated my intent to keep information about their identity “strictly confidential.” It sought their prior approval to participate in an audio taped interview or to have their photographs taken. In compliance with Principle 9 of the NHMRC statement, all interview and photograph participants were made aware that they were “free at all times to withdraw consent to further participation” (2000, p. 2).

I stored the consent forms for the interviews separately from the tapes and transcripts in order to try and assure anonymity to the interview participants. At the interview I devised codes for each participant and used them to identify the audiotapes. In the transcripts I substituted names of places, organizations and people with letters of the alphabet, unless identification was of no harm to the participant (such as naming the city of Vancouver or using a generalization like Cape York). I used the coded identities throughout the analysis process, but eventually a “nickname” arose from the data to describe the role of each individual, such as RCB for “Rural Community Builder.” More recently, I chose a pseudonym, such as “Penny,” for each participant because I wanted the women to be known as individuals, not only by their role.

I then forwarded a schema of the themes that had arisen during the analysis to all the participants whom I was able to contact and offered them the opportunity to comment or respond to them. At the same time, I included a collection of the poems I had extracted, along with the pseudonyms that I had derived for each, and asked for feedback on their own or others' representations. I endeavoured to "adopt the stance of genuine learner" (McGinty, 1992, p. 59) by soliciting and incorporating the reflections of the participants as the results unfold, although in practice the feedback at this later stage has been very little, and mostly from the Canadian contingent. I do not assume that this indicates that there is nothing more to learn, but rather, it indicates the difficulty of maintaining "conversations" with some of the participants over the distance of time and geography.

#### Re-searching by Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data analysis phase of the research started during the first interview and continued until I felt that all of the significant leads had been explored and that it was time to construct an interpretation of my findings. I began with identifying a phenomenon that I wanted to study and in naming the experience as being an "auntie." Following the data collection phase, I sought to identify small meaning units such as codes and word patterns in the transcripts. I clustered these units, identified commonalities that arose, and sought relationship between them. I constructed three themes that incorporated the units, their meanings, and their relationships. These themes are presented as some "possible" meanings of the concept "auntie," and of the experience of being one.

The data analysis process has taught me that the explication of meaning through phenomenological reflection can be a "difficult and often laborious task" (van Manen, 2002b, p. 1) and I have turned to other qualitative researchers along the way to help me understand the process. For instance, I have adopted the five approaches to data analysis as proposed by Kvale (1996), including meaning condensation, meaning categorization, narrative structuring, meaning interpretation, and generating meaning through ad hoc methods (pp. 192-193).

In the meaning condensation stage, I worked to abridge and reduce the interview texts "into briefer, more succinct formulations" (Kvale, 1996, p. 192) and "natural meaning units" (p. 193). Next, I highlighted all the passages that were in first person, present tense, in order to stay with the specifics and avoid generalizations (Max van

Manen, personal conversation, May 5, 2003). I then took each interview question and created a “cognitive map” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 134) of the responses to each question in order to condense and visually represent the arising concepts and the relationships between them. Once I felt thoroughly familiar with the themes, I began the process of meaning categorization. Meaning categorization is the next phase of analysis identified by Kvale (1996) in which the researcher creates codes or categories and organizes the data in order to structure and reduce the larger text (p. 192). I looked closely at the words used by the participants and began to draw out “micro-themes” (van Manen, 2002c) by highlighting patterns that I detected, noting patterns or themes, and making contrasts and comparisons between categories and codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 245). During this phase, I tried to be open to new possibilities, and attempted to “work with loosely held chunks of meaning... to reconfigure them as the data shape up... and to lay aside more tenuous ones” (p. 70). I found it particularly useful and grounding to return to the research question over and over, as Miles and Huberman suggest, “just to remind yourself of what is important” (1994, p. 70).

During this stage of the analysis process, I was aware of the fine balance between thoroughness and over coding, which can occur when the researcher “codes beyond the research question” so that much of the results are simply not relevant to the study (Given & Olson, 2003, p. 171). After much refinement and “winnowing” of the codes (Cresswell, 1998, p. 140), I reviewed them, eliminated any overlap or redundancy, collapsed similar categories, and made sure that I had noted any counterexamples (Krathwohl, 1997, p. 311). I then chose the best supporting examples and identified “verbatim narrative from the data for each code” (p. 311). The selection of narrative for inclusion involves an “attempt to create a coherent story out of the many happenings” (Kvale, 1996, p. 192) while endeavouring to stay “with the vernacular” (p. 193).

One challenge that the researcher/writer faces at this stage is creating a balance between presenting descriptive and interpretive text. Patton (1990) suggests that the data not be so “thin” as to “remove context or meaning,” but be “thick” enough that the descriptions “should allow the reader to enter into the situation and thoughts of the people presented in the report” (p. 430). “Thick” descriptions are those that have depth and breadth because they arise from numerous sources and contain a large variety of details (Geertz, 1973, p. 3-5). Likewise, van Manen challenges the researcher to

question “What does this passage speak of?” and to select only those data that have “punctum,” which prick, touch or disturb the reader in some way (personal communication, May 5, 2003). For instance, the excerpts that I selected to represent as poetry contain passages that I perceived of as having “punctum” because they stood out and touched me more than other passages did.

The next stage of analysis involves meaning interpretation whereby the researcher “goes beyond what is directly said,” to identify structures and relations of meaning that “are not immediately apparent in the text” (Kvale, 1996, p. 201). Here, I leap from concrete data to abstract, interpretive themes. I understand that the interpretive stage is a “complex and creative process of insightful invention, discovery and disclosure” (van Manen, 2002c, p. 1; see also Patton, 1990, p. 433). In reality, the process of analysis was an “ad hoc” one, whereby I used “different approaches and techniques for meaning generation” (Kvale, 1996, p. 203). I engaged critically in hermeneutic and heuristic reflection, and I found that eventually “the question itself is infused in the researcher’s being” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 43). In order to strengthen the construction of the analysis, I followed the advice of Huberman and Miles (1994) who suggest “building a logical chain of evidence and making conceptual/theoretical coherence” by comparing the interpretation “with the referent constructs in the literature” (p. 432). In addition to this, I also built a chain of evidence to be accountable for ethical decisions that I made along the way.

#### Re-capping the Research Process

Over the course of researching this thesis, I have adhered to the practices of phenomenology, feminism, and qualitative methodologies because they position the participants as the experts in the study rather than the researcher. These methodologies also guided the formation of the research question, interview protocol, and data selection of this study. Data included the transcripts of the ten interviews that contributed to the study, the photographic evidence I collected of aunties in action, and the vernacular media that I gathered along the way. Phenomenological and hermeneutic analysis of the data revealed themes that grouped into concepts, which describe possible experiences of being an auntie. In the following chapter, theories of social construction are explored because they can strengthen the analysis of the data by addressing the constitutive power of language to enculturate dominant ideologies.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Re-constructing Aunties in Action**

Aunties may socially “re-construct” their place in society by synthesizing alternative concepts, discourses, and practices that bring their families and communities together for mutual gain

#### **Re-constructing**

a complex image or idea resulting from a synthesis by the mind  
to create by systematically arranging ideas and expressions  
devised with the mind; synthesized from simple elements, esp. a concept  
to pile up together, from Old English *streon* to spread, gain, offspring

**Raging Grannies Reconstructing Stereotypes  
at their annual Un-Convention**

**Saltspring Island, BC**

**Photos courtesy of Cowichan Raging Grannies**

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TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

## **Not a Bunch of Yahoos**

We made sure  
that they were protected  
from the police,  
and

we also made sure  
that they had a chance to speak.

And that's all they want.

We realized they are not a  
bunch of yah-hoos.

Sometimes they get angry and  
we helped to calm down that  
anger  
by singing....

We went

down  
one side

and across, right in front of the police,

the other side  
up  
and

singing...

and everybody was  
cheering  
because we did this.

And they forgot that they were  
yelling.

And then we did the spiral dance  
four times on the street.

And that's what happened,  
and that was really good.

(19)

**Sophia  
Raging Granny**

## Re-constructing Aunties

I have been informed by a variety of theories in constructing this study, including feminist, social construction, socio-linguistic, and response-based theories. I am among the qualitative researchers who are struggling to find **re-construct** theories, symbolic representations, or mental schema to guide me towards a suitably reflective “representation of reality, [as] malleable and modifiable” (Morse, 1997, p. 171). Qualitative methods such as hermeneutic phenomenology work well with sociological inquiries such as this one because they get at “the messiness of reality” (Brew, 2001, p. 236).

My study is rooted in post-modern and feminist theories because they both pose “counter discourses” to the dominant Enlightenment discourses of “dualisms and hierarchies” and they reject an “absolutist, unitary concept of truth” (Hekman, 1990b, p. 189). Post-modern and feminist theorists seek to establish a discursive theory of knowledge that presents the subject as “constituted by discourse,” yet as capable of resisting subjugation by forming new discourses and alternative “modes of subjectivity” (p. 189).

Likewise, social construction theorists like Guba and Lincoln propose that “there exist multiple, socially constructed realities ungoverned by any natural law, causal or otherwise,” and challenge the notion of objective knowledge by acknowledging that researcher and researched are “interlocked” (1989, p. 84). They urge qualitative researchers to find new ways of collecting, analysing, and reporting data in post-modern situations where the norm is fast becoming to produce “messy, uncertain, multivoiced texts” along with “more reflexive forms of intertextual representations” (p. 98). Post-modern researchers who examine socially constructed realities are likewise encouraged to “expose the constructions... open each to critique... and provide opportunity for revised or entirely new constructions to emerge” (p. 89).

For instance, I have gained new understandings and engaged new modes of inquiry from my studies of the response-based theory proposed by Wade (1999). This theory provides me with a new framework for analysis of language and social action with which to critique the social construction of aunties. Narrative and socio-linguistic theories have also been employed because I am interested in the “ways in which we are active in producing and reproducing the social relations of discourse... and, inversely,

the ways in which those social relations overpower our lives” (Smith, 1990, pp. 226-227).

### Re-constructing Feminist Theories

Feminist theorists are engaged in an ongoing critique of the dominant discourses that “constitute women as inferior” and they challenge others to “explore the limits of those discourses and what lies beyond them” (Hekman, 1990b, p. 187). As Foucault suggests, dominant discourses permeate society (in Rabinow, 1984), and feminists have taken up his challenge to “oppose those knowledge/power discourses that subordinate women everywhere throughout society” (p. 187). However, other feminists argue that some forms of post-modernism are removed from the point of doing research, which is “to create useful knowledge which can... ‘make a difference’” (Maynard & Purvis, 1994b, p. 8). Feminist theorists also challenge andocentric assumptions about research and inquiry that “speak of theories, methods, and designs” rather than of lives (Chandler, 1992, p. 130).

Along with many other feminists, I strive to adopt post-modern theories and practices that bring stories of real people and real communities to the foreground (Chandler, 1992, p. 130). I have tried to keep the research grounded in “common and visceral understandings” of the experiences of other women because that is where “resistance to everyday, unexamined stories begins” (Nielsen, 1998, p. 119). I purposefully sought alternative stories to those “that currently hold the spotlight” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 71) and from these stories, I sought to construct a plausible understanding of the experience of being an “auntie.”

### Re-constructing Social Construction Theories

A leading social construction theory that has informed this thesis is the constructivist (or hermeneutic) paradigm proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989). They posit that the meaning assigned to everyday experience is influenced by the current social and cultural constructions under which individual members of society “attempt to make sense of their surrounds” and, in the process, share in socially constructing knowledge (1989, p. 13). Assumptions that underlie Guba and Lincoln’s evaluation theory that inform my work include that facts have no meaning except within a value framework (therefore there is no objective assessment), that the notion of “truth” is a matter of consensus that is negotiated through discursive practices, and that causes and

effects do not exist (so that accountability is a relative matter) (1989, p. 44; see also Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

Constructivists also assume that knowledge is contextual and malleable, and therefore challenge themselves to ask which theory, concept, or interpretation “seems to take best account of that knowledge constructed to date – itself changeable – in the most sophisticated way?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 70). Feminists such as Hekman (1990b) take up social construction theory because it lets the gaps and ambiguities of discourse provide room to identify other conceptualizations, to revise the accepted truth (p.187) and to present other forms and possibilities “for resistance” (p. 189) to undesirable constructions (see also Christians, 2000; Smith, 1990).

Many social “construction” theorists in the fields of psychology and social psychology have adopted a model that is “a loose collection of theoretical perspectives” (Burr, 2000, p. 163) whose tenets stand in “stark contrast to most traditional psychology” (p. 5). [Some have taken up Gergen’s (1985) term “*constructionism*” to distinguish themselves from “*constructivism*” as a particular Piagetian developmental theory (in Burr, 2000, p. 2). For the sake of clarity, I will use the term ‘*constructivism*’ throughout]. I share the understanding with constructivists that knowledge is socially constructed in the course of our everyday lives and sustained by social processes, actions and interactions (p. 4). These theories also challenge me to take a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, to be suspicious of shared assumptions, and to consider the historical and cultural specifics of concepts such as urban or rural (pp. 3-4; see also St. Pierre, 2002).

I have chosen to adopt social constructivist theories because they assume a relativist ontology that “denies the existence of an objective truth” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43) and therefore demand tolerance for ambiguity. These theories espouse a subjectivist epistemology that challenges me to develop “humility appropriate to the insight that one can never know how things ‘really’ are” (p. 47). Likewise, naturalist methodologies require that I give up “control over the process” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 46), and provide opportunities for “revised or entirely new constructions” to emerge (p. 89).

### Re-Constructing A Relativist Ontology

Constructivist theory is informed by a relativist ontology that recognizes the nature of reality as complex and denies the possibility of any single objective truth

about complex social phenomenon. A relativist perspective asserts that “realities are social constructions of the mind” and not under a “cause-effect law” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 42), and likewise, that all knowledge is a “direct perception of reality” so that we “construct our own versions... between us” (Burr, 2000, p. 6). Social constructivist tenets are relativistic because they state that “there cannot be any given, determined nature” and that, subsequently, “There are no ‘essences’” (p. 5). Feminist theorists are aligned with a relativist ontology in that both hold that “human beings can change themselves and the world they live in” by independently exercising free choice in their acts and beliefs (Burr, 2000, p. 60). Constructivists recognize that human beings can create change because “the self is a product of language and social interaction” (p. 40). This premise ensures a constant state of flux, whereby “meaning is never fixed.... and is always contestable” (p.41). Therefore, language is considered to be the site of “variability, disagreement, and potential conflict.... where power relations are acted out and contested” (p. 41).

A constructivist researcher understands that language is a powerful constituting element in society. According to Foucault, power is ever-present in discourse, so that the needs of the powerful are often met in dominant discourse practices (in Rabinow, 1984). Foucault understands discourses as being systems of representation, schemata, or an order of concepts that impose themselves on and constitute subjects (Foucault, 1980). A discourse may be comprised of a single “unit of utterance” or an “integration of sentences” but it often holds a global meaning “that is more than that contained in the sentences” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 31). Gee refers to a capital “D” “Discourse” that emerges according to the societal context and includes “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing” (1999, p. xix ), so that “Each of us is a member of many Discourses, and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities” (p. xix ).

Social constructivists and post-structuralists share their perceptions of the “positioning” power of discourse (Davies & Harre, 1990), whereby “our identities and ourselves as persons come to be produced by socially and culturally available discourses” (Burr, 2000, p. 141). However, this is not a deterministic perspective, as many constructivists recognize that “constructivism provides for a proactive posture; we can re-create our context, our situatedness. We are no longer victims... but are the shapers of our destinies” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 131).

Social constructivists focus on the reflexive interactions and social processes that take place in the everyday world, including those that constitute the research process (Burr, 2000, pp. 7-8). The researcher may engage in a reflexive “critique-as-inquiry” by positioning themselves as the “insider” who examines the actualities of “how things work” (Smith, 1990, p. 204). I positioned myself as an insider in this study and attempted to maintain a reflexive critical stance during the process, whereby “we explore our own lives and practices” (p. 205) by identifying power relationships and “disclosing practices we know and use” (p. 204). A reflexive stance also opened me up to alternative interpretations of the research process and findings because it “refers to equal status... of researchers and their respondents... [and] the accounts offered by each” (Burr, 2000, p. 181).

Researchers who adopt a relativist ontology understand the nature of reality to be reflexive, to be co-constructed by language and discourse, and to be capable of a multitude of representations and interpretations. Consequently, the relationship between the researcher, the researched, and the audience must be constructed differently than when the division between the object and subject of research was clearly defined. For example, the participants in this study had the opportunity to review and comment on the three concepts that I derived from the data as well as on the poetry that I extracted from the transcripts to assure that they were comfortable with these representations of their collective experiences.

### Re-Constructing A Subjectivist Epistemology

Many innovative researchers are seeking to break down the traditional barriers between the knower and the known by adopting a subjectivist epistemology whereby “the findings of an investigation are the *literal creation* of the inquiry process” (italics original) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 84). As the “interrelationship of personal and research issues” changes, it will bring about “dynamically radical and progressively transformative” ways of knowing (Brew, 2001, p. 104) so that new rules of conduct and standards for research credibility are required (p. 55). I am one of a number of researchers who is learning to trust my personal and cultural biography and is bringing new ways of understanding subjectivity into the research process (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 53-54). More and more, researchers are reclaiming the “involvement of the self” from the usual assumption of an “imposed subjective denial,” and are choosing “topics which are of personal significance to them” (Brew, 2001; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 1994b).

I claimed my space in the middle of this research right at the outset and positioned myself as an “insider” who perhaps had experiences similar to the respondents or shared a taken-for-granted knowledge about the topic with them (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 48). I used a conversational manner during the interview process, rather than a strict question and answer format, so that the respondents gained some sense of the interview experience as “an authentic dialogue... in which all are respected as equally knowing subjects” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 129). However, I did not want to impose my preconceived ideas upon the respondents nor to treat their constructions with disrespect, so I tried to minimize “the tendency to transform those researched into objects of scrutiny and manipulation” (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1991, p. 136).

At some point, nonetheless, I had to draw back from the subjective/ inter-subjective position in order to critically examine the experiences shared, translate them into more abstract and general terms, and to link the individual experience to the immediate social world (Acker et al., 1991, p. 136). I have found that the iterative process of experiencing and researching the phenomenon at the same time has helped me to create a balance whereby “experienced reality is used as a valid source of knowledge for critiquing sociological facts and theories, while sociological thought offers new ways of seeing that experienced reality” (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 54). At times I have found it difficult to move from “subjective” knower to “objective” knower, and have struggled to develop a discourse with which I can construct myself as an “interactive” and “inter-subjective” knower.

Traditional ways of knowing and relations of ruling have objectified knowledge (Smith, 1990, p. 67) and for many it would seem that a “masculinist epistemology” has permeated the social sciences (Hekman, 1990b, p. 96). This epistemology is one that objectifies women so that “their experience as social actors is invisible” (p. 103). When individuals are objectified, they are often defined in relation to the subject, and are therefore positioned as the “other.” It is important to challenge this objectification and to move towards a more intersubjective understanding of social relations.

### Re-constructing the “Other”

The denial of an individual’s agency, self-definition, or subjectivity can occur either explicitly or implicitly, and their “absence from the larger cultural, economic, political, and social spaces” (Madrid, 1998, p. 56) is a constant reminder of their being

“other” than the assumed norm. The phenomenon of being the other is experienced differently by different people. For example, to some being “other” means feeling distinct, different or excluded, while others experience it as a contradiction because sometimes they are invisible and other times they stand out (Madrid, 1988, p. 57). To many more it means being stereotyped and defined in debilitating or damning ways. Dominant groups can manipulate language to construct stereotypes that attempt to externally define, dehumanise, and control the other (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 38).

Mainstream discourses exert control in “both subtle and violent ways,” and frequently position women as disempowered victims who are “incapable of effecting change” (Shogan, 1992, p. 333). However, an “important way of resisting the dehumanisation essential to systems of domination” (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 39) is by valuing and defining one’s own self and community. Many feminists such as myself have turned their attention to the ways in which “women have resisted the oppressive circumstances” (Shogan, 1992, p. 333) that they live with daily and we have sought to “foreground the agentic acts of women” (p. 334).

#### Re-constructing Agency

I am seeking research practices and social discourses that recognize and give voice to the agentic acts of both men and women. Constructivist theorists reject the mechanistic notion of cause and effect and assume that “respondents are *not* inert, passive objects” (italics original), but are “capable of a variety of meaning-ascribing and interpretative actions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 99). I am aware that different discourses can construct powerful or condemning explanations of social phenomena “because some ways of representing the world appear to have an oppressive or constraining effect” (Burr, 2000, p. 15). However, Burr does suggest that people have the capacity to “identify, understand, and resist the discourses that we are also subject to” (2000, p. 153) and can “change their situation or that of others by their own intentions and actions” (p. 89) by both actively producing and manipulating discourses.

I propose that many individuals resist dominant discourses and reclaim their subjectivity by small assertions of agency in their everyday language. These individuals are engaged in an ongoing process of “resignification,” whereby those who have been violated by discourses, locked in painful categories, or trapped in “viscous binaries” can throw off, criticize or rewrite the language with which they construct their own subjectivity (St. Pierre, 2002, p. 400). Constructivists are engaged in reading these

alternative discourses, while traditional social scientists often fail to recognize them as everyday forms of activism. For example, Black feminists have identified that Black women may overtly conform to societal roles, yet they covertly oppose the pressures of oppression (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 45). It is through enacting agency in their “roles as mothers, their participation at church, their support of one another in Black female networks” that they retain definition of themselves, mitigate the pressures of oppression, and reject objectification by dominant structures in their lives (p. 46).

Constructivists likewise understand that everyday conversation can have significant associated power implications, because language “is central to women’s oppression,” and is “therefore far from trivial” (Burr, 2000, p. 147; see also Paase, 1998). Women who understand how language constrains and shapes their “sense of self, the ideas and metaphors with which we think, and the self-narratives we use” (Burr, 2000, p. 152) can go on to actively resist unacceptable positions. Burr further proposes that they may take up alternative positions, for example, by “deciding how to change one’s response” as a “useful way of resisting positions we do not want to accept” (p. 152). The social scientist who seeks to recognize free will can contribute to a growing understanding that “The greatest evil we can ever perpetuate upon ourselves is to become convinced that we do not have a choice” (Levin, 2001, p. 278). As a social scientist, I have endeavoured to select methodologies for this study that are recognize the individual’s right to free choice and are responsive to shifting notions of agency, voice, and inter-subjectivity.

#### Re-constructing Naturalistic Methodologies

Constructivist researchers adopt naturalistic methodologies because the process is dynamic, the analysis is hermeneutic, and the construction is dialectic. To begin with, constructivist research is conducted in a setting that is as close to natural as possible (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 175). I conducted most of my interviews in settings that were familiar to the participants, and often of their choosing, such as in their own homes, in the Women’s Centre, or in their local school. The “basic criterion” for naturalistic methods is to lead to “successively better understanding” of the research problem in a dynamic process (p. 89). As a naturalistic researcher, I engaged in a “hermeneutic dialectic process” (p. 44) with all the respondents in an effort to “create a constructed reality that is as informed and sophisticated as it can be made at a particular point in time” (p. 44).

Naturalist investigators also recognize their own position as the “one most likely to have a great deal of knowledge” about the phenomenon and so they are advised to “use language that conveys the tentativeness of presently held views, initial questions, and orienting definitions concerning the phenomenon” (Sandelowski, Holditch-Davis, & Glenn Harris, 1989, p. 78). I have endeavoured to be tentative in my assertions and to assume competency and expertise on the part of the participants in the study. With these actions, I hope to adopt a position of “one-downmanship” by not assuming the expert position during the research process. Finally, along with other researchers, I have attempted to “enter the frame as learners” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 175), to minimize my manipulation of the study, and to generate valid knowledge claims by trying not to place “prior constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be” (Patton, 1990, p. 41).

#### Re-constructing Valid Knowledge Claims

The criteria used to assess the rigor, integrity, or validity of post-modern knowledge claims are being reconstructed as new relationships between the researcher, the researched, and the community of readers emerge. At present, there are no clear-cut rules or formulas about how to do “credible, high-quality analysis,” and most post-modern researchers are simply trying to “do one’s best to make sense out of things” (Patton, 1990, p. 477). Traditional criteria such as validity, reliability, and generalizability are being challenge by many researchers who recognize knowledge as a social construction and truth as being constituted by dialogue, through which “valid knowledge claims emerge as conflicting interpretations” (Kvale, 1996, p. 239).

Phenomenologists and feminists also seek to assure rigor and integrity in research practices in their own way. A phenomenological perspective encourages researchers to arrive at an understanding of concrete experiences; however, concreteness “removes any sense of validity” because there is no comparison to be made between a natural, concrete situation and a controlled, abstract testing situation (Giorgi, 2002, p. 9). Likewise, feminists struggle with perspectives that separate objective from subjective knowledge, and that require researchers to “control their own subjectivity through the rigor of their research method” (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994, p. 128).

### Re-constructing Trustworthiness

One of the goals of constructivist researchers is to reconceptualize the assessment criteria of scientific rigor and integrity by replacing positivist terms such as reliability and validity with the more flexible term “trustworthiness.” Traditionally, meeting the criterion of reliability has implied that the research findings are (for the most part), replicable, while achieving validity in the findings has meant that there is “little or no reason to doubt their truth” (Meadows & Morse, 2001, p. 197). Many qualitative researchers now seek terms that fit more comfortably with their understanding of the social construction of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994b). I have adopted the post-modern criteria offered by Guba and Lincoln for assessing a projects’ trustworthiness, or scientific rigor: credibility for internal validity; transferability for external validity; dependability for reliability; and confirmability for objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

### Re-constructing Credibility

A researcher can meet the criterion of credibility (internal validity) by advancing credible or plausible generalizations, explanations, and interpretations that are congruent with the research problem set out in the study (Kratwohl, 1997, p. 339). Congruency must be achieved between “the constructed realities of respondents... and those realities as represented by the evaluator and attributed to various stakeholders” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 237). Researchers who wish to assure credibility in their work can adopt such techniques as triangulation, member checking, negative case analysing, and demonstrating accountability.

### Re-constructing Triangulation

Triangulation refers to the practice of combining several methods or data sources to strengthen the credibility of a study. I designed my study to meet this criterion. I collected data using a variety of methods such as interviewing and photographing, and drew from a variety of sources including myths and material culture of Canadian, Australian, and Indigenous communities. I was informed by multiple theories such as social construction and response-based theory, adopted several practices such as those of Hermeneutic Phenomenology, and brought feminist, heuristic, and rural perspectives to the analysis. Constructivist researchers can also bring

credibility to their work by exposing their findings to multiple critiques through peer debriefing, and similarly, phenomenologists are encouraged to conduct member checks by starting with the participants in the study to see if the findings are valid for them (Hycner, 1985, p. 29).

### Re-constructing Member Checking and Peer Debriefing

Member checking and peer reviewing are important steps in assuring the credibility of research findings because they provide for multiple checks on the adequacy of the data and the interpretation. I employed member checking by having the respondents verify the transcriptions of our conversational interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 241) so that the respondents and the interviewer have the opportunity to correct factual errors, add material for clarification, and to assess the “overall adequacy of the interview” (p. 239). This process provided a useful review of the data, but in some cases proved to be problematic, for as some researchers have found, even though the respondents may “recognize the accuracy of the description, they may reject this view of themselves and claim it is inaccurate” (Krathwohl, 1997, p. 340). This was the case with one of the respondents in the study, who withdrew her transcript because she could not make the oral and written representations of her experiences congruent. I also forwarded to the respondents a scheme of the concepts and themes that had emerged during interpretation, a collection of the poems I had extracted from the data, and a list of the monikers and pseudonyms that I had created. One woman requested a change of name for her pseudonym, but that was the only alteration I was asked to make.

I also incorporated some peer debriefing strategies in order to increase the credibility of the findings because this process enables me to understand my own position in the study and the test out my interpretation of the data. Guba and Lincoln suggest engaging a “disinterested peer” in discussions of the process, methodology and stresses as they arise, and in explorations of the tentative analysis as it emerges (1989, p. 237). I was able to engage in ongoing conversations about the methods and theories guiding my interpretation with some of my peers in the Orcas Society (for the study of collaborative therapies), including several who had recently conducted phenomenological and social constructivist-based research. In particular, I sought guidance in formulating the interview questions and then in constructing the interpretative framework. I was also part of an associated discourse group for a year that explored the application of constructivist and response-based theories to social

work, child and youth care, and family and group processes. The discussions with these peers helped me to work out the application of these theories to the community development process.

### Re-constructing Negative Case Analysis

Increased credibility can be assured in research reports that contain negative case analyses because this practice challenges the researcher to leave their comfort zone and address issues that may be messy or contradictory to their proposal. Negative case analysis occurs when the researcher develops and refines the data until all cases that do not fit into “appropriate categories” have been accounted for (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 237-238). Likewise, the elimination of “rival explanations” involves the researcher’s judgement as to whether there are “equally plausible rival explanations that account for the data” that need to be ruled out (Kratwohl, 1997, p. 147).

I have attempted to assure credibility through seeking negative cases in the data collection, interpretation, research literature, and historical reviews. For example, I incorporated questions into the interview protocol that asked for negative cases, such as “Have there been aunties in your experience who have been a hindrance to you?” Negative cases also emerged during the interviews, such as when two of the respondents in the study rejected the title of “auntie” as a term they could use to describe themselves. I have retained these excerpts in the research report because I wanted to deal openly with the “complexities and dilemmas” that arise in any project (Patton, 1990, p. 464), as they did in mine. In addition, I included examples from historical and contemporary literature that show rival explanations to the perceived benevolence of the actions of aunties, such as women who participate in socially or racially oppressive organizations. I also chose to seek out and include negative samples because I found, as Patton did, the “exploration of alternative explanations... can be among the most interesting sections of a report to read” (1990, p. 463).

### Re-constructing Accountability

Finally, credibility can also be achieved when the researcher demonstrates accountability for the construction of the inquiry through strategies such as progressive subjectivity, prolonged engagement, and persistent observations. Progressive subjectivity refers to the process of progressively recording the researcher’s own development as the inquiry unfolds (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 238); this progress is

shown in the aunt-ecdote that opens this section. Other researchers refer to an “audit trail” or documentation of the context, methods, analysis, and personal responses that helped construct the research (Meadows & Morse, 2001, p. 196). I have recorded my research progress and reflected on personal developments in a series of journals over the 5-year progression of this work from a Master’s into a Doctoral thesis. I was able to draw upon these writings, for example, when it came time to report the evolution of the project or the process of data collection. In the process of reporting, I have tried to credibly explain my technique choices, my experiences along the way, and the assumptions that have guided my study (Janesick, 1994, p. 216).

I claim a prolonged engagement with the phenomenon of being an “auntie” because I have been actively serving my community for over 35 years, or since I was a Brownie leader in grade school. I have occupied numerous formal and informal community service positions in a variety of small and rural contexts since then, so I feel confident that I have sufficient “sustained involvement” with the phenomenon itself. I also maintain some degree of “prolonged engagement” with the five Canadian respondents, while I have had only sporadic contact with the other four Australian respondents and have lost entire contact with one.

I claim to have purposefully observed the phenomenon of informal community development (from the inside as a contributor and from the outside as a consumer) since I first coordinated volunteers professionally 25 years ago. I have studied the phenomenon of the social development of communities in my undergraduate degree by taking Sociology and First Nations Studies as the foundation coursework for interdisciplinary Liberal Studies. I have observed community service activities in rural contexts, for instance, while being a student leader in a small agricultural college, and by researching the phenomenon while undertaking Rural Studies at the Master’s level.

In closing, I have attempted to meet the criteria of credibility in this study by practicing triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and by being transparent about the decisions I made along the way.

#### Re-constructing Transferability

The criterion of “transferability” used to judge trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research is parallel to the positivist notions of external validity or generalizability. Transferability is understood by constructivists to be a relative term that depends on the “degree to which salient conditions overlap or match” (Guba &

Lincoln, 1989, p. 241). The findings of phenomenological studies are not considered generalizable by many researchers because of the limited number of participants and the “absence of randomness” (Hycner, 1985, p. 295) in participant selection. However, I suggest that qualitative findings are transferable in the sense that “they illuminate to some significant degree, the ‘worlds’ of the participants” and in the investigation of one unique world, we may gain a richer understanding about “the phenomenology of human being in general” (p. 295). Eisner suggests that we do not use generalizations to “draw conclusions about other situations, rather, we use them to search those situations more efficiently” (Eisner, 1999, p. 141). He sees them as heuristic devices “intended to sharpen perception so that our patterns of seeking and seeing are more acute,” and we can see things on their own terms, rather than comparing them to others (p. 141).

I tried to let readers see things on their own terms by using many “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) in the profile contained in the auntie-cedent to this thesis. Thick descriptions provide rich and detailed illustrations for the readers to “see whether they fit their experience,” and therefore “facilitate transfer to new situations” (Kratwohl, 1997, p. 343).

#### Re-constructing Dependability

The criterion of dependability assures rigor in the qualitative research process because it allows for the emergence of unique findings and shifts in construction, whereby changes are seen as “the hallmarks of a maturing - and successful - inquiry” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 242). Conventional research criteria would see such research practices as unreliable because it would be difficult to replicate the findings under such shifting conditions. Constructivists assure dependability under these circumstances by tracking the changes in such a way that others can judge the decisions made along the way and understand how interpretations were made (p. 242). Most phenomenological researchers try to strike a balance between constructing a dependable and replicable study and seeking out the unique, different, or exceptional examples in order to add to the meaningfulness of the findings (Hycner, 1985). I sought to increase dependability in the study by tracking and reporting changes, by explaining my position and my assumptions, by triangulating my sources, and by leaving a clear audit trail for others to follow (Merriam, 2002b, p. 172). I engaged in an iterative construction process whereby I “constantly validate the nature and the progress of the process and

results” by moving back and forth between the data and the analysis to assure that fit of the two was “stringently monitored” (Meadows & Morse, 2001, p. 189).

### Re-constructing Confirmability

The last criterion that constructivists use to assess trustworthiness is confirmability or the degree to which “findings are rooted in the data” and can be tracked to their sources (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 243). The conventional counterpart to confirmability is objectivity, whereby research process and findings are considered to be “divorced from the values, motives, biases, or political persuasions of the inquirer” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 243). Rather than divorce themselves from their intersubjective position, constructivists assure that an audit trail of the project’s process is clearly laid out for others to follow. For example, I made sure that all the data could be traced back to the original transcription by noting the source of each extraction.

I followed the advice of Wolcott (1994) to assure rigor in the research process and tried to “talk less and listen a lot” during the interview sessions, and I attempted to “record accurately” by audio-taping the interviews and making notations afterward (pp. 348-349). I began “writing early” in both my journals and in drafting chapters, and in the process, endeavoured to “let readers ‘see’ for themselves” by including verbatim transcript excerpts and by using lots of examples from the literature (p. 349-350). When constructing the report, I intended to “be candid” by locating myself in an anecdote and to “report fully” by including the uncomfortable moments and the pieces that I struggled to understand (p. 351). Wolcott also suggests that the researcher try to maintain a balance between objectivity and “rigorous subjectivity” (1994, p. 354) and to “write accurately” and with modesty ( p. 355). I purposefully sent my work out along the way to “seek feedback” from the participants and from my supervisors, peers and family. I did this as a way to “keep me mindful” of my commitment to keep the work accessible to a wide audience of readers, and to assure that the work seemed trustworthy to others (Wolcott, 1994).

Constructivist criteria for judging the rigor and integrity of research findings and knowledge claims have also been incorporated into my research process. I established rigor in this thesis through building trustworthiness, assuring credibility, and through illuminating transferability. In addition, I demonstrated dependability and confirmability in the knowledge claims that I make.

### Re-capping Social Construction Theories

In summary, social constructionism has many features that can be loosely grouped under the single definition; however, its practice is informed by the following key actions:

- Adopts a critical stance that opposes positivism and challenges taken-for-granted knowledge or the conventional view of objective, unbiased observation.
- Recognizes the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge as an artefact of social and economic arrangements, and that how the world is understood depends upon factors such as gender, rurality, or period of history.
- Understands knowledge as sustained by social processes and as constructed through the daily interactions of people via symbolic and language systems.
- Links knowledge and social interaction together because “each different construction ... invites a different kind of action” at the same time that each construction can exclude or constrain other actions. (Burr, 2000, p. 5)

My understanding of social construction theories has merged with my understanding of sociology, which includes theories of symbolic interactionism, socio-linguistics, and narrative inquiry.

### Re-constructing Symbolic Interactionism

The theory of symbolic interactionism arose from the work of Mead (1934), who proposed that people construct their own and other’s identities through everyday social interactions. Blumer (1969) identified three fundamental premises of symbolic interactionism, which stated that human beings act on the basis of the meanings that things have for them, that meaning arises from social interactions, and that meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process (Patton, 1990, p. 76). These understandings were akin to those of ethnomethodologists Berger and Luckmann (1967/1989), whose early constructivist work argued that we not only create social constructions, but sustain them through social practices.

Symbolic interactionism underpins the social constructionist stance of this study because it investigates the “original meaning and influence of symbols and shared meanings” in order to reveal “what is most important to people, what will be most resistant to change, and... how particular interactions give rise to symbolic understandings” (Patton, 1990, p. 76). Many symbolic interactionists conduct individual and group interviews because they can gain “close contact and direct interaction” with the participants in order to understand “the symbolic world of the people being studied” (1990, p. 76).

Symbols are social objects that are used by people to represent and communicate their understanding of the world to themselves and others in their lives. Symbols are significant because they are used intentionally to give meaning and create common understanding (Charon, 1989, p.41). However, the use of symbols is subjective because they are often defined in social interaction, whereby people chose or construct symbols and come to agree upon “what they shall stand for” (1989, p. 42). Language and words are the most important kind of symbolism to man, because as change occurs and society evolves, “language is used to refer to or represent a part of reality” (p. 44). For social constructivists, all truth is mutable and relative, and they understand that “Explanations are at best ‘here-and-now’ accounts that represent a ‘photographic slice of life’ of a dynamic process” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Symbolic understandings of reality are embedded in everyday living, and they have both enhanced and constrained women’s contributions to shared understandings of the world. As a feminist and sociologist, Smith (1990) concerns herself with how the worlds that are predominately occupied by women, such as households, children, and neighbourhoods, are constructed as being subordinate to men’s worlds, and likewise how language and other symbolic systems work “to compel women to think their world in the concepts and terms in which men think theirs” (p. 13). The ruling and governing bodies of society use, create, sustain, and suppress symbols in order to govern (p. 14; see also Foucault, 1980). Historically, the political economy and discourses of academic, professional, and state institutions have taken for granted the marginal position in society of women and their symbols (Smith, 1999, p. 40). Likewise, the discourse of the ruling bodies is embedded in social science discourse, and Smith urges researchers and others to adopt a feminist critique of “thinking, writing texts, and investigation of how our everyday/everynight worlds are put together, determined, and shaped... [by]... the complex of powers, forces and relations that are at work” (p. 44).

Post-modernist sociologists also recognize the constitutive powers of social discourse, and urge the exploration of alternative sociological practices. For instance, Agger suggests developing an everyday sociology to connect people's lives to the structures that condition them (2002, p. 428). Recently, some sociological writing has become reconnected with its early, pre-positivist roots, and some scholars are embracing both the vanquished author and the art of "narrativity" in an effort to portray the world "as fluid, [and] available to transformation" (p. 429).

### Re-constructing Narrativity

One of the central challenges for constructivist scholarship is to enrich the "range of theoretical discourse" by accepting the notion of the self as meaning-making through stories or through "narration rendered intelligible within ongoing relationships" (Gergen, 1994, p. 185). Human actions have long been narratively organized and rendered intelligible through "fairy tales, folk tales, and family stories" and in "novels, biography, and history" (p. 185). Stories have also been constructed and used by ordinary people on an everyday basis as a "critical means by which we make ourselves intelligible within the social world" (p. 185). Narrative accounts render communal action and events "socially visible," so that most accounting of daily life has become "laden with a storied sense" (p. 186). Ordinary people use stories and narrative accounts to bring significance to their experiences, or perhaps, as White and Epston propose, "persons give meaning to their lives and relationships by *storying* their experience" (1990, p. 13).

Feminists warn, however, that narrative expression can also entrap the storyteller in modes of representation that arise from and reproduce patriarchal and other dominant ideologies (Bloom, 2002, p. 295). Women must learn to challenge conventional patterns of narration and notions of being female, such as "happily-ever-after" endings, and to unmask the "conflict women face living under patriarchy" (p. 295). Bloom suggests that specific complexities arise from specific situations, so that responses to situations are never generic, but are a "strategic fixing and unfixing of subject positions" based on "situational responsiveness" (2002, p. 301). An individual who engages in situational responsiveness is able to respond in multiple ways, using multiple strategies, according to the choice of the individual. However, women often have difficulty in choosing how to respond because they feel alienated from the

dominant discourses and practices of society, so that often, “women’s multiple subject positions... compel us to speak from between boundaries” (p. 301).

Gee posits that we all live in multiple identities, and that struggles arise for any individual who “lives and breathes this conflict as we act out our various Discourses,” which include “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing” (Gee, 1999, p. xix ). Each Discourse has taken-for-granted theories of “what counts as a ‘normal’ person and the ‘right’ ways to think” (p. xx). Women often experience conflict between their ways of being and those constructed in “the dominant Discourse of male-based public institutions” (Gee, 1999, p. xx ). When people uncritically act out Discourses that undermine or undervalue the worth of other ways of being, they are complicit with the embedded theories that “privilege us who have mastered them and do significant harm to others” (Gee, 1999, p. 191). When people critically engage in, challenge, and seek to change dominant Discourses, they “allow room for both individual creativity and... *resistance* to domination and hegemony” (p. 178). However, those on the leading edge of movements for resistance and change must be “able and willing to live with the initial cognitive dissonance and conflicts” (p. 179) that arises when dominant Discourses and ways of being are challenged. Likewise, those who seek a new language, new narratives, and new ways of resolving conflicts must do the same if new ways of researching are to emerge (Brew, 2001, p. 168).

One way in which sociologists are re-defining the Discourse of research is to value the presence of narrative as “quintessential to the understanding and communication of the sociological” (Richardson, 1997, p. 27). Richardson suggests that social order is maintained in everyday life narratives of “what we did today;” however, few have studied the link of the personal narrative to the public narrative of larger social structures (p. 30). She suggests further that new narratives offer potential for new lives, because they can link the individual to a shared consciousness or community, so that “the possibility for social action on behalf of the collective is present, and, therewith, the possibility for societal transformation” (p. 33). In addition, if narratives are valued as a way of “acquiring and representing knowledge,” then Richardson contends that they can “empower individuals, contribute to liberating civic discourses, and support transformative social projects” (p. 33).

Although it is widely accepted by sociolinguists that dominant discourses and symbolic systems value certain linguistic strategies, genres, or variants more than

others, “it is important to remember that domination and power rarely go unchallenged” (Gal, 1995, p. 175). For example, often linguistic forms and practices such as vernacular, slang, or ritual speech are denigrated and devalued, nonetheless, they are practiced and celebrated and can come to offer an alternative model of the social world (p. 175). Gal (1995) offers women’s everyday talk and cultural discourses as forms of resistance to dominant cultural discourses of gender, and she contends that social theorists such as Gramsci, Bourdieu and Foucault have overlooked gender as a structure of social relations (p. 176).

### Re-constructing Language

The challenge to create an alternative social discourse has arisen from diverse sources, including sociologists, feminists, post structuralists. In addition, post-modernists encourage social scientists to re-focus on the taken-for-granted, the neglected, and those members of society deemed insignificant, and to explore the regions of resistance, difference, complexity, and diversity (Rosenau, 1992). Some sociologists are seeking a new political economy that will display the complex powers of language at work in the everyday world (Smith, 1999, p. 44). Many feminists look for the possibility of disrupting old discourses, and of opening up paths for speaking ourselves into existence in other ways (Davies, 1993, p. 12). Likewise, numerous post-structuralists look at the constitutive forces of language and social structures, and seek ways to “invent, invert, and break old structures and patterns and discourses” (Davies, 1993, p. xviii ).

From some sectors of the community development field comes the challenge to develop a social services system that is not focused on deficiency and need, and to identify social forms that are resistant to being colonized by service technologies and industries (McKnight, 1995). Social service and other professional languages often disguise the inherent political biases that assault people’s dignity and freedom in subtle ways, while they mask those conditions of the individual’s lives, environments, and opportunities that primarily need change (Edelman, 1974, p. 305). One example of professional language that assaults people’s dignity is the use of the term “therapy” as a suffix or qualifier to medicalize a common activity. Edelman (1974) gives the example that “Mental patients do not hold dances, they have dance therapy... recreation therapy... and group therapy” (p. 297; see also Ferguson, 1984). In her studies of adult literacy, Horsman (1999) found that experiences of discord are often medicalized so that

the problem becomes personal and de contextualized from the social relations of power that gave rise to the discord (p. 46). For example, the medicalizing of violence portrays violence as “other than” normal human experience, and as being a private matter rather than a social and political issue that is “embedded within our social structures” (p. 44)

McKnight likewise recognizes a growing trend in the discovery of new, unmet needs that are then marketed to create a demand for a new professional service. Examples that he gives include “tired housewife syndrome” and “six-hour retardation” (a child who is “normal” for the 18 hours a day not in school), to which I add “Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome” (a strong urge to stay out late, followed by an inability to wake up on time), and “Pseudologia Fantastica” (a condition ascribed to an American judge with a penchant for padding his resume with tall tales) (“News of the weird,” 2000). In another example, McKnight laments the professionalization of communal experiences such as grief and cites the diagnosis of the newly labelled “bereavement deficit” (1995, p. 23) as an example. He reminds us that once upon a time, neighbours, kin, and townspeople supported the bereaved family through lamentation, prayer, and song, which strengthened the bonds between them and held grieving as common property (p. 23). Now, professional bereavement counsellors offer expertise and replace the community of mourners. McKnight warns that such practices “cut through the social fabric, throwing aside kinship, care, neighbourly obligations, and community ways of coming together and going on” (1995, pp. 6-7). The sense of powerlessness and disorder experienced by those subjected to dominance and aggression can erode the strength of the individual, the family, and the community as a whole. For example, in the United States, Kretzmann and McKnight have found that:

if one surrounds any individual with messages and experiences that are always saying to them, what is important about you is what’s wrong with you, that that will have a powerful, powerful, depressing, disillusioning and degrading effect upon that person. (1993, p.4)

Similarly, the connections between violence and language are currently being explored by a team of researchers and therapists who propose a new framework for analysis of legal, psychological, and public discourse, which is constructed on the contrasting notions of the language of effects and the language of responses (A. Wade, Coates, L., Todd, N., 2000). This framework is applicable to any situation that involves the humiliation of human dignity, because, as Wade suggests, there is a pronounced family resemblance between patterns of interpersonal and socio-political violence (A. Wade, 1999, p. 2). These violations may take physical, emotional, or social forms and

could include “economic exploitation, harassment, destructive criticism, threats, intimidation, humiliation, or discrimination on the basis of gender, race, occupational status, sexual preference, age, illness, or disability” (A. Wade, 1999, p. 2).

### Re-constructing the Language of Effects

The language of effects constructs a deterministic and mechanistic world ordered by relationships of cause and effect. It is constructed of “a diverse repertoire of terms, figures of speech, and metaphors that represents subjective experience and behaviour (e.g. of victims) as the effects of a cause (e.g. violence)” (Todd & Wade, 2002). The language of effects tends to conceal an individual’s agentic responses by constructing the oppressor as the active, proficient expert and the oppressed as the inexperienced, deficient, or passive recipient of their own oppression (A. Wade, personal communication, March 19, 2002). The language of effects is not an overtly political discourse, but one that is taken-for-granted and virtually invisible in everyday life, and as such, has saturated the professional discourse of researchers, therapists, and the public alike (A. Wade, 1999).

The language of effects has a tendency to create nouns from verbs, thus shifting the focus from the action to the mind. For example, describing a response to violence or oppression as “acting in a depressed way” constructs agency and volition quite differently than the statement “I am depressed,” because the later constructs the individual as having no agency and actually being the pathology (A. Wade, personal communication, Feb. 2, 2002). In addition, the language of effect tends to conceal responses by decontextualizing and diminishing the response, thus mitigating volition and judgement on the part of the respondent (A. Wade, 1999, p. 323). For example, “I am sorry for what happened to you” mitigates responsibility for the offence, as compared to “I am sorry for what I did against your wishes and over your protests,” which clearly places responsibility for the offence with the perpetrator (pp. 243-244).

One example of language that tends to pathologize is bureaucratic discourse, which produces clients, who in turn are officially diagnosed, categorized, and treated. Accordingly, clients become cases and must define themselves as such if they wish to be heard (Ferguson, 1984b, pp.136-137). McKnight (1995) is also critical of professional discourse, which he says encodes and mystifies the language, so that many times, citizens are excluded from the process, and are no longer the problem definer or the solution generator (p. 48). I suspect that the same often occurs with struggling

communities that are dealt with as “case studies” or that are subjected to “needs assessments” conducted by “experts” in the community development field. In fact, Lakey et al., who lament the impact of such powers in ordinary lives, claim that “The majority of us are... being forced to bear the negative effects of development imposed on our communities by outside interests” (1995, p. 101).

Authoritative powers are claimed and granted to those who make “exclusive claims to expert knowledge, wealth and privilege – professionals, political elites, corporate owners” (Lakey et al., 1995, p. 100). The ruling political and economical structures that produce “experts” are also embedded in the discourses of contemporary social science and inquiry methods (Edelman, 1974, p. 298; see also Hekman, 1990a; Rosenau, 1992). For example, Smith argues that research and education communities, as well as others in elite positions, perpetrate the power structure by restricting access to knowledge by the ruled, the marginal, and the excluded (1999, p. 40).

#### Re-constructing the Language of Responses

The power relationship between oppression, violence, and language may be reconceptualized in numerous contexts by implementing a response-based framework for analysis and critique (A. Wade, Coates, L., Todd, N., 2000). A language of response assumes agency, competency, and the presence of pre-existing skills, assets or abilities in people, families, communities, and neighbourhoods. The language of response is a repertoire that “represents subjective experience and behavior” as agentic and intelligible in response to the circumstance (Todd & Wade, 2002). The language of response provides a more precise approach to identifying oppressive operations of social discourse and tries to establish more accuracy in language (A. Wade personal communication, March 19, 2002). Strategies that Wade suggests to shift from a deficiency model to a proficiency model of service are: get specific by staying away from abstractions and paying attention to alternatives; re-engineer the discourse by developing alternative discursive machinery; assume competency to maximize the opportunity for agency and contest representations of passivity; and contextualize the experience to reveal social networks that pathologize and conceal violence (A. Wade, 1999).

The language of responses also reframes individual, volitional acts of resistance by “eliciting detailed accounts of individual’s responses... and elucidating the intelligibility of some of those responses as forms of resistance” (A. Wade, 1999, p.

360). The language of effects portrays healthy, judicious resistance to oppression as dysfunctional and disordered, such as those who use the term “feminist” in a derogatory way. However, by the very precise way in which people resist oppression, it is evident that, in many cases, the victims recognize the abuse despite its being concealed or justified, understand who is responsible, and contest assumptions of their passivity by asserting their personal worth (A. Wade, 1999, p. 360). Individual acts of resistance are not usually violent or reactionary, in fact, many show a combination of extraordinary persistence, informed prudence, and tactical acumen on the part of the individual (A. Wade, 1999, pp. 14-15).

### Re-constructing Resistance

“Small acts of resistance” can have a profound impact at the individual, community, or societal level by exposing violence and clarifying responsibility for the offensive actions. Non-violent, non-collective forms of resistance can be “capable of wielding great power,” but unfortunately, they do not receive the same attention in the media as violent ones (Ackerman & DuVall, 2000, p. 8). Individual acts of resistance are often downplayed or overlooked entirely because they do not directly threaten the existing social order (A. Wade, 1999, p. 240), and small acts of resistance are seldom discussed in clinical, scholarly, or public discourses, yet they are ubiquitous in their nature (A. Wade, 1999). Women’s responses to oppression are particularly obscured and denigrated as a necessary condition for the “preservation of the patriarchy” (Spender, 1983). Non-violent actions often involve small acts of resistance such as staying home from work, refusing to carry identity papers, or by printing newspapers in secret (p. 9) are about “common citizens who are drawn into great causes, which are built from the ground up” (Ackerman & DuVall, 2000, p. 9). Many small acts of resistance can be made visible and reframed as intelligible responses to oppression by using techniques such as assuming competency, getting specific, and paying attention to detail (A. Wade, 1999, p. 360).

For example, the women of the Himalayas initiated a protest in 1973 against the massive deforestation of their homeland (Roy, 1999). The women of the Chipco movement worked without the aid of money or a centralized organization. Nonetheless, news of the resistance movement spread throughout the forest, passing from woman to woman and from village to village. On the given day, the women of the area walked into the ancient forests, declared that they were there to protect the trees that gave their

families life, and simply embraced the trunks with their bodies (Roy, 1999). Thus was born the Chipco movement, which means to embrace, and from this the term tree-hugger was coined.

Another example of a grass-roots resistance movement are the groups of “Raging Grannies,” which started over a decade ago in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada (Roy, 2004) (p. 122). The Raging Grannies are a politically active group of aging women who use their familiar maternal image as nurturers to draw attention to issues that threaten their families and communities and one member describes the movement as “groups of women who reflect peoples’ suffering in the world where human values are too scarce. We sing with satire to motivate others to take a stand for global justice” (Cowichan, 1999).

In their flowered bonnets, shawls, and lace, armed only with umbrellas, the Raging Grannies sing to encourage others to challenge politicians, bureaucrats, and corporations, and to become active in their own backyards and around the world (Tapping, 1998, p. 5). However, the songs are not so syrupy as to be mistaken for entertainment, but are not intended to be so affrontive (or bad) as to alienate those that the group wants to intimidate or inform (Roy, 2004). One example of a Raging Granny song is an adaptation of Home on the Range: “Oh give me a home/ Where the rivers don’t foam/ And the squirrels and chipmunks can play/ Where the lakes all have fish/ You can put on your dish/ And the skies are not foggy and grey” (Cowichan, 1999).

The Raging Grannies are environmental adult educators and cultural activists who use provocative and creative lyrics to “confront the status quo and give voice to communities without one” (Hofrichter, 1993). Raging Grannies can act as role models for other women because when the Grannies act together to think creatively and critically, they model a collective power and a deep hope (Roy, 1999, p. 93). Raging Grannies identify themselves with an “un-motherly” public rage, which reveals “older women’s playfulness as well as the importance of passion” (Roy, 2000, p. 14). As one Granny explained: “We learned that, at times, rage is the right response” (Howard, 1989, p. 14).

Roy (2000) posits that the women who join Raging Grannies groups are in fact acting out their rage in order to defy oppression and gain respect for life (p. 14). The predominately white, middle-class, well educated, elder women are ready, willing and able to compromise their respectability in society precisely because they have it to loose, unlike the “under-resourced poor or the ideologically rich” who are not willing or

not positioned to “challenge cultural assumptions or social structures because they have too much to lose” (Roy, 1999, pp. 92-93). She suggests that large corporations “particularly dislike housewife activists because they know them unwilling to compromise with the health of their families” (p. 96).

Women in grassroots resistance movements such as the Raging Grannies and the Women of Chipco use their familiar images as mothers, grandmothers, and aunties to challenge the systems and discourses that suppress them. The language of responses can be used to reframe the stereotype of the passive victim by understanding individual and collective actions as intentional responses to oppression. When everyday acts of resistance can be elucidated as volitional responses to oppression, they can promote positive change, and may enhance an individual or community’s on-going pursuit of justice and security. For example, the poem “Not a Bunch of Yahoos” (see page 123), illustrates how readily positive change can be promoted by the re-construction of language. Once the Raging Grannies assumed the competency of the protesting youth, they intervened with song and dance and reframed the discourse of resistance from angry protest to cheering and singing while still respecting the voices of the youth and delivering a message of resistance to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

### Re-capping Theories

Social construction theories are important to understanding the experience of being an “auntie” because they reveal the way that dominant discourses construct grassroots people and initiatives as insignificant to greater society. The language of response provides an alternative to diminishing discourses by reconstructing language to be precise, to assume competence, and to attend to the small acts of living. The social construction theories discussed in this chapter informed the analysis of the data, which appears next in Chapter Six, followed by a summary of the thesis in Chapter Seven.

## SECTION THREE

### Chapter Six

#### Re-conceptualizing Aunties in Action

Aunties can be “re-conceptualized” as significant contributors to society by taking on new ideas, theories, or symbols to understand their roles and associated activities

**Concept:**

an idea that includes all that is associated with a word or symbol  
general understanding that arises from specific instances  
from Latin *concipere* to take to oneself, conceive.

## **Rotary Members Reinforcing Roles**

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**Duncan BC**

## **Red Cross Members Multi-tasking**

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**Marching in Tully, Qld, in the morning**

**Laying a wreath in Tully, Qld,  
in the morning**

**Laying a wreath in Cardwell, Qld,  
in the afternoon**

**Marching in Cardwell, Qld**

## **It's not all Glory**

It's a lot easier  
in a small community,  
I think,  
To do that kind of work,  
and  
maybe  
get a little respect.

Because  
people know that you do that.

So, it's not all glory.  
It's definitely,  
it's not all glory.

But,  
it is just,,,  
getting a little respect,  
is okay.

It's your support  
to keep you  
doing  
what you are  
doing.

(26)

**Sophia**

**Raging Granny**

## Part One: Who Are Aunties and What Do They Do?

“Aunties” are significant members of many small and rural communities because they can provide an alternative to the formal role of “volunteer” and can counter the dominant discourse of civic disengagement and decline of social capital in North America and Australia (Putnam, 2000; Cox, 1995). If in fact social capital and civic engagement are in decline, then it is important to know who is actually active at the grassroots level of the community, and to identify what they are doing and how they are doing it. In the context of this discussion, social capital is understood as “the informal relations and trust which bring people together to take action” (PovertyNet, 2002, p. 7), which “facilitates exchanges of resources and skills across sectors” (p. 8). In this thesis, I **re-conceptualize** the experience of being an “auntie” and I suggest that aunties enhance the social capital available to families and communities by being active citizens, by building relationships and connections, and by creating shared understandings. It is my intention to share these insights with social scientists, policymakers, and community programmers so that they may be better prepared to both “impact existing and create new social capital” (World Bank Group, 2002, p. 5).

This thesis provides insights into the social significance of women’s voluntary participation in grassroots community affairs and contributes to the growing body of qualitative research conducted in response to the International Year of the Volunteer in 2001. This inquiry is also a response to the growing call for interdisciplinary research (Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, 2004) because it utilizes methods from hermeneutic phenomenology and feminism, and is informed by social constructionist and response-based theories. Specifically, I conducted phenomenological interviews with ten women who were civically active at a grassroots level in their Canadian or Australian communities. The literature reviewed during this study included a broad range of disciplines because it was my desire to create a naturalistic and multifaceted study, in order to expose the reader to a multitude of possible renderings of the concept of “auntie.”

My analysis is based upon responses to the interview questions, photographic evidence, and to the literature I reviewed, and to my own experiences of the being an “auntie.” My analysis also includes discussions about inconsistencies and tensions that became evident to me while reviewing the data or the research literature, such as the tension that exists between maternal and paternal constructions of the social world. I

also link the concepts, themes, and tensions that I identified to discussions of social capital and to the notion of aunties as individuals, to the roles that they play, and to the actions that they are involved in. These elements have been blended and interspersed with extracts from the interviews so that the vernacular voice of the participant's is always present. Interview excerpts are referenced by code and transcription page number, and are presented as: (CWA 24).

The interpretation and discussion of how aunties contribute to the building of "social capital" is prefaced here by a brief introduction to the concept, a discussion of its perceived decline, and reference to how small or rural community contexts may influence its development.

### Re-conceptualising social capital

The term "social capital" is important to understanding the phenomenon of being an "auntie" because current civic participation discourse falls short of describing the experience adequately. Unfortunately, there exist myriad understandings of the meaning of the term. Sampson (2001) warned that "social capital" has been used too expansively, and it has come to include so many different things that "it has lost much of its meaning" (p. 9). Social capital is built when community members actively participate in social networks from which shared values arise. For the purposes of this study, I understand social capital to be comprised of networks of relationships that engender reciprocity and trust in communities; to encourage the sharing of social norms and pooled, common resources; and to provide the opportunity for the expression of both collective and individual efficacy or agency (Onyx & Bullen, 2000, pp. 105-108).

The World Bank stressed that studies in social capital are important because its unequal accumulation can lead to altered life chances for individuals and communities alike (Hagan & McCarthy, 1996). Similarly, in Australia, civic participation has been recognized as "vitally important to a sustainable future for society... and rural areas in particular" (Alston, 2002, p. 4). I also understand that social capital can "flourish or fade" (Hagan & McCarthy, 1996, p. 4) according to the political, cultural, and economic forces that have an impact upon the local community. Language is one of the social forces that can encourage or inhibit the formation of trust and reciprocity; therefore dominant discourses can have an impact upon the social capital available to family and community members.

### The Language of Social Capital

Social capital is important to the sustainability of communities, families, and individuals; however, it is only now entering into some discussions of government and policy development. In Australia, Cox (1995) questioned public policy agendas where “the ties that we call society and community.... are omitted from public debate” (p. 2), and noted that in policy discussions, we hear “little about the base of social capital on which economic growth depends” (p. 27). However, the public governance system in Australia is changing in response to shifts in demographics and social values, and a new public policy is emerging. These transformations require an element of innovation in order to embed the “logic of social capital” into new public policy so that citizens and governments are better prepared to work together to “confront the dilemmas that we face in common” (Stewart-Weeks, 2000, pp. 304-305). I propose that aunties can offer innovative solutions to some of the challenges that contemporary families and communities face, including the apparent decline in civic engagement throughout Western society.

### The Decline of Social Capital

Currently, there is much discussion in the social research literature about the perceived decline in social capital and civic engagement across Western society. In his influential work “Bowling Alone,” Putnam (2000) suggested that civic engagement has been eroding silently for several decades, and that we are, in general, less connected to each other than in the past (p. 183). In fact, he raises several concerns:

Grassroots groups that once brought us face-to-face with our neighbours...are overshadowed by... staff-led interest groups.... Place-based social capital is being supplanted by function-based social capital. We are withdrawing from those networks of reciprocity that once constituted our communities. (Putnam, 2000, p. 184)

Other social scientists are concerned that globalization and the domination of urban culture has compounded the decline, and this has resulted in alienation, dispossession, and disconnection from the “land and from meaningful social relationships” (Nozick, 1992, p. 107). In response, there has been a marked decline in “local political involvement... and a loss of what it means to be an active citizen” (p. 107). In the United States researchers noted that people are increasingly withdrawing

from civic participation, which leaves leadership and organizational roles to be filled by fewer and fewer people (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997, p. 21). This creates a predicament in small and rural communities because when the local community begins to decay, local knowledge and memory also erode, with the result that “its members no longer know one another” (Berry, 1990, p. 157). The loss of local memory and culture is detrimental to social capital because it can lead to the erosion of social trust, whereby “people who do not trust one another do not help one another, and moreover they fear one another” (p. 157).

Putnam’s (2000) assertion that social capital is eroding is countered by many social researchers, including Price (2002), who states that rather than a decline, we are experiencing shifts and fluctuations in civic engagement and in social structures (p. 126). For instance, Wuthnow (1998) suggested that as social boundaries and organizational structures become more porous, society is actively adapting rather than passively declining to participate (p. 79). As an example, he noted that in contemporary society, “it simply is not important whether an ‘aunt’ is a blood relative or only a neighbour” (p. 59).

In response to shifts in Canadian society, those interested in building sustainable communities are being urged to seek alternative examples of social development, to find new ways to take action, and to make linkages with “others on a similar mission” (Nozick, 1992, p. 212). Likewise, in a time of weakened social capital, Putman (2000) urges Americans to “discover and invent new ways of connecting socially that fit our changed lives” (p. 404). Aunties have provided an alternative example of how traditional family structures can be adapted to encourage social development in post-modern families and communities.

Social capital is enhanced when families are respectful of each other, and are strong and healthy, and conversely, children and families thrive when social capital is available to support their cognitive and social development (Winter, 2000a, p. 1). The social construct of family” is tied to the construct of “community”, so it is therefore important to arrive at a common understanding of what the term “family” means within the post-modern context of this study.

## Re-conceptualising the Family

Many Canadians perceive that the family is in a “national crisis” (Fleras, 1998, p. 169) and that these indicate larger transformations and social disintegration in Western society (p. 169). On the contrary, a recent survey in the United States found that family values and structures are changing, with the result that “new forms of social organization” are emerging, along with “many complex, alternative views of the family” (Smith, 1999, p. 9). “Family” is a social construct (Fleras, 1998, p. 172) that is “central to our social existence” (p. 169) and is constituted by “an interrelated system or rules, roles and relationships for meeting the universal need for security, subsistence and survival” (p. 168). The concept of “aunties” offers a new way of conceptualizing the family, and as a corollary, a new understanding social capital that is particularly fitting in small or rural community contexts.

Recent rural research has linked the “universal” properties of families as proposed by Malinowski (1913) with the properties of rural communities, and his work illuminates the role that aunties might play in both contexts. Gougeon (1997) proposed that living rurally is “like belonging to a family” because many of the social roles and relationships are similar and are connected in multiple ways. Gougeon (1999) proposed that a rural community is like a family because both require clear boundaries of membership, both need a physical space to come together to perform daily tasks, and members of both families and communities may “hold affection... and intimate association with each other” (p. 5).

Gougeon (1999) also drew on the work of Ferdinand Tonnies (in Sorokin, 1928) when he proposes that rural communities and families experience *Gemeinschaft* relationships and associations that are based on interrelations and community will. Correspondingly, urban communities and organizations experience *Gesellschaft* relationships whereby individuals act and interact according to their own individual will (Gougeon, 1999, p. 2). Gougeon proposed that the more isolated the rural community, “the more its members rely on each other” (1999, p. 4), and conversely, the more urban the area, the more members rely on experts from outside of their intimate associates.

Further similarities between families and rural communities emerged from the work of other social researchers. For example, Gougeon (1999) likened the social connections within small communities to kinship networks as described by Stack

(1974), which bring clusters of people together and provide the opportunity for individuals to establish deep connections to others. Similarly, Collier and Yanagisako (1993) proposed that tribal cultures rarely distinguish boundaries between the family and the tribe and therefore many members join in the raising of children. However, families and communities do act independently and may extend their networks at will, re-determine their boundaries, or enforce community sanctions. Gougeon concluded that “since being a biological parent is not sufficient to gain parental rights over a child, living in a community is insufficient to gain social acceptance” (1999, p. 7). Those who gain acceptance into family or community take collective responsibility for caring about other members of the contemporary family and community. I suggest that the actions of aunts can counter the discourse of the demise of the family and the decline of civic participation; however, their roles as agents of social change are distinctly absent from discussions of social capital and civic engagement. I suggest that “auntie” is a fitting metonym to advance the proposal by Gougeon (1999) that families can share similar social dynamics to a rural community.

At the same time, I am aware that not all family members or active citizens actually build social capital. It is therefore important to consider how active community members may inhibit the capacity for individuals, families or communities to generate and accumulate social capital.

#### Aunties are Benevolent and Malevolent

Aunties may be a precious community resource because their activities can strengthen social networks and relationships, and generate social capital; however, the impact they have on the community is not necessarily benign. Active citizens who participate in mutually beneficial relationships with others and do not expect reward or recognition performing their civic duty could be performing a “duty of beneficence” (Sidgwick in Blum, 1996, p. 243). Nonetheless, Putnam (2000) cautions us that “vices may be hidden on the dark side of civic virtue” (p. 351). Social capital can indeed “be directed towards malevolent... purposes,” and Putnam reminds us that it is important to understand how to maximize the positive consequences and minimize the “negative manifestations” (p. 22).

Other researchers suggest that social capital “can be either too strong or too weak” (Flora & Flora, 2003, p. 1). On the one hand, communities with very high levels

of social capital can contain “closely protected social networks” (p. 1) that engender distrust of others and fear of change, for example, in a “gated” housing development or a religious colony. On the other hand, communities with low levels of social capital are prone to resist change, tend to become elitist, and readily apply moral sanctions to the “other” (Cox, 1995, p. 33). In such situations, communities often do not flourish because those who deviate from or challenge social norms are “open to accusation” and “hostility” for their failure to “adjust to the local norms of reciprocity” (Crow, Allen, & Summers, 2002, p. 139).

I was curious whether the participants had experienced benevolent and malevolent actions in their community service work, so I asked about what may have hindered the women, and ideas arose about family, negative attitudes and struggle. Sophia (RG) was held back by having a lot of kids and a husband who said “everything he did had to come first” (16). Allison (RS) was challenged by the scheduling demands of raising her active family on a ranch located far from their activities in town. Sophia (RG) was also challenged by sexism, racism or ageism (16) but she overcame that by learning to speak out (2), much like Penny (RCB), who has “become a bit up front” (8) when she encounters negativity. Both Sophia (RG) and Penny (RCB) identified that small town attitudes hindered them, and Penny described being subjected to gossip, jealousy and envy (8) in particular. It seems to me that family and friends can both help and hinder the activities of women, and that the limited social constructions acceptable for women in small communities adds to the pressure to conform to constraining roles and expectations.

When some of the participants in the study were asked who had hindered them along the way, a number of them mentioned others who held themselves to be morally superior or were resistant to change. For instance, Allison (RS) encountered a woman in the community who was a “tough old bag” to work with because she resisted change. Allison made the observation that, “to other people in the community she was their ‘auntie’, but to me, we were just butting heads” (19). Sophia (RG) related that she was hindered by other people’s fears when she “got pushed off the porch of the church... by a woman” who objected to Sophia’s participation as a Wiccan priestess in an Ecumenical Prayer service (11). Several other examples arose of being hindered by community members who resisted change (RM, RS, RCB).

Not all community service activities are beneficial, despite their outward appearance, and it is important to acknowledge that the work of some aunties may in fact have a malevolent impact on the lives of others. Even when one's actions are carried out with good intentions, in some cases, "services designed to enhance life... have unintended iatrogenic effects... including dehumanisation, oppression and humiliation" (Higgins, 1997, p. 289). In Australia, for example, the "Australian Natives Association", founded in 1871, was a "friendly society" of well-to-do Caucasian or 'white' men and women that was formed for the purpose of "promoting the country's welfare and advancement" and campaigning for "federation and a 'white' Australia" (Ohlsson & Duffy, 1999, p. 126). Although the society did have some social functions, "there was a definite political undertone in their advocacy of a strong white population base for Australia" (p. 126). It is important to acknowledge that not all work done by grassroots women such as aunties is beneficial or benign, and that their actions may be perceived to be detrimental to the community when viewed from different social, religious, and political viewpoints.

The following discussion re-conceptualizes the relationship between aunties, their families, and the small and rural communities they live in. The concept of "auntie" itself will be re-conceptualized by engaging in a rich exploration of who is an auntie in small and rural communities, what it is that aunties do, and how they actually carry out their roles and activities.

From the experiences of the ten participants I derived three themes:

Aunties are women who actively provide social care in their communities

Aunties build relationships and connections

Aunties create shared understandings.

Furthermore, ideas of how aunties resist and persist in response to diminishing discourses are explored, and in this way, the capacity for the women's actions to speak louder than the words that diminish them may be revealed.

## **Un-sung heroines**

I know  
a lot of  
    women too,  
a lot of  
    grassroots,  
    gritty,  
    down  
    to  
        earth,  
the real stuff,  
    the un-sung heroines,  
    they are.

They do this stuff  
because  
it  
    just  
    has  
    to  
    be  
    done.

(12)

**Sophia**  
**Raging Granny**

## Who Is an Auntie?

“Aunties” are particularly active women who are engaged in generating informal social capital in their communities, and it is important to identify who they are so that community members, organizations, and rural developers can recognize them and learn from their experiences. I propose that individual aunties are identifiable in most small and rural communities and that they share some common, recognizable roles and responsibilities that are often not named or recognized in discussions of social capital.

It is important to study which individual community members are proactive if the social capital available to the community is to be enhanced. As Onyx and Bullen (2000) found, the capacity to form connections between people starts with the individual and, therefore, “the collective power of the community requires the commitment of many proactive individuals” (p. 128). Proactive individuals are important stimulators of social capital because they are often found doing things in the company of family and friends.

Herd and Harrington-Meyer (2002) urge that social capital must be included in discussions of civic engagement because it “affects the health of civic life and is fundamental component of participatory citizenship” (Oct. 2002, p. 683). They posit that a “public-private dichotomy” obscures the value caring work, but this divide can be breached if unpaid care work is included in the language of civic engagement, and if the family is recognized as critical to the formation of a healthy democracy (, p. 666). In fact, the World Bank identified that the family is the “first building block in the generation of social capital for the larger society” (PovertyNet, 2004, p. 1). The relationships within a family ideally “foster the development of trust” and the formation of external relationships, and these interactions enhance social capital because they encourage reciprocity and exchange in the community (p. 2).

I sought to illuminate similar interactions when I set out to collect the data for this study. As Winter (2000a) suggested, I extended the concept of “volunteer” to include those individuals who generated informal as well as formal activities. I also sought to expand the conventional concept of “community development” by exploring the experiences of grassroots women who were active in the private as well as the public domain.

I chose the term “auntie” to name the social role under investigation, but I did not want to assume that I could construct its meaning at my own discretion. I therefore posed the term to the participants for exploration because I knew that it was important to recognize multiple meanings for shared or common concepts (Burr, 2000). I asked

the question “What meaning does the word auntie hold for you?,” and from the responses, I identified the themes that aunties hold a family-like position in the community, that aunties provide a range of voluntary social care, and that aunties are older, wiser, and experienced women. During the data analysis, I encountered several contradictions when exploring the question, “Who is an auntie?” For instance, I struggled to reconcile the idea that aunties are common, identifiable characters in most Western communities with the notion that they may be considered uncommon or unique because only certain women give in such extra-ordinary ways. Additionally, I sought to explore the dissonance I had experienced as an auntie when I was recognized and acknowledged in the community, while at other times, I felt anonymous or taken-for-granted by family, community members, or by formal institutions.

### Being an Auntie Means...

The participants in this study indicated that being an auntie means belonging to an extended family and holding a respected position in a social network. From their responses, I surmised that the word “auntie” primarily suggests having a family-like relationship with others in the community, and being part of a network that encompasses both formal and informal connections. For instance, my childhood friend Allison (RS) explained that the meaning of “auntie” could apply to both relatives and friends: “One can be, of course... as a family member... like family but it’s an auntie.... Almost like a mentor... to my children, I mean” (RS 14).

Some women associated other family terms with the experience of being an auntie, such as sisterhood (CTM, SM) and mothering (RCB), while for Cathy, the indigenous term “mokai” indicates “a form of respect for, usually, the oldest in the family” (ICL 11). The term “auntie” also brought to mind “an older, a maturer person” (CWA 31) who is liked and respected by others (RM), or who is known to be responsible (ICN). Pauline (CWA) said that “auntie” meant being a role model, while other women said it meant sharing, teaching, or showing (ICN), as well as nurturing or supporting (ICL, RM, ICN), or having fun (RG). Finally, “auntie” was described as being a meaningful term (CTM), or as being a powerful, rich and privileged title (SM).

I purposefully asked most of the respondents if they could use the word “auntie” to describe themselves, rather than assume that they would identify with the title or were comfortable with the term. I also asked for each participant’s response to the names and

monikers that I created for them, because it was important to me that they were comfortable with my choices. The table below lists each participant and their identity.

*Table 1 – Participants’ Names, Monikers, Codes and Country Residence*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Moniker</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Country</b>
Allison	Rural School Mom	RSM	Canada
Fiona	Indigenous Community Nurse	ICN	Canada
Simone	Re-sourceress at Large	RL	Canada
Bella	Cyber Tribal Mother	CTM	Canada
Sophia	Raging Granny	RG	Canada
Mary	Sister of Mercy	SM	Australia
Pauline	Country Women’s Advocate	CWA	Australia
Cathy	Indigenous Community Liaison	ICL	Australia
Cathy’s mother		CLM	Australia
Penny	Rural Community Builder	RCB	Australia
Jill	Rainforest Mayor	RM	Australia

Allison is a Rural School Mom (RSM) who is active in a ranching community in Western Canada. She confirmed that she would use the term “auntie” to describe herself because, “People that know me will come to me for certain roles, certain things that I do, that I don’t have to be a family member to achieve” (15). Fiona is an Indigenous Community Nurse (ICN) in northern British Columbia who “definitely” describes herself as an auntie because “If I go to other children, I don’t have any problems talking to them, or being with them, or doing stuff. They don’t have to be my niece or nephew, or anything like that” (19).

Simone called herself a Re-sourceress at Large (RL) because she works with the resources at hand to create alternatives in her semi-rural environment. Bella called herself a Cyber-Tribal Mother (CTM) because she creates community in cyber-space. Bella used the term auntie inclusively when she stated that, “I see the ‘aunties’ and the ‘sisterhood’ as sort of the same thing. It is all of us with our little mama bear energies doing what we can do to better our realms of existence” (11). Sophia (RG) is a member of a Raging Grannies troupe on her island, and when asked if she could call herself an auntie, she

replied, “It’s a funny thing, but I haven’t been an auntie... I relate more to being a ‘granny’ .... Yes, it’s possible... [but] I’m probably more seen as an ‘elder’” (22).

In Australia, I interviewed Mary, who is retired from the Order of the Sisters of Mercy (SM) and is active in a small parish in North Queensland. She had no hesitation calling herself “auntie,” and she said, “It’s very rich for me because... I have seventeen nieces and nephews, and I’ve got fourteen grand-nieces and nephews, and three more arriving this year and one great-grand-nephew, so that auntie is a privilege for me” (26). Pauline is a pioneer in the Country Women’s Association (CWA) and lives on a remote cattle station. She regarded herself as an auntie, and explained,

Well... since I have been older I do ‘do’ some of that now, so yes.... auntie, as an older person who learns from these other people but gives another point of view, and probably stabilizes a bit. (CWA 32)

Cathy also works in remote conditions, where she is an Indigenous Community Liaison (ICL) at the district school. She is a traditional auntie or “mokai” in her clan, and is therefore responsible for the well being of many nieces and nephews. (Cathy’s mother joined in the interview part way through, and her contribution is coded as CLM.)

Penny supports several local employment and skill-development initiatives in Far North Queensland, and she implied that the term “auntie” could apply to her, “I guess auntie, I guess what you are looking at is a mothering role.... I would say probably, yes in the role that I am doing, it’s a mothering” (11). Finally, Jill is involved in international affairs through her role as a mayor (RM) in a small rainforest town. When asked if she could use the title auntie to describe herself, she replied,

I hate it actually.... I couldn’t regard myself in that terminology.... I think I prefer the term sister. I do because that covers any age, and to me, an auntie is looking down, taller, bigger and older... I prefer the term sister. (RM 28)

The participants’ responses to the term suggest to me that an “auntie” is a particularly active individual who plays a caring role in her family and community that is identifiable and quantifiable. Being an “auntie” means holding a privileged position that can extend beyond the family role into the community, where aunties act as role models or mentors and offer an experienced perspective. The concept of aunties is closely tied to the concept of family, and much of the discussion made links to other family roles such as granny, mother, or sister.

The term “auntie” appears to be an acceptable metonym to describe the phenomenon under study, and there seems to be a high degree of acceptance and shared

understanding of its meaning amongst the participants. The two participants who did reject the term (RG, RM) did so because the term was not age-appropriate for them, and not because they rejected the term *per se*. Overall, the responses to the term “auntie” indicate to me that there are some common understandings about its meaning that are identifiable. At the same time, it names a phenomenon that is significantly unique to warrant being studied separately from other related experiences, such as being a volunteer. I perceive a tension between the notion that aunties are familiar figures in the community, and that aunties are unique, as it is not every woman who is an active and engaged family or community member.

### Being an Auntie Means Being Common and Uncommon

Although the experience of being an engaged and active citizen could be considered as a common one, statistically, it is a somewhat uncommon experience in both Canada and Australia. On the one hand, voluntarily giving to “the private pursuit of public purpose” has been a recognizable and common feature of society since the early sociological work of Tocqueville (Markham, 1995). Indeed, some observe that volunteering “is so pervasive that it is sometimes invisible” (“Who is a volunteer?,” n/p). On the other hand, Canadian and Australian statistics show that only 1/3 of the adult population reported being engaged in voluntary activities of any sort in the past year, making it a statistically uncommon phenomenon. (see Table Two for further comparison).

Some individuals commonly assume active roles in the civic life of a community, but not all citizens take the opportunity to do so. Aunties may be among those who report formal volunteering activities, and I find it easy to imagine them among the “folks” described by McKnight’s (1994) as community-minded people:

All of us know these folks, some of us *are* these folks, and they are people who mainly see the gifts in other people; optimistic people; they are the people who like to be with people, who like to take on responsibilities, who like to be in the sharing of community and civic and associational life. Therefore, they are trusted, and because they are trusted and they’ve been much involved and they have an optimistic view, they believe the community works. (McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994, p. 20)

It is my perception that the participants in this study could fit McKnight’s description of community-minded people. Additionally, during the interviews, many of the participants identified other “folks” from their own experiences whom assumed collective and individual responsibility for civic life. For example, in the poem “Unsung Heroines” (p.174), Sophia (RG) tells of the “grassroots, gritty, down to earth”

heroines that she knows who “do this stuff because it has to be done” (12). Likewise, it is my perception that such “heroines” are all around us and that the experience of being an “auntie” is possible for many women to achieve, not just a few.

### Aunties are Volunteers

Aunties who formally volunteer can be vital contributors to social capital in communities, but, unfortunately, the voluntarily service that they and others perform is generally under-researched and misunderstood. For instance, the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy recently declared that there has been a “dearth of volunteering research in Canada” (Husbands, McKechnie, & Gagnon, 2001, p. 1) and they expressed concern that “failure to understand demographic change... may mean... a skewed view of potential volunteers” (p. 8). They warn that as a result, social scientists are currently working with “an unproductive image of ‘who a volunteer is’” (p. 28). In Canada, images of volunteers often include “people with time on their hands, rich, white, busybodies, retired people, charity givers and envelope stuffers” (Who is, 1999, p. 20).

Similarly, in England, conventional images included the middle-aged spinster or “the middle-class lady with her twin-set and pearls caring for the needy” (Lukka & Ellis, 2002a). For others, the “v-word” itself (Lukka & Ellis, 2002a) is objectionable because it “reeks of middle-class do-gooding” (Crossman in Lukka & Ellis, 2002a). Stereotypes like these may be detrimental to engaging community members in “volunteering” because the images are exclusionary. Such stereotypes may alienate young people and ethnic minorities from participating in activities associated with the term (Lukka & Ellis, 2002a).

A clearer understanding of who actually is active as a volunteer is becoming more important with growing concerns about the changing nature of civic engagement in both North America (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 9) and Australia (Cox, 1995, p. 8). This study of civically-minded women is timely because, in Canada, the social significance of volunteer work “appears to remain an under-researched area” (Park, 1996, p. 127; see also Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000). For instance, the term “volunteer work” is a poorly defined one, yet is used as a taken-for-granted term to describe a “complex, varied and socially constructed phenomenon” (Park, 1996, p. 43). Some surveys may define volunteer work as formally contributing to an organization and others may include informal acts such as driving an ailing neighbour to the doctor (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2004). I purposely excluded the term “volunteer” from the interview

protocol of this study because I wanted to encourage the respondents to speak about formal and informal ways of being active without being constrained by the terminology. For clarity in this study, the term “formal” volunteering refers to “any contribution of unpaid time to activities of formal organizations,” while “informal” volunteering refers to “any assistance given directly to non-household individuals... not through a formal organization” (Reed & Selbee, 2000, p. 1).

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, researchers argue that the narrow Western construct of the term “volunteer” leads to mismeasurement of civic participation because the image of the “altruistic giver benefiting the ‘needy’ recipient” is in “sharp contrast to the realities” of the experience (Lukka & Ellis, 2002a, p. 2). The narrow definition of “volunteer” can result in the marginalisation of potential volunteers “who do not conform to, or identify with, this dominant construct” (p. 4), and are therefore unlikely to report their activities as such.

I propose that not all aunties would report themselves as “volunteers” if asked, just as not all women who formally volunteer would consider themselves to be “aunties.” Nonetheless, the most closely related phenomenon to that of being an auntie which has any body of research to review was that of being a “volunteer.” I suggest the experiences have enough similarities that I can “adopt” data on volunteering to compare the social contexts where the studies of Canadian and Australian aunties took place.

Table 2 below reports quantitative data of volunteer rates in both Canada and Australia at the macro, societal level. These figures provide a context for this qualitative study of the details of voluntary social care at the micro, individual level.

***Table 2 – Comparative volunteering patterns in Canada and Australia***

<b>Type of activity</b>	<b>Canadian rates<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>Australian rates<sup>6</sup></b>
Total Population	over 30 million	approx. 19 million
Reported participation rate of entire population	31% overall 28% of women 25% of men	32% overall 33% of women 31% of men
Total volunteer hours reported annually	1 billion hours	2.2 million hours
Average hours per volunteer per annum	162 hours per annum	72 hours per annum
Most active age & %	35-54 years of age	35-45 years of age

<sup>5</sup> (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000)

<sup>6</sup> (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001)

of total active	30%	40%
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There are many similarities between the volunteer rates shown in Canada and Australia for participation rate, gender distribution, and the most active age groups. Overall, the volunteer rates in both countries show a marked similarity when quantitatively measured, and these statistics support my decision to conduct qualitative interviews with volunteers in rural Canada and Australia. These similarities also lend support to my decision not to compare the Canadian and Australian data, but to interpret the data collectively. The most marked difference between countries appears to be total hours per volunteer per annum, shown for Australia at 72 hrs and Canada at 162 hrs. This difference is probably due to variations in the measurement and defining of “volunteer” activities<sup>7</sup>, and it provides a ready example of the lack of clarity in understanding what constitutes the experience of being a formal “volunteer”, much less that of being an informal “auntie”

The national participation rates quoted in Table Two for Canada and Australia fail to tell the entire story of volunteering in small or rural contexts, where similarities between the countries are again evident. In both countries, rural and small town dwellers reported higher participation rates than their urban counterparts, and participation rates increased as the size of the community decreased. For example, the rate of participation is 47% in Saskatchewan (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000), and is 45% in Western Australia (Fischer & Byron, 1999), both of which contain primarily rural populations. In another example of participation differences in relation to rurality, Canadians living in communities of 30,000 people or less comprise only 24% of the entire population, yet they give 37% of the total hours per annum for the country (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000). Based on these indicators, I submit that it is important to study those citizens who are active in small, rural, and remote communities separately from their urban counterparts specifically because their rates of volunteering differ substantially.

Regardless of context, it appears that certain community members are far more active than others in providing voluntary services. For example, in Canada, it was

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<sup>7</sup> The Canadian “National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participation” figures include informal voluntary activities such as carpooling, while the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures reflect only formal volunteer efforts such as belonging to a group or organization.

found that 25% of all volunteers perform 72% of the total recorded hours (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000). This statistic means that only 7% of all Canadians contribute almost three quarters of the nation's voluntary effort. When broken down further, it appears that 5% of the most active volunteers do 32% of the total work, and on average they each contribute 548 hours per year (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000). Clearly, much does come from a few, and it is the actions of those few that I seek to understand.

### Re-capping "Who is an auntie?"

"Auntie" is a "thick" (Geertz, 1973) term that is constructed of many subtle meanings associated with family and community that are not easy to describe. Rather than a concrete term, "auntie" provides an abstract description of McKnight's (Jan. 1994) "folks" who get involved in the community, or Sophia's "nitty-gritty" heroines (RG 12) who do what has to be done. The term "auntie" appears to be part of a familial discourse that evokes ideas of sisterhood, mothering, and intergenerational mentoring. Being an auntie appears to mean being more than a volunteer or a neighbour because it implies an intimate and privileged place in the community or extended family, regardless of the presence of kinship or blood ties.

Not all blood aunts are "aunties," and not all "aunties" accept or use the title. The term usually denotes an honorary and not obligatory position in the bosom of the family. The term encompasses particular individuals who assume a familiar, active role in the community. Aunties may be young or old but they have both the energy and the confidence to exercise their social consciousness, develop networks, and acquire skills that make them effective. Statistical data can provide some quantitative insights into "Who is an auntie?," yet qualitative data about the experience of being an auntie provide a richer and deeper understanding of the individuals who could be described by the term. My curiosity about their experiences led me to ask, "What is it that aunties actually do in the community?" I hoped the answer would provide some significant insights into how to support aunties in their roles as generators of social capital.

**Just**

... the Youth Talent Festival,  
and 4-H  
and the walkathon;

those are all things  
that  
I just do.

I don't even think twice about  
doing them

and I've never really  
thought about it as

being an "auntie."

It is just  
something that I do.

And if I'm not doing  
something like that,

I'm feeling like  
I'm not contributing.

But I've never really  
thought about it  
as being

a figure in the community.

It's just what I do.

(2)

**Allison**

**Rural School Mom**

## **What Do Aunties Do?**

Aunties are active members of society whose roles are more complex than those of a “volunteer,” and who participate in a wide variety of activities that have far-reaching impacts on social capital. Their actions are significant to discussions of social capital because aunties span the boundaries between private and public spheres and because the civic activities of grassroots women can provide a “platform from which to do a job that wasn’t otherwise being done” (Stewart-Weeks, 2000, p. 282). For instance, the individuals in this study perform multiple small acts of living and giving, which help move the community forward and look after the “tribe.” Many of the women also reported assuming the role of mentor, sister, or role model to others. Unfortunately, their contributions are often unrecognized or are taken for granted by themselves, their families, and other community members.

### Being an Auntie Means Being Active

I was able to identify many examples in the interview data of women asserting themselves as active rather than passive members of the community. To begin with, Sophia rejected the stereotype of the passive grandmother when she asserts, “I’m an activist, I like to do things and I don’t like sitting in long meetings” (3). She bemoaned organizations that “want your money and then they want to do stuff” (19), and her standard reply to them is, “I’m an activist, tell me something I can do. Something I can do” (19). Fiona stated emphatically that being an auntie was important because, as an auntie, “to look back and share” with nieces and nephews is not enough: “You have to show them. You have to do stuff with them” (20). Allison is definitely active because she is the one who will “shake up the pot a little bit and take the next step forward.” (22). Likewise, Jill revealed that often, “I am the one that actually has the courage to raise issues and say ‘This is what needs to be done’” (4). Being an active member of a family or community often means doing what needs to be done, regardless of other responsibilities and aunties frequently find that this entails performing multiple tasks.

### Aunties Perform Multiple Tasks

A number of the respondents provided strong evidence that aunties perform multiple tasks in their families and communities. Several women spoke of being busy with the multiple activities of their children (CTM, CWA), including Allison (RS), who

said, “my children are very involved in... dance and sports. You name it, they’re there, so I’m there” (2). Penny also indicated that she had multiple tasks as chairperson of the annual town festival, and she explained; “Actually, what I am is the chief cook and bottle washer, I think... the whole box and dice.” (4). In addition, Jill (RM) and Penny (RCB) both held civic posts and listed local, regional and international commitments for which they were responsible.

Evidence of aunties multi-tasking also appeared in some of the photographs that I took for the study. Specifically, the photographs entitled “Red Cross Multitasking” (p. 153) shows that the same group of Red Cross volunteers took turns to represent the international organization in two different ANZAC Day parades on the same day. When I saw the same women marching in Tully and then again in Cardwell, I realized that some aunties not only hold multiple roles in the same community, but may be active in the same role in multiple locations.

These investigations into what aunties actively do in the community may forge links between the everyday experiences of ordinary people and the generation of social capital. It is important to find out what engaged people are actually doing because “social capital is produced and used in everyday interactions,” and daily acts may well be a source of “social, civic and economic well-being” (Falk & Kilpatrick, 1999, p. 19). A phenomenological perspective and interdisciplinary research are well suited to do this because they can contribute “above and beyond” to understanding the “complexity and diversity of neighbourhoods and communities themselves” (Booth & Crouter, 2001, p. 242).

Some governments are exploring how to encourage everyday volunteering, and in particular, the English government have declared their intention to “invest in social capital” by encouraging the capacity of ordinary people to do things to make “an extraordinary difference” (in Gaskin, 1999). Feminists are also challenging others to identify, name, and promote “the daily reciprocal relationships that define family and community” (Callahan, 1997, p. 193), which often get lost in the discourse of welfare agencies and their workers. Martinez-Brawley (1995) helped me to understand the phenomenon of being an auntie when she described active community members:

People who are not anomic are busy, active, coping, living, winning or losing but never disengaged. People... find meaning in helping the larger collective; they find meaning in being helped or cared for by those with whom they share community. (Martinez-Brawley, 1995, p. 28).

Active participation appears to be a significant indicator of what being an auntie means, because many aunties put their words into action in order to bring about social change in their communities. When I reviewed the data for this study, I found that what the participants did as active agents clustered into themes of helping the community move forward, looking after the tribe, performing small acts of living, and that many take on multiple roles in the community, such as being a mentor or, as Simone calls herself, a “re-sourceress.”

### Aunties Help the Community Move Forward

Being an auntie means successfully helping the community move forward by teaching, care-taking, organizing, and stabilizing. As Penny explained, “I hope my role, my successful role, will be if ... the community are able to move forward.” (12). Some aunties help others by teaching or sharing their experience and knowledge (RG, ICN) or by passing on the family or community stories (ICL). For example, the members of the Bowen Historical Society (p. 86) help the community move forward (as well as look back) by teaching and sharing stories and artefacts from the local district. Other respondents described what they do as sharing, caring (CLM), or being supportive (ICN, SM), and Allison mused, “the word ‘caretakers’ comes in to play” (14). As an example, Mary cared for a young mother up the street by offering to her, “if you need a couple of hours sleep this arvo (*afternoon*), give the little fella to me” (19). Other respondents helped the community to move forward through their ability to organize (RSM, CWA), as well as to “probably stabilize a bit, because you have been there, done that, sort of thing” (CWA 32). Being an auntie means having a concern about the welfare of others who live in the community and actively doing something to help them move forward. For many of the respondents, this seemed to mean looking after the extended family or “tribe.”

### Aunties Look After the Tribe

The experience of being an auntie often includes looking after the family and all manner of family business. For Bella, being an auntie meant

taking some aspect of social responsibility and doing something in the community to make a difference. And, so, it’s not just about looking after the youngins, it is about looking after the tribe. (CTM 11)

Fiona (ICN) identified that aunties “spend time with the children.... showing them, being a companion, sort of” (19). Mary (SM) also said that being an auntie within her family is a privilege because she finds that “everyone tells me things that they may not necessarily tell one another” (27), and she can say or do things that others are not able to (26). Similarly, for Cathy (ICL), being a traditional auntie, or “mokai,” meant that at times, she took over for the parents when problems arose with her nieces and nephews. She explained that, “They respect me.... They won’t talk back” (11); nevertheless, Cathy’s mother added that, “...the mokai... she can tell you but she can’t make you” (CLM 14).

Being an auntie seems to mean looking after the other members of the family, community, or tribe no matter how difficult the task. This infers to me that aunties have earned the respect of others because they take on responsibility for doing the hard work.

#### Aunties Do the Hard Work

Some of the respondents mentioned doing the ‘hard work’ in the community or with their families. For example, Sophia (RG) stated, “You can’t get something for nothing” and explained that in order to get respect in the community, “You just have to do some of the dirty work too.... The tough work” (26). She also said that she has to work harder to gain respect in the community because

I am pretty out there and diverse and I speak my mind. And not only that, but I’m Wiccan and you know, you have to work a little harder to be accepted in your community because there are people who are sort of afraid of it. (RG 1)

Mary (SM) related difficulties she had experienced because she often makes the first move to address an issue and that sometimes “it is really hard stuff” (22). Penny (RCB) found it difficult when other people failed to take on responsibility because, at times, “You have just got to bite the bullet and say ‘Well, at least I can do something’. You just don’t walk away” (16). As the family mokai, Cathy (ICL) has difficulty sometimes because she must know all the boundaries between the clan lines and it is her duty to say, “You can’t marry through that line, that’s too close,” or “You are marrying [the] wrong way there” (13). Cathy’s mother explained the burden of shame the mokai can bear; “You know, if you weren’t there when an incident happened, you know you can really feel that shame” (CLM 12). Cathy knows that being a mokai means bearing a burden, but it is a burden “that they usually carry because of their love for their families” (ICL 12).

Along with the privileges of being an auntie in the community come responsibilities, and this often means having to do the hard work in the community. This has been the case for a long time, as an historical account of rural Canadian women shows. This account suggests that in the colonial era, women “were the nurses and doctors for their families and neighbours,” and in more isolated areas, that they “acted as the midwives, even if they were inexperienced” (Sunberg, 1986, p. 102). In addition, rural women often performed the duties of the mortician, and “the ritual of preparing the body... provided women the opportunity to support and comfort one another” (p. 103). I would suggest that women have played similar roles in both Canadian and Australian pioneering situations, and that in both countries, women continue to do the hard work in families and communities today.

Some women decide to take more responsibility than others for guiding and helping the community move forward safely, and for caring about their own family members and others in the “tribe.” My understanding of how aunties support and care about others is encapsulated in the photograph titled “Australian School Moms Marching with Children” (p. 76), which shows school children participating in an ANZAC Day parade. Like the woman carrying the child on her hip in the photo, many aunties persist in guiding, care-taking, and providing social care to others in the “tribe” despite the fact that this often increases the burden they already bear.

### Social Caring

Aunties provide social caring in the community by looking after the “tribe” and helping the community move forward, and their activities can contribute to the social capital available to the community. The idea of social capital is tied to the idea of social care by networks of connections that involve doing things with fellow community members rather than for them (Putnam, 2000, p. 117).

In this study, I assume the definition of rural social care as offered by Cheers (2004), which includes, “all the arrangements through which people try to meet each other’s social, emotional, and material needs” (p. 3). Caring behaviour begins with commitment, passion, and vision (Cheers, 2004, p. 1). Nonetheless, social care is a poorly understood and taken-for-granted social phenomenon. For example, a study of women volunteers in Canada revealed that the research literature lacks “comprehensive discussions, explorations, explanations and theorizing” (Park, 1996, p. 131) about

women's caring roles and practices. Caring actions are the basis of healthy community life and are the "substance of community ties" (Adair & Howell, 1993, p. 39).

Aunties act as caregivers in their families and take on extra responsibilities to create change in their communities despite the fact that this often results in increased difficulty or adds to the burden carried by the individual. The primary caregivers in a family are most often women, and as a result of assuming this role, they are "likely to be the most active participants in community-based efforts" (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 288). Although being an active caretaker in the community may lead some individuals into positions of leadership, it may also represent "an additional burden on women" (p. 288).

As an example, Canadian researchers claimed that those who work for social change are doing difficult work that is "dirty, gritty and unrewarding" (Lakey, Lakey, Napier, & Robinson, 1995, p. 3). They found that social activists are often subject to "unconstructive criticism, and attacks" or "hostile or indifferent" treatment from others, while the media trivializes or ignores their work (p. 3). The burden of care may weigh heavy for some, but many persist despite knowing that caring work takes time and patience and that it can be a slow process marked by small achievements and quiet changes (Adair & Howell, 1993, p. 39). I recall the words of Margaret Mead, who once said, "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing which ever has" (in Theobald, 1997, p. 10).

My experience of being an agent of social change is congruent with Harman (in Theobald, 1997, p. 71), who suggests that change happens when "a lot of people do a lot of things a little differently" (p. 71). Small acts of caring are often deemed unimportant by larger society because these acts are associated with "women's work," yet they are important to community identity and sustainability because they include "the work of remembering the details, noticing emotional nuances, [and] keeping the peace" (Adair & Howell, 1993, p. 39). During my interpretation of the data, I developed an understanding that being an auntie means performing small acts of living (Wade, 1997), which can be detected by assuming competency, getting specific, and paying attention to detail, and in this way we can reconstruct and reframe small acts of resistance as intelligible responses to oppression (Wade, 1999, p. 360). When I searched for examples of small acts of living and giving, I was encouraged by the words of St. Theresa, who supposedly said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love."

### Aunties Perform Small Acts of Living and Giving

Many aunties actively engage in small acts that can contribute to the social capital of a family or community. Social capital may be both produced and consumed in small, everyday interactions that involve various members of the community in “clusters of meaningful social activities” (Falk & Kilpatrick, 1999, p. 19). For instance, informal, casual interaction and learning can take place in meetings, clubs, or over the internet. Although these small acts are easily dismissed as idle chatter or gossip, much of this “chat” serves “crucial social purposes” that can contribute significantly to “the community’s advancement” (p. 12). From such micro-interactions can arise trust, a sense of reciprocity, and “expectations of social accountability,” which are the “social glue which binds many small, rural communities together” (p. 20).

I gleaned several examples of how aunties might perform small acts of living, and the first came from Jill, the Rainforest Mayor. She spoke of seeing “an accumulation of tiny things which... makes this a positive place” (13), and explained, “if you work with and promote positive people... who are doing things... they do achieve the little results which accumulatively make a difference” (30). In a similar fashion, when Bella (CTM) volunteered at the Bingo hall, she was aware of role modelling in small ways: “I don’t drink pop, they just watch me drink water. Just little things.... and it gives people a subconscious shimmy” (16). Additionally, in the poem “Auntie” (p. 7), Mary (SM) spoke of the “little things that aunties do,” and later explained,

I find that I am less and less and less active in that big “out there.” I am more and more active in teaching a little boy... how to sound his vowels.... I can see much, much, much more clearly now that if this little boy gets his confidence up, and he can read, then he can go on and... this is where it has to happen. (26).

Small acts are becoming increasingly desirable in times of a growing sense of anomie, because they can contribute significantly to building social capital. For example, being a good neighbour does not necessarily mean “extensive involvement” in each others lives, but can be “expressed quite adequately in small ways” (Crow et al., 2002, p. 139; see also Berlin, 1997). Many interactions between community members and neighbours take place in casual ways, and often, the centre for exchange is the local coffee shop, pub, fire hall, school, or marketplace (Martinez-Brawley, 1995, p. 21; see also Avenilla & Singley, 2001).

Some examples from the data are provided by Mary (SM), who related how she supports her neighbours by offering a seat in the shade to an elderly man who walks by every day, or by lighting a prayer lamp “for somebody who this morning said, ‘Listen, say one for me today’” (19). Mary also remembered the days of her childhood when her family was closely connected to certain neighbours. In particular, she recalled the ladies “who fixed the dress of this girl to fit me... who, if your mother was sick...[or] was having another baby, would come around to the house, those sort of aunties” (27).

Examples of individual actions that neighbours may do to take care of each other include “lots of little ways” such as “gardening, shopping, and giving/receiving lifts,” as well as generally “keeping a look out for each other” (Crow et al., 2002, p. 139). I suspect that small acts like checking in on a neighbour or a friend are becoming increasingly significant in peoples’ lives, for as Martinez-Brawley suggests:

Perhaps the search for significance has sparked the current return of hundreds of citizens to the small towns and villages where undramatic and casual contributions to community are counted by their fellow citizens. A sense of security is derived from this mutuality of communal relationship... [and] from the affection and support of neighbors. (1995, p. 14)

The support (and affection) of friends and neighbours is what builds social capital in most communities, and clearly, the small acts of individuals can make subtle and significant impacts on the social life of a community. In the photographic data, I found evidence of small acts of living and giving on bulletin boards and vernacular signage, as shown on p. 56. Two of the pictures show collective, organizational engagement in small acts, such as the Rotary Club sign, which invites travellers to pick fruit for free, and the Post Office Hotel poster, which boasts a weekly raffle for “Hot Chooks [chicken] and Beer” to raise funds for local clubs. In addition, the notice for “Girls Night Out” in the city shows that individuals can enhance social capital by organizing small, informal events and gatherings that reinforce relationships and connections within their neighbourhoods and communities. I suggest that these small acts can contribute significantly to constructing and strengthening the multiple ties that bind families, neighbours, and community members together. I found evidence in the data of aunties being active in both formal and informal roles in the community, and that they were often performing several roles at a time. I was curious to learn how the participants perceived their roles in so I ask them several questions about it.

### Aunties Fulfil Multiple Roles

When women who participated in this study were also asked how they would describe their role in the community, some mentioned being a source of support and a mentor to others, and others described having multiple roles in the community. In the first place, several of the women described multiple roles that they held in the community, such as Cathy (ICL), who is a granddaughter, clan member, mother, grandmother and wife (9). These roles combine to enable her to be trusted in the school with the children from her community (9). Bella (CTM) spoke of being a mother (22), a bingo volunteer, women's centre volunteer, and she ran an awareness library, and organized various events in the community (3). Additionally, Jill (RM) said that her role was as a "representative of a range of interests" such as the economic and service needs of the area and as a lobbyist and negotiator for whatever issues were current (24). Pauline (CWA) described her role as "Just as a helper, I suppose... somebody there to support and reach out" (27), while both Mary (SM) and Fiona (ICN) spoke of being supportive. Finally, Simone (RL) described her role as an ally, midwife and "somebody who's crossed the bridge and... will make sure that other sisters get across... too" (5).

I then took a narrative turn and asked the women how others would describe their role in the community, and themes of being "doers" and representatives in the community became evident. For example, Fiona (ICN) thought her cousins would describe her as organized, as a key person and as goal oriented (17). Community members could describe Sophia (RG) as someone who "isn't afraid to speak out" and who will write stories, letters and "do things" (19). Mary (SM) thought people would describe her as "belonging" and as a "pretty caring kind of person" (24). At the same time, she saw her role as a representative of the church; "I am church in a lot of the lives of the people... and I'm interested in them" (35). Jill (RM) answered that others would describe her as "the mayor" (25) and concluded, "I can't get away from the fact that I am local government and it colours what I do and how I am seen" (33).

Many of the women who participated in this study spoke of performing multiple and varied roles in their families and communities, and themes emerged of aunties assuming the role of leader, mentor, mother, or, as Simone (RL) calls herself, "resourceeress at large."

### Aunties are Informal Leaders

Although grassroots women who are active citizens often occupy positions of leadership, many of the participants did not refer to themselves as leaders. Allison doesn't think of herself as a leader, for, as she explained,

in a community as big as X, a leader is a mayor; a political figure is more of a leader. As a mother who is just trying to keep things rolling, that might seem lower on the scale of politics. (RS 8)

Allison's perceptions about mothers not being leaders is contradicted by her experience, because she has found that "my friends... always look to me for a leadership role" (7) and she did concede that "I tend to come on as a leader" (7). Other respondents also rejected the role of leader, for example, Mary (SM) prefers to work in the background or to "be a couple of steps back" (25), while Sophia (RG) said she doesn't mind being the one to speak out, but "I don't like being 'president' of anything" (21). Pauline (CWA) declined taking on a leadership role and a political career because "family is just too important, so I just kept saying 'No, I'll work in the background'" (19). However, both Penny (RCB) and Jill (RM) sought formal leadership positions in local or regional councils specifically because they felt they could effect the most change at that level. The data indicates that the participants in the study understand the meaning of "leadership" in quite different ways because it is also a socially constructed concept.

The meaning of the term "leadership" is highly contextual and is therefore prone to being dominated by popular constructions and discourses. The formal term "leadership" is an imprecise, emotionally laden one (Bryt in Epps & Sorensen, 1996, p. 157), which carries many connotations and is therefore "subject to many misconceptions" (Sorensen & Epps, 1996, p. 114). However, being a leader is not the same as being in charge of things, according to Walsh (in Soto, 2002), because leadership is "grounded in integrity and trust, and unless you build on those things, you are not building leadership" (p. 21). Unfortunately, dominant perceptions of formal leadership portray men as the builders and leaders in the community, and many people do not perceive of grassroots women as having the same potential.

For centuries, social arrangements have been constructed around male experiences, and current perceptions of leadership are still predominately "organized around patriarchal notions" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 261). For example, in Canada it was found that, "In some social movements eighty percent of the activity is done by

women and eighty percent of the leadership spots are taken by men” (Lakey et al., 1995, p. 28). Often, women’s service work is seen as an extension of their housework, with the result that the men expect to make the policies while the women are expected to plan the parties (Price, 2002, p. 42). Perhaps similar experiences have led some women “influentials” to be active in “traditionally nurturing or expressive issue areas,” while in other cases, discrimination has led to “lower participation of women in... political leadership” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 167). For example, in Canada, the formation of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1932 as an anti-capitalist party provided the opportunity for some women to enter the political arena for the first time. However, women were encouraged to contribute to the social and fundraising committees, but not to run as candidates because the men in charge generally thought that women “were the ‘perfect jewels’ at raising funds and loved ‘playing amateur sales ladies at bake sales’” (Light & Pierson, 1990, p. 349). Clearly, the participation of women in political life was hindered by the stereotyped image of women as homemakers and nurturers, so that most aunties and other women were relegated to contributing behind the scenes.

Male constructs of leadership are still strongly entrenched in Western society, and probably more so in rural communities, where changes in social attitudes are slow to come about (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 167). However, some women can increase their influence in a small community by becoming “power actors,” because, unlike politicians, power actors may possess a “broader and more varied role in decision making” (p. 167). An example from the data is Penny, a Rural Community Builder who became successful on national and local boards of directors after failing to be elected mayor because she was a woman. As Penny demonstrates, there may be a link between “the quality of more general community leadership and the pace and form of local development” (Sorensen & Epps, 1996, p. 113). In fact, one study concluded that the participation of females in leadership has a positive association with community viability (O’ Brien & et al., 1991), and many other scholars acknowledge the importance of community leadership in economic development (Epps & Sorensen, 1996, p. 156), (Alston, 2002), (Heartland Center, 2003). Participants in the National Rural Workshop reinforced the importance of leadership to small and rural community development because it “sets the community’s vision, goals, and direction” and in addition, it “motivates and inspires people and channels the community’s energy in a focussed way” (p. 16).

Despite the growing recognition and increasing exploration of the significance of women's grassroots leadership, there remains scant research to inform and enliven the conversation. For instance, in the United States, researchers who investigated women's grassroots leadership found that little is known about a "leadership tradition rooted in maternal practice.... because society seldom looks to women as leaders," and consequently, "we probably know less about them than we do about grassroots women silenced by depression and despair" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 9). The lack of articulation about this grassroots leadership tradition is cause for concern, as Belenky et. al. warned:

When a tradition has no name people will not have a rich shared language.... Without a common language the tradition will not become part of a well-established, ongoing dialogue in the larger society. Institutional supports... will not be developed. Leaders' efforts to pass the tradition on to the next generation will be poorly supported. (1997, pp. 293-294).

Grassroots leadership traditions appear to be marginal in discussions of rural and social development; however, little is actually written about how they can be encouraged. Many researchers understand the leadership phenomenon to be "much more complex than a person's innate ability" (Soto, 2002, p. 22) and some asserted that leadership attributes "such as visions, values... creativity... commitment... can be learned, understood and acted on" (Soto, 2002, p. 21). Indeed, Belenky, Bond and Weinstock (1997) suggested that, more usually, "the approach was achieved through study, engaged practice, dialogue and reflection" (p. 294). They also concluded that, under the right circumstances, leadership skills could be successfully passed on to others (p. 295).

Aunties can encourage the development of leadership skills in many of the roles that they play, including when they are parenting their own children. Rural Canadians recently identified a lack of "leadership succession planning" in their communities and felt that there is no infrastructure and few resources to support local leadership development, particularly for youth (National Rural Workshop, 1998, p. 16). In the role of parent, aunties often have the opportunity to influence other children and families when interacting at school or in other public spaces.

### Aunties are Mothers Too

There is a strong indication in the data that aunties sometimes act like "mothers" to other children and families and that mothers sometimes act like "aunties" to others.

The notion of family being an important influence on women's participation in civic activities came clear when I asked the participants how they first became involved in community service work. Jill (RM) became involved "initially through the children, which is very common" (5), and Fiona (ICN) recalled that she began with "my nieces and nephews, to my grandmother and then I just became involved. It was amazing how it all just came about" (5). Other women responded clearly that involvement with their families and other children lead them to become more active. For instance, Allison (RS) said, "I think that as soon as your kids become a little more active within the community, it's just a natural role, of a mother, especially" (4). Both Sophia (RG) and Jill (RM) identified that it was their social conscience and concern for future generations that motivated them to become involved in issues affecting their community.

Some of the participants in this study made comments about the relationship between their involvement in the community and involvement in the family, and it seems that this is significant to understanding the role of aunties. Pauline (CWA) explained to me; "Well, my family is very important to me, but... [from there] you'll reach out into all different sections of the community with those various people that you are close to" (27). For Fiona (ICN), supporting the family is a way to reach out to the community. As she observed, "You need to start with family and being there.... If people can see *Fiona* helps the family and she is trying to help the community, then that's good, let's help her do that" (23).

The link between family and civic activity seems to be substantiated by statistical data collected in Canada and in Australia, which shows that many women are active in the public realm in order to support and nurture their families. In both Canada and Australia, married women in the middle-aged group are the most likely to volunteer, particularly if they have children living in the home. These "moms" are estimated to account for 45% of all Australian volunteers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). In Canada, one in three households with children reported volunteer activities (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000). Apparently, the presence of children in the home is a large contributing (but not a wholly deciding) factor in the level of voluntary engagement generated in a household, and this suggests to me that mothers can become aunties by extending their care to others in the community.

Similarly, an Australia study of rural schools found that interchanges between families are "vital to the economic and social wellbeing of many communities," and that

schools “build social capital by creating networks... facilitating communication... and provide opportunities... to appreciate each others viewpoints” (Kilpatrick & Hansen, 2002). From similar public exchanges between children can arise networks, alliances, and relationships amongst families while they participate in school sports days, play at the local park, or share meals and rotate babysitting rosters (Baum, Palmer, Modra, Murray, & Bush, 2000, p. 263).

The interview and photographic data collected strongly indicate that the roles of mother and aunt are inextricably linked through the community. For example, the photograph on p. 75 shows a school sports day where mothers are preparing lunches for the kids, and p. 76 shows mothers helping teachers on a out-trip to participate in the ANZAC day parade. During her interview, Penny (RCB) made the most direct link between the roles when she said that being an auntie is “A mothering role.... Yes, in the role that I am doing, it’s a mothering” (11). Allison (RS) describes herself as “just... a mother who is just trying to keep things rolling” (8) but perceives her role as being less significant than other community roles, like the mayor. Likewise, Simone (RL) knows that she is dismissed by many people because she is a single mother on welfare, yet this assumption “is such a contrast to what I understand my worth as being” (6). Simone utilized her situation to her advantage because the dismissal “makes me free to do exactly what the heck I want, because I have all the time in the world. They expect me to be just a stupid welfare mother tied to the strings of my children” (6)

The concerns of mothers and aunties are often diminished in popular discourse or ignored by mainstream institutions, and as a result, their contributions to social care are frequently dismissed as insignificant. Social caring work is frequently carried out by those members of the community who adopt a mothering role and in doing so, are enacting an extended form of “maternal thinking,” says Ruddick (1995, p. 369). In her understanding, “maternal” is a social construct because “biological parenting is neither necessary nor sufficient” as a prerequisite for adopting a maternal role and because “many women and some men express their maternal thinking... in working and caring for others” (p. 376). In order to create change, Ruddick urges feminist researchers to bring maternal thought “into the public realm, to make the preservation and growth of *all* children a work of public conscience and legislation” (1995, p. 377).

Acts of maternal caring were abundantly evident in the data that I generated with the ten participants, and a prime example arose during Simone’s interview. I consider Simone (RL) to be the benefactor of “maternal thinking” because she forged vital links

between the private domain of her family and the public realm of her community. She explains, “My own family was never there for me...I surrounded myself with people who include me in their family stuff, so I inherited other families” (RL 3). Similarly, in Bella’s interview she explained that the presence of a mentor provided her with an alternative to the oppressive situation she experienced at home:

The only person in a kind of a miserable childhood was an auntie who never passed judgment, and never put me down, and always encouraged me, and always was there when I needed her. So that to me, alone, has incredible significance. (CTM 10).

Evidently, in some situations, family life can be constraining and can limit the development of individuals because families can become insular and distrustful of others (Winter, 2000b, p. 1). Women often play significant roles in the lives of others because they provide an alternative source of support and care for families or communities. When discussing these caring roles with the participants, I observed that the term “mentor” was commonly used to describe their role to me, and I encounter the same term when reviewing social development literature.

#### Aunties are Mentors

A collection of comments made by the participants suggested to me that being an auntie also means being a mentor and encouraging intergenerational relationships. Such personal interactions contribute significantly to building social capital because they increase trust and strengthen networks in families, neighbourhoods and communities. Some participants in the study actually described themselves as “being a mentor,” such as Simone (CTM) and Sophia (RG), who said her community would describe her as “Maybe, sometimes being a mentor to people and helping them” (18). Pauline (CWA) pondered the term and concluded, “Yes, a mentor, that is what ‘auntie’... means” (31). Other respondents described women who had mentored them, including Cathy (ICN 12), Allison (RS 21), Sophia (RG 22), and Mary (SM), who was once mentored by the older nuns and went on to mentor many novices herself (9).

The concept of the mentor originated in Homer’s telling of *The Odyssey*, in which Mentor becomes “teacher, counsellor, and guide” to Telemachus (Portes, Longwell-Grice, & Chan, Apr. 26, 2000, p. 3). Researchers suggest that mentors train, facilitate, protect, support, orient and develop the skills of their “mentees” (p. 3), and that mentors strive to develop information networks and stimulate the curiosity and intellectual capacity of all involved (p. 4). Having a mentor also seems to mean

empowering communities “by facilitating community collaboration, pooling resources, and engaging in cooperative problem-solving” (Generations United, March 2002, p. 1).

I gathered that aunties could mentor and inspire families and community members in ways that appear to breach the generation gap, and I suggest that this is important for activating social capital. For example, Fiona’s (ICN) role as a health nurse involved mentoring and teaching health education to all age groups, from her nieces and nephews through to the grandmothers in the community (5). Sophia (RG), Fiona (ICN) and Pauline (CWA) each spoke of liking to work with young people in particular, and several participants made reference to doing things in consideration of the future or the next generation. For instance, Simone (RL) suggested that she engages in feminist actions “so that our daughters have a fair shake” (11), Fiona (ICN) emphasised that she “wants so much more” for the children and the future (5), and in the poem “Complete” (p. 23), Allison (RS) says that she writes manuals so that someone can take on her work “if I am not there to do the job tomorrow.” Examples also include Sophia (RG), who spoke proudly of witnessing her daughters “being aunties and uncles to their nieces and nephews” (22) and Bella (CTM), who referred to her daughter as being an “auntie in training” (13).

Research in the United States supports the claim that intergenerational mentoring can boost social capital. A study of the relationship between social capital and children who prosper reports that significant indicators of a child with a high social capital index include, “affiliations, perception of personal social support, and support within the neighbourhood” (Runyan et al., 1998, p. 12). Mentoring offers individuals the opportunity to form meaningful and positive interactions, with the potential result that youth and elders both feel more connected to their communities (Generations United, March 2002, p. 1). In Western Canada, the value of intergenerational mentoring was identified during a community asset-building project, which concluded that many youth were vulnerable because they had few assets and because they generally “lack adult support” (Summerland Asset Development, n.d., p. 1). In order to “help build assets in youth,” the project is intended to provide opportunities for youth to interact with and form “good relationships with many adults, young and old” (2). Another study concluded that for children at risk, “the likelihood of doing well increases when multiple protective factors are present” (Runyan et al., 1998, p. 16). I suggest that aunties and uncles (along with grannies and grandpas) who are active in the community

may be prime candidates to provide multiple protective factors to youth and young adults who are struggling to develop their own skills, networks, and resources.

I also marvelled at the capacity for some women to overcome multiple challenges despite having a varied range of resources available to them. Simone's (RL) is the one who coined the term "re-sourceress" because she meets challenges by using all the resources at hand to conjure something from nothing. I have adopted "re-sourceress" to describe those women who use the resources at hand to "magically" meet the needs of their families and communities.

#### Aunties are Re-sourceress-es

I was particularly inspired by Simone's (RL) description of herself as a "Re-sourceress at Large" because she names the resourcefulness that many aunties exhibit. A re-sourceress, she explains, "is someone who sources again, and again, and again" (8). Simone gave a lively description of her own abilities as a re-sourceress:

My particular magic is the ability to take lemons and make lemonade out of anything. Instead of thinking of it as lemons, to me it's a palette. This is my palette, this is what I'm limited to and instead of bemoaning the fact that I don't have all the colours of the rainbow, I do have some colours and I can do something with what I've got. (RL 4)

Simone's ability to glean richness from scant resources and to value herself in different ways than the dominant culture does is inspiring because she manifests a positive attitude despite the challenges. For instance, in the poem, "Re-sourceress" (p. 27), she claims that maintaining the "poverty kick-start diet" is an asset to her and she later explains, "If I was better off financially, I wouldn't understand [that]... I have such valuable re-sourceress skills" (16). I suggest that Sophia (RG) is also a "re-sourceress" because she holds that "I'm not rich as far as financially. I'm poor, but I'm rich in the fact that I have a lot of resources in my community that are supportive" (23). Clearly, the lack of resources does not deter these women being active in their communities, although having abundant resources can certainly make getting the job done a little easier.

Pauline (CWA) offers an alternative construction of a re-sourceress because she utilizes the abundant resources at hand to achieve her goals. In her case, the affluence of her family gave her the opportunity to remain out of the paid work force so that she could act autonomously on her concerns for rural communication, health and education (6). Her position amongst the political elite also gave Pauline unique opportunities to

lobby for various rural causes. For example, on certain occasions, her husband was able to fly her down in their airplane to meet with the premier of the state or the appropriate minister in order to straighten out misunderstandings or to discuss urgent matters (CWA 8).

A re-sourceress recognizes and utilizes the resources that are available to help achieve her goals. Some women in the study indicated keen awareness of the value of the resources that they had access to, and others made comments about not taking the resources they had available for granted. For instance, Simone (RL) recognized, “Just what a waste of life it is to not make a difference with your resources” (6). Sophia (RG) has similar expectations, and expressed frustration with those who take their resources for granted when she exclaimed:

I wish a lot more seniors would volunteer in their community, because they don't have to worry about having an income.... I always say, getting a pension, the government pays me to rabble rouse. (RG 1)

Fiona (ICN) was realistic about the resources available to her community when she explained, “I understand the needs, and what resources are there, and what it also lacks” (17). In a similar manner, Jill (RM) realized soon after the forest industry shut down in her district that “we could play a role in educating other nations around the world, how to use your resource for your community, but keep it sustainable too” (10).

Aunties may enhance community sustainability and resilience by “magically” transforming available resources and these are important skills in small and rural contexts. Rural or remote individuals often illustrate resilience because they have become “acclimated to ‘the school of make-do’ [which] adds to the inner resources of each rural citizen” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 255). The resources that each individual has access to can vary greatly, as the stories of Simone and Pauline demonstrate. On the one hand, Simone (RL) creates magic in her family and community from scant resources, while on the other hand, Pauline (CWA) takes advantage of the many resources available to her to advocate for rural families and communities. This understanding provides an alternative to the predominant assumption that civically-active individuals must have sufficient “financial, discretionary, and personal resources” (Higgins, 1997) in order to be active, such as time, energy and, quite often, access to a vehicle. However, lack of resources does not appear to exclude individuals and families from participating in informal community activities.

In Canada, it appears that many people contribute substantial amounts of their time voluntarily despite not having money or material comfort (Ralston Saul, 2001a, p. 4). Likewise, in the United States, it is suggested that, “economic factors may be insufficient indicators of community capacity,” especially in neighbourhoods where residents “have been restricted in their economic and social mobility by external forces” (Putnam, 2000, p. 84). In fact, Martinez-Brawley (2000) observed that local networks are formed “around an exchange or reciprocity in terms of limited resources,” which tend to “increase in importance as resources decrease” (p. 263). In turn, I suggest that those who assume the role of “re-sourceress” are important contributors to community resilience, and I concur that a discussion of community sustainability “would be incomplete without looking at *people themselves*, as the *greatest community resource*” (Nozick, 1992, p. 141). However, as I became immersed in the data, I detected a pattern whereby a few of the respondents recognized the value of their work to the community, but many spoke in subtly diminishing terms about their role and its significance to the community.

#### Aunties Recognize and Diminish their Significance

Two patterns of recognition emerged as I reviewed the data, whereby some respondents recognized their situations as fortunate to play a supportive role in the community, and others dismissed or diminished their role as important to the community. To begin with, many of the respondents recognized their fortune by making statements such as, “Haven’t I been lucky? Very blessed, really” (SM 28) and, “I’m one of those lucky people... I feel that responsibility to repay the abundance in my life” (CTM 3). Jill (RM) also described herself as fortunate because she was, “articulate enough...[and] able to present a case at most forums” (3). Other women described how they loved what they were doing (RCB) or thought of their role as “neat” (ICN).

Respondents in the study also made statements that diminished their role in the community, for example, by using the word “just” to preface descriptions of their activities. (I have italicised the diminishing statement for emphasis in the following excerpts). To begin with, Allison (RS) reflected on her activities by saying, “It is *just* something that I do” (1), while in the poem “One Step” (p. 39), Pauline (CWA) explained what she did by stating; “It was *just* one step at a time.” Finally, Fiona (ICN) described her place in the community as, “*Just* one little small cog in this wheel of their progression” (9).

I also noticed that some participants diminished the importance of their actions in more subtle ways. For instance, when asked to describe her role in the community, Sophia (RG) pondered “I *guess* I see my role as an older woman as important” (18), and elsewhere she explains her motivation as, “I *sort of do it* because it needs to be done” (12). In another example, Penny (RCB) diminished her role in the community when she quipped, “Sometimes I think [I’m] a headache” (9). In a different example, Mary (SM) doubted her own knowledge about her preference for rural living when she puzzled, “...whether that’s for true or not *I have no idea*. That’s the way I feel about it” (21). In addition, during the photographic sessions, several women made denigrating statements about “not wanting to break the camera” or “ruin the photo,” and others were simply reluctant to be photographed at all. Overall, these diminishing statements and actions indicate to me a disjuncture between how aunts value their work as significant, and their reluctance to acknowledge its value.

#### Aunties are Recognised and Unrecognised

The participants gave many mixed messages regarding the element of recognition; some received it and did not want it, some wanted it and didn’t receive any, and others seemed to fit somewhere in between. As an example, Simone (RL) said she doesn’t do things for the recognition, validation (7), or to gain credit, because she realizes that it’s not about being egotistical and it’s not “I’m all that and a bag of chips!” (12). Other women made similar statements, such as “You are not looking ... for people to say ‘Well thank you, you are doing a great job’” (RCB 2), and, “You don’t get many wows” (RS 31), or many “pats on the back” (RCB 2).

Some women were frustrated by the lack of recognition for their work. Mary (SM) stated clearly that she expects to be appreciated for her creativity, but “half the time” she is not. She explained further, “I don’t expect... “hip hip hooray,” but I do expect a give and take” (17). In a like manner, Allison (RS) gets frustrated because, “...you just think, you are working, working, working and you don’t get many thank you’s” (31). To add to the frustration, when Allison does get recognition, she finds that “it is always the same people that come up to you” (31).

Several women did speak favourably about receiving recognition for their work, and Jill (RM) admits that even though she doesn’t often claim credit for her achievements, “I quite enjoy, sometimes, the recognition... I do get a bit of a kick out of that” (9). Jill explained however, “Sometimes you feel a bit narky because you think

‘Well, I played a huge role in that, but no one knows’. So there is a lot of invisibility” (RM 9). Bella (CTM) also spoke of her community service and “the incredible immediate kick back it gives me” (13), while in the poem “It’s Not All Glory” (p. 164), Sophia (RG) expressed that her support to keep going comes from “... just getting a little respect” (27). Finally, Penny (RCB) emphasized that although she didn’t go into community activities “to be thanked” she knows that she is “certainly not Mother Theresa... [so] if someone does say thank you, it is wonderful” (6).

Obviously, recognition for their service is something that some participants would appreciate, however, it does not seem to be a motivator for becoming active. This does not mean that the women would be content to continue to work unappreciated or are willing to remain anonymous.

### Aunties are Visible and Invisible

There appears to be a contradiction between the notion that women’s community work is visible, recognized, and acknowledged and the notion that women’s community work is invisible, unrecognised, and is carried out, for the most part, anonymously. An example of this tension was given when Belenky, Bond and Weinstock (1997) examined the tradition of grassroots women’s leadership and found that,

Because this form of women’s leadership runs counter to the conventional conceptions of both women and public leaders, these strong, powerful women remain largely invisible, their words unheard, and society fails to reap the full benefit of their contribution. (1997, pp 3-4)

For centuries, the stories of many grassroots women have remained untold (Mukherjee, 1993, p. 13), and historically, their experiences have been either “ignored or misunderstood by traditional leaders, the media, funding agencies, and the general public” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 159; see also Callahan, 1997). In contrast, recent historical research has shown that women in colonial British Columbia have been active, or have “asserted their power to change their communities... and have been highly visible” (Converse, 1998, p. 30). Unfortunately, in contemporary society, leadership is still mainly evaluated from a paternal context, and women’s community work remains, for the most part, devalued, ignored and invisible (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 17).

I watched for similar ideas to show themselves in the data, and found many incidences where invisibility, recognition and anonymity were mentioned. For instance, many of the respondents mentioned being invisible in one context or other, like Sophia

(RG), who said that, “I don’t feel invisible in my community... older women often feel invisible. If I go to Vancouver, I feel invisible” (1). In another example, Penny (RCB) became aware of her invisibility when she ran for mayor after being deputy mayor and councillor for several terms. During the campaign, she was

just absolutely gob-smacked actually, when people said to me ‘You won’t have time’, and I thought ‘Well, what the bloody hell do you think I’ve been doing these last five years?’ (RCB 2)

It seems that invisibility can be a benefit or a burden to the individual woman, depending on the context of the situation. Bella (CTM) mentioned that she is often invisible because she is poor (3), and even more so because, to mainstream society, she is “just another welfare mom” (6). However, Bella has learned that her invisibility can become a source of strength to her in a paternalistic society because “the invisible nail that sticks up can’t get pounded down... they are not going to recognize it” (CTM 6). Simone (RL) also spoke of the power of being invisible because whenever she mentions menstruation she disappears “at the drop of a word” (12). She remarked on the juxtaposition of visibility and invisibility; “It’s been kind of cool to have this kind of influence in the community and at the same time be virtually invisible” (4).

Rural dwellers can also experience invisibility, even within their own ranks, as Pauline (CWA) discovered at the World meeting of Country Women’s Associations in Melbourne. The Australian delegates had their meeting and didn’t include the Queensland or Western Australian delegation. When Pauline inquired about the meeting, the national president remarked, “We’ve met, didn’t you come?... We didn’t know you weren’t there,” and Pauline fumed, “Now, that absolutely typifies the southern [attitude]!” (18). Pauline also told me about the invisibility of rural women when she was arguing with the premier of Queensland about funding to train governesses to teach children in remote settings (CWA 8). His dismissive reply to her requests for funding was, “Oh, ladies help,” to which she retorted, “Don’t you recognize that our kids need to be taught, just as much as you people in the city?” (CWA 8). The premier did apologize for the misunderstanding and later he successfully lobbied to establish the Isolated Children’s Fund to support instruction for remote students (8).

It seems evident to me that much of the grassroots work that is carried out by women at a community level is invisible or taken for granted by society, which may be a hindrance to the work of some women, while for others, invisibility is an empowering element. However, the fact remains that both the data and the literature support my

claim that the significance of community and social care largely remains unrecognized by individuals, families, and society at large.

### Aunties are Anonymous

The issue of anonymity has posed several challenges to me as my understanding of the issues that aunties faced unfolded. I battled with the decision of whether to include the term “anonymous” in naming the phenomenon under investigation. On the one hand, the label “anonymous” could diminish women as individuals and may construct a disadvantage for women in community service roles, while on the other hand, anonymity can be a point of strength in certain situations, such as being an anonymous donor or benefactor.

There are a number of ways in which the specific theme of “anonymity” appears in the data both as a benefit and a burden to the respondent. The most obvious benefactor of anonymity is Simone (RL), who says about her menstrual work; “I’ve taken great pains to sort of be anonymous in the community.... that kind of life has been underground, and I like that” (4). Conversely, Allison (RS) inferred that anonymity is a burden when she reflected that after eight years of coordinating the Talent Festival, “I know that the people who are directly involved recognize my name but... I really don’t know if anybody else even knows who *Allison* is?” (8). Jill (RM) offers another perspective when she described the loss of anonymity because her role as mayor brings with it “a funny sort of unnecessary and undeserved respect sometimes, but... there is also an undeserved contempt and blame... that people think ‘Who can we target?’” (8). Those who study small community dynamic realize that a loss of anonymity can lead to “undesirable nosiness” and friction (Debertin, 2003, p. 7) for those not used to living under close scrutiny. This is even more so for those active citizens who live in a small or rural community context.

Citizens who are active in small or rural communities may find that they quickly lose their anonymity because in these contexts, “faces and names are always put together in meaningful ways” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 271). Often, newcomers who are not prepared for the lack of anonymity in small towns find that gossip constrains their freedom in some ways, although some do find satisfaction in being known and willingly exchange a sense of “anomie for a measure of scrutiny” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 246). Indeed, some people seek small communities precisely because “they do not want to remain anonymous” (p. 271). Nonetheless, evidence

shows that women who continue to be active at a grassroots level in their communities are often “working anonymously for change and reform” regardless of the fact that their activities can make significant contributions to the communal good (Ohlsson & Duffy, 1999, p. 197). Unfortunately, for long time now, “Women have not been allowed to construct their own meanings or to name their own experiences.... Commonly, women’s perceptions... have indeed been denied, suppressed, or invalidated” (Crimshaw, 1986, p. 83). The situation has remained relatively unchanged over the years, and women’s leadership and maternal practices continue to go unnamed and poorly articulated (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 294).

### Re-capping What Aunties Do

Aunties are women who are particularly active in their families and communities and they often go “above and beyond” the call of duty to create change rather than sit by idly or participate passively. Aunties often perform multiple tasks at once, or perform the same task in multiple locations. Among the themes that arose from the data about what aunties do are that aunties help the community to move forward, help to look after the “tribe,” and that they often do the hard work in the family or community. The term that arose from the literature that best describes the work that aunties do is “social care,” which refers to caring behaviour that is intended to meet the social, emotional, or material needs of other community members. Social care takes commitment and is often unrewarding, particularly because many of these activities are diminished in popular discourse as being “women’s work.” Aunties perform many small acts of caring in the course of their daily living, and these micro-interactions play a crucial role in developing trust and reciprocity, which is the “social glue” that binds individuals and families together. In many cases, aunties perform multiple roles in their families or communities, including being leaders, mentors, mothers, and re-sourceress-es. Those individuals in the community who do adopt caring roles are often dismissed for their “maternal” ways, and the skills and expertise that they bring to the role are often diminished, even by the women themselves. The data showed several instances where the women spoke in diminishing ways about their significance in the community, and other instances where the women did recognize and speak of the importance of their contributions. Similar tensions were identified between the women’s experiences of being unrecognized for their contributions and their desire for some recognition for their work, as well as between their experiences of being highly visible “volunteers” in the

community while their work remains virtually invisible to professionals and formal institutions.

At the crux of the issue is the sense of anonymity that many of the participants experienced, whereby the individuals (along with the roles and activities they engage in) are not fairly represented in dominant discourses, and whereas few words exist to adequately describe their significance in providing social care or in generating social capital within their families and communities.

Now that some understanding has been gained about who could possibly be an “auntie” and what it is that they might do, I suggest that it is important to explore how it is that the participants were able to achieve what they have done.

## **Part Two: Aunties Build Relationships and Connections**

### **Scout Leaders Role Modeling**

**Bowen, Qld**

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## **Gymkhana**

... it is all of the  
grassroots people,  
for sure,  
that have been doing  
the same  
Gymkhana  
For seventy-five years.

And it is great.  
It is potluck lunch,  
it's boxed lunch auctions.

What is it?  
They have the  
horse show,  
they have the  
dog show,  
they have races.

It is the whole  
old community  
pulling together and  
trying to survive...  
for years and  
years and  
years.

(12)

**Allison**

**Rural School Mom**

## **Part Two: Aunties Build Relationships and Connections**

The theme that aunties build relationships and connections is an important one to understanding how aunties do what they do because relationships and networks can increase the capacity for trust to develop among community members and others. When trusting relationships exist in families or communities, the social capital available to them is increased. It is particularly important for community development professionals, policy makers, and civic scholars to understand the significance of trusting relationships and networks if they are to facilitate community development or social care processes in small or rural community contexts.

### Aunties Create Social Networks

Relationships and connections form the basis of social networks and can enhance social capital by increasing trust and support amongst family and community members. Social networks and interactions are important to the life of a community because “to be ‘in community’ is to be part of people’s lives” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 148). Social networks are equally important to the life of the individual because “the fullest potential of human beings is realized in associations and communal efforts” (p. 148). Individuals may also gain strength from the links and connections that bind them together, because these links “define who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to others” (Cox, 1995, p. 70). Indeed, relationships and connections are pivotal to the notions of community empowerment and resilience because “community and individual and group resilience are inextricably bound together” (Saleebey, 1997, p. 200). The poem “Gymkhana” (p. 204) speaks of the importance of building social networks and relationships over time in order to increase the capacity for the community to survive.

Social networks are particularly important in small or rural contexts because these communities are more oriented toward “common understandings, mutual interdependence and a... sense of participation” (Martinez-Brawley, 1995, p. xxv). The anomie that has resulted from the impersonal relationships and complicated lives of the modern era has driven many people to search for intimate and meaningful community outside of the city, in part because “small towns and villages provide the sense of belonging of true communities” (p. xxv).

The social fabric and safety net of the small community can be strengthened in incidental, daily encounters that family life creates because “social contacts outside of the immediate family develop positive relationships with wider communities” (Cox, 1995, p. 72). Interpersonal relationships and networks are the core of social capital, and they facilitate the formation of social trust amongst family and community members (Debertin, 2003, p. 1). Indeed, one way to measure social capital is to observe “the health of group processes and social interactions” that are taking place between “whole communities, smaller groups, their members, [and] individuals” (Cox & Caldwell, 2000, p. 49). For rural and small communities to survive, it is essential that residents have opportunities to form trusting relationships and networks so that they can work together to identify common problems and arrive at equitable solutions.

Families are also connected to the larger community by their responsibility for nurturing the development of all members of the larger “human family” and for “developing the broader community that sustains the family” (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997, p. 262). I agree that the definition of a family can include those individuals connected by networks that unite “kin and non-kin” and that evolve through the daily interactions that assure the domestic and safety needs of its members are met (Gilligan, 1982, p. 169). For example, p. 203 shows a photograph of boys and girls in the Scouting program under the guidance of their den mothers who are role modelling how to build safe and caring relationships through daily interactions.

Family and social connections were very important for many of the participants in this study, and several women talked about how these networks helped sustain them. For instance, Sophia (RG) said that her community meant having connections with people and being there for each other in different situations (18). Bella (CTM) spoke of “feeling a closer kinship” to others because of the “depth of awareness of the support network that I’m connected with” (4). Social and family networks provided “enormous opportunities” for Jill (RM) at the local government level because of the “networks within the community and outside the community” that enabled her to “achieve effectively at the state level also, through that network” (1). Likewise, Cathy (ICL) related how her extended family networks made her job as the liaison between several indigenous communities and the state school much easier because “I have never lost that contact with the community” (4). Fiona (ICN) also commented on the importance of maintaining connections within the community and her family when she stated, “It is

important to keep those family bonds.... What I've done with my family, I do with my friends; I don't lose touch" (6).

Social networks do not depend on one single relationship, but are constantly being renegotiated and diversified by their members. Individuals and families will experience more success if they are flexible and adaptable in their relationships, because the ongoing process of "creating relationships and embedding oneself into the social structure is pertinent to the success of social networks" (Vivian & Sudweeks, 2003, p. 1435). Interpersonal relationships that develop between family and friends help to foster social networks because they "cut across boundaries such as neighbourhood, workplace, kinship or class" (p. 1431). In small or rural communities, social networks can actually be more diverse than in urban settings, because there is a greater likelihood "that people of widely varying education, income and employment skills will meet and interact with each other" (Debertin, 2003). Diverse people can have more opportunities to work together in small and rural contexts, because the ties that bind them are more likely to be localized rather than globalized, as in urban contexts.

Social capital also increases when local, microcosmic ties within the community are in balance with global, macroscopic ties to larger society. Members of small and rural communities are connected by horizontal ties at a "microcosmic level" (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 74), which are strengthened by "local community linkages" (p. 71). Horizontal ties are important for the development of social capital because they "give communities a sense of identity and common purpose"; however, they can also become narrow and restrictive and may "actively preclude access to information and material resources" (World Bank Group, 2002, p. 1). Vertical ties connect people at a "macrocosmic level" (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 74) and are important because they strengthen the relationship between the local context and the larger world outside (p. 74). However, with advances in communication technologies, vertical ties may be strengthened to the degree that, "Local ties are diminished [and].... Global ties become the norm" (p. 78).

Community organizing can counter the potential imbalance between local and global interests, and may provide a "strategy for translating vertically sponsored programs into the fabric of the day-to-day community life" (Buck in Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 79). Community practitioners are often the ones who transform policy into action, because they stand "at the point" where the vertical ties of larger society intersect with the horizontal ties of the local community (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p.

80). Therefore, it is important for community practitioners to work with local community members to achieve a balance between the needs of the individual and the demands of the larger society (p. 80). I suggest that aunties are among the community members who can create connections between policy and practice and between local and global interests; indeed, the participants emphasized the importance of their role in forming connections amongst family and community members.

### Aunties Create Community Connections

I was curious how aunties might form meaningful relationships with their communities, so I asked the participants for their perspectives. Their responses clearly show that aunties encourage relationships and connections to form between family and community members, and reveal several tensions that aunties might experience while doing so.

When I asked the participants in this study “What does your community mean to you?” they indicated that building relationships and making connections were important. Having common relationships and a common understanding is what community meant to Fiona (16), while for Jill (RM) it meant “a wonderful bunch of mixed people” (24). For Sophia (RG), “Community means connection with people, and looking and... seeing our differences and learning to be with them” (18), while for Simone (RL) it indicated the sisters and allies who support her (5). On the contrary, community meant frustration for Allison (RS), who said, “I would love to have a strong community of people... but you just don’t seem to get that feeling anymore” (9).

Cathy (ICL) knows she belongs to a strong network of families and she recognized how her relationships with her own people made her role as the school liaison possible because many people knew and trusted her (4). Likewise, Jill (RM) explained how her formal relationships as mayor interlinked with her “social and cultural network” to make her more effective in her job (7). Social networks are particularly important in small and rural contexts because they can link private and public relationships and increase the capacity of individuals to create safe and trusting communities.

Some women said that their community meant having a safe home base. For Sophia (RG), her community is meaningful because, “Community is my base. I think really, it is everything to me” (23). Community means home for Bella (CTM 3), as well as for Fiona (ICN), who related, “It means home.... and I know it is safe” (17). Pauline

(CWA) described how isolated communities could be safer than towns or cities because everyone knew each other and would watch the “one or two bad eggs” in the area, and as a result, “it was self-policing” (26). The presence of strong networks of relationships can lead to the formation of social trust, which can significantly increase community safety, particularly because in small and rural contexts, people know and watch out for each other.

I was curious whether the women who participated would perceive of themselves as meaningful contributors to their communities, so I posed the reflective question: “What do you mean to your community?” The women’s responses ranged, from some who recognized their connection to the community to others who did not seem aware of it. On the one hand, Penny (RCB) described herself as an information source and sounding board (9), and Mary (SM) saw herself as a person of goodwill who was involved with others (24). Simone (RL) said, to her community she meant “the spider in the middle... the one that sees the needs and tries to fill them,” while on the contrary, to greater society she means “just another welfare mother. I’m one of those drains on the system” (6). On the other hand, a few of the women had difficulty perceiving what they might mean to their community. For instance, Sophia (RG) questioned her value when she said, “I don’t know, ask them... I guess I’m an important part of my community” (20). Similarly, Penny (RCB) joked, “I think a headache!” and then reflected that she had “never really thought about what they think of me” (9).

Aunties are certainly capable of being a headache to others because they challenge the divisions between the public and private realms or maternal and paternal perspectives, and they counter the perception of civic participation and withdrawal. This is important work because “the links between personal and the political, the individual and the structural, or private troubles and public issues are essential components of community development” (Ife, 1995, p. 183). Aunties achieve this by building relationships between people with diverse interests, encouraging community safety and trust, and easing the tensions that may arise in day-to-day life, some of which originate in conflicts in larger society.

#### Aunties Build Relationships in Public and Private Realms

Women’s work most often takes place in the private domain of society while their contributions are largely devalued or disrespected in the public domain. Women’s

private caring activities constitute a vital part of civic society (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 676) and are a fundamental form of social capital (Putnam, 2000, p. 73). Regardless of this understanding, the unpaid care provided by women within families and communities remains largely ignored by scholars (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 676). I also found evidence in the research literature that the social, community and private concerns of women rarely enter into public debate (Cox, 1995, p. 2), nor are they present in political language (Hekman, 1990a; see also Ife, 1995). Rural women's concerns in particular are likely to be absent from public debates (Lahey, Lahey, Napier, & Robinson, 1995 p. 33), as well as from many agricultural discourses (Alston, 1998, p. 206). As a result, women often experience a discord between their private and public experiences, in part perhaps because in Western society there is no sharp divide between the private and public realms (Higgins, 1997, p. 281; see also Berlin, 1997).

Women who experience tension between their private and public commitments often live in a state of discord and feel out of step, which inhibits their ability to fully participate with their families and community (Theobald, 1997, p. 55). Feminists claim that women have difficulty reconciling their experiences with the masculine values that dominate public discourse, and that many women “come to question the normality of their feelings and to alter their judgments in deference to the opinion of others” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 16). Women who experience discord often assume that they, rather than the system, have failed their families and friends (Theobald, 1997, p. 49). For example, a study of rural women identified a predominate notion that “family life and public life are not compatible” and concluded that women felt deep guilt about their inability to “respond to all the demands” placed on them (Teather, 1996, p. 8).

The boundaries that separate public from private life are often finely drawn for active community members, and even more so for those who live in small or rural community contexts. Fiona (ICN) spoke of her own experience of the public and private aspects of her life being inseparable when she explained,

being a nurse in a community or a professional, you don't take that hat off. I was always seen that way.... But that is a part of a small community, you don't take your hat off when you leave the office. (ICN 11)

Fiona witnessed other aunties whose private and public lives blended, because they were busy building relationships in communities and families around her: “They are not just being an ‘aunt’, they are being a boss, they are being a sister... You have to

do all those things, you never get away from them” (ICN 20). Jill (RM) also learned that being involved in local politics means that she is always on the job because, “I can’t get away from the fact that I am local government and it colours what I do and how I am seen” (33).

Photographic evidence also supports the claim that the public and private lives of aunties are often intertwined. For example, the image *Red Cross Members Multitasking* (p. 153), shows women who volunteer in emergency response services that are vital to the survival of many small and rural communities. The public and private roles of individuals intersect when they involve protecting home, community, and country at any given time. When the call goes out, many men and women give freely of their private time in order to advance the public safety of their communities.

Some individuals willingly curtail their private interests in order to meet public commitments; however, public service can come at a high personal cost. Jill (RM) understood that being a political figure would involve personal struggle, and she explained, “There’s a personal fall-out for yourself because you are expressing views people don’t want to hear, and the others who do want to hear it haven’t got the courage to say it” (4). In the poem “Necklace” (p. 33), Jill’s public life invaded her private life when she was “being targeted and being personally maligned during an election” (13). In response, her friends rallied around to publicly support her, which was very helpful for Jill to reconcile the experience “because it was an issue that you are still an individual” (RM 13).

Penny (RCB) and Sophia (RG) also know what it is like to suffer personally because of public actions undertaken. Penny (RCB) has been the subject of “personal gossip” because “in a small place, you find that people will never come and ask, they... listen to what somebody has gossiped and told them” (8). Penny found personal gossip to be very frustrating and described the experience as “The hardest thing, to come up against that sort of negativity” (RCB 8). Sophia (RG) has also suffered personal attack for her actions as a Wiccan priestess and a Raging Granny. She has been pushed off the porch of a church (11), received ranting phone calls (26), been attacked in the local press (25), and was arrested nine times while voicing her private opinions in public (25).

It seems apparent to me that many women who enter into community service find that their private and public lives become intertwined. In some cases this provides the individual with safety and support in the form of reciprocal caring with other

community members. In other cases, public matters can infringe on private affairs when the boundaries between home and community become blurred, and this can create tension for the individual. Feminists have worked to ease the tensions between private and public interests for several decades now.

More than twenty years ago, feminist researcher Gilligan (1982, p. 19) claimed that the moral development of women embedded conflicting responsibilities in the public and the private spheres (p. 19). Social caring activities still remain strongly associated with maternal activities because they take place primarily in the private domain of the family and its extensions (Ruddick, 1995, p. 369). Some feminist researchers have urged social scientists to bring “maternal thoughts” out into the public realm (p. 377), and others warn us that we can no longer afford to have values such as nurturing, mercy, and fostering human connections restricted to the private realm (Helgesen, 1990, p. 253). Unfortunately, maternal values still remain closely linked to the private domain (Dean, 2002, p. 23) and maternal concepts remain disrespected (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 53) and devalued (Theobald, 1997, p. 49). Ruddick (1995) suggested that women who express their lives in maternal thinking are practicing a “revolutionary discourse,” and other researchers add that for this reason, many women who struggle to nurture their families and communities are “carrying out a tradition that has no name” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 38). I suggest “auntie” as a name to describe those anonymous women who carry out maternal caring traditions in their extended family and in the community, and I assert that “aunties” are among those who are carrying out a “revolutionary discourse” with their everyday acts of social care.

Studies in Canada, Australia, and the United States have concluded that women predominantly provide the unpaid caring work in families and communities (Phillips, Little, & Goodine, 2004, p. 2). However, caring work is usually invisible when carried out in private (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 671) and overshadowed by professional care when carried out in public (Baines, Evans, & Neysmith, 1991, p. 282). Even professional women engaged in caregiving roles experience disrespect, and are often devalued by other “experts” in their fields. For example, the recent hearings into the SARS virus outbreak in Canada concluded that, “Nurses’ warnings must be recognized” when dealing with health crises, and that those who manage health care “need to come to terms [with the fact] that nursing knowledge counts” (Listen to nurses, 2003, p. A5).

Social caring is a tradition that is inextricably bound to both the public and private realms of women's lives and is constructed as a maternal duty by the dominant structures of Western society. I suggest that the tradition of building relationships and connections may well be a "revolutionary discourse" that transcends the divide between the private and public lives of individuals and families, and between maternal and paternal constructions of the world.

#### Aunties Interact in Maternal Ways

Another tension that emerged from the data and the literature is between maternal and paternal constructs of the social world, and this difference reinforces the division between the private and public worlds. For example, tensions may arise because maternal ways of thinking are reported to be more about "drawing out," "raising up," and "lifting up," while paternal ways are more oriented towards "ruling over" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 17). If this is the case, then women's life experiences and perspectives differ from men's, and consequently, the way that women handle relationships and interactions will differ as well (Cox, 1995, p. 3). For instance, the choices that women make when volunteering differ from those of men, perhaps because volunteer work is most often constructed as women's work.

A recent Canadian study revealed the gendered differences in volunteer activities when it shows that women volunteers comprised 54% of all volunteers, and that their preference is for supporting and caring roles in social and health services, while men prefer recreational and cultural services involving teaching/coaching, maintenance, and driving (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000). The activities that women volunteer for are more often associated with "expressive" groups, which are private or internally-oriented and "essentially accommodative and nurturant in nature" (Park, 1996, p. 30). In comparison, many men chose to become active in public or externally-oriented "instrumental" groups that are often "focused more on political and economic" matters (p. 30).

The social construction of males as being active in the public realm represents their volunteer actions as "noteworthy" (Bell, 1987, p. 265), whilst the construction of females as "volunteers" and keepers of the "hearth" embeds them in the private realm, and dismisses their actions as not being worthy of public note (Callahan, 1997, p. 185). For example, the "hearth stories" that women told as they shared the collective task of laundering or gathering food (Dean, 2002, p. 23) acted as a bridge between their public

and private lives (Bell, 1987, p. 265). However, many of these stories have been lost or dismissed as idle gossip (p. 265), and, in response, women's lives may seem emptier and lonelier (Dean, 2002, p. 23). When maternal ways are dismissed from public discourse as not being worthy, it is easier for family and community members to delegate responsibility for doing the "down to earth" stuff of social caring to the women of the community.

#### Aunties do the Down to Earth Stuff

In the data, I identified several instances where respondents mentioned that the provision of social care usually fell to the women in the community. For example, Penny (RCB) explained how responsibilities were assigned while she was the only woman on the shire council:

The men on the council... for them it is rates, roads and rubbish, so that was the blokes thing.... So all the other community, educational, health, all the other... down to earth, human activities that was an interaction with the community, was 'Well, *Penny*, you could do that'. (2)

The situation appears to be similar in the indigenous communities where Cathy (ICL) lived and worked, whereby

As far as the men are concerned... the children all belong to the women, you know. They still are in charge of their sons... like teaching them to hunt, fish... look after horses, cattle.... But the educational side is always up to the women. (4)

These indigenous women are not only responsible for educating the children, but also for developing social and cultural activities. Cathy (ICL) reported that, in the remote indigenous communities, "The women have been a very strong force out there. They organize all the community events... They just automatically take over from the men, they do everything" (2).

Pauline (CWA) had similar experiences of women taking responsibility for social, cultural or spiritual activities. When families first opened up the remote cattle properties of Western Queensland, she found that the men were so busy starting up the industry that any social development was left to the women. With children in tow, women worked together and "built tennis courts, built restrooms, the library, all this type of thing.... It was women who... had Christian gatherings for children.... That part of it was left to the women" (CWA 1). However, many of the men did not understand that their wives needed social supports of their own in order to cope with their isolated lifestyles. At one point in the 1960s, Pauline (CWA) lobbied local and distant councils

to gain support for the formation of a Country Women's Association. She was able to challenge the biases of the men who sat on the councils by saying, "The wives are sitting in the cars, and you are all in here at a meeting. Why can't they then come together and get to know one another?" (1). In addition, Pauline encountered blocks to setting up regular communications over the radio amongst women who live remotely. The "powers that be" who ran the public airways balked at the idea of the Country Women's Association "cluttering up the airwaves" for one hour a month, despite the fact that the men talked to each other over the radio every evening (2). Pauline and her supporters finally convinced the men to allow regular radio communications among women on the remote cattle stations, and this served to strengthen the connections amongst families living throughout Australia.

Two other participants in the study told stories of having their skills and knowledge diminished by men in the community. Both Jill (RM) and Penny (RCB) discovered during election campaigns that some constituents still believed that women were incapable of holding public office. Jill's (RM) experience as a political figure taught her "in the business and corporate world all over, I guess it is still more acceptable for a man to make a decision than a woman" (4). Jill (RM) encountered this bias in her district when certain men targeted her during an election by saying, "She's only a woman" (3) and, "We don't want a woman... She'll be quite useless and the place will fall apart" (3). Despite the dire predictions, Jill became mayor and the town has survived but, as Jill explained, "It was really about perceptions, because it wasn't me that kept the place together; it wasn't going to fall apart anyway" (RM 3). Likewise, Penny (RCB) experienced defeat when she ran for a higher public office, and she explained, "I was just absolutely gob-smacked actually, when people said to me.... 'Yes she's great as a deputy mayor, yes she's doing a great job, but she is a woman'" (RCB 3). Clearly, many rural women have had their needs regarded as less significant and have been judged as less competent than the men on governing bodies.

### Aunties are Constrained

The social construction of maternal caring as insignificant has resulted in the loss or alteration of traditional ways of connecting and relating to others. Typically, women are the caregivers in the community, and they play a critical role in the "early development of social capital" of the individual and society (PovertyNet, 2004, p. 10). However, the social construction of gender has a significantly impact upon how women

fulfil their obligations as citizens and how they develop social capital in their families and communities (PovertyNet, 2004, p. 10). Unfortunately, narrow conceptions of women's lives constrain and overshadow their abilities, and as a result, society as a whole is impoverished (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 37). During the interviews, several of the participants gave examples of being constrained by a dominant culture that favoured male's experiences and disadvantaged female's. At the same time, some participants revealed how they (and other women) created alternatives arrangements by circumventing the men's authority, often without the men really realizing it.

Sophia (RG) provided some examples from her early life of being constrained by dominant males. As a young adult, she was constrained intellectually because she "Really, really wanted to go to university... but my father said, 'Oh no, you don't go to university. You are only going to get married'" (5). When she did marry, she was further constrained from developing her potential and becoming involved in the community because

My husband said everything he did had to come first.... If he had a Union meeting, he had to go to that first. And if it was any other thing, he had to go. And so anything I did came second. (RG 16)

Sophia eventually left her constraining marriage and has been actively defending human rights ever since.

Other women reported being constrained by the expectations (or lack thereof) that society held of them in their lives. However, some understood that they were able to significantly influence communities and families from behind the scenes, often without the men realizing it. Penny (RCB) described how things seemed to operate from her perspective in Far North Queensland:

you look at the cattle properties and businesses... and you look, really, who are the driving forces? Who are the ones that literally hold it together, and they are the women. And I don't say that in any defensive role for women, but it is a fact. It is a fact of life. (RCB 3)

Women are often the driving forces behind successful businesses, families and communities; however, the levels of public recognition and support they receive depend on the social and political climate of the time.

Over time, the imposition of Western constructs on indigenous community and family members has lead to many shifts in power relationships between males and females. Cathy (ICL) explained that in recent times, the men have lost their positions of power in the community:

Years ago they used to all sit congregated.... And all discussed matters, and the women were never seen.... Now, because of the government changes.... The women have... pushed the men to the back, and they are the ones out the front. And in a way it has been detrimental to the community. (ICL 17)

Cathy says that, in order to compensate for men's loss of authority, many women "make the men think that they are the ones in charge, but really they are not" (2)... "The women are... just allowing them to think that they have made that decision" (3). These women may be seeking to create alternative relationships and alternative forms of leadership in order to meet their responsibilities for doing the caring work in the community, which construct and constrain women's life experience, and as a result, tensions often arise.

### The language of maternal and paternal constructions

Tensions do exist between maternal and paternal constructions of the social world, whereby women are constructed as the invisible providers of social care, while men are constructed as visible generators of economic and political power. Much of the gendered construction of social care occurs through the medium of language, which is dominated by male constructs and perceptions of the world.

Over two decades ago, feminist researcher Gilligan (1982) suggested that "men and women may speak different languages" that intersect in many places and many of their communications "contain a propensity for mistranslation" (p. 173). She suggested that women speak a language of responsibility and relationships as well as a language of rights that includes caring for "not only the other, but also the self" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 173). Other feminists have identified that the language of males uses "ruling over and war language," while the language of women uses "raising up" and home language (Belenky et al., 1997, pp. 260-261). Not surprisingly, men's language has dominated social research and its interpretations in the past, so that male behaviour has tended to be the "norm" and female behaviour has been the deviation. Two corollaries that follow this interpretation have been that "something is wrong with the women" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 14), and that women's concern with relationships is a weakness of women rather than a strength of humans (p. 17).

Popular culture can disadvantage women who engage in civic activities because it excludes females in the language of civic leadership. Evidence for this arose in both the literature reviewed and in the data collected. The research literature showed that

women are uniquely positioned to be agents of social change because they tend to connect the world of the community to the world of the self (Meyer, 2000, p. 38), and because their roles are critical to both public and private life (p. 47). In social movements, women express their agency differently than do men because they have different ways of speaking about the issues facing their communities and families (Teske, 2000, p. 5). Women behave and speak differently than men in social movements, and as a result, women are often relegated to the private, behind-the-scenes work, while men dominate the public roles. Feminists continue to urge researchers to resist a “patriarchal epistemology” that constructs the binaries of maternal and paternal ways of being, and to “begin to create another understanding... based upon new maps and new words” (Callahan, 1997, p. 185).

From the data arose an example of how some community associations can be dismissive of females and biased towards male competencies. Sophia (RG) experienced this in a peace organization that she no longer belongs to:

My brain wasn't accepted there by the men that were in the organization...Oh, yes... as long as I stuffed envelopes and did the bookkeeping, mostly just running the photocopy machine... I never got on the computer. I never got truly valued for any ideas that I had. (RG 2)

Stories of sexism in social movements have also emerged from the literature, including discussions of the American civil rights movements in the 1960s (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 173), where research has shown that women-organized or women-led organizations of the day were “acutely vulnerable to male expropriation” (Teske, 2000). In the mid-1980s, English women staging a protest at Greenham Common against nuclear energy withdrew from Britain's largest peace movement because “it was male dominated and hierarchical” (Romalis, 1987, p. 93). Contemporarily, women in the Canadian peace movement often find that they are expected to be the “fetchers and gatherers” for the men, and many women simply move on to form alternate groups of their own (Roy, 2002, p. 10). Other research has shown that in voluntary organizations, “women work in subordinate and inferior positions to men” because women volunteers “generally hold front-line service positions whereas men hold decision-making positions such as board members” (Park, 1996, p. 31). Research conducted in rural Australia found that women were still not considered for leadership positions at the same rate that men were (Geoffrey, Kristen, & Salim, 1996, p. 17).

One sequence of photographic data provides an example of the place of women in many traditionally male domains. In the photograph on p. 152 titled “Rotary Club

Members Reinforcing Roles,” it is evident that the women are doing the majority of the work while the men are doing the majority of the talking. Rotary International opened their membership to women nearly a decade ago; however the roles for men and women are still clearly divided. This is another example where women have been subtly constrained from full participation as members with equal rights.

Women’s caring work is often constrained by narrow constructions of their abilities, which relegates these activities to the private domain, with the result that women’s contributions are often not part of a shared, public language or included in discussions of civic activity. However, many women create alternative discourses and discussions that challenge the notion that social care is insignificant.

#### Aunties are Actively Engaged Citizens

Women’s caring work is important to social development because it has the potential to be a pivotal point between the public and private domains of society; however, it is often overlooked in discussions of civic activity. Some scholars charge that the present-day debate about civic engagement is incomplete because it is a gendered debate that does not include women’s unpaid care work (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002 p. 672). As a result, women’s civic activities tend to remain largely invisible and taken for granted.

For example, researchers in the United States found a “rich example of the invisibility of women and women’s unpaid work” (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 665). They determined that care work is absent from most discussions of civic engagement, and furthermore, that the literature reviewed was “largely gender blind” (p. 665). Correspondingly, they found that the issue of responsibility for care was rarely addressed in civic engagement studies, nor was there much mention of how “care work... constitutes civic activity” (p. 665). Other scholars consider that care work does not constitute civic engagement because it occurs in the private sphere; however, Herd and Harrington Meyer (2002) argue that caring for families and others is a “key part of civil society... [and] critical to a healthy democracy” because it challenges the “public-private dichotomy” (p. 666). Part of the tension between these two positions arises because public discourse fails to define care work as a legitimate way for “many women and some men [to] meet their citizenship obligations” (p. 666).

Many women, men, and families meet their civic obligations and raise social capital by volunteering in formal and informal ways. One of the cornerstones of civil

society is the notion of volunteering as civic activity because volunteering promotes solidarity and a just society by strengthening community caring and sharing, making connections across differences, and by providing an opportunity for individuals to exercise their rights and responsibilities (Volunteering Australia, 2002, p. 1). There are many discussions about what constitutes “civic engagement,” and I have come to understand it to be “voluntary and altruistic by nature” and to involve “reciprocity, social ties and trust” (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 674). “Civic virtue” is generated by individuals and families “getting out there and putting time into being a citizen” and by doing small, “amazing” things “that change their society” (Ralston Saul, 2001a, p. 4).

Civic activities can encourage connections, understanding and trust to flourish amongst community and family members, whereas conflict and contempt flourish when trust, relationships and connections are scarce (Cox, 1995, p. 18). Conflict and tension can be a healthy and necessary part of the process of building community resilience and sustain mutuality (Cox & Caldwell, 2000, p. 52), but conflict may also erode common ground and social capital if the tension is sustained (p. 57). The informal relationships that can emerge from civic activities can lead to increased trust and safe conflict, which are critical to civil society because they “provide opportunities for participation and give voice to those who may feel locked out of more formal avenues” (PovertyNet, 2004, p. 7). Thus, the popular construction of civil society can be a source of connection and support for some women but may be a source of tension for others.

Women can contribute their voices to civil society through supporting household and neighbourhood activities, which, in turn, may motivate previously inactive citizens to become involved in “political activity” (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 672). However, there is a paucity of resources and social support available for women to participate in civil society or formal politics, and instead, many women prefer to support informal social movements, where their familiarity with the public and private spheres can help them to span the boundaries between civil and political space (Teske, 2000, p. 8).

The social caring activities performed by many women in public and private realms are significant because women are uniquely positioned to be agents of social change. When women are constrained in their private or public roles, individuals, families and communities may lose opportunities to develop the social capital available to them. When the social caring work of women is misunderstood, devalued, or ignored

by civic engagement scholars, the perception can arise that individuals and families are failing to participate in civic activities. Aunties can provide an alternative to the discourse of civic disengagement if their formal and informal activities are recognized as key contributions to social capital and civil society.

#### Re-capping Building Relationships and Connections

Aunties are significant contributors to community care or development initiatives, because they build relationships and create networks that transcend the boundaries between public and private interests and concerns. Aunties persist in doing the “down to earth” social caring regardless of discourses and practices that diminish maternal ways of relating and connecting. Aunties provide an alternative, maternal discourse that challenges the constraints that dominant discourses place on informal ways of caring for families and communities. Aunties also challenge the discourse of diminishing connections and declining civic engagement by persisting in their actions, despite the fact that many of their activities are invisible or dismissed in paternal constructs of the social world.

If civic scholars, educators and policy makers recognized the importance of relationships and networks to those who live in small or rural communities, then perhaps a shared understanding of the needs and desires of community members can develop. From this shared understanding can arise trust and reciprocity, and this can significantly impact the capacity of individuals, families, and whole communities to respond to challenges that arise from social, political, or economic changes.

## **Part Three: Aunties Create Shared Understandings**

### **Monthly Markets Developing Community Yungaburra, Qld**

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TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

## **Rural**

Rural? “Home!”

In one word  
it would mean  
“home.”

It would mean,  
family,  
relationships,  
kinships.

That’s what  
rural  
would mean.

It would  
mean  
a  
common  
understanding.

Yes,  
to have  
all those.

(14)

**Fiona**  
**Indigenous Community**  
**Nurse**

## **Aunties Create Shared Understandings**

Grassroots people who share common experiences and understandings have a greater opportunity to develop social trust and to form reciprocal relationships, thereby increasing the capacity for small and rural communities to thrive. The presence of informal networks of social care provides support for community members and helps them to meet the challenges of living in rural or remote settings. I assert that it is important for community developers, educators and policy makers to understand how aunties might encourage shared understandings in order to construct more collaborative, inclusive community processes.

In the interview data, I encountered several instances where the respondents spoke of the importance of creating shared understandings when building the capacity of individuals and communities. For Simone (RL), it was important that she knew she was helping people tap into their skills and resources so that they can gain a shared understanding of the potential they have to positively impact their community (18). For Fiona (ICN), living rurally meant that she shares experiences (19), understanding, companionship, and common knowledge with other members of her community (15). Fiona created new experiences with her nieces and nephews when she taught them the roles and responsibilities of being a family and community member (19). Similarly, Pauline (CWA) felt it was very important to create common understandings for women who live remotely and to provide opportunities for regular communication with each other to build a social community together (3). Likewise, Sophia (RG) spoke of the importance of building shared understanding between the rich and the poor people on her island, and knew that this would take time and hard work, because people are often afraid of those who are different (11). Evidently, the creation of shared understandings is an important feature of community and family life for several of the participants in this study.

The capacity for grassroots people to build a local community culture is enhanced when there are opportunities for people to get together, to know each other, and to discover a “common social purpose” (Nozick, 1992, p. 202). Local people have the chance to shape the development of their community when they engage in mutual aid, which in turn, contribute to the “greater well-being and security of the whole” (p. 154). Mutual aid arises from activities such as when people “help each other build houses, harvest crops, or prepare food for weddings and funerals” (p. 154). Reciprocal

relationships can arise from such community interactions, whereby individuals learn to create a balance between self-reliance and interdependence.

Informal social networks are important to community development processes because “Greater interaction between people generates a greater sense of community spirit” (Office for National Statistics, March, 2003). When people work together in reciprocal, cooperative situations, they are more likely “to be tolerant of others... to return others’ respect” and to provide “the conditions under which freedom, equality, tolerance, [and] respect for human rights flourish” (Stanley, 2003, p. 10). Reciprocity is required for social capital to flourish because participation in a community alone is not capital building (Vivian & Sudweeks, 2003, p. 1433).

In order to generate community spirit for individuals and families who live rurally, it is important to gain a clearer understanding of the meaning of the terms “community” and “community development” to local residents. It is equally important to create a shared understanding of how the contexts of living rurally and being active at a grassroots level may impact the understanding of these terms and how these contexts may make a difference to the generation of social capital and community spirit by community members.

### **Reconceptualizing the Meaning of Community**

The concept of “community” seems to mean more than a physical space because to many, it represents shared relationships and understandings, which often result in a sense of safety and belonging. This meaning is important to discussions of social capital because it transcends the notion of community as a physical space and recognizes the significance of relationships, connections, and trust to the development of community capacity.

I arrived at a richer understanding of “community” as social and physical space when I asked the participants what the word meant to them. Their responses included themes of sharing relationships, common understandings, and physical or social space. In addition, the term “community development” referred to a network of physical, cultural, and social processes, which are not always driven by economic considerations. Primarily, the women appear to construct their understanding of community and its development in social and relational terms rather than in economic or physical terms.

### Community Means Having Shared Understandings

It seemed to me that the meaning of the word “community” is linked to the presence of shared understandings and common relationships among people. Members of a community share common relationships, understandings and activities (ICN 16); are homogenous groups of people (RM 24); or have a “commonality, a finality of some kind” (CWA 26), such as in a religious community, where the sisters “form community, and we work at it” (SM 22). For both Fiona (ICN 16) and Cathy (ICL 8), the word community meant family, home, and security because being known meant being safe. Community also meant having relationships and connections for Sophia (RG 18), Fiona (ICN 16) and Simone (RL), who described its meaning as “a group of people... like a tribe that support each other” (2).

For the participants in the study, the term “community” had connotations of both tangible, physical space and intangible, social space. To begin with, it could mean “the area in which I live” (CTM 2), a “group of people geographically isolated” (CWA 26), or something more “ethereal” such as the “spirit of a place” (CTM 2) that may even be experienced in cyberspace (CTM 9). Next, community can mean social space, such as “a wonderful bunch of very mixed people” living and interacting with each other (RM 24), or it could mean being included, and walking or being with people (SM 22). Finally, socially responsible people can make up a community (CTM 2), as can residents and ratepayers who live in a region (RM 24).

The literature suggested the idea that “community” is a social construction that can have multiple meanings, depending on the context. “Community” can be understood as a fragile network constructed by language (Lane, 1997, p. 334). “Community” can be a composite of meanings (Tester, 1997, p. 228; see also Ife, 1995), many of which challenge the rationalistic, structural notion of community (Lane, 1997, p. 334) or propose interpretive, subjective meanings (Ife, 1995, p. 93; see also Martinez-Brawley, 2000a). The word community can be used to describe people sharing a tangible, physical location, or it could be used to describe the intangible experience of belonging to a community of the mind (Clark, 1973, p. 409; McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994). Thus, the meaning of “community” is unique, slippery (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 34), and illusive (McSwan & Barman-Jenssen, 1999, p. 48). Nonetheless, the term “community” does infer some common elements (Lane, 1997) and some shared narratives that are identifiable (Cheers, 1999).

For example, community can mean having a sense of being home, fitting in, and being safe (Nozick, 1992, p. 210). It can also mean being recognized by others, which provides status, significance and a sense of self (Blum, 1996, p. 232). Fiona (ICN) spoke of living in a community where everyone knows who you are, and this provides a sense of safety because “It’s like home, your community” (15). Furthermore, Cathy (ICL) explained that community means safety to the indigenous children in her school, because “These kids are in very tight-knit families, that is their security, so family, community, security, all is the same thing” (8). Small communities can offer a sense of security because their members share a familiar environment, have mutual, communal relationships, and as well as “the support of friends and neighbors” (Martinez-Brawley, 1995, p. 14). Shared relationships that arise between friends and neighbours can have a significant impact on the development of social capital because families and communities can both be “places of support, nourishment, and refuge, or, on the other hand, places of intolerance and oppression” (Wharf, 1997, p. 3).

Many community researchers and social capital scholars warn against ignoring the discourses of family and community as sources of oppression and violation. From a feminist perspective in particular comes the challenge to critically assess the home and community as sites of oppression, because “It is counterproductive to view the community as benign and the state as evil” (Callahan, 1997, p. 197). In some cases, neighbourhoods and homes are not safe places for women and children to live, but, unfortunately, communities often turn a blind eye to the violence that takes place in their midst. Some women engage in community service work in order to escape oppressive home environments, because community work can legitimise their participation in a “public sphere beyond the community where they are actors and decision makers” (p. 197). Evidently, for some people, “community” can mean physical spaces or social environments that may be constraining, but community can also provide individuals with an alternate social space that can engender shared understandings along with a sense of belonging, identity, and safety that is not achievable within their family.

### Community Means Social and Physical Space

The social construction of “community” can transcend physical boundaries to include an individual’s social space. It is therefore important for social scientists to recognize that both tangible and intangible aspects of society can shape the meaning of

community for citizens (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 80). A community can be understood as a space “where citizens prevail” (McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994, p. 2), come together to claim the space as their own, and where the fact of their citizenship entitles them to hold responsibility and authority in the space (p. 3). At the same time, the meaning of “community” reaches beyond the confines of physical, geographic terms to include “communities of interest” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 150), which can function in non-geographic terms (Debertin, 2003, p. 6), and most recently, can include virtual or cyberspace (Absolon & Herbert, 1997, p. 218; see also Berlin, 1997). In the data collected, Bella (CTM) describes her understanding of community in cyberspace when she says, “I speak of cyber-tribal but cyber is just an extension of the tribes. It’s managing to weave all the tribes together that have been separate prior to the Internet” (12). I suggest that whether in virtual or physical space, social relationships can increase the social capital of small and rural communities because they encourage the development of shared understanding and reciprocity between members.

Many social scientists are coming to recognize cyberspace as an important factor in strengthening rural communities, while others warn that it may increase alienation for individuals. For example, Martinez-Brawley (2000) suggests that computers have the potential to create “new positive and negative realities” for rural Americans because computers offer the opportunity to explore new avenues in communication and employment (p. 27). At the same time, computer-mediated communications can create “a sense of self-containment and often a lack of concern for other real individuals” (p. 28). Other social researchers warn that structuring a new Internet chat line or neighbourhood does not necessarily constitute creating a sense of “community” (Nozick, 1992, p. 197; see also McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994, p. 211). Similarly, Putnam (2000) is aware that the Internet has the potential to decrease social capital because it can forestall (as well as reinforce) community engagement (p. 410). He challenges Americans to discover ways in which electronic mass media can create solutions to share community problems by “convening diverse groups of fellow citizens” (p. 410).

Whether in person or in cyberspace, residents of small or rural communities have more opportunity to strengthen the ties and relationships that constitute their community when they interact with each other (Wharf, 1997, p. 5). Social interactions can create common understandings amongst citizens of a community, and these “collegial contacts” are important because they “help us to learn to trust those outside

our limited intimate circles” (Cox, 1995, p. 31). Social interactions are also important for community development because the well-being of the individual is strongly linked to the well-being of the community (McSwan & Barman-Jenssen, 1999, p. 45). People who come together to identify common goals can strengthen their communities by bringing about a shared sense of working for the “common good” (Berlin, 1997, p. 43). In a like manner, sharing experiences can be beneficial because those communities that develop local narratives, collect common stories, and hold common memories have a better chance of survival (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998, p. 21). Connecting to others and forming trusting relationships can create a sense of belonging for the individual. Although social interactions are not contingent on shared physical space, the physical context of the interaction can shape the way these relationships are formed. Community development professionals must account for the local context to avoid creating misunderstandings with locals during the development process.

### The Language of Community

Many of the misunderstandings experienced during the development of rural and urban communities originate in differences between the language of everyday people and the discourse of professionals. For example, Lane (1997) encourages social scientists to challenge the position of “experts” who speak and act from outside the local context. She also urges researchers to privilege common speech and local knowledge, and to recognize the significance of common, collective actions (p. 334). Other social scientists resist the inclusive language of “community” that tends to deny independent action and autonomy, because they understand that “social cohesion does not depend on social sameness” (Stanley, 2003, p. 9). For instance, the term “the community” is often used by professionals and lay people to denote a single entity rather than a complex system of individual members. In her interview, Jill (RM) proclaimed that the tendency for this to happen made her uncomfortable;

I dislike the phrase, ‘No-one’s listening to the community’, which means no-one’s listening to their or their friends’ view. I mean, a large group is not necessarily representative of all the divergent views of the community. (RM 17)

A related issue arose from the research literature, where some writers noted that the term “community” has changed so much over time that it has been “overused until its meaning is so diffuse as to be almost useless” (Forsey, 1993, p. 1). As a result, the reference has become empty for many people. For example, commercial advertising

interests have adopted “community” as a feel-good phrase to be used by banks and development companies (Berlin, 1997, p. 8). Now, rather than “community” being understood as vital to us, the word has been diminished, devalued and detached from its origins (p. 8).

### Recapping the Meaning of Community

The concept of “community” was significant to many of the respondents in this study because it is closely associated with their conceptions of home, family and safety. Being a member of a small or rural community provides opportunities for relationships and connections to form between individuals, which can lead to the formation of shared understandings about common issues. Although “community” can mean a particular physical space that is shared, it was also constructed in terms that could exist outside of an actual space, such as over the Internet or in cyber-space.

The participants also tied the concept of “community” to the notion of reciprocity because it implies the presence of shared understanding, mutual trust, and lasting relationships. These ideas are important for social scientists to understand, because they will appreciate how social capital is generated at the local level, and this understanding may better prepare them to assist communities that are struggling or undergoing transition. Researchers who understand “community” to be a complex, contextual, and subjective concept may be better prepared to seek alternative approaches to examining social phenomena in small and rural contexts. Finally, community programmers, policymakers and educators may find that they are able to establish connections and create common understanding with rural residents if they understand the term “community” to consist of social as well as physical attributes.

I suggest that aunties are significant contributors to communities because they provide an alternative discourse to community as a structural and spatial entity and facilitate the shared understanding of social aspects that are important to local residents. The actions of aunties can enhance the quality of life for residents of small and rural communities because aunties promote the development of social capital as well as human and economic capital, and this can encourage a more balanced community development process.

## **Reconceptualizing the Meaning of Community Development**

“Community development” can be understood as a process whereby individuals arrive at a common understanding of local resources and engage these resources to achieve common goals. The definition suggests a local process where consultations with professionals take place in a “back and forth” manner rather than in a top-down manner that may be decontextualised. Grassroots community development, as I understand it, is represented in on p. 224, which shows scenes from the Yungaburra Marketplace, run by the parents association of the State School. For 20 years, this monthly market has been the site of much social, cultural, educational, and economic development, which takes place amongst the 250 stalls. Markets such as the Yungaburra or Queens Beach Market (run by the Lapidary Club) provide opportunities for residents of small communities to strengthen their ties to each other as they work together to develop a shared understanding of the goals of the community as a whole.

### Community Development Means Achieving Common Goals

I sought the participants’ ideas about what the term “community development” meant to them, and the women indicated that it had social and cultural rather than economic connotations and that development is a process rather than a single entity. For Fiona (ICN), community development meant arriving at a “common understanding of what the problem is” by “involving the people” (17). For Jill (RM), it meant a very integrated mix of “social, environmental, cultural, and economical” activities, even though hers “is not a popular concept with... other decision makers” (25). Allison (RS) sparked the idea of social warmth when she spoke of the turkey dinners hosted by her church, “You see a wonderful community development, socially, there” (10). Other women talked of people getting together (CTM, CHN) or working together (RG), particularly in a small community where “you get to know people” (RG 20). Community development also meant making sure that the people involved get thanked or recognized (ICN), and that “they have their self respect... a sense of pride...[and] a sense of achievement in what they are doing” (CWA 30).

### Community Development Means an On-going Process

From the literature, I gleaned ideas that “community development” meant coming to a common understand, sharing perspectives, or being involved in an on-going

process. Conversely, the community development process can also result in rapid change and loss of control or agency for some community members. During the development process, common understandings may be arrived at by sharing knowledge amongst community members (National Rural Workshop, 1998), by creating an inclusive process (Ife, 1995, p. 1), or by encouraging diversity (McSwan & Barman-Jenssen, 1999, p. 50; see also Taylor, 1994, p. 111). Social capital may be increased in communities where shared understandings are built upon because social cohesion is raised when members of a community act together and share “common beliefs, values, concerns, and interests,” as well as common problems (Debertin, 2003, p. 4).

Other researchers assert that it is vital to involve community members in the development process, for example, by applying their knowledge and skills to the problems at hand (Bryden, Watson, Storey, & van Alphen, 2004), or by considering both the “pragmatic and idealistic nature” of the local people (Baker, Draper, & Fairbairn, 1991, p. 276). In addition, “hands-on,” local research can lead to pragmatic community improvement because local investigations have the potential to “render practical outcomes” and “formulate solutions to daily problems” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 246).

Community development can also mean being involved in a shifting, evolving, and active process that takes time and relies on making connections and creating alternatives. For Ife, (1995), community development is a “complex process, full of dilemmas and problems which require unique and creative solutions” (p. 94). In order to help bring on a “radical alternative to the existing order” (Ife, 1995, p. 199), connections and links must be made amongst individuals, structures, processes and actions. This is particularly important in small or rural contexts, where considerations of economic, social, political and cultural perspectives must be integrated into the community development process (McSwan & Barman-Jenssen, 1999, p. 49). Inclusive community development practices require that people and organizations show resilience when engaging in the process of change (McNair, 2000, p. 396), so that arriving at a common understanding of how to develop a community does involve being flexible and open to alternatives. This often means engaging citizens in a multi-dimensional, on-going process that may extend over a long time.

The participants in the study also indicated that the term “community development” could mean an ongoing process (ICN) in which people can consult on, or participate in, a wide variety of activities (ICL). Being part of the development process

often means that people make a long-term commitment, because, as Pauline observed, it takes time to create common understanding (4). Penny (RCB) knew from experience that community development “is not ever going to happen overnight” (5) and she felt strongly that new business people did not understand this. She explained

It is like I served an eighteen-year apprenticeship. People will come to me and say ‘We must bleed your brains’ and I am more than happy to share my knowledge. But I quietly think to myself ‘You don’t understand, I can share my knowledge, but ... You have got to do the apprenticeship’. (4)

Not only does the community development process take time, but it can involve multiple activities and commitments. Several women expressed that community development is not composed of a single entity but of overlapping ones (RM). For instance, as a Rural Community Builder, Penny pondered multiple meanings for the term: “Are you looking at property ... education... personal development? You know it covers all those things” (10). For Cathy (ICN), community development is not an isolated activity but a multifaceted one because it means that “X community is trying. It means progress... training... continually educating” (9).

Several of the respondents expressed the meaning of community development in terms of what it was not, such as, it is not solely about economics (RM, RL). Others felt strongly that the term does not refer simply to more buildings and people (RG) or to physical development (RS, RCB). For Allison (RS), community development is “not a positive thing” (9) because it did not mean people coming together, but rather the threat of rapid growth meant social separation and people “branching off” (9).

Residents of rural and small communities undergoing growth and change often experience feelings of fragmentation and separation because the language of community development often constructs local residents as being passive and not active members of the process. For example, in the United States, it was found that a “deficiency orientation” to community development can arise when “needs surveys” (McKnight, 1995, p. 176) are conducted, as this approach often highlights problems, ignores capacities, and denies “basic community wisdom” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 4). Such processes can weaken community confidence because there is a dangerous potential for community members to perceive that “only outside experts can provide help” (p. 4).

## The Language of Community Development

The elite language of professionals in the community development field tends to alienate and silence ordinary citizens, but some scholars are challenging the way that it reconstructs citizens as passive consumers of the development process. Language is an important element in constructing, describing and defining common goals for the future of the community (Baker et al., 1991, p. 268) because “reinterpreting words can help set new directions for social change” (p. 268). In Australia, Cox (1995) challenged the notion that “citizens” are “customers” of government and institutional services, which are driven by concerns for “the profit margin and not by customer need” (p. 51). The common knowledge of local citizens is likewise in danger of being dominated by the language of economics (Taylor, 1994, p. 111), the language of politicians (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 218), or other elitist codes that represent common issues and potential solutions in terms beyond the understanding of most citizens (McKnight, 1995, p. 49).

Traditional patterns of developing community supports and local resources have given way to a human services industry that has “colonized our lives,” with the result that “we are bundles of needs... [and] we become less and less powerful” (McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994, p. 4). In many situations, residents find they must behave like “clients” in order to have their “special needs” met (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 2). In response, McKnight (1995) encouraged people to redefine themselves as citizens by rejecting the label of “clienthood” (p. 16) and by challenging the commodification, management, and curricularisation of community care (p. 12). In addition, he warns that every time external agencies increase their involvement in the daily life of the community, “we are making a decision that the neighborhood’s indigenous associations, leadership and capacities are inadequate to solve the problem” (McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994, p. 5).

An alternative to a community development model that excludes citizens is offered by McKnight and Cayley (Jan. 1994) when they suggest that the key to inclusive community development is to stay focussed on the internal assets and resources of the community, to build connections between them, and to invest in an ongoing process of building and rebuilding relationships within the community (p. 9). This is not to say that communities should not seek help from outside when necessary (p. 9), but to recognize that significant changes most often happen when locals are

committed to and invested in the process. Similarly, others suggest that reciprocity is an important aspect of any “community-oriented services” (Martinez-Brawley & Blundell, 1989). She urges community service providers to recognize the networks that develop between neighbours as valuable sources of support, legitimacy and of common culture and language, especially for citizens who are experiencing difficulty in their lives (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 263).

Community developers and other professionals often fail to recognize the significance of local relationships and networks and as a result, many development initiatives are not successful because they come from the “top down” (McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994, p. 5). This issue arose in some of the interviews, when several of the participants made strong statements about their experiences of “top down” management and how poorly it served the needs of the local people. Sophia (RG) got frustrated by the “top down” approach of large charities and big organizations when “they want your money and then they want to do stuff, but it is just the top that wants to do it, not the ‘grassroots’” (RG 10). Pauline (CWA) also felt strongly about the role of local people in guiding the economic development process:

Grassroots to me is so important because they have been there, they understand it and... you get a perspective, what they consider to be the best.... Yes, I think it is important... not to come down from the top, I've seen too many disasters. (CWA 33)

Jill (RM) experienced such a disaster when a World Heritage Site was established that encompassed her rural district. She had contempt for the top-down process they experienced because it was

a political motive for listing an area for an internationally recognized title, and the management mechanisms weren't even thought of until too late.... The sociologists or economists or whatever who passed through ...they would all sort of agree, 'Well, actually, we are sort of coming after the horse has bolted'. (RM 10)

Similar “top-down” development initiatives have occurred in Canada, and social scientists there are concerned that economic interests are overwhelming the social and communal interests of ordinary citizens. Piper (2002) forecasts that in order to produce citizens who are free to express their own minds, more research and scholarship are needed so that community members can better understand “themselves, their values, and the roles they play” (p. 6). She proposes that in order to counter public policy that focuses on economics concerns, interdisciplinary research must be conducted because it

can advance our understanding of social problems and of our “responsibilities as members of the larger community” (Piper, 1995, p. 8).

### Re-capping Community Development

It is evident from the comments of the participants and from social researchers that the term “community development” means much more than economic development. To many, it means a process that incorporates social and cultural considerations, obligations, and activities. The development process can include multiple, ongoing consultation and dialogue to arrive at a common understanding of the goals, aspirations, and fears of community members and also to identify local resources that may be contributed.

When a common understanding of the goals and objectives of the community development process is created, there is an increased likelihood that social cohesion and social capital will increase as a result. Ideally, the community development process involves a “backing and forthing” to create shared understandings between professionals who hold development expertise and locals who hold expertise within the community. In addition, the participation of local people can enable social researchers and planners to understand local history, perspectives, and resources and to gain an alternative understanding of the competence and expertise that resides in the community. When local residents are invested in the development process, they can develop a sense of pride and ownership in the process. As a result, local people may feel more confident to work with professionals from outside the community to achieve a balance between the social, cultural and economic development of the community. It is equally important for development professionals to consider the unique characteristics, needs and aspirations of those citizens who live in remote, rural, or small town settings because the physical context of a community can have significant impact upon the social, cultural and economic development of a region.

I propose that aunties can provide an alternative to the discourse of community development as a formal, “top down” process that is “delivered” to the community, because aunties understand the importance of creating a reciprocal process that is context specific. Such a process can increase the potential for sharing responsibility and can encourage cooperation rather than competition between community members and development professionals, social planners or researchers, who bring outside expertise to the project. Cooperation between local community members and development

experts is vital to an inclusive community development process, and this is particularly important when the process takes place in rural or small community contexts.

### **Re-conceptualizing the Meaning of Rural**

“Rural” is a social construct that is often misunderstood by those who do not have direct experience of rural lifestyles themselves. Developing an understanding of the unique benefits of living rurally is significant to the sustainability of rural communities because there is a tendency for urbanites to develop negative stereotypes that portray rural residents and communities as disadvantaged and isolated. Negative stereotypes can diminish the social capital available to communities and individuals and decrease shared understandings of the challenges and rewards of rural life because negative representations can inhibit the development of connections amongst rural and urban dwellers. It is therefore important for rural residents, community developers, social researchers, planners, or those who establish government policy or programs to be exposed to an alternative to the discourse that portray “rural” as underprivileged, alienated, and unsophisticated. In this way, urban professionals may form a shared understanding of what living rurally means to those who have experienced the lifestyle.

#### Rural Means Having Shared Understandings

When I inquired what the word “rural” meant to the participants, their responses included themes of common understandings, relationships and networks, and of social or physical space. Fiona’s (ICN) response was most captivating, when she exclaimed;

Rural? Home! In one word it would mean home. It would mean family, relationships, kinships. That’s what rural would mean. It would mean a common understanding. Yes, to have all those. (ICN 14)

For Allison (RS), rural means that people in a community are “closer” and “share the same feelings of wanting to be a community” (5), and for Sophia (RG), living on a rural island means, “You can go to the store and... people know who you are” (16). In Fiona’s (ICN) experience, rural communities are about safety, where there is no fear and no unknown, because “I know the area, I have a routine, so I know people” (15). Similarly, Cathy (ICL) relates that many of the rural aboriginal children do not feel safe at the school in town because the children prefer to be where their families are on remote communities because they know that “their security is out there” (8). Having a sense of identity, sharing common understanding with others, and being safe are

important to the participants' constructions of the term "rural," and similar themes were identified in the research literature.

Themes of common understanding and mutuality are evident in the rural research literature, and it seems that the early work of Ferdinand Tonnies still influences the literature of today. Many small and rural communities can still be described as premodern, *Gemeinschaft* societies, a term first suggested by Tonnies to distinguish them from urban, industrial, societies (in Sorokin, 1928). *Gemeinschaft* communities tend to reflect agrarian attributes such as having an affinity for large, extended family networks based on mutuality and trust, maintaining continuous commitments, and engendering a strong sense of belonging amongst community members (T. Gougeon, 1997). *Gesellschaft* societies, on the other hand, tend to reflect urban values, have limited family networks, make contractual and impersonal ties to others, and are accepting of change and new ideas (T. Gougeon, 1997). Contemporarily, Gougeon (1997) suggests that citizens of rural communities most often form *Gemeinschaft* relationships based on a unity where everyone's roles are understood, the tried and true are trusted, informal sanctions and norms are important, and new ideas are subjected to heavy scrutiny. He suggests that families behave in similar ways to rural communities and that they both resemble *Gemeinschaft* societies.

#### Rural Means Being Like a Family

There were several references in the literature that linked the social relations in a rural community to those in a family. In Canada, Gougeon (1997) equated the social interactions of a rural community with those of a family and claimed that they shared similarities such as they both gain their strength through knowing each other and through developing an unconditional acceptance for and obligation to each other (p. 1). Another shared characteristic of kinship and rural social dynamics is the presence of "community networks," which enable and support social cohesion between neighbours, family and friends (T. Gougeon, 1999). Social cohesion arises from the ongoing process of developing "a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity... based on a sense of hope, trust and reciprocity" (Jeanotte, 1997). Social cohesion provides those families and rural communities that share certain values and understandings with a higher chance of survival.

I encountered many links in the social sciences literature that tied the survival of rural communities to the survival of families, and these may shed some light on the role

of aunties in the rural development process. Community development studies in the United States of America have connected social and family development and propose that the vital functions that sustain families are lost when community capacities are diminished (McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994, p. 5). An Australian study found that the community and the family are interlinked significantly, and that they both raise stereotypical notions of “a tight-knit, friendly, caring community” (Little & Austin, 1996, p. 107). In Canada, Fleras (1998) found that extended families are more prevalent in agriculturally-oriented societies, where “conjugal and consanguineal bonds” unite smaller family units (p. 174). The families who formed extended networks had a greater chance of survival because networks can create a “more equitable workload,” broaden the “range of role models,” or encourage the “pooling of resources for survival or wealth creation” (Fleras, 1998, pp. 174-175).

If, in fact, rural communities do behave like families, then aunties may be key players in the survival of families living in rural places. Aunties can help develop relationships and shared understandings and this can increase trust and reciprocity amongst family and community members. Those who chose to live rurally often rely on the social networks that form to meet the challenges of living in geographically distributed communities.

### Rural Means Having Space

The data gathered from the participants on the meaning of “rural” also included references to spatial relationships, whether social or geographical. Both social and physical space were important to Allison (RS), who said that “rural” means “just being in the country... not having the neighbour that looks inside our window at suppertime” (5). Rural living is “a rather special way of making a choice” according to Penny (RCB), who said that rural means living very simply, and that “The simplest things are usually the nicest, anyway” (15). Other women said that rural means farming (RG), being in the country (RCB, CTM), living with animals (RS), or being “where the critters are safe” (RL 2). Rural was also described in physical terms as, “a lot of open space” (RM 22), or as having breathing room (RL). Rural appears to be defined as a lifestyle by some of the women who listed qualitative aspects of the experience. Other participants referred to quantitative factors such as relative distance to frame their understanding of the term, and this was predominately the case in the rural research literature.

The respondents employed a range of terms to describe the degree of rurality they experienced in their own lives. Some respondents identified themselves as semi-rural (RL, CM), while others preferred the term “small community” (RM, RG). Pauline (CWA) considered rural to be “further out” than the regional towns, and Bella describes it as “not necessarily out in the boonies, but sort of on the edge of town” (8). Mary (SM) pondered the idea and explained that, for her, “somehow rural has to do with green, and outback has to do with dust” (22). Living with a high degree of rurality in the remote outback made a significant difference to Pauline’s life and she knows the risks and costs of living far from health services. She explained,

I know the hazards... when I was a young bride and we had no airplanes... I delivered a baby and it was buried, because no one can get to you and the Flying Doctor can talk to you, up to a point. (CWA 23)

Those who live rurally or remotely come to know the dangers associated with their lifestyle choices, where physical distance and geography intensify the experience of isolation and vulnerability. Members of families and rural communities may counter isolation and vulnerability by forming social networks that offer safety because they are based on a shared understanding of the risks and benefits of rural life.

#### Living Rurally Makes a Difference

The theme of “relationships” came up when I asked the participants if living rurally made a difference to the way they carried out their community service work. Pauline (CWA) described how “the further you are away, the more you are dependent on your neighbour” (23), and Allison (RS) related that she has become more involved “since I’ve moved out further” (7). As an older woman, being rural makes a difference to Sophia (RG) because she doesn’t feel invisible and she is known as “being part of the community” (16). Nonetheless, she related that living in a small community is hard sometimes because “you have to behave yourself.... Once I wrote a poem about not wanting to misbehave because I would get in the paper, and so she put the poem in the paper!” (17).

Much of the “charm” of living in a small community is that neighbours know “what the others are doing” (Debertin, 2003, p. 7); however, the anonymity of urban settings may be more desirable to some residents. Gougeon (1997) explored the issue of visibility for active citizens and he concluded that mandatory participation “is a characteristic common to most small communities” because “people are aware of your

every move. People cannot decide to miss a meeting” (p. 11). Conversely, in an urban setting, participation in community events is more voluntary, because “people tend to function anonymously” (p. 11) and individual choices can be made more independently. Likewise, sanctions on behaviour differ in rural and urban settings. As an example, in a family or small community, informal sanctions can be employed if a student misbehaves; “Talking to a mother or an aunt or uncle may be all that is required” to correct the behaviour (p. 3). In an urban environment, the teacher would be more likely to respond with formal sanctions such as sending a report card or letter home (p. 3).

Members of small communities often have higher levels of familiarity and trust and share an understanding of the social norms. However, as towns and cities get larger, higher degrees of alienation and confrontation develop between citizens and this is dangerous because social capital erodes when trusting relationships are not formed. For example, studies of Canadian rural communities showed that the larger the community, the less likely helping relationships were to form (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2004). Small communities offer more opportunities to form trusting relationships because they rely heavily on volunteers for infrastructure and services; however, as communities get bigger, similar opportunities become fewer because the level of civic participation declines (Government of Canada, 1998, p. 8). This decline can hinder the formation of social capital because where civic participation and trust are low, citizens tend to be less collaborative and more competitive (Snively & Tracy, Mar., 2002, p. 78). This is not desirable for community development, in part, because competition can lead to confrontation and conflicts that are increasingly settled in court rather than in conversation (Debertin, p. 10). Living rurally makes a difference to the way people form trusting relationships because familiarity and visibility tend to be greater than in urban contexts.

“Rural” may be described as a way of life or as a relationship to a place and to the people who share the challenge of living there. Some scholars have concluded that rural is a social construction because the “true meaning of rurality varies considerably from nation to nation... as well as from purpose to purpose” (Sher & Sher, 1994, p. 11). In fact, scholars, researchers, and those who live rurally themselves have long struggled to achieve “consensus on any single characteristic or set of attributes” (Whitaker, 1983, p. 72) to describe the term “rural.” Nonetheless, some scholars propose that there are shared experiences that can be identified by those who live rurally.

Rural people can share a common history that arises from collectively experiencing the “social, cultural and historical reality” of the local community (Cheers, 1994; see also Nozick, 1992). Rural people “dwell” in an “intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place” and because of this, they come to behave like “inhabitants” who care about their community rather than mere residents who are detached from it (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998, p. 3). Berry (1996) described how community identity is linked to locality when he wrote, “our culture must be our response to our place... our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other.” The presence of a community culture and a sense of place are linked to the formation of relationships within a community and this is important to the creation of shared understandings. Those who choose to live in small or rural communities tend to form relationships and understandings in ways that are different than urban inhabitants. “Small scale people” come to rely upon each other for social relationships, and they often “derive their ideas, values and emotional security from interpersonal relationships” (Stevens, 1989, p. 51). In small and rural communities, socialization and the development of a common language establish informal norms and ways of relating, much like in a family (T. Gougeon, 1997, p. 4).

Residents of rural communities may identify with informal norms, whereas norms in an urban environment are established by formal laws or through structured processes and symbols (p. 4). Generally speaking, in small communities, “each person’s identity becomes publicly recognized” with the result that people become “familiar with each other’s quirk’s” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 128) and each person is known for their idiosyncrasies (p. 129). Like some families, personal communities build shared understandings because they may be willing to accept people for their strengths and their foibles, and in turn, people are willing to “accept the strengths and weaknesses of others” (Martinez-Brawley, 1995, p. 27). Unfortunately, urban dwellers, who are more familiar with structure and orderliness may not understand the idiosyncrasies and craziness that go with every small community or family (T. Gougeon, 1997). Indeed, rural characteristics may be stereotyped as parochial and disadvantaged by urban dwellers, which in turn may threaten the identity and pride of rural inhabitants.

Redman (1991) speaks out against those who are defining, researching and analysing the term “rural” while having limited experience of rurality themselves and she discourages rural research that is conducted “from the outside looking in.”

Similarly, in America, social researchers warn of the dangers of experts creating a sense of the “other” by excluding the experiences and perspectives of those being defined:

Typically, the superordinate presumes that the Other is incapable of independent thought... Although superordinates often see the Other – women, people of color, the poor, rural inhabitants – as capable of emotional power, they are not likely to think of them as well endowed with intellectual power. (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997, p. 21)

Urban dwellers may easily regard rural dwellers as “other” and stereotype them as less capable of thinking for themselves because the social construction their communities differs.

### Rural Stereotypes

Various stereotypes prevail that diminish or idealize rural communities and their inhabitants, and these are often accompanied by equally inaccurate myths about urban dwellers. Williams examined the stereotype of the rural dweller in Australia nearly thirty years ago and found that,

on the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtues. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition, on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation. (Williams, 1975, p. 9)

A “discourse of disadvantage” continues to dominate discussions of rural issues despite a growing recognition in the last decade of the need to increase social capital “in order to restore and regenerate rural Australia” (Alston, 2002, p. 3). Other research revealed that Australian rural policy and programs are often misguided because “government funding practices encourage a service delivery system which is suited to addressing needs in an urban context” (Sacco, 1994, p. 100). Similarly, a recent literature review conducted by Canadian Montgomery (2003) found that there still exists a pervasive tendency towards a “rural-as-deficient perception” rather than a “rural-as-different point of view.” This tendency was also identified in the United States, where Martinez-Brawley (2000b, p. 116) found that in social work and education practices, “Ruralites were fighting a losing battle, where the cards were stacked against their unique points of view” (p. 116). As an example, during her interview, Jill (RM) said she is aware that she must “not be seen as too rural” (27) when she represents her constituents at regional and national levels. Through experience she has learned that “it is of critical importance to be as articulate as possible so that people at the urban levels

will not categorize you as a country hick” (22). The perpetuation of stereotypes can either diminish or idealize the actions of individuals or communities and this can threaten the formation of shared understandings between them.

Stereotypes can certainly inhibit shared understandings between rural and urban residents. Long-term residents and “smalltownites” may construct themselves in a positive light (Dempsey in McSwan & Barman-Jenssen, 1999, p. 48) while presenting negative stereotypes of newcomers and “city people.” Martinez-Brawley (2000a) describes the “fickle” affections that some people have for small communities, villages or towns, which act as a “source of felicity” for their private and public lives (p. 70). However, the “community-ness” of small or rural communities can also be a “source of unhappiness because they can be divisive, suffocating, and stultifying” (p. 71). In some situations, new arrivals to small towns feel ignored and “end up being resentful” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 134), because they experience being “‘newcomers’ for a long time” (p. 134). For example, during her interview, Sophia (RG) observed: “There are people on our island that are still feeling invisible or are invisible because they have come from cities” (16). Stereotypes can be detrimental to individuals and families because social capital breaks down as “differences in culture” arise between rural and urban residents or as neighbourhoods become increasingly diverse ethnically (Debertin, 2003, p. 7). For further discussion of rural stereotypes, see Baker et al., 1991; Nachtigal, 1982; Martinez-Brawley, 1994; and National Rural Workshop, 1998.

The social capital available to individuals and their communities can erode when there is a lack of common understanding between rural and urban perspectives. For example, recent research with farmwomen in Canada, New Zealand and Australia suggests that the continual “juxtaposition of urban values with long-established rural ones” (Teather, 1996, p. 6) have resulted in a growing sense of powerlessness, disorder, and a lack of understanding for rural dwellers. If rural social capital is to be enhanced it is important to support rural development initiatives that encourage common understandings and shared values.

### Rural Social Capital

It seems apparent from the data that aunties are significant contributors to the social development of many rural communities, and the connections between social capital and rural development are also well established in the rural literature I reviewed. In rural contexts, the ties between social and economic development are particularly

significant because “a decline in social capital could have profound negative consequences for... rural economic development” (Debertin, 2003, p. 3). In Australia, Cheers (1994) described the reciprocal nature of the relationship: “Ignoring social development often delays and raises the cost of economic development. Conversely, economic stagnation or decline has often seriously affected social cohesion and provision for human needs” (p. 276). Social and economic capital can be accumulated in communities where residents work together to share ideas and identify problems or solutions, and interactions like these increase the potential for employees and businesses to evaluate the community as desirable for development (Debertin, 2003, p. 1). On the other hand, high levels of social capital can discourage new businesses and residents because it can constrain growth and development by resisting change or new ideas.

In some small and rural communities, families or individual members may be constrained because they constantly interact with those they share close relationships and common understandings with. This can create a restrictive environment because it can lead to “high ritual density” (Fuchs & Case, 1989), which may result in resistance to new ideas or people, and can hinder growth. For instance, a series of workshops with rural Canadians identified that difference in visions and interests can create “conflict with new urban settlers” and this “clash” can inhibit community development (National Rural Workshop, 1998, p. 3). In many cases, rapid growth can alter the culture of small or rural communities, and this is not always desirable to long-term residents. This was certainly the case with Allison (RS), who increasing finds her neighbours are becoming

the bedroom-community “rural” people, that are just coming home:  
“Don’t bug me, don’t talk to me, do not ask me to get involved with the Community Hall, because I am just here to sleep and get away from the city.” (RS 5)

Conflicts can arise because urban newcomers to a small town often have different expectations of community involvement. They are not accustomed to the “close-knit neighborhood,” and, as a result, “feel less of a stake” in the community (Wuthnow, 1998, p. 139). Many residents of small towns “fear outsiders (particularly racial minorities)” and as a result, their views can be “narrow in scope and in spirit” and “decisions are often made that hurt town possibilities for renewal” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 137).

Rural social capital increases where people have shared understandings and work together to achieve common goals. However, high levels of social capital can also

constrain individuals, families, and communities in their development because of expectations for conformity, and this tension can lead to relationships of competition and conflict rather than of cooperation. The capacity to trust and cooperate directly impacts the social capital available to the community because the lack of trust can create misunderstandings, from which tensions may arise.

### Rural – Urban Tensions

I noted several incidents mentioned by the participants that clearly demonstrated tensions and misunderstandings between rural and urban perspectives, and these came from both Canadian and Australian sources. In Canada, Allison (RS) spoke of the frustration of seeing the rural district that she has lived in for 21 years becoming populated by urban people who hold different values. As a demonstration, she mentioned the demise of the traditional potluck supper a number of times:

I mean, wow, potluck dinners go way back and they are just the best way to socialize in a small community. I have been to potluck dinners out here where you never ever go hungry. Everybody knows what a potluck dinner is and there is plenty of food and warmth. (RS 11).

However, members of the Horse Club that Allison's children belong to arrived for a potluck at a district gathering to find that, "it was urban kids who wanted to have a horse... but they had none of that community spirit.... We never ate because nobody brought food but our club, and they devoured it" (11). Similarly, at a Karate Club potluck in town, she and her husband did all the dishes because "everybody ate and left a mess. I mean who is going to do the dishes? A potluck function is potluck to the end. Everybody pitches in" (34). Although she does not resent the situation, she feels it is a strong indicator of the changes in her community, and she is struggling with the fact that "It's just the way it's working out these days" (RS 34).

Pauline (CWA) told me that she resented the fact that rural issues of education and social development were still not being taken seriously by the Queensland or Australian governments. She related the difficulty she experienced during the 1960s and 1970s in securing support for women who were teaching isolated children in rural and remote settings because the urban decision-makers did not understand rural lifestyles. While in the city to lobby the Minister of Education for financial support for remote women to teach their children, she emphasized that rural and remote mothers had many expectations and hardships that distract from

their ability to focus on teaching their children. While in his office, she gave the example to the Minister that,

it was important to have a washing machine.... I went to the window, I said 'Would you say that there is any house out there without a washing machine?', and he [Minister] said 'No, I suppose not', and I said 'I can take you to homes all over the west where they've still got boilers and coppers and that type of thing'.... the copper was away from the house, so the mother had to be away from where the schoolroom is. (CWA 8)

Pauline did eventually secure the funding for the isolated children's fund and the minister made more of an effort to create shared understandings of rural lifestyles within his department. She explained that, after that particular conversation, the Ministry of Education "flew me down every year to talk to them and to conduct one or two sessions on life in the country and the special problems you will find [teaching on a station] as opposed to in a schoolroom" (CWA 9). Pauline fought to create a common understanding of the needs of rural families at the state and federal level and in doing so, she was able to increase the social capital of isolated children throughout Queensland.

#### Re-capping the Meaning of Rural

From the data and the literature, I concluded that "rural" could mean having shared history and common understandings amongst people who have experienced the rewards of living in geographically challenging situations. "Rural" is also a social construct that indicates safety, family and the presence of trusting, reciprocal relationships.

When urban and rural people come together to solve problems, great things can happen to increase common understanding of issues that are often very diverse. When relationships and networks are formed between individuals, organizations or service providers, there is an increased opportunity for social capital to flourish. Rural people and urban decision makers need opportunities for reciprocal exchanges of ideas in order to arrive at a common understanding of how living rurally impacts the physical and the social aspects of life. I suggest that opportunities to form relationships, to collaborate, and to create shared understandings be encouraged between rural and urban dwellers in order to counter the urban misconception that living rurally is a disadvantage.

The understanding of rural as a social as well as a geographical term is significant to the development of social capital because the social capital of small and

rural communities can be diminished in situations where rural is perceived as a deficit. The perception of disadvantage may inhibit the creation of shared understandings, reciprocity, and trust amongst community members, and this may erode the relationships that bind individuals and families together. It is therefore important for rural residents to understand and promote their communities as advantaged, so that community development professionals, social planners, researchers or policy makers can encounter an alternative discourse to “rural” as disadvantaged, alienated, and unsophisticated.

I submit that aunties are important contributors to the social capital of small and rural communities because they can offer an alternative to negative stereotypes of rural residents as disadvantaged and “parochial.” The women who participated in this study provided many examples of rural living as advantageous in physical as well as social contexts. From these examples, I suggest that aunties can help to create shared understandings at a grassroots level amongst rural residents, which can develop into strong relationships, supports, and reciprocal ties. Informal connections often develop between ordinary members of a community because they have overcome geographic isolation and in the process, fostered interdependence rather than alienation. When ordinary people get together, powerful initiatives can arise from the social warmth that is generated. I suggest that aunties are often the informal leaders who initiate grassroots activities and encourage individuals and families to participate in community events.

### **Re-conceptualizing the Meaning of Grassroots**

“Grassroots” is a term that seems to mean the ordinary, everyday people who initiate activities at an informal level and who often use local resources to carry out acts of unpaid social care. Grassroots people and initiatives are significant to rural communities because they can increase the social capital available by encouraging interactions in a shared social space, and this can increase the social warmth experienced by individuals and families. Professionals and “experts” who only recognize formal activities as important to social and economic development often overlook grassroots people and their initiatives as being significant contributors to social capital. It is, therefore, important for community developers, social planners and those involved in leadership development recognize grassroots leaders, individuals and initiatives as significant contributors to the social care that is carried out in small and rural contexts.

### Grassroots Means Everyday People

In a constructivist manner, I asked the participants in the study what the term “grassroots” meant to them. From the responses, themes of individuals or “everyday people” and activities such as “community initiatives” arose. “Grassroots” means the ordinary people to many participants, including Fiona (ICN) who said it means “the people and what they believe in” (ICN 18) and Mary (SM), who described grassroots people as “the ordinary, everyday strugglers” (25). Sophia (RG) stated that “grassroots is so important” because it means, “working with ordinary people and empowering ordinary people” (20). In the poem “Unsung Heroines” (p. 174), Sophia described grassroots women as being “gritty, down to earth, the real stuff” (12). Penny (RCB) likewise described grassroots people as, “back to the ground, to the dirt, to the earth” (10), and as “really real people” (14). For others, grassroots can mean the local people how those in a rural location view things (ICN), or it can mean the pioneers of the area (RS), or those who know the area and “have... the future of it at heart” (CWA 30).

There was a mixed response to the actual adoption of the term “grassroots,” where some women used it to describe themselves, while others did not. Bella (CTM) said that grassroots was one of her favourite words because it means community working together (9), and Mary likes the term because it is where the religious community has always been, alongside the “really ordinary, everyday people” (25). Pauline (CWA) also liked the term and exclaimed, “Well, I am a great grassroots person... because you are talking and learning from people” (30). On the contrary, Penny (RCB) sees the term as “a bit hackneyed” (11), and Fiona never liked the word grassroots because it refers to the elderly or “how the parents would view things” (18).

### Grassroots Means Community Initiatives

From the participant’s responses, I also identified that grassroots can mean an activity that arises from “community initiatives.” Bella (CTM) said it meant, “people getting an idea and coming to some solutions” (9). For Pauline (CWA), grassroots meant, “utilizing everybody’s initiative rather than just one or two” (36), and she emphasized that, “it is absolutely vital to go back to the grassroots because... they have been there. ... and you get a perspective of what they consider to be the best” (33). Jill (RM) also felt it was “incredibly important” to note the interests and abilities of the citizens and try to “achieve end results in common” (26). In summary, the respondents

indicated that “grassroots” can indicate the “everyday” individuals who are committed to working together to share understandings and create local solutions, and it can also describe the activities that arise from these initiatives.

The research literature I reviewed also indicated that “grassroots” could mean a community of like-minded people, an informal initiative, or an individual who is involved at a local level. Grassroots activities can encourage shared understanding and enhance social capital because they encourage individual and community empowerment and agency. For instance, a grassroots community can be one where members have both the freedom and space to initiate informal community movements and to act rather than “merely be acted upon” (Tetreault & Teske, 2000, p. 14). The Canadian government recently recognized the importance of grassroots initiatives to sustainable economic and community development, and committed to partnering with rural citizens and organizations in order to “make use of local knowledge, decision-making and management capabilities” (Government of Canada, 1998, p. 9). The inclusion of local knowledge is important to social development because community capacity can be increased in situations where citizens are free to participate in activities or decision-making and are able to contribute to local leadership or organizational efforts (The Aspen Institute, 1996). When locals interact with each other, social networks are formed that can become “key enablers” of social capital because they encourage norms of reciprocity as well as “innovation, mutual learning, and productivity growth” (Putnam, 2000, p. 325).

Social activities provide the opportunity for local people to meet and share common understanding and interests. Belenky et al. (1997) propose that communal activities are linked to increased community capacity because people who stage plays, concerts and festivals together gain a “clearer picture” of who they are as individuals and come to see their community “as a place of power rather than of powerlessness” (p. 291). Cox (1995) suggests, in Australia, that social capital is enhanced when citizens have access to “active public space” such as “free libraries, galleries, museums, sporting grounds and historic sites” (p. 78). Shared access to social space is important for social capital because individuals can “meet, communicate with others and assimilate” and once common ground has been established, they can “maintain basic connections... [and] create relationships” (Vivian & Sudweeks, 2003, p. 1432).

Grassroots initiatives can arise when ordinary people come together to work and learn with each other. Trusting relationships may develop, and these can encourage reciprocity, which can impact the formation of social capital in the community.

### Being Grassroots Make a Difference

Being “grassroots” differs from mainstream society in both subtle and obvious ways, so it can be misunderstood or overlooked as important. I asked the participants if grassroots activities differed from other community activities, and from their answers, I identified themes of “social warmth” and leadership styles. To begin with, Allison (RS) related that “grassroots activities are definitely stronger and they have that social warmth” (12). For example, she organized a country dance, and

all the old-timers came out... we packed the place .... it was wonderful, and they were reminiscing about... [when] their children slept in the loft... and wagons were tied up outside” (RS 13).

Similarly, Sophia (RG) said being part of a grassroots community makes a difference to her because “People know they can approach me any old time” (21), although she admits, “I have a bit of a hard time saying ‘no’... but, that’s okay... as long as it doesn’t make me miss the ferry!” (21). Most people who live in small communities know that social and physical boundaries can be difficult to set and that the norm of “friendly distance” can be difficult to maintain (Crow, Allen, & Summers, 2002, p. 135). In his studies, Gougeon (1997) found that in both small communities and families, “people seem to know what other people are doing” (p. 6) all the time because roles are complementary and membership in groups tends to overlap with each other. Grassroots individuals who are active citizens often find that their family roles overlap with their community roles. In many cases, women who are active in the social development of their families find themselves in positions of informal leadership in the community.

From the data, I gathered that grassroots leaders often take a leading role in the development of social and cultural activities within their families and communities, and that, somehow, being a grassroots leader was an experience that was uniquely different from formal leadership. However, I also found that many of the women who participated in this study did not refer to themselves as leaders despite the fact that others held them in this regard. For instance, Allison (RS) was reluctant to use the title of leader to describe herself, because:

I don’t like to think of myself as a leader, although I tend to come on as a leader.... I’m always the one that instigates things. I know that my

friends, people that I know well, always look to me for a leadership role.... So I know that they see me as a leader. And in other areas, I'm not even sure people know who I am. (RS 7 - 8)

On the contrary, both Penny (RCB) and Jill (RM) are active in their communities as grassroots leaders. Jill (RM) describes herself as a grassroots leader when she interacts with her constituents because she is someone who "takes a broader view of what the issue is, who is involved... and how it should be addressed" (27). She sees her role as important because many community members believe, "it really doesn't matter what we do or say, no one will listen or know about it" (31).

Some community members regard grassroots as having little significance to those in formal systems and institutions. The work of grassroots leaders is important because many rural residents look to local leaders to "champion" their interests to governments and institutions. For example, Penny (RCB) observed that:

Sometimes people don't have the confidence in these areas to stand up and say 'Look, this isn't what we want... we are not happy with this'.... So I think grassroots... are very important, because you really get back to... what people really feel, what their fears are, what their aspirations are. (11)

In many instances grassroots people look to other community members for leadership to build relationships with external agencies because they "lack the expertise necessary to maximize the benefits available through partnerships" (National Rural Workshop, 1998, p. i). Pauline (CWA) understood this clearly when sharing her perspective: "Leadership is so vital, and that is what we are lacking today.... Leadership leads grassroots and takes them with them" (CWA 34). Grassroots leaders are important because they can mediate the interactions between ordinary, everyday people and formal systems that support them. In doing so, grassroots leaders encourage the generation of social capital by developing trusting relationships and creating shared understandings between formal and informal ways of community organizing.

#### Grassroots Means Being Informal

Informal ways of organizing and interacting are important for the accumulation of social capital by individuals and communities. From the data comes the example of Mary (SM), who explained that, when she and other Sisters of Mercy took a house in the village,

I went into every shop and introduced myself, into that little shopping centre, and people said "She thinks me serving behind the bread shop is

worth saying hello to” and not only do I think they are worth saying hello to... they are life for me. So I can walk into any shop down there and be greeted by name. (SM 19)

Social capital accumulates when individuals have the opportunity to have interactions in “families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, local associations and a range of informal and formal meeting places” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Nov. 2000). In fact, positive relationships within the wider community often develop when there are opportunities for “social contacts outside the immediate family” to develop (Cox, 1995, p. 72). A climate of trust and mutuality is essential for social capital to develop, and both formal and informal structures must exist for this to happen (p. 72).

Both formal and informal activities are important for the accumulation of social capital, however, it is often difficult to set a clear boundary between them. One distinction could be made between formal organizations that have names and official titles and mandates, and informal, unofficial gatherings of citizens to solve problems, celebrate occasions, or enjoy each other’s company socially (McKnight, 1995, p. 118). Cox (1995) describes the formal and informal links that bind us as having “various depths and intensities with multiple communities,” which come together to form “the web that is society” (p. 30). Some of these links can be readily identified and measured because they “come to light” in formal meetings and activities, while others remain “part of the undergrowth” such as in car pools and friendships (Cox, 1995, p. 30).

Recently, researchers have shown that not all citizen activity is conducted in formal settings and some inquiries have attempted to quantify informal activities. For example, in America, 80 % of all community groups could be described as social “dark matter” because they have no formal structure or record-keeping, and are therefore “invisible to conventional chroniclers” (Putnam, 2000, p. 416). Similarly, in Canada, it is estimated that 75% of women over 15 years of age take part in informal volunteer activities that take place outside of the home (2001, p. 1). Women tend to form informal networks that include more “kin” when compared to males, and this may be because of women’s general “lack of participation in formal work organizations” (World Bank Group, Oct. 2002).

Informal voluntary activities that breach the divide between the home and larger society are important to community survival because they create connections between citizens and encourage them to face challenges and form solutions together. For instance, those individuals who share common interests and activities are more apt to

come together to solve common problems (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 6) and this can increase a community's capacity for survival. Similarly, those communities that have high levels of social capital are more likely to "realize common values" (Sampson, 2001, p. 9), which can increase trust and reciprocity. Robust societies arise when multiple links are created because they encourage individuals to "recognize our commonalities in the diversity of humanity" and this breeds confidence and trust, which enables citizens to "work together to create social capital" (Cox, 1995, p. 30).

An example from the data can be provided by Jill, the Rainforest Mayor, when she explained that her formal and informal roles in the community are "interlinked":

Being social is what makes you known, and helps achieve the other. And then having gained a formal part enables you to contribute more effectively to that social and cultural network. (RM 7)

Jill gained different perspectives from these networks; for instance, on occasion she would chat with a "regular" patron down at the pub: "He couldn't give a stuff whether I was mayor.... It can work that way too because... he had an awareness of different issues and not just what was on the TV" (RM 23). Those who are not aware of the importance of informal networks to the daily life of small and rural communities may overlook their potential to enhance social capital.

#### Informal Networks Enhance Social Capital

Community development workers and scholars in related disciplines vastly underestimate the value of informal networks in the social development of struggling communities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 6). Most community builders fail to recognize the depth, extent and significance of informal associations that exist for "religious, cultural, athletic, recreational and other purposes" (1993, p. 6). Recognition of informal networks is particularly important when working with those who live on the margins of society, because they tend to "participate most in informal social exchanges" (Baum, Palmer, Modra, Murray, & Bush, 2000, p. 268). It is equally important for professionals in social development to "recognize the value of sporadic, spontaneous, informal social contact" (p. 268), because opportunities for such interaction may "lead to a more trusting, integrated and tolerant society" (p. 269).

Those who share interests and activities with others around them can contribute to the social capital of their communities by encouraging spontaneous civic participation and social interactions. Cheers (1994) proposes that help for one another

can arise out of the natural processes of “spontaneous caring efforts” and “helping interactions” (Cheers, 1994, p. 278) that exist within a small community. Other researchers suggest “Festivals, Little League baseball games... neighbourhood parties and potluck dinners” (Mathews, 1996, p. 8) are important to the foundation of civil infrastructure because “citizens must be able to find others who have similar or related interests” (p. 11). Similarly, fairs and celebrations can be “critical to young participants’ experiences of learning and belonging” because these events reach back “to sustain activities that have been central to local lifeways” at the same time that they reach forward to “stretch participants’ horizons” (Porter, 1995). It is apparent that spontaneous and informal acts are important for creating shared understandings between community members of all ages; however, these often take place in ways that seem invisible to community researchers and developers.

#### Informal Means Being Invisible

Much of the social care that happens at an informal level among families, friends and neighbours is assumed to be of little importance by professionals and elites in the formal system and this is threatening the language and culture of small and rural communities. Some of the difficulty experienced in recognizing how informal contributions help build social capital is related to defining what is and is not civic activity. Being a good neighbour differs from being a volunteer, for instance, because a volunteer usually serves through a community organization or in a civic activity (Wuthnow, 1998, p. 51), while a neighbour may help to look for a lost pet or fix a flat tire (p. 56). Some researchers argue that informal gestures do not constitute civic activity; however, others challenge their claims by questioning, “How can we argue that a hospice volunteer caring for a neighbour is engaged in civic activity, while a woman caring for her elderly aunt is not?” (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 674).

Those who measure only formal volunteer activities are not assessing the true value of a community’s social capital, Putnam says (Putnam, 2000, p. 49), because they are failing to account for the vitality of informal interactions taking place at the grassroots level (p. 48). He warns that tracking memberships alone is bound to result in investigators missing “massive change or massive stability” because they do not see the activity that takes place at the informal level (p. 416) and fail to arrive at a shared understanding of its value. Canadian researcher Noziak (1992) suggests that “volunteer-based initiatives” and community projects are a “well kept secret” because

they fail to make the front or even the back page news (p. 9). Regardless, they are valuable in activities to the community, and “quietly, invisibly, they are making their statement, transforming our communities from the inside-out” (1992, p. 9).

Invisibility is becoming a threat to the autonomy of citizens and communities because it perpetuates the myth that only elites “do” formal volunteering. In an increasingly busy world, average people are so highly structured in their day that there is no room left for formal or informal citizen participation (London, 2001, p. 4). Participation thus becomes the realm of the elite’s, who have the luxury of scheduling time to volunteer. This is dangerous to democracy and free speech because elites then have the potential to control the dynamics and language of public life (2001, p. 4).

### The Language of Informal Caring

If elites have the opportunity to dominate and formalize the public life, then the informal culture and language of the average citizen will be lost to a corporate culture and a language of expertise. Unfortunately, social care tends to be dominated by the structures and language of the formal sector, and this language is likely to exclude social care as an expression of human community (Cheers, 1999, p. 258). The exclusion of informal caring has dire consequences for community culture because the professionalising of language often results in the construction of formal, expert knowledge and the fracturing of informal, local knowledge (London, 2001, p. 3).

McKnight (1995) also sees that traditional caring patterns have been disrupted by the proliferation of formal systems. As a result, communities are struggling because they are often inundated with services, agencies, and systems, all aimed at fixing what is wrong with the place and the people who live there (McKnight & Cayley, Jan. 1994, p. 5). He warns that if communities become “disabled” by systems that propagate a perception of need and deficiency, then communities risk losing access to individual capacities, skills, or gifts, and to the “power of wise citizenship” (McKnight, 1995, p. 76). Consequently, experts from outside of the community presume to identify the problem and to decide what the solution is (p. 51), and in doing so, they tend to code the problem in a language that is incomprehensible to the average person (p. 49). An example of this arose in the interview with Mary (SM), who expressed concern that the formal church was becoming incomprehensible to the average parishioner.

The church, as an official thing, in some cases has got very much away from the grassroots people, the ordinary, everyday strugglers. I think if

you look around the church, they are not there. They are strict Catholics... but the church hasn't touched them. Because I think the grassroots people are somewhere else, they are not in that big organization stuff. (SM 25)

The importance of informal networks and patterns of caring to grassroots people has been lost in many institutional contexts. Informal ways and language may indeed create new understandings for professionals and academics; however, many may in fact be “blind and deaf to the rich, varied and intricate cultural mosaic that characterizes daily life in the small community” (Martinez-Brawley, 2000a, p. 215). It is important for grassroots people and those formal organizations who work with them to develop common understandings of the value of informal networks to building trusting and caring social relationships.

### Social Caring

Increased opportunities for informal interaction can build trust, enhance social capital, and strengthen social caring networks amongst community members. Social care, in this context, means trying to meet the “social, emotional, and material needs” of others, and includes natural support, or “the help we give each other as we go through life” (Cheers, 2004, p. 3). Informal connections are particularly evident in rural and remote communities, where it was found that “familiarity with neighbours was higher... and was directly related to higher levels of trust in local people” (Hughes, Bellamy, & Black, 2000, p. 237). In rural communities, both informal and formal care arrangements contribute to the development of social care, as well as to “social planning, community development and participation” (Cheers, 2004, p. 24).

Caring of a social nature happens primarily in extended family and friendship circles, although neighbourhoods can provide spaces for informal interactions to occur and for people to form common belief systems and goals (Berlin, 1997, p. 43). Likewise, the presence of informal, public meeting places like sidewalk cafes or benches in parks makes it easier for “a community of diversity to form” (p. 43). A caring community can develop around a shared social place if it is used by families, friends and neighbours (McKnight, 1995, p. 164). Friends and neighbours can form interlocking, intergenerational networks, which carry with them an “extensive” set of expectations and obligations that help to “facilitate the informal social control and support of children” (Sampson, 2001, p. 9).

## Devolution of Social Care to Community Care

The reduction of government services and devolution of professional care occurring in many Western societies is problematic for women in particular, because they are likely to fill the gaps in service at the community level, regardless of their pre-existing workloads. Since the 1990s, the adoption of business-like approaches to the provision of care has resulted in many service cutbacks, and in the United States of America this has “generally meant to reduce staff and cut access to care” (Martinez-Brawley, 2003, p. 4). Likewise, in Canada, citizens, family members, volunteers, and voluntary organizations are being expected to “take up the slack” when governments are increasingly “drawing back from their previous responsibilities” (Park, 1996, p. 39); (Cote et al., 1998, p. 4). In Australia, Cox (1995) warns that this trend towards devolution of services and decline of government as a “provider of last resort” is dangerous to civil society, in part because

A smaller government puts at risk all those areas of concern which do not lend themselves to market solutions. There has never been much business interest in providing help or services to those who have little ability to pay, or in protecting those who cannot afford to buy their own safety. (Cox, 1995, p. 49)

Social science literature provides much evidence that when responsibility for social welfare shifts away from formal structures, tension increases in the home and the community.

The recent trends in the reduction of government imply that “undetermined human resources” are available to take on the burden of care. The decision to cut services is often based on the assumption that there are plenty of women volunteers “sitting around with time on their hands” (Waring, 1999, p. xxxvii). To Waring (1999), it seemed that the devolution of care to the “community” inevitably means an increase in “menial, boring, low-status and unpaid invisible work” for women (p. xxxix). This can only serve to increase the pressure for many women who take on extra roles and responsibilities in the community while they continue to balance the demands of home and job (Husbands, McKechnie, & Gagnon, 2001, p. 9).

Across the Western world, social and economic systems are showing their inability to meet the growing demand of human needs at the same time that families are increasingly fractured and are proving to be “utterly incapable of meeting the demands of social care” (Ife, 1995, p. 11). The reciprocal social contract that exists between the community and the individual in an ideal community is far from the reality that many

families are experiencing. Instead, the social contract has broken down and “individual needs are not being met... people are not being given protection, security or opportunities to improve their lives” (Nozick, 1992, p. 141). The impact of the loss of common knowledge and local expertise was recognized 30 years ago, when Illich lamented that:

The exclusion of mothers, aunts, and other non-professionals from the care of their pregnant, abnormal, hurt, sick or dying relatives and friends has resulted in new demands for medical services. (Illich, 1973, p. 3)

As the government became more socially active and the demand for professional services rose, the capacity of the community to take responsibility for social care has been diminished. Much of the common knowledge, practices, and language of non-professionals has been replaced by the expertise of professional caregivers.

### The Language of Social Care

The devolution of responsibility for social care from government services to community-based and voluntary services has shifted the language of care and diminished grassroots peoples’ capacity to respond to these changes. For example, in the last few decades, social welfare programs have been cut many times in British Columbia, and the much of the responsibility for the well-being of society has been assumed by “the private sector, the community and family” (Clague, 1997, p. 100). As a result, “the language of community” has come to mean different things to community members, those in the development field, and those in government (p. 100), and unfortunately, the “language of the market” has come to dominate.

An example arises from a Canadian study, which found that a “sea of change” had occurred in organizational, funding and service ideologies since devolution had taken place (Matthews & Burnley, 2005). Along with the responsibility to provide care came the expectation that community organizations reflect “a business model of free enterprise and competition” (Matthews & Burnley, 2004, p. 3). In order to do this, grassroots organizations must adopt a new language, which often “replaces ‘service plans’ with ‘business plans’, and ‘communication processes’ with ‘marketing strategies’” (p. 3). However, some individuals, organizations, and communities are meeting the challenge by creating innovative responses to social and structural changes.

### Devolution May Mean Innovation

There is growing evidence that a shift away from government provision of social care and towards community provision has some potential benefits for individual members and may increase the social capital available to the community as a whole. Cheers (1998) suggests that the devolution of welfare services may open up the possibility for non-government organizations in rural communities to develop innovative programs and services. To begin with, individuals may benefit from social services that are more community-based because services could be “designed and provided by... local community members” rather than by external experts (Ife, 1995, p. 121). Rather than trying to achieve an “anonymous central uniformity,” services delivered at a local level could value “personal experience... local knowledge, understanding and wisdom” (p. 121). The community may also gain from community-based human services because these could encourage community members to be responsible for the identification, planning, delivery and evaluation of services (Ife, 1995, p. 121). Finally, others argue that if unpaid care work was regarded as civic activity, then supporting and redistributing responsibility for social care might “actually improve civil society and consequently... civic engagement... particularly for marginalized groups of citizens” (Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 677). As a matter of fact, informal exchanges among neighbours, friends and extended family members can involve such “a dizzying degree of reciprocity” (p. 675) that civic engagement scholars have included “family care” in their definition of civic life (p. 676). However, discussions of community and rural development do not always recognize informal or spontaneous actions as civic activity.

Individuals who engage in unpaid care giving can increase the social capital of their community by fostering a shared understanding of the importance of taking responsibility for each other. An increased appreciation for informal social care may result in services that exceed those that a professional may offer. Pauline (CWA) witnessed a decline in the quality of social care when the voluntary Blue Nurses program was professionalized:

Community care is very good, but it is paid, it is regimented. The other was from the heart.... The women gave over and above, because volunteers do, over and above the line of duty. (16).

Women who provide social care on a voluntary basis are significant contributors to the grassroots development of their families and communities, in

part because they can provide a quality of care that may surpass professional services.

### Re-capping the Meaning of Grassroots

It is important for professional care providers to appreciate the significance of informal care despite the fact that it is generally taken-for-granted by the grassroots people who provide and receive it. If local caregivers and professionals can arrive at a shared understanding of the importance of both informal and formal services, then perhaps they will be better prepared to respond to shifting expectations of their roles in the community. If local community members and families can understand the importance of their contributions, they may be able to cope with the added stress and tension that arise when service provision fluctuates. In addition, non-profit organizations, community developers and educators who arrive at an alternative understanding of the value of unpaid work, may be able to support unpaid caregivers in more appropriate ways, such as by enhancing community understanding, practices, and skills.

I understand that aunties may be important providers of informal social care in many small and rural communities because they offer an alternative understanding of the competence that can reside in grassroots members of the community. In times of social service devolution, aunties may ease the tension because they help create shared understandings and reciprocal caring between various family and community members. In this way, aunties can help to perpetuate the tradition of unpaid, informal caring for individuals and families, and this can enhance the confidence and capacity of the community to meet its own social caring needs in times of service fluctuations.

### Re-capping How Aunties Create Shared Understandings

Aunties enhance the social capital of small and rural communities by creating shared understandings of the ways that grassroots people actively participate in the social care and development of their communities. Grassroots people who share common experiences and informal networks have a greater chance of developing trusting or reciprocal relationships, and this strengthens their capacity to meet the challenges of living in geographically challenging situations. To the participants in this study, the meaning of “community” included having common understandings with others who share the same physical and social space, and having safety and trust within

the community because everyone knows and watches out for each other. However, high levels of internal trust and familiarity may constrain the privacy, freedom, or development of individuals and families by fostering distrust of those who are new or different.

It is important for urban professionals to create shared understandings among rural and urban dwellers during the community development process. When local people have the opportunity to participate in the development process, common goals, shared understandings, and reciprocal relationships can evolve. Residents of rural or remote communities tend to form reciprocal relationships based on trust, interdependence, and informal networks; however, when locals are excluded from the formal development system, misunderstandings and distrust can develop. Those who live in urban contexts often misunderstand the choices made by grassroots people who live in rural settings because they construct their social worlds in such different ways. These misunderstandings can lead to the construction of constraining stereotypes, which can inhibit the formation of trust and reciprocity amongst rural and urban dwellers. A decrease in trust can diminish the potential for an inclusive community development process and can inhibit a shared understanding of what is important to the community.

Distrust and fear of the community development process can be countered if those professionals involved understand the importance of taking time to develop trusting relationships within the community. Residents of the community will be more inclined to identify common goals, challenges and solutions if a reciprocal process has been developed. If the process is a “top down” one, or is driven by economic concerns, then there is a risk that residents will be misunderstood or treated as clients, and as a result, locals will not be willing participants in the process.

Aunties can foster participation by local residents in community development initiatives because aunties broach the divide between private and public interests. Community development professionals, educators, and policy makers must understand the importance of informal networks in small or rural communities in order to create a context-appropriate development process. Urban social and health care providers must also gain an understanding of grassroots people and initiatives to successfully work with community members who may be ill prepared to assume responsibility for devolved government services. Unfortunately, grassroots people are often invisible to urban professionals and are not included in the dominant discourse of community development or social care. It is important to reclaim the informal language and

practices of grassroots people so that those involved in formal development or care processes can begin to see, appreciate, and foster local knowledge and informal ways of interacting.

The findings of this study indicate that aunties are important contributors to social capital because they provide an alternative to the perception that grassroots people and families are passive recipients of social care and community development. Aunties create networks of relationships that enhance the development of trust and reciprocity and create shared understandings of the competency, expertise and strength of community members. Aunties also respond to changes in social, political, or economic priorities by resisting discourses and practices that diminish rural community capacities, and by persisting in leading or supporting informal, grassroots initiatives. The ways in which each respondent resisted a diminishing discourse will be explored in the next section, which integrates the response-based theories of Wade et al. (1999) into the interpretation of how aunties actually achieve what they do.

## **Part Four: How Aunties Resist, Persist, and Create Alternatives**

### **Equestrians Shattering Stereotypes**

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**Courtesy of Cowichan Valley Therapeutic Riding Association**

## **This is a Field**

Now, you live in a barrio  
or a village,  
but at night  
everybody meets in small groups  
out in the street  
- there's no hall -  
and the women are learning to read.

And what do they read?

They don't go "A cat sat on a mat."

They say, "This is a field.

Who owns this field?

Why is the boss taking the money  
from my field?"

You see.

And then they say,

"What's this?

I planted that

and he is getting the money!"

And the next lesson  
would be Chapter 2.

(31)

**Mary**

**Sister of Mercy**

## **Aunties Resist, Persist, and Create Alternatives**

I wanted to explore the actions of aunties from a theoretical perspective that was response-based, rather than from a “cause and effect” perspective. I sought to understand how individual aunties responded to their lived experiences, to find evidence of everyday, “small acts of resistance” (Wade, 1999), and to illuminate their persistence and capacity to create alternative choices. Evidence arose from the interviews and photographs I collected, which was complimented by examples from local and national media.

For instance, I collected photographic evidence of women in both Canada and Australia who were actively resisting the production of genetically modified food (see p. 70 and p. 224). These women could be described as “resist-aunts” because they are insisting on socially-responsible food production and marketing, despite the construction of genetically modified products as a well-understood and safe alternative.

In another example, the photograph on p. 266 shows members of the Cowichan Therapeutic Riding Association (CTRA) actively resisting the discourse of “disability” and challenging the social construction of physical or mental challenges as barriers. The supporters and participants who are active in the CTRA program challenge the notion that difference is a deficit by participating in everyday acts such as going for an autumn trail ride. I suggest that aunties could be among the women who provide opportunities for “differently-abled” individuals to meet the challenges in their lives, to develop new abilities, and to experience mobility through the movements of a horse.

Many of the participants in the interviews spoke of creating alternatives to diminishing discourses and of working on the edges of mainstream society. For instance, Sophia (RG) has persisted in defending social justice. When she spoke out against those in the community who feared poor people (11), she stated, “I don’t count any sexism and racism stuff or ageism stuff. I don’t, you know. So if somebody tries that, I just speak up right away” (6). Jill (RM) described how her alternative ideas were regarded as suspicious by many of her rural constituents because “I speak differently, I’ve got different views, I’ve got different education, I’ve got a different mix of friends” (23), and similarly, she said that at the state level, “I am regarded by a lot of people as different” (26).

Mary (SM) explained that the Sisters of Mercy have always worked on the edges of mainstream society: “It is not our vocation to be right in the middle, our vocation is

out on the edge, and keep moving” (12). Since their inception, the Sisters of Mercy have created alternative choices for those living on the edge, and from the outset, conservative people in parishes considered that “The nuns have gone crazy” (12). The Sisters of Mercy have a reputation for persisting in their actions despite opposition:

“It’s always been... inbuilt into the back of our brains, and it goes something like, ‘Oh, you don’t approve? Tch, tch, tch’ as you do it” (SM 13).

Working on the edge of society is not always easy to do, and Mary (SM) reflected on the challenges she has met: “My life has been a fair struggle, health-wise, study-wise, understanding-wise, lots of wises” (18). Penny (RCB) also struggled, particularly not being thanked for her efforts. However, she has not pulled out of her commitments because,

I guess over the years... you become a little bit more cynical, a little bit hardened.... [and] look at the big picture.... You can have confidence in yourself without being obnoxious, I think (7).

Pauline (CWA) also struggled with the government overtaking the to the Blue Care voluntary nursing program, and in the end, decided to withdraw from her commitments to the program:

I just lost interest because it is wrong .... The women gave over and above, because volunteers do, over and above the line of duty, and they were providing a wonderful care in rural areas. Tremendous.... and it has all gone because they are making it into a bureaucracy, and it’s sad. (CWA 16)

Simone (RL) also decided to pull out of the formal economic system in order to market her menstrual products. She chose to take her work underground because she had “met resistance from the system every step of the way” and she decided “That is not a path I’m going to allow my self-esteem to even let me wander down” (20). Apparently, some women respond to difficulties by sticking to their grounds, speaking their minds, or becoming cynical, while for others, the option of withdrawing or creating other opportunities is far more attractive.

I was also interested in how the women persisted despite the challenges they faced, so I asked the participants to recall a time when they nearly pulled out of an event and to describe how they resisted doing so. Some women said they remembered why it was that they started the project, or that they couldn’t see their projects die (ICN, RS). Others said that they persisted by creating alternatives, for example, by engaging in skill development (RCB, RL). Several women said the they had actually pulled out of

certain projects because they didn't like the way that things were developing (CWA), or because they felt that their voices were not being heard (RG, CTM) and their work not being valued (RCB, FN, RL).

Women who do persist in fulfilling their commitments are often at risk of burning out, so I asked the participants how they resisted overextending themselves. Some women mentioned aspects of looking out for themselves, such as going by their everyday needs (ICN), or by working quietly in the background (CWA, RG). Others spoke of their spirituality (CWA, SM) or of having fun (RG, RCB) as sources to keep them going. Several mentioned that it was a matter of how they managed their choices (RM), such as by reassessing (RCB, RS), regrouping (CWA), or realigning their efforts (RG, ICN), while others talked about knowing when to walk away (CWA, RCB, RG, RL, RM). At the same time, a few women spoke of not managing well (RCB) or of suffering from burnout (RS, CTM). Clearly, not all aunties have an easy time doing their community service work, and many develop a range strategies to cope with the constraints they encounter.

The "Resist-aunt" stories that follow feature each interview respondent and illuminate how that particular woman actively resisted, persisted, and created alternatives to diminishing discourses that they encountered in mainstream society.

## Canadian Resist-aunts

### Allison is a Resist-aunt

Allison is a Rural School mom (RS) who said that the activities of her family came first in her life because, “All in all, my heart runs with my family” (14). She contributes to the social capital of their rural district by creating a shared understanding of the importance of children’s arts, cultural, and sporting activities. Allison is a resist-aunt because she actively resisted the idea that children’s dance and music were not important to the community when she created an alternative format for the annual children’s “Talent Festival”. She explained that she was frustrated with the Festival because “They handed out little awards for the cutest smile, cutest wiggle. Yes, you know, like ditsy kind of stuff” (22), and she would say to her family, “This has so much potential... There is so much more that can happen here” (23). Allison eventually went to the committee and said, “Is there any way that we can turn this around, so kids are not being awarded for cute costumes when they should be recognized for their talent?” (23). Allison joined the committee and quickly became chairperson, which she said happened because of “The ‘S’ that’s planted on my forehead. The ‘S’ for sucker” (8). She was also motivated to join because “It just made sense to me that it needed to be changed and something needed to be done, so I did it.” (23).

Allison persisted in supporting the children’s Talent Festival despite the fact that she struggled with wanting to resign from the committee several times. When I asked her how she resisted pulling out, she explained: “My gut. My heart. I could not see all of the work and the accomplishments that we had made so far, just going down the tubes.... I couldn’t see it just die. So I went back at it” (27). Allison eventually did resign from the committee, although she remains committed to the Festival: “If A called me tomorrow and said she needed help, I would help her. But I’m not going to tell her that!” (27).

Allison is a resist-aunt because she resists the trivializing of children’s arts and cultural activities and persists in creating an alternative to the discourse of children’s musical and dance as “ditsy kind of stuff” (22). Her actions contribute to the social capital of the community by creating shared understandings of the value of children’s cultural activities and by building relationships and connections between the Festival committee, the Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, and families in the community.

Allison advocates for children's artistic activities and conducts "small acts of resistance" such as completely reorganizing the Talent Festival and setting up a manual so others could follow "step by step" (see poem "Complete" p. 23).

### Fiona is a Resist-aunt

Fiona is an Indigenous Community Nurse (ICN) who actively promotes the social and physical health of her family and other "band" and tribal members on several indigenous "reserves" and communities. Fiona enhances the social capital of families and communities by building relationships and networks and by maintaining those connections. She played the role of a resist-aunt when she developed an alternative health system in her remote district. As a hospital nurse, she found there was no time to develop relationships with the patients or to teach them how to care for their own health. When she saw the same children and elders repeatedly admitted for treatment, she asked, "What's going on in the community? What are they doing? Right! Why isn't someone teaching something?" (3). In response, Fiona collaboratively developed a Health Plan, Health Goals and a Health Team on each reserve, based on models that she and the board observed in other indigenous communities (6).

Fiona persisted in promoting the social and physical health of the community by keeping in touch and spending time with her large, extended family. She explained that organizing "activities and events" is an important part of her health promotion work (17) because she is "Not just doing it for the family, I'm doing it because I want other family members and their children to see it, to witness it, so they want to support it too." (23). Fiona found that building networks and connections was frustrating at times and she struggled to be accepted by some families, while others resisted working together because of family rivalries (10).

When I asked Fiona how she has achieved what she has, she replied, "What I've done with my family I do with my friends; I don't loose touch. I keep in touch" (6). Fiona persisted in maintaining her relationships within the community and with other bands around the province because she didn't want to loose "that communication, or the networking, or the support" (14). Fiona's experiences have taught her, "If I want to get something, I have to go get it. But I also know, I remember, you don't start something without finishing it" (17). In summary, Fiona is a resist-aunt because she refuses to be satisfied with the inadequacies of the mainstream medical system, and in response, she created an alternative health system. She increases her community's capacity by

building and maintaining relationships among family or community members and health care or education providers. Fiona challenges inadequate health care and education by performing small acts of resistance such as holding birthday parties for the elders or pizza nights for the youth.

### Simone is a Resist-aunt

Simone is a Re-sourceress at Large (RL) who builds the social capital of her community by creating alternatives to the discourse of scarcity. She is a resist-aunt because she refused to let her alternative ideas about menstrual education be diminished by mainstream institutions, and she responded by going “underground” with her products. Simone also created an alternative discourse to being “just another welfare mother” by valuing the role and seeing its advantages. For instance, she resisted the notion that scarcity is debilitating because she understands that “it makes me free to do exactly what the heck I want” (7). She explained to me that “Being poor helps me because if I had the distractions of vast income... I wouldn’t be tapping in to so many other invisible people, that is, poor women, who are also like-minded” (16). Simone created a common understanding among other women that there are alternative ways of using their resources (16) by encouraging them to see that “You are not poor. You are financially challenged, but your lives are rich” (16).

Simone knows what it is like to be financially challenged and has learned to maintain a rich and successful life despite it. For instance, Simone has struggled to get financial support to set up a collective to produce cloth menstrual pads, and she explained, “I’ve met resistance every step of the way. People refusing to take me seriously” (20). When she approached banks and community development agencies, she found “because I wasn’t able to fit on their forms and follow their protocol, I was basically de-valued” (21). Simone responded by going back to promoting menstrual health at markets and festivals because “that kind of life has been underground, and I like that” (5). Being rejected by the formal system did not defeat Simone because she had experienced alternative discourses at the Clayoquot Sound peace camp, when she was sought out as a Moon Woman and was treated with respect. These were valuable experiences for Simone because “I learned then that I do have a valid role in society. So having some suit tell me that I’m not credible didn’t mean a hill of beans to me” (21).

Simone has actively resisted being devalued by people in formal institutions and has responded by taking her menstrual business underground. When I asked how she

persisted despite the challenges, she said, “I don’t know - the fact that I’m stubborn and headstrong. Tenacious” (16). Simone persisted in creating alternative understandings about women’s menstrual experiences and in showing other women how to counter the discourse of poverty. In the poem “Resourceress at Large” (p. 27), Simone uses her creativity and the resources hand to engage in small acts of resistance such as maintaining her dignity while surviving on a “poverty kick-start diet.”

### Bella is a Resist-aunt

Another resist-aunt is Bella, a Cyber-Tribal Mother (CTM) who actively resists the traditional discourse of birth family as safe by creating an alternative family of her own. Bella’s early life was a struggle because her mother would “wail the crap out of me” (9), and she recalled that “I didn’t have an ice cubes’ hope in hell because I had everything against me. I am so tempered by my childhood” (13). Bella responded to her childhood experiences by rejecting most of her blood-related family (14) and creating an alternative “tribe” of her own. In doing so, she contributes to the social capital of her community by building relationships and connections in both physical and cyber space.

Bella responded to her unsafe family by seeking and creating alternative relationships with safe individuals and families. She credits her survival to other women who taught her alternative ways of relating and being in the world. In particular, she was encouraged by one auntie in her family who offered an alternative discourse to the messages of worthlessness she was receiving at home (14). In later life, several counselors were pivotal in her life as she was “going through the hardest parts of my path. They taught me. They planted seeds in me of an alternate dialogue that I had never considered before, and I was just amazed” (14).

Since having her own children, Bella has persisted in forming a “tribe” of her own, including using the Internet as a communication tool. Computer-mediated networks provide new opportunities for her to establish an alternative “family” because “Cyber is just an extension of the tribes” (12). She resists the notion that virtual relationships are not significant and she explained that, “I see how useful I can be, in the global sense, on the web” (5). In the process, she helps other families to create alternatives for themselves by teaching that “They can find the tools to empower themselves on the Internet. It transcends any of the options that we used to have as women living in poverty, raising children, and trying to have some joy in our lives”

(12). Throughout her life, Bella has built relationships and formed networks with like-minded people in order to create an alternative “tribe” to her blood-related family. She is a resist-aunt because she has resisted the social construction of “family” as a safe haven and she persisted in creating safe and caring networks that transcend physical boundaries into cyber-space. Thus, Bella participates each night in small acts of resistance by simply logging onto her computer and creating her own support network of like-minded people from around the globe.

### Sophia is a Resist-aunt

Sophia persists in creating shared understandings amongst community members despite the struggles that she sometimes experiences. As a Raging Granny (RG), Sophia contributes to the social capital of her community by creating shared understandings on issues of social justice. For example, she is a resist-aunt because she opposed the social construction of individuals experiencing poverty as social deviants. In her island community, Sophia challenged the fear associated with “poor people” who make use of the Food Share (food bank) program, because as she explained: “A lot of people in our community are afraid of poor people” (11). She provided an alternative to the dominant perception that people are poor “because they’re drinking or they’re on drugs... That’s not the perception I have at all. I like these people.... Some of them have mental problems, and physical problems, but there is not a lot of jobs around these days, you know, and people are trying really hard” (8).

Sophia also worked to create alternatives for people experiencing poverty when she defended the Food Share program from being shut down. She explained that a new board of directors was assessing the Food Share program and they said to the community volunteers, “Your committee is no more. You are out” (8). Sophia said she “felt terrible” and decided to persist in her efforts to support financially-challenged people on the island. During that summer she “started taking soup around and lunch around to a couple of beach places and getting people to have food” (7). However, this proved to be difficult and she went back to the Food Share program because, as a volunteer, “They could not tell me not to” (7). As autumn set in, Sophia found that “less and less people came” and eventually she rebelled and insisted, “I’m making soup, damn it!” (7) Her persistence paid off, eventually the board was replaced, and “We got the thing back again” (8). She summed up her experiences by saying, “I’m proud of my

work in there and I'm really glad that I stuck it out through hard times.... I kept a sense of joy through what I was doing, through all that struggle" (8).

Sophia is a resist-aunt because she would not let the Food Share program be constrained by the new Board. In addition, she continued to resist the notion that "poor people" are deficient and to create a shared understanding that all community members deserve to be treated respectfully, regardless of their financial situation. Sophia was able to oppose the closure of the Food Bank by performing small acts of resistance such as taking sandwiches and soup to the local beaches.

### Raging Grannies are Resist-aunts

Members of the "Raging Grannies" movement (p. 122) could be considered resist-aunts because they actively counter the dominant discourses of economics, greed and war. Individual members of the sixty or more Raging Grannies troupes around the world help to build the social capital of their communities by creating alternative understandings about social justice. Raging Grannies could be considered "resist-aunts" because they respond with non-violent resistance when others threaten the health or safety of their families and communities. For example, a large protest rally in Ottawa starting to get unruly and the Raging Grannies offered an alternative discourse by singing. The response to the Grannies was that "we helped to calm down that anger.... They forgot that they were yelling.... We made it focused" (9) (see poem "Not a Bunch of Yahoos", p. 123). Grannies can create alternatives and shared understanding by "using a little humour, and it's not preaching.... We can get those ideas over by... singing them in a satirical way" (3). Raging Grannies also create alternatives by "making people wake up a little bit. And not making them feel uncomfortable but making them feel uncomfortable! Enough that they want to do something" (24).

Sophia explained that the Raging Grannies persist in "righting the wrongs" (3) because they see themselves as "sort of the 'watchers' and 'listeners' of the community, and finding out what needs to be done, and doing it" (24). The Raging Grannies movement is important to building social capital because these troupes create shared understandings about social justice and environment issues within their communities. Individual Grannies can take on the role of "resist-aunts" when they speak out against the dominant discourses of economics and war and when they persist in using humour and non-violent tactics to confront injustice. Raging Grannies engage in small acts of

resistance by taking everyday songs and re-presenting them as messages that challenge the dominant discourse of the market economy.

## **Australian Resist-aunts**

### Jill is a Resist-Aunt

Jill is a Rainforest Mayor (RM) of a working forestry district who creates shared understandings of community capacity and resilience. When the rainforest district became part of a World Heritage conservation site 14 years ago, the local economy collapsed. Since then, Jill has worked to increase the social capital of her community by resisting the discourse of defeat and by challenging the “victim mentality” that she and others were caught up in at first. Jill reported that over the last seven years, “a shift in attitude has occurred but the economics definitely hasn’t changed” (30). She explained further: “We have become more positive.... So it’s a matter of how you react to it, if you work with and promote positive people” (30).

Jill offered an alternative perspective to her constituents on the community’s capacity when she said,

Let’s not dwell on the past, let’s look at what we can do for the future, what resources we have.... We have to look at our advantages today, what we have, what we can offer, [and] paint a positive picture. (11)

Jill is a resist-aunt because she refused to remain despaired and because she persisted in creating alternatives to a discourse of defeat: “It is just so draining, to be down there in the mire with everybody else crying poor me, etc., etc. We’ve got to get out and fight. You know I’m a fighter” (11).

Jill has had to fight personal and political challenges in her role as mayor and she has persisted in her actions by “handling my own time, being able to say no occasionally, and sticking mostly with positive people” (20). Jill maintained her position as mayor for three terms despite being “targeted and being personally maligned” (13) on several occasions. She realized that “a lot of people were very suspicious” (10) of her because she led an alternative lifestyle: “I was different. Reasonably educated... reasonably articulate. I was a woman, I was on a farm with a couple of young kids... so there were a number of constraints” (10). Jill persevered despite adversity, and found that “The best management tool of all is... how you respond to any situation. It is your responses... that determine whether you stay in, get out, or what you feel good about” (20).

Jill contributes to the social capital of her community by creating shared understandings of the needs of the rainforest community amongst local, national and international interests. Jill is a resist-aunt because she counters the discourse of defeat, challenges the “victim mentality”, and resists being intimidated by people who fear change. She persists in looking towards the future and in believing that “Good things can be catching. Negative is far more catching, but good things can be too” (13). Jill creates alternative understandings of the capacity of the community by performing small acts of resistance such as refusing to take a negative view despite the challenges, and insisting on being “a hell of a lot more positive” (14).

### Penny is a Resist-aunt

Penny is active as a Rural Community Builder (RCB) who promotes the social and economic development of her remote district. She resists the notion that women do not belong in politics and seek alternative opportunities to gain political influence in her community. Penny is a successful businesswoman who was successfully elected to the municipal council (2). However, she met resistance when she ran for mayor and encountered conservative attitudes such as, “Yes she’s great as a deputy mayor; yes she’s doing a great job, but she is a woman” (2). After her defeat, Penny decided not to persist in municipal politics because, “Sometimes it’s not meant to happen, so that way you move on. You don’t dwell on that point” (8). She developed an alternative approach to building the capacity of her community and she now contributes to the school-based apprenticeship program, hospital board (3), and to a number of regional and national community development boards.

Penny contributes to the social capital of the district by building relationships and creating common understandings despite small town attitudes that constrained her. She explained that small town gossip is often a challenge for public figures because “Some people look upon you maybe with envy, jealousy” (8) while others “listen to what somebody has gossiped... I find that very frustrating” (8). In response, Penny has “become a little bit more cynical, a little bit hardened” (7) and has learned to be “a bit up front. If I’ve got a problem, I’ll come right out” (8). At other times, she chooses not to persist and her response has been, “Bloody hell, go away, that’s it’... and I just keep moving forward” (7). Penny knows that it is important to say no at times and when she hears herself “whinging” (see poem “Mirror” p. 35) she reminds herself, “People have asked me but... I don’t have to say yes” (7).

Penny is a resist-aunt because she refuses to be excluded from community building activities because she is a woman. She persists in creating an alternative to public election by holding invited or appointed positions on several community development boards. She responds to challenges with optimism, cynicism, and an understanding that sometimes it is better to seek alternatives than to persist. Penny performs small acts of resistance to her oppression such as volunteering to hold positions on local employment and education boards.

### Cathy is a Resist-aunt

As an Indigenous Community Liaison (ICL), Cathy creates social capital for her people by building relationships and connections between the state school and several aboriginal “communities” in her remote district. Cathy is a resist-aunt because she challenges dominant perceptions about the language skills of aboriginal children and demonstrates the persistence of indigenous peoples to retain their own culture despite centuries of cultural oppression. For example, she explains to the students in her language classes, “See these aboriginal kids here? They can talk... white man language, they can talk their language.... On top of that, they’ve made up their own slang, aboriginal English, and... a sign language” (15). The response from the non-indigenous students was “Ah, that is amazing!” (15). Cathy understood that this new perspective was “an eye opener for these kids here because... I suppose they have probably been taught that it is a disadvantage to be an aboriginal” (15).

In addition, Cathy challenged the notion that aboriginal families and communities are disconnected and in disarray. For instance, she offered a different perspective to the non-indigenous students about their own relationships and connections to family when she asked them, “Do you know who your grandfather and grandmother is?” to which they typically responded “Nah. Mum never told us that” (8). She explained to the students, “We know who our grandfathers are, our great-grandfathers. We know where we come from. We know our stories from our area” (8).

Cathy also creates alternative understandings about the relationships that connect aboriginal families and communities. She told the non-indigenous teachers that, despite prevailing assumptions of chaos and disorder, indigenous communities offer more safety to the children than the school or town: “The kids don’t want to come in here.... This, to them, is an alien environment.... It is safer where their families are” (8).

Cathy is a resist-aunt because she challenges popular perceptions of indigenous communities as disabled, disconnected and dangerous. She raises the social capital for all children in the remote district where she works by creating shared understandings amongst schools, students and their families. In the poem “Family” (p. 37), Cathy challenges the discourse of disarray with small acts of resistance such as talking about family and community stories with the students in her classes.

#### Pauline is a Resist-aunt

Pauline raises the social capital of families and children in rural and remote contexts through her many activities as a Country Women’s Advocate (CWA). She creates common understandings amongst community members and resists practices that diminish the needs and desires of rural residents. For example, in 1972 she advocated to start the Isolated Children’s Fund, and as a result, the government recognized the need for a governess to be trained as a teacher’s aide (8). However, when Pauline lobbied people in the city, they wondered “What have you got a governess for?” (8). She created common understanding by explaining “Those kids out there... had no school, no teacher, no nothing, no this, no laboratories, no anything, no libraries, anything, you know” (11). She persisted in telling people in the city about the challenges of educating children in remote settings, “and the only time I got money from them was when I was able to... make them recognize that we do have a problem” (4).

Pauline faced further challenges when the Queensland government withdrew their scholarship for rural children to attend high school in town. Pauline responded by getting on the national radio station and urging all “country” families in Queensland to “take their children to the nearest school... and put them on the school verandah, and say ‘I want a desk and a teacher’.... And when you do it, send a telegram to the minister for education and the premier, and tell them what you have done” (10). Pauline successfully created an alternative form of protest because she reported that “They took the telegrams in in buckets, and that day at school was chaos” (10). The result of her actions was the restoration of the scholarship program for rural and remote students to attend high school in town.

Pauline is a resist-aunt because she refuses to have the needs of rural families and students diminished by government policies, and she builds the social capital of rural communities by creating a shared understanding of the challenges that rural

citizens face. Pauline persists in her activities because she has learned that the way to respond to adversity is to “regroup, get back and work out your priorities, and go the other way” (19). Despite facing resistance, Pauline persists in challenging the discourse of rural as insignificant and encourages others to perform small acts of resistance such as taking their children to school. She explained that she has been helped tremendously by her faith because, “I think, when you get frustrated and these things, it is not the end. The sun gets up tomorrow morning, and the dear Lord is still around” (19).

### Mary is a Resist-aunt

Mary is a retired “Sister of Mercy” (SM) who enhances social capital in her community by creating relationships and connections between the church and grassroots members of the congregation. She is a resist-aunt because she actively resists the formal relationships established by institutions or others in positions of “officialdom.” She persists in connecting to the “ordinary, everyday strugglers” because “I think that the church, as an official thing... has got very much away from the grassroots people.... Because I think the grassroots people are somewhere else, they are not in that big organization stuff” (25). Mary creates an alternative relationship by building informal connections to the grassroots people of her parish, such as introducing herself to the merchants in the village. Mary explained that, rather than preaching a sermon in a church, “I am more involved when I walk down the street and I see X who says ‘Oh, I just feel rotten. I feel I need to talk to somebody’” (25). She is proud of the fact that grassroots people approach her and that she can call on every family in her sacramental program by name: “To me that is the ultimate, because I am church in a lot of the lives of the people.... And I’m interested in them. That’s all they want. They don’t want to go to the big officialdom stuff” (35).

As a Sister of Mercy, Mary maintains a commitment to the grassroots people of the church. Mary has persisted in her faith over the years, and she described her life as, “a fair struggle, health-wise, study-wise, understanding-wise, lots of wises” (18). She explained that a sense of humour has been helpful in achieving her goals: “They reckon you need three bones to be in the religious life... and the backbone and the funny bone have been the two that have seen me through” (16). Mary is a resist-aunt because she counters the formal discourse of religious practice and persists in conducting her work “behind the scenes” (25). In addition, she raised the social capital of her parish by building relationships and connecting grassroots community members to the church.

Mary has suffered greatly during her lifetime; however, she persists by using her creativity, sense of humour and her “backbone” to carry on her work as a religious woman. Mary increases the social capital available to her family, parish, and community by performing small acts of resistance such as teaching a child to meet life’s challenges (See poem “Auntie” p. 2).

### The Sisters of Mercy are Resist-aunts

As a group of religious women, the Order of the Sisters of Mercy have worked to create shared understandings of the human rights of people around the world. The Sisters of Mercy increase the social capital of communities by creating shared understandings of the importance of liberation and of human rights. Many women in the Order persist in asserting human rights regardless of the struggle involved, for as Mary explained, “A Sister of Mercy is basically committed to human endeavour.... It’s about being with people” (18).

Mary talked of her experience as a Sister of Mercy in the Philippines where the local religious women were actively involved in supporting the fight against Marco’s regime. Some of the Sisters resisted the oppressive regime by teaching the people what they were not supposed to (32), such as that “You resist peacefully” and that “the greatest power that you have got is to be who you are in the face of fear” (33). This form of liberation theology gave the grassroots people confidence and hope, which Mary explained is powerful because “When church and people meet at that level, nothing can stop it. Nothing can stop it” (33). However, many religious women suffered in the struggle, and Mary recalled that one of the Sisters was arrested “because she was lecturing in sociology, and she was teaching how all people are equal, and people have rights, and that rich regime” (33).

The Order of the Sisters of Mercy is engaged in creating alternatives for those community members who “live on the edge” or are subject to human rights violations. Many religious women could be considered resist-aunts because they actively oppose oppression and domination of the human spirit. As a religious order, the Sisters of Mercy demonstrate their commitment to this ideal by persisting on their own path, regardless of objections from the Catholic Church or foreign governments. Mary explained that within the religious community, the Sisters of Mercy have been known to have “a little character trait, all over the world, and it went like this ‘Damn it, do it! Apologize later’. It’s fascinating, it’s almost part of the call” (13). Individual Sisters of

Mercy may be resist-aunts in their own communities by persisting in small acts of resistance such teaching the women of the village to read and to think critically (See poem “Field, p. 278).

#### Re-capping How Aunties Resist, Persist, and Create Alternatives

When viewed from a response-based perspective, creativity seems to be an important element in how the participants managed to resist and persist in their actions, and in how they manifested alternative opportunities to those provided by mainstream society. Relationships with members of their family and community were certainly helpful to the participants, but these relationships could also be a hindrance to other aunties. In small, everyday ways, aunties can challenge dominant discourses that are diminishing, and they often do so despite meeting resistance. Evidence that I gathered included women who where photographed resisting biological engineering, and the dominance of greed and economics, while others persisted in developing new abilities for friends and family through horseback riding. From the interviews emerged the theme that some of these aunties resisted discourses of fear that construct scarcity and poverty as deviation, perpetuate a victim mentality, or oppress liberty and human rights. Other aunties persisted in asserting the worth of some element of society, such as children’s artistic expression, women’s participation in politics, or indigenous, grassroots, or rural perspectives. When they encountered resistance, many women responded by speaking their minds, becoming stubborn, cynical, or by moving on and creating other opportunities.

#### Re-capping the concept of aunties

Being an auntie means being someone who is proud to care for others in her family or community in extra-ordinary ways. Aunties are particularly pro-active women who provide an alternative to the concept of “volunteer,” which fails to capture the full scope of the informal social care that aunties provide. Aunties often assume multiple roles in the family and community that most others do not, such as being a grassroots leader, a mentor, volunteer, or “re-sourceress.” Aunties also contribute to multiple activities that they are proud of including big events such as organizing Talent Festivals or Rainforest Management bodies, small acts of living such as giving respite to a tired mother or calling up a sick friend, or the nitty-gritty work of the community such supporting others through the birthing and dying processes.

Aunties are part of the local, vernacular culture of many *Gemeinschaft* or rural communities. Aunties can be blood-related, or they can develop kin-like relationships with other families and community members. Aunties can aid in the re-conceptualizing the post-modern family and its relationship to society, and at the same time may help to redefine the concept of civic engagement. Aunties look after the tribe and help the community come forward by taking social responsibility for others. Unfortunately, discussions of social capital rarely articulate the value of informal social care as civic activity, nor is there a shared language to describe the women who perform grassroots leadership roles in the community.

Aunties build relationships and connections, from which arise social trust, reciprocal care and informal networks amongst community members. These elements can significantly increase the social capital available to community and family members, which in turn increases their capacity to not only survive, but to thrive.

In addition, the informal activities of aunties can also counter the current perception of a decline in civic participation, whereby much informal social care is ignored or diminished in discussions of civic engagement. Aunties do so by bridging the gap between public and private aspects of society, challenging the dominance of paternal constructions of life, and by offering alternative discourses and practices that encourage trusting relationships and reciprocity.

Aunties also create shared understandings about grassroots and rural living, and this can lead to the formation of reciprocal relationships amongst family and community members. Reciprocity is important to the development of social capital, particularly in socio-economic climates where the devolution of government services to “the community” is the norm. Aunties therefore play a significant role in creating opportunities for reciprocal relationships and informal networks to flourish in response to the increased demand for voluntary social care.

Aunties are also response-able for assuring the rights and safety of their families and other community members. Many aunties can actively resist oppression in everyday, small acts of living and persist in creating alternatives to achieve social trust and safety for other family and community members. In this way, “resist-aunts” can enhance the social capital and social care available to their families and communities.

**Chapter Seven**  
**Re-collecting Aunties in Action**

Aunties can be “re-collected” by calmly gathering together scattered memories and  
knowledge of them

**Re-collect**

to recover knowledge  
to recall to mind; to remember  
to calm or control oneself

**Cairns to Karumba Cyclists Persisting**  
**Yungaburra Markets, Qld**

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## **Eulogy**

Whenever my time comes  
to pass on,

I would really hope  
that my eulogy says  
who I am.

That I am recognized for  
the community work  
that I have done.

Because  
sometimes  
I think I am not.

And I have said that  
I don't want to be in the  
limelight...

I really don't want that.

But when the times comes,

I hope that I've been  
recognized

somewhat

for those things  
that I have  
contributed to.

(20)

**Allison  
Rural School Mom**

*Aunties in Action: Speaking Louder Than Words* was a phenomenological study that explored the taken-for-granted roles and activities of certain women who actively provide informal social care to family, friends, and neighbours. In doing so, aunties increase the social capital available to their small or rural communities. Common themes that arose to describe the experience of being an “auntie” include that aunties are active and community-minded women who take on multiple roles and perform multiple acts of social care in their families and communities. They achieve what they do by building relationships and connections amongst community members and the professionals who serve them or by creating shared understandings about grassroots and rural people and their experiences.

The concept of “aunties” is worthy of study because aunties are important contributors to the building of social trust and reciprocity, which can lead to an increase in the social capital available to families or communities. Social capital is the “glue” that binds community members together and it arises when trusting relationships are common, when social norms are shared, and when common understandings of roles, responsibilities, and expectations exist. Aunties actively develop social capital, which can lead to increased opportunities for rural communities to become places of safety where individuals and families can flourish.

The data that informed the analysis was derived from conversational interviews and photographs that I collected in Western Canada and Northeastern Australia. I conducted interviews with 5 women from Western Canada whom I selected because of their reputation for grassroots community service or through referral from colleagues. In addition, I photographed other women doing typical community service activities such as Rotary women cooking pancakes at a community breakfast, sorority sisters holding a garage sale, Boy Scout leaders in a parade, and women volunteering at the local school sports day. For instance, the women in the photograph “Cycling” (p. 286), demonstrate how aunties often persist in caring for their communities in extra-ordinary ways despite the struggle this involves, and in doing so, aunties resist those discourses that construct grassroots people and rural communities as passive or insignificant. Each photograph I selected for inclusion offered a unique representation of some possible activities that aunties might engage in, as did the profiles of the ten individual participants that appeared in the “auntie-cedent.”

I also sought to identify women who could be considered to be filling the role of “auntie” in mythological, historical, and contemporary accounts of Western society. In

the historical and vernacular chapters, I intended to make the concept of “aunties” familiar by identifying and acknowledging various roles they play in vernacular culture. I suggested that wise-women, midwives, Girl Guide leaders and Women’s Institute members typified aunties in action and could encouraged the reader to remember aunties and recognize them in their own neighbourhoods and communities. These accounts supported my claim that aunties have been active in Western society since time immemorial, and challenged the notion that aunties are not part of our collective memory, despite the fact that many of their stories are absent or obscured in public discourse. This tension lead me to select Phenomenology as an appropriate choice of methodologies to research the experience of being an “auntie”, because its practice facilitates the study of taken-for-granted social phenomenon.

When conducting the data collection and its analysis, I did as Pauline (CWA) suggested for her projects, which was to take just one step at a time (see poem “One Step” p. 39). I followed the teachings of Max van Manen (1992) in practicing Phenomenology, or the study of the lived experience of a particular phenomenon. I engaged the work of Heidegger (1962) by asking hermeneutic questions about the meaning of key words. I also engaged in a heuristic process, as described by Moustakas (1990), whereby I explored my own experiences as an auntie. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant, based on the work of Kvale (1996).

Theoretically, I adopted post-modern feminist approaches to conducting research, and I engaged social construction theories to construct the framework. Social construction theories were appropriate for this study because they can reveal the power of language to construct the perception of aunties and their roles as trivial. Foucault (1980) and other post-modernists assumed that power relations are embedded in language, whereby the needs of the powerful are met in dominant ways of speaking and behaving, referred to as “discourses.” For example, feminist theorists like Hekman critiqued the dominant discourse of males that constitutes women as inferior and she challenged researchers to explore those discourses to see what lies beyond them (1990a). In addition, associated narrative or response-based theories gave me more tools to explore dominant discourses and identify the gap between the informal actions of aunties and the formal discourse of professionals and experts.

Similar critiques arise from the community development field, where McKnight and Cayley (Jan. 1994) challenge practitioners to reconstruct professional language so that it was not focussed on deficiency and needs. Likewise, Wade (1999) and colleagues

propose a new framework to examine language based on the assumption of agency and competency. Their response-based theory provides a more precise approach to identifying, responding and resisting the social construction of oppression that arises from living in any inequitable social context. I then grouped similar responses together, and identified common themes and looked for alternatives to these. I next clustered the responses together into 3 themes, and these were offered as possible constructions of the meaning of being an “auntie.”

### Aunties are Active

Aunties are pro-active citizens who contribute to the social care of their families and communities in ways that exceed the narrow concept of “volunteer,” which fails to capture the full range of roles and activities that aunties perform. Aunties enhance social capital through their roles and activities because they redefine the boundaries between private and public lives and reveal the significance of informal social caring to the survival of families and communities. These actions are becoming increasingly important in light of the recent trend in the devolution of social care from being a professional public service back to being a private, non-profit, or voluntary service.

Aunties help look after the “tribe” by taking responsibility for social care, such as doing the hard work of tending to the emotional, social, and material needs of their friends and families. Aunties also “help the community to come forward” by working voluntarily with and not for others, and by acting as conduits for information and support to flow freely amongst community members. They achieve this by being active and not passive members of the community, by conducting small acts of living and giving, and by multi-tasking and taking on multiple roles such as leader, mentor, or “resourceress.”

Unfortunately, much of what is done by aunties is taken for granted, not only by their friends, families, and neighbours, but also by the women themselves. The significance of the individuals, their activities, and the roles they play in developing social capital are often diminished by or are absent from public discourse, and as a result, society shares no language with which to speak about the experiences of community-minded women. In response, I propose the term “aunties” to describe those women who take on extra-ordinary responsibility for providing voluntary social care to others in ways that exceed the term “volunteer” and challenge the construct of grassroots women as insignificant to the community development process.

### Aunties Build Relationships and Connections

Aunties enhance social capital in many small and rural contexts through building relationships and connections amongst community and family members. They achieve this by creating informal networks and by acting as conduits or as the “spider in the middle” who facilitates the process. Aunties encourage the development of formal and informal networks, and this can lead to an increase in social trust and safety amongst community members, which enhances the social capital available to them. Aunties also make connections between the private and public realms, between maternal and paternal constructions of the world, or between local and global interests. However, aunties often experience discord in their lives because the dominant discourses of society fail to include grassroots women in their language, dismiss their wisdom as “gossip,” or construct their informal roles and activities as less significant than those of men or urban professionals. These diminishing constructions weaken social trust, decrease safety, and hinder the development of social capital. To counter this, aunties can help to create shared understandings of the meaning of community and its development; of the significance of ordinary, grassroots people and initiatives; and of how living in a small or rural community can make a difference to the community development process.

Rural social capital is increased when social trust and caring relationships are part of the everyday activities of the community, when there exists a common culture and language, and when physical and social space is shared. Aunties can be instrumental in developing social capital because they help to create shared understandings amongst diverse members so that trust, reciprocity, and “social warmth” can evolve. Likewise, community development initiatives can be more successful when they arise out of a shared process whereby local wisdom and common understandings are sought, rather than initiatives manifesting from the “top down.”

Aunties can help to bridge the gap between the grassroots people and urban professionals because aunties may take on informal leadership roles or act as conduits between formal and informal processes. Grassroots initiatives often arise from spontaneous social interactions and informal exchanges between family or community members. Unfortunately, informal aspects of society are mostly excluded from the language of professionals or overlooked in discussions of community development. However, I propose that these casual contacts are significant to community survival because where informal networks and connections are strong, rural and small

communities are better prepared to overcome challenges that arise and their members are more apt to problem solve together.

### Aunties Create Shared Understandings

The actions of aunties can enhance social capital by creating a common understanding of the challenges and rewards of living in small and rural community contexts. Many individuals and families who choose to live in rural contexts need the mutual support of friends and neighbours in order survive, so trusting relationships and interdependency are vital to sustain strong communities, much like in a family. Aunties are particularly important figures in small and rural communities because they help to create the informal networks and connections from which social trust arises, and they foster shared understandings of the ideas, problems, and solutions that arise from grassroots people and initiatives. In doing so, aunties often encounter diminishing discourses about themselves, their roles, and the small or rural communities in which they live.

The dominant discourses of Western society are primarily constructed around economic and patriarchal understandings and are phrased in the elite language of urban experts, which effectively silences the vernacular language and common understandings of many grassroots women and their families. Such exclusionary practices can significantly hinder the development of rural social capital because it flourishes when trust, shared understandings, and social warmth are present. Under these conditions, shared understandings and common goals for community development may emerge, where social considerations are not dominated by economic priorities. Those who come together to form a community require both social and physical space in which to construct complex relationships that can survive conflict, change, and the discourses that diminish them.

### Aunties Resist, Persist, and Create Alternative Understandings

Aunties help to counter diminishing discourses and create alternative understandings by performing small acts of resistance in their everyday lives. Aunties respond to and resisted the social construction of their work as marginal, and persisted in activities that counter the perception of grassroots people and movements as insignificant to mainstream society. These “resist-aunts” are putting into practice a revolutionary Discourse that assumes competency, pays attention to details, and utilizes

the resources at hand to strengthen the social “glue” that binds grassroots people, families, and communities together.

### Re-commendations for Further Action

It was my intention when I set out to conduct this study that the concept of “aunties” would fill a gap in the present understanding of who actively develops social capital in small and rural communities. I gained some valuable insights into who might be described as an auntie, what roles and activities they may be involved in, and how they might achieve what they do. I interpreted the experience of being an “auntie” to mean being an active citizen who builds social networks and connections, and who creates shared understandings about grassroots and rural people and their informal initiatives. Some of these insights could be explored further to determine their capacity to enhance social capital.

I set out to create a clearer picture of some of the active women who are inferred by the encapsulating term “the community,” and to gain a better understanding of what encourages them to give to others in extra-ordinary ways. A majority of the participants in this study made reference to their immediate and extended family commitments as key motivators for providing social care. I **re-commend** that those people who voluntarily take responsibility for community engagement be further investigated so an active citizenry can be encouraged and to counter the perception of civic decline.

I also wanted to understand more about how communities and families survive in times of difficult transitions. The themes of building relationships and creating shared understandings both encourage social trust and reciprocity to develop amongst community members, which strengthens support networks in times of social or economic stress. It was evident in the data that informal networks and relationships are encouraged when opportunities for spontaneous or casual interactions and exchanges is possible. I would suggest that further research be conducted into the ways in which informal networks and casual exchanges can be encouraged as a means to build trust and reciprocity, such as providing physical and social spaces for them to flourish in.

I intended to provide some insights into how a more inclusive community development process might be encouraged. The creation of shared understandings was very significant when the participants spoke of how being grassroots or living rurally made a difference to how they achieved what they did. I recommend that further research engage in understanding how these contexts might enhance or constrain the

ability of local community members to find commonalities within a diverse array of perspectives, including those of urban and global interests.

I had also sought to illuminate innovative approaches to community development, and a number of participants mentioned the benefits hands on such as personal, organizational, and financial skill development. I suggest that further research may identify how formal skill development might help individuals tap into all the resources available to them without constraining the informal nature of social care.

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## Appendix

### Glossary

In the initial entry I interpret the definitions to form a link to the concept of “aunties”. The first (1) descriptor for each entry arises from the Macquarie Dictionary, 1985, containing Australian English, while the second (2) arise from the Houghton Mifflin Canadian Dictionary of the English Language, 1982. A notation of (3) refers to the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1991), and (4) refers to the Chambers Dictionary (1993).

#### **auntie:**

- Aunties are particular women who voluntarily assume an informal caring role in the social development of families and communities that involves love and friendship
- a familiar form of aunt (2 – 87)
- an institution considered to be conservative or cautious, esp. the BBC (3 – 71)
- aunt:
- the sister of one’s father or mother (1 – 30)
- from various nursery words, Old French *ante*, from Latin *amma* mother, *amare* to love, *amicus* friend (2 – 1507)
- colloq. an unrelated woman friend of a child or children; *sl.* An exclamation of surprise, disbelief, etc.(3 – 71)

#### **auntie-cedent:**

- an entryway into the thesis where the words and actions of the aunties who participated precede those of the writer
- antecedent:
- to go before in rank, place, or time; the previous events in a person or an ancestor’s life (2 – 55)

#### **benevolent:**

- Aunties perform acts that may benefit their families, friends or communities
- desiring to do good for others; intended for benefits rather than profit (1 – 43)
- an inclination or tendency to perform charitable acts; goodwill; a kindly act (2 – 123)

#### **crone:**

- Aunties are among the wise-women whose skills and knowledge have been demeaned by the term crone, which associates them with death and decay rather than with flourishing life
- a withered witch-like old woman; from Middle Dutch, old ewe, dead body; from Old North French *carogne*, carrion; from Latin *caro* or flesh (2 – 315)

#### **faerie/fairy-**

- Aunties are associated with the supernatural world of fairies because they assist (or harass) others as healers and wise-women
- a tiny supernatural being in human form; depicted as clever, mischievous and capable of assisting or harassing humans (2 – 471)

#### **fairy goddess-mother**

- a mentor, benefactor, or protectress who performs her role with creativity and a touch of magic

#### **fairy godmother:**

- a benefactress (3 – 421); a female sponsor at baptism

#### **familiar:**

- Aunties are familiar figures who establish informal, “familial” relationships with those they commonly see and know

- commonly or generally known or seen; well-acquainted; thoroughly conversant; easy, informal, unceremonious, unconstrained (1 - 151)
- natural and unstudied; of frequent instance or occurrence; common; a close friend or attendant spirit; an officer of the Inquisition whose function it was to apprehend and imprison the accused; archaic from familial (2 - 475)

**hag:**

- Aunties may be hags because their wise-women ways have been associated with sorcery and witchcraft rather than with healing and community service
- a repulsive old woman (1 – 185)
- an ugly, frightful old woman; crone; witch; sorceress; a female demon (2 – 592)

**informal:**

- Aunties perform their caring activities in everyday ways, often without receiving official recognition or recompense
- without formality; unceremonious (1 - 208)
- of or pertaining to everyday use; casual; relaxed; belonging to the usage of naturally spoken language (2 - 674)

**malevolent:**

- Aunties may perform acts of voluntary service that are intended to benefit but may instead create ill will within their families, friends or community
- wishing evil to another; showing ill will (1 – 243)
- rancor or malice; evil influence (2 – 790)

**metaphor:**

- “Auntie” is not a metaphor because the figurative term indicates more than a mere resemblance to the literal application of the term
- a figure of speech in which a term is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable, in order to suggest a resemblance (1 – 251)
- designate only by implicit comparison or analogy; from Greek to bear change; for example “evening of life” (2 - 825)

**metonym:**

- “Auntie” is a metonym because the roles and activities some women perform in families exhibit attributes that are transferable to women who perform similar roles in the community. Therefore the figurative term auntie is readily substituted for the literal, familial term that I suggest
- a figure of speech in which an idea is evoked or named by a term designating some associated notion; from Greek “substitute naming” (2 - 826)
- substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant (3 - 747)

**re-cognize:**

- Aunties are “re-cognizable” figures in the community because we know them from past experiences or have shared understandings about their roles and activities in everyday life around us
- to identify from knowledge of appearance or character (1 – 333)
- to know that something perceived has been perceived before; to acknowledge the validity or reality of (2 - 1089)

**re-conceptualize:**

- Aunties can be “re-conceptualized” as significant contributors to society by taking on new ideas, theories, or symbols to understand their roles and associated activities
- **conceptualize:**
  - to form concepts, theories, or ideas (2 – 275)
- **concept:**
  - an idea that includes all that is associated with a word or symbol (1 – 91)
  - a general understanding that arises from specific instances; from Latin *concupere* to take to oneself, conceive (2 – 275)

**re-construct:**

- Aunties may socially “re-construct” their place in society by synthesizing alternative concepts, discourses, and practices that bring their families and communities together for mutual gain
- construct:**
- a complex image or idea resulting from a synthesis by the mind (1 – 94)
  - to create by systematically arranging ideas and expressions; devise with the mind; synthesized from simple elements, esp. a concept; to pile up together; from Old English *streon* to spread, gain, offspring (2 – 286)

**re-search:**

- Aunties are “re-searchable” because their experiences can be diligently sought out and investigated from many angles and with multiple lenses
- diligent and systemic inquiry or investigation into a subject (1 - 340)
- scholarly or scientific inquiry; to study thoroughly; Old French to seek out or search again (2 - 1105)

**Re-sourceress:**

- a woman who utilizes the resources at hand to create social capital; one who sources over and over again to give rise to something from nothing
- **resource:**
- something to turn to for support or help; from old French to rise again (2 - 1107)
- **sorcerer/sorceress:**
- one who practices sorcery; a wizard; enchanter (2 –1232)

**re-collect:**

- Aunties can be “re-collected” by calmly gathering together scattered memories and experiences of them
- to recover knowledge (1 - 333)
- to recall to mind; to remember; to calm or control oneself (2 - 1089)

**re-commendation:**

- Aunties may inspire confidence in their re-commendations because their presence is accepted and desired by others in the community
- to present as worthy of confidence, acceptance (1 – 333)
- to commend as reputable, worthy, or desirable (2 – 1089)
- **commend:**
- worthy of notice, praise; bring to mind

**re-create:**

- Aunties re-create families and communities with the resources at hand, and bring to fruition refreshing social activities that encourage growth and enjoyment
- a diversion, exercise, or other resource for relaxation and enjoyment (2 – 334)
- to impart fresh life to; refresh mentally or physically (2 – 1090)

**create:**

- to evolve from one’s thoughts and imagination; constitute (1 – 103)
- to be first to portray or give character to; originate; from Latin to cause to grow; from *Ceres*, goddess of agriculture, esp. fruit (2 – 311)

**re-member:**

- Aunties are “re-membered” when we bear them in our minds with affection and recognize their worth
- to retain in the memory; bear in mind (1 - 338)
- to recall to the mind with effort or determination; to keep in mind as worthy of affection or recognition (2 - 1100)

**re-present:**

- Aunties are “re-presented” in this thesis in words, symbols, and photographs that display before the public how these particular women embody the concept through their everyday experiences
- to express, designate, stand for, or denote as a word, symbol, or the like; act for by delegated authority; exemplify, equivalent of, correspond to (1 - 339)

- to present clearly to the mind; to describe as an embodiment of some specified quality (2 - 1105)
- **present:**
- to introduce, especially with formal ceremony; to bring before the public; to view or display; a gift; (2 – 1035)

**re-veal:**

- Aunties are “re-vealed” in this thesis because it lays open to view their words and actions and draws back the web of language that obscures their significance
- to make known, disclose, divulge; to lay open to view, display, exhibit (1 – 343)
- to unveil; go back to prior condition; from Latin *weg* sail, curtain, or to weave a web (2 – 1547)

**spinster:**

- Spinsters are unconventional aunties who spin a web of informal support in families and communities
- a woman who has remained single beyond the conventional age for marrying; a woman whose occupation is spinning (2 -1245)
- an old maid; a woman fit for the spinning house (4 - 1663)
- an unmarriageable woman’s occupation (n/a)

**time immemorial:**

- Aunties have been actively caring for families and communities since before the memories that are carried by the people
- **immemorial** – reaching beyond the limits of memory, traditional or recorded history (2 - 658)

**traditional:**

- Aunties are builders of local culture because they are active in passing down of family or community customs and other important traditions of society
- pertaining to or in accord with tradition (2 - 1360)
- **tradition** – cultural custom or usage viewed as a coherent body of precedents influencing the present; the passing down of elements of a culture especially via oral communication (2 - 1360)
- common practices, whether by a family, culture or society

**vernacular:**

- Aunties are familiar figures in the everyday, domestic activities of many small and rural communities and they contribute to the local, native culture through the various activities, roles, they are active in
- native or originating in the place of its occurrence or use, as language or words (oft. as opposed to literary or learned language); the idiom of a particular trade or profession (1- 448)
- the non-standard or substandard everyday speech of a country or locality; using the native language of a country as distinct from literary language (2 –1423)
- homely speech; from Latin *vernaculus* domestic, native, *verna* or home-born slave (3 –1365)
- belonging to a home-born slave (4)

**witch:**

- Aunties are among the wise and clever women who are constructed by dominant discourses as evil for carrying out unconventional healing and social caring practices
- a person, now esp. a woman, who professes or is supposed to practice magic, esp. black magic or the black art; a sorceress (1 – 465)
- a woman who practices sorcery or is believed to have dealings with the devil; an ugly, vicious old woman; a hag; Old English *wicce* (fem) witch and *wicca* (masc) wizard (2 – 1470)
- wizard:

- skilful or clever person; obsolete for a wise man or sage (2 - 1471)  
**witch hunt:**
- a search for and persecution of supposed witches; a campaign directed against a particular group of those holding unpopular or unorthodox views (3 – 1408)