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ABSTRACT:

Using a Parents Support Group run in Cape Town, South Africa, the study aims to illustrate how the psychodynamic model is inadequate in providing an understanding of the gender dynamics within this group. The study takes on an interpretive approach to explore this research problem and employs qualitative techniques, which were found to be most suitable. Data were collected through the use of field notes that documented the process of the Parents Support Group. This group consisted of ten females and one male participant, ranging from 34 to 45 years of age and who come from a lower socio-economic stratum. Furthermore, to elicit additional data and to capture the multi-layered experiences of participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five female and one male participant who were selected from the Parent Support Group. The field notes and the data acquired from the interviews were analyzed through the method of textual analysis, which elicited five key themes. It was found that although the psychoanalytic model was inadequate in explaining certain dynamics within the Parents Support Group, feminism and social constructionism models were able to highlight how gender was key in the dynamics at play within the group. This finding was vital in making recommendations about gender sensitivity and training concerning therapeutic interventions.

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CHAPTER ONE:

I NTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to illustrate how the psychodynamic model on its own is not adequate in offering an understanding of the gender dynamics in a group. Using the context of a Parents Support Group, the study uses feminism (Kristeva (1982, in Lazerson, 1992); Butler and Wintram, 1991; Bender & Ewashen, 2000) and social constructionism (Gergen, 1985; Cheung, 1997; Daniels, 1994; Magana & Short, 2002; O' Neil, 1999) as alternate models for effectively exploring the dynamics within the group. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV-TR) states that a learning disorder is diagnosed when an individual's achievement in reading, mathematics, or written expression is substantially below their expected age, schooling, and level of intelligence. This learning problem significantly interferes with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require these skills (American Psychological Association, 2000). The support group was aimed at offering an intervention to parents of learning-disabled children, who seemed to be distressed by the interference a learning disability has on their child and the family as a whole.

An estimated four percent of school children in the United States have a learning disability (Kaplan et al., 1994). Reliable South African prevalence rates of learning disabilities are not available. The Child Guidance Clinic, which is part of the University of Cape Town, identified an overwhelming number of children diagnosed with a learning disability and who were in dire need of psychometric assessment and intervention.

The University of Cape Town, Child Guidance Clinic provides services to children from disadvantaged areas. During the Period 1990-1999, 29.8% of children at the clinic were psychometrically assessed (Van De Berg, personal communication). It was found that apart from the private remedial services, there were no subsidized services to provide for the needs of children found to require remedial help. There was an attempt by the Child Guidance Clinic to address this identified lack of services by providing a group run by remedial teachers to these children with learning disabilities but it was found that this group did not work and these children with learning disabilities required more containment of the total family system.

The project thus aimed to provide remedial input, emotional holding from the emotional groups as well as containment and educational input for parents in the Parents Support Group. According to Stern (1985) the child's capacity to self regulate their feelings is linked to the parent's ability to provide containment. In order to provide containment, the parent will have developed a capacity to self regulate, reflect on the child's experience and attune to the child's needs. Parents need to have a process of working through their disappointment towards the child and coming to an acceptance of the limitations of the child. Using this understanding the Parents Support Group aimed to facilitate this process by working within a psychodynamic framework, which is the theoretical orientation of the University of Cape Town's, Child Guidance Clinic. The group also aimed to provide parents with psycho-educational support.

The Learning Problems Project was run once a week between 4pm and 6pm, where the children first had remedial classes run by Cape Technikon remedial teachers and then participated in emotional groups, which were facilitated by two intern psychologists in each younger and older age groups. The parent support group was run concurrently with the emotional groups and was co-facilitated by a clinical psychologist and an intern psychologist. Each group had a supervisor that supported the therapists and teachers working within the project. Refer to the organizational layout in Appendix 1.

The Parents Support Group as the name suggests was an intervention for both parents of these learning-disabled children, however the group consisted of a majority of women and thus an unequal gender composition. Gender is one of the most fundamental ways we categorize people and is therefore held that gender possibly affects the behavior and beliefs of people. This affect on behavior and beliefs seems to be due to an awareness of the inequalities created between the genders and this seems to have created a dynamic that was being enacted between the men and women in the group as well as the organization. This dynamic was a process or phenomenon that was causing much tension within the group and the organization and which could not be accounted for. Therefore, the gender dynamics within the Parent Support Group can be seen as activity or a process within a group, which can be attributed to gender. The co-facilitators worked within a psychodynamic model but during the group sessions it became apparent that there were other dynamics at play within the group that could not be accounted for. It seemed that the psychodynamic model was unable to offer an adequate explanation for the dynamics in the group so another model was sought to aid with this explanation.

The dynamics in the group could not be accounted for, however these dynamics appeared to have a common tie to gender. Therefore, in this study the researcher uses a feminist framework in an attempt to explore the gender dynamics in the Parents Support Group.

The purpose of the research is three fold. First, the study aims to explore how gender dynamics contribute to or hinder the Parent Support Group intervention. Second, the study seeks to uncover the negative gender enactments within the group and explore whether these gender enactments can and should be challenged with the group process. Third, the study aims to raise questions about the extent to which co-facilitators as well as an organization collude with and reinforce distorted gender dynamics through certain practices and interventions. These practices and interventions refer to the ideology and theoretical models, which the organization adopts and which could influence important decisions made within the organization as well as all therapeutic work conducted.

The study explores the gender dynamics of the Parents Support Group but more importantly it seeks to raise questions about current practices of the Parent Support Group intervention. The study expects to challenge therapists, group facilitators and organizations that choose to ignore the importance of gender in their interventions. It is hoped that this research contributes to the careful consideration of gender in therapeutic interventions, and that these interventions are also utilized as platforms for social change.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide a review of the literature. The first section looks at parenting, which provides a background to compare how this concept differs from parenting a learning-disabled child. The second section explores a group as an intervention for parents with learning-disabled children as is the case in the study. This section also looks at three types of groups namely, support groups, Yalom's interpersonal group and a group that uses a psychoanalytic understanding, since this was the theoretical framework that was used by the organization. In the third section social constructionist theory is used to uncover how these theoretical frameworks are inadequate or alternatively succeed in providing a comprehensive understanding of groups. The fourth section discusses feminist theory. This theoretical framework is then used to look at how gender dynamics are enacted within a support group and organization. Finally the section highlights how feminist groupwork has the added responsibility of being political work as well.

2.1 Parenting

Traditionally adults have assumed a natural authority over their offspring and have maintained a hierarchical distance from their children through the conduct of parenthood. Singer (1992) attributes this natural authority of parents to the fact that parents are older than their children and have acquired more resources to be able to ensure the well being of their children. Parents are also legally responsible for the well being of their children due to the fact that children are not developmentally mature enough to make decisions for

themselves. Discourses surrounding parenting have a long history. Goodnow and Collins (1990) state that parenting depend on the qualities parents want to see their children develop, and propose a hierarchy that starts from physical health and survival and progresses through the acquisition of economic capacities. These qualities are dependant on and altered over time, in accordance with socio-cultural and economic activities. Goodnow and Collins (1990) use the example of parents in societies where achieving high up in the hierarchy might seem unlikely because of subsistence demands and may therefore display a great interest in the emotional development of children. Therefore parenting seems to be a practice that mirrors the changes of the surrounding context, so it is dynamic rather than a set of dormant rules.

Gill (2001) also argues that parenting is a culture-bound concept that is constantly reinvented or socially constructed as a response to socio-political and economic developments. It seems that the responsibilities of parenting in most cultures are gender specific. Women are seen to be responsible for the majority if not all responsibilities associated with parenting children. Through history there have been two world wars, economic changes and conditions, which have drastically impacted on parenting, however women's responsibilities towards their children have remained constant with the inclusion of other responsibilities. According to Deutch (2001) both world wars affected parenting in two ways. Firstly, fathers had to leave their family to fight in the war, leaving the mother to take full responsibility for their children. Secondly, during the Second World War many women worked outside the home but this was understood as being a temporary, wartime necessity. After the war some women continued to take jobs,

partly because there were not enough men to take them, partly because many families and women needed more income, and partly because women were tired of domesticity and wanted jobs. This changed the existing structure of the traditional family and further disrupted parenting itself. This disruption in parenting caused the mother to divide her sole responsibility towards her child with her job, leaving less time for her children and family. Thus, these events have redefined family and parenting.

Parents are often described as having responsibility for children and as feeling responsible. According to Goodnow and Collins (1990) there is no clarity to what parents regard as the essentials or the limits of responsibility, and what the conditions are that give rise to different definitions. Despite the lack of clarity on the responsibilities of parents, there still seems to be a collection of several popular discourses of appropriate ways to raise children, which have survived. These discourses range from what children should be fed or clothed in, when and how they should be disciplined if at all, how to ensure children's safety, ensuring children acquire moral standards and valued social and norms surrounding the length of commitment parents offer to offspring. These discourses on parenting responsibilities are important when considering what happens when the act of parenting is challenged by one having to parent a child with a learning disability.

2.1.1. Parenting a learning- disabled child:

Learning-disabled children face the crisis associated with the fact that they are not "normal" (Scott, 1999). Marks (1999) states that this concept of normal is exacerbated in modern western cultures, which place high regard on intelligence and

academic achievement. Performing well academically is sometimes perceived as intelligence and children who cannot perform as well as their peers academically are excluded from the category of what it means to be normal, and are labeled as being learning-disabled. According to Carr (1999) intelligence can be construed as the ability to function adequately in a specific environment such as in school. Furthermore, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) provides criteria by which it can be determined if a child has a learning disability, as stated in the previous chapter. (American Psychological Association, 2000).

Parenting learning-disabled children presents not only the usual parenting problems, but also additional problems. Learning disabilities seem to set off particular problems in parenting and family life that differ from parenting children without learning disabilities (Berman, 1979; Harter, 2003; Russell, 2003; Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990). Following the diagnosis of a child's disability, parents have to develop new expectations concerning their child, their role as parents and the support services that are designed to meet their needs. Waggoner and Wilgosh (1990) suggest that parents of learning-disabled children have far more than just the conventional roles attributed to parents. First, parents show a far more active involvement in the educational experience of the child, assuming different roles, such as teacher and advocate. Second, parents of learning disabled children endure far more emotional strain in their parenting and this often affects family dynamics, as demands upon the parents can be numerous and extremely time consuming. A range of social, educational, relational and emotional challenges confront parents, who often feel ill equipped to manage them. For example, parents often have to deal with multiple systems

a meeting every week. This meeting is a place to learn from shared experiences, a way of breaking down loneliness and isolation, a place to get different perspectives on problems, a place to experience power over personal situations with the capacity to implement change, and a place where friendships can be built. However, it seems that group interventions seem to attract more women than men. Lyttleton (2004) states that to date women, markedly outnumber men in most groups, and, many members regard masculinity as a constraining factor on male participation. It also seems that women feel more able to utilize the group and therefore seem to benefit more from group interventions than men do.

2.2.1 Support groups for parents of learning-disabled children:

According to Smith, et al. (1994) in general, support groups for parents are diverse but share principles of prevention, development models of parenting skills, a great value for peer support, and an ecological belief in service delivery. The literature suggests that support groups for parents are highly effective in helping them overcome difficulties relating to their children with learning disabilities (Andersen, 1994; Bresnick & Stocker, 1994; Fernandes & Souza, 2001; Greenspan, 2004; Sadoski, 1999; Slowik, Willson, Loh & Noronha, 2004; Strip, 2001). Smith, Gabard, Dale and Drucker (1994) document the usefulness of parent support groups with respect to issues like teenage suicides, deaths of children, children with terminal illnesses and children with eating disorders. Rawlins and Horner (1988) state that support groups for parents are effective for two key reasons. Firstly, they provide mutual support and friendship for parents, and secondly, they facilitate the gathering

and distributing of information to and between parents. Thus a parent support group is seen as useful for parenting children with learning disabilities. In general there are several ways that parent support groups are facilitated but all share principles of prevention, development models of parenting skills and peer support.

2.2.2 Yalom's interpersonal theory of groups:

There are multiple theories of understanding groups but Yalom (1995) has provided what is seen to be the most comprehensive model. According to Yalom (1995) certain factors underlie effective therapeutic groups. Some of the factors on Yalom's list are mechanisms that are responsible for facilitating change, which include the instillation of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socializing techniques, imitative behaviour, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis and existential factors.

An important issue that Yalom identified and which is implicit in some of the mechanisms identified is that which happens in groups. Yalom (1995) also emphasizes that what happens in the group with participants is connected to participants' experiences outside the group. "Individual experience does not occur in a vacuum, experience involves an encounter with the social and cultural context, which acts to inform and transform the individual's inner meaning of that experience" (Brown, 1994 in Bender & Ewashen, 2000, p302). Thus Bender and Ewashen (2000) conclude that traditional therapy attends to the specific and emergent individual details of a participant's life, but fails when links between the participant's

experiences and the related sociopolitical realities are not addressed. Therefore the only way to “learn about how we function and experience the world is to listen to the individual voices as they are connected to the social world” (Lazerson, 1992, p. 527).

Yalom (1995) explores the theoretical concept of a social microcosm, which refers to the notion that given enough time, members behave in the therapy group very similarly to the way they behave in the outside social environment. According to Yalom (1995) each group member brings into the group the whole socio-cultural context in which he/she lives and all members will enact their styles of relating within the group. These will tend to reflect the realities in which participants live and which they are likely to enact within the group. Thus the Parent Support Group allows participants to interact as parents of learning-disabled children and use the group as a means of getting support and acquiring of skills, but the group process also highlights other significant socio-cultural dynamics in the group, which reflect the sociopolitical realities of group members. The concept of the social microcosm offers a way to understand these processes in members' lives and group therapists or facilitators thus bear the responsibility of acknowledging and helping members make meaning of their problem issues as well as their functioning within their respective socio-political realities. Bender and Ewashen (2000) suggest that the experience of interacting with others in a social microcosm constructed as a 'group' constitutes a powerful method of self-learning. Bender and Ewashen (2000) utilize an example of how nurse therapists applied the concept of the social microcosm to their groups, which proved

to be very effective in allowing them to highlight the prejudice that was being enacted within the group.

The concept of the social microcosm can be extended towards an understanding of an entire organization, by explaining ways in which it too enacts dynamics of the larger socio-cultural context in which it is located. An understanding of the social microcosm thus helps the organization identify where it may collude and enact dynamics that are prominent in South African society. Such an enactment of broader contexts may be problematic because instead of facilitating change within the organization it merely reflects dynamics outside the organization. Bender and Ewashen (2000) highlight two problems that emerge when systemic social issues are not confronted. Firstly, they argue that this causes issues or problems to be located primarily in the individual, and secondly the social environment in which we all participate is excluded and its importance denied. Therefore, the Parents Support Group is viewed as a social microcosm in which members' sociopolitical realities will be reflected and enacted. However, it can be argued from a social constructionist perspective that the concept of the social microcosm fails to explore whether these social-cultural experiences that participants bring to the group are fixed or if they could be malleable in a medium such as a group.

2.2.3 Psychodynamic understanding of groups:

Although the study seeks to explore the Parents Support Group, it cannot be separated from the organization as a whole. When an organization, like the Child Guidance

Clinic is psychodynamically orientated, this informs all practice, whether it is in individual, family or group work. Therefore, a psychodynamic approach is usually also adopted by group facilitators during the group process.

Garrick and Ewashen (2001) state that the psychodynamic model relies heavily on psychoanalytic theory and this theory assumes that maladaptive behaviors and beliefs are a result of unconscious drives and conflicts. Therefore the goal of therapy is to help the patient gain awareness of those parts of the unconscious that result in destructive distortions. Halton (1994), Moylan (1994) and Stapley (1996) state that psychoanalysis takes the approach of looking at issues from a conscious and unconscious perspective and then works simultaneously at both levels. Ideas which have a valid meaning at the conscious level may at the same time carry an unconscious hidden meaning.

According to De Board (1978) the application of psychoanalysis from individual therapy to group life began with Freud's consideration of the church and the army. Freud, although mainly concentrating on individual behavior and the therapeutic affect of psychoanalysis, sought to extend the application of his ideas and theories to groups, organizations and society. Gould (1991) discusses how Freud linked certain dynamic aspects of these organizations to his earlier hypothesis regarding the origins of social process and social structure namely, the primal horde. Psychoanalysis has thus contributed to the understanding of groups by applying concepts and processes utilized in individual therapy. So groups, like individuals have an unconscious life,

which is highlighted by the dynamics between participants in the group. Halton (1994) recognizes psychoanalysis as a potentially creative activity, which may help in understanding and dealing with certain issues in a group by looking at it in terms of unconscious emotional processes. The psychoanalytic approach to group work has helped in exposing group dynamics that are less visible, without considering the unconscious processes at play. For instance dialogue and behavior within a group could be meaningful on the conscious level but at the same time uncover an unconscious conflict in the group. Therefore, both the conscious and unconscious emotional processes are monitored simultaneously.

According to De Board (1978) unconscious conflicts within groups are made conscious by interpretations. When the group facilitators or therapists make interpretations about these unconscious processes happening within a group, the group becomes aware of them. This allows for the hidden conflicts and drives within the group's unconscious to be dealt with and worked through in consciousness. This process therefore facilitates change within the group.

Drawing from Freud's initial application of psychoanalysis to the organization, several pioneers like Klein and Bion have built on this work. Gould (1991) may be correct in asserting that there is a rich body of research, which asserts that using a psychodynamic understandings in groups and organizations have considerable utility, however, it appears to leave gaps when offering a complete and rich understanding of

group dynamics. Therefore, social constructionism can prove to be useful in filling these gaps and thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of groups.

2.3 Social constructionism

Social constructionism is a school of thought introduced into sociology by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann with their 1966 book on *The Social Construction of Reality*. The interest of social constructionism is to discover the ways that individuals and groups create their perceived reality. As an approach, it involves looking at the ways social phenomena are created, institutionalized, and made into tradition by humans. Gergen (1985) adopts an endogenic perspective that places knowledge within a process of social interchange. The theory asserts that the beliefs that people hold about the world, their reality and meanings made of their experiences, are socially constructed. Social constructionism theory sees the development of knowledge as a social phenomenon and maintains that perception can evolve only through communication and people's interaction. Therefore the knowledge, beliefs and experiences that participants have when they enter a group are modifiable through the group process of exploring and talking about these beliefs and experiences. It emphasizes the communal basis of knowledge formed through communication, negotiation, and interpretation by individuals. Thus, knowledge is not just what people possess in their heads, but something people do and create together, and an evolving set of meanings emerge unendingly from interactions between people, and these meanings are in turn part of a general flow of constantly changing narratives (Cheung, 1997; Daniels & White, 1994; Magana & Short, 2002; O'Neil, 1999). According to social constructionism theory, the process whereby social

including schools, teachers, and medical and mental health practitioners (Cartwright, 1981; Snell & Rosen, 1997).

Studies have shown that parents of children with learning disabilities often report higher levels of stress in the parenting role than those without these concerns (Dyson, 1996; Fuller & Rankin, 1994; McConachie, 1986). Components of this stress include negative views of self and parenting roles and perceived lack of social supports (Banyard, Englund & Rozelle, 2001). Frustration, guilt, helplessness, despair and embarrassment are common feelings for these parents, and this often leads to a stressful parent-child relationship (McConachie, 1986). According to Greenspan (2004) parents identify with their children's struggles as well as their joys and successes, but in the case of children who have learning difficulties parent's questions, anxieties and tendency to over-identify with their children can become more pronounced. It may be hard for these parents to understand what their children are going through and are unsure of how to help, so they often experience extreme reactions that range from guilt, fear, and worry, to over-identification with their learning disabled children's vulnerabilities.

A number of studies have documented the impact of parenting under conditions of family stress such as death, divorce, remarriage and poverty (Arditti & Bickley, 1996; Brooks-Gunn, Berlin & Fuligni, 2000; Fine & Schwebel, 1992; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). It can be argued that parenting a child with a learning disability presents another example of stressful conditions for parents and the family. Furthermore, this

disrupts the family in that the siblings of the learning-disabled child must come to terms with the fact that their parents cannot give them the amount of care and attention required. Parenting a learning disabled child also has implications for the relationship between both parents. According to Berman (1979) the strains of having a learning disabled child can cause so much stress that it can lead to marital discord, separation and even divorce. Some reasons that could cause relational tension between the couple are issues around discipline, blame and responsibility. Parents may argue about how to discipline their child due to one of the parents feeling that the child is just lazy or naughty and therefore deny that there is a problem of a learning disability. Parents also struggle with issue of blame when the cause for the learning disability is unclear. Parents sometimes believe that their child is learning-disabled due to a genetic predisposition or bad parenting and this causes these parents to blame themselves or each other for the cause of their child's learning disability. The extra responsibilities that a learning disabled child brings is another cause for tension between parents due to the unequal sharing of these responsibilities. Nevertheless studies on parenting under conditions of family stress and/or specific additional child stressors (e.g. emotional or learning impairments) also highlight a number of protective factors for parents, including benefits of higher levels of social support, which should be a key aspect of interventions (Koeske & Koeske, 1990). Despite these protective factors, parents in such situations have particular needs.

George and Wilding (1976, in Butler & Wintram, 1997) differentiate between felt and expressed needs. They define "felt needs" as those needs that are perceived and

identified by outsiders such as an organization and/or a group of individuals who offer help. Bradshaw (1972, in Butler & Wintram, 1997) states that the actual existence of a 'felt need' cannot be known unless it is translated into action, and becomes what he calls an "expressed need". These are manifest when people, such as parents of children with learning disabilities identify needs within themselves and express these needs to an appropriate organization or individual that they see as having the capacity to help them. Parents express a need for an intervention for their children and an organization or individual caters for the children's needs through remedial classes and a play therapy group. At the same time an organization or individual might also feel that parents need more support and may therefore offer a group intervention, which is possibly perceived to be the best way of providing this support.

2.2 Group Interventions:

According to Butler and Wintram (1997) a group is born when there is a need for behavioral change, and group therapists believe that such changes are likely to be encouraged in a co-operative or semi-coercive fashion through group participation. Prior studies of different kinds of groups like therapeutic groups, supportive groups, work groups and other naturally occurring groups have explored the general effectiveness of groups for their members. "Groups satisfy a number of basic survival, psychological, informational, interpersonal and collective needs" (Forsyth, Elliott & Welsh, 1999, p. 172). According to Butler and Wintram (1997) the group is a source of immediate support, where there is safety in just knowing that there will be

exchange takes place is essentially a linguistic and communicative structure. Cheung (1997) states that social constructionism views the world as being understood as interchanges between people, and in these interchanges meaning is created.

There seems to be a lack of research that uses social constructionist theory to understand groups in psychological practice and interventions. Although there is a plethora of literature on social constructionist theory, there is little work that uses this theory to understand group processes and whether processes within a group can be reconstructed differently. The rich literature on feminism seems to be able to adequately tie together both Yalom's theory of the social microcosm and social constructionist theory by focusing specifically on gender. This study, which was concerned with gender as reflected and enacted in the group, uses feminist theory.

2.4 Feminist theory:

According to Butler and Wintram (1991) the goals and strategies of feminism must be articulated with felt oppression, and with the utopian hopes, fears, wishes, and aspirations of women. There is a sweeping list of names that have contributed to feminist theory like, Dorothy Richardson, Elaine Showalter, Helen Cixous, Jane Gallop, Juliet Mitchell, Kate Millett, Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Wolf. Though belonging to the same movement, these intellectuals' opinions and discourses are not by necessity compatible with each others. Therefore, feminism and feminist theory is not unified and there are many different expressions of it.

Feminism also seeks to conceptualize how gender operates in a culture; how it interacts with our ways of thinking about our social, economic, political and cultural interactions and structures. In responding to gender saliency in our South African culture, feminism highlights how gender affects our social interaction just as class and race affect our social interactions. Lazerson (1992) argues that gender permeates our ways of being in the culture, therefore a person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others. However, it also seems that culture permeates our ways of doing gender.

According to Nussbaum (1995) 'culture' can be defined as the distinctive patterns of ideas, beliefs and norms that characterize the way of life and relations of a group within a society. There is a diversity of cultures within the South African context which suggests that gender is done differently within all these cultures. It also seems that culturally determined gender ideologies define rights and responsibilities and what is believed to be appropriate behavior is for men and women. It also influences access to and control over resources and participation in decision-making. These culturally determined gender ideologies within the South African context often reinforce male power and the idea of women's inferiority. Some feminists use the concept of 'patriarchy' to explain the systematic subordination of women by systemic social structures and this at the same time maintains unequal gendered prescriptions. Walby (1990) states that these overarching and localized structures work to benefit men by constraining women's life choices and chances.

Despite all the goals and strategies of feminism, the central commitment to equality has followed a long and sinuous road. Kristeva (1982, in Lazerson, 1992) describes three

generations of feminists. In the 1960s first generation feminists were concerned with equity in society, such as eliminating discriminatory practices in the work place. These first generation feminists raised awareness about how the social and economic structures were differentially rewarding men and women. Therefore, this was a period of consciousness raising. Second-generation feminists, in recognition of the differences between men and women began to focus on the differences. During this period, attention was paid to women as caretakers and the values associated with the role equity. The first and second waves of feminism are united neatly into parallel movements displaced in time, part of the same spiral that will rise again in the third wave. Now feminism has entered a third phase. Lazerson (1992) argues that in this phase feminists are reviewing the first two first phases and look at the successes and failures in order to move toward integrating the old and the new. Lazerson (1992) further states that in continued recognition of the first generation feminists' concerns that inequity is still a problem, and of second generation feminists' concerns with the "different voice" of women, Third Wave feminists are picking up the task of completing the work the Second Wave did, as well as defining new issues for which to fight.

Given the shifts of feminist practice over time it is interesting to explore how feminist theory can help us to understand how gender interacts in groups and individual lives of participants in ways that can contribute to the effectiveness of groups.

2.4.1 Looking at the group and organization through a feminist lens:

Liberal feminism is a form of feminism that can be used as a lens when looking at the group and organization. Liberal feminism argues that equality for women can be achieved through legal means and social reform, and that men as a group need not be challenged. Liberal feminism leans towards an equality of sameness with men. The researcher utilizes a liberal feminist understanding for this study that challenges us to firstly, view the Parent Support Group as an enactment of sociopolitical contexts and secondly, to view these enactments as malleable." Feminism is not a set of techniques or conclusions, but rather a lens through which one views and understands realities" (Werner-Wilson, 2001). Feminism is a response to gender potency, which impacts on social relations. According to Garrick and Ewashen (2001) the key to feminism is the concept of 'gendering', that is being shaped or defined by society's structures and assumptions about gender. Stevenson (1997) refers to gender as being the differences between males and females, which are attributable to cultural stereotypes and socialization. Liberal feminism seeks to explore how gender interacts with our ways of thinking about one another as well as our social, economic, political and cultural interactions and structures. According to Garrick and Ewashen, (2001) class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other factors linked to societal inequities intersect with, and affect, gender-based inequalities and gender processes. In this study liberal feminism links participants' personal experience of being parents with learning disabled children with socio-politically shaped realities in which they live, work and play. "Understanding the importance of gender in the development of human behavior, in people's sense of self, and in their interactions, with one another has been one of the most salient and

powerful contributions made by feminist therapy to psychotherapy practice in general” (Brown, 1994, p.51, in Bender & Ewashen, 2000). Social constructionist theory highlights that gender is a process rather than a static result of socialization and it allows one to perceive these gender attitudes as modifiable.

Gordon (1990) highlights the distinction between feminist theory and feminist practice. However, Butler and Wintram (1991) argue that in groupwork both practice and theory are value-laden processes. Attitudes and beliefs are held by and within feminist therapists and actions are present at every stage of the practice endeavor, whether they are aware of it or not. Feminism helps therapists make these values and theoretical principles explicit, and to share them at every stage of the group process. Therefore Moradi, et al. (2000) argue that being a therapist and going into a group with a feminist theory directly implies that the therapist is a feminist therapist who will react to the feminist theory they carry, whether intentionally or not. While several efforts are being made, according to Moradi et. al (2000), to arrive at some consensus regarding the central tenets of feminist therapy, there are no set definitions of feminist therapy but rather multiple and varied approaches to its practice.

2.4.2. Feminist groupwork is political work

Butler and Wintram (1991) argue that group work carried out with a feminist perspective is a direct challenge to normative practice. They emphasize the range of changes which groups are capable of bringing about, such as feminist practice, by highlighting the ways in which feminist group work can promote personal identity

change and at the same time contribute to social change. In groups this translates into group consciousness-raising regarding relations of power, oppression and privilege. This consciousness raising is viewed as a means to group and social change. According to Lazerson (1992) a feminist therapist assists group participants to understand personal changes from the perspective of society, culture and context. When sexist biases are overtly acknowledged and explored, this halts their perpetuation.

Feminist groupwork needs to evolve from the group therapists' consideration of group structure and dynamics, so both intrapsychic processes of participants as well as socio-political processes of the group need to be tracked. Brown (1994, in Bender & Ewashen, 2000) states that traditional therapy attends to the specific and the emergent individual details of a client's life, but is inadequate when links between the client's unique experience and the socio-politically shaped realities shared with others are not addressed. The intrapsychic process of identity and the socio-political processes of group need to be drawn together. This is in keeping with Breakwall (1986) who argues that identity should be treated as 'a dynamic social product, residing in psychological processes, which cannot be understood except in relation to its social context and historical perspective' (p.9). People are conscious of their identities or sense of self in relation to others, and hence construction of self is largely defined by those around them. Breakwall (1986) proposes that identity is structured across two planes – the content and value dimensions. The *content dimension* encompasses 'social identity' (group membership, roles) and 'personal identity'

(values, attitudes). Each element in the content dimension has a *value dimension*, which is constantly subject to reappraisal, in response to changes in social systems and the participant's relation to such systems. Breakwall's model of identity offers a level of theoretical understanding that captures the dynamism of group process and how these reflect and reshape the personal realities of group members. Through the interactions in a group, the beliefs and social roles attached to parents may be reconstructed and this may lead to change.

In reviewing the literature, there seems to be no other published study that explores the gender dynamics within a Parents Support Group. Therefore this study could contribute to a severely deficient area of research.

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CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology and the rationale for particular methods used, in order to explore the dynamics within a Parents Support Group. The first section explores the qualitative approach and interpretivist paradigm used in the study. The second section looks at the participants in the study and how they were selected. In the third section the procedure of collecting data through participant observation and interviewing will be discussed. A fourth section in this chapter will discuss the method of thematic analysis, which was used to analyze the data collected. Finally in the fifth section the chapter looks at the ethical considerations and limitations of the methodology.

3.1 Research Design:

The study primarily sets out to investigate the dynamics within a Parents Support Group. Terre Blanche and Durheim (1999) state that exploratory studies make preliminary investigations into relatively unknown areas of research. They employ an open, flexible and inductive approach to research as they attempt to look for new insights into phenomena. A fitting approach for this exploratory study is a qualitative approach, which seeks to discover and explain experience. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1999) this method tries to describe and interpret people's feelings and experiences in human terms rather than through quantification.

According to Neuman (1994) the orientation of qualitative research, its assumptions about social life, its objectives for research, and the way it deals with data are often at odds with the quantitative approach. The most obvious difference is that qualitative data tend to be in the

form of words, sentences, and paragraphs rather than numbers. Qualitative reports therefore contain rich descriptions, detail and a feel for social settings.

According to Terre Blanche and Durheim (1999) qualitative research maintains that there are multiple realities, which are socially constructed and are constantly changing due to the changing social contexts. A qualitative approach used in this study seems apt in that it appears to support the feminist framework used in the study, which sought to uncover how meaning and knowledge around gender is socially constructed. Feminist research emerged during the 1980's as feminist thinking became established in the academic community and has since been associated with qualitative research methods. A dimension of feminist research is its opposition to positivist assumptions. According to Neuman (1994) feminist researchers argue that positivism is consistent with a male point of view; it is objective, logical, task orientated, and instrumental.

Therefore the study takes an interpretivist approach. This approach assumes that "people's subjective experiences are real and should be taken seriously, that we can understand others' experiences by interacting with them and listening to what they tell us, and that qualitative techniques are best suited to this task" Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999:124). Interpretive researchers believe that the purpose of research is to understand social life and discover how people construct social meaning. The approach uses ordinary language and expression to help better understand the social world. Interpretative research also states that the researcher is key to how the participants' experiences are understood and interpreted, therefore Banister et al. (1994) claims that the researcher is central to the research process.

Qualitative research is useful in recognizing that the researcher is not absent from the process but is rather an emotional and involved insider to the research process. It does not ignore the researcher's active part in this study. The researcher is the central tool in data collection within the group, and highlights how the researchers own reality could influence the data collection. Therefore Terre Blanche and Durheim (1999) highlight that in a qualitative study reality can only be approximated and objective science does not exist.

The researcher has had significant involvement in the organization and Learning Problems Project, which on the one instance appears to contribute to the study but at the same time this intense involvement in the organization and Learning Problems Project could possibly hinder the study. According to O' Leary (2004) reflexivity is a vital process whereby the researcher stands outside the entire research process and critically reflects on it. Reflexivity involves constant consideration of the researcher, the researched and the research process. As Du Bois, (1983, in Banister et al 1994:151) states, 'Reflexivity is about acknowledging the central position of the researcher in the construction of knowledge, that the knower is part of the matrix of what is known'. Objectivity is limited due to the researcher bringing their own experiences and views to the study. Therefore, Kvale (1996) states that the researcher co-creates with the participants what they are describing and through the researcher's interpretation new information is constructed. The researcher's relationship with the participants is one of interdependent intersubjectivity, where data gathered is a rich account of both the participant and the researcher. In an attempt to address this issue the researcher reflected on this relationship during the entire research process through supervision. The researchers' concerted effort to be aware of these intrusive feelings and expectations had contributed instead of hindered the research process. It is therefore vitally important that the researcher is aware of their subjectivity during the research process and a failure to do this

will mean that the research will 'merely be a reflection of our own unconscious issues disturbed by research' (Banister et al, 1994:125).

According to Durheim (1999) a paradigm acts as perspectives that provide a rationale for the research and commits the researcher to particular methods of data collection and interpretation and for the rationale of this study the qualitative paradigm was deemed most suitable. Qualitative researchers collect data in the form of written or spoken language, or in the form of observations that are recorded in language. There are a plethora of data collection methods in qualitative research like interviews, observation, grounded theory, case studies ethnographic studies and document analysis. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998) qualitative research, privileges no single method and no specific method or practice can be privileged over any other. However, for this study the data collection methods of interviewing and participant observation were used. For the purposes of this study interviews proved to be the method of data collection that would yield the most useful information required to answer the research questions. "Interviews are one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings" (Fontana and Frey, 1994:361). Interviews allow the researcher to explore the participant's subjective feelings, thoughts, beliefs and perceptions of their experience to be obtained. The second method of data collection utilized was participant observation. According to Mason (1996) participant observation usually refers to methods of generating data which entail the researcher immersing themselves in a research setting so that they can experience and observe at first hand a range of dimensions in and of that setting. According to Mason (1996) this method is favored because of its reliance on first-hand information, the rich emergence of data, and reliance on relatively simple and inexpensive methods.

Durheim (1999) states that design coherence can be achieved by ensuring that the research purposes and techniques are arranged logically so as to 'fit' within the research framework provided by a particular paradigm. The design of this study seems coherent because the techniques of sampling, data collection and interpretation as well as the context of the study fit within the logic of the interpretive paradigm and with the purpose of the research.

3.2 Participants:

3.2.1 Group Participants:

The group consisted of thirteen participants. There was a male and a female co-facilitator in the group. The male co-facilitator was a qualified psychologist, who worked at the University of Cape Town, Child Guidance Clinic and who was also the coordinator of the entire Learning Problems Project. He had a keen interest in the area of learning disabilities and was extensively involved in the project. The female co-facilitator was a student in the first year of the clinical psychology masters program. The female co-coordinator had limited experience in facilitating groups but did however receive extensive supervision and skills training during the progression of the Parents Support Group. The supervisor of both co-facilitators was a senior lecturer and staff member who also worked at the Child Guidance Clinic. The supervisor had extensive experience in facilitating and supervising group work.

In addition to the co-facilitators, ten of the thirteen participants were women and there was one male participant. Nine of these female participants were mothers of the learning-disabled children and there was a grandmother who attended the group on behalf of the parents of one child. The group was conducted in English, which was the primary

language of most of the participants, however there were a few participants who used Afrikaans as their primary language. The members are all so called 'Coloured' and all participants fall within the lower income range. In the South African context, the term Coloured refers to various people of mixed Bantu, Khoisan, and European descent. In South Africa during the apartheid era in order to keep divisions and therefore maintain a "race" focused society the term "Coloureds" was invented as one of the four main racial groups identified by law.

3.2.2 Interview Participants:

A sample of six parents was selected from the Parent Support Group for semi-structured interviews. It was not possible for the entire population (Parent Support Group) to be used in the research due to accessibility, time and financial restraints. Mouton (2001) states decisions about whether or not to cover the whole population are influenced both by methodological considerations, such as accuracy and precision, and also practical considerations, such as the available time and financial resources. Obtaining a sample for the study was done in two steps. First, there were only six participants who continued to attend the Parent Support Group a year after the researcher co-facilitated the group. These six participants were then identified and approached by the researcher to be interviewed. This was done to ensure easy access to those participants who were in the same Parents Support Group facilitated by the researcher and because they were familiar with the researcher and the purpose of the research, which meant that rapport was already built between the researcher and the participants. Second, from this identified population, the researcher using convenience sampling and drew a sample of participants to be interviewed. According to Morse and Richards (2002) convenience sampling is used in exploratory research where the researcher is interested in getting an inexpensive

approximation of the truth. As the name implies, the sample is selected because at the time of data collection are selected for purposes of convenience. The researcher used participants that continued with the Parents Support Group for the second year. These participants used were still involved in the project and this provided the researcher with the opportunity of having convenient access to these participants. Therefore the sample consisted of a total of five female participants and one male participant that mirrored the sex composition of the Parent Support Group. Only one male participant was interviewed because he was the only male participant that attended the Parent Support Group. The average age was 41years (range from 34-45 years of age) and all participants were so called coloured.¹

3.3 Procedure:

Data was collected through two processes. According to Mouton (1996) a general principle in data collection is that the inclusion of multiple sources of data collection in research is likely to increase and compliment the richness of data collected from each source. Denzin (1978) coined the term triangulation to refer to the use of multiple methods of data collection. Silverman (2004) states that triangulation assumes that looking at an object from more than one standpoint provides researchers with more comprehensive knowledge about the object. Another underlying assumption of using two methods and techniques of data collection in a single study is that these various methods complement each other and their respective shortcomings are balanced out.

¹ The terms Black, coloured, white and Indian used to distinguish 'racial' categories previously enforced by the state. The usage of these terms does not indicate any acceptance of these categories.

The researcher was involved in several levels of the organization and the Learning Problems Project, which made entry into the setting and access to data collection uncomplicated. Firstly, data was collected through the researcher being a participant observer in the Parents Support Group and taking session notes after each session. This also allowed the researcher an opportunity to be a participant observer in the group and collect data. More specifically overt participant observation was used for this study. Mason (1996) states that overt participant observation, as the name suggests, involves the researcher being open with the group that they are going to study. In this instance the researcher informed the participants in the group about the purpose of the research, and the duration of the research and how they would be involved. Data used for this study were notes that the researcher made after each Parents Support Group session.

According to Neuman (1994) these notes captured are referred to as direct observation notes. The researcher writes these notes immediately after leaving the field, which they can add to later. The notes are organized chronologically with the date, time, and place on each entry. The notes are a detailed description of what the researcher heard and saw in concrete terms. When possible there are exact recordings of the particular words, phrases, or actions used in a specific group. These notes provide rich source information concerning the researchers experience in the group as well as the group dynamics. Session notes also included notes from supervision sessions of the group, which added to the material already captured. According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, in Terre Blanche & Durheim, 1999) a tape recorder can be perceived as being very intrusive to participants. Therefore, the Parent Support Group sessions were not audiotape recorded as it was felt that it might disrupt the process of interaction and communication. It was also felt that some aspects of group

experience are not accessible through the spoken word and what participants say is often different to what they actually do, so detailed notes were made after every group session.

Secondly, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with participants were conducted. All interviews except one were conducted in the same venue where the Parent Support Groups were run, to ensure easy access for the participants and privacy. The interviews were semi-structured which consisted of open-ended but guiding questions, which gave participants the freedom of an open response to a specific question. Banister, et al. (1994) state that semi-structured questions, as used in the study enable the participant a degree of flexibility. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 75 minutes and at the start of every interview participants were informed about the aims of the research and assured of confidentiality. All interviews were conducted in English.

A new interview schedule was formulated by the researcher (see Appendix 2) due to an existing interview schedule appropriate for the purposes of this research project being unavailable. The interview schedule consists of four broad subgroups and more specific questions based on each subgroup are listed to elicit the relevant information required. Thus the interview schedule consisted of 22 open-ended questions. When formulating the interview schedule, the questions were informed by the feminist framework used, other relevant literature and from the researchers previous involvement with the Learning Problems Project and specifically the Parent Support Group. Due to the interactive nature of the interview and the rich source of information being related, the interview was audiotape recorded. The audio tapes were transcribed which changed the raw data to text form in preparation for data analysis.

3.4 Data analysis:

The method of analysis that was used for both the direct observation notes and data collected from the interviews was thematic analysis. According to Lewis-Beck (1994) thematic analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from texts. These inferences are about the senders of the message, the message itself or the audience of the message. The exploratory nature of this study provides a rich source of data, which then needs to be analyzed. Thematic analysis appears to be the best-suited method to adequately analyze this rich data and identify and extract key themes submerged within the raw data.

There are several steps that were followed in the data analysis process. First, the researcher immersed herself in the raw data in an attempt to understand and conceptualize ideas central to the study. Application of concepts drawn from the theoretical framework of feminism used, encouraged thought about possible themes that were submerged within the raw data. Durheim and Terre Blanche (1999) state that it is important for the researcher to know their data well enough to know more or less what kind of things can be found where as well as what sorts of interpretations are likely to be supported by the data and if not why not. Second, themes were induced from the raw data, using a bottom up approach where themes that underlie the text are emerging instead of a top-down approach that uses existing categories and look for instances fitting those categories. These “themes should ideally arise naturally from your data, but at the same time they should also have bearing on your research question” (Durheim and Terre Blanche, 1999:141). Third, phrases that were common among participants were ideal in giving rise to several broad themes. It became evident that some themes were merging and after this process of analysis was exhausted five fixed themes were delineated from the initial numerous themes found.

3.5 Ethical considerations and limitations:

At the beginning of the duration of Parent Support Group sessions the participants and the organization in question were briefed on the aims and rationale for the study and also on how they both could possibly benefit from the study. During the process of interviewing participant's subjective experiences are elicited and they are at risk of exposure. To guard against this, the researcher reassured the participants of complete confidentiality. Participant's confidentiality was protected by not disclosing their identity and by not allowing access of this data collected to other members involved in the organization and the Learning Problems Project. Access to this data was limited to the researcher and the supervisor of this study.

The researcher has been intensely involved in several levels of the organization and the researcher's relationship with the participants due to facilitating the Parent Support Group, may have possibly restricted the freedom of participants to speak freely about certain aspects of their experience. There was the risk that participants could have felt that disclosing too much about their negative experiences could possibly hinder their and their children's chances of being readmitted into the group the following year. In an attempt to address this problem the researcher firstly, assured all participants that the purpose of the interview was not to judge but instead to understand their experience and they were then encouraged to speak freely. Participants were also assured that this research is an independent study and had no direct ties with the Learning Problems Project and would not influence their children being readmitted or not the following year. The relationship of the researcher with the participants could have in the same event helped the interview process, because the researcher had already built trust with the participants. The relationship of the researcher to

the participants may have been a hindrance to the study and this could have limited the study. It is important to note that the relationship of the researcher with the participants could have also helped the interview process, because the researcher had already built trust with the participants prior to the interview.

It was possible that sensitive issues could have been evoked with participants during the interview process. The researcher took precautions in guarding against this. Firstly, the researcher was clinically trained and was able to offer containment to participants during interviews. Secondly, participants were given the option to make contact with the researcher if they encountered any problems or questions pertaining to the interview.

This chapter firstly discussed the interpretive paradigm used and provided a rationale for adopting a qualitative approach for the study. The second section described the participants used from the Parents Support Group and how participants were selected for the interviews using convenience sampling. The third section discussed the methods of semi-structured interviewing and overt participant observation used to collect data. The fourth section highlighted how thematic analysis was used to uncover specific themes from the raw data. Finally, ethical considerations and limitations concerning the well being of participants and the research were discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR:

RESULTS

This study aimed to explore the gender dynamics within a Parents Support Group. Several themes emerged through exploring both group session notes as well as interviews conducted with participants. The themes derived are the unequal gender constitution of the Parents Support Group, Parent Support Group being a positive experience for female participants, gender enactments in the group, challenging gender stereotypes in the group and gender re-enactments by the co-facilitators.

4.1. Unequal gender constitution of the Parents Support Group:

It was found that both parents were not attending the group but instead mostly mothers were using this intervention, despite the organization recommending that both parents attend. There was only one male participant in the Parents Support Group and therefore the group had an unequal gender composition with significantly more women than men. Due to this, the male participant often reported feeling uncomfortable with being the only man in the group and felt as if he didn't belong there.

Male Participant: I am the only man in the group, among all you ladies and I don't have any other man here. I don't mean to offend you, ladies but I only come for my son to this is place for me as the only man here.

Female Participant: I think it's good that you come for your son, when though the other fathers don't come here.

Most participants stated that the Parents Support Group consisted of mostly female participants because the group was constructed by the organization through their practices, expectations and interventions that it was perceived to be a group for women, thus inviting only women. Participants stated that the Parents Support Group was perceived as being a group that provided women with a space to gather and talk about their difficulties. Participants felt that the group being constructed as a women's group automatically excluded men from that space and the group as a whole. In an interview a participant spoke about certain practices surrounding the Parent Support Group, which seemed to feminize the group and in doing so exclude male participants.

Interviewer: Why do you think that most fathers didn't attend the group last year?

Male Participant: Well, I'm sure there are many a reason. It's hard for me to say why don't they. It's hard to say ... as a ... as a man myself, you see, this group is fine. You see, if you will see, most of the men are coming, because of ... see, if you look at a whole set, OK, it's most women, with tea and coffee and biscuits, and they sit and chat. Now that is now mainly what the women want to do. They want to

be the group, like to have a cup of tea and talk. Now men is not like that.

Participants stated that men also felt excluded from the group because of the nature of the group. The Parents Support Group dealt with emotional matters, which was explored in detail within the group and participants felt that this intervention was appropriate for female participants because they are emotional beings and naturally predisposed to deal with situations emotionally. However, men are less emotionally accessible than women therefore the group was not a suitable intervention for them. Thus preventing them from attending the group. The male participant spoke in the Parents Support Group about the different emotional needs between men and women and how the Parents Support Group was not a good intervention for men.

Male Participant: Especially when you talk about their children. Men won't open up, they won't open up especially about his children – about his family. But, ok, maybe one or two or three times. But not for a whole year; he will not continue. A woman can do that all the time, but not a man. It will become – if I can put it this way – it will become boring. You have opened up, and that's it, and we deal with it, and that's it.

Participants felt that structures outside the group also prevented men from attending the group. According to participants men are denied leave from their places of work and employers to attend the Parents Support Group. It is felt by employers that male employees getting leave from work to attend a Parents Support Group was not a valid reason because children are not a man's responsibility and neither was attending a Parents' Support Group.

Female Participant: It's easier for a woman to go to a boss, and say 'Look my child's got a problem, he's got to be there every Wednesday – is it possible if I can work in my lunch hour, take off from 4 til – and then be here by 5. I think it's much easier for a woman to do it than for a man. I think for a man to be here every week, so where's your wife, you know? But it's actually nice to see the men in the group.

In interviews participants spoke about how they understood the fact that other female participants who also worked were able to get time off work to attend the Parent Support Group in comparison to the men that were denied leave to attend the group. It was believed that women, more specifically mothers assume responsibility of caring for children and the Parent Support Group was a meeting for the caretakers of children namely mothers.

Male Participant: Where's the wife. Because in that case also, especially with an older boss, he also grew up where the mother had to take the lead when it comes to the kids.

Interviewer: So in terms of this group, the woman is easier for ... to take off work, because the bosses are probably more sympathetic towards the women – women are carers of children, and being for a man to want to be in a meeting which cares for children?

It was found that women are perceived to be naturally more caring and nurturing and were better suited than men to bond emotionally with a child and see to their emotional welfare. Participants also spoke about a very mysterious instinct or process that women have that makes them better attuned to the emotional needs of their children. According to participants this natural predisposition causes women to take responsibility for the emotional well being of their children. Therefore it was highlighted in interviews that attending the Parents Support Group is seen as a woman's responsibility instead of a man.

Interviewer: How do you make sense of the responsibilities being divided in this way...

Male Participant: You see, to me, it's ... it's natural. It's natural because a woman got special – you see there's a big difference between a woman and a man. We've each got a different role to play.

Interviewer: Like?

Male Participant: Like for instance, like I say, see, looking after these children and taking care of their feelings and emotions, changing their nappies, feeding him, breast-feed him, and I think which, I wouldn't be able, maybe, to do, the way she is doing it.

The unequal gender constitution of the Parents Support Group seems to highlight and allude to the gender dynamics at play within the group.

4.2. Gender enactments in the group:

During group sessions, female participants began to identify with each other and their experiences of being a woman, and more specifically a mother of a learning-disabled child. This seemed to have caused the female participants to become increasingly more aware of what they have contributed to their families and specifically to their learning-disabled children. In doing so they also became aware of how they were neglecting themselves. During a group session one participant commented on this.

Female Participant: We have to wear so many different pairs of shoes as a woman, there are the mothers shoes, the teachers shoes, the working shoes and so many other pairs. We have to do so much for our families and children that we are always changing shoes for them but we sometimes don't wear our own shoes.

Another participant also spoke in a group session about how her responsibilities towards her family and as well as the extra burden of having a learning disabled child, prevented her from making time for herself.

Female Participant: I watched this program on Oprah about how women should make time for themselves and not center their lives around their family. They spoke about lighting candles while you wash the dishes [laugh]. I don't know it just seems that I have too many concerns with my child's learning disability and the rest of my family, so how can I make time for my self.

This over-involvement in their children's lives was at the same time followed by a growing awareness of the absent men in their lives, which was perfectly highlighted by the absence of males in the group. This seemed to anger the female participants in the group. The male participant, being the only man in the group seemed to become the scapegoat for all the women's aggression and anger that was emerging towards the absent men in their lives. This emerged in a group session.

Female Participant: Most of us are women here and it's strange to have one man in the group. Well, it's strange because all the other men don't want to come to this group.

Although there was evidently a growing awareness of their oppression, and their absent partners there seemed to be resistance against naming the anger and rage, which they were experiencing. There were several attempts by co-facilitators to name this underlying aggression in the group, without success.

Female co-facilitator: It feels like some of the women are angry for being here today. I wonder if some of the anger is about having to be here alone without having your child's father with you?

None of the participants responded to the female co-facilitators question. The silence of the female participants seemed to have been an attempt at resisting the possibility of exploring their underlying anger.

During interviews with participants an underlying aggression and anger towards men in their lives again became increasingly more evident. Through probing questions female participants spoke about feeling unsupported in their families and relationships and this caused them to become frustrated towards their husbands. Although they were able to speak about their frustrations towards their husbands they still seemed unable or perhaps resistant to verbalize the anger that seemed evident to the interviewer.

Interviewer: How does this leave you feeling towards your husband?

Female Participant: I wish he could just see what's happening and understand. He should do his responsibilities but I must do that too, I'm frustrated with him. I don't know.

Interviewer: Frustrated with him?

Female Participant: No, hmm, I don't know.

The male participant seemed to be attuned to this underlying anger of the women and attempted to neutralize it by apologizing to the women in the group on the behalf of all men.

Male Participant: You see I am a man and I come here for my child. I don't know why other fathers don't come. Uhm, but let me apologize for all those men, because a man should support his wife and children in all things even coming to this group.

Female Co-facilitator: Seems like you being the only father and male participant in the group are carrying the responsibility of representing all the other men outside the group.

Female participants started to isolate the male participant from their experiences and also appeared to marginalize him from the group. In one session the co-facilitators walked into the room where the group was held and the female participants were sitting on one side of the room, while the male participant was sitting at the other side of the room facing them. The facilitators initially didn't comment on this seating but shortly into the session the female co-facilitator commented on how the female participants were separated from the male participant.

Female co-facilitator: Seems like the female and male members in this group are sitting on opposite sides of a boxing ring.

Group participants did not respond to this comment by the female co-facilitator and no attempt was made by any of the group participants to change the seating.

In addition, there seemed to be an air of hostility between the male participant and other participants in the group and verbal attacks started to become increasingly more evident and direct. This seemed to happen about mid way through the year's sessions, when the group began building better rapport with each other. The male and female participants seemed to use gender stereotyping as a method of attacking each other.

Male Participant: Well disciplining is usually a man's job. Women are too emotional and soft they can't really properly know how to discipline a child.

Female Participant: You are a man and you discipline your son but you still have problems with him

Even though the male participant in the group appeared to carry feelings of guilt in the group for all men outside the group by apologizing for all men, he also seemed to carry his own anger possibly responding to being marginalized from the female participants in the group. He at times became very critical towards the women in the group, by commenting on how long it took women to deal with issues in the group.

Male Participant: Men are more practical, when there is a problem, they sort it out and that is that. Women are different; when there is a problem they must talk about it and go on about it.

None of the group participants responded to the male participant, but his comment was followed by an awkward silence from the entire group.

Interestingly, instead of developing an alliance or seeking support from the male co-facilitator, the only other man in the group in response to being marginalized, the male participant used the differing sexual orientation of the male co-facilitator to further distance himself. He did this in one specific group session by appearing very angry and covertly attacked the male co-facilitator.

Male co-facilitator: Seems like the women in the group feel that they have to raise their children on their own without the support of their husbands or their children's father.

Male Participant: I'm the only man in the group and I know what its like to be a father and my child has a learning problem too. I'm the only one in the group that knows what its like to be a father with children, nobody else will understand.

4.3. Challenging gender stereotypes in the Group:

With the start of the gender enactments in the Parents Support Group there also came the enactment of gender stereotypes in the group. It was found through the use of the co-facilitator's supervision sessions, that throughout the group sessions and the interviews that were being conducted the female co-facilitator of the Parents Support Group challenged these gender stereotypes that was being expressed and enacted. The female co-facilitator appeared to challenge the gender stereotypes emerging within the group and interviews in two ways. Firstly, the female co-facilitator challenged the female participants when they spoke of experiences that seemed to perpetuate or collude with the gender imbalances that were already evident in the group and outside the group. An instance of this was highlighted in a group session.

Male Participant: My wife and I always make our decisions about our children together, and we both get a say. So far our decisions have been good because we talk about them and hear what we both have to say about it.

Female Participant: I have to make all my decisions myself and its not easy, I wish I had a man in my life to help me make these decisions.

Female Co-facilitator: I would like you to think about the good choices that you have made without having a man in your life.

Secondly, the female co-facilitator also encouraged female participants in an attempt to empower the female participants and stop gender re-enactments and stereotypes. The female co-facilitator supported female participants in empowering themselves through doing extra courses or setting boundaries with their over-involvement with their families. This was evident in an interview with a female participant.

Interviewer: It seems like it's a difficult process to realize that you need help. Something that you've been through, and found quite positive.

Female Participant: But in a sense, I never looked at my own anger, my own frustration. I also have my own problems. And that's why I

said I must help myself first, before I can help others. I must continue with my course and so things for myself.

Interviewer: It seems like you've come a long way and something you should continue with.

The female co-facilitator on several occasions overtly interpreted gender dynamics that were believed to be contributing in maintaining gender stereotypes in the group. However it appeared that the female co-facilitator was met with resistance from the female participants when interpretations that challenged of any gender re-enactments or stereotyping in the group were made. This resistance seemed to become apparent after a session where the female co-facilitator challenged the group about needing men in their lives to make better decisions. In this session, the female co-facilitator was seated in the room where the group sessions were held. As participants slowly entered into the room they began seating themselves against the wall opposite to where the female co-facilitator was seated. The female co-facilitator commented on this during the session.

Female co-facilitator: This feels like I'm a teacher and I'm about to teach a class now.

The female participants didn't respond to that statement but later in the session the women began highlighting the difference of the female co-facilitator from the other women in the group. The female participants highlighted the differences between

themselves and the female co-facilitator in the group in terms of age. It seemed that by highlighting the difference in age female participants also at the same time pointed out a difference in life experiences, possibly the experience of being a mother. In doing this, female participants in the group began to marginalize the female co-facilitator from themselves.

Female Participant: Rondebosch is a young student hangout, I see you there often. You like it there don't you?

Female Co-facilitator: Yes, Rondebosch is a convenient place to go to when you work in this area

4.4. Gender enactments by the co-facilitators:

Re-enactments of stereotypical gendered roles in the group were not only restricted to the participants but the co-facilitators also played into the re-enactment of gender stereotypes as well. The male co-facilitator of the group seemed to wield more power in the group than the female co-facilitator. The male co-facilitator opened and closed groups, dealt with administrative tasks and conveyed messages from the organization to the group. While this may have been a function of his status in the group the group participants seemed to be aware of this power difference and approached the male co-facilitator with administrative matters, or other matters relevant to their involvement in the project but not relevant to the group. Besides these specific tasks that were performed that highlighted the power difference between the male and female co-facilitator there were several incidents that

occurred during the year where co-facilitators endured power struggles. This power difference and struggle was displayed in various ways, like being dismissive towards the female co-facilitator.

Female Participant: Once, my son and myself were talking about a girl that he was interested in. He always told me because my husband never concerned himself with these things. So I was talking to V* and I told him that if he liked this girl that he should ask her to the movies or something, but I didn't realize that my husband was eaves dropping from the kitchen. When I was done talking to my son my husband was furious and shouted at me for encouraging this relationship with his girl. He then went down to the video store where this girl works and he told her to stay away from V*.

Female co-facilitator: How does the group understand what happened there?

Male co-facilitator: But more importantly, I was thinking about what we were talking about earlier

In that instance the father seemed to have an absent role in the family yet he still had significant power within the family to undermine his wife's decision. The male co-facilitator undermined the female co-facilitators question and her authority to ask the question in a similar way the female participant's husband undermined her. The co-facilitators enacted the experience that the female participant had had with her husband outside the group and the gendered relationship that co-facilitator and presented was common to the members outside the group. Not only was the participants experience with her husband enacted by the co-facilitators, but so too was the power differences enacted. The same power differences that were evident between mothers and fathers, but more specifically men and women outside the group was highlighted and illustrated inside the group.

The results highlight themes that are in keeping with the aim of the study, which seeks to explore the gender dynamics of the Parent Support Group. When looking at the themes it becomes clear that these themes also seem to highlight key problems concerning Parents Support Group intervention. Exploring these results using relevant literature will not only provide an understanding but also an explanation for the findings of this study.

4.5. Parent Support Group being a positive experience for female participants:

Most participants felt that attending the Parents Support Group proved to be a positive experience for them and that they had benefited from the Parents Support Group. They reported receiving two main benefits from attending the Parents Support Group. Firstly,

participants felt the group had provided them with support when they were dealing with issues surrounding the learning disability of their child. Secondly, it was believed that the group equipped them with additional parenting skills, which was necessary to care for their learning-disabled child.

Interviewer: Has the group influenced your beliefs about parenting?

Female Participant: Um yes. But I must say, to a positive ... degree, because when you sit in that group and what they are going through, and you think, OK, you're not alone. There's people with maybe bigger problems than yours. Yes, then, it's a positive side to it.

It is however important to highlight that only female participants experienced their participation in the Parents Support Group as being positive. The only male participant in the group didn't feel that attending the Parents Support group was a positive experience. He also stated that he didn't feel as if he received the same benefits from the group as compared to the female participants.

Male Participant: You know, at one time, I felt so bad about this group that, I stayed away for two weeks. I didn't see why I had to still come because I wasn't going anywhere with it. I didn't know that my contract said that if I stayed away two weeks, the

child will be, like, dismissed also. I just stayed away because, I just felt I must get away.

The male participant reaffirmed his belief that the group didn't help him in any way during an interview with him.

Male Participant: I understand. I will ... I've past the first year, I want to move on. Because time is pressing. You come here and sit here for an hour, that's an hour, if I can put it like that, if it doesn't mean anything to me, it's an hour wasted.

Only female participants reported benefiting from the Parents Support Group and it was found that they felt that this was due to listening and learning from experiences of other women in the group. Female participants felt that they were able to learn different skills on how to parent their learning-disabled child by listening to the experiences of other women in the group who have already or were encountering a similar problem. They also reported feeling comforted by the fact that they could identify with other women having a similar experience. This was expressed by a female participant during an interview.

Interviewer: So, you are saying that hearing other people's experiences is almost comforting, because you know you're not alone in this problem, and they say things that sometimes you listen to?

Female Participant: Yes, yes. You see because at home, I'm alone with this problem, and it's like, I ... the teacher knows about it at school, but still, here you still have this group of people, and if I feel I want to talk about something, everybody will discuss it. It's not just like you alone. So, yes. And then, the hour you have, you can raise whatever question you have, without feeling that 'oh, are they going to look at me now', not am I going to fit in now, because they're sitting with the same problem, and it's (inaudible) if you're looking for answers.

Another participant also highlights how she has benefited from being in a group of women who shared the same experience of being a women, with a learning disabled child.

Female Participant: No, they didn't change. Instead, I gained something I didn't know, maybe hear from when you meet other women, they talked like this and feel that they make me feel like they going through the same things like me and I can learn from them.

Interviewer: What did you gain?

Female Participant: Yes, I gained something, that to be a woman you must be strong ... (long silence).

The shared experience of female participants in the group resulted in female participants feeling supported in the group. This sense of being supported by the group seems to be due to a sense of belonging felt in the group with other female participants who shared their experiences. Therefore, identifying with other women in the group led female participants to feel a sense of belonging to the Parents Support group, which proved to be supportive.

Interviewer: You said the group has influenced your beliefs about parenting positively. Which ways?

Female Participant: If I look at it now, like I said, at first, I felt ... alone. Most of the times you feel alone with this problem, with this child having a learning difficulty. You feel alone, but then you hear there are other children, and other women sitting with the same problem, and, it's almost you feel that somewhere you belong, with your child. So that's how I feel.

CHAPTER FIVE:

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data reveals that five main themes were identified when exploring the gender dynamics of a Parents Support Group. The themes derived are the unequal gender constitution of the Parents Support Group, gender enactments in the group, challenging gender stereotypes in the group and gender re-enactments by the co-facilitators and Parent Support Group being a positive experience for female participants. In this chapter these themes will be discussed using relevant literature.

5.1 Unequal gender constitution of the Parents Support Group:

The Parents Support Group was an intervention offered by the organization to both parents of learning-disabled children. However it was found that there were significantly more women in the group than men, which could have caused the only male participant to experience a sense that he didn't belong in the group. Several reasons could account for this unequal gender constitution of the group.

First, it was perceived by participants in the group that men did not come to the Parents Support Group because they did not feel obligated to attend the group, unlike female participants in the group who felt a sense of obligation to come to the group because of a naturally assumed responsibility over their children. It seems that stereotypical gendered roles come with quite rigid gendered responsibilities for men and women towards their children. Therefore, men and women are divided with very specific responsibilities towards their children. The tie between mother and child has been exalted and traits of nurturance, selflessness and altruism have been defined as the essence of the maternal, and hence, the

womanly. It was assumed that because women gave birth they would also 'naturally' take responsibility for looking after children and bringing them up properly. Deutsch, (2001) states that the responsibility for breadwinning is still expected from fathers and families that claim to share childcare are often characterized by 'manager helper' dynamics, in which mothers are responsible for childcare and fathers merely help when asked. Therefore, it seems that female participants assumed a natural responsibility and obligation towards their learning-disabled children, while men are exempt from this responsibility unless it is required. According to Deutsch (2001) these gender-split responsibilities leave women and men with an unequal responsibility towards the children and conventional images of parenting, social interactions and gender-based job pressures push couples towards unequal parenting.

The Parents Support Group was a therapeutic group that provided support to parents as well as the sharing of knowledge and skills. However, participants felt that the group was more suitable for women than men. "In groups where there is a fluidity of intention and purpose, slipping between support, information giving and therapy towards change and influence on external concerns, it would be inappropriate to place further boundaries around membership, other than that participants should attend on their own volition" (Butler and Wintram 1991 p.73). Parents Support Group was considered by participants to be an emotional group and due to gendered stereotypes of men and women and the group was considered suitable for women because women are perceived as being emotional beings however, men are perceived to be not emotionally as accessible as women therefore the group was not suitable for them. It seems that gendered stereotypes about how men and women relate emotionally, kept men from attending the Parent Support Group due to the perception that the group was an emotional group.

The female participants felt that the gendered stereotypes about men's responsibilities towards children was extended to outside the group and were used by external structures that prevented men from coming to the group. More specifically, the female participants believed that employers and organizations held similar distorted gender stereotypes and expectations of what men's roles are towards their children. So, indirectly structures outside the group prevented fathers from attending the group because of the gendered roles that men are perceived to be responsible for.

Besides the gender stereotypes and enactments that stopped men from attending the group it was also perceived by participants that the organization constructed the group in such a way that kept men out of the group. The organization created an intervention for parents, men and women of learning-disabled children however it is interesting to explore how the organization at the same time excludes men through certain practices. For example the practice of serving biscuits and tea before group sessions was perceived by the female participants as being a feminine activity which was predominantly practiced by women. Therefore it was felt that in setting up this practice the organization constructed the Parents Support Group as being a women's group and a space for women. According to the female participants, in creating this feminine space, the male participant was indirectly excluded. The male participant reported feeling as if he did not belong in that space. He expressed this by saying "See, if you look at a whole set, OK, it's most women, with tea and coffee and biscuits, and they sit and chat. Now that is now mainly what the women want to do. They want to be the group, like to have a cup of tea and talk. Now men is not like that"

An organization as a whole has an ideology and this is adopted and shared by all members of the organization. This ideology is something that members of the organization adhere to collectively in

order to reach the aims that the organization has set out. Stokes (1994) uses the concept of organization in the mind to expand on the idea that each individual member carries the organization in their mind and there is a collective organization in the mind shared by all members of the organization. The Parents Support Group is not separate from the organization. Therefore the individual members of organization and the organization as a whole are linked to each other and impact each other in various ways. Whilst the members of the organization and the organization as a whole appear to share an ideology of gender equality it is important to note that this ideology was possibly concealing underlying processes.

Looking at the organization through a feminist lens allows the gender dynamics within the organization to be explored. According to Stokes (1994) whilst an organization may have one publicly stated idea of its primary purpose or mission, there are often also hidden conceptions at work. Thus, there is a level of 'what we say we do' but there are also the levels of 'what we really believe we are doing' and also 'what is actually going on'. It is important to note that the organization is also a social microcosm which implies that individual members of the organization and the organization as a whole mirrors the socio-political context outside the group.

The Parents Support Group as the name suggests is based on an expectation from the organization for both parents to be involved. It is important to consider that the 'collective organization in mind' also carries gender stereotypes and it too seems to construct a group that bars men from attending because of the stereotypical perception that men are not responsible for children. In this way the organization is possibly colluding with the gender stereotypes. This is done through directly or indirectly supporting gender stereotypes, through certain practices or by not being aware or challenging distorted gendered thinking. The Parent support Group was an intervention created for both parents of a learning-disabled child and it was a prerequisite for both parents to attend the Parent Support group together. However,

allowing fathers to be excused from the Parents Support Group and not challenging their absence seems to have been a way that the organization possibly colluded with the oppressive gender dynamics that are already at play within the group and the participant's lives. Stokes (1994) states how necessary it is to acknowledge the complex dynamics of cure and care. Unless this ambivalence is acknowledged and managed, and worked with rather than denied, there is a danger of a considerable amount of cruelty in any system" (Stokes, 1994). Thus through this psychological practice and intervention are hindered. Psychologists within the organization and other staff members cannot be objective in their psychological practice and interventions when they are unaware of how they are unconsciously colluding with their patients. Therapists need to be aware and constantly reflective of their own socio-political beliefs and experiences and how these are enacted within a group else they become consumed with these dynamics and aren't able to monitor group processes objectively.

5.2 Gender enactments in the group:

The female participants became increasingly aware of their contribution towards their families and specifically to their learning-disabled children. They seemed to be a growing awareness of the added burden of parenting a learning-disabled child as compared to other normal children. At the same time there was also seemed to be a growing awareness of the absent men in their lives and how these men were also absent in carrying the burden of parenting their learning-disabled children. The female participants felt that these men's absence ranged from a physical absence due to divorce or separation, to an emotional absence where they did not offer any support to them or their learning-disabled child. This overinvolvement in their children's lives and the absence of men and their support in these women's lives seemed to be perfectly highlighted in the absence of males in the group. The female participants became increasingly more aware of their overinvolvement with their learning-disabled children due to the absence of men in their lives, and with this came a growing anger. According to Butler and Wintram

(1991) as women begin to give elaborate explanations for events and assign causes which do not involve self blame, as they come to see the ways in which spontaneity and simplicity in enjoyment have been distorted and denied, then they inevitably get in touch with an helpful state – anger.

The increasing anger that the female participants were experiencing seemed to be directed towards the absent men in their lives. Interestingly enough in the group this anger seemed to be displaced onto the only male participant in the group. According to Malan (1979), displacement is a process whereby emotional charge is separated from its real object or content and attached to an entirely different one. This displaced anger towards the male participant was evident in the seating arrangements in the group, where the male participant was seated on one side of the room opposite the female participants. The male participant was not only being marginalized from the group, but the women in the group had formed an alliance against him. According to Butler and Wintram (1991), to minimize the perpetuation of members powerlessness, attention can be given to seating arrangements during discussions as these can inadvertently reinforce exclusion and marginalization. Therefore with the female co-facilitator saying that the new seating arrangement felt like a boxing ring, could have possibly made participants aware of their anger towards the opposite gender and possibly encouraged participants to express this anger instead of repressing it and reinforcing stereotypical behaviors.

The male participant, being the only man in the group seemed to become the scapegoat for all the women's aggression and anger that was emerging towards the absent men in their lives. According to Lazerson (1992) when anger is expressed in the group, the group becomes the container for the rage that moves away from the self and towards the abuser. The male participant seemed to also be attuned to the anger being subtly expressed by the female participants and their perception of men being the perpetrators of their felt oppression. His initial response to their anger was guilt. The guilt he was

experiencing was evident in that he apologized to all the women in the group on behalf of the absent men in their lives. Malan (1979) states that guilt is a force operating within people that is used to hold in check their primitive and selfish impulses. However, the experience of guilt was short lived and it soon turned into anger. The male participant also began to get angry with the female participants. The male participant began to put men and women into stereotypical roles and through this he highlighted the power difference between men and women, and his own power within the group. According to Lazerson (1992) in mixed gender task-orientated groups, men isolated in a group of women perform better as their numbers decrease while women do better as their numbers increase; in effect each gender exaggerates its stereotypes when in the minority position. The male participant strengthened the stereotypical roles of men and women by attacking the sexuality of the male co-facilitator who was homosexual. He at the same time highlighted another power difference in the group, but drawing a division between heterosexual and homosexual individuals. According to Gough (2004), there is a tendency for heterosexual men to split off 'feminine' attributes and locate these in women and gay men where they are safely rebuked and contained. The male participant thus affirmed his masculinity and power within the group by separating himself from the female participants and homosexual male co-facilitator.

Although, evidently there was anger being subtly expressed by the female participants towards the men in their lives and more specifically towards the male participant in the group, there seemed to be resistance against naming the anger and rage, which they were experiencing. This was evident when the female co-facilitator asked the female participants a question by saying "It feels like some of the women are angry for being here today. I wonder if some of the anger is about having to be here alone without having your child's father with you?" None of the participants responded to the female co-facilitators question and the silence of the female participants seemed to indicate a resistance in exploring their

underlying anger. Besides the anger being subtly expressed in the group it seemed that the female co-facilitator experienced the anger that the female participants were experiencing through projective identification. "Through the mechanism of projective identification, the patient can actually induce the therapist to experience the denied aspect" (Kets de vries, 1991: 310). This can be illustrated in the incident where a female participant agreed with the male participant who implied that women can not make good decisions without the presence of a male partner. The female co-facilitator seemed to have carried the anger for female participants in the group and responded by saying "I would like you to think about the good choices that you have made without having a man in your life". The female participant possibly carried and expressed the anger that the female participants were not able to at the time. There were several attempts by both co-facilitators to name this underlying aggression, but the group didn't seem able or ready to acknowledge this yet.

It appears that the psychodynamic model offered an understanding of these dynamics, however using feminist theory it becomes more evident why the female participants in the group couldn't fully express their anger and instead they had to deny their anger and covertly express it. From exploring gender stereotypes of women and how women are normally constructed when they express anger, it seems that there is this fear that the anger they are experiencing is uncontrollable and unmanageable. Women seem to experience the fear that their anger will 'leak' out and they will be labeled as immature and the anger will be dismissed as temper tantrums. Therefore this could possibly explain why women reacted in a similar way within the Parents Support Group, by refraining from acknowledging their anger and rage. Butler and Wintram, (1991) state that there are considerable constraints on the expression of woman's anger, and that anger has been encouraged differently in men and in woman. Using Yalom's (1995) concept of the social microcosm, it is seems that the female participants re-enacted how they express anger as women outside the group.

Even though naming the underlying anger in both male and female participants in the group was resisted it could have provided a stage for participants to view, explore and reconstruct how anger is expressed by both men and women. In this way the female participants in the group were given the opportunity to explore their anger through talking about it. According to Butler and Wintram (1991) women's suppression of emotionality is a defense that is used to survive against oppression. Talking about this anger and exploring the reasons for it could have possibly led the women to understand that their anger was justified and therefore normalized this emotion for them instead of having their fear perceived as a tantrum. Therefore through acknowledging their anger the female participants could have reconstructed their expression of anger and in the instance their reconstruction of self. "A sense of self and identity is viewed as constructed out of the discourses which are culturally available to us and which we use when communicating with others" (Harre' and Gillet, 1994 p. 75).

5.3 Challenging gender stereotypes in the group:

The female co-facilitator became aware of the oppressive way in which the women appeared to speak in the group. The female participants at times agreed with the gender stereotypes that the male participant was highlighting and through this they seemed to reinforce gendered stereotypes. For example the male participant stated that good decisions could only be made for their learning-disabled children if both parents were involved and not by a woman alone. A female participant then agreed to this comment. This was perceived by the female co-facilitator as contributing to their own reality of oppression instead of exploring alternative interventions to this situation. According to Lazerson (1992) cultural countertransference issues are particularly significant for female therapists who may react negatively to stereotypical female traits such as dependency, passivity and altruism.

The female co-facilitator took an active role in challenging gender stereotypes and re-enactments within the group. Lazerson, (1992) states that feminist group therapists have argued that the main purpose of the group is to counteract negative socialization processes. The typical patterns that they believe should be countered in groups are interaction patterns where women may act submissively to males, let men take leadership roles, act dependant on the therapist, and turn towards solely intrapsychic explanations for their difficulties instead rather than analysis that include social, political and economical interpretations. When we begin to account for the relationship between gender and power in the social, economic, and political realm, we can begin to understand that the person is interwoven with the context and therefore Lazerson (1992) argues that the personal is political and should be treated as one. Not analyzing and challenging social roles, particularly stereotypic responses by women and men and between women and men, thereby reinforce gender stereotyping. Using Yalom's concept of the social microcosm is enough to help make group facilitators aware that participants bring their socio-cultural contexts with them into the group but fails in explaining whether this can be modified or attempting to do so would be futile.

Feminism helps illuminate the oppressive social roles and beliefs that women enact in the group and how gender is an integral part of the group's dynamics. "A feminist perspective in group therapy challenges us to view the social microcosm as a reenactment of sociopolitical contexts" (Bender and Ewashen, 2000 p.297). However social constructionism seems to offer a solution by stating that these oppressive social roles and beliefs can be modified through becoming aware of them in the group through talk and challenging them through talk.

The female co-facilitator took a strong feminist stance and tried to challenge "oppressive talk" by the women in the group. This was done in the hope of encouraging some change in the way the female

participants thought about their position in their socio-cultural contexts and through that stimulate change in their lives outside the group. According to Butler and Wintram, (1991) feminism is an ideology that when applied by female therapists in groups can cause its participants to be swept along where they take on the female therapists ideologies very quickly. Although a conscious and well thought out attempt was being made by the female co-facilitator, there seemed to be something that was happening within the dynamics of the group that caused the female participants to start firstly resisting the female co-facilitator and then marginalizing her from the other women from the group. Initially the female co-facilitator was extremely confused about why the female participants were marginalizing her. The female participants had created a group identity and identified with each other on the basis of their oppressive experiences as women, however it was interesting that the female co-facilitator was excluded from this.

Several differences between the female co-facilitator and female participants were being highlighted by the women in the group. It seems that the female co-facilitator positioned herself as falling into the same strata as these female participants but failed to realize that she was positioned in a different sociopolitical context than these female participants, due to her race and her access to resources. The mere fact that the female co-facilitator had the power to challenge gender stereotypes and re-enactments in the group illustrated the differences between her and the other female participants. The co-facilitator seemed to have presented a false sense of equity between the other women in the group and herself. Butler and Wintram (1991) argue that there is a danger, in seeking to apply feminist theory and practice across diverse social situations as we fail to acknowledge the hierarchical differences between women in terms of race and socio-political power which could leave feminist therapists playing the role of oppressors. This interaction between the women in the group and the female co-facilitator is reflected in their interpersonal relations with other woman outside the group, who also try to empower these women

but in a sense disempower them by sweeping them along in their ideology and not allowing a reflective process. According to Butler and Wintram (1991) a false equality trap is where differences between women are minimized and which conjures up a mythology of equality which glosses over structural positions in the group and differences in experiences of oppression and in possession of knowledge and skills.

Therefore using a feminist stance it was necessary for the female co-facilitator to interpret the gender enactments and oppressive gender stereotypes in an attempt to affect change concerning gender stereotypes both inside and outside the group.

5.4 Gender enactments by the co-facilitators:

Looking at the Parent Support Group through a feminist lens makes the gender enactments within the group visible. These gender enactments inside the group mirror the gender dynamics that seem to be prominent outside the group. Parents seemed to take on the same gendered roles and beliefs that they held outside the group and enacted them with other participants within the group. According to Bender and Ewashen (2000) each member's interpersonal style of relating eventually appears in the interactions of the group. This is in keeping with Yalom's concept of the social microcosm, which states that group participants will behave within the group in a similar fashion that they would behave outside the group, because each participant brings their socio-cultural contexts with them to the group.

However, gender enactments within the group are not exclusively restricted to only group participants but instead the group's co-facilitators also play into these gender enactments as they too bring to the group their own socio-cultural experiences. Lazerson (1992) states that, just as group members are pressed into stereotypical roles so too are group leaders. The power difference between the male co-

facilitator and female co-facilitator of the Parent Support Group was explicit in that the male co-facilitator is firstly, a qualified clinical psychologist and the female co-facilitator was a less experienced intern psychologist. Secondly, the co-facilitator is also the co-coordinator of the entire project, which gives him significant standing within the group. This power difference was displayed in various ways, for example the male co-facilitator would start and end the sessions, hand out accounts and do other administrative tasks. Furthermore this gendered enactment highlights the gender dynamics that occur outside the group.

The co-facilitators also displayed gender re-enactments of experiences that participants spoke about in the group. An example is when a female participant spoke about how her husband was absent when it came to matters of deal with their son's emotional wellbeing, but on one occasion he dismissed his wife's decision regarding this and he took authority over the matter and made the final decision. The female co-facilitator responded to this female participant and asked the group a question regarding this incident. Before anyone responded the male co-facilitator dismissed what the female co-facilitator said and proceeded to ask another question. It seems that co-facilitators re-enacted the experience that the female participant related. It seems that in both instances the men had significantly more power to firstly dismiss what the women said and then to offer their own suggestion on how things should be done.

According to Yalom (1995) a co-therapy arrangement of anything other than two therapists of completely equal status was, in his experience inadvisable. It was evident that the difference of power between the male and female co-facilitators caused significant tension and miscommunication between them however; a social constructionist perspective would challenge Yalom's (1995) view about same sex co-facilitators being "inadvisable". The tensions that arose between the male and female co-facilitator and the power struggles were the exact conflicts that the participants experience outside the

group, as the social microcosm concept highlights. However, Social constructionists would argue that these power struggles between the male and female co-facilitators are productive and that it models a healthy way of resolving these power struggles through talking about it. “Co-therapists in a dominant submissive relational pattern may inadvertently lend support for group members to identify with the dominant or submissive pattern in their own relationships. The relationship between co-therapists can provide a model of relationships for clients and can also be a catalyst for the development of relationships among members in a group” (Levin, 1979: 296).

When group participants are active in the talk of resolving the conflict between the co-facilitators participants are exposed to an alternative way to resolve conflict. “Social constructionist see social interchange and construction of meaning as a process, which is the ongoing interactions and communication among members of a system. The overriding goal of therapy is to alter the meaning or context of the problem process in the direction of improvement” (Cheung, 1997 p.339). Their old beliefs and patterns of how to resolve gendered conflicts is replaced by this new knowledge that they acquired in the group. They could then apply this new knowledge to aid in their behavior outside the group and thus influence social change outside the group.

Through the use of a feminist lens we are able to see how oppressive gender dynamics are at play at all levels related to the group extending from external structures like places of work, the organization as a whole as well as therapists in the organization. Not being aware of these gender distortions firstly, colludes with them and reinforces them. These gender dynamics also seemed to have provided differing experiences for the male and female participants.

5.5 Parent Support Group being a positive experience for female participants:

Female participants reported having a positive experience within the group. They felt the group had provided them with support when dealing with issues surrounding the learning disability of their child and also equipped them with knowledge and parenting skills required to manage their learning-disabled child. The group became a space where women could share their positive and negative experiences of parenting a learning-disabled child with each other and this provided a forum for women to support each other and learn from each other. This enabled parents to learn how problems relating to their children could be efficiently resolved, and other parents benefited from listening to this because there was the likelihood that their child might experience the same difficulty. This proved to be a positive experience for most participants in itself.

Through further exploration using a feminist understanding it was found that the positive experiences of the female participants was due to gender dynamics within the Parents Support Group. It appeared that being in the Parents Support Group also benefited female participants in that it provided them with a space to share their experiences of being a woman with learning-disabled children. The group provided female participants with a forum where they could highlight the challenges they experience as women and the oppressive gendered roles they assumed responsibility for inside and outside the group. There appeared to be a pattern of invisibility of women's experiences and knowledge in domestic and public spheres, and the group seemed to readdress this injustice by reclaiming a space and their voice. According to Butler and Wintram (1991) women brought together can offer each other support, validation and strength, and a growing sense of personal awareness, in a way that is difficult to achieve otherwise. Therefore through the group the female participants were able to identify with each other's experiences as women, validate each others experiences and offer each other support.

Identification with the group led to emotional ties between the women being built within the group, thus if female participants did not identify at any level they would not be able to form an emotional bond with other women in the group. According to De Board (1978) Freud claimed that identification is known to psychoanalysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person. A group seeks emotional bonds or common ties between the members of the group in order to be maintained. According to Stapley (1996) the female participants in the group identified with each other in this way and this led to their identity as women being affirmed and group cohesion possible. These emotional ties with the group caused the women to feel a sense of belonging to the group.

Stapley (1996) claims that when an individual becomes part of a group with boundaries, a group identity is achieved. A group identity serves as a defense against both external and internal distress. In this instance the female participants seemed to create their identity around gender and being women and this possibly served to defend against the distress of absent men in their lives and due to this having extra responsibilities towards their learning disabled children. In the Parent Support Group the presence of the male participant appeared to have been cause of the distress. The male participant was perceived by the female participants to represent absent men in their lives. The female participants held these men accountable for their extra responsibilities and oppression as women, therefore the female participants felt that they needed to defend against the presence of the male participant. This causes much stress and anxieties to be stirred up. Diamond (1991, In Kets de Vries, M.E.P. (Ed.), 1991) states that some affiliation with others is important in that it provides them not only with a defense, but also with a sense of being greater than themselves. Having a group identity can give many the feeling of omnipotence, therefore being a member of a group gives individuals a sense of exaggerated power. It becomes clear when the female participants are able to identify and share an identity with other women in the group, only then do they feel resilient enough to express their anger even if it is done covertly. Having a

group identity and feeling a sense of belonging to this group of women enabled the female participants to feel as if they could manage their distress.

Therefore although the female participants found the group beneficial in terms of getting support and learning parenting skills about how to manage their learning disabled children, the female participants also found support for themselves in terms of their oppressive experiences as women. However, the male participant stated that he did not feel that he benefited from the Parent Support Group and furthermore it was an uncomfortable experience for him.

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CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSION

To conclude it is apt that the three-fold purpose of the study is revisited. First, the study aimed to explore how gender dynamics contribute or hinder the Parent Support Group intervention. The unequal gender constitution of the group seems to hinder the Parent Support Group intervention in that it causes the group to focus mainly on the experiences of the mother in a parental unit. This compromises the therapeutic intervention that is focused on both parents of a learning-disabled child. It was found that female participants perceived the Parent Support Group to be a positive experience, however it was quite the opposite for the male participant who felt that he didn't benefit at all from the group. Drawing on feminist theory it was found that the women perceived the group to be a positive experience based on their experience of being a women rather than a parent to a learning-disabled child. The unequal gender constitution of the group resulted in gender within the group and which also seems to have compromised the main aim of the Parents Support Group. This could be due to the fact that the Parent Support Group facilitators were not entirely aware of these gender dynamics and thus they were not addressed. However it seems that these gender dynamics offered female participants a platform to explore their oppressive experiences as women.

Second, the study sought to uncover the gender enactments within the Parent Support Group and explore whether these gender enactments can and should be challenged with the group process. The psychoanalytic model is adequate in providing us with an

understanding of enactments within the Parent Support Group, however it fails in adequately explaining whether these enactments can be modified or not. However, a feminist approach in this study appeared to help illuminate how gender is an integral part of these enactments and argues that gender enactments should be challenged to counteract negative socialization processes. Social constructionism further demonstrated that these gender enactments could be modified through talking about it.

Third, the study aimed to raise questions about the extent to which co-facilitators as well as an organization colluded with and reinforced distorted gender dynamics through certain practices and interventions. Participants felt that the organization colluded with gender stereotypes, through certain practices, which in turn excluded men from the Parent Support Group. It was found that like participants, co-facilitators also displayed gender enactments within the group, and in this way affirmed negative gender stereotypes. Social constructionism argued that these enactments should be used to highlight these gender stereotypes and distortions. In doing so this process can be used as a platform for resolving these gender stereotypes and conflicts through talking about it.

6.1 Limitations:

- i. There is a lack of published research that explores similar aims as those of this study.
- ii. The researcher of the study also co-facilitated the Parent Support group and this could have hindered the research due to this biased stance.

- iii. The researcher has been intensely involved with the participants due to facilitating the Parent Support Group, and this may have restricted the freedom of participants to speak freely about certain aspects of their experience. There was the risk that participants could have felt that disclosing too much about their negative experiences could possibly hinder their and their children's chances of being readmitted into the group the following year
- iv. Having only one male participant in the Parent Support Group limits the study in that experience of one man in the Parent Support Group has to be generalized as a broad male experience.

6.2 Recommendations:

These recommendations are being made based on the findings and objectives of this study. The researcher is aware of the difficulties, both logistical and resource based of most recommendations but felt that it would be beneficial to highlight them for future reference.

- I. It seems that intern psychologists are not adequately prepared to manage gender dynamics within a group and an awareness of gender could possibly better prepare them. Intern Psychologists should be trained to be gender sensitive when facilitating groups. From the researchers' experience it is felt that she would have

been better equipped to manage the gender dynamics within the Parents Support Group if there was specific training around gender. Thus, there should be a gender module built into clinical training that encourages an awareness of how gender dynamics in a group are not separate from intrapsychic processes.

- II. It should be a prerequisite for fathers to attend the Parent Support group together with their wives. Allowing fathers to be excused from the Parents support Group otherwise colludes with the oppressive gender dynamics that are already at play within the organization, the group and the participant's lives. Fathers being excused from the Parents Support Group should be done at the discretion of the co-facilitators together with their supervisor.
- III. There should be regular peer support meetings with all people involved in the Learning Problems Project. These meetings will allow people involved in the project to have a safe space to explore frustrations and difficulties they are experiencing. Hopefully, through exploring these difficulties this space will result in underlying dynamics to come to the fore where they can be managed.
- IV. Co-facilitators should have regular supervision to explore and become aware of their unconscious processes and how it impacts their relationship with each other, the group, the project and the organization. Being aware of unconscious processes ensure that they don't negatively impact the group.

This thesis illustrated how the psychoanalytic model on its own was not adequate in offering an understanding of the dynamics in a Parent Support Group. However, the study offered feminism and social constructionism as additional models for effectively explaining the gender dynamics at play within this group. These models demonstrate how gender dynamics within the Parents Support Group can both hinder the intervention but at the same time these gender dynamics can be used as a platform for initiating change with participants. An awareness of the powerful presence of gender dynamics in groups is key.

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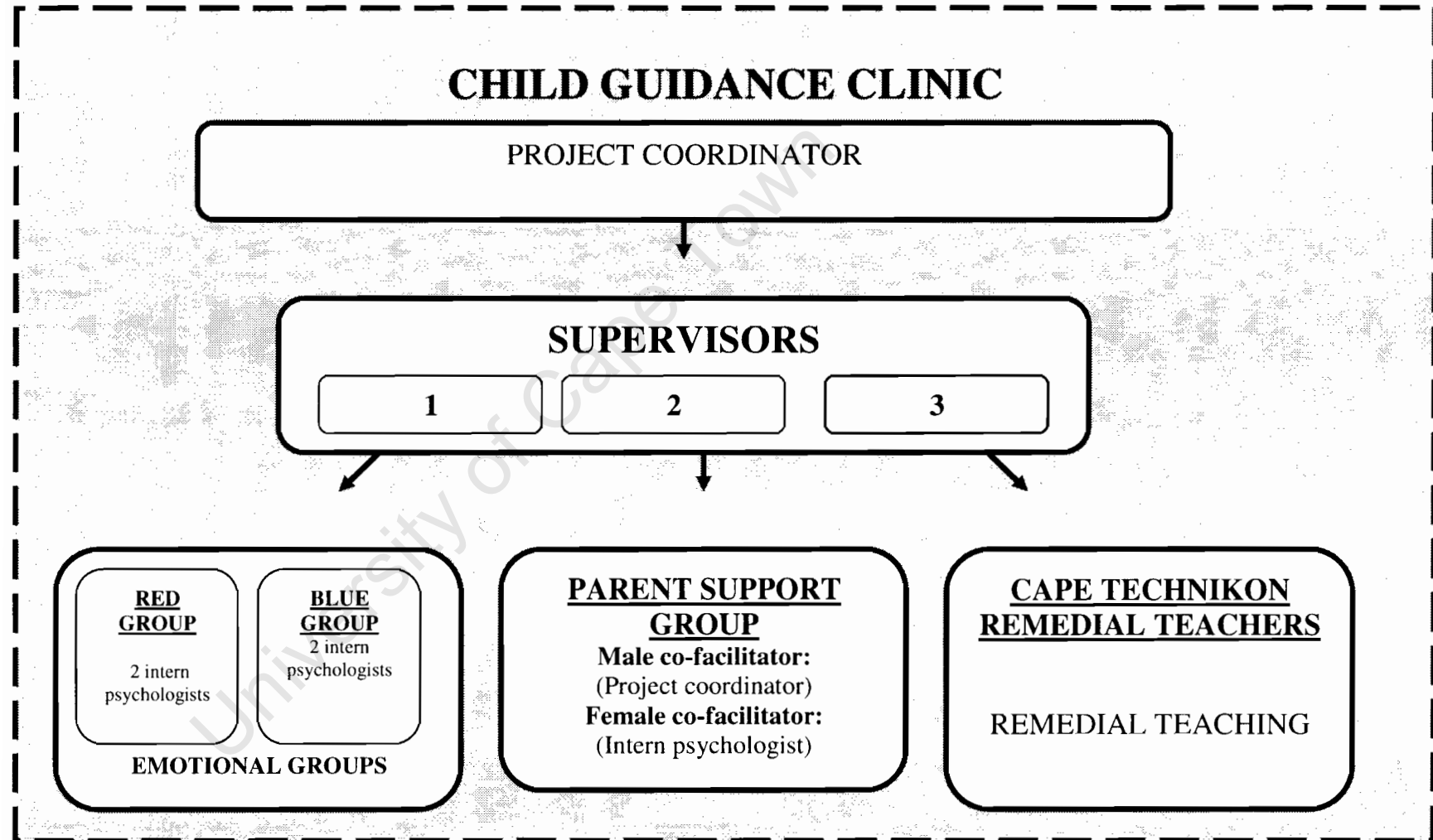
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APPENDIX 1:

Learning Problems Project Organogram



APPENDIX 2:
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

(Frame around confidentiality, purpose and feedback)

Demographics:

1. Name?
2. Age?
3. Address?
4. Occupation?
5. Marital status?
6. Spouse/Ex-Spouse Occupation?
7. Number of children?
8. Age of children?

Personal Experience:

9. Was your child who is in the learning problems group planned?
10. When expecting your child/children, what were your hopes for him/her?
11. How much did you have to adjust your expectations and dreams for that child compared to what you is experiencing now?
12. Who were the primary caregivers of the children as they grew up and was this expected?
13. What responsibilities did the father have towards the child? Was this what you expected?
14. What responsibilities did you (mother) have towards the child? Was this what you expected? Does this differ if it is a girl or boy child?
15. How do you make sense of the responsibilities being divided in that way?
16. Do you think these responsibilities should change?
17. Has this experience with this child been different with other children?

Beliefs about Parenting:

18. What are the responsibilities that parents have towards children?
19. What do you believe the role of the mother is? Why do you think mothers should do that?
20. What do you believe the role of the father is? Why do you think fathers should do that?

Experience in Group:

21. Has the group influenced your beliefs about parenting? How?
22. Why do you think that most fathers didn't attend the group?