

Neighbourhood Houses as sites of women's empowerment

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Abstract

Neighbourhood Houses, first established in Australia in the 1970s, operate within a community development framework and are committed to empowering individuals and communities. Their practices encourage active participation and involvement in social and recreational programs, formal, informal, and incidental learning, leadership activities, and local decision making. Empowerment is a central principle of community development, although in recent times its continuing relevance has been questioned within the community development field.

Women constitute a majority of participants and staff in Neighbourhood Houses. This thesis reports on the first Australian study to focus on women's experiences of empowerment through their engagement with Neighbourhood Houses. It examines the processes, practices and aspects of community development that contribute to their experiences. The epistemological approach of this research draws on feminist and poststructural perspectives regarding how knowledge and meaning are produced, and what constitutes knowledge. An overall qualitative approach to the research design was used in order to focus in a detailed way on women's everyday experiences of empowerment in the course of their engagement with Neighbourhood Houses.

Twenty-eight women participants and managers of Neighbourhood Houses in urban and rural areas were interviewed for the study. Semi-structured interviews, informed by narrative research practices, explored the multiple and diverse ways in which discourses and practices of power were expressed, negotiated, challenged and resisted by the participants.

The findings of this research present in rich detail the diversity and fluidity of the women's experiences of power, disempowerment and empowerment. The research found that the women experienced empowerment in multilayered and iterative ways through engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses. In their active engagement, the women were supported by the flexible, inclusive, and non-prescriptive community development practices within the Neighbourhood Houses. The participatory, learning, and relational environment of the Neighbourhood Houses enabled the women to explore new ways of being in the world and to develop new understandings of themselves in relation to the world. This contributed to a strengthened sense of their own agency and control within their personal, working and civic lives.

This detailed exploration of women's everyday experiences in Neighbourhood Houses supports the continuing usefulness to community development of an enriched, nuanced understanding of power and empowerment informed by feminist and poststructural theory.

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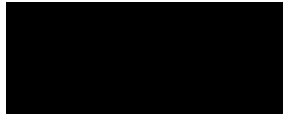
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Student declaration

I, **Ursula May Harrison**, declare that the PhD thesis entitled, *Neighbourhood Houses as sites of women's empowerment*, is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the student.

Date

14/12/18

Conference presentations

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Chapter One: Introduction to the research

Women in contemporary Australia experience power, disempowerment, and empowerment in diverse ways. This study focuses on women's experiences of empowerment in Neighbourhood Houses in the State of Victoria, Australia. Women's engagement with Neighbourhood Houses, as participants and managers, appears to have empowering impacts on their lives. This observation is grounded in my years of managing a Neighbourhood House established by and for women in a northern suburb of Melbourne, Victoria. Witnessing the transformation in many women's lives, and experiencing my own, was the catalyst for my desire to explore and highlight the diversity and multilayered nature of women's experiences in Neighbourhood Houses – experiences which appeared to be empowering for women and communities.

Empowerment is one of the key principles underpinning community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses. The Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Sector Framework (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2003) unambiguously declares their transformative intent for individuals and local communities by including empowerment as a key principle. Empowerment was frequently mentioned as an aim of Neighbourhood Houses in the early days, but has now become unpopular and often dismissed as having little meaning (Buckingham, Aldred, & Clark, 2004). One reason offered for this is that neoliberal discourses have adopted and adapted the concept to define particular individualised outcomes detached from any notion of social justice or critical understanding of power. This is further emphasised in the requirements of funding bodies to report against outputs rather than on less tangible and more political outcomes such as empowerment. However, women's experiences in Neighbourhood Houses today continue to resonate with the idea of empowerment.

In the 1970s when Neighbourhood Houses were first established, the bodies of theory informing their philosophy and practice were based on structuralist and modernist paradigms. In accordance with these paradigms, empowerment was conceptualised in binary terms, such that people were either empowered or they were disempowered. Fook (Fook, 2016) argues that structural traditions do not enable consideration of the contingent nature of lived experience, nor fully account for complexity, contradictions, and differences in the way people experience empowerment within their personal, civic, and working lives. This study argues for and contributes to a deeper understanding of empowerment using contemporary feminist and poststructural bodies of theory to provide a nuanced understanding of the concept of empowerment in the context of women's everyday experiences in relation to their engagement with Neighbourhood Houses.

Research questions

The central question guiding this research is: *In what ways do women experience empowerment in the course of their engagement with Neighbourhood Houses?* There are two research sub-questions:

1. *To what extent and in what ways do women participants and managers experience empowerment by their participation and involvement in Neighbourhood Houses?*
2. *What processes and aspects of community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses contribute to women participants' and managers' experiences of empowerment?*

This chapter introduces the research project. It discusses the key concepts – Neighbourhood Houses, community development, women, and empowerment – and

presents a rationale for the research design. The chapter ends with an overview of the structure of the thesis. A series of short narrations situating my own story within an unfolding understanding of the practices of power, and myself in relation to the research provides a prelude to the chapter.

Becoming a researcher

A research story has many beginnings. Mine began when I was attending my younger daughter's graduation on a hot night in early December 2012. I whiled away the time before she received her award reading the program notes describing the doctoral theses, noting that one was a study of the history of women's refuges in Melbourne. This immediately and deeply resonated with me, leading me to reflect on my own involvement in the women's collective which established the first women's refuge in Melbourne. Then I began to think about the other women's projects and organisations I had been connected with over the years. Their *herstories* had not been written. The Wimmins Circus: we had often dreamed of writing the *herstory* of the first feminist women's circus in Melbourne. Other possibilities for research included the place where I was currently working, a women's Neighbourhood House. A myriad of stories had been lived and shared within those walls: women's stories, hidden stories, stories of empowerment and change. I began to envision the possibility of a new future for myself – becoming a researcher.

My life story began in the goldfields of central Victoria in the early 1950s. Growing up in a country town during the 1950s and 1960s I had no exposure to the radical ideas of women's liberation. At the time I did not recognise that my environment, and my life, was shaped by the prevailing gendered views of women and women's role in society.

Although my parents did not subscribe to radical political views, they were significant role models: my mother was a senior secondary school teacher, whose profession was respected and supported by my father, a toolmaker in a local factory. He was not a distant figure in our lives, and took his turn in preparing the family meal before he left for the nightshift on alternate weeks.

Education was highly valued by my parents. Both from poor backgrounds they were unable to complete their education. My father could not accept an offer to study violin with a leading orchestra conductor and left school at the age of thirteen. My mother completed secondary school but was unable to complete her university studies because of the need to earn an income and help to support her widowed mother. I was aware of their disrupted educational histories when I was younger but I had limited understanding of what drove their enthusiasm for *getting an education*.

My own education was disrupted, for different reasons. I left school after completing my Leaving Certificate (Year 11). At that time, the late 1960s, it was quite typical for young women in the town to leave school before completing Matriculation (Year 12), to work in a bank or in retail for a short time, marry, and leave the workforce. I knew I wanted something else but did not know what that something else was. With few available options I began work as a junior clerk in the office of a local factory. Here I became aware of the way gender discrimination impinged on the working lives of women but I had no critical framework with which to analyse it. Two gendered realities of women's working lives confronted me – my pay rate was significantly less than the male workers doing the same work I was doing, and women were required to leave their job when they married. I did this work for 18 months, then returned to school to complete my final year.

The early 1970s, at university

I was exposed to radical and liberationist ideologies

learned about

feminism

racism

capitalism.

Left university before completing my studies

demonstrations, marches, protests International Women's Day, Anti-racism, May Day
marches, *Reclaim the Night*.

Collective action – conferences, meetings

first women's refuge in Melbourne, lobbied for funding, gave interviews, helped women
escape from violent partners, children too.

1975 International Women's Year

activism became performance in Women's Theatre Group agit-prop street theatre

women's rights – women factory workers, the medical system

women's issues theatre filled my life

completed undergraduate studies a decade after beginning – women's studies (at last),
with baby in bassinet

the *realmightybonzawhacks* Wimmin's Circus, strong, funny, musical, acrobatic,
juggling women challenging limitations and stereotypes

balancing/unbalancing, juggling

objects, roles

mother partner daughter performer student

March 1986. A new phase. Appointed the foundation co-ordinator of a new

Neighbourhood House for women in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. I knew nothing
about Neighbourhood Houses, had no idea about the powerful and life-changing
impact they could have on the lives of people in communities. For me too, being a
manager was a transformative and empowering experience. I met many inspiring
women: women who lived their daily lives with enormous courage, women of all ages
and cultures, some struggling, others had overcome enormous obstacles to be where

they were. Many women, my peers, supported and encouraged me along the way. I hope I did the same for others. There were challenges to be faced and overcoming them was very satisfying and empowering. Failures were hard. It was difficult work at times – worrying about finances, meeting deadlines and targets: *the realpolitik of community development in neoliberalism*. However, this did not take away from the joy in the work – celebrating women's achievements, learning about women's lives, cultures and aspirations, proud family members celebrating their mothers and partners – women together, learning new skills, gaining new insights, imagining new futures.

A serendipitous connection with this research occurred two days before I left my job as manager when I received a phone call from a young woman who told me that she had just been offered work in her chosen field. Her connection with the Neighbourhood House began the year following secondary school, at a time when she was dealing with life's complexities and unsure about her future aspirations, when she joined a creative program for young women at the Neighbourhood House. She returned to the program several times, as a participant, then as a volunteer. Her own deeply valued experiences and passionate belief in the importance of the program for young women struggling with complex life issues led her to become a volunteer providing creative and peer to peer support to the young women participants. When additional financial support for the program was required she made a film, spending many months interviewing participants so that its benefits could be widely promoted. During this time, she developed a desire to become a community worker and applied for a tertiary course. At times she doubted her ability to complete the course, however she remained, completed the qualification, and successfully applied for her first professional position. Hence her phone call telling me the news of her appointment. It

was a joyous reminder to me of the impact of Neighbourhood Houses on women's lives, of their stories I was privileged to hear and witness in my time as manager.

Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria: a herstory

There is a herstory of Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria which has not been written and perhaps is in danger of being lost. This is not unusual, as many women's endeavours have been rendered "invisible in discursive constructions" (Alston, 2010, p.65) of historical and contemporary events and circumstances. While writing the herstory is beyond the scope of this thesis, it acknowledges the important contribution and the key role played by women in the establishment of the Neighbourhood House movement in Victoria. The first Neighbourhood House in Victoria was established in 1973¹. Its beginnings and those of subsequent Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria were very clearly connected to the philosophy and activism of two social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s – the progressive education movement, and the women's movement (Lonsdale, 1993). These two movements profoundly influenced the aims and practices of Neighbourhood Houses. The progressive education movement, inspired by Freire, promoted the idea of learning outside traditional educational institutions, recognising that it was empowering for adults to learn in environments encouraging dialogue and awareness of the social and political realities of their lives. The first learning centre² in Victoria was a product of this activism and desire for less hierarchical and more participatory forms of learning and social organisation at the community level (Lonsdale, 1993). Over time, this centre interpreted and incorporated

¹ Diamond Valley Learning Centre, Greensborough, Victoria.

² Learning centre is one name Neighbourhood Houses are known by. In this study the generic term Neighbourhood House is used unless a specific reference uses another term. The first learning centre established in Victoria was known as the Diamond Valley Learning Centre.

aspects of the progressive education movement and the concerns of the women's movement into its practice.

Neighbourhood Houses developed a multifaceted approach to local social justice and change: community development practices and processes informed by wider and international struggles for justice across many areas of life, such as environmental sustainability, urban regeneration, and women's rights (Aytan, 1991; Burgman & Burgman, 2011; Guinness, 1998); and adult learning – formal, informal, and incidental – which were together regarded as the means for achieving personal and community empowerment and social change (Kimberley, 1998; Lonsdale, 1993). This approach to empowering communities distinguishes Neighbourhood Houses from other community development initiatives.

The early 1970s in Australia was a time of significant cultural and political transformation when traditional values and norms were no longer taken for granted, and the notion of “power to the people” was embodied in activism and protests against the Vietnam War, conscription, racism, sexism, and large-scale inner-urban development (Burgman & Burgman, 2011; Lonsdale, 1993; Rule, 2005). The cultural and political landscape featured protests against oppression and injustice, and activism for greater democratic participation and recognition of rights (Lonsdale, 1993). The women's liberation movement (the second-wave women's movement) politicised women through consciousness-raising and activism to recognise their marginalisation and inequality in private and public life. Women demanded recognition of their rights – to control their own bodies, for equal pay for work of equal value, for affordable childcare so that they could enter the workforce.

The catchcry of the women's movement "the personal is political" (Cahill, 2007, p.268) resonated with the Freirean approach, and focussed attention on the private spaces and aspects of women's lives as sites of subordination and oppression. Many Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria were instigated and established through the efforts of women. Women, and women's concerns, were central to their establishment from the early 1970s and well into the 1980s (Ducie, 1994; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Lonsdale, 1993; Neville, 1996; West, 1995). Women's efforts to redress the inequities associated with gendered and discriminatory ideas of women's place in society identified "the need for avenues for social interaction, learning and information" (Bennett & Forster, 1985, p.4.3.1) and this became a driving force behind the establishment of Neighbourhood Houses. Women sought solutions for their social isolation, they wanted places where they could socialise with others (Bennett & Forster, 1985). They advocated for onsite affordable childcare and classes within school hours to create accessible education and learning environments which acknowledged the realities of their lives as primary carers of young children. They wanted access to learning opportunities for employment and personal interest, and opportunities for active citizenship (Aytan, 1991; Bennett & Forster, 1985; Foley, 1993; Golding, Kimberley, Foley, & Brown, 2008; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Humpage, 2005; Kimberley, 1998; Lonsdale, 1993; West, 1995). Foley (1993) wrote that:

The houses were established for a variety of reasons: women's desire to come together to end their suburban isolation and obtain social and intellectual stimulation, to establish playgroups for young children, to provide education for women, to furnish productive outlets for women's skills. (p.25)

A gendered pattern of participation has existed in Victoria since Neighbourhood Houses were established more than forty years ago (Clemans, 2010; Golding et al.,

2008). Early research on Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria showed that women, often with young families, formed the majority of participants (Neville, 1996). Recent data shows that women comprise approximately 75% of participants (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b; Savage & Perry, 2014). Although there was just a small number of Neighbourhood Houses established for women-only, it was widely recognised that Houses were especially beneficial for women (Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Moloney, 1985; Neville, 1996), one writer claiming that “women, particularly, have gained more access to decision making processes through the community houses” (Aytan, 1991, p.13). Alongside the commitment to respond to the concerns of women, Neighbourhood Houses were and are still committed to supporting the rights of all people in local communities to access adult education and to participate in activities and decision making on issues affecting their lives.

A further important social policy development, coinciding with the groundswell of social and political activism and movements for change, was the election of the Whitlam Federal Labor government in 1972. This government, with a strong social agenda, established The Australian Assistance Plan (AAP) (Kenny, 2011; Lane, 2013; Peisker, 1989). The AAP “was based on regionalisation and community development strategies” (Lane, 2013, p.42) and promoted community development as the preferred way for citizens to become involved in identifying local needs and establishing community-based initiatives (Lane, 2013). Under this plan small grants to community groups were provided which supported the employment of community development workers to identify local needs and facilitate responses. The AAP provided the impetus for community members in Melbourne’s outer eastern suburbs to come together and research the needs of the local community and eventually to establish three Neighbourhood Houses (personal communication with Jocelyn Aytan). Several Neighbourhood Houses obtained seed funding through this scheme enabling them to

employ part-time staff and to repurpose and refurbish buildings for community use (Aytan, 1991; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Peisker, 1989).

Neighbourhood Houses in Australia

Currently there are more than 1,000 Neighbourhood Houses across Australia (ANHCA, 2018). In Victoria, just over 400 Houses are *the heart of local communities*, attracting more than 190,520 participants each week across the State (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017a). The high number of Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria, compared to that in other States of Australia, can be attributed in part to a funding regime which has provided core funding for coordination through the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program (NHCP), and an ongoing funding scheme for adult community education through the Adult, Community, and Further Education Board (Rooney, 2011). Women played a critical and strategic role in advocating for core coordination funding, which was successful largely on the basis that Neighbourhood Houses addressed the needs of women by offering opportunities for education, socialisation, and skills for employment (West, 1995).

Neighbourhood House activities are typically cost effective, and support and engage with a diversity of people including older adults, people with a disability, women and men, young people, children, single parents, people living with disability, public housing tenants, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTIQ³, and people from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b). A study in the State of New South Wales, highlights the vital role Neighbourhood Houses play in maintaining and improving the wellbeing of

³ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer.

communities, and illustrates the diversity of activities in Neighbourhood Houses adding that they are “uniquely placed to play a strong role in the delivery of a whole range of social services” (Izmir, Katz, & Bruce, 2009, p.ii). Examples of services provided include childcare, family support, advocacy, disability support, and counselling.

Neighbourhood Houses are recognised in Australia and internationally as key elements of the “social infrastructure of disadvantaged communities” (Izmir et al., 2009, p.iii; Yan, 2004). Internationally, many neighbourhood centres and houses were established following the traditions of the Settlement House movement.

The Settlement House movement

The Settlement House movement began in the early 1880s. Toynbee Hall in East London is generally considered to be one of the first Settlement houses (Craig & Mayo, 1995; Hansan, 2011). The movement was an early form of neighbourhood-based community building and development, established in response to the increasing poverty associated with industrialisation and the disruptive and dislocating effects of immigration and rapid urbanisation (Craig & Mayo, 1995; Ife, 2016; Larcombe & Yan, 2010; Ledwith, 2011; Yan, 2004). A social reforming movement, it addressed the needs of immigrants and low paid workers, advocating for better housing conditions and improved quality of daily life. Before long Settlement Houses were established in the United States, Canada, and in Europe. Women were pivotal to their establishment (Lewis, 2018). Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House in 1889 in Chicago, identified four major areas of human need served by settlement houses – “social, educational, humanitarian, and civic” (Yan, 2004, p.59). Educational programs were established to foster communal bonds and a sense of interdependence, and to address the needs of women and children (Larcombe, 2008; Sandercock & Attili, 2009). The Settlement

House model combines “service delivery, community building and social change” (Yan, 2004, p.57) and has become an enduring model of local place-based community building across the globe (The International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centres, 2018).

In Australia, local education programs for workers were provided by the Mechanics Institutes and Progress Associations in the early part of the 20th century (Bowman, 2016; Ife, 2016). There are many commonalities between the international Settlement Houses and Neighbourhood Houses in Australia, particularly their inclusive approaches and provision of programs to meet the needs of local communities. They are now linked together in a global movement through membership of the International Federation of Settlements and Centers (IFS) (The International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centres, 2018).

Neighbourhood Houses, community development, and empowerment

Neighbourhood Houses have a long history of commitment to the empowerment of “communities as well as of individuals” (Kimberley, 1998, p.24). The need to address the power inequities existing between powerful social institutions and local communities was recognised when Neighbourhood Houses were established (Kimberley, 1998). Neighbourhood Houses had a political agenda, to raise the status and improve the situations of women in local communities. They advocated and acted for recognition of women’s, and community, needs – increased resources and local services, spaces for social interaction and community connection, improved access to local services, accessible learning opportunities outside mainstream education (Foley, 1993; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Kimberley, 1998; Lonsdale, 1993; Moloney, 1985; Peisker, 1989; West, 1995). They enabled women to try out new ways of being in the

world, encouraging and supporting them to participate in community life and to engage with community and wider socio-political ideas and processes

The interconnectedness of community development and adult learning and education has long been evident in Neighbourhood House activity (Kimberley, 1998; Rooney, 2011). Learning in Neighbourhood Houses is formal, informal and incidental (Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2009). Transformative and empowering learning pedagogies influenced by the ideas of Freire and Illich were adopted (Lonsdale, 1993). Learners were regarded as active and creative participants in dialogic learning processes in which learners and educators were considered equals. Learning was communal and relational and drew upon the concerns and everyday realities of people's lives. All forms of learning were considered as empowering for individuals and communities irrespective of what was learned: learning was intrinsic to the intention of supporting personal transformation and social change (Foley, 1993, 2001; Kimberley, 1998; Lonsdale, 1993).

Over time, however, use of the term empowerment has decreased in the Neighbourhood House sector. Whereas once it was included in the aims and statements of purpose of many Neighbourhood Houses, this is less common today. Even though this is the case, the Neighbourhood House sector's statements about empowerment have made it clear that "houses and centres do not seek to do for others, but to empower others to do for themselves" (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2003, p.3). The current statement on empowerment, now 15 years old, reiterates earlier commitments towards empowering individuals and communities. Empowerment is described as:

To put into practice a process which respects, values and enhances people's ability to have control of their lives. This process encourages people to meet their needs and aspirations in a self-aware and informed way which takes advantage of their skills, experience and potential. (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2003, p.4)

These practices in Neighbourhood Houses encourage people's active involvement and ownership of local community planning and decision making. They are practices based in the belief that empowering practices at the local level have the potential to bring about personal and social transformation, and inspire social and political engagement and activism within the local community and at other levels of society, including government and international levels.

Community development

Community development is a contested, dynamic and contextualised practice based on a set of principles and values drawn from broad critical theoretical traditions such as feminism, socialism, environmentalism, and humanism (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Lathouras, 2012a; Ledwith, 2011; Rule, 2006). Mayo asserts (Mayo, 2000) that community development is concerned with culture when this is understood as "a way of life and consciousness" (Mayo, 2000, p.99). Community development uses a model of practice located within the everyday lives and activities of people in communities based on the principles of participatory democracy, collectivism, and empowerment, to redress the impacts of power inequities operating at the local level (Ledwith, 2011). It aims to strengthen the capacity of community members to identify and develop collective responses to their issues and needs in order for them to lead fulfilling lives and reach their full potential as human beings (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017;

Ledwith, 2011). Community development incorporates conceptions of social justice, human rights, ecological sustainability, democratic participation, holism, the empowerment of communities, and valuing of the local (Emejulu, 2011; Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Ledwith, 2011).

The principles and commitments of community development are embedded in the social connection, participation and learning practices and activities of Neighbourhood Houses and address a broad range of local concerns and interests (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017c). Neighbourhood House activities focus on community members who may be experiencing disadvantage, discrimination and marginalisation associated with ethnicity, migration and resettlement, unemployment, poverty, social isolation, domestic violence, single parenthood, disability, illness, age, grief, sexuality and gender identity (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013). Participatory processes provide community members with the opportunity to act on their environment and to feel connected with broader social concerns. They are encouraged to engage with and become involved in planning and decision making at all levels of the Houses, from membership of committees of management ⁴, to volunteering, and program participation according to their own interests (Kenny & Connors, 2017; Kimberley, 1998).

Neighbourhood House community development activities addressing locally identified needs are related to power inequities that result in local disadvantage and discrimination. Participation in the many activities of Neighbourhood Houses enriches community members and enables them to become aware of and learn how to challenge injustices and damaging initiatives and practices at the local level, and more

⁴ The governing body of Neighbourhood Houses, sometimes called Board of Management.

broadly. Participation facilitates social and community connection, alleviates social isolation, and increases skills and knowledge (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017). Community-driven initiatives vary widely, ranging from local efforts to establish a Neighbourhood House in newly settled areas or areas which lack social infrastructure, or to extend or increase the amount of accessible community space. Determining and participating in activities such as planning celebrations and festivals, establishing community arts projects, community gardens, and sustainability-focused activities, or publishing a community newsletter, increases the capacity and capability of communities to identify and resolve their own concerns.

Tensions and ambiguities at the theoretical and practice levels of community development inform vigorous debate among practitioners and theorists. This is attributed to the multiple bodies of theory underpinning community development and the many ways in which it is practised (Kenny & Connors, 2017; Lathouras, 2012a). The relative merits of the professionalisation of the sector are frequently the subject of debate. Claims are made that professionalism establishes a hierarchy of power between the highly valued expertise of qualified and professional staff, and the local knowledge and skills of community members which are given less credence and value (Ife, 2016; Kenny, 2002; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Lathouras, 2017). Much current discussion within the field centres upon the influence and impact of neo-liberalism on community development practice (Burkett, 2001, 2011; Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017). The individualist and private market-based perspective of neoliberalism is antithetical to the collectivist and progressive approaches embraced by community development. Along with co-opting the discourse of empowerment to suit individualistic ends, the mechanisms of neoliberalism, such as managerialism, and competitive practices, impact on the ability of organisations to focus their energies and resources on people and communities. This impacts on the ability of Neighbourhood Houses to

remain true to the principles of community development and the empowerment of local communities as they are forced to comply with and pay attention to increasingly bureaucratic and business-focussed tasks and requirements (Lindeman, 1994).

Empowerment

The concept of empowerment was popularised during the social liberation movements of the 1960s, including the women's, black power and anti-war movements (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011; Mayo, 2005; Wilson, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 1994). It has historical origins extending as far back as struggles against the caste system and gender oppression in 13th century India (Batliwala, 2007). In critical community work contexts, empowerment is used in connection with the notion of social justice and anti-oppressive practice (Ife, 2016; Mullaly, 2011; Parker, Fook, & Pease, 1999; Pease, 2002).

Although empowerment has fallen out of favour in some progressive circles (Ife, 2016; Mullaly, 2011; Pease, 2002), it has had wide application across disciplines as varied as community development, education, social work, community health, and international development (Batliwala, 2007; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Ife, 2013; Lane, 2013; Shields, 1995; Woodall, Warwick-Booth, & Cross, 2012; Zimmerman, 1995).

Empowerment refers to increasing the capacities of individuals and communities, particularly those who are disadvantaged or marginalised, to gain greater influence and control over aspects of their lives (Batliwala, 2007; Gutiérrez, 1995; Ife, 2013; Kenny, 2011; Ledwith, 2011; Summerson Carr, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995).

In community development the intention to empower communities is grounded in the notion of power as "power to, or power as competence" (Yuval-Davis, 1994, p.180) rather than power as dominance and control over others (Foucault, 1980; hooks, 2014;

lfe, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017). Community development implements practices that provide opportunities for people to exercise control in their lives, aiming to empower local communities by demonstrating many different possibilities for people to work together and to assume “collective control of and responsibility for their own development” (Kenny & Connors, 2017, p.12).

lfe (2016) understands empowerment as a series of processes and practices that enable people to have a voice in the issues, debates and concerns which impact on their lives. He considers that to enable communities to have greater capacity for self-determination it is important to:

... [provide] people with the resources, opportunities, vocabulary, knowledge and skills to increase their capacity to determine their own futures, and to participate in and affect the life of their community. It also means an analysis of power itself, and what that means in the context of community. (p.264)

Empowerment requires access to resources, the opportunity to participate in decision making, and awareness of the ways power operates to limit people's ability to live fulfilling lives (Kenny & Connors, 2017). Underlying these elements are two key principles of community development: participation and critical awareness.

The way power is conceptualised shapes the way that empowerment is understood (lfe, 2016; Kesby, 2005; Pease, 2002). Community development conceptions of empowerment are principally drawn from structural and post-structural perspectives of power and the way power operates in people's lives (lfe, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Ledwith, 2011; Rule, 2006). This study draws upon feminist and poststructural perspectives of power to conceptualise and explore empowerment in the everyday lives of women participants and managers through their engagement with

Neighbourhood Houses. These perspectives of power are based on a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1980) analysis in which power is theorised as productive, with “positive, creative capacities” (Kesby, 2005, p.2050), and on a feminist analysis which eschews the idea of power as control and domination (hooks, 2014). In Foucault’s view, power exists within and is maintained by discourse (Ife, 2016). Power is not possessed, or located within any particular social institution or structure, it is decentred and diffused, it “comes from everywhere so ... is neither an agency nor a structure” (Foucault, 1977, p.63).

Empowerment exists in mutual entanglement with power not distanced from it (Sharp, Routledge, Philo, & Paddison, 2000), and like power it is subjectively experienced and exercised in relations. Both are situated, partial, unstable and “subject to future challenge and transformation” (Kesby, 2005, p.2052). Power and empowerment are unstable because the possibility of resistance to power co-exists with power (Foucault, 1980). Resistance comes in many forms, from large social movements to small everyday acts of refusal, creativity and strength (Foucault, 1980; hooks, 2014). The conception of power and empowerment in this study focuses attention on the micro-levels of social interaction in women’s everyday lives (Gore, 2003), recognising that the very smallest acts of resistance can produce significant changes in women’s lives (Ollis, 2010).

The intention of this research is to reclaim and re-envision empowerment by focusing on the diversity of women’s everyday lived experiences in their association with Neighbourhood Houses. In the current neoliberal environment this can be construed as an act of resistance. As Mullaly (2007) suggests eliminating use of the concept leaves progressive practitioners without the ability to describe processes and outcomes which contribute to a reduced sense of powerlessness. If the idea of empowerment is

abandoned the great diversity of local projects implemented in the name of community development in Neighbourhood Houses risk becoming depoliticised. Instead of being seen within the context of local action connected with broader social and political concerns, these activities become ways of making people's lives a little better and more satisfying and lose their political impact. This study concurs with Ife (Ife, 2016), that it is important to challenge the conservative discourse of empowerment and reinvigorate the way it is understood within the practices and discourses of community development.

Research design

Women's stories of personal experience are at the heart of this qualitative research which aims to understand in what ways women experience empowerment through engagement with Neighbourhood Houses. Sharing stories of personal experience was a powerful consciousness raising practice adopted by feminists interested to uncover and understand the circumstances of women's lives (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Building knowledge from empirical research is important to women's lives, to Neighbourhood Houses, to local communities, and to community development practice. Using women's stories as primary sources, as in this research, highlights the nuanced experiences of women in Neighbourhood Houses, resonates with a typical community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses of people sharing their personal stories, and it reveals some of the myriad and hidden "little stories" which illustrate empowering experiences in women's everyday lives (Ledwith, 2011, p.62). Women's stories are foregrounded in this study for two main reasons: in order to explore diverse ways of knowing by giving space to "alternative and previously silenced knowledges" (Bursian, 2012, p.33; The Personal Narratives Group, 1989) and because of the

significant historical and current connections women have with Neighbourhood Houses (Lonsdale, 1993; Neville, 1996; West, 1995).

This research takes an overall qualitative approach to gather, present, and interpret women's experiences (Grace & Gandolfo, 2013; Liamputtong, 2012). The analysis is informed by narrative research approaches and poetic interpretation (Richardson, 1993; Riessman, 2008). The narrative approach of this study resonates with feminist practice and Kimberley's (1998) observation that people in Neighbourhood Houses love to tell their personal stories, however, it has rarely been used in research on Neighbourhood Houses. In this research a total of twenty-eight women were interviewed. Fifteen women from ten separate Neighbourhood Houses in rural and metropolitan locations shared their personal stories of participation in programs and activities. Thirteen managers from eleven separate Neighbourhood Houses located in rural and metropolitan areas shared their personal stories as managers. All the interviews were in-depth and semi-structured.

The narratives of the women in this research exemplify the "experiential knowledge" (Beresford, 2013, p.56) of women in Neighbourhood Houses. Their stories reveal a deep interrelatedness and embodied connection (Tamboukou, 2010) between themselves and the Neighbourhood House they were attending or managing.

Contribution to knowledge

This qualitative study explores contemporary women's experiences of empowerment within the community context of Neighbourhood Houses. The intention of this research is to explore the nuances of empowerment as experienced by women within the particular milieu of Neighbourhood Houses. The study builds on previous research and theoretical work on women and empowerment, and on Neighbourhood Houses. It

extends and deepens understandings of how community development practice within Neighbourhood Houses supports women to develop a greater sense of control in areas of their lives, in their local communities and more broadly. The thesis contributes to knowledge by making an argument in support of the continued usefulness of the concept of empowerment. Contemporary perspectives of empowerment increase understanding of the ways in which participating and working in Neighbourhood Houses engage women with counter discourses and practices of power. These practices provide diverse and multifaceted possibilities for women to experience empowerment in their everyday lives, local communities, and more broadly.

Structure of the thesis

This first chapter has provided an overview of the rationale for the research and introduces the research questions. It has defined and discussed the key concepts relevant to the research, and outlined the research design. It includes an overview of the contribution to knowledge made by this research.

Chapter Two, “Review of relevant research”, begins with a survey of the Australian and international literature on Neighbourhood Houses. This is followed by a review of research that is relevant to the focus of this study, women’s experiences of empowerment.

Chapter Three, “Theoretical framework”, outlines in detail the community development, feminist and poststructural theoretical conceptual frameworks used in this research.

Chapter Four, “Research design”, presents the methodology and philosophical approach of the research, and outlines the method of data gathering. The chapter

concludes with consideration of relevant ethical concerns and the limitations of the research.

Chapter Five, “The women participants: engagement and participation”, presents the findings based on the data gathered in this research in relation to the fifteen women participants in the Neighbourhood Houses. The findings, presented thematically and poetically, identify the reasons which brought the women to the Neighbourhood House, the diverse and multilayered nature of their experiences as participants, volunteers, and in some instances paid staff, and the facilitative aspects of the Neighbourhood Houses.

Chapter Six, “The managers: leadership in the community” presents the findings based on the data gathered in interviews with the thirteen managers who participated in this study. The findings are presented thematically and poetically, and identify the motivations and pathways for becoming the manager, encapsulate the wide-ranging nature of their experiences, and the aspects of the organisational culture of Neighbourhood Houses which contributed to their experiences.

Chapter Seven, “Discussion and conclusion”, draws on the literature to discuss the findings of the research to illustrate the central argument of this thesis, that empowerment remains a useful concept for understanding the ways that Neighbourhood Houses facilitate and enable women to develop a sense of agency and control in their personal, working and civic lives. The chapter includes a section articulating a re-envisioned notion of empowerment and concludes by identifying the contribution to knowledge, the limitations of the study and implications for practice, and makes recommendations for future research, followed by a short reflection on the research journey.

Chapter Two: Review of relevant research

This chapter presents a review of the research-based literature on the key focus of this research, Neighbourhood Houses, and women and empowerment. It is noted that the Neighbourhood House sector in Australia is under-researched (Ollis, Starr, Angwin, Ryan, & Harrison, 2016; Rooney, 2008; Rule, 2005; Townsend, 2006, 2009), and internationally, with the exception of North America and Canada, there are few studies which explore the complexities of these organisations (Yan & Lauer, 2008). It is therefore not altogether surprising that both the existence and the benefits of Neighbourhood Houses for local communities has been under-recognised (Humpage, 2005; Paltridge, 2005; Yan & Sin, 2011).

A survey of the literature revealed a dearth of studies examining women, empowerment and Neighbourhood Houses. In light of the limited literature exploring the combined topics of this research – women, empowerment and Neighbourhood Houses – this chapter reviews research on Neighbourhood Houses thematically addressing the following areas:

- the culture of Neighbourhood Houses,
- women's participation,
- inclusion and diversity,
- learning and education, and
- power and empowerment in Neighbourhood Houses.

Although these topics are discussed separately there is extensive overlap and interdependency between them.

The review of relevant research concludes with research focused on women and empowerment. There has been considerable international research on women and empowerment often associated with international community development and aid-based projects. Other international research, along with some Australian-based research, has explored these topics within particular locations, for example, universities and community-based organisations and groups.

The distinctive culture of Neighbourhood Houses

This section on the distinctive culture of Neighbourhood Houses begins with a poetic construction using quotes from the interviews conducted for this research.

What is a Neighbourhood House?

it looks like a house when you walk in the front
I remember thinking, oh it's just a house isn't it?
it's a very safe place and people feel very safe coming here
people come in and say it feels like home
friendliness
the welcome is about people feeling comfortable here
here I could be just who I am
when they're good they are there to provide a place for community
I love when it all comes together
I just really love my job, I really love my job.
one of the main things I see is relationships and connections with people
having a space where they can make connections,
the connection
a lot of our members say without this house what would we do?
a real hub for being included in such a small isolated community

they're always happy to sit down with someone and have a chat
it's much more interactive
I don't see that happening in quite the same way in any other organisation in town
you come to learn or you come to share a skill
or join a group
people drop in or drop in and have a cuppa
I know if I come here I am going to be challenged
they're open to new ideas and new thinking
houses are organic and they can change and adapt
I've learnt so much, I've changed big time,
I love working in this sector, I love being around people.
it's great for the flow of ideas that come through
people with lots of rich experiences of life
a place where everybody can come
and feel they have
a place.

Much of the research conducted on Neighbourhood Houses, in Australia and internationally, acknowledges their special and distinctive culture (Brophy & Rodd, 2017; Izmir et al., 2009; Kimberley, 1998; Larcombe & Yan, 2010; Sandercock & Attili, 2009; West, 1995; Yan & Lauer, 2008; Yan & Sin, 2011). These studies clearly illustrate one of the primary distinguishing features of Neighbourhood Houses – they are all different, although they share many similarities (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017c; Rooney, 2011). Because they are all different, any account of Neighbourhood Houses should be read as one of many possible accounts. What is empirically evident in one House may not be evident in another, and vice versa.

Australian and international research on Neighbourhood Houses shows that they are distinctive social spaces where diverse communities interact and individuals gain a

sense of social belonging. A distinguishing feature of Neighbourhood Houses is the integration of community development, adult learning, advocacy, and service delivery (Humpage, 2005; Izmir et al., 2009; Larcombe, 2008; Rooney, 2008, 2011; Whyte, 2017; Yan, 2004; Yan & Sin, 2011). They are place-based locally managed organisations embracing inclusivity and diversity, responding to local needs by offering a broad range of programs across life stages, providing learning and social opportunities, volunteering, community support, community events and celebrations, and employment training and support (Larcombe & Yan, 2010; Lathouras, 2012b; Rooney, 2011; Sandercock & Attili, 2009; Yan & Lauer, 2008; Yan & Sin, 2011).

Studies focused on the organisational structures and cultural practices in Neighbourhood Houses have concluded that the integrated model of practice, and the wide range of programs and activities offered, creates a culture in Neighbourhood Houses unlike that of other agencies based on more bureaucratic or specialised models (Kimberley, 1998; Lindeman, 1994; Neville, 1996; Yan, 2004; Yan & Lauer, 2008). Neighbourhood Houses are closely aligned with forms of organisation that are non-hierarchical, concerned with equality, relationship focussed, and often women-led (Neville, 1996). Australian studies emphasise the informality, accessibility, and often small-scale nature of operations (Paltridge, 2005; Permezel, 2001) and the specialness of Neighbourhood Houses, sometimes describing the culture as magical, special or even strange (Gibson-Pope, 2017; Kimberley, 1998; Paltridge, 2005). Paltridge (2005) notes that there is an apparent intangibility about Neighbourhood House culture, it being substantially more than what is visible – a felt, lived experience “associated with the environment and the meaningful experiences that occur there” (p.161). The welcoming culture of Neighbourhood Houses has been frequently commented upon (Kimberley, 1998; Neville, 1996; Paltridge, 2005; Permezel, 2001; Thompson, 2015). Paltridge, for example, says that “Neighbourhood Houses place importance on the

environment being welcoming, friendly, free, safe, informal, relaxed, multi-purpose, flexible, tolerant, non-religious, free from pressure to participate, and significantly, open daily” (p.160).

As the name suggests, Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria are often located in converted houses, retaining the domestic scale and home-like features of ordinary dwellings, which contributes to the down-to-earth and informal nature of the environment (Permezel, 2001). This physical characteristic immediately creates a sense of familiarity and accessibility, whereby people, particularly women, are able to feel at ease and belong. Permezel (2001) noted that for the women in her study the similarity of the environment “to domestic culture could be related to by women from a range of backgrounds” (p.235).

Kimberley (1998) conducted a deep exploration of the culture of Neighbourhood Houses, uncovering complex layers in order to discover why it was “commonly experienced as enigmatic” (p.274). She combined a genealogical examination of early sector documents outlining the history, philosophy, principles, and practices of Houses since the early 1970s, a focus group of House co-ordinators, and participant observation undertaken at two Neighbourhood Houses. Kimberley described the welcoming culture of Neighbourhood Houses as resembling a significant ritual conveying “trust and mutual appreciation” (p.125). Her study depicted a culture welcoming to strangers, connecting community members with each other and “the wider world” as they shared their “tales of life” (p.124). She concluded that Neighbourhood Houses manifest characteristics of opposing and contradictory cultural styles. The highest value is placed on people and relationships, reciprocity, co-operation, and sharing the experiences of everyday life. Informality and mutuality are the dominant features of this cultural style. Simultaneously, Neighbourhood Houses

develop operational structures, accommodate and respond to the requirements of government policies, and plan and network with external organisations. This aspect of cultural style entails a greater focus on formal organising and planning processes.

Australian and international studies have found there is a lack of recognition and valuing of the important contribution made by Neighbourhood Houses to local communities, and this is accompanied by a scarcity of resources (Bowman, 2016; Clemans, 2010; Humpage, 2005; Larcombe, 2008; Paltridge, 2005; Sandercock & Attili, 2009; Thompson, 2015; Townsend, 2009; Yan & Lauer, 2008; Yan & Sin, 2011). Clemans (2010) offers an explanation for this is. In a study exploring the adult education work of Neighbourhood Houses, she concluded that the feminisation of these spaces, with their domestic scale and emphasis on caring, is problematic because it contributes to the undervaluing and invisibility of the complex work that is undertaken. There is strong evidence attesting to the importance of caring and compassionate approaches and of the powerful nature of adult learning in the community (Thompson, 2015; Townsend, 2009), and as Clemans (2010) found, there are significant personal and professional rewards for those working in these spaces. However, she suggests that the highly feminised workforce, the emphasis placed on feminine-type skills, and the discursive construction of community-based education work as focussed on caring and relationship, undermines the perception of the sector as professional. As a consequence what follows is inadequate resourcing, both human and financial.

Being resource poor places constraints on the capacity of Neighbourhood Houses to respond to the wide range of local needs (Humpage, 2005) and it restricts the ability to publicise widely either their existence or their activities (Paltridge, 2005). In order to overcome these inadequacies, staff spend large amounts of time writing funding

submissions (SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013; Sandercock & Attili, 2009). A review of Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria conducted by Humpage (2005) noted that despite Neighbourhood Houses providing valuable local infrastructure, human resources and social and organisational networks:

Current funding levels do not, however, fully recognise that this is the case. This restricts the growth and the development of the sector and thus its ability to build and maintain the infrastructure needed to respond to local opportunities, needs, problems or emergencies in the future. (p.29)

There is wide variability in funding levels and funding sources across the sector (Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association, 2011). In Victoria, the Neighbourhood House Co-ordination Program (NHCP), administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, provides recurrent funding for co-ordination of Neighbourhood Houses ranging from 25 to 40 hours per week (Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The most recent survey of Neighbourhood Houses conducted in Victoria (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b) reports that, “On average, Neighbourhood Houses’ NHCP funding provides for 24.9 hours of coordination funding per week. However, they are actually open with paid staff for 34.9 hours a week, with an additional 13 hours a week of outreach work” (p.12). Other recent studies have shown that Neighbourhood Houses “provide services in a very cost effective manner” (Izmir et al., 2009, p.iii; SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013). Additional funding sources include other state government departments, local government, and philanthropic bodies (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b). There has been increasing recognition by governments that Neighbourhood Houses are “uniquely placed to play a strong role in the delivery of a whole range of social services” (Izmir et al., 2009, p.ii).

Reliance on government funding is associated with risks and challenges some of which can be attributed to the tensions between the intentions of funding bodies, that is to ensure delivery of services, and that of Neighbourhood Houses to do community development (Buckingham, 1997; Lindeman, 1994; Moloney, 1985; Townsend, 2006). Burkett (2011) identifies some of the difficulties:

An emphasis on contractual funding relationships, a policy framework emphasizing increased self-reliance and entrepreneurship and a focus on enhancing funding efficiencies have left many smaller and medium sized community organisations struggling to find core administrative funding, to attract and retain staff and to build long-term community development strategies. (p.113)

Changes in economic and social policy since the mid-1980s towards free market and user-pays systems have impinged on Neighbourhood Houses requiring time, energy and resources to be diverted from core community development activities towards establishing business-focussed reporting and accountability arrangements. A study by Lindeman (1994) showed that new managerialism was forcing changes in organisational and management structures, having a “disempowering and silencing effect on community based organisations and the users/participants of these organisations, usually women” (p.100). Neville (1996) identified increasing bureaucratic encroachment associated with Neighbourhood Houses’ roles as “providers of educational services” (p.76) which created pressure for greater efficiencies and accountabilities. Buckingham’s (1997) study of one suburban Neighbourhood House, from conception to the 16th year of operation, concluded that the “demands for increased and more complex accountability”, and “the loss of symbolic ownership [of Houses’ operational structures, and activities], through compulsory competitive tendering” (p.2) was disempowering for Houses. Burkett (2011) claims that “the advent

of contractual relationships between funders and providers has resulted in a shift of practice away from community development towards service delivery” (p.112).

Participatory democracy is a core principle of community development (Emejulu, 2015; Ife, 2016). Participatory decision-making is an integral aspect of community development and Neighbourhood House culture (Ife, 2016; Kimberley, 1998; Paltridge, 2005). In individual Houses, participating in decision making is encouraged at all levels: from the formal and high-level collective decision-making on Neighbourhood House committees of management, to individuals making decisions about their own levels of participation and contribution (Kimberley, 1998). These practices play an important role in ensuring that Neighbourhood Houses continue to operate and provide activities that reflect the needs and desires of community members (Paltridge, 2005). Participatory practices are a way of developing group responsibility and ensuring that power is enacted collectively rather than resting with any particular individual. Foley (2001) found that participating as committee of management members, as staff, and in programs and activities, women gained skills and knowledge, “self-awareness, and an understanding of the complexity of human relationships” (p.77).

Volunteering opportunities exist at all levels of Neighbourhood Houses, from cleaning to governance, teaching to cooking, gardening to administration. Volunteering is a form of participation in Neighbourhood Houses with many benefits for community members. It provides opportunities to overcome social isolation, establish social networks, gain work skills and experience and orient to workplace culture, gain transferable skills, enhance wellbeing, contribute to social change, and to support local communities (Bailey, Savage, & O'Connell, 2003; Lauer & Yan, 2013; Savage & Perry, 2014).

Volunteering is associated with health and wellbeing benefits (Savage & Perry, 2014),

with building social capital (Lauer & Yan, 2013), and with feeling empowered (Paltridge, 2005). A study by Yan and Lauer (2008) expressed the view that:

Volunteering has long been a major community-building vehicle for NHs, and is part of a philosophy of creating opportunities for people to connect with others by contributing to the community as a whole.... Volunteering opportunities enable newcomers to contribute to the community and improve its quality of life. (pp.242-243)

Volunteering has an important place in Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria. The annual survey conducted by Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b) identifies the substantial levels of volunteering in Neighbourhood Houses. However, it was beyond the scope of that survey to interrogate the data regarding the tasks and activities undertaken by volunteers, or the outcomes for volunteers. The survey notes that “the number of people choosing to volunteer at a Neighbourhood House has seen a significant increase over the last 4 years” (p.3), and values this contribution at over \$24.5 million per year. The Victorian Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres Sector Framework states that “Volunteers and community members are integral to the decision-making, evaluation, provision, participation and direction setting at all levels of the organisation” (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2003, p.4).

Volunteering occurs across all areas of society and is a form of active and engaged citizenship. However, volunteering is a contested practice in community development. Kenny and Connors (2017) suggest several reasons for this: the historic links of volunteering with charity work, the risk of undermining the industrial conditions for community workers, and the potential for exploitation of volunteers. In order to mitigate against exploitation, volunteering must be undertaken freely, and arrangements made

regarding tasks and times which suit the volunteer. A study of volunteering in a rural community found that volunteers considered that in working with others “people in their community could influence decisions that affect their community (Bailey et al., 2003, p.10).

Volunteering within community organisations:

... can be empowering for marginalised groups who lack the confidence and experience to take on a paid job. Many women who have been isolated during their childbearing years, for example, are empowered through volunteering experience: they may begin as participants in a program at a community house, for example, and progress to volunteer, part-time worker and eventually full-time co-ordinator. (Kenny & Connors, 2017, p.264)

Volunteering is recognised for its value in providing opportunities for women who may otherwise have limited options to gain skills, socialise, establish social networks, and to contribute to their community (Kenny & Connors, 2017).

Neighbourhood Houses – a liberating space for women

The focus on women was a form of gender-activism by Neighbourhood Houses promoting women’s right to participate in civil society (Permezel, 2001). Chapter One of this study included a discussion of the women-focussed origins of many Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria. Many studies have testified to the efforts and experiences of women, many of whom were out of the workforce, at home with young children, or feeling dissatisfied with their lives, for the establishment of Neighbourhood Houses (Dean, Boland, & Jamrozik, 1988; Ducie, 1994; Gravell & Nelson, 1986;

Guinness, 1998; LinkWest; Lonsdale, 1993; Moloney, 1985; Ollis et al., 2016; Paltridge, 2005; Peisker, 1989; West, 1995).

It was previously mentioned that sector-based surveys and studies show that women did and still do comprise a majority of participants in Neighbourhood Houses (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2013; Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association, 2011; Ducie, 1994; Golding et al., 2008; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Neville, 1996; Peisker, 1989). An early study by Neville (1996) observed that:

The most striking feature was the predominance of women, and particularly of young women who were 'at home' with young families, who served on the committees and rosters and who attended ... Two of the centres openly acknowledged that women were their primary concern , included the word 'women's' in their title and actively pursued 'women's issues'. (p.74)

Savage and Perry (2014) recorded women's participation across Victoria at approximately 75% in 2013. There do not appear to be any recent studies exploring women's engagement with Neighbourhood Houses, however, several earlier studies did focus on women's participation (Buckingham, 1997; Ducie, 1994; Neville, 1996; Peisker, 1989; West, 1995). Permezel (2001) subsequently pointed to the inadequacies of the government policy framework for Neighbourhood Houses in regard to supporting provision of women-only or women-specific spaces. She suggested that the revised Neighbourhood House Co-ordination Program (NHCP) guidelines in 2000 included men as a disadvantaged group due to high levels of unemployment, and no longer used a definition of disadvantage which included women. Permezel (2001) claimed that not only was this a denial of the "material differences in men and women's

participatory capacities and opportunities in the public sphere” (p.196), it created ambivalence among Neighbourhood House staff about the predominance of women, and thwarted this form of gender-activism.

Multiple benefits for women resulted from participation in Neighbourhood Houses (Ducie, 1994; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Neville, 1996; Paltridge, 2005; Peisker, 1989; Permezel, 2001). A study by Foley (1993) explored women’s participation in two Neighbourhood Houses, some of whom were involved in advocacy for an on-site children’s service. The study concluded that, “Neighbourhood Houses can be seen as ‘liberated spaces’ in which women have opportunities to explore their experiences and build women-centred, nurturing relationships (p.11). (quotation marks in original).

Women-centred spaces and practices provided opportunities for women from diverse backgrounds to share their skills and knowledge and socialise with other women (Guinness, 1998; Permezel, 2001). Sharing food and social occasions were important ways of attracting women, “at the end of the year, and at other celebrations we have a party and the women from different cultures feel free to dance because there are no men there” (Guinness, 1998, p.195). Studies by Paltridge (2005) and Permezel (2001) reported that feeling safe and being accepted as equals led to increased self-esteem, and with greater self-esteem and confidence women found the courage to become proactive, to “take risks and learn new skills” (Paltridge, 2005, p.183).

Paltridge (2005) used theories of social capital and women’s wellbeing to explore the practices of five Neighbourhood Houses in South Australia from the perspectives of the women attending, identifying perceived changes in their social connections, feelings of inclusivity, levels of trust and reciprocity, and community participation. The positive changes occurring in these areas of the women’s lives from participation in craft

groups, single mother's programs, drop-in, and volunteering were considered as evidence of building social capital and enhanced wellbeing for women.

Permezel's (2001) study, set in six Melbourne Neighbourhood Houses, focused on practices of citizenship for women, people with disabilities, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD). Her study demonstrates the role Houses play in supporting the enactment of different subject positions for women, as they move from disengaged to engaged citizens. The formal and informal processes and practices of the Neighbourhood Houses facilitated women's agency to take up opportunities for learning and engaging in public life, and re-envisioning life directions. Permezel (2001) suggests that women-specific neighbourhood-based spaces enable women to engage in community life because they are accessible and safe. In these flexible communal spaces the complexities associated with integrating domestic responsibilities, dealing with fears for personal safety, lack of confidence, and the many disadvantages compounded by social isolation and low socio-economic status experienced by women were not barriers to participation (Permezel, 2001). The location of Neighbourhood Houses in suburban streets close to where women live and children attend school overcomes the barriers of travel to new and unfamiliar places in order to engage with and participate in new social spaces (Permezel, 2001). The domestic-scale and homely character of Neighbourhood Houses, although contributing in no small measure to the welcoming and friendly feel, and sense of security and belonging is also something of a double-edged sword. The study by Clemans (2010) mentioned earlier identified some negative effects of gendered and domestic-related learning environments. Thompson (2015), in concurring with Cleman's view, stated that placing an emphasis on care can inadvertently undermine and conceal the complex educational work involved in supporting disadvantaged learners.

Participating in Neighbourhood Houses facilitated a broad spectrum of personal and life changing benefits for women: increased self-esteem and confidence, expansion of personal horizons and social networks beyond the domestic sphere, critical awareness and understanding, increased skills, and civic and community leadership and engagement (Foley, 1993; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Kimberley, 1998; Moloney, 1985; Paltridge, 2005; Peisker, 1989; Permezel, 2001). Permezel (2001) observed that in Neighbourhood Houses, “Women begin to develop the courage to take proactive measures in changing their personal circumstances and in re-casting their lives in ways that meet a range of important material and educational needs” (p.185). Other studies (Buckingham, 1997; Moloney, 1985; West, 1995) have identified empowerment as an outcome and benefit for women. This is discussed separately in a later section of this chapter.

Neighbourhood Houses and social inclusion

Paltridge’s (2005) study claims that “Neighbourhood houses are the only community organisation that actively promotes and pursues social inclusivity programs” (p.207). Sector surveys and studies conducted over many years support claims of the substantial diversity of participants in Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria. Albeit that the majority of participants are women, there are many differences in their life circumstances, experiences and desires.

The diversity profile of Neighbourhood Houses includes women and men:

- with a disability, physical, mental, and intellectual,
- unemployed, seeking work,
- unemployed, not seeking work,
- of different faiths,

- seniors,
- young people,
- children,
- single and teenaged parents,
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and
- people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD), with mixed experiences of migration, for example, asylum seekers and refugees, new citizens, immigrants (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2014, 2015).

Inclusion and diversity are addressed with specifically-focussed programs, for example programs for single parents, for people planning to return to employment, people with an intellectual disability, or multicultural and ethno-specific programs, and with generalist programs which focus on interest rather than particular life-situations or experiences as the criteria for participation (Clemans, Hartley, & McRae, 2003).

Neighbourhood Houses offer a generalist suite of programs, activities, and services to local communities, and they are able to be flexible in the way they respond (Gibson-Pope, 2017). In addition to organised programs, informal responses are important ways of meeting the needs of otherwise excluded community members. Thompson (2015), for instance, identified a low-key approach to literacy mediation as an example of inclusive practice for community members with low levels of literacy who often experience embarrassment and fear of ridicule. The friendly and supportive administrative and management staff overcame this by offering literacy support *on demand* “in the foyers and kitchens and hallways of two Neighbourhood Houses” (Thompson, 2015, p.478).

In one of the few studies which address the inclusion of people with a disability, Permezel (2001) concludes that “the Neighbourhood House is one of the few local forums where different versions of interaction occur” (p.229), between people with and without a disability, and between people from many cultural backgrounds. State deinstitutionalisation policies in the 1990s, and later State and Federal policies on inclusion led to increasing numbers of people with a disability seeking to access programs and activities at Neighbourhood Houses. Many Houses embraced this, while some did not (Permezel, 2001). She noted that people with a disability can struggle to access public social spaces, often arising from the fear and anxiety of others (Permezel, 2001). Although there is commitment to addressing the needs of people with a disability, there are a range of constraints to be overcome: lack of trained staff, additional spatial and physical requirements, the negative perceptions of other community members, and the need to “mediate competing needs” (Permezel, 2001, p.209). The most recent sector survey of Victorian Houses (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b) indicates that 55% of Houses offered programs determined by people with a disability, and 48% of Houses offered programs determined by people with mental health issues.

Several Australian and international studies have concentrated on the inclusion, and barriers to inclusion, of CALD communities in Neighbourhood Houses and Settlement Houses (Gibson-Pope, 2017; Guinness, 1998; Permezel, 2001; Robles, 1992; Sandercock & Attili, 2009; Townsend, 2009; Yan & Lauer, 2008). Providing English Language classes has long been considered an important way for Neighbourhood Houses to include and respond to the needs of people from CALD backgrounds (Guinness, 1998; Permezel, 2001; Townsend, 2009). The opportunity to learn and practise English language was considered to be “a cornerstone of all programs” (Guinness, 1998, p.93) in Houses located in communities with high numbers of CALD

members. Lacking facility in the dominant language is a significant barrier to access and participation (Robles, 1992). In a report prepared for the peak body of Neighbourhood Houses, Robles (1992) noted that, "Access to language classes is critical for the enhancement of social and economic participation. English language knowledge ... interpreter services are not alternatives – interpreting is always second best in the empowering stakes" (p.13). Along with formal language classes, informal social gatherings provided opportunities to understand "the more implicit complexities and nuances of the English language to be learned" (Permezel, 2001, p.141).

The informal and relaxed environment is an important element of the homely spaces of Neighbourhood Houses, and creates a sense of security for diverse groups of people (Clemans, 2010; Permezel, 2001; Thompson, 2015). Fears of racism were reported to have a profound impact on CALD women's capacity to participate in public spaces. For these women the familiarity of the home-like appearance of Houses engendered a sense of safety (Permezel, 2001). Along with physical proximity and accessibility this familiarity and sense of security fostered a willingness by CALD women to participate in programs or to just attend a House while they acculturated to a new country and developed their "understanding of social and cultural norms" and expectations of them as women in a new society (Permezel, 2001, p.175). Studies of Settlement Houses, initially established to forge connections between the rich and poor in geographical areas, highlight their role in supporting immigrants to establish themselves in new communities: in America and Canada they were "mostly set up in immigrant communities [and] were overwhelmingly concerned with bridging newcomers to the entire host society" (Yan & Lauer, 2008, p.232). Recent studies (Gibson-Pope, 2017; Yan & Lauer, 2008) have explored the role of Settlement Houses and Neighbourhood Houses in connecting and integrating newcomers with local communities. Gibson-Pope (2017) found that approximately half of the Neighbourhood Houses in South Australia

offered programs “identified by researchers as critical to successful settlement of new arrivals, including English Language, employment, social connections and cultural knowledge” (p.190). Furthermore, the Neighbourhood Houses were providing assistance to integrate “at the local level and at an emotional level in ways that other service providers were not able” (p.190). Developing social connections fosters a sense of belonging, mitigates against social isolation, and improves individual wellbeing. While it has been shown that women from CALD backgrounds do experience significant and life-changing benefits from attendance and participation in Neighbourhood Houses, this is not universally the case. Several studies have contested claims of inclusivity in relation to CALD women, arguing that a gap exists between the rhetoric of inclusion, and real and meaningful inclusion in Neighbourhood Houses (Foley, 1993; Guinness, 1998; Robles, 1992; Townsend, 2009). Foley’s (1993) study of two Neighbourhood Houses outlined one reason why English language classes are important for overcoming barriers to inclusion, noting that when a woman’s level of English is not as high as other people’s, “Houses are not always warm and welcoming, people sometimes have to struggle to find a place” (p.27). Sensitivity, tolerance, and understanding by native speakers is a necessary aspect of inclusive practice, and is particularly important for ensuring that CALD members are supported and encouraged to become involved in decision-making at committee of management level (Robles, 1992).

The complexities associated with inclusion of people from CALD backgrounds were often compounded by a lack of resources – to fund English language classes, provide cultural diversity training for staff, and to translate written materials into community languages (Guinness, 1998; Robles, 1992; Townsend, 2009). Townsend (2009) has shown that English language learners are a heterogeneous group, varying in age, literacy levels in their first language, prior schooling experiences, reasons for learning,

socio-economic circumstances, learning styles and skills. Simply providing one class to meet a broad range of needs, experience, and interests is not appropriate. Robles (1992) suggests that it is not appropriate to label the issues of culturally diverse communities as predominantly about language or cultural differences, because they experience similar needs and concerns to native speakers, albeit compounded by the language barrier, and disadvantages associated with migration and re-settlement. Townsend (2009) problematises blanket provision of language classes and other learning activities for CALD community members which ignore their differing motivations and needs, and do not take into account the “complexities and multiplicities of [their] individual experiences and circumstances” (p.162). Townsend’s study demonstrates the complexities associated with inclusive practice, and the error of making assumptions about normative sets of needs or a uniformity of experiences to be addressed by targeting a few programs towards CALD women . Barriers to inclusivity and diversity exist at the individual organisation level, and at the policy level (Guinness, 1998; Robles, 1992; Townsend, 2009). In individual Neighbourhood Houses the dominance of white, English-language speakers can shape perceptions of needs and availability of opportunities (Guinness, 1998; Robles, 1992; Townsend, 2009), and can keep people as “cultural outsiders (Townsend, 2009, p.160).

Other barriers to inclusion are associated with the level of staffing, and physical and material resources available to Neighbourhood Houses (Gibson-Pope, 2017).

Researchers have recommended that the broader policy and funding environment needs to be flexible enough and adequately resourced to support the complexities of inclusion (Guinness, 1998; Humpage, 2005; Townsend, 2009). This could include cultural diversity training to equip community workers with the skills and knowledge to practice inclusivity, and employing bilingual staff and recruiting management committee

members from culturally diverse backgrounds to ensure that houses make room, not allowances (Guiness, 1998; Robles, 1992).

Learning in Neighbourhood Houses

Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria are distinctive learning environments, involving complexity and diversity. While they could be seen principally as sites of adult community education (ACE), due to the high number offering ACE, adult learning and education are intrinsic aspects of the community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses (Foley, 1993; Kimberley, 1998). Currently more than half of the Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria offer funded ACE programs (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b). According to Kimberley (1998) from the very beginning learning activities were regarded as the “starting point towards empowerment” (p.24). An early study (Neville, 1996) positioned the learning aspect of Neighbourhood Houses within community development frameworks. It identified that the classes offered were generally not an end in themselves, but were the means for realising the broader aims of Neighbourhood Houses: fostering social interaction and connection, building women’s confidence, encouraging women to take up community leadership positions, and consciousness raising around wider social and political concerns.

Several studies have shown the embeddedness of adult learning within all areas of activity in the social environment of Neighbourhood Houses, and that learning occurs within the classroom and in the broader social and working environment of the Neighbourhood House (Foley, 1993; Kimberley, 1998; Ollis et al., 2016; Thompson, 2015). Learning in Neighbourhood Houses occurs formally in curriculum-based programs, and informally and incidentally through interactions, observations, and participation in the wide range of activities offered (Carteret, 2008; Foley, 1993; Ollis et

al., 2016; Ollis, Starr, Ryan, Angwin, & Harrison, 2017). Both formal and informal learning in Neighbourhood Houses contribute significantly towards building social connections and community capability, and facilitating important individual and community processes of empowerment and awareness raising (Foley, 1993, 2001; Kimberley, 1998; Ollis et al., 2016; Ollis et al., 2017; Townsend, 2009). A study by Foley (1993) cited the nuanced and interwoven aspects of learning and community development in Neighbourhood Houses: the inseparability of adult learning and community development; the informal nature of much learning; the importance of learning through participation; and the critical nature of the learning that occurred. Foley (1993) recognised that:

...the whole experience of participating in a house is an important learning process for women. Much of this learning is informal and incidental, it is embedded in other activities, and it is often not articulated as learning by neighbourhood house members. (p.27)

Marsick and Watkins (2001) use the following definitions of formal, informal, and incidental learning, and they are relevant for understanding learning in Neighbourhood Houses:

Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Incidental learning is defined as a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial and error experimentation, or even formal learning. Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an

organization or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning. Incidental learning...almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it. (p.25)

Golding, Foley and Brown (2009) use the terms formal, non-formal, and informal learning, whereby formal learning is typically state-sponsored, organised, intentional, directed towards specific outcomes, and involves accreditation when successfully completed. Non-formal learning is organised educational activity, not accredited, but directed towards particular learning requirements, and informal learning is learning which continues throughout life, may be intentional, but is unstructured.

The relaxed and informal environment in Neighbourhood Houses may obscure the educational and social value of the learning that takes place and the significant transformations which occur in people's lives as a result of their learning (Clemans, 2010; Duckworth & Smith, 2018; Foley, 2001; Permezel, 2001; Thompson, 2015). Formal learning in community spaces such as Neighbourhood Houses is not recognised in the same way as learning in schools and other traditional places of learning (Clemans, 2010). According to Clemans (2010), the construction of community education spaces as homely and caring spaces of mutual learning creates the perception that the learning which occurs is of lesser value, and mitigates against "public recognition of the social and economic value [it] adds to communities, to individuals and to the nation" (p.157). Golding et al (2009) argue that a power differential operates in favour of structured learning modes thereby devaluing unstructured and less formal ways of learning. This diminishes their value as meaningful learning, and as a consequence disempowers many learners. It has been shown that the informal culture and nature of learning in Neighbourhood Houses counteracts exclusionary dynamics by providing opportunities for engagement,

participation, and sharing for people whose knowledge and skills may not have been formally recognised (Permezel, 2001).

Learning activities in Neighbourhood Houses are responsive to the diverse needs of community members. Ollis et al (2016) identify the mutual teaching and learning processes in Neighbourhood Houses which involve teachers and learners in the co-construction of curricula. These practices are based on Freirean critical pedagogy which regarded people's lived experience, their goals and aspirations as important aspects of learning, and eschewed the hierarchical teacher/learner basis of traditional education (Crossan & Gallacher, 2009; Freire, 1970; Ledwith, 2011; Lonsdale, 1993). Crossan and Gallacher (2009) identify the "permeable boundaries" (p.136) of community learning spaces, whereby the personal situations and aspirations of learners are relevant to their engagement with learning. Thompson's (2015) study of the role of non-teaching staff in literacy mediation in Neighbourhood Houses demonstrates the informal and incidental, often invisible, and embedded nature of adult learning in Neighbourhood Houses. These interactions supported adults with low skills with understanding and completing bureaucratic requirements, and occurred outside classrooms in the kitchens and hallways of Neighbourhood Houses. Thompson (2015) claims that, "The literacy mediation in the neighbourhood houses appears to largely occur around codes and genres of power where mistakes carry high risks for already economically and socially vulnerable people" (p.488).

A recent multiple case-study research project (Ollis et al., 2016) found that learning in the Neighbourhood House environment was transformative for learners of all ages, for learners who were engaging or re-engaging with learning after earlier unsuccessful or difficult learning experiences, and for those who had come to learning in later life. The study centred on narrative accounts of the lived experience of adult learners in

Neighbourhood Houses, and explored processes of identity change as they became successful learners, often overcoming previous negative conceptions of themselves as learners. The study found numerous aspects of learning at a Neighbourhood House to be beneficial for learners across all ages, ranging from early twenties to mid-eighties. Second-chance learners who were learning for employment purposes, and others, many of whom returned to learning in later life after retirement or after completion of family duties, mentioned the relaxed and group-based learning styles, the social nature of learning, and the personal growth opportunities available.

Adults are able to develop useful knowledge at their own pace. Participants appreciate flexible learning environments with non-hierarchical relationships, individualised and small group programming, learning and social support networks, and the personal benefits associated with work placements, training and employment opportunities. (Ollis et al., 2016, p.16)

As learning organisations, Neighbourhood Houses comprise the largest single provider type in the Adult Community Education (ACE) sector in Australia (Bowman, 2016). ACE is a contested concept and refers to organisations delivering community-based adult education and training (Bowman, 2016). Other ACE organisations include the University of the Third Age (U3A), Men's Sheds, and Community Colleges.

Australia has a long history of adult learning, beginning with the establishment of learning programs in Mechanics Institutes, trade unions, and public libraries during the 1880s (Bowman, 2016; Ife, 2016; Rooney, 2011). Many of these learning programs were political in nature as workers came to study "historical materialism and capitalism" (Ollis et al., 2016 p.12). The radical history of adult learning in Australia was repeated with the establishment of Neighbourhood Houses and Centres in the 1970s providing

access to adult education alongside distinctly feminist and social action orientations (Rule, 2005). The philosophical approach of the popular education movement provided the foundation for the modes of accessible learning Neighbourhood Houses provided (Lonsdale, 1993).

ACE is situated within the current policy landscape of lifelong learning (Ollis et al., 2016). Ollis et al (2016) state that lifelong learning occurs, formally and informally, within multiple education and community settings, and “is relational, embedded in and generated by social engagement/interaction” (p.15). ACE providers are community-based and managed, offering a high level of support in friendly and social learning environments and with small class sizes (Bowman, 2016; Ollis et al., 2016; Rooney, 2011). Adult education programs are offered according to the needs and interests of local community members (Clemans et al., 2003). Within the broad field of adult education in Neighbourhood Houses there is an extensive and extremely varied offer of programs, including accredited vocational training, basic adult education, environmental, support and recreation programs (Humpage, 2005; Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b; Rooney, 2011; SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013).

A recent literature scan of the ACE sector (Bowman, 2016) establishes contemporary base-line data for the sector in Australia. The scan quantifies and enumerates the increasingly substantial economic and social contribution of ACE by reporting the numbers of participants and providers, training completion, and employment outcomes across the range of ACE provision. The study further identifies the contribution of ACE towards key government policy initiatives: supporting and enhancing work-related outcomes for disadvantaged learners through an increased uptake in workplace training offers; improving individual and community health and wellbeing through

personal interest learning; and supporting social inclusion agendas. An earlier study noted that:

ACE is flexible and adaptive and caters for groups that no other sector provides for... Both accredited and non-accredited learning provides participants with work-related skills and understanding. But it is the close involvement with local communities that distinguishes ACE from other sectors of education, an involvement manifested in many different ways, through co-operative ventures, helping people make connections, fostering community development, supporting disadvantaged groups, sharing knowledge and expertise, and establishing and maintaining networks. (Clemans et al., 2003.p.27)

Along with studies that have explored the benefits of ACE, other studies have drawn attention to the limitations and challenges faced by ACE in responding to government policy initiatives. A study by Townsend (2009) explored the role of ACE in building social capital and inclusion for newly arrived and long term members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The study found that ACE did successfully enable participants to build social networks and to re-engage with education. However, the capacity of ACE to respond more meaningfully to the diversity of needs and interests within these groups was hampered by the inflexibility of funding structures and policy frameworks. Although recognising diversity between sub-groups they were less able to respond to the diversity within sub-groups, or the evolving and changing needs of individuals within these groups. Bowman (2016) found that competitive funding models have negatively impacted on ACE by shifting demand towards private for-profit providers, and that the increasing levels of fee-for-service offerings within ACE conspire against the participation of low-income community members.

Neighbourhood Houses, power, and empowerment

Very few of the qualitative studies undertaken on Neighbourhood Houses have focused on empowerment, either at a conceptual level, or explored the lived experience of participants or managers. Several early studies referred to the empowering nature of Neighbourhood Houses particularly for women (Aytan, 1991; Buckingham, 1997; Ducie, 1994; Kimberley, 1998; Moloney, 1985; Neville, 1996; Paltridge, 2005; Peisker, 1989; West, 1995). Some studies suggest that the predominance of women on committees of management is evidence of empowerment for women due to their active involvement in decision-making. Other forms of participation were experienced as empowering. The women in Paltridge's (2005) study claimed that participating in activities such as craft groups, personal development courses and volunteering provided meaning and purpose in their lives, and facilitated (re)engagement with the wider community. One woman reported that as a volunteer the personal development, learning, and social opportunities available moved her from feeling powerless to feeling empowered. Paltridge (2005) reports that volunteering assisted a woman in her study "to move from feeling distraught and useless from depression to becoming a valuable member of the Neighbourhood House administration team (p.147).

While most studies have not examined empowerment in any depth, a small number of these studies have made significant statements about the ways in which Neighbourhood House processes and practices contribute to empowered outcomes for women (Buckingham, 1997; Moloney, 1985; West, 1995). Moloney's (1985) study of three centres identified the link between the philosophy of Neighbourhood Houses and social change at the local level in interviews with female co-ordinating staff. Neighbourhood Houses supported women to "find their voice" (p.39) as they learned to challenge and question and become socially and politically active. Women who were

isolated were empowered as their confidence and sense of self-worth was restored through creative pursuits. A centre reported “the quite astonishing empowerment of women” whose “consequent activism in local affairs has changed the politics and role of local governments” (p.17).

West’s (1995) feminist study, *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Outcomes*, demonstrated women’s empowerment through social and political activism by analysing the policy development processes and political activity which led to “the attainment of core programmatic funding for Neighbourhood Houses” (p.vi). While not explicitly about empowerment, the study explored the activism of Neighbourhood House women in the establishment, and later the successful gaining, of on-going funding for the sector in Victoria. West’s study illustrates the women’s tenacity, and their increasing levels of political acumen and advocacy skills, as they negotiated obstacles and hurdles in the protracted quest for secure funding for the sector. The women employed a range of strategies including engaging in formal government-directed policy making processes and informal advocacy.

The Neighbourhood House women worked to change the power structure by altering the arrangement of interests and by introducing new interests into the sector. Much of this work was hidden behind the scenes. As opposed to the reactive work of engaging in formal policy process, the Neighbourhood House women undertook proactive strategies designed to increase support ... in the policy sector generally. (p.51)

Buckingham (1997) addressed the issues of power, empowerment and disempowerment within the Neighbourhood House context in a study which followed the evolution of one House over sixteen years. Her study gathered data through

interviews with community members, local council officers and state government employees who were involved in the planning and development of the Neighbourhood House in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. This study, along with several other studies, attributed local social change and community empowerment to involvement in decision-making processes (Aytan, 1991; Buckingham, 1997; Lonsdale, 1993; Moloney, 1985). Buckingham's study used a definition of empowerment emphasising the importance of locating decision-making with "the people who have to wear the consequences of those decisions" (p.23), along with an analysis based on Foucault's Panopticon (Foucault, 1977) concept referring to constant surveillance. The study reveals the ambiguities and undulations of power played out between the women and men within the planning group, with Buckingham suggesting that the campaign to establish the House, while appearing to be gender-neutral, in fact silenced gender issues. Several women instigators had a gender-specific vision for the Neighbourhood House, however, a man occupying a more powerful position as a council officer had a non-gendered vision which prevailed. Despite the specific voice of women not being heard "all the women interviewed expressed their personal sense of empowerment" (p.68) as a result of their involvement in the planning as individual community members.

A "range of social and political discourses" (Rule, 2005, p.136), including feminism, Marxism, environmentalism, and multiculturalism, have been adopted, adapted, challenged, and elaborated upon in Neighbourhood Houses since the early days. Empowerment has remained a central component of this conceptual environment, despite its meaning being ambiguous and questioning of its continued relevance (Buckingham, 1997). Early studies referring to the centrality of empowerment as a philosophical approach (Kimberley, 1998; Neville, 1996) did not explore the nuances or nature of lived experiences of empowerment. Kimberley's (1998) study attributed the

sector's long-held interest in empowerment to the belief that "people's ability to acquire a measure of control over their lives" was essential for any community development (p.10). She elaborated extensively on the conceptualisation of empowerment within the Neighbourhood House sector, from its initial appearance in an early manifesto, to numerous later formal statements of sector philosophy. These statements contained varied references to empowerment, sometimes including both collective or community empowerment, along with individual empowerment, and at other times excluding the notion of individual empowerment. A more recent study (Humpage, 2005) demonstrates a similar ambiguity about empowerment, identifying a sense of empowerment as an individual outcome, and empowerment and inclusion as a community outcome of sector practices. Although the focus of Kimberley's (1998) study was on the organisational culture of Neighbourhood Houses, her extensive elaboration of the place empowerment has occupied in formal sector documents testified to the importance of the concept in Neighbourhood House philosophy and practice.

Buckingham (1997) and Kimberley (1998) addressed some of the ambiguities and tensions regarding the notion of power, its uses and impacts, in Neighbourhood Houses. Buckingham questioned whether empowerment should continue as "neighbourhood house folklore" (p.79) because the increased intrusion of the State via market-based policies and stringent accountability regimes created tensions between the social justice aims of Houses and the market objectives of the State, eroding the agency of Neighbourhood Houses.

Kimberley (1998) depicted the shift in attitudes to power from earlier times. Initially, women with "vision and personal strength" (p.134) struggled for individual power in the movement, before adopting a position where collective power, "distributed throughout the movement" (p.138), became a defining practice. The early individual power

struggles were perhaps responsible for establishing a long-held suspicion of power. These struggles for power by individual women perpetuated inequalities between women and were polarising to the movement, although some believed that the conflictual approach drew attention to the movement, raised women's consciousness, and challenged women to take action.

Attitudes to power have continued to be ambiguous, with great suspicion cast upon individual power as controlling and potentially threatening to the agency of others. For women, leadership was considered problematic because "women were seen to downplay their skills and cede their power and expertise to others, especially to men, and to be threatened by the empowerment of other women" (p.143). Kimberley reported a widespread belief that there were no hierarchies of power in the movement or in individual Houses. Managers, co-ordinators, and members of committees of management held leadership positions in Neighbourhood Houses, and exercised power, albeit collectively not as powerful individuals. Power was not lauded for its own sake, but rather:

... the power that is celebrated ... is certainly not the power of people to control. It is the power to enable others, a form of what is often called empowerment She is entrusted with power by the group ... She has power to lead but not to control.

(Kimberley, 1998p.140)

This meant that leaders who worked in this way were empowered, or became empowered through their actions. The subject of power exists paradoxically in Neighbourhood Houses. At its heart lies a fundamental dualism between perceptions and discourses of individual and collective power. Collective power, struggles between Houses and external authorities, the power of the sector to influence and create

change, and the empowerment of participants and personnel, is lauded. At the same time, there remains a suspicion of power particularly when associated with individuals, questions about whether power can be shared equally, the negative effects of exercising power, who is entrusted with power, and what constitutes legitimate power (Kimberley, 1998).

At the conceptual level, a qualitative study by Rule (2006) deconstructed discourses and understandings of empowerment, along with other key concepts in community development, through reflexive stories of practice from a group of community development workers in inner-Sydney neighbourhood centres. Rule's interest in empowerment was to understand the evolution, application, interpretation, and discursive practices of empowerment. The community workers and activists in his study defined their work as intentionally "counter-hegemonic" (p.143), in other words, in diametric opposition to considerations of welfare and provision of services as community development. Using a post-structural perspective allowed a deeper layering of stories and reflections, and engagement with the temporal and contextual nature of empowerment. In troubling the stories and reflections of social action, and discourses of empowerment, Rule concluded that, "There is no linear story of community work as being about co-option and control, nor is there a straightforward trajectory of community empowerment and participation that arises from various forms of activism" (p.150).

The staff interviewed for Rule's study troubled the contractual nature of funding agreements and the output-dominated policy landscape in which they worked, questioning whether in their roles as professional community workers they were "agents of social change or social control" (p.145). The staff positioned themselves as subjects within the discursive environment, their sense of self, as activists and critical

practitioners, concurrently shaping and being shaped by their experiences and practices.

Women and empowerment

The body of research on women and empowerment extends across a wide range of disciplines, including healthcare, sport, education, social media, social work, community and international development. Within the international development arena, women's empowerment became a Millenium Development Goal at a United Nations summit in 2000 (Mosedale, 2014). Gender awareness in international development had long been advocated by feminists, particularly those in developing countries, who critiqued the largely apolitical and gender-blind nature of international development models (Batliwala, 2010). The interaction of new discourses emerging in the 1970s – feminism, popular education, conscientisation, post-colonial theory – ultimately led to the incorporation of gender issues into the theory and practice of international development. Women's empowerment was central to gender equality and social transformation, and by the 1990s “empowerment held pride of place in development jargon” (Batliwala, 2010, p.559). Subsequently, the body of research on women's empowerment within the international development field has been concerned with gender equity issues and social transformation: the alleviation of women's poverty (Spry & Marchant, 2014), education, awareness raising and skill building for women and girls (Scheyvens, 2003; Stacki & Monkman, 2003; Vijayanthi, 2002), increasing women's access to and control over material and financial resources (Vijayanthi, 2002), examining the effectiveness of NGO approaches for women's empowerment (Nikkhah, Redzuan, & Abu-Samah, 2011), or in uncovering and identifying the subordination of women (Mosedale, 2014).

Much past research focuses on women whose material and life circumstances are, in relative terms, more highly disadvantaged than those of many women attending Neighbourhood Houses in Australia. Nevertheless, the theoretical approaches and findings of many of these studies are relevant to this study and discussion. Many women attending Neighbourhood Houses experience inequalities based on gender, race, class, age, and ability, and international development and locally-based research apply similar empowerment frameworks to shed light on the processes of empowerment for women. Multiple studies attest to the contextual and contingent nature of empowerment and assert that there is not a one-size-fits-all process or outcome regarding women's empowerment (Fredericks, 2008; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Scheyvens, 2003; Stacki & Monkman, 2003; Van Wijnendaele, 2013; Wray, 2004). Nonetheless, there are similarities and parallels across the diverse social/political/historical contexts in which women live.

Empowering approaches for women challenge the subordination of women, and aim to transform unequal relationships. Such approaches include providing greater access to resources, increasing awareness of women's historical subordinate social position, and enhancing women's access and ability to influence decision-making processes (Scheyvens, 2003).

Sheilds (1995) interviewed 15 women in Oregon USA – university students, women survivors of violence and abuse who were attending women's centres, and other women in the community who had experienced life change events, to explore women's perceptions of the meaning of empowerment in the context of their diverse lived experience. She reported that the sense of awareness and understanding shown by the women in her study in recognising that “the personal is political, and the political is personal” (p.32) resonated with Freire's (1970) notion of the necessity for “the

oppressed to know and speak of their own reality” (p.32). The women referred to the influence of the women’s movement, traumatic life events, and sense of self, on their perceptions of empowerment and disempowerment, and they understood the importance of meeting basic needs, such as shelter, food, and money. Sheilds (1995) identified three central interwoven and interconnected themes important for empowerment:

... the emergence of an internal sense of self; the movement to action, choice and control; and a salient theme of connectedness...[the latter being] the most noteworthy difference between themes identified in the current study and previous theory and research findings. (p.32)

These themes recur in diverse ways in other studies, and are sometimes described as dimensions or levels of empowerment (Nikkhah et al., 2011; Stacki & Monkman, 2003; Wray, 2004). Stacki and Monkman (2003) presented two case studies of women teachers, one from South Asia, and one from Latin America, to illustrate the role of education in women’s empowerment. They found that “self-esteem and self-confidence” (p.185), psychological empowerment, along with “knowledge about, and understanding of, the conditions and causes of subordination” (p.181), cognitive empowerment, facilitates the other dimensions of empowerment – termed economic and political empowerment in their study. Education was likewise a catalyst for empowering women in an evaluative study by Spry and Marchant (2014). They evaluated a personal development education program for women delivered by community providers based in the Sydney area, and found significant positive changes in “self-esteem, purpose, emotional intelligence and mobilisation” (p.42), as women were motivated to take up further study, to start their own businesses, or to seek work.

Vijayanthi's (2002) study of a Tamil women's self-help-group (SHG) program based in Chennai, India, concluded that an enhanced sense of self, wherein women recognised the validity of their own aspirations, and came to accept and value their identities, was an important factor for personal empowerment. The study explored women's empowerment as both a personal and a group-related experience. The SHG program engaged the women as active participants, rather than passive beneficiaries (a critique of past development programs), aiming to increase awareness, knowledge, and problem-solving skills in water and sanitation issues. Her study identified important components of empowerment as decision-making about children's education, awareness, prevention and management of environmental sanitation, self-development, including community participation, increased social standing for the family, and decision-making power in the family, and understanding the benefits of group participation.

The empowering impact of participation in groups was the subject of several studies. Groups studied included social and self-help groups (Scheyvens, 2003; Vijayanthi, 2002), craft groups (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Rebmann, 2006), community and experiential education programs (Shellman, 2014; Spry & Marchant, 2014), virtual groups (Stavrositu & Shyam Sundar, 2012), and team sports (Ashton-Shaeffer, Gibson, Holt, & Willming, 2001; Theberge, 1987). These studies present a wide range of attributes of empowering environments that are relevant to this study of Neighbourhood Houses. For instance, Shellman (2014) identifies these environments as facilitative, organised around empowering processes, offering "small, supportive group settings that encourage cooperation and reciprocity, opportunities to develop skills and make decisions, and opportunities to achieve success" (p.23).

Maidment and Macfarlane (2011) explored older women's participation in informal craft groups in conversation with nine craftswomen from two differently organised craft groups – one, a closed group of experienced craftswomen, the other a large community craft group open to women with varied crafting skills. The second group actively encouraged the participation of new members. Both groups were deeply connected with their local communities, being involved in supporting local charities and making items for people in need of comfort. The crafting activities of both groups centred on imparting skills and knowledge among members, teaching and learning from one another to extend their skills.

This sharing not only extended the skills and artistry of the women, but the act of teaching and learning itself generated a sense of self-efficacy in the teacher, and stimulation for the learner. Teaching others increased members' sense of self-worth and valuing of their own skills. As one woman put it, 'I love it when someone asks you, 'how did you do that?' ... and I say, 'if you do this and that' ... and you feel, I don't know, a bit important'. (p.287)

Sharing skills and teaching each other to knit and crochet overcame the powerlessness experienced by a group of homeless teenage mothers in Rebman's (2006) study conducted with a life-skills group based in Boston USA. A further important aspect for their empowerment was being given the opportunity to determine their own activities, initially denied them by the student facilitator of the group who was anxious to assert her own competence by directing the activities of the group. Several of the young women remained insistent about their desire to learn to knit. After the facilitator acceded to their wishes, the young women began learning to manage their own activity, and bonded as a group, supporting, teaching and encouraging each other. In a similar fashion, it was empowering for the older women crafters to make decisions

about their preferred activities, and to determine their own levels of participation in the groups, for instance, how frequently to attend, and how many projects to take up (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011).

An important recurring theme for women's empowerment in much of the published research was the emphasis on connectedness and interdependence as indicators of empowerment (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Rebmann, 2006; Scheyvens, 2003; Shields, 1995; Vijayanthi, 2002; Wray, 2004). Scheyvens' (2003) study drew on case studies of church-based women's groups and organisations in the Solomon Islands to assess the significance of these groups for empowering women. Although many such groups were established with a welfare, rather than an empowering intent, she acknowledged the value of women working collectively to "identify their concerns and work to achieve more power" (p.27). The importance of connectedness and closeness to others was established in a participatory action research (PAR) study conducted by Van Wijnendaele (2013) with young people growing up in violent neighbourhoods in El Salvador. As the young people shared their experiences, hopes and fears with one another, trust and a sense of solidarity developed among the group, replacing previous indifferent attitudes and conflicts. This "facilitated a learning process of cooperating together, strengthening their capacity to organize and take action together" (p.273).

Wray (2004) suggests that a western liberal understanding of agency and empowerment, based on ideas of self-sufficiency, and the need for "autonomy of the self" (p.23), was not borne out by the experiences and perceptions of many of the women in her study, who understood independence differently. Wray's study showed the multidimensional and contextual nature of women's agency and empowerment, how "the interplay of culture, gender, and structural inequalities across ethnicity" (p.34)

permeated the relations of power in their daily lives. Women in the study were living in Yorkshire and identified as women of colour, or white women, and as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, British-Muslim, British-Polish, African-Caribbean. Many of the ways empowerment was evident in the women's lives varied across and within ethnicities. Interdependency and relationships were important elements of agency and empowerment. For some, familial interdependence remained strong and it was empowering to feel that they still had an important role in the family; active grandparenting provided opportunities for a valued continued connection with family members, and for others caring for grandchildren was a source of additional income. Women were empowered when they could negotiate the terms of these relationships, but disempowered when they could not. Choosing to live apart from family was preferred by some women. Women who had lost familial relationships found that connecting with others of similar ethnicity was an important means of maintaining traditional values and beliefs, and they were empowered by their cultural friendships, association with a particular identity group, and by taking action against "structural constraint and inequality" (p.35).

Connecting with others provided women with opportunities not otherwise available to them:

Some women have had the opportunity to be involved in decision-making processes beyond the household through gaining election to their women's group executive. Such experience has helped women to take on community leadership roles, a major achievement. (Scheyvens, 2003, p.30)

Among the many benefits of connecting with others and group participation is the capacity for resistance against marginalising and discriminating discourses that is generated when interacting with others in similar life situations, or with similar interests.

Ageist stereotyping, and discussions in the media about the burden of the ageing population, leave many older women feeling marginalised and excluded (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011). Participation in crafting activities enabled the women in Maidment and Macfarlane's study to exercise greater control over some aspects of their lives, and to challenge discourses and stereotypes of older women rendering them as passive and excluded. Ashton-Schaeffer et al (2001), in a feminist post-structural study of women participating in a national wheel-chair basketball team competition, found that empowering outcomes from participating in a team sport with other women sharing similar life experiences were "both physical and mental" (p.11). Many significant outcomes were reported from resisting negative stereotypes of disability, including identity change, increased motivation and widened social networks. They argued that, "The women felt empowered in their own lives as elite sport affected their identity, self-confidence and accomplishment, motivation, friendships, travel, health and fitness, and purpose in life" (p.16). Resisting "societal stereotypes of 'the disabled' as being weak and not athletic" (p.16), was empowering and the women believed they could encourage other women to resist these stereotypes and become empowered as well. Women experiencing marginalisation and structural inequality found that resisting negative stereotyping and challenging discriminatory discourses was a source of strength and empowerment.

Other studies explored resistance and the meaning of empowerment in the lives of minority women and challenged conceptions of empowerment originating within dominant perspectives (Fredericks, 2008). Older women, for instance, experience discrimination, powerlessness, and marginalisation (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Wray, 2004). Discourses around ageing are typically constructed in negative terms, referring to growing dependency on others, loss of independence, withdrawal from social and economic activity, ill-health, and reduced agency (Maidment & Macfarlane,

2011; Wray, 2004), and furthermore, as Wray (2004) notes, growing older can render women invisible. Alternatively, discourses of successful ageing portray independence and freedom from family responsibilities as desirable. Wray (2004) problematises conceptions of women's agency and empowerment that presume temporal stability and cultural universalism. For the older women from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds Wray interviewed, the significance of feeling in control over one's life, perceptions of what constituted quality of life, and favoured strategies for empowerment were fluid and contested. For some, religious beliefs and practices were a source of "collective agency and empowerment" (Wray, 2004, p.29), creating a sense that togetherness through faith would help overcome disempowering experiences.

A study of women's NGOs in Iran found that the bottom-up approach scored comparatively higher than top-down and partnership approaches in terms of enabling active and dynamic participation and self-mobilisation (Nikkhah et al., 2011). Enabling participants to define their own problems and be engaged in decision-making and finding solutions is important for facilitating empowerment (East, 2000; Fredericks, 2008; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Rebmann, 2006). A study by Fredericks (2008) illustrates the importance of this, and with contextualising conceptions of empowerment. Fredericks interviewed Aboriginal women living in central Queensland to explore their relationship with health services, and to identify how this relationship could become more empowering for the women. The history of Aboriginal people in Australia is one in which colonisation, dispossession, and disempowerment have displaced former sovereignty and self-determination over all aspects of their lives. Early discussions between the researcher and the women raised the idea of re-empowerment in this context. The study showed the importance of resisting negative discourses around marginalised identities; one of the women explained this when she said that "even if you do not know your Nation, you need to know what it means to be

an Aboriginal person” (p.14). The important conclusion to this study argued that for Aboriginal women to become empowered the power imbalances between the dominant health culture and Aboriginal women need to be addressed and health services must become more supportive and facilitative across all operative areas, staffing, and policies. Fredericks concluded that, “It is through Aboriginal women’s voices being heard and being enacted that Aboriginal women will become empowered. There must be processes in place which foster confidence-building, education, true inclusion not tokenism” (p.15).

Summary

This chapter has examined research on Neighbourhood Houses, Neighbourhood Houses and women, and on women and empowerment. The research reviewed identifies multiple benefits for women associated with being involved in Neighbourhood Houses. Empowering aspects of the interactive, communal, and welcoming Neighbourhood House environment are associated with multiple opportunities for participation, learning, and connecting with others. Women had the opportunity to participate in programs, become volunteers, to participate in decision-making, take up leadership positions, and develop their skills and knowledge. Formal and informal modes of adult learning along with incidental learning are important aspects of community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses, contributing to an enhanced understanding and awareness of the self and the social and political influences in the women’s lives and the wider world. Along with the numerous references to empowerment some studies referred to disempowering aspects, usually in relation to instances of power and control exercised by external authorities and policy environments and the ways this impacts on the practices and focus of Neighbourhood Houses.

Some studies positioned empowerment as a key guiding principle of the Neighbourhood House sector associated with the underlying critical theories that inform community development. Contrasting with this, the ambiguous relationship of the Neighbourhood House sector to the idea of power and empowerment is identified. This ambiguity arises from several sources: concerns that including the notion of individual empowerment blurs the distinction between community development with a focus on collectivity, and the individual focus of welfarism; fears that individuals with power will dominate or control others; and from concerns that co-option of the term by conservative discourses has severed its association with social justice and liberation movements.

The research on women and empowerment establishes the application of the concept to wide-ranging areas of women's lives, and illustrates the multifaceted and diverse nature of empowerment in women's lives. International community development studies on empowerment for women living in developing countries, have focused on increasing women's access to resources – material, physical and economic – along with opportunities to develop skills, and to engage in and influence decision making. These studies, and studies conducted with women living in Western countries, identify the interconnectedness of several themes for women's empowerment: the importance of connection with others; an increased awareness of women's historical subordinate social position; an enhanced sense of self; and the ability to act, make choices, and exercise different forms and levels of control in their lives. Overall, the studies provide evidence of the contingent and contextual nature of women's empowerment, and provide a counterpoint to perceptions of empowerment as a single process or outcome. The studies reveal variations in the extent to which women experience empowerment, and the differences and diversity, along with the commonalities of women's experiences of empowerment.

Chapter Three: Theoretical framework

This research on women and empowerment in Neighbourhood Houses is grounded within the theory and practice framework of community development. The key concepts of the research 'women', 'community development', 'empowerment', and 'Neighbourhood Houses' were introduced in Chapter One. That chapter locates Australian Neighbourhood Houses within their socio-political, international, and community development context. Chapter Two reviews published research in relation to the key concepts of this research focusing on the distinctive environment and practices of Neighbourhood Houses and how this impacts on women. Chapter Two concludes with reviews of research more broadly in relation to women and empowerment identifying key influences in women's experiences of empowerment.

This chapter locates the research in relation to important bodies of theory. In particular, it traces the influences of theories of power and emancipation, including feminism, and how these theoretical developments have interacted over time with the theory and practice of community development. The chapter begins with tracing the early influences of modernist structural critiques and conceptions of power on community development theory and practice, and then suggests that poststructural conceptions of empowerment allow understanding of the diversity and fluidity of women's lived experiences of empowerment in their engagements with Neighbourhood Houses.

Community development frameworks of power and empowerment

Community development theories and approaches provide the philosophical and practice framework of Neighbourhood Houses (Humpage, 2005; Ife, 2016; Lonsdale, 1993; Ollis et al., 2016; Sandercock & Attilli, 2009; Townsend, 2009; West, 1995). [The](#)

theoretical building blocks that underpin the social justice approaches and intentions of community development are derived from some of the foundational critical theories of the 20th Century.

At the level of both theory and practice, community development is a contested field (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; M. Shaw, 2008). Tensions and debates exist between its social justice philosophical position and the approaches of funding bodies and external stakeholders. With the decline of the welfare state, community development organisations often provide the social and welfare services that the state no longer provides (Ife, 2016). Policy directions over the past three decades have increasingly adopted business-based language and ideas, requiring community development practitioners to navigate conflicting and contradictory expectations (Kenny, 2002). The encroachment and influence of neoliberalism and new managerialism into policy environments has shifted energy and focus away from the needs of people and communities towards fulfilling ever increasing bureaucratic requirements (Burkett, 2011). A genealogy of community development's theoretical and policy-driven influences suggests that community development has been resilient in the face of changing and challenging political and economic landscapes (Boulet, 2017). Ledwith (2011) describes community development as dynamic and responsive to "current thought, political contexts and lived experience" (p.14).

Within community development contemporary philosophical debates often focus on the differing ontological and epistemological frameworks of modernism and postmodernism, structuralism and poststructuralism (Burkett, 2001, 2011; Ife, 2012, 2016; Kenny, 2002; M. Shaw, 2008). Ife (2016) and Ledwith (2011) suggest that both structural and post-structural perspectives provide the necessary critical and nuanced

frameworks for analysing the dynamics and relations of power and empowerment in communities.

Modernist perspectives are associated with the major tenets of Enlightenment thought: humanism, which positioned human beings as the dominant species, motivated by and acting from reason and rationality, and individual free will; logocentrism, the belief that there is a fixed, certain and logical order; and positivism, the belief in scientific objectivity, and conviction of the certainty and accuracy of scientific knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Fook, 2016; Ife, 2016). Enlightenment ideas were the building blocks for the meta-narratives of modernity which explained the human and natural world as an ordered rational system that could be scientifically studied and explained in terms of cause and effect (Ife, 2016). This androcentric world view emphasised top-down expertise and hierarchical approaches to power and knowledge, and fostered universalising and essentialising practices. Examples of such practices are imputing the same motivations and experiences for all men and all women through their interactions with their world, and defining or categorising the essential characteristics of what constitutes a “man” or a “woman”. Everything was categorised and classified according to hierarchies and either/or binary logics: either you were a man or not a man – man/woman – powerful or not powerful – powerful/powerless. Such designations were mutually exclusive essentialised categories with no capacity for accommodating difference and diversity (Braidotti, 1994; Fook, 2016). Difference from the norm, maleness, was considered to be other and inferior. The concern with unity and certainty prompted a search for universal causes and solutions to social problems, and underpinned research approaches and education systems (Ife, 2016).

Structural critiques and analyses of power, such as Marxist and Marxist-derived analyses, emerged in the modernist era. While these were important radical social

critiques they reiterated the universalist and essentialist approaches of modernism in seeking the one Truth, or right solution to the social problems seen to be caused by initially class, and later gender, race, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. However, they focussed attention on the causes and effects of oppression and disadvantage, and attributed powerlessness as a function of the way society was structured (Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011). Although community development is associated with structural and other critical theoretical traditions, it is typically practised within environments shaped and influenced by dominant ideological and theoretical traditions such as liberalism. Classical liberal traditions tend towards victim-blaming and attribute social problems to individual pathologies (Ledwith, 2011). The political theory of classical liberalism expounded a vision to “maximise the liberty of individuals” through “open, meritocratic, competitive and tolerant societies in which free-thinking, enterprising individuals compete and achieve success” (Kenny, 2011, p.88). This vision is enabled by small government, that is, limiting the level of government intervention into people’s affairs and the operation of society, and by promoting the civil rights of individuals, for example, freedom of expression. Kenny (2011) proposes that the similarities between aspects of classical liberalism and community development, are “the commitment to tolerance, freedom of thought and action” (p.88). However, the significant point of divergence between the two comes from the emphasis on individualism, competition and merit-based hierarchical systems typical of liberalism, and the inclusive, co-operative, and collectivist traditions of community development. Neoliberalism is the contemporary manifestation of economic liberalism at the expense of social or classical liberalism. Neoliberalism entered the economic and political landscape in Australia during the 1980s with a primary ideological focus on the importance of economics as the principal lever of social systems. It promotes the value of competition, and assumes that individuals are motivated predominantly by economic self-interest (Kenny, 2011).

The ideas expressed in structural critiques were a counterpoint to the focus on individual pathologies and individual solutions. These critiques favoured collectivist and community-based approaches as a way to organise for social change, an approach which Young (I. M. Young, 1986) described as a departure from the dominance of liberalism.

Structural critiques particularly those associated with Marxism underlie the radical philosophy of community development (Kenny & Connors, 2017). The ideas of Gramsci and Freire were influenced by Marxist ideas. Ledwith (2011) attributes the works of Gramsci⁵, Freire⁶, and Alinsky⁷ as particularly important influences on the theory and practice of community development. She credits Gramsci's analysis of hegemony for providing an understanding of the ways in which dominant ideas and practices are accepted as normal, and for providing feminists and community development workers with a theoretical framework to understand power and domination. Freire's work linked the personal and the political through a critical pedagogy located within the real life circumstances of people. Alinsky laid out strategies for community action and organisation (Lane, 2013). Their works spoke to the social justice aims of community development and resonated with its grounding within the lived realities of people in communities (Ledwith, 2011).

Freire's (1972) consideration of the political nature of education extended from and augmented Gramsci's conception of the educational nature of politics (Ledwith, 2009). Freire expounded on the importance of literacy education for the poor, based upon his work with peasants in Brazil, asserting that:

⁵ *Prison notebooks* (1971)

⁶ *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970)

⁷ *Reveille for radicals* (1969)

One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action programme which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people ... The starting point for organizing the programme content of educational or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people. (p.68)

Central to Freire's critical pedagogy was a belief in the power of grassroots education to raise political awareness. Literacy education for the poor became the means of consciousness raising enabling them to "become active and reflective about their reality" (Craig & Mayo, 1995, p.6). Freire used a problematising and questioning approach to learning, based on a dialogical interaction between teachers and students in which the expert knowledge of the teacher, and the lived experience of the students came together in a mutual teaching/learning relationship. His work underlies the philosophical approach of the popular education movement supporting its political intent to raise people's awareness of their lived circumstances of oppression. The learning practices of Neighbourhood Houses incorporated aspects of Freire's pedagogical approach by acknowledging grassroots concerns and drawing on the lived experience of community members.

Feminists critiqued Freire for basing his conceptions of a more humane world on overcoming the oppression experienced by men, and for excluding the specific lived experiences of women (Ledwith, 2011). However, hooks' (1993) view of Freire's work differed. She credited his work with affirming her reality as a black woman resisting and struggling against racism, at a time when the particular struggles of black women were not recognised by white feminists. Subsequently, Freire's work has been revisited and reframed to include the particulars of women's oppression (Ledwith, 2011; Weiler, 2001).

Second-wave feminism articulated a vision for a world in which women were no longer inferiorised and dominated by men and the patriarchy, and this vision deeply influenced community development (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Ledwith, 2011). The many strands of feminist theory and perspectives analysing women's oppression drew attention to the inequalities women experience in their daily lives, in both public and private domains, although analyses of the specific nature of women's oppression, and the solutions, diverge widely (Tong, 2009). Liberal feminists wanted to achieve equal rights and equality with men by reforming the system – removing the legal constraints and discriminatory attitudes preventing women's equal access and opportunities (Tong, 2009; Weedon, 1994). Radical feminists claimed that sexism was the fundamental oppression (Tong, 2009). Divergent strands of radical feminist thought focussed on either rejecting defined gender roles and identities and the limitations of being 'feminine', or in affirming and valuing the culturally ascribed aspects of femininity and roles of women (Tong, 2009). Socialist feminists refuted the strict class-based analysis of socialists in favour of one which interlinked material and gender-based inequality. In the early years of the second wave women's movement, the assumptions of white feminists of a universal sisterhood of women whose lived experiences were shared and understood by all, effectively left the concerns of black women, women of colour, poor women and other minority women invisible (Ledwith, 2011). They challenged the dominance of white feminist perspectives and highlighted issues of racism and ethnocentrism in the second wave women's movement. They argued that black women's lived experience of racism, and their particular economic concerns, had not been taken into account (Davis, 1990; hooks, 2014). Third-wave feminism is "concerned with difference, inclusiveness, and issues of gender, race, and class" (English, 2012, p.88). Crenshaw's (1991) widely respected and accepted theory of intersectionality identified multiple and intersecting aspects of women's oppression,

rather than attributing women's experiences of oppression to a single source (Carasthesis, 2014; Davis, 1990; hooks, 2014; Ramazanoglu, 1986).

A broad range of feminist concerns and approaches has influenced the contemporary theoretical and values frameworks of community development. However, Ledwith (2011) maintains that there is still work to do in order to develop a truly anti-racist community development practice, advocating for "critical whiteness" (Ledwith, 2011, p.178) challenging the invisibility and continued privilege of whiteness as a source of power. She argues that white privilege is an unfamiliar concept to most white people, and has "still not been embraced into the theoretical base of community development" (p.178).

Lonsdale (1993) wrote that the social change and liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by radical critiques and analyses of sexism, racism, classism, and other social concerns prominent at the time, fuelled a sense of optimism among citizens that social change was possible. Community development expanded in this era of radicalism as an alternative response to welfarism and charity in alleviating poverty and oppression (Ledwith, 2011). It was this optimism and political awareness that inspired the development of Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria. Importantly, these analyses provided the Neighbourhood House movement with a broad theoretical framework for conceptualising empowerment and transformation within communities.

Empowerment has traditionally been conceptualised within the binary logics of modernism – empowered/disempowered, powerful/powerless, dominant/dominated. Community empowerment and individual empowerment have typically been characterised as separate, rather than interconnected and iterative, processes (Ledwith, 2011; Cahill, 2007). Individual empowerment has been conceptualised as

predominantly intrapersonal, and emphasises psychological aspects of empowerment, such as increased self-confidence (Ledwith, 2011). Community empowerment is associated with collective activity and acts of resistance which challenge inequitable and dominant power relations (Ledwith, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 1994). Concepts of individual empowerment often dissociate it from broader structures of power, associating it with improved sense of self, and considering it as a largely psychological phenomenon. In contrast, community empowerment is described in agentic terms as communities taking collective action to transform their lives, materially, culturally and politically (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Ledwith, 2011).

Challenging the inequities of structural systems of power is considered to be an important aspect of empowerment (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Ledwith, 2011; Riger, 1993). A general tenet of structuralist and modernist analyses has been that empowerment can be achieved only when the structural 'causes' of disadvantage – race, gender, and class inequality are overcome (Ife, 2016; Mowbray, 2000). In these analyses empowerment has been closely connected to collectives and movements which challenge and resist systems and structures of oppression.

Contemporary community development scholars (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Ledwith, 2011) affirm the strong focus on community empowerment and its association with transformation and social change. They argue that personal or individual empowerment is transformative only when it is linked to collective social change processes. This view acknowledges the interconnection between individual and collective or community empowerment, however, it appears to be an approach in which community and individual are positioned in dichotomous relation to one another (I. M. Young, 1986), and which considers that structures of power must be completely dismantled for change to be worthwhile (Fook, 2016). Mullaly (2011) suggests that sole

reliance on structural analysis can lead to structural determinism and a politics of despair, making attempts to completely dismantle the structural causes of disadvantage seem overwhelming and hopeless.

Young (1986) offers an alternative to the oppositional dichotomy present in community discourses between individual and community, weaving the two together:

Unlike reactionary appeals to community which consistently assert the subordination of individual aims and values to the collective, most radical theorists assert that community itself consists in the respect for and fulfilment of individual aims and capacities. The neat distinction between individualism and community thus generates a dialectic in which each is a condition for the other. (p.8)

A contemporary and more nuanced approach to understanding power and empowerment is offered by post-structural conceptions of power. Cameron and Gibson (2004) and Davies and Gannon (2011) claim that poststructuralism disrupts modernist certainties of social and theoretical concepts, which resonates with Young's troubling of the individual/community dualism. Feminist poststructuralism deconstructs oppositional dualisms such as male/female, and powerful/powerless, and the gendered binary thinking that positions women as lesser than men (Davies & Gannon, 2011). Cahill (2007) conceptualises empowerment as both an individual and a group process in which each are interconnected and indivisible from the other.

Poststructuralism proposes that concepts such as power and empowerment are discursively constructed, and historically and culturally situated (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Gore, 2003; Ife, 2016). Gore (2003) argues that this means empowerment can no longer be considered to have a fixed or universally applicable meaning; its meanings are

associated with the changing contexts and particular discourses within which it is embedded. According to Ife (2016):

... empowerment becomes a process of challenging and changing discourse. It emphasises people's subjective understandings and the construction of their world views, and points to the need for the deconstruction of these understandings and the establishment of alternative vocabularies for empowerment. (p.62)

Poststructuralism exposes the limitations and assumptions of structuralist approaches which view power from a top-down perspective (Foucault, 1980; Ife, 2016). Mullaly (2011) explains that power is not the possession of any one group:

Whereas power was traditionally viewed as something that the dominant group possessed and subordinate groups lacked, (postmodern thought)...has helped us to see that power is not an absolute entity concentrated among a powerful few. (p.237) (brackets in original).

Foucault (Foucault, 1982, 1980) analysed power from below rather than from the top. He argued that power exists everywhere, in all relations, whether of production, kinship, or sexuality, and that power is not an entity possessed by powerful groups, but rather that power exists in relation, when enacted. This view challenges the structuralist critique of powerlessness and its causes. Gore (2003) claims that Foucault directs attention to the "microdynamics of the operation of power as it is exercised in particular sites" (p.336). Paying attention to the microdynamics of power acknowledges the transformative and empowering impacts of small changes in the private and personal lives of individuals and their social relations (Rowan & Shore, 2009).

A feminist and post-structural conception of power provides the theoretical lens for this study to explore the dynamics of power and resistance, and to locate this in the micro sites of human activity: within the family, among friendship networks, in the neighbourhood (Healy, 2000).

Consciousness raising and critical awareness

In community development the concept of conscientisation, critical awareness or critical consciousness (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Ledwith, 2011), is regarded as intrinsic to processes of empowerment.

Conscientização, is a concept developed by Freire and describes “the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence” (Freire, 1972, p.81). It results from an educational process in which people reflect upon and become aware of the nature of their oppression, of their situation in the world. This process uses a problem-posing iterative approach to investigate the way people think about their lives, based on their view of the world:

The more educators and the people investigate the people’s thinking, and are thus jointly educated, the more they continue to investigate. Education and thematic investigation, in the problem-posing concept of education, are simply different moments of the same process. (Freire, 1972, p.81)

As people in dialogue with one another critically reflect upon and understand the conditions of their lives, they become committed to act in order to change their situation, they “acquire the ability to *intervene* in reality as it is unveiled” (Freire, 1972, p.81). People come to understand their own capacities to challenge structures of power (Craig & Mayo, 1995; Darder et al., 2003; Freire, 1972; Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011).

Freire (1970) describes dialogue as “an encounter among women and men who name

the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others” (p.62).

Dialogical processes enable people to understand more about themselves, others, and their world (Cahill, 2007; Freire, 1970; Ledwith, 2011; Westoby & Dowling, 2013).

Westoby and Dowling (2013) argue that deeper understandings between people, and about society, can occur whether or not people are consciously aware of the import of these encounters at the time they are happening.

In community development, collective processes leading to transformative change form the basis of empowering practice as people gain shared understandings, insight and worldly awareness (Cahill, 2007; Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011; Weiler, 1991). Ife (2016) contends that consciousness raising, whether it is a deliberate strategy or occurs informally, underlies the idea of empowerment in community development.

Consciousness raising and critical awareness are fostered through dialogical processes, such as sharing personal stories, which identify and problematise the issues and concerns of people in their everyday lives. Interest in the social value of personal stories, in practice and research, was initially inspired by C. Wright Mills’ writing about the “sociological imagination” in which he argued that positivist sociology was far removed from lived experience (R. J. Berger & Quinney, 2005). The narrative turn in the social sciences originated from such critiques of positivist and realist epistemologies, along with the developing interest in first-person accounts of lived experience (Riessman, 2008). The social movements of the 1960s, including the women’s movement, realised the transformative potential of bringing previously hidden personal stories to light, challenging dominant world views and revealing the relationships between individual histories and social realities (R. J. Berger & Quinney, 2005; Riessman, 2008; The Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Women’s consciousness raising groups were sites where women shared their personal stories as

a way of critically examining the hegemonic patriarchal and masculinist ideologies shaping their lives (Healy, 2000).

Sharing stories is a valued practice in Neighbourhood Houses (Kimberley, 1998). Ledwith (2011) proposes that sharing individual stories is a consciousness raising exercise that leads to personal empowerment and encourages collective action for change:

Individual stories become collective narratives that express the hopes and fears, needs and strengths that are the basis of theory and practice. Personal empowerment through a process of *conscientisation* is the beginning stage of collective action for transformative change. (p.97) (*italics in original*).

Conscientisation is centrally important to conceptions of both individual and community empowerment (Cahill, 2007). Cahill (2007), drawing on the work of Freire, argues that the dialogic process of consciousness raising, in which discourses and practices which constitute people as powerless or disempowered are recognised and challenged, creates the possibility of developing new and potentially transformative subjectivities. She troubles assumptions that conscientisation is a linear process in which people move directly from awareness to social action. Instead, she suggests it is a fluid, iterative process wherein people come to understand and rework their subjectivity through collective praxis which occurs over time, not as the result of any single moment of revelation.

Difference within community

Community development employs collective processes for social change in local communities. Collectivity and solidarity, along with recognition and valuing of difference

and diversity, are important concepts in community development (Ife, 2016). Difference and diversity refer to recognising and valuing difference *within* communities however they are defined, and *between* groups of people in communities, and the multiplicity of possibilities, solutions and ways of doing things (Ife, 2016). Valuing difference and diversity problematises constructions of difference as inferior, and removes the powerful/powerless dichotomy which labels people as different if they are in need of particular support. Practices which stigmatise and label people, although they are intended to be empowering, create the “dilemma of difference” (Parker et al., 1999, p.151), a dilemma created by seeking to empower people while at the same time using labels that suggest inferiority.

Community development is inseparably associated with the idea of community, however, it is often difficult to separate an understanding of community – whether referring to particular geographic communities, to communities of interest, or to communities of identity – from its traditional associations with notions of homogeneity, unity, and co-operation (Bryson & Mowbray, 1986; Everingham, 2001; Ife, 2016; I. M. Young, 1986; Yuval-Davis, 1994). Yuval-Davis (1994) and Young (1986) problematise the assumptions of unity behind notions of collectivity and solidarity in community and argue for re-visiting these concepts to take account of difference.

Yuval-Davis (1994) illustrated one of the pitfalls of linking the idea of community with homogeneity and unity by arguing that the ideology of empowerment was associated with a failure to address complexities around conceptions of solidarity and difference. This was so because empowerment through collective action for change was based on fixed and essentialised categorisations of ethnicity which assumed homogeneity within those communities. Yuval-Davis (1994) claimed that linking the idea of empowerment with collective action based on community as egalitarian and homogenous, consensual

rather than conflicting, unified rather than diverse, assumed that processes of empowerment were experienced in the same way by all people designated or identifying as members of a particular community or group.

Young (1986) argues that community is a political ideal which is founded on a dualism between community and individualism. It is based on assumptions of fixed and stable subjectivity and identity, denying the continuous and intersubjective construction of identity. An idealised conception of community emanates from a desire for “social wholeness and identification” (p.2) that denies difference between and within groups, and attempts to reduce difference to a form of commonality. She argues that difference is irreducible to commonality, suggesting that efforts to achieve unity or social wholeness in this way ultimately deny the existence of difference.

Difference in modernity was constructed around “the masculine” as the normative condition of being human (Braidotti, 1994, p.241) in a dualistic system which positioned women as different, other, devalued, and oppressed. Within the ideological hegemony of white middleclass Western maleism, all difference, for example race and class, was othered and oppressed. The politics of difference has been linked historically to the writing of Simone De Beauvoir, the emancipatory movements of the 1960s, and to the critiques advanced by black women and women of colour (Braidotti, 2007). Women’s sisterhood and solidarity, as a philosophical position, originated from Simone De Beauvoir’s analysis of “the structurally discriminating force of the concept of ‘difference’” (Braidotti, 2003, p.196) which exposed the oppressive dualism on which women’s inferiority was based. De Beauvoir posited the necessity for “a bond of solidarity between herself and all other women” (Braidotti, 2003, p.197), inspiring a philosophy of solidarity founded on what was an important and empowering assumption for the time – that women’s lived experience arose from a common

oppression. Braidotti (2003) credits Adrienne Rich⁸ with outlining a more complex framework for women's solidarity which recognised that "'we women' are all in it, though in very dissymmetrical and uneven ways" (p.197). Rich's analysis drew upon the critiques advanced by black women and women of colour, who argued that their concerns differed from those of white feminists and challenged assumptions that the patriarchy was the main source of their oppression (Davis, 1990). These analyses problematised conceptions of solidarity which assumed a commonality of experiences among women that was primarily gender-based (Davis, 1990; hooks, 1993; Tong, 2009; Weiler, 1991). Kimberley Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in the late 1970s to express the different ways that black women experienced oppression; for being black, for being women, and for being black women (Carasthesis, 2014; Davis, 1990). Intersectionality theory originated from critical race analyses. It has provided an important framework for conceptualising the multidimensional nature of inequality and oppression (Davis, 1990; Kenny & Connors, 2017) by exposing and naming multiple axes of oppression and different "social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege" (Carasthesis, 2014, p.304) experienced by women of colour. Intersectionality theory opened the way for analysis and naming of the reality of lived experience around multiple axes of oppression and difference. It signified a move from the initial concern with socially constructed gender inequalities and differences between women and men, to a focus on the different axes of identity and "power differences and inequalities that exist *between women*" (Archer, 2004, p.459). (italics in original).

Burbules (1997) articulates two broad perspectives for considering difference. The first perspective, the "categorical approach" (p.101), acknowledges the simultaneity, and contested nature, of multiple dimensions of difference. The second approach he terms

⁸ Rich, A. (1985), *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979 – 1985*. New York: Norton.

“a philosophy of difference” (p.102). This approach differs from the categorical approach in that it does not focus on characteristics and typologies for social groups, nor does it assume sameness as the beginning point or general condition from which difference is identified. In a philosophy of difference the instability and continuousness of subjectivities is taken as the general condition, as the primary state of being. This resonates with Young’s (1986) view which speaks to the idea of difference both within groups, and within individuals, in an ontology which recognises the notion of a subject-in-process, moving away from the immutability of identity categories. Burbules argues for a relational discourse of difference, stating that, “Differences are enacted. They change over time. They take shape differently in varied contexts ... They do not assume sameness, they are the conditions out of which we establish agreements about sameness” (p.103).

A politics of difference as proposed by Mullaly (2011) and Young (1986), does not situate solidarity within discourses of unity and sameness within social categories. Young (1986) proposes that *community* be reconceptualised within a politics of difference that is able to bring “differently identified groups together without suppressing or subsuming the differences” (p.23).

Theories emphasising difference have been critiqued for their apparent relativism, arising from concerns that embracing difference as the primary state of being will foster an uncritical acceptance of difference and not take into account “fundamental social and economic inequalities” (Healy, 2000, p.57). There is concern that privileging difference ignores structural power inequities, and risks depoliticising contemporary feminist and other struggles against oppressive social practices, and undermining collective action for change (Healy, 2000; McLaren, 2002).

lfe (2016) emphasises the importance of counteracting the exclusionary practices and discourses of racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, and valuing and celebrating difference and diversity. Braidotti (1994) refutes claims of relativism, and argues that rejecting universalism and acknowledging the contingency of subjectivity and knowledge, and the specificity of experience, is not relativist. Rather it requires a new approach to thinking about difference. Tracing the theoretical movement from early feminist empiricism which took no account of difference, to standpoint feminism which strongly emphasised difference, Braidotti (2003) argues that post-modern feminism transforms difference “into stepping stones towards cross-border or transversal alliances” (p.203). Viewing solidarity through the lens of difference and diversity makes it possible to establish alliances across differences, based on dialogue identifying common concerns and messages. These views recognise that unity in community and underpinning political activity is provisional and contingent (Healy, 2000; Ledwith, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 1994). Weiler (1991) argues that recognising the complexities of diverse subjectivities shaped through multiple situated experiences does not require giving up the struggle for social justice and empowerment, instead it requires us to remain keenly aware of difference when engaging in collective activities. Further, it is incumbent upon community empowerment processes to encompass complexity by acknowledging multiple subjectivities within and between community members (Mullaly, 2010).

Sense of belonging, and relationship

Sense of belonging is associated with participation in a group, a community, or a neighbourhood. Theorists (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; A. F. Young, Russell, & Powers, 2004) claim that belongingness, having a sense of belonging, feeling that you belong, is fundamentally about emotional attachment and connection. Emotional attachment and connection to a group or community is fostered by feeling part of a group, having a

sense that it is possible to influence the group, having your needs met, and being able to establish meaningful relationships and social connections (A. F. Young et al., 2004). A sense of belonging to a group or place is often expressed as a feeling of being at home, or feeling safe when in a particular social location (A. F. Young et al., 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Ife (2016) argues that community is a subjective, felt experience given meaning by people through their interactions with others. Sense of belonging, too, is connected with a person's subjective response to groups and communities (A. F. Young et al., 2004). It is described as both an emotional response, and an emotional investment, which is driven by a desire for social connection with other people. Furthermore, a sense of belonging can influence motivation, and enhance cognition and emotional and physical wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; A. F. Young et al., 2004). Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need to belong is "a fundamental human motivation" driving human beings to form "lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships" (p.497). Relationship building is facilitated by supportive interactions based on respect and acceptance (Freeman et al., 2007), and caring environments in which people are encouraged to participate (A. F. Young et al., 2004). Coates (1996) argues that women talking together is an aspect of relationship building that is intrinsic to establishing a sense of belonging and connection.

Community development writers propose that relationality and connectedness are significant aspects of community life (Christens, 2012; Ife, 2016; Putnam, 1995; A. F. Young et al., 2004). The theory of social capital articulates the significance of social relationships, networks, and connections formed between people in communities (Putnam, 1995). The central informing idea of social capital emphasises that "social

networks have value” (Putnam, 2000, p.19) because they contribute to social cohesion. The term refers to interactions between people not to skills and capacities, or human resources (Humpage, 2005). Putnam (2000) identified two forms of social capital, bridging and bonding social capital where bridging capital refers to the links between and within heterogeneous groups, or links between people who are dissimilar. Bridging capital refers to transactions in communities which “build knowledge, experience and skills” (Townsend, 2009, p.161). In this sense, bridging capital is inclusive, whereas bonding capital is exclusive because it refers to the links within and between homogenous and identity-based groups. A third form of social capital, linking social capital, refers to connections established between people and groups who are differently situated within hierarchies. According to Humpage (2005) linking social capital “allows individuals to forge alliances with ‘sympathetic individuals in positions of power’ e.g. members of parliament, policy makers, business and philanthropic organisations” (p.6). Although social capital theory was recognised as useful for highlighting the importance of relationship building in communities, it was critiqued for using ‘capital’ as a descriptor and reference for the social aspect of community, claiming it pandered to a neo-liberal and managerialist vocabulary and agenda (Ife, 2012).

Christens (2012) recognises the significance of relationship for individual and community empowerment, arguing that this has often been overlooked in theories of individual empowerment which have focussed predominantly on intrapersonal, psychological, aspects of empowerment. Ife (2016) proposes that relationship, built through dialogue, mutual support and exchange, consciousness raising, and collective action, “creates reality and gives meaning to the world” (p.94) and is the principal constitutive element of community life. Relationship and connectedness is the result of people’s ability to establish meaningful relationships which create a sense of belonging

within diverse groups and communities. A. F. Young et al (2004) identify a complex set of elements associated with a sense of belonging. Along with interpersonal relationships and emotional connections they stress that environmental factors and participation in community organisations are also important.

Constructions of community which separate the world into “us and them” (Ife, 2012, p.204), and which reinforce dominant power relations can damage an individual’s sense of belonging. Central to the politics of belonging is the question of sameness, or difference, which operates to define who is included, and who is excluded (Ife, 2012). In this regard, Yuval-Davis (2006) and Westoby and Dowling (2013) theorise a politics of belonging which resists pressures towards sameness and operates within and across multiple axes of difference, social location and identity.

The role of the emotions

Emotions are interwoven with every aspect of life, in people’s everyday activities, in their work, and are enmeshed within all power relations (Hochschild, 1979; hooks, 2003; Ife, 2016; Ollis, 2012; Van Wijnendaele, 2013). The emotions are strongly motivating, they play an important role for community workers, teachers, and activists (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1972; Hochschild, 1979; hooks, 2003; Ife, 2016; Ollis, 2012). Community development practitioners are typically motivated by a deep commitment to the work, and a love for and care about the people they are working with (Ife, 2016). They are motivated by a strong value position, and by a vision for a better world and a sense of hope that change is achievable (Ife, 2016). Freire spoke of a love for all humanity as the primary guiding and motivational force in his work. He held a deep belief in love as a necessary aspect of authentic and transformative practice (Darder, 2015; Ledwith, 2011). Darder (2015) refers to Freire’s loving pedagogy as the

foundation of dialogue and commitment to others, engaging with rather than negating difference. Darder says that, “Love constitutes an intentional spiritual act of consciousness that emerges and matures through our social and material practices, as we work to live, learn, and labor together” (p.49).

Emotions permeate “the very essence of our being” (Ollis, 2012, p.173). They are interwoven with every aspect of life, in people’s everyday activities, in their work, and are enmeshed within all power relations (Hochschild, 1979; hooks, 2003; Ife, 2016; Ollis, 2012; Van Wijnendaele, 2013). They influence the way people interrelate and engage with the world and are inseparable from the social life of people in communities (O’Loughlin, 2006; Van Wijnendaele, 2013). They inspire and guide social action (O’Loughlin, 2006). Along with love, anger and outrage provide strong motivations for people to stand up for their values, and to resist and struggle against exploitation, violence, and injustice (Darder, 2015; Ife, 2016; O’Loughlin, 2006). O’Loughlin (2006) claims that emotion supports “the engagement of embodied subjects in the multiplicity of practices enacting their joint social life” (p.125). Emotions are closely associated with social norms and values, and with resistant beliefs and values, and are the vehicle through which values are experienced and expressed (Jaggar, 2009).

Hochschild (1979) developed the concepts of feeling work, and emotional labour, to highlight the skills and capacities of women engaged in the caring professions. Emotion work is the act of managing the feelings which arise within the workplace, in response to particular situations and environments (Tonkens, 2012). Emotional labour is described as:

... the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling. To “work on” an emotion or feeling is, for our purposes, the same as “to manage” an emotion

or to do “deep acting”. Note that “emotion work” refers to the effort – the act of trying – and not to the outcome, which may or may not be successful. (Hochschild, 1979, p.561) (quotation marks in original).

Hochschild (2003) points out that the appropriateness of and expectations applying to expressing emotions in the workplace are circumscribed by feeling rules which, although undocumented, guide judgement about the appropriateness of particular feelings, and the social norms of particular situations. Emotions reflect “the prevailing forms of social life” (Jaggar, 2009, p.54). The ways that emotions are expressed are influenced by the power relations and constructions of meaning associated with the specific cultural and historic contexts in which they are felt (Darder, 2015; Van Wijnendaele, 2013).

Feminists have troubled historical analyses which constructed emotion as feminine and reason as masculine, arguing that this was tied to other essentialising binaries associated with male dominance and female subordination (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; O'Loughlin, 2006; Sodhi & Cohen, 2012). They contest the way that emotions have been constructed as irrational, and the province of women (hooks, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2006). The ground breaking study by Belenky et al (1997) on women's ways of knowing identified and valued the non-rational and non-traditional ways women learn. Ways of knowing, and learning, have frequently been constructed as conceptual mind processes in which the body and the emotions are absent (Hunter, 2004; O'Loughlin, 2006; Van Wijnendaele, 2013). Ledwith (2011) points out that contemporary feminist discourses have reframed women's roles. They have challenged “Universal truths about human behaviour are challenged and increasingly *feeling* has contributed to feminist pedagogy as a balance between the inner self and the outer

world, between the public and private, the personal and the political” (p.190). (*italics in original*).

Focussing on cognitive awareness and ignoring the role of embodied and integrated ways of knowing establishes a dualism between *experience* and *awareness* which implies that people will be motivated to act only when they have experienced a change in cognitive awareness (Fook, 2016). Overlooking the role of the emotions and embodied experience devalues experience “as an important part of how people understand their interests” (Fook, 2016, p.84). Loughlin (1996) suggests that “cognitive activity is not always sufficient to engender the necessary inner power for transformative action, particularly when concerned with areas of deeply ingrained behaviours and attitudes” (p.55).

The emotions and embodied experience play a role in cultivating new and empowered subjectivities and identities in interaction with others (Ollis, 2012; Van Wijnendaele, 2013). The study by Belenky et al showed that a group of women who became committed to social action were motivated by both feelings and thoughts, “their transformation in part emerged through a learning process in which cognitive insight and intuitive promptings equally engaged their will to choose action for personal and social change (Loughlin, 1996, p.56). Learning is an embodied activity engaging “the whole body, including the mind, the physical body, and the emotions” (Ollis, 2012, p.163), and is much richer and more likely to be successful than conceptual learning alone (hooks, 2003; Van Wijnendaele, 2013).

In arguing for recognising the empowering role of the emotions, Van Wijnendaele (2013) proposes a multi-layered understanding of empowering processes which recognises the connectedness and mutual interplay between emotions, subjectivity,

and culture wherein each constitutes the other. She views emotions, cognition, and the physical body as interconnected, arguing that emotions are:

... *multi-faceted* phenomena consisting of varying combinations ... of physiological, cognitive and behavioural aspects which are all ... influenced and affected by specific historical and socio-cultural contexts. I see emotions as *cognitive* and constructed through discourses and social and cultural processes and, *at the same time*, as deeply rooted *bodily* sensations ... located between mind and body, but irreducible to any of them ... [and this is] what makes them fundamental to developing a more holistic approach to personal empowerment and social transformation. (p.269) (italics in original).

The infinitesimal details of power

Understanding the dynamics of power as articulated by Foucault (Foucault, 1982, 1988, 1980) is central to the exploration of empowerment in this study. Foucault describes power as activity which modifies or constrains the actions of others. This description does not refer to coercive forms of power, or violence. It refers to the dynamics of power in relations where people are able to exercise choice about how they will act. Analyses which focus attention on the importance of understanding power in women's personal lives, are derived from Foucault's radical rethinking of the nature of power as capillary-like and extending into all aspects of life.

According to Foucault (1980) power exists everywhere, permeating all aspects of people's lives, their everyday relationships, touching all spheres of their lives (Healy, 2000; Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011). Foucault (Foucault, 1982, 1980) rejects the model of power on which traditional analyses of power and domination, such as liberation theories, were based, claiming that power is *not* an entity held or possessed by groups

of elites, nor is it located within particular social structures, institutions or instruments of the state. Foucault (1980) maintains that “power is ‘always already there’” it emanates from “*within* the social body, rather than *from above* it” (p.141) (italics in original):

Power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network ... relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) for which they play at once a conditioning and a conditioned role. (p.142)

Healy (2000) characterises this view as a “politics of detail” (p.51) for it seeks to understand power, subjectivity, and transformation from within the social practices of everyday life. This view resonates with feminism which relates politics and the dynamics of power with the personal realm, and with Freire’s (1970) work highlighting the connection between personal experience and political and economic power (Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011). These views advocate for social change based on the subjective understandings of oppression as experienced by people in their daily lives. More traditional understandings of power, although concerned with the realities of people’s lives, offer descending analyses of power. Foucault (1980) argues for an ascending analysis of power, beginning with its “infinitesimal mechanisms” (p.99). This approach is truly embedded within the practices and relations of women’s everyday lives. Bignall (2008) claims that a bottom-up view encompasses the operation of power at all levels, from small-scale and micro-relations between individuals and small groups to a global political level. Ledwith (2011) says that a capillary view of power supports a community development approach because it focusses attention on the way power permeates all aspects of life, providing an understanding of how powerful forces impact on people in communities. Rowan and Shore (2009) claim that directing attention to the small details

of lives, which frequently go unremarked and unnoticed, ensures that their significance is no longer undervalued and misunderstood.

Foucault's exploration of power originated with his interest in exploring how "human beings are made subjects" (Foucault, 1982, p.777). He says that, "We should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc" (1980, p.97). Feminists have been drawn to Foucault's exploration of the subject because it deconstructs the idea of stable and unchanging subjectivity (St. Pierre, 2001). Foucault (1982) regarded individuals, their subjectivity, as both the effect of power, and the vehicle for its expression. He argued that power is exercised, and that power relations are maintained and reinforced, through discursive practices (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Ife, 2016). Discourses are signs, practices and statements that constitute ways of presenting and knowing the world. More than language, they constitute the objects they speak of (Foucault, 1990) and articulate the systems in which we live and which shape our identities (English, 2006; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Discourses therefore play a significant role in the constitution of subjectivity. They shape the way we describe and experience the world, our practices, what is accepted as truth, and who speaks with authority. Flyvbjerg (2001) makes an important observation when he says that discourses are not forever fixed in their effect or meaning: neither constantly emancipatory nor constantly oppressive. Kesby (2005) acknowledges this in his discussion of participatory discourses – central to community development – stating that an apparently emancipatory discourse of participation can become oppressive if it becomes the required and enforced norm.

Any given discursive network is open to new meanings and usages, or incorporation into other discursive networks, including discourses of empowerment, participatory

discourses, and community development discourses. Healy (2000) argues that if meaning, the way we speak and think about ourselves, is constituted through discourses in which meanings are not fixed, but assigned according to particular contexts and particular historic periods, then subjectivity can no longer be regarded as pre-determined or stable. Tett (2016) claims that the fragility and fluidity of discourses provides “space for individuals to play an active role in constructing meaning through their interactions with the discourses they encounter” (p.429). Butler (1992) refers to the continuous constitution of subjectivity within the multiple and competing discourses and axes of identity through which women circulate in their daily lives, meaning that women’s subjectivity is in a constant state of becoming (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). St. Pierre (2016) refers to Butler’s view of women’s subjectivity and the potential for women’s agency when she states that:

If the subject is not given in advance, then it must be constructed within everyday living, within linguistic, cultural, and material formations and practices organized within power relations, values, and so on. ... Butler’s point is that freedom, agency, and choice are possible even though not innate. Freedom does not exist prior to living but becomes available through cultural practices, both existing and invented, in the course of everyday living. (p.111)

The power/ knowledge nexus

Foucault (1977) drew attention to the nexus between power, knowledge and claims to truth, by arguing that:

... power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations ... the subject

who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations. (pp. 95-96)

As power produces knowledge it can be properly understood only in relation to its connection with fields of knowledge and the discursive practices which disseminate and maintain them (Foucault, 1977). It is inseparable from particular fields of knowledge and claims to truth, and from the discursive and material practices which intersect with and maintain power/knowledge relations (Schirato, Danaher, & Webb, 2012). Knowledges, discursive practices, and material relations of power vary according to changing historic, cultural and material circumstances. Despite this contingency and fluidity, and the co-existence of contradictory and resistant discourses, power and knowledge remain in constant and dependent connection to each other (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

Given the power/knowledge nexus it cannot be assumed that knowledge is neutral or that truth and knowledge claims are not associated with power, and this, furthermore, problematises claims to universal or absolute truths, and identifies truth claims as claims to power (Richardson, 1991). Power/knowledge relations determine what knowledge is accepted as truth and whose knowledge is legitimated. Practices of power/knowledge are partial and situated (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Foucault's analysis foregrounds the association of power with discursive practices and professional fields of knowledge which make claims to truth and objectivity (Pease, 2002). Many fields of knowledge develop discourses proclaiming the objectivity, professionalism, and expertise of their knowledge bases. Foucault (1977) considered that bodies of knowledge, including the social sciences and emancipatory discourses, constitute particular forms of power and knowledge and operate as regimes of truth

(Healy, 2000; Pease, 2002). Healy (2000) and Pease (2002) argue that without critique, discourses of empowerment can construct the status of 'knower' as powerful within a dichotomy which views the 'client' as powerless. Healy (2000) contends that recognising the forms of power and knowledge which are available to clients is a way to mitigate against constructing these relations within a powerful/powerless dichotomy. Taking into account the power/knowledge nexus, a lack of reflexivity towards any discourse considered emancipatory can constitute a "regime of truth" (Gore, 2003, p.340), which can operate to oppress those who are inside or outside of the particular social reality the discourse refers to.

Ife (2016) claims that expert knowledge is typically of a more universal and broadly generalisable nature than local and contextual knowledge. However, any claims to universality do not remove the political nature of this knowledge because power underlies the reasons for its universal or broad acceptance. Countering these knowledges with other forms and sources of knowledge, or resisting these knowledges, challenges the truth claims of universal knowledge. The basic premise from which community development operates is that local people and local knowledge are the best source of information about the concerns of local people (Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011; Sandercock, 1998). In this view expert knowledge is valued as long as it is used reflexively and critically and does not devalue the knowledges of local people. Just as power/knowledge relations determine what knowledge is accepted as truth and who speaks with knowledge, they equally determine what knowledges are ignored or subjugated. Foucault (1980) describes "subjugated knowledges" (p.82) as knowledges that lack power, as they are considered naïve and lacking scientific verification. Ife (2016) argues that local knowledges are devalued within mainstream discourses in comparison with the professional and universal knowledge held by experts, because they are local and contextualised. Other examples of subjugated knowledges are

women's and indigenous knowledges, knowledges of minority and marginalised groups, the knowledge of elders, and any knowledges which pertain to relatively powerless groups in society (Ife, 2016; The Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

Second wave feminism challenged the sexism of male discourses and knowledge which privileged men and subordinated women (Gunew, 1990). Women's knowledge and ways of knowing were not recognised or valued. They were on the wrong side of the binary which valued men over women, and scientific and rationalist practices over intersubjective, contextualised and relational ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1997). Belenky et al (1997) challenged the hegemony of male-dominated knowledges and ways of knowing, describing the multiple ways in which women gain knowledge, and emphasising the importance of subjective and contextualised knowledge gained from lived experience. They claimed that:

Usually, we are supposed to learn it the way men see it. Men move quickly to impose their own conceptual schemes on the experience of women ... These schemes do not help women make sense of their experience; they extinguish the experience. Women must find their own words to make meaning of their experiences, and this will take time. (p.203)

This work recognised that women's lived experience and the ways they chose to make meaning of their experiences are legitimate sources of knowledge. Freire (1970) sought to redress the domination of oppressed people by recognising that knowledge comes from lived experience, that those who are oppressed, although they may not recognise it, "‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men" (p.37). The idea of lived experience producing knowledge that transforms subjects resonates with Foucault's notion of *le savoir des gens* (Foucault,

1980, p.82), a concept describing knowledge about the self that is constructed through lived experience and in relation to others (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). We know what we know through direct embodied experience of the power/knowledge relations in which we are embedded. Knowledge does not pre-exist these relations, or reflect an objective reality existing outside of ourselves. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) describe *savoir* as “active and [it] captures a subject’s process of modification and transformation. *Savoir* is a practice of knowledge which not only defines, but also changes the way a subject participates in the world” (p.60). Foucault understood power as productive, of “knowledge, subjectivity, and resistance” (p.61). Jackson and Mazzei propose that people use knowledge constructed within particular relations and practices to understand themselves, their relations to others, and to transform themselves.

Resistance and agency

Foucault (1982) conceptualised resistance in an inextricable relationship to power, contending that resistance does not exist in external relationship to power. Furthermore, he argued that resistance was the most important aspect of power relations, because “if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations” (Rabinow, 1994, p.167). The conception of power and resistance as co-existent challenges dichotomous perspectives of powerful or powerless, empowered or disempowered (Darder et al., 2003). Resistance to power, to dominant discourses and material practices, is possible from any position within the multiplicity of power networks and levels (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Foucault, 1982). hooks (2014) argues that it is false to assume that women have no power, even the most oppressed women have some form of power. For example, women can exercise their purchasing power as consumers in daily acts of economic resistance: they can refuse to buy particular goods, or to support businesses which exploit women’s labour.

Foucault argues that the possibilities for resistance are not dependent on symmetrical relations of power; resistance can occur even when “the power relationship is not the same” (Rabinow, 1994, p.167). Foucault’s view that all people have the capacity to resist, recognises that individuals have the capacity to negotiate power relations. Feminist post-structural scholars argue that resistance can occur at both the individual and the group level (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001; S. M. Shaw, 2001). Wearing (1995) describes Foucault’s conception of resistance as:

... the struggle against the form of power which pervades everyday life and constitutes individuals as subjects in the sense of being subject to somebody by control and dependence and subject to their own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. (p.51)

Women’s agency and resistance are theorised as closely connected to women’s empowerment (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001; Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007; Wearing, 1995). Raisborough and Bhatti (2007), quoting S. M. Shaw (2001) claim that:

Empowerment is an integral aspect of resistance ... it is both a positive outcome of resistance (women are empowered through their agency) and part of the process of resisting (women are empowered through the acquisition of skills, knowledge and vision) that enables them to resist. (p.462)

Foucault (1982) identified three forms of struggle and resistance: against religious, racial or social domination; against class exploitation; and against forms of subjection and submission, which have each taken precedence at different historical periods. However, he maintains that in contemporary times, “the struggle against the forms of subjection – against the submission of subjectivity – is becoming more and more

important, even though the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared” (p.782).

A capillary analysis of power differs from conceptions of power as an entity to be possessed and, while not precluding the possibility of revolutionary forms of resistance, it refutes the notion that there can only be one form of resistance (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Foucault (1982) says that resistances to subjectification are immediate and close struggles. They are grounded within the relations and practices which pervade women’s everyday lives and constitute women as subjects (Sandercock, 1998; Wearing, 1998). Darder et al (2003) point out that possibilities for resistance are circumscribed by the social and material conditions of people’s lives. Addressing this, hooks (2014) argues that sexist discourses, despite oppressing women, have never fully succeeded in rendering women totally powerless. A first step in the empowerment process for women is claiming the space to create new ways of being and relating (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1999). Neighbourhood Houses can be viewed as community spaces which provide women with a space to assert their personal and collective power as they engage in leisure and learning activities, and volunteering. .

... the exercise of this personal power is an act of resistance and strength. Many poor and exploited women, especially non-white women, would have been unable to develop positive self-concepts if they had not exercised their power to reject the powerful’s definition of their reality. (hooks, 2014, p.92)

Resistance and empowerment can occur in potentially limitless ways, and in many different sites. Ledwith (2011), and other feminist theorists (Lane, 2013; Sandercock, 1998) claim that community development processes resist and expose the dominating effects of power, making it possible to “claim back our power as subjects in the world”

(p.161). Feminists have theorised leisure as a site of power relations which can be conceptualised as a site of resistance (Green, 1998; Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007; Wearing, 1998). Feminist leisure theorists argue that “leisure behaviors, settings and interactions can challenge the way in which power is exercised, making leisure a form of political practice” (S. M. Shaw, 2001, p.186). Wearing (1998) argues that resignifying leisure as both physical and metaphorical personal spaces opens the way for women to exercise personal power and agency to “explore their own desires and pleasures” (p.149). She further argues that leisure enables women to compose subjectivities which are not constrained, or are less constrained by normalising discourses about how women can and should be. Leisure theorists highlight women’s agency in negotiating the time and space for leisure, and in resisting normative and gender-based constraints and expectations on the use of time in their lives (Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007). Different forms of women’s leisure activity, such as competitive sport and recreational sporting activities, provide opportunities for women to subvert gendered norms and discourses based on physicality and physical ability (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001; Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007).

The potential for leisure as a place of resistance and empowerment for women, derives from the way leisure is situated “at the intersection of contradictory discourses [so that] resistance to imposed gender-related constraints can occur in which case women can be perceived as active agents rather than as passive recipients of constraining structures” (Green, 1998, p.172). A significant aspect of specifically-designated women’s leisure spaces, or generalist spaces which are women-sensitive, is the opportunity created for women to talk with one another (Coates, 1996). Women talking together is intrinsic to establishing a sense of belonging and connection, and for developing friendships among women (Coates, 1996; Green, 1998; Wearing, 1998). Green (1998) claims that as women interact with others in leisure spaces they engage

with multiple, complementary, and resistant discourses. Some discourses are mutual and complementary, whereas other discourses are exploratory, opening up new perspectives and awareness, similar to consciousness raising. When women claim their power as subjects in the world, they gain confidence and improve their self-esteem, learn to think critically, explore and generate new ideas, acquire new skills, participate in decision making, become involved in the community, and creatively express themselves.

Gore (2003) cautions against unreflexive approaches to empowerment, pointing out the potential dangers of establishing “regimes of truth” (p.340) in any emancipatory discourse. Taking this view into account, Gore’s argument demands that when constructing leisure as a resistant and empowering discourse there not be an unquestioning assumption that women participating in leisure are engaging in resistance against dominant discourses and becoming empowered.

hooks’ (2014) view is similar to that of Foucault when she argues that if people are free it is possible to exercise the power to reject dominant and subjugating discourses and push back against prevailing truth and knowledge claims. Without the possibility of resistance, hooks argues, poor and marginalised women would be unable to reshape dominant inferiorising discourses into discourses of positivity and agency. Braidotti (2015) claims that women produce new subjectivities when they find ways to exercise their power, for power produces more than resistance, it produces new subjectivities.

Productive, creative power

Foucault’s (1980) view of power as productive challenged conceptions of power as domination, repression, coercion, and violence. Foucault argued that the exercise of power is not dependent on consent, however, power is accepted because:

... [it] traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (p.119).

Foucault (1982) claims that if power is simply a negative or repressive force there would be no incentive to obey. Braidotti (2015) suggests that viewing power negatively or regarding power simply as confining does not give a full picture of the nature of power. Power “covers both negative or confining methods (*potestas*) as well as empowering or affirmative technologies (*potential*)” (Braidotti, 2007, p.67). Some feminists have expressed concern that Foucault’s conception of power does not account for violence against women (Deveaux, 1994). Foucault (1982), however, argues that repression and violence are the instruments, or the results, of the exercise of power, they do not constitute the nature of power.

Power is productive and creative, it produces and creates subjectivity, in ways which are creative and self-affirming (Foucault, 1982, 1988). hooks (2014) proposed that power is “creative and life-affirming, definitions that equate power with the ability to act, with strength and ability, or with action that brings a sense of accomplishment” (p.90). She was a long-time advocate for the development of new feminist concepts of power, claiming that some early feminists failed to maintain an unquestioning view of power as domination and control over others. Other feminists offered alternative conceptions of power moving away from the emphasis on strength and domination traditionally associated with masculine conceptions of power, reconceptualising it as “energy and creativity” (Theberge, 1987, p.387). Arguments by Riger (1993), and hooks (2014) objected to limiting women’s expression and exercise of power to normative gendered prescriptions, or confined to limited domains of activity. Riger (1993) argued that

whether or not the expressive domain, normatively attributed to women, became more highly valued, women should not be confined to any particular ways of exercising power, but be allowed expression across the full range of possibilities: as strength, relationship, caring, emotion, and reason. hooks (2014) argues that concentrating on any one area of power, for instance, economic power, fails to recognise the diverse ways in which women, and members of excluded groups can exercise their power.

Within community development conceptions of power as productive emphasise emancipatory and transformative notions of power, such as *power with*, and *power to* (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 1994), moving away from conceptions of power as *power over*, which emphasise negative, and androcentric, views of power as mastery and domination (Ife, 2016). Kenny and Connors (2017) cite many possibilities for women to exercise power productively. These include, but are not limited to, having the power to participate meaningfully in decision-making, having the power to make decisions about their own bodies, being in control of their own resources including financial resources, having access to education, having the power to plan for their future and make decisions which affect them. Foucault describes resistance as a productive form of power, “a creative process; to create and recreate, to change the situation, actually to be an active member of that process” (Rabinow, 1994, p.168). Women’s agency in making decisions and choices, critically evaluating their beliefs, exercising disbelief towards inferiorising discourses, and changing the ways in which they behave in their everyday lives, is productive power. Women exercise power as energy, strength, and creativity as they participate in activities which are self- and life-affirming, and contribute to creating more inclusive and equitable communities.

Foucault's (1988) techniques of the self are based on an ancient Greek concept "to take care of yourself" (p.19). They are affirming and productive expressions of power which enable new ways of being and becoming subjects (Braidotti, 2015). Techniques, or practices of the self are concerned with how the self becomes constituted as a subject (Burkitt, 1997). They:

... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988, p.18)

Practices of the self describe the ability to be self-reflexive in relation to one's thoughts and behaviour. They are concerned with agency, and with taking responsibility for one's own thoughts and actions as they are mediated by dominant discourses (Atkins, 2005). St. Pierre (2004) suggests that care of the self is an active, agentic practice, "a radical freedom that operates not only as *choice* but also as *resistance* to self-forming practices" (p.340). (*italics in original*). Care of the self involves agency, acting within the world, while simultaneously being concerned with relating and behaving ethically and responsibly towards the self and others (Braidotti, 2015; St. Pierre, 2001; Van Wijnendaele, 2013). Practices of the self are multiple, diverse, and complex, involving "resistance, ambivalence, or accommodation to the codes – including gender, religion, education, kinship, widowhood, and old age" (St. Pierre, 2004, p.343).

Summary

This thesis is concerned with exploring and identifying the ways that Neighbourhood Houses facilitate women's experiences of empowerment. The theoretical framework of the thesis combines three separate but related conceptions of power and

empowerment: a Foucauldian theory of power, contemporary feminist perspectives of power, and community development approaches to power and empowerment.

Empowerment has traditionally been conceptualised using structuralist approaches which viewed power from a top-down perspective and considered power as an entity possessed by elites and institutions. These analyses used binaries which essentialised and positioned people according to powerful/powerless, empowered/disempowered, male/female dichotomies. In this study empowerment is understood as ongoing, dynamic, and embodied, embedded within the micro-practices and relations of women's everyday lives. Power and empowerment are viewed as discursively constructed and historically and socio-culturally situated and as circulating within all social relations and sites of human activity. While this view of power and empowerment acknowledges relations of power within the practices of everyday life, it does not presume an absence of unequal power relations. Furthermore, power is conceptualised as productive and creative, containing within it the possibility of resistance, rather than as a negative and totalising force.

The community development approaches explored in this study identify a complex set of integrated and interrelated participatory practices and processes in Neighbourhood Houses. The social and learning environment was responsive to and supported the particular concerns and interests of the women participants and managers. It enabled decision making, fostered confidence building, self and social awareness, and broadened world views leading to enhanced agency and sense of control in their lives.

The following chapter describes the research design and the methodological framework of this study. It outlines the epistemological perspective of the study, and reflexively discusses my position and experience as researcher in relation to this study.

The chapter identifies the methods used to select and interview participants, and the modes of data analysis used.

Chapter Four: Research design

This research focusing on women's experiences of empowerment in Neighbourhood Houses is situated within the broad theoretical traditions and practices of community development. The research design uses an overall qualitative approach integrating community development, feminism, and poststructuralism. Narrative research practices were used in the data gathering and analysis to provide women with the opportunity to describe and reflect on their personal, everyday experiences in their own words.

The research explores the question, *In what ways do women experience empowerment in the course of their engagement with Neighbourhood Houses?* There are two sub-questions:

1. *To what extent and in what ways are women participants and managers empowered by their participation and involvement in Neighbourhood Houses?*
2. *What processes and aspects of community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses contribute to women's experiences of empowerment?*

This chapter presents the philosophical approach of the research. It describes the method of data gathering – in-depth semi-structured interviews, and the chosen methods of analysis – thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) and poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010). The chapter concludes with consideration of relevant ethical concerns and the limitations of the research.

Philosophical perspectives of the research

Qualitative studies provide for an “in-depth understanding of the issue under examination” (Liamputtong, 2012, p.14), allowing the researcher to select the

interpretive practices and empirical materials which offer the strongest means to explore the research questions. The broad field of qualitative social inquiry is primarily concerned with “people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these” (Maxwell, 2013, p.29). A variety of methods and methodologies for gathering and interpreting the data are used by qualitative researchers. Denzin and Lincoln (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) describe qualitative inquiry as:

... a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world ... qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p.3)

Qualitative research is concerned with more than describing the world. Denzin and Lincoln claim that qualitative researchers want to transform the world. Grace and Gandolfo (2013) suggest that good qualitative research has “the potential to bring about desirable social change” (p.85). Olesen (2011) argues that feminist qualitative researchers developed their research praxis as they *raged* at the injustice of excluding women as research subjects and as researchers. They prioritised the subjective, contextualised, and embodied nature of women’s lived experience as a source of new knowledge (Gunew, 1990; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Schumann, 2016). In this research, the lived and embodied experiences of the women research participants are presented to illustrate the particularity and diversity of women’s lived experience.

Context is central to qualitative inquiry. The dynamic environments of Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria provided the discursive, social, and locational context for this study. Qualitative inquiry focuses on lived experiences of people within the contexts in which

they participate and work, in order to gather, explore, and interpret the rich and complex ways in which human experiences are created and given meaning through interactions within particular social, cultural, and historical discourses and practices (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Liamputtong, 2012; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Research which is contextualised provides the most reliable means for understanding the “viewpoints and behaviour of social actors” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.83). This makes qualitative inquiry a strong and relevant approach for exploring and describing how women participants and managers of Neighbourhood Houses subjectively experience, reinterpret, and make meaning of their world (Grace & Gandolfo, 2013; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

The epistemology of this research is based on a feminist perspective of how knowledge and meaning is produced and what constitutes knowledge. This perspective recognises multiple knowledges and ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1997; Grace & Gandolfo, 2013; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Early feminist researchers rejected positivist research methods in favour of epistemologies that challenge the notion of objectivity in knowledge production (Maynard, 1994). They troubled the concepts of the researcher as socially and politically neutral, and that the knowledge produced was objective and value-free (Schumann, 2016). In exposing the exclusionary, value-laden nature and sexist biases of positivist forms of knowledge production they challenged the knowledge/power nexus in which men created knowledge, and therefore truth, according to their androcentric world views (Foucault, 1980; Gunew, 1990; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Maynard, 1994; Maynard & Purvis, 2005). These knowledge paradigms discounted and ignored minority, local, and subjugated knowledges, denied epistemic authority to women, and excluded women’s experiences in research (Anderson, 2010; Schumann, 2016). Feminist researchers have developed research approaches that move beyond positivist paradigms to incorporate:

... interpretation, subjectivity, emotion, and embodiment into the knowledge-building process, elements historically associated with women and excluded from mainstream, positivist research ... to illuminate potential new sources of knowledge and understanding precisely *within* the lived experiences, interpretations, subjectivities, and emotions of women. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p.13) (italics in original).

Early feminist epistemology was theorised as a singular standpoint based on the assumption of structural gender inequalities shared by all women. Feminists of colour interrogated these assumptions arguing for recognition of multiple and intersecting sources of oppression across class, culture, race, ethnicity, and gender (Brooks & Hesse-Biber Nagy, 2007). Poststructural feminist perspectives problematise the essentialism of the category *woman*, and the universalism of a “women’s perspective” or set of experiences (Ackerley & True, 2010, p.466), and argue for “a plurality of feminist epistemologies” (Stanley & Wise, 1990, p.29), which are partial and contested and constructed within relations of power (Lather, 1991).

Contemporary feminist approaches decentre the notion of the subject as stable, a “knowing, rational, conscious, a priori, grammatical doer who exists ahead of the deed” (St. Pierre, 2016, p.103). They argue the importance of re-theorising and viewing the subject as constituted through multiple and contradictory discursive and material practices, and power/knowledge relations (Davies & Gannon, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Foucault, 1980). This fundamentally disrupts the Cartesian ontology of the *constituting* subject who is “the center of knowledge building and the bearer of truth” (Leavy, 2007, p.96). Subjectivity is conceptualised as fluid, “the ongoing construction of human being, human being in flux, in process” (St. Pierre, 2016, p.109), subjects are *becoming* (Mazzei, 2016; Tamboukou, 2008); or *in process* (Leavy, 2007).

Feminist research

Contemporary feminist inquiry and scholarship is a broad, highly diverse and contested field, not limited to any one particular theoretical or methodological approach, or concerned with any one aspect of the research process (Ackerley & True, 2010; Stanley & Wise, 1990). It acknowledges women's subjective and embodied experience as a source of knowledge, and emphasises an approach to gathering data which is cognisant of and sensitive to the power relationship that exists between the researcher and the research participant. Liamputtong (2012) proposes that all aspects of feminist research intertwine with and affect each other.

Feminist research is distinguished by its political intent and "potential to bring about change in women's lives" (Maynard, 1994, p.16). In exploring, highlighting, and documenting the nature of women's lives, feminist research is a form of activism making an important contribution towards ending women's inequality and making the world a more just place for women (Lather, 1991). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007) claim that, "By documenting women's lives, experiences, and concerns, illuminating gender-based stereotypes and biases, and unearthing women's subjugated knowledge, feminist research challenges the basic structures and ideologies that oppress women" (p.4). Contemporary feminist inquiry gives substantial recognition to the multiple and diverse ways in which gender intersects with other dimensions of power and inequality (Olesen, 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Much feminist research begins with seeking women's views and exploring women's experiences in order to more fully understand the diversity of their experiences (Grace, 2002), and to redress the marginalised and deviant status of women's lives in research (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

This research explores women's experiences in Neighbourhood Houses using a poststructuralist research perspective to understand the nuances of power in their everyday lives. While use of the category *women* (Gunnarsson, 2011) has been questioned because it may imply an essentialised understanding of what the category means, it remains relevant to explore women's experiences because a pervasive gender culture continues to shape women's lives (Ford, 2017). The approach of this research recognises the multiple, diverse and fluid nature of women's lived experiences.

Turning towards narrative

Narrative inquiry has emerged strongly over the past three decades as a research approach in the social sciences (R. Berger, 2013; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Chase, 1995; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Riessman, 2000). Throughout history, personal and group stories and narratives have been shared in order to understand and make sense of past experience or events, to connect actions and events in time, to transfer important lore and knowledge, and to create meaning and identity (Bruner, 2002; Chase, 2005; Elliot, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 2000).

The narrative turn in the social sciences has been historically linked with the emergent critiques and events of the 1960s emancipatory social movements, following the work of the Chicago School sociologists who had used life stories to study people in historic contexts (R. J. Berger & Quinney, 2005; Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008). The women's movement strongly advocated for and encouraged telling narratives of personal experiences as a way of bringing to the fore the previously silenced voices of women (R. J. Berger & Quinney, 2005; Chase, 1995). Narrative ways of knowing challenged the exclusionary practices of traditional epistemological approaches, and

acknowledged the growing dissatisfaction with the absence of the human element in positivist inquiry. The desire for nuance and particularity, rather than broad generalisations in seeking greater understanding of human lives motivated inquiry to turn away from the search for a single truth towards recognising “multiple, subjective, contextual ways of knowing and doing” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p.64).

What is narrative?

Narrative inquiry has become a recognised method of conducting social research. However, there are no hard and fast rules about ways to conduct narrative social research and many differing approaches are adopted (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Some scholars distinguish between *narrative*, a method of inquiry, and *story*, “the *phenomenon* of that inquiry” (R. J. Berger & Quinney, 2005, p.4). In this research, I use the terms *narrative* and *story* interchangeably when referring to the accounts of participants’ experiences, following a convention adopted by Riessman (2008). She identifies three separate aspects within narrative inquiry: the telling of stories, or narratives, which become the narrative data gathered and available for analysis, and the study of this data, the act of narrative analysis. In this research the term narrative inquiry encompasses all three aspects.

Narratives may be short or extended stories about meaningful or remembered aspects of a person’s life (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Chase, 2005). Georgakopoulou (2006) makes a distinction between *small* stories and *big* stories. Advocates of the small story approach prioritise the micro-social aspects of storying, proposing that more attention should be paid to the everyday social interactions that occur naturally between people.

Tamboukou (2010) argues for the importance of stories that capture momentary action, and the things that occur fleetingly in life, otherwise these moments and actions will be

lost. The stories told by the women in this study attend to the minutiae of their daily interactions with others as learners, workers, volunteers and peers. They refer to the important relationships and social interactions, either ongoing or casual, which became part of their everyday experiences as they participated in programs, or enacted their management roles. In the context of this research, women telling their stories resonates with feminist consciousness raising practices and with community development practices linking women's personal experiences (the small stories) to broader socio-political narratives or discourses of power (the big stories).

Chase (2005) describes narratives as:

... meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one's own or others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time (p.421).

Meaning and coherence within a western narrative framework is typically constructed using a trope consisting of a beginning, middle, and ending format (R. J. Berger & Quinney, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Riessman, 2008). The sequential order of narratives is considered to convey meaning by ordering events into a whole, enabling "each event to be understood in relation to that whole" (Elliot, 2005, p.3). Tamboukou (2008) argues that the conceptual framework of "sequence-meaning-representation" (p.284) presumes an unbreakable bond between the three aspects. She argues for interrogating and disrupting this bond and for theorising narratives as processes which are fluid and open. Her view allows for interest in the "minor processes of how narratives emerge and evolve as stories in becoming, taking unpredicted bifurcations, being interrupted or broken, remaining irresolute or open-

ended” (Tamboukou, 2010, p.21). In this study, the research design is informed by narrative research practices drawn from several narrative approaches and perspectives. Thematic narrative analysis and poetic interpretation were used to analyse and interpret the women’s stories gathered using in-depth semi-structured interviews. In the context of this research meaning is constructed by the participants and by myself as researcher.

Privileging women’s voices

Dominant cultural narratives and discourses about women may not reflect or represent their lived experiences (Chase, 1995), making it important to be attentive to how women tell their stories, and what stories they tell. Grace and Gandolfo (2013), in their research on women’s creativity, report that “some of the richest, most poignant accounts are those that have a narrative or story-telling character” (p.86). Chase (2005) says that feminists regarded personal stories as primary sources of knowledge about women’s lives:

[They] were interested in women as social actors in their own right and in the subjective meanings that women assigned to events and conditions in their lives. Importantly, these feminists opened up new understandings of historical, cultural, and social processes. (p.655)

Narrative inquiry opens a space for women *as subjects* “to define themselves, to tell their own stories” (Stivers, 1993, p.411), and it gives “credence to the value of personal, practical knowledge” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p.62). Privileging women’s voices challenges the dominance of practices that exclude women or dismiss their stories and experiences as “‘mere’ subjectivity” (Pierce, 2003, p.307). Narratives act as “*technologies of the self*, active practices of self-formation” (Tamboukou, 2013, p.93).

Narratives, therefore, are an important means for women to understand and make sense of themselves and their worlds.

Privileging women's first person accounts brings rich and layered knowledge about the social realities of women's lives (Chase, 1995; Pierce, 2003; Richardson, 1990; Riessman, 2008; The Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The Personal Narratives Group (1989) (The Group) view women's narratives as primary data sources for feminist research, and researching women. They claim that women's narratives reveal and interpret the "dynamics of gender" (p.4), the effects of power and subjection in women's lives, and present the ways women "negotiate their 'exceptional' gender status both in their daily lives and over the course of a lifetime" (p.5). The Group considers that women's narratives provide a way of understanding the dynamic interactions between the individual and society in constructing gender norms, and distinguish between narratives that describe apparent acceptance of these norms, and those which counter and disrupt normative expectations.

Pierce (2003) suggests that personal narratives help us to locate individual agency within a social context:

... life stories are valuable for their rich and varied detail...can provide unique insights into the connections between individual life trajectories and broader social structures. Moreover, because of their subjective perspectives, they offer a methodologically privileged location from which to comprehend human agency and subjectivity. (p.308)

Stories are constructed within social and historic contexts and relations of power which influence how stories are told and what they tell us, and the meanings given to lived experiences (Bruner, 2002; Gergen, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Mishler, 1992;

The Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Tamboukou (2013) views narratives through a Foucauldian lens, arguing that “narrative is understood through structures and forces of discourse, power and history” (p.88). Narratives interweave with power/knowledge relations which are enacted through multiple unstable and contradictory discourses and material practices. The simultaneous possibility of resistance that lies within all power relations means that women’s stories may be constrained, but not totally determined by, context and discourse (Chase, 2011). Women’s narratives may be resistant, counter-hegemonic, and nomadic (The Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

Narratives must be read and understood as constructions, and reconstructions of experience, rather than being interpreted literally as lived experience (St. Pierre, 2016). Women’s experience should not be uncritically accepted as the endpoint of feminist research, as reported experience is only ever a representation mediated by the narrator’s interpretation (Maynard, 1994). St. Pierre (2016) cautions that using experience as a source of knowledge requires researchers to do more than let the data speak for themselves, suggesting that we must investigate the material and discursive constraints in people’s lives.

What do narratives do?

Through telling stories, people describe, construct, enact and interpret their lives (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). Listening to other people’s stories is part of the culture of Neighbourhood Houses, because “what people in Neighbourhood Houses most enjoy is telling stories” (Kimberley, 1998, p.219). When we tell our stories to others we develop an understanding of ourselves, and ourselves in relation to others, that is inseparable from historical and cultural contexts “saturated by power/knowledge

relations that keep destabilizing their meanings and characters” (Tamboukou, 2013, p.92).

Richardson (1997) suggests that narrative is a humanising activity which allows “individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs” to become “comprehensible as wholes” (p.27). As we relate to other people’s stories, and enjoy listening to them, we look for the ways they resonate with or differ from our own stories. Stories may be open to interruption or interrogation by the listeners and they may change as other interpretations and experiences are offered, and when told in different settings and to different audiences (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). Stories, therefore, are dynamic, constructed interactively with particular audiences, whether physically present or not, and in particular contexts (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). In this research, the stories were co-constructed at interview, based on the interaction between myself as interviewer and the women interviewees.

Researcher positionality

In qualitative research it is important to acknowledge the researcher’s perspective and positionality in relation to the research design, the participants, and the data (Liamputtong, 2012; Maynard, 1994; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2005; Pitard, 2017; Reinharz, 1992). Researcher positionality is the prism through which all aspects of the research are mediated:

[Reflexive practice] means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognise and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation. (R. Berger, 2013, p.2)

Reflexivity plays an important role in the generation of knowledge (R. Berger, 2013; Finlay, 2008; Liamputtong, 2012; Pitard, 2017). Reflexivity enables a researcher to locate themselves in the research and to become critically aware of self as researcher (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Liamputtong, 2012; Oakley, 1981). As researcher I made decisions and choices that have been influenced by my philosophical values and beliefs, my knowledge and understanding of the research site, my prior and new and emergent understandings and knowledge of the world, all of which are partial and fluid, as I engage in the process of *becoming a researcher*. Pitard (2017) suggests that we must practise two distinct types of reflexivity through the research:

... personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. Personal reflexivity involves considering how our own values, life experiences and assumptions have influenced the research. Epistemological reflexivity requires us to consider how our research design may have limited or influenced the research, and how we could have done it differently. (p.9)

There is a symbiotic relationship between the two types of reflexivity. Practising personal reflexivity required recognising how my personal characteristics, beliefs, values and embodied experiences have shaped who I am, the way I interpret the world, and how this has influenced this research. It is important to be aware that in relation to this research I have a certain level of knowledge and understanding of women's lives, of managers' experiences, and of Neighbourhood Houses.

Naples (1996) claimed that we are always in a process of negotiation and renegotiation of insider and outsider positions. The researcher does not remain in a fixed, static position in relation to the research or research participants throughout the research process. As researcher I am simultaneously positioned as an insider and an outsider

(Breen, 2007). Breen (2007) eschews the insider/outsider dichotomy claiming that it does not capture the complex nature of the researcher's relationship to the research, arguing that reflexivity in the research process is more nuanced than staking a position within a binary either/or logic of insider/outsider. Whereas having been a manager of a Neighbourhood House positioned me to some extent as an insider, many of my experiences differed from those of the managers in this study. My insider experience occurred within a particular socio-cultural community setting: a women-only centre, located in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, operating in a diverse community with a rapidly changing upwardly mobile demographic. The managers who participated in the study are located within different socio-cultural settings. Experience as an insider equips me with knowledge and empathy in relation to the broader Neighbourhood House environment and simultaneously positions me as an outsider in relation to specific Neighbourhood House contexts.

My personal experiences of empowerment along with the associated contradictions and disempowerments of the manager role, has given me an insider's understanding of the complexities of the role of manager. I was positioned as an outsider in relation to the women participants who were differently positioned in relation to the Neighbourhood Houses, and their lived experiences, for example, of domestic violence, migration, trauma caused by war and the necessity of fleeing from their country of birth, differed from my own. I remained an outsider to the subjective and inter-subjective perceptions and events in the women's personal stories because they were their stories, and their experiences, not mine. However, the discourses that influenced their personal narratives, and their professional experiences, permeate and inform my own subjectivity and ways of understanding the world, and they provided the context for our interactions.

Berger (2013) argues that an area of reflexivity that has not been attended to in research is “the relationship between reflexivity and the position of the researcher vis-à-vis the phenomenon under study” (p.4). The interplay between my personal positioning and the epistemology and methodology of this research intersects at this point. A narrative form of inquiry was chosen because it resonates with community development practices in Neighbourhood Houses, and because I had personally witnessed the transformative power of women sharing stories of their experience. Women’s experiences are important sources of knowledge about the value of Neighbourhood Houses for women and local communities. Familiarity with the role of manager, my embodied experience of this role, engaged me subjectively – intellectually and emotionally – in the research process (Liamputtong, 2012, p.12). This research was deeply personal for me as a feminist and a former manager of a women’s Neighbourhood House. The research topic arose from my personal experience and understanding of the world being studied, my own sense of being empowered by this experience, and my deep commitment to the work of the sector.

Being positioned as an informed empathic researcher with personal experience of the focus of the study facilitated access to potential participants due to my familiarity with the sector. This provided me with prior tacit and empirical knowledge about the cultural location and context of the research; facilitated a layered understanding of participants’ reactions; and it assisted in quickly developing a rapport with the managers (R. Berger, 2013).

A potential disadvantage of insider positioning is the possibility that this may influence the course of the conversation (R. Berger, 2013). In order to minimise this possibility, and to mitigate against a sense of familiarity which may have resulted in assumptions about shared meanings and understandings, I chose not to interview managers or

participants whom I knew, or to include any Neighbourhood Houses I was familiar with in the research. My interest was in learning about their experiences not in using the research process as a means of self-exploration (R. Berger, 2013; Grace, 2002).

The interplay between personal and epistemological positioning influences all stages of the research process, and requires reflexivity towards both our personal positioning and towards the research design and methodological decisions (Pitard, 2017). Power relations operate in the research process just as they do in all other areas of life (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). A source of actual or perceived power asymmetry can be the relatively privileged social positions that researchers occupy in relation to their participants, which may include having higher educational attainments (Grbich, 2013). Researchers exercise power in the research process at many stages – choosing the topic, deciding who to interview or not, what questions to ask, how the research will be conducted, and the way the data will be analysed, written up and re-presented to readers. While being aware of the potential for power asymmetries to impact on the research, care must be taken not to view participants as powerless (Grbich, 2013). In keeping with the poststructural perspectives of this research participants were not regarded as powerless.

It is important to establish trust and rapport with participants in order to overcome power disparities (Grbich, 2013; Liamputtong, 2012; Maynard, 1994). Oakley (1981) advocated establishing a friendly relationship with women participants, however, others have pointed out that there are potentially sensitive and ethical issues arising from close involvement with research participants (Christians, 2003). In this research care was taken to avoid confusion or to unintentionally exploit participants. The relationship between researcher and research participants is nuanced and fluid, and was negotiated at the time of each individual interview. Sharing some common ground was

considered important for establishing trust and rapport with research participants, and in helping them to feel comfortable to share their personal experiences and situations (Grbich, 2013; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Liamputtong (2012) cautions that self disclosure by the researcher assuming common ground may result in participants feeling uncomfortable, or feeling under pressure to do the same. In this study, it was important not to assume commonality, by expressing views or opinions, or relay personal experiences that could upset the participants or exert pressure on them to say what they thought I wanted to hear. Common ground was established by articulating the reasons I was conducting this research and my personal interest in the topic, disclosing some information to participants about my previous connection to Neighbourhood Houses, while being careful to avoid excessive self disclosure or expression of my own opinions. I took care to explain how the interview was going to be conducted and what was expected of them (Grbich, 2013). Research with women who may not have had opportunities to express themselves, or who are unused to talking about themselves, requires sensitivity because of the possibility that participation in the research may be distressing or anxiety-provoking (Liamputtong, 2012).

Reflexivity requires deep and active listening in order to hear the unexpected or contradictory, to hear the previously unknown, and to counter the conscious and unconscious assumptions and biases brought by the researcher. Maintaining an openness and spirit of inquiry towards the revelations in the data, including new information and subjective interpretations helps to explore and tolerate uncertainty (Fook & Gardner, 2007, p.165). As researchers we do not know what will be revealed to us, nor do we know when new understandings and significant experiences will be shared. Hartman (2000) says that:

... we must ask people and then listen. And as we listen, we must attend to difference, to particularity, the contradictory, the paradoxical. As we do this, we will attend to that which may be quantifiably insignificant but whose presence may question a more conventional interpretation and expand understanding. (p.22)

Methods

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used in this study to gather women's accounts of their experiences of empowerment, transformation and change. The data included 15 women participants and 13 women managers associated with a total of 11 Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria. Two pilot interviews were conducted, one with a woman participant, and one with a manager. The pilot interviews were used to fine-tune the interview questions, although refining and reviewing the questions continued throughout the data gathering phase.

Narrative approach to interviews

A narrative interviewing method was used in this research. Tamborra (2012) says that "when a woman tells her story, as opposed to answering a list of questions, it allows the woman to feel like a person rather than a number" (p.122). In this study the women were able to tell their stories in their own words, and to choose the events and experiences they wanted to tell, free from the restrictiveness of responding to a predetermined order and set of questions (Liamputtong, 2012; Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). Prior to the commencement of each interview the participants were informed that I welcomed detailed and extended responses to the open-ended questions, and that there was no right or wrong answer to the questions because I was interested in their experiences and reflections (Liamputtong, 2012).

All interviews with women participants of Neighbourhood Houses were conducted face-to-face and one-on-one in the Neighbourhood House the women attended. This was the same for all but two of the managers. They were interviewed via Skype due to the remoteness of the location of the Neighbourhood House. All interviews were digitally recorded and each woman participant and manager was interviewed once. While recognising the limitations of a single interview, for a number of reasons – the time available, number of interviews and the distances travelled to meet interviewees, and the desire to include as much diversity as possible in the sample – it was decided to interview each person only once. Given these limitations I fully understood that what they chose to share, what they could remember, and what it was possible to share, was partially mediated by the short amount of time we had together.

Conducting the interviews

Each interview was planned to last for approximately one hour. The shortest interview lasted for 40 minutes, and the longest 78 minutes. The semi-structured in-depth format covered the areas pertinent to the experiences I was interested in exploring. Different questions were asked of the two groups. An indicative copy of the interview guides is located in the Appendices, Appendix C for the women participants, and Appendix D for the managers. The questions were designed to cover the following areas:

- Their motivation for coming to the Neighbourhood House
- Significant experiences/aspects of the Neighbourhood House
- The changes occurring in their lives, thoughts, feelings
- Their understanding of empowerment.

Apart from the opening question the format was usually not strictly adhered to as I allowed the narration to flow in ways the participants chose, and then responded to

what they told me. This allowed me to actively engage with the participant in co-constructing the narrative (Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) suggests that the narrative interviewer must relinquish control of the interview situation in order to enable the narrator to choose their own pathway into and through their stories. This may create some uncertainty about the direction the interview will take, however, it can also reduce the power asymmetries within an interview situation (Riessman, 2008). This created some performance anxiety for me particularly in the first few interviews, however, it was important that the women were able to speak about things as they came to mind.

In several of the interviews the women became quite emotional as they told deeply distressing stories of experiences which had preceded their engagement with the Neighbourhood House. When this happened I gave more frequent non-verbal cues, asked how they were feeling, and whether they wanted to stop the interview, or to get a tissue or some water. I, too, was deeply affected by some of these stories. My emotional responses to the women's stories were recorded in the research diary, and in some cases were expressed in a poetic re-presentation of some parts of interviews. This is discussed in the section *Poetic Interpretation* later in this chapter. Sometimes the women indicated that they were feeling emotional, or "a bit choked up". Some managers, when reflecting on the interview, were surprised they felt emotional. A range of emotions was traversed in most interviews. Even when distressing stories were told, later in the interview there was laughter and smiles. There were many times we laughed together, acknowledging common understandings, life experiences, and points of view. Sometimes laughter was a response to misunderstanding, and it was necessary to rephrase a question or clarify what I was asking by using examples.

Lather (1991) argued for empowering approaches to social research and claimed that such approaches were capable of producing change in the subjects of the research. The interview process can be an empowering experience for the interviewees and the interviewer (Pierce, 2003; Smart, 2009). The empirical praxis encouraged by Lather “enables people to change by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their particular situations” (Lather, 1991, p.56). At the end of each interview I asked each participant how they felt about the experience of being interviewed. Responses to this question varied, some women stating that they appreciated the opportunity for reflection, to think about and share with others how their engagement with the Neighbourhood House had impacted on their lives. Some had not previously described their experiences as empowering but on reflection saw them as such. Grbich (2013) argues that any claims a research study empowers its women participants must be grounded in those women’s own definitions and understandings. The empowering potential of this research perhaps resides in the opportunity it gave women to reflect on and revisit their experiences in the interview process. Their stories of their own choosing form part of their own continuing process of meaning making, personal transformation and empowerment. Some women expressed the hope that sharing their story would inspire other women.

Recruitment and sample

Purposive sampling was used to recruit women whose experiences were highly relevant to the research questions (Birch, 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Ollis, 2012; Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2014). Purposive sampling is “the deliberate selection of specific individuals, events or settings because of the crucial information they can provide that cannot be provided so well through other channels” (Liamputtong, 2012, p.14). It provides “*information-rich cases for study in depth*” (Patton, 2002, p.46)

(emphasis in original) maximising the opportunity for learning about the research topic. Ritchie, Lewis, Elam et al (Ritchie et al., 2014) suggest the two principal aims of purposive sampling are to cover the most important and relevant subject characteristics, and to ensure that the sample is sufficiently diverse “so that the impact of the characteristic concerned can be explored” (p.113). The participants in this research were purposively selected because they were able to speak about change and transformation in their lives in order for the relevant themes of the research to be explored (Maxwell, 2013).

A successful recruiting strategy was speaking at the Victorian conference of Neighbourhood Houses in 2015. Following my presentation several managers expressed their interest in participating. Once the managers had confirmed their interest in participating, a further purposive technique was used to recruit the women participants by asking the managers to identify and approach women from their Neighbourhood House who they considered had information-rich stories to tell (Minichiello et al., 2008; Patton, 2002; Ritchie et al., 2014). The managers were given a copy of the *Information for Participants* (see Appendix A) and a flier about the research for themselves, and to pass on to any women they regarded as potential participants. Once the women were identified and had indicated interest, I followed up with them to confirm, answer any questions, and arrange an interview time.

Participant diversity

Previous studies focussing on Neighbourhood Houses have indicated the importance of including culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community members in the study (Guinness, 1998; Robles, 1992; Townsend, 2009). The English Language profile of women participants in Neighbourhood Houses was used as a rough guide for

determining appropriate numbers. The 2015 Statewide survey of Neighbourhood Houses showed that approximately 75% of women participants have English as their primary language (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2016). Depending on the location of a Neighbourhood House this demographic profile can vary widely. Every effort was made to ensure that women from CALD backgrounds were interviewed by seeking research participants in Neighbourhood Houses located in areas of significant cultural diversity. All interviews were conducted in English which necessitated limiting the invitation to women with sufficient English language proficiency to enable participation in an interview. It was beyond the scope of this research to engage interpreters.

The profile of women participants in Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria is highly diverse (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b). I was keen to include women of different ages, life stages, life experiences, histories and cultures, and purposive sampling provided the opportunity to select a diverse group of participants. The 2011 SEIFA Index of Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), indicated areas of high need in the western, northern and southern suburbs of Melbourne and this was used as a guide for approaching Neighbourhood Houses. Selecting for a diversity of participants enabled exploration of experiences of empowerment from multiple lived and embodied positions (Ritchie et al., 2014), and was a way to ensure that the richness and complexity of the women's experiences of empowerment were presented. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 at the beginning of Chapter Five illustrate the diversity profile of women participants of Neighbourhood Houses in the study. Tables 6.1 and 6.2 at the beginning of Chapter Six illustrate the diversity profile of the managers, and their prior employment experiences. For confidentiality reasons the diversity profiles are presented in a format which limits the likelihood of identification.

It was important to include a diversity of Neighbourhood Houses in the study. This meant purposefully selecting a range of locations of Houses, from inner and outer urban, to rural and more remote rural locations. In addition, a range of sizes of Houses was included from very small Houses with less than 1 EFT⁹ staff per week, to larger Houses with more than 15 EFT staff per week. Only one of the Houses in this study has been included in a previous study as I considered it was important to approach Houses not previously included in academic research on Neighbourhood Houses (Buckingham, 1997; Guinness, 1998; Kimberley, 1998; Lindeman, 1994; Permezel, 2001). A further criterion for selecting Houses for this study was that they were in receipt of funding under the Neighbourhood House Co-ordination Program.

Data analysis

The data gathered in this research has been analysed using two approaches: narrative thematic analysis, and poetic interpretation (Liamputtong, 2012; Patton, 2002; Richardson, 1993; Riessman, 2008). The particular approach to narrative thematic analysis is discussed in this section, and the use of poetic interpretation is discussed in the next section.

In relation to narrative thematic analysis, Riessman (2008) says that “the interpretive process begins during conversation” (p.26) shaping the way that questions are asked and what questions are asked. Transcribing the raw data is also an interpretive practice (Minichiello et al., 2008; Riessman, 1993). I transcribed each interview, allowing me to become immersed in the data and to start identifying the possible themes and links across the women’s stories. Constructing a transcript engages researchers in deep

⁹ Equivalent full time (employment)

listening and decision making. As I transcribed each interview I could hear the women's voices and the rhythms of speech in their accounts, and wanted these to be recorded in the written record of the interview. The interviews were transcribed as closely as possible to verbatim in order to capture nuances of meaning, rhythms of speech, subtle modulations and changes of tone (Riessman, 1993). Transcriptions included "messy talk" (Riessman, 2008, p.28): non-lexical utterances, repeated words, hesitations and pauses, and indicated emotions where they were obvious. Including this detail helped me to hear the individual rhythms of each woman's speech and story as I read and re-read the transcripts and to re-traverse the emotional journey of the interview. Riessman (2008) remarks that:

Some mistakenly think the task is technical, and delegate it. However, transcription is deeply interpretive as the process is inseparable from language theory. The "same" stretch of talk can be transcribed very differently, depending on the investigator's theoretical perspective, methodological orientation, and substantive interest. (p.29)

There is no universal method to use for transcription, and I devised my own legend to indicate emotions, emphases, speech rhythms, repetitions, and hesitations, as well as my utterances and occasional comments, which drew in part on symbols used by Riessman. A copy of this legend is at Appendix E. Even so, a written transcription cannot completely capture the spoken and interactive aspects of an interview, just as an aural recording does not capture everything that occurs in the interview (Riessman, 1993).

Each interview was transcribed shortly after completion and most participants received the transcriptions within one month of the interview. When the transcriptions were sent

to the interviewees an explanation was provided about the nature of the transcript, and the reasons for including such a level of detail.

Liamputtong (2012) writes that the aim of narrative analysis is to “unfold the ways individuals make sense of their lived experience and how its telling enables them to interpret the social world and their agency in it” (p.251). A challenge when interpreting narrative is how to analyse the large volume of spoken and written text as narrative interviews gather detailed and lengthy accounts (Elliot, 2005; Patton, 2015). The substantial level of detail provides rich and thick descriptions of experience. The challenge was to undertake a complex analysis of the data while at the same time communicating the diversity and multi-faceted nature of the women’s stories, valuing the detail and richness of the stories, and ensuring that the women were present within their stories.

Riessman (2008) says that thematic narrative analysis continues the tradition in qualitative inquiry of identifying common themes across the body of data, while “preserving narrative features” (p.74). Thematic narrative analysis is often undertaken in order to present the similarity of meanings within and across the narratives and so move beyond the subjective and the particular (Riessman, 2008). In this research I chose to use thematic narrative analysis in such a way that both the general and the particular were presented. While common themes were identified in the women’s stories, the distinct detail of each case was highlighted rather than subsumed into a generic summary. Broad themes highlight the similarity between the women’s experiences, and the detail included under these themes illustrates the heterogeneity and diversity, as well as the particularity of their subjective experiences.

The themes identified for the women participants:

Engaging with the Neighbourhood House

Sense of belonging

Connection and relationship

Learning together

Leadership, advocacy, activism

Standing in their power

The themes identified for the managers:

New opportunities

Emotional work

Knowledge and understanding

Support and collaboration

Meeting challenges

NVivo was used to manage the substantial volume of raw data, using a detailed set of codes developed from close study of the interview transcripts. Once the data were coded, an iterative approach, moving between the transcripts and the codes in NVivo, was used to identify the six major themes and sub-themes for the women participants, and five major themes and sub-themes for the managers. Thematic narrative analysis does not segment the data to the point where the detail and context become lost; longer sequences of text are preserved in order to maintain context. My strategy at this stage was to keep the stories as larger chunks, rather than segmenting into short phrases or single sentences as this can lose the “contextual and structured elements of a story” (Patton, 2015, p.130). People tell their stories and recount their experiences as a whole, they do not separate and fragment into elements and themes (Riessman, 2008). The discrete and image-rich *stories within the story* were coded separately as they often included several themes or different interwoven threads. This ensured that the integrity and richness of the women’s stories was preserved (Grace & Gandolfo, 2013).

Poetic interpretation

The words we use, and the way we use words is more than a simple technical exercise. Ursula Le Guin (2004) says:

Words do have power ... Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it. (p.199)

Listening through headphones to the recorded interviews was an intense experience, literally bringing the voices of the women right inside my head. Their words were transformative, they shaped how I wanted to report my research. As I listened, I became acutely aware of the imagery, speech rhythms, word repetitions, emphasis, and emotions present in the women's narratives. A standard prose representation of the women's expressiveness did not seem entirely satisfactory (Connelly, 2010).

Somewhat serendipitously, following a citation in Riessman (2008) which had piqued my interest during the transcription phase of the research, I discovered Richardson's (1993) method of writing-up sociological inquiry as poetry. Her view of the power and importance of writing as a form of inquiry resonates with Le Guin's regard for the power of words. Writing data as poetry changed things for Richardson personally and unexpectedly. Writing is not merely or simply an act of telling or re-telling, it is the way in which we as researchers discover, reveal, interpret, come to know and understand, and communicate, the aspect of the social world which we are researching (Richardson, 2000). In the contemporary theoretical landscape there is greater freedom to explore myriad possible approaches to writing sociological texts, freeing us from the hegemony of traditional scientific forms of writing (Richardson, 2000). Richardson interrogated sociological conventions which excluded women's voice, turning to more

experimental forms of writing, and naming her approach transgressive writing (Richardson, 1993). She is generally considered to be the first social scientist to use poetry in sociological texts (Butler-Kisber, 2010). This form has variously been called poetic transcription (Richardson, 1993; Riessman, 2008), poetic re-presentation (Connelly, 2010), poetic narrative (Glesne, 1997), poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010), found poetry, or narrative poetry (Prendergast, 2009). It has been embraced by scholars across many different disciplines. I count myself among the many students and scholars who have been inspired by Richardson, and the permission she gave to “write differently” (White, 2016, p.1). I use the term poetic interpretation for the process of developing the poetic texts in this research.

Glesne (1997) created “poem-like compositions from the words of interviewees” (p.202). She claims that “poetic transcription creates a third voice that is neither the interviewee’s nor the researcher’s but is a combination of both” (p.215). Using poetic interpretation of field texts creates an emotional, aesthetic and political connection between the researcher/author and the narrator (Richardson, 2000). Such texts link the writing enterprise of the researcher with the “lived, interactional experience” of undertaking the research because reading and writing poetry touches us “where we live, in our bodies” (Richardson, 1993, p.695). This resonates with my own embodied experience of poetically interpreting the recordings and written transcriptions of interviews. The words and rhythms forming the women’s stories were powerful and energising. Developing poetic texts enabled me to connect with my own emotional response to the text and overlay and interweave my subjective response with the women’s words and imagery. Writing poetic text had a profound impact, taking me to a place of deep empathic understanding and connection to the women and their experiences (Prendergast, 2009).

The power of poetic inquiry is similar to poetry, enabling readers to “really engage” (Connelly, 2010, p.36), directly and affectively, with experiences that are fundamentally significant in people’s lives (Prendergast, 2009). I discovered that these texts evoked a strong response in others who read them. Connelly (2010) turned to poetic representation for just this reason, stating that her main aim was to “create a *connection* between the reader and the stories” (p.32). (italics in original). The poetic form evokes “emotional responses that bring the readers closer to the work” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p.83), offering the reader a way to connect emotionally with the narrator in a more direct way than a traditionally written sociological text allows, thus making it accessible to diverse audiences (Connelly, 2010).

Crafting the poems

Butler-Kisber (2010) uses the terms *found poetry* and *generated poetry* to encapsulate two different approaches to poetic inquiry, while admitting there is some difficulty in specifying the difference between them. In generated poetry researchers use their own words to interpret their findings or write about their personal experiences. Found poetry is a more relevant description for the approach used in this study. It covers varied approaches originating with the words and phrases of the research participants, “extracted from transcripts and shaped into poetic form” (p.83). The approach used in this research was similar to that of Butler-Kisber:

Some researchers start with the transcribed interviews and approach the work by categorising and coding ... and then they choose the most salient words within a particular theme/experience and work with these to re-create the rhythm and speech patterns of the participant. (p.85)

After transcribing the interviews, coding and arranging them into themes, I then found sections of text in individual women's transcripts which I worked and shaped into a poetic form. I established some guidelines for approaching this task. A primary concern was to honour the women's words, to use their words, not my own. Prendergast (2009) calls this form of writing "vox-participare - participant-voiced poems" (p.545). While the words of the poems are the women's, the construction of the poems is my own (Connelly, 2010). I used various poetic devices such as repetition, pauses and line breaks, and longer passages, to clarify, emphasise, and highlight their words, and represent the rhythms and emotions of their stories. Other narrative strategies included embedded dialogues and conversational asides the women used. The poetic devices I chose interpreted the meaning, emotion, and agency in the women's narratives. Along with the rich imagery within the transcripts this illustrated and added depth to the thematic narrative analysis. The order and repetition of words and phrases I used in my own way, however, in most instances I attempted to keep the section of transcript fairly intact. See Appendix F for a copy of the poetic interpretation of Reya's transcript. There was one exception to the practice of poetically interpreting women's narratives individually, the poem that appears in Chapter Two, titled *What is a Neighbourhood House?* This poem was crafted using words selected from many of the women's transcripts.

Whereas generated poetry has few limitations and restrictions aside from the researcher's imagination and capacity to wordsmith, found poetry, adhering strictly to the words within transcripts imposes limitations on the researcher (Butler-Kisber, 2010). I did not find this problematic because my intention was to use various poetic conventions to convey the women's experiences in their own words.

The poems became part of the total epistemological approach of the research presenting what Richardson calls a “female imaginary” (Richardson, 1993, p.695) – interpretive creative texts using the women’s experiences and my subjective responses to them. The choice of text reflects my interpretation and understanding of what I consider to be a central or key aspect of their story and in part represents my response to their story. It remains “faithful to my sociological understanding” of the women’s stories (p.696), and provides another way to introduce meaning. Interpreting narratives does not uncover truth and meaning, but rather “it allows us to begin to know a thing and to think about it in a number of contexts” (Connelly, 2010, p.33, citing St Pierre 2005).

Trustworthiness

According to Liamputtong (Liamputtong, 2012), there are two broad elements pertaining to research trustworthiness, the research design and processes, and the processes relating to the research participants. The previous section presented the details of the research design and processes, including methods of data gathering and interpretation. The details provided in that section, and in the next section on Ethics, support the trustworthiness of this research.

In any research, it is important to ensure that the processes and findings of the research can be trusted. In positivist research, where replication and generalisability are important, trustworthiness is based on the reliability and validity of the research (Liamputtong, 2012). Reliability refers to findings that are fixed and not subject to change if the same methodology is followed. Validity refers to the idea that the research is measuring or assessing what it set out to measure or assess, and not some other, possibly spurious construct. The concepts of reliability and validity support the

ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches of positivist research to establish objectivity and claims to truth.

Whereas positivist research is concerned with Truth, qualitative inquiry, based on quite different ontological and epistemological foundations, requires different methodological and validation approaches. Qualitative inquiry focuses on people's lived experience situated within a social, political, or cultural context (Liamputtong, 2012; Riessman, 2008). Truths in qualitative inquiry are not meant to be generalised; they are contextual, drawn from the single or multiple realities "constructed by people in their own contexts" (Liamputtong, 2012, p.25). The quality and trustworthiness of the research is more relevant than its generalisability or claims to Truth (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this research, multiple realities based on the constructed narratives of the women as they reflected on and interpreted their experiences as participants and managers of the Neighbourhood House were explored.

Critiques of qualitative research typically refer to it lacking reliability and validity due to its interpretive and subjective nature (Lather, 1993; Liamputtong, 2012; Riessman, 2008). Findings in qualitative research are interpreted rather than measured and detailed knowledge (Riessman, 2008), including atypical instances, is important. In this study, the analysis provided nuanced and detailed knowledge of the complexities of the women's lived experience. It included the similarities and the differences between their experiences of empowerment, as well as identifying atypical or contradictory experiences.

Recognising the partial and situated nature of narrative truths does not override the importance of demonstrating the trustworthiness of research. Qualitative researchers

suggest that there are different ways to reassure readers about the trustworthiness of their research. Researchers need to:

...make arguments to persuade audiences about the trustworthiness of their data and interpretations – they didn't simply make up the stories they claim to have collected, and they followed a methodical path, guided by ethical considerations and theory to story their findings. (Riessman, 2008, p.186)

In this regard, the use of concepts associated with positivist research has been contested and unsettled (Lather, 1993; Liamputtong, 2012). Lather (1993), for instance, maintained an interest in the notion of validity, however she referred to it as the “core but changing concept of validity” (pp. 673-674) and argued for unsettling it “as a regime of truth” (p.674). She argued for research in the human sciences to embrace a methodology that is not so much prescription as “curves of visibility and enunciation” (p.687). Liamputtong favours “credibility and authenticity” as the conceptual means to determine whether research is “genuine, reliable, or authoritative” (Liamputtong, 2012, p.25), that it is trustworthy. It is appropriate for qualitative research to be assessed according to “the situated perspective and traditions that frame it” (Riessman, 2008, p.185). Several strategies were adopted to support the credibility of this research. They include the careful designing of the research to ensure that methods aligning with the philosophical approaches were used for gathering, analysing and interpreting the richness, nuances and multiplicity of the women's diverse realities and lived experiences as participants and managers.

This research is situated within the perspectives of community development, feminism, poststructuralism, qualitative research, and narrative inquiry. Its intention is to explore the depth and complexity of women's experiences of empowerment by focusing

attention “on narrative detail (the ‘little things’)” (Riessman, 2008, p.194). Its trustworthiness rests upon having provided sufficient information for readers to decide what the women’s stories mean (Riessman, 2008), and to be confident of the methods and the findings, in other words, that the research is credible (Liamputtong, 2012). In this research, trustworthiness is associated with the following aspects of the research design: the purposive selection of participants in order to present a diversity of experiences; sensitive and respectful conduct of interviews enabling the women to tell their stories in ways of their own choosing; construction of detailed transcriptions of the interviews which were checked with the participants; ensuring that the analysis and presentation of the findings were clearly linked to the data; and by providing a comprehensive discussion bringing together the findings and the theoretical framework. In addition, all aspects of the research were verified through regular academic supervision. Presentation of the research design and findings at an international conference of community development and other practitioners in neighbourhood and settlement houses from many different countries provided a form of peer review (Liamputtong, 2012).

The information provided about the research design and conduct make it clear that this research was conducted carefully, respectfully, empathically, honestly, sensitively, openly and reflexively (Liamputtong, 2012, p.27), and with respect for ethical research processes.

Ethics

The impetus for this research came from my personal and professional values and lived experiences, my belief in the importance of Neighbourhood Houses to local communities, and my commitment to feminist and social justice values. These

underpinned consideration of ethical issues and ethical practice which were integral to every stage and aspect of the research. The focus of this research arose from my observations and reflections on my experiences as manager of a women's Neighbourhood House. This consolidated my sense that women sharing stories of their experiences is a powerful means of bringing people together, of understanding self and others, and of learning about and making sense of the world. From the outset I intended to shape and conduct the research in a way that I perceived to be profoundly ethical. I believe that listening to and sharing stories forms part of the ethical practice of Neighbourhood Houses, and it was important to embed community development values and practices in the research process. The research process began with reflecting on what research is worth doing, and making decisions about the research – that it was to be a qualitative study, feminist in orientation, and use a narrative approach. In carrying out the research I wanted to do more than avoid harm to participants; I wanted the interview experience to be a place for reflection and enrichment for the participants.

This research received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Victoria University, Australia. The research was conducted under the supervision of two experienced academics who were committed to high standards of ethical conduct for the research. Four main ethical issues relating to human research are presented below: informed consent, avoidance of harm, confidentiality, and trustworthiness.

Informed consent

I was conscious of ensuring the participants were fully informed of their rights as participants and that no harm would arise from their participation in the research (Christians, 2003; Liamputtong, 2012).

Giving informed consent is one of the most significant rights of research participants. In order for informed consent to be given, research participants must be provided with clear, detailed, and pertinent information about the research (Smythe & Murray, 2000). This involves identifying the researcher and explaining the aim of the research, the length of time that the participant will be involved, and any other activities in which they will be required to participate. In this research, participants were assured verbally and in writing of their right to freely consent to participate, that they could withdraw at any stage of the process and that withdrawal would not involve any penalties.

The informed consent process in this research consisted of several steps. Before I met the interviewees face to face, I spoke with them on the phone, or emailed them, and then emailed or mailed the *Information to Participants* (see Appendix A) and *Consent to Participate* (see Appendix B) forms. This process established early rapport with the research participants and provided them with the opportunity to ask questions about the research, an opportunity extended again at the time of the interview. Once the recording equipment was set up, I gave an overview of the research, checked that they had read and understood the *Information to Participants*, and reiterated the most important aspects of this information, including that the interview was to be recorded. I explained that if they still wished to be interviewed it was a requirement of the ethics process that they sign the *Consent Form* before the recording commenced. A further opportunity for giving informed consent was extended when the transcript of the interview was sent out to each interviewee. The opportunity to view the transcript gave each of the women an additional opportunity to make further comments or additions, or to delete anything they did not wish to remain in the transcript. In several instances transcripts were adapted and changed based on the research participants' feedback. The revised version of the transcript was then sent to the participants. There were no withdrawals from the research.

Avoidance of harm to participants

The risk to participants in this research was assessed as being low. Avoidance of harm involved taking steps to ensure that participants' physical, mental and social well-being were attended to, and that there were no adverse effects on participants from taking part in the research (Liamputtong, 2012). Narrative style interviews are usually conducted in a conversational style (Elliot, 2005) where the relationship between the researcher and the participant is closely akin to a subject-to-subject connection (Stivers, 1993). Some feminists claim that the non-hierarchical style minimises the potential for exploitation or harm befalling the participant (Elliot, 2005; Oakley, 1981). Others dispute this arguing that in the comparatively relaxed environment of a narrative interview participants may unwittingly share information that has hitherto been kept private, and this may lead to them feeling exploited or distressed (Elliot, 2005). The risk was mitigated by allowing the participants to choose which experiences and personal information they were prepared to share, and at what stage of the interview they wished to disclose this information.

When people share personal stories there is the potential for temporary or short term psychological distress or discomfort due to the personal nature of the stories. As long as the researcher remains sensitive to these matters and ensures that the interview environment is a safe space it may be quite therapeutic and empowering for the participants to have the opportunity for in-depth reflections about their lives (Elliot, 2005; The Personal Narratives Group, 1989). I was prepared if necessary to direct the women towards a locally available counselling service. Some participants did become emotional about particular aspects of their lives as they recalled difficult or sad times (Elliot, 2005). When this happened I asked if they would like to have a short break, or a cuppa, offered a tissue, and allowed them to determine when they were ready to

continue. All the participants felt settled when the interview concluded. Listening to the women's stories brought home the profound ethical responsibility a researcher holds when gathering stories of people's lived experience: ensuring that no harm is done, protecting their anonymity, and providing them with full details of their rights as participants in the research.

At the conclusion of the interview, the participant and I sometimes briefly discussed an aspect of their story which had strongly resonated with me or which was of particular importance to them. For example, one of the women had talked about a very distressing bushfire emergency experience. I mentioned that this was the first time someone had shared their personal experience of this horror with me, and I told her that at some points in her story I found myself feeling quite tearful too. My embodied response to the experiences, imagery, and emotions in the women's stories unfolded as deepened understanding and knowledge, it was present in the physical act of writing, expressed in the poetic texts, and contributed to my ongoing reflective practice as recorded in the research diary, and present in discussions with my supervisors (Tobin & Tisdall, 2015).

Maintaining confidentiality and data security

Participants were reassured that their confidentiality and privacy would be protected with the use of pseudonyms for themselves and the Neighbourhood Houses. In most instances, participants chose their own pseudonyms. Interviews were recorded, with participants' permission, using a digital voice recording device, and downloaded as MP4 files onto a password protected desktop computer for transcribing. The portable digital recording device was password protected in case of loss, and once the recorded interviews were downloaded they were deleted from the recording device. The actual

name of participants was documented on the *Consent Form*, and this was not linked in any way to their pseudonym. Field texts, recordings and transcriptions were de-identified and any identifying information about research participants such as signed *Consent Forms*, were stored in a locked cabinet. Other identifying information was stored on the password protected hard drive of the researcher's personal computer. The Victoria University Research Storage provides secure long-term storage of data. Within this thesis all references to participants and verbatim quotes have been de-identified (Liamputtong, 2012), and this practice will be followed in conference presentations and journal articles. A further protection was offered for managers by not linking any of the diversity characteristics presented in Chapter Six with their pseudonyms.

Limitations of the research design

The limitations of the research design are due to it being a small study conducted with twenty-eight women and 11 Neighbourhood Houses in total. Given that there are more than 400 Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria and over 190,000 weekly participants (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017a) the study cannot claim to be representative of women's experiences in Neighbourhood Houses. Nor can it make claims to be representative or to cover every possible aspect of Neighbourhood Houses' contribution to women's experiences of empowerment. This would most likely be beyond the scope of even a much larger study, although a larger study would have greater capacity to present a wider cross section of Neighbourhood Houses, participants and managers.

The age-range of the women participants, while extensive, includes only four women under 39, due to difficulties of availability. The diversity of the managers, in terms of

age and language/ethnicity is limited as most are over 55, and there is no manager who is bilingual.

The gendered focus of this research may be viewed as a limitation, considering that men attend Neighbourhood Houses too. The reasons for the focus on women was explained in Chapter One. To briefly encapsulate, women are the majority of participants, as documented in reports and evident anecdotally, women's concerns and needs were the main drivers in the establishment of Neighbourhood Houses in the 1970s, and women played, and continue to play, a pivotal role in leadership within individual Neighbourhood Houses and across the Neighbourhood House sector in Victoria.

Summary

This chapter has presented the overall qualitative approach to this research exploring women's experiences of empowerment through their participation in Neighbourhood Houses. It has outlined the feminist epistemology underpinning the intention of this research, to explore and foreground women's experiences in relation to their participation in Neighbourhood Houses as a source of knowledge. This epistemological approach recognises the diversity of women's lived experience and the fluidity of women's subjectivity.

Participants for the research were selected purposively by making approaches through Neighbourhood House networks and managers of Neighbourhood Houses. The approach to interviewing, data gathering and analysis was informed by narrative research practices, which was considered to establish the trustworthiness of the research. It was highly relevant for the aims of the research as it provided depth and richness in the data, and gave the research participants the opportunity to express and

reflect upon their experiences in the way they wished. Analysis of the data using themes drawn from the data, and poetic interpretation, respected the women's stories and allowed their voices to permeate and give richness to the research.

The findings of the research are presented in the following two chapters, arranged thematically and illustrated with poetic interpretations of aspects of the women's stories. Chapter Five presents the findings in relation to the research participants who were Neighbourhood House participants (the women participants). Chapter Six presents the findings in relation to the Neighbourhood House managers (the managers). The decision to present the findings for the women participants and managers separately was made because different themes and sub-themes pertain to each group.

Chapter Five: The women participants – engagement and participation

This chapter reports on the experiences of the 15 women participants who were at time of interview, or had recently been, engaged with a Neighbourhood House. The chapter begins with a description of the women using the diversity characteristics which informed the purposive recruitment strategy for this research. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the findings of the thematic narrative analysis and poetic interpretation that was undertaken as the data analysis in this research. The women's experiences had far-reaching and significant impacts on their lives, and were often unanticipated. The women's diverse experiences of empowerment explored in this research followed from their initial engagement with the Neighbourhood House.

The women participants

A profile of participants in Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria shows substantial diversity in age, language and cultural background, and education, as well as significant numbers of people living with a disability (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017b). Similar diversity was present in this study, as illustrated in Tables 5.1 and 5.2. Table 5.1 shows the ages, birthplace, language background for each woman participant, the number of years they have been associated with the Neighbourhood House, and the location of the House. Table 5.2 shows the breadth of the women's previous occupations and current employment status, including volunteering.

There was a wide range in the ages of the women, from early twenties to late seventies. Six of the women were born overseas, and four of these women spoke English as a second or third language. The number of years the women had been

associated with the Neighbourhood House ranged from 1 to 20 years, illustrating the longevity of their involvement and the close and important connections many women made with the Neighbourhood Houses.

Table 5.1: Diversity profile of the women participants

Women	Age	Born	English as a second/third language	Years at NH	Location of house
Reya	20 - 29	Overseas	yes	2	Metropolitan
Robyn	30 - 39	Australia		3	Metropolitan
Roxie	30 - 39	Australia		1	Rural
Leonie	30 - 39	Australia		9	Rural
Justine	40 - 49	Australia		4	Rural
Linda	40 - 49	Australia		4	Rural
Jenny	40 - 49	Overseas	yes	6	Metropolitan
Helen	50 - 59	Australia		2	Rural
Kate	50 - 59	Overseas	yes	6	Metropolitan
Chanda	60 - 69	Overseas	yes	4	Metropolitan
Grace	60 - 69	Australia		4	Rural
Dora	60 - 69	Australia		3	Rural
Jeanette	70 - 79	Australia		7	Metropolitan
Tina	70 - 79	Overseas		2	Rural
Margaret	70 - 79	Overseas		20	Rural

Table 5.2: Current and previous occupations of the women participants

Current employment status	Previous occupations
Childcare educator at Neighbourhood House	Teacher
Midwife	Sales
Handicraft Business owner	Nursing
Community Development worker	Research student
Hairdressing	Catering
Cleaner at Neighbourhood House	Childcare educator
Home Duties	Volunteering
Sessional tutor at Neighbourhood House	Administration
Canteen duties at Neighbourhood House	Nursery worker
Retiree	
Childcare educator	
Volunteer tutor at Neighbourhood House	
Volunteer elsewhere	
Administration at Neighbourhood House	
Not Stated	Not Stated

In order to protect the women's anonymity, table 5.2 does not correlate previous and current employment status with any pseudonyms. Employment status was not one of the diversity characteristics used to purposively select women for this study. However, this table illustrates an important feature of Neighbourhood Houses, the fluidity of roles. Several women who had begun at the Neighbourhood House as participants, were subsequently offered paid employment. Four were tutors, two were in administrative positions, others held positions as cook, childcare educator, and cleaner. Several women were involved with the Neighbourhood House in multiple ways: one woman was a cleaner, a tutor, and a program participant: another was a program participant, volunteer co-ordinator, and a volunteer program facilitator. Ten women were regular or occasional volunteers at the Neighbourhood House, as committee members, in administration, community projects, and program facilitation or support. Volunteering at the Neighbourhood House was the pathway into paid work at the Neighbourhood House for three women. For other women volunteering was a pathway to employment elsewhere.

The women learned many transferable skills in the course of their volunteering and participation at the Neighbourhood House. Some women entered new occupations as a direct result of this. For example, a young woman, who as a volunteer had been supporting and training volunteers, qualified as a community development worker and commenced employment in this field. Two women who came to the Neighbourhood House after retiring entered new occupations by taking up paid work at the Neighbourhood House. An offer of paid work at the Neighbourhood House gave one of the women her first employment opportunity in Australia. There were four women who were not in any paid employment. Some women did not disclose information about their employment status.

Marital and domestic living arrangements were not relevant to the selection of women for this study, however, during interview most women referred to their previous or current status. Some women had experienced very difficult family and personal relationships.

The next sections of this chapter present the findings of the research using themes identified in the women's stories. Six key themes and numerous sub-themes were identified. The key themes are: Engaging with the Neighbourhood House, Sense of belonging, Connection and relationship, Learning together, Leadership, advocacy, and activism, and Standing in their power.

Engaging with the Neighbourhood House: “the best thing that ever happened to me”

This section introduces the 15 women who were interviewed for this study and presents the women's reasons for their initial engagement with the Neighbourhood House. Identifying the women's circumstances and reasons for engaging is an important starting point. It is easy to assume that the principal reason for women attending Neighbourhood Houses is to enrol in a course or program because the community development and support activities of Neighbourhood Houses are typically realised within group-based programs and activities. The educational, recreational, peer support, and social programs are often the most visible aspect of what Neighbourhood Houses do. The women's stories reveal complexity in their reasons for engaging, and they reveal the interconnectedness of the community development and learning activities of the Neighbourhood Houses.

The women's reasons for engaging were multilayered and intertwined, however, they are presented thematically in order to highlight important aspects of their lived

experience, motivations and interests. Equally, the six key themes, which are presented separately, are interconnected, and were interwoven throughout the women's stories.

The ways in which the women engaged with the Neighbourhood Houses were diverse and intimately connected with their own particular lived realities and subjective experiences. Neighbourhood Houses became a destination for some of the women in their attempts to alleviate their experiences of loneliness and isolation. Some women referred to social needs such as wanting the company of others, seeking personal support, or desiring involvement and connection with the community. Others identified learning needs and interests as the reason for participating in specific programs offered by the Neighbourhood Houses. Alternatively, seeking employment or taking up volunteering was the motivation for other women. Several women did not explicitly refer to feeling isolated or lonely, although some had spent substantial time away from the workforce due to parenting and caring responsibilities. What became clear in their stories was that there were often multiple and interconnected reasons for engaging with the Neighbourhood Houses.

Experiencing isolation: *"I was completely isolated"*

Social isolation was a key issue in the lived experience of many of the women in this research, and was a significant contributor to the women's engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses, as *Tina's* story illustrates. Some of the multiple and interconnected contributing factors for the women's social isolation: relocation, including being newly arrived in Australia, or moving from the city to the country; a lack of proficiency in English; low self-esteem and other personal issues; personal trauma

including domestic violence and bullying; new motherhood; living alone; and unemployment.

Isolation and loneliness were linked with relocation by several women, however, most of the women did not consider that their move was the sole contributing reason. Instead, multiple circumstances exacerbated their situations. Relocation was highly disruptive, resulting in separation from family and friends, from social networks, and in loss of employment. The women described their feelings of isolation and disconnection from their new communities in different ways. *Margaret* lived alone. She illustrated her difficulty in feeling part of a country-town community she had moved to 30 years earlier when she said, *“I’ve been here 30 years and I’m still not part of the town”*, despite having been involved in establishing several community-initiated programs in the town. For the women who came to Australia as refugees and migrants, experiencing isolation and loneliness was associated with the lack of a shared language, cultural and familial upheaval, and difficulty in accessing employment. *Reya’s* isolation from the mainstream community after her move from a war-torn country, was compounded by her lack of English language skills which undermined her confidence to establish new social connections. She had previously been a teacher in her own country, but in Australia she had difficulty finding this work because her English *“was not up to the level where I should be able to communicate with people”*. She joined a local women’s group who were from her home country:

I didn’t have the confidence to talk to people other than my community ... I haven’t been here for a very long time, and I haven’t had a lot of contacts outside as well, so I have been really limited to my own world. (Reya)

Reya’s engagement with the Neighbourhood House occurred serendipitously. It resulted from the women’s group she attended being invited to hold their meetings at

the Neighbourhood House in order for them to have access to more material resources to support their activities.

Lacking confidence after significant upheavals and other trauma was a common thread in the women's stories. *Leonie* made a deliberate decision to come to the Neighbourhood House when she found herself at home with a young child in a community where she did not know anyone. She described how being a new mother, a research student, and recently unemployed following a move from the city to a rural town led to her feeling overwhelmed, isolated and lonely:

I came like a lot of people who move ... looking to, just make some connections. I just felt very isolated you know I'd come from quite an inner city kind of background and was used to working and suddenly wasn't and I'd been doing a research degree ... in the end not long after we moved up I gave that up because I just found the isolation too overwhelming, trying to be a research student and a mum with a young baby and all the rest of it. (Leonie)

The isolation experienced by *Linda* and *Roxie* was associated with enforced relocation due to difficult and traumatic personal situations. *Linda* initially came to the Neighbourhood House for other reasons. While there, her relationship became violent and, having escaped from this relationship, she relied on the social support she found at the Neighbourhood House. The move had resulted in a significant loss of friendships: *"I don't have many contacts from where I used to live anymore, there's one person I keep in contact in with"*. *Roxie* experienced both physical and emotional isolation after moving to a remote area of Victoria to find respite for her daughter from schoolyard bullying:

Where I lived was very isolated ... I moved ... 18 kilometres away from Riverside Neighbourhood House ... But moved up there, bit of a tree-change, sea-change had a few issues with my daughter suffering terrible anxiety ... I was pretty isolated. (Roxie)

Overcoming isolation: “*you have to be involved*”

The women’s varied circumstances and experiences resulting in social isolation were mirrored in the variety of reasons they offered for taking steps to address their isolation.

Several women recognised the importance of being involved in the local community, and Neighbourhood Houses were seen as potentially offering these opportunities.

Helen and *Leonie* both wanted to make social and meaningful connections with their new communities, regarding this as essential for overcoming their isolation. When *Helen* moved to a small rural town she was determined to make connections with her new community as she fully understood the importance of community involvement to alleviate isolation. She knew this would require her to actively seek social connections rather than sitting back and waiting. Her craft group was not based at the Neighbourhood House, however, the outreach visit by the manager of the Neighbourhood House bringing a welcome pack and information about the town was the catalyst for her deepening social connection to the community:

The Neighbourhood House, they give you like a welcome bag ... with bits and pieces in it. And [manager]... came to our house and made herself known. It sort of just started there, I became friendly with her, and you know I’d drop-in and “Hi” ... that’s how it came about, she just made herself be known, which she does with everyone that comes to town. (Helen)

Leonie came to the Neighbourhood House seeking to make connections with other mothers of young babies, having decided that there would be options available to new mothers. She had tried several other local activities:

I did the rounds. I went to the playgroup and then I came here and went to the library and toy library and joined, you know started to get involved in a few different things. At the time that I first came to the Neighbourhood House, they were running the courses as usual but there weren’t that many groups here and so the only group that I could really join was a [mother’s and babies’ program] so I did that [laughing]. (Leonie)

Leonie laughed as she recalled this experience, because her attempt to make new social connections was not as straightforward and successful as she had hoped. Instead of finding women with whom she could share her difficulties and struggles as a new mother, and allay her sense of displacement, she found a group of women who were comfortably established in their rural environment:

I did it once and I was kind of like just scarred cos [the other women] doing it ... were so different to me, they were born and bred in the country ... I really struggled I really struggled. I just felt very isolated you know. (Leonie)

She did not continue in this group and subsequently found another course at the Neighbourhood House, joining a group of women with whom she shared a common interest in learning about sustainable gardening.

The women's accounts revealed their different reasons for approaching the Neighbourhood House, and showed some of the many possible ways of becoming involved. When Grace and Kate first came to the Neighbourhood House they were not aware of what they would find. Grace recounted that at the time she came to the House she had little knowledge of the services and programs being offered but she loved the connection with the community and became a member:

I really enjoyed that sense of community when I came in here and people were always saying, "Oh how are you and what are you doing?", and we talked about all sorts of other issues relating to community and I love that sort of thing. (Grace)

Personal support: "it saved my life pretty much from isolation"

Personal support was frequently mentioned by the women as an important aspect of their continuing relationship with the Neighbourhood House. However, the need for personal support was rarely acknowledged as a key motivating factor for their initial

contact with the Neighbourhood House. Instead the women used phrases such as, “*I was really struggling*”, “*I felt isolated*”, or “*I was lonely*”, to describe their emotions.

Roxie’s story poignantly illustrates the importance of women being able to access personal support at a Neighbourhood House. *Roxie* was the only woman to identify her need for personal support as the primary motivation for attending the Neighbourhood House. She had relocated from a small rural town to a remote area of the State in the hope that the beautiful natural surrounds would provide a safe place for herself and her child to recover from episodes of schoolyard bullying, which had led to her child self-harming. *Roxie* came to the Neighbourhood House seeking human company and someone to talk to when she was feeling anxious and depressed. Living in geographical isolation and without any close neighbours meant that going to the Neighbourhood House became an important part of *Roxie*’s week because she knew she would find someone to talk to:

Where I lived was very isolated, and I would drive into Riverside nearly every day ... and it really saved me a lot of loneliness. I was pretty isolated ... so it was really nice to go there and meet with other women and other people that came through.

You had the support so if you were feeling depressed, or you had anxiety, as draining as it can be for people to listen to someone who’s really down in the dumps for weeks on end, they didn’t give up on me. (Roxie)

Being around other people, and being listened to, helped her to feel less anxious and depressed, and alleviated her feeling of being alone in coping with her own and her daughter’s trauma.

While there were other women who recognised their isolation and loneliness they more often referred to social and learning needs as drivers of their first contact with Houses. The reasons they proffered for engaging with the Neighbourhood House, included

wanting to make connections in the community with people experiencing similar life circumstances, or to learn new skills as the following women's stories illustrate.

Learning new skills: *"I knew I had to learn how to use this computer"*

The desire to learn new skills, to become more knowledgeable and proficient in a particular area or practice, or to pursue a new interest, motivated *Tina*, *Chanda*, and *Grace*. Their stories revealed the very different circumstances in which they enacted this desire. *Tina* enrolled in a course to learn how to use the computer she had bought in order to keep in touch with the friends she had left behind when she moved to a small country town several years earlier. Now in her late seventies, she moved in order to be closer to her adult children, following a period of illness after her husband died. *Tina* found it difficult to meet new people and feel confident in new situations. A lifetime of shyness, and a self-perception of not being as smart as other people, *"I've never thought I was intelligent or anything like that, and it used to hold me back a lot"*, and persistent feelings of unworthiness, had resulted in her rarely leaving home: *"I'd been down here three years before I moved out of the house ... I didn't know anybody, not even my neighbours"*. Eventually her loneliness and need for social contact provided the impetus to go to the Neighbourhood House to learn how to use her computer:

I bought a computer so I could keep in touch with my friends back in Melbourne. I'd no idea how to use it, so I used to pass this place when I was wandering around just having a look at the shops and I thought, "Mmm, computer classes", so I plucked up courage to come through that door. Best thing I ever did.

I knew I had to learn how to use this computer, so that was the turning point, I'd bought the computer, and it was sat there doing nothing. And I'd seen these advertised you know the fliers that come round and then [in the local paper] I thought I should do that. (Tina)

Chanda overcame significant barriers to bring learning into her life, as did *Tina*.

Chanda could speak two Asian languages when she arrived in Australia as a refugee in the early 1990s, and then learned English so that she could obtain her licence and find employment. *Chanda* had always been a keen learner, however, as the eldest daughter in a family of five children it was her duty to “*help my mum to look after my brother and sister and do the housework*”. Having grown up in a cultural environment where the eldest daughter was expected to help with home and family duties she did not have many opportunities to pursue her desire to learn. She came to the Neighbourhood House to continue with her English language studies after spending time on and off over a period of years caring for a parent:

I just want to learn English. When I was a child I just like to learn, and I study here ... I thought the best way I should go to attend English class so I can speak English [laughing] improve my skills [still laughing]. I can write I can read I can speak, I understand. (Chanda)

Grace first came to the Neighbourhood House to enrol in a course conducted by her favourite yoga teacher. Doing yoga helped her to realise that she was physically capable of doing more than she had previously thought, and as she became physically stronger her confidence to deal with the issues associated with growing older, such as feeling that “*the body’s declining*” increased. Her story, however, focused on a creative writing course she enrolled in some 10 years later after retiring, and which she has continued to attend ever since:

Then four years ago I joined the writing group and, or is this the 5th year? I started that and because I’d always wanted to do writing and although I’m not a writer my background’s in food ... I’ve always enjoyed, I enjoyed reading so I enjoy writing. (Grace)

Volunteering: “I just like to be busy”

Five women began their association with the Neighbourhood House as volunteers, and several others became volunteers at a later stage. The reasons offered for taking up volunteering included the desire to help others, to get out of the house, to develop skills and prepare for employment; and being invited to serve on the committee of management. One volunteer came in order to fulfil a Centrelink¹⁰ requirement.

The broad range of volunteering undertaken by the women illustrates the important contributions volunteers make in their local communities by taking up opportunities available at the Neighbourhood House. Volunteering took various forms including serving on committees of management, providing on-going program support for regular Neighbourhood House programs and activities, cleaning and gardening, administrative duties encompassing reception or clerical work, and planning special events. The women were able to choose the level of volunteer contribution they wanted to make and the areas where they felt most comfortable volunteering.

Volunteering provided a means for getting out of the house, not being stuck at home, which was a strong motivation for both *Jenny* and *Jeanette* to volunteer. *Jenny* was not currently in paid employment and was bored spending too much time at home after a volunteering position at another organisation had recently ceased. An opportunity arose at the Neighbourhood House:

I just like to be busy ... I hate sitting home [laughing], it's just not me ... I received a little voucher, the newsletter, in the letterbox, and they were asking for people to be involved here in the house. So I rang up the co-ordinator and she said,

¹⁰ In Australia, there is a requirement to undertake a certain number of hours voluntary work or study per week when in receipt of benefits.

"Come for an interview", so I came and she interviewed me ... and then she put me on board. (Jenny)

Jenny has always liked to be *"involved in something"* and is happy to volunteer as much as she can at the Neighbourhood House, shopping, washing, helping with the community lunches, fundraising barbeques and food programs, and whatever else is needed.

Likewise, Jeanette was keen to get out of the house, laughingly describing herself as the *"sort of person that would rather go out and do something than do something at home"*. She volunteered at the Neighbourhood House when she found herself with time on her hands after spending seven years as her mother's carer. A friend had mentioned the Neighbourhood House, and when she went along to investigate she discovered that it was very near to where she lived. The opportunity to get back into things was welcomed:

I enjoy what I do as a volunteer I don't look for payment at all. I'm at that age where you do like to do these things ... I'm turning 70 this year, I feel it's given me something to have for the rest of my life so to speak and it's something I've found fairly late in my life. (Jeanette)

Jeanette anticipated that she would continue to volunteer for the rest of her life. When she began at the Neighbourhood House most positions were voluntary, and she created a position for herself as the gardener and then the cleaner. When organisational changes were mooted she realised that her prior experience on sports club committees could be helpful in establishing the new committee:

I was able to come here as a member and I just gradually worked myself in ... we didn't have a co-ordinator at that stage we were all mainly volunteers ... I also started finding out that we were going to be left to our own devices ... our Neighbourhood House was going to have a committee of management etcetera (Jeanette)

The opportunity to become more deeply involved was attractive to *Jeanette* and she had no hesitation in accepting an invitation to become a committee of management member. *Justine* was invited to join the committee of management by a friend, and although she had previous experience on other committees, she hesitated because she was busy with work and parenting. Her friend's persistence was persuasive and once there she quickly took on responsibilities.

I said on the third time that she asked me 'Ok it sounds interesting why don't I come to one meeting and have a look?' And after the first meeting ended up being in charge of organising the volunteer Christmas party ... so you get thrown in straight away. (Justine)

Linda began her volunteering after being at the Neighbourhood House to fulfil Centrelink requirements. When her circumstances changed she continued as a volunteer to complete an important task organising an event:

I did spend a bit of extra time here because at the time that I'd finished my hours, I had been organising a campaign trying to show a positive light for community houses, and Neighbourhood Houses and what they do in the community. I had organised for all of the local MPs to come and be part of it and we organised morning tea and we had councillors and other guests and things like that here so we could get a petition signed for more funding for Neighbourhood Houses. (Linda)

During this time *Linda* escaped from a relationship which had become violent and abusive, and she was isolated and in need of personal support after moving away from where she had been living. Being connected with the Neighbourhood House as a volunteer enabled her to access important personal support at a critical time in her life:

When I came here I got a lot of support, which was, it was really needed ... there were times during that period of time where life was really quite tough ... the co-ordinator has constantly supported me all the way through. (Linda)

Seeking/preparing for employment: “having gone round putting my name down for jobs”

The Neighbourhood Houses offered volunteering and employment opportunities for the women. Some women came as volunteers because they were preparing for employment or to return to the workforce. Some women undertook volunteering to update their skills for employment. *Kate* came to the Neighbourhood House because she had been out of the workforce for 15 years while parenting, and had lost confidence in herself and her employability. Being aware of the importance of rebuilding and updating her skills and her confidence after such a long time, she asked Centrelink to find a voluntary position for her. They suggested the Neighbourhood House:

The interest in volunteering was to get me back, to get my skills up to scratch to get me back into the workforce, because I'd been out of the workforce for a while with having my children, so that was the purpose of volunteering, and wanting to contribute to the community. (Kate)

Dora came to the Neighbourhood House seeking work when she was in the process of moving permanently to a small town. She was keen to continue teaching, and had been seeking opportunities for employment in larger surrounding towns. One afternoon she just “*had a feeling*” to call in to the Neighbourhood House. *Dora* was especially taken with the welcome she was given:

The young lady that met me [the manager] was so welcoming and so interested and what I really really liked she didn't judge me for being old. She liked me because I could teach a language. That was the main thing that she was interested in ... a couple of days later I got a 'please send your CV', which I did, and it was so simple. (Dora)

She accepted the offer of tutoring work, subsequently finding that her numerous skills in languages, art and sewing were soon in demand for teaching other classes. Tutoring in the diverse adult environment of the Neighbourhood House was a delightful and enriching experience for *Dora*.

Robyn came to the Neighbourhood House seeking tutoring work in Multimedia, an area she had studied when she left secondary school. *Robyn* had experienced many years of domestic violence and abuse, and separate concurrent episodes of workplace bullying, which had undermined her self-esteem and left her feeling anxious. After fleeing a violent situation she wanted to do something “*extraordinary*” with her life, and decided to try and establish herself in business running Multimedia workshops. She contacted the manager of the Neighbourhood House to ask if she would be interested in the workshops:

As soon as I met [Manager] she was just like, you know, very nurturing and she believed in me instantly. She said “You’re perfect for it”, and I said, ‘Am I?’ ‘Ok’.
(*Robyn*)

Sense of belonging: “I feel really integrated in the community now”.

The previous section outlined the multiple and varied reasons motivating the women to engage with the Neighbourhood Houses. The women discovered that the Neighbourhood House environment was safe and comfortable, enabling them to develop new, respectful and mutually supportive friendships, to pursue their interests and gain new skills, and to strengthen their sense of self and their abilities. The characteristics of Neighbourhood Houses identified by the women – that they are friendly and welcoming places, inclusive and non-judgemental, and diverse – provided an important foundation for the women’s experiences and were highly influential for the women developing a sense of belonging to their communities. These characteristics

and practices enabled the women to connect with their communities in deeply meaningful and powerful ways. They are discussed separately to emphasise and highlight their importance although they were mutually influencing and generally experienced as interrelated.

A welcoming and supportive place: *“I like being there, it’s a friendly place”*

The welcoming and friendly environment of the Neighbourhood Houses was strongly emphasised and enthusiastically expressed by all the women. The women regarded the Neighbourhood House as a safe place to learn and socialise, a place of happiness and enjoyment, and a desirable alternative to spending time alone at home. For *Chanda* the friendly environment was the place where she felt safe while learning English, *Tina* described it as *“a wonderful place to be in”*, because she loved the people she met there, and *Reya*, who had recently arrived from a middle-eastern country, called it *“just like a second home”* because she was not treated as different. In the poetic interpretation below, *Jenny* enthusiastically recalls the *“wonderful atmosphere”* and *“wonderful people”* at the Neighbourhood House which gave her a strong sense of family and security.

A wonderful place

It’s pretty wonderful really,
wonderful people,
wonderful atmosphere,
wonderful,
a wonderful place to be.
I love coming here
Coming here
I feel really good.

Friendly

(like I said)

All the people here,
They feel like family, like a second home.
That's how I feel
It's just like a second home.

(poetic interpretation from *Jenny's* transcript, emphases my own)

The women recognised the central role and contribution of the staff in creating the friendly and welcoming environment. Any initial hesitations, doubts or fears the women may have harboured about entering the Houses, was dispelled by the warmth of the welcome they received. When *Tina* came to enrol in a computer class she was very hesitant about entering the Neighbourhood House. When she did finally summon the courage to “*walk through that door*”, the people, particularly the staff, were so nice to her that she immediately felt comfortable, “*whoever employs them has got good taste*” she remarked. *Chanda* enjoyed studying and volunteering at the House because all the staff were friendly and supportive.

Something as simple and everyday as being offered a cup of tea helped the women feel welcome. Volunteering at reception, *Jeanette* recognised the importance of warmly welcoming people, offering a cup of tea, and making the time to sit down and talk, especially when people were “*feeling a bit down*”. When *Roxie* dropped-in to the Neighbourhood House it was the manager who offered her a cuppa, gave her information about what was happening in the community, and supported her through tough times.

Inclusive and non-judgemental: “*no-one gets judged here*”

The women's stories touched upon the socially inclusive and non-judgemental nature of the Neighbourhood House, and how important it was to be and feel included, and not

to be judged for being different. This clearly impacted on their sense of self, their ability and willingness to participate and be involved, and how they saw the Neighbourhood House in relation to others. The staff were acknowledged for their pivotal role in shaping these experiences, with *Dora* mentioning that in her first contact with the manager she was treated with respect although she was an older woman. This was in stark contrast to her experience in the teaching position she was in at that time where she was treated disrespectfully by some of her students and other teachers because she was an older woman. Two women from a non-English speaking background attributed their sense of belonging to the inclusive attitudes of the staff. *Reya*, who has a middle-eastern background, had experienced racism elsewhere, but at the Neighbourhood House she experienced friendliness:

The friendly environment, the friendly staff that we have, because I have experienced a lot of racism, a lot of you know all those stuff, in every other place that I have been to. Well when I, when I came here they don't see me as a different person. I feel as if I'm at home. Because of the staff, the environment, the friendly environment that they have. (Reya)

Linda, *Roxie*, and *Reya*, had very different reasons for appreciating the inclusive and non-judgemental environment of the Neighbourhood House. *Linda* repeatedly commented how important it was for her not to feel judged, to be accepted for herself, to be “a little bit individual”, as she laughingly referred to her brightly coloured hair and clothes. It was important to be able to express herself as an individual and not be isolated or excluded, or treated as different, because of it:

For me it's the contact with other people in the sense of, you know, no-one gets judged here, we all talk to each other and feel free to talk about things that are happening and yeh, no-one's judged. It was a place where I could come and feel like I fitted in. I didn't have to prove who I was and what I was capable of doing I could just come and do what I needed to do. Help out where I could. And it got me talking to other people and things like that, that didn't judge who I was, so it was good. (Linda)

Feeling included and belonging were significant and recurring threads woven throughout *Reya's* and *Roxie's* stories. Both women were new arrivals in their communities, *Reya* in a new country and *Roxie* in a small rural community. Being invited to participate in and to attend community events contributed to both women's sense of belonging and inclusion. *Reya* appreciated the Neighbourhood House for issuing repeated invitations to gatherings, even though they understood that it was difficult for her to attend. Being supported by someone who would listen when she had problems contributed to her sense of belonging:

The most important thing is that I can share my problems with them and they listen to me. I can talk to them, they've got like gatherings together. I haven't been able to attend a lot of gatherings together because I've been quite busy for this year. But I feel that welcoming, welcoming behaviour that they have. (Reya)

Roxie, who had visited the area in the past, referred several times to how she felt included in the activities of the Neighbourhood House, describing it as “a real hub for being included in such a small community”. The manager invited her along to programs and special events, and to participate in making decisions about how to spend grant monies received by the House:

The inclusion. Being included in absolutely everything. “Rox, do you wanna do this? Rox, do you want to come with us to such and such, there's a meeting down there about the fires?” or “There's a women's group and we're going to go to [name of town]”. If you couldn't afford things, the Neighbourhood House had funding to help out every now and then for the ones that were finding it hard financially, to be able to include themselves in the things that were offered to them. (Roxie)

Roxie appreciated that her financial position did not result in her being excluded from participating in activities. Just as being included in organised activities was important for her, having a place to go where she felt comfortable and able to contribute something back to the community was too:

I'd often go in there and I had nothing to do, I just needed some company and I would vacuum the Neighbourhood House and I would dust and I would get the cobwebs down, or do whatever. Make it like an extension of your own home.
(Roxie)

There are times in the life of a community when being included becomes critically important, as *Roxie* observed when she referred to the bush-fire emergency the community had experienced a couple of years earlier. The Neighbourhood House became the focal point for disseminating up-to-date information and ensuring that community members knew the latest developments. The House facilitated community meetings where *Roxie* was reassured by hearing the views of long-term community members whose knowledge she trusted:

For me it was a very important part of my life ... I think having that Neighbourhood House there, during the bushfires, it brought everybody closer together because we had fire meetings so that we were all informed, where the fire was, how fast it was travelling, what was the back-up, what support did we have with trucks, and people and volunteers so we were all kept up to date.
(Roxie)

Other women echoed *Roxie*'s observations of the importance of inclusive practices for local community members. *Helen* observed that staff members made themselves available to sit and have a chat, and help people who were experiencing problems. *Grace* was deeply appreciative of the Neighbourhood House for making "*time for people [with] specialist needs*", and for advocating to continue programs based on their social benefit and positive impact on people's lives, rather than focusing purely on the basis of numbers attending.

Diversity: "we all have different stories"

The women who participated in this research were a diverse group of women, in age, language and cultural background, employment and educational history, life

experiences and circumstances. They participated in a wide range of activities including volunteering, as committee members, administrative workers, and program support workers, and participation in programs and activities, including one-off and special events, arts and crafts based programs, and formal adult learning.

The women considered that the diversity of people attending, and the wide range of programs and activities offered, were important aspects of the inclusive and welcoming environment of Neighbourhood Houses. Diversity was evident within each Neighbourhood House, with *Leonie* observing that Houses respond to their communities and *“each community is different”*. The women found this heterogeneity *“opened their eyes”* to others’ circumstances and realities, their different life experiences and interests, points of view, and life stages. Hearing different people’s stories helped *Justine* to realise that we often do not really know *“what is happening for other people”*. At the same time, listening to different people’s stories contributed to the richness of the women’s experiences at the Neighbourhood House. *“We all have life experience and we all have different stories and we all walk a different path”*, commented *Linda*. *Linda* had experienced times in her life when she felt like an outcast for expressing her individuality. She had an intimate appreciation of how the inclusive and diverse Neighbourhood House environment enabled people to feel that being different did not mean they did not belong:

Some people go through stages in their life where they don’t feel, like they fit in and all of that. And I’m sort of starting to attract people that see me as normal. Not different. Someone had said to me about tattoos and how if you’re a woman and you get a tattoo you know you’re an outcast. And I just sort of went I don’t care I’m gonna get one anyway. (Linda)

Dora was inspired by meeting *“different people who were doing great things with sustainable gardening”*, and suggested that the varied and interesting courses were a

drawcard. *Leonie*, too, was delighted to have the opportunity to form strong bonds and lasting friendships with women of “*all different ages and at different stages in life, and living in different places*” who were attending the same sustainable gardening program. This experience disrupted her earlier expectations that in order to develop lasting bonds and friendships she would need to find women whose life experiences and current life situation mirrored her own.

Dora admitted that the diversity of participants in the class she was about to teach was initially confronting for her. She was an experienced teacher but when first coming into the class she wondered whether she could teach such a diverse group:

I love teaching but it was more than teaching like the first class I had was the sewing and I thought, ‘Gee whiz what a disparate group of people. I don’t think this is gonna work’. But we ended up being very close in the end. (Dora)

The women’s awareness and understanding of each other and their communities was enhanced by the diversity they experienced and witnessed. *Leonie* observed that her volunteer time on the front desk revealed “*the sheer variety of people who access the Neighbourhood House for different reasons*”. This experience opened her awareness of the richness, and the range of needs, within the local community and it was the catalyst for her decision to change career and “*go into some form of community development*”. *Jeanette* understood how important the Neighbourhood House was to the local community. She saw that people coming to the Neighbourhood House were dealing with a range of issues, such as struggling to afford the cost of rental housing, experiencing mental health or substance-abuse issues in a community widely recognised for its high rates of unemployment and disadvantage. The participation of people across all ages, and from different cultures, demonstrated to *Kate* that learning and acquiring knowledge, and being with others, is important to people regardless of age:

I saw it as interesting because the centre as a package had all these different courses that they were offering ... more mature people coming to do dancing, and then we had other people learning English and we had Childcare, so it was offering a range of things and courses to the whole community, it wasn't just one lot of people. It was from children to the elderly which was really interesting.
(Kate)

Diversity was valued and appreciated at all levels of the Neighbourhood House by the women who participated in planning and decision-making. *Justine* explained that when she was chairperson of the committee of management, the diversity and variety of skills and views of members taught her the importance of respectful listening and paying attention to the quieter members, instead of allowing the most talkative to dominate discussions. *Grace* loved the “*diversity of people on the committee*” which included young people, Indigenous people, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds, who were all keen to make a contribution to the community. When *Dora* attended a planning day for the Neighbourhood House, along with committee members and other interested community members, she was excited and stimulated by the “*cross-section of people who have different roles within the community*” who presented “*many different ideas*” for discussion.

The inclusive environment and the diversity of people attending Neighbourhood Houses created an atmosphere in which the women learned from and about others, developed respect for others, and where they overcame fear and ignorance of difference. *Leonie* imaginatively encapsulated this diversity when she said that the Neighbourhood House was doing “*an amazing holding of space in the community for people*”.

Connection and relationship: “you can’t buy that”

Being connected

Being connected to community

That’s really important to me.

When you’re connected with community you’re actually able to help other people.

For me,

being connected to community

is being able to share problems

and being able to *talk*

and go for a *coffee* if that’s what you wanna do,

and being able to support your neighbour.

And then sometimes, you know, your neighbour can support you

or you’ve got friends

that can help you out and not feel alone and isolated.

Show other people coming into the community that they fit in

that this is not a place where you come and you get forgotten about.

That to me is really *really* important.

(poetic interpretation from *Linda’s* transcript)

This section has highlighted the women’s perceptions and experiences of the Neighbourhood House environment. They made it clear that they felt they belonged in the House and in their communities. This environment fostered the development of close connections and relationships with others; sometimes with other participants, and at times with staff members. The connections and relationships the women formed changed their lives. In speaking about the connections and friendships they made, the women painted a vivid picture of the people-focussed nature of Neighbourhood Houses, emphasising that the vitality and richness of their experiences was due to the meaningful interactions they shared with people.

Friendship and support: “*she’s there all the time for me*”

Most of the women mentioned significant relationships or friendships that have developed through their participation at the Neighbourhood House and spoke about how these have impacted on their lives. Friendships extended across generations and cultures. The support and sociality of friends helped *Dora* and her husband to settle into their new community, which *Dora* thought was particularly significant because it “*really was the start of my life here*”. Friendship was an important topic for her and she talked passionately and at length about friendship, returning to the subject several times during her interview. The poetic interpretation of a section of *Dora*’s transcript below, describes why she felt that the friendships she made were important: they affirmed who she was, she did not feel alone, and she learned that her feelings and reactions were understandable in the circumstances and had been similarly experienced by others.

Friends

Friendships are important,
friendships are **really** important,
you *need* friends.

I made friends in *both* the classes that I was teaching
and in the classes that I undertook.

Friendships are important	(<i>now why?</i>)
well you need friends,	(<i>don’t you?</i>)
I mean, people need people	(<i>don’t they?</i>)
you need someone to affirm	
that who you are is all right	
that the way you feel about certain situations	
is fine to feel like that	
cos they would feel like that too.	

(poetic interpretation from *Dora*’s transcript, emphases are my own)

Dora's personal life benefited from her supportive friendships because they provided a safe place for her to “vent”, “let off steam” and “debrief” when things became tough at home. There had been some tension with her partner when she felt excluded from decision-making about what to do with a recently purchased block of land. Debriefing with friends helped her to calm down and over time she was able to find her own way of contributing to establishing life in a new community. She was surprised that the developing friendships between her friends' husbands and her own opened up new possibilities in her personal life which had not previously arisen:

Some of the friends, we are supposed to go there tonight, that I made through the class, my husband and her husband get along pretty well too ... it's helped us move in as partners. Like we've had separate lives ... he just worked all the time and I did my work plus the kids ... it gives us something that we're going to do together. (Dora)

Jenny referred several times to having “made a lot of friends”, and she enjoys being able to talk and socialise with friends. She became close friends with another volunteer at the Neighbourhood House. Their friendship crossed generations and cultural backgrounds, and involved supporting and helping each other. *Jenny* drove her friend to appointments, and took her shopping when she was not able to drive herself, and her friend reciprocated by taking her out for coffee or a meal. They understood each other's circumstances; “*she's really good, she knows how it is, you know, so she often shouts me for drinks or whatever*”. They appreciated the mutual support they offered one another, although this entailed overcoming a degree of embarrassment about revealing their vulnerabilities and needs to each other.

Friendships offered support and encouragement, often in times of personal crisis, and while many remained within the House, some women became close personal friends and socialised outside the House. *Jeanette* explained how a strong working

relationship between herself as chairperson of the committee of management, and the manager of the Neighbourhood House, had developed into a close and valued personal friendship. She valued both aspects of their relationship, and in many ways regarded them as symbiotic, mentioning several times how much she valued both aspects of their relationship:

I don't play the heavy hand, and my role is in a supportive way ... [co-ordinator] takes the lead on that ... I'm the chairperson of our committee, but I'm not as far as the running of the House goes that's the co-ordinator, that is a defined role and I recognise it ... she and I work together in that way.

We do a lot a lot of things together, we go to the football together. We're good friends ... and I call that a highlight in my life because I've met her through this House, there's no doubt ... [she] means a lot to me, she does, and I know I think I mean a lot to her. She and I have a wonderful time together. (Jeanette)

Although many friendships extended beyond the Neighbourhood House, this was not the case for *Reya*. Nonetheless, this did not lessen the importance of relationships in which she felt supported, listened to, and able to share her problems:

I can talk to them ... The most important thing is that I can share my problems with them and they listen to me. I have shared a lot of problems with [staff member] with [manager], whatever I have they listen to me and they give me solution to that. So I think that's what makes me feel home. (Reya)

Friendships with staff members, including the managers, were referred to by several women. *Jenny* deeply appreciated the readiness of the manager to support her, and others as well, saying that she was “*always available*” if she needed anything. Reciprocating this support was important for *Jenny*. Being supported and treated as a valued member of the community gave her the confidence to take on volunteering responsibilities she would not have previously considered herself able to do. *Helen's* friendship with the manager brought her regularly to the Neighbourhood House. One day, “*just talking*” to the Neighbourhood House manager, and a committee member,

she happened to mention to the two women that it was her dream to open a craft shop. *Helen* did not know at the time that she shared this passion with the other woman, who had previously run her own craft business. Before she realised what was happening, her dream to have a shop of her own was about to come true, and she became a business woman:

All of a sudden she left the room, she come down to [owner of shop] who rents this whole building. She spoke to him, and within [laughing as she says this] within an hour we were opening up a craft shop. (Helen)

The poetic interpretation from *Linda's* story at the beginning of this section illustrates how connecting with others was important for her because it was reassuring and inclusive, an important means of mutual support, and helped her to overcome her isolation and loneliness. These connections encouraged *Linda* to become active in her local community. When she first came to the Neighbourhood House *Linda* was supported by the manager. After leaving her violent partner she went through “a tough period” in her life; and was “struggling a little bit both financially and mentally” and appreciated the support she received from the manager:

The co-ordinator has constantly supported me all the way through and there's been days where I've come and I've been so totally upset, it's like, “Come on we'll go get a cup of coffee and we'll get you through”. (Linda)

Apart from supporting her during this personal crisis, *Linda* was supported and encouraged in other ways by the manager. When asked to undertake a special administrative and organising task at the Neighbourhood House, at first she did not feel confident and was reluctant to do it. The manager reassured her saying that she would be there to help her. The ongoing support *Linda* has received over the past four years has created a strong connection with the manager:

And then to the point where when something really great happens in my life I call the co-ordinator to tell her, because I feel that there's a relationship there, so that's what sort of happened along the way there's been quite a lot of relationship building. (Linda)

Learning together: "I'm learning new skills from them"

With others, I can learn

I'm happy doing what I'm doing,
to play,
with other people who I know are like I am
we get on well together
we all understand each other,
I think
I'm not on my own
I can learn with other people.
Other people struggle,
I'm learning that too,
you don't have to be given the gift [of learning easily]
even though it's struggle
you can learn,
I've been surprised how much I've changed
since I joined this place.

(poetic interpretation from *Tina's* transcript, emphases my own)

Learning was a significant aspect of the women's participation and involvement in the Neighbourhood House. Learning was formal, informal and incidental. It occurred in classrooms and formal learning environments, and outside these environments. Knowledge sharing and learning together occurred within and beyond the classroom, and through everyday informal and incidental interactions in relationships with other program participants, and with staff members within the wider Neighbourhood House environment. In short, learning, whether it was formal, informal, or incidental was intertwined with all activities and aspects of the Neighbourhood Houses. *Leonie*

observed that the Neighbourhood House environment was a “*much more interactive*” place where “*you come to learn, or you come to share a skill or join a group*” compared with other organisations in the town.

The women participants and staff were actively engaged in co-creating a caring, dynamic, and dialogical learning, knowledge-sharing and social space. Learning occurred within the enduring friendships and relationships they developed, by observing others, and in the casual and fleeting interactions they had with peers and other participants. In some instances friendships and relationships established within the classroom continued by sharing knowledge and learning together beyond the walls of the classroom.

Learning was personal, practical, and political. It contributed to the women’s personal growth, increased awareness and understanding of self and others, extended practical skills and knowledge, and created heightened political and social awareness, particularly as this related to women and social justice. *Leonie* remarked on the personal growth and self-awareness she gained from the many interactions she had with Neighbourhood House participants while volunteering at the reception desk, and when she was coordinating a large number of volunteers, stating that this taught her about her own personal limitations and how to work better within her personal boundaries:

Learning a bit more about how to work well within my own personal boundaries which is good. Here you’re constantly interacting with people so you do have to learn how to draw your boundaries quite clearly. If you never interact with anybody that’s often something that you never really figure out. (Leonie)

Several women spoke of sharing knowledge and learning, inside and outside the classroom, with the friends they had made at the Neighbourhood House. *Dora* recalled

how the new friendships she formed with classmates around shared interests in food-growing and gardening aided her in taking on the challenge of restoring, re-vegetating and cultivating the 60-acre property on which she was now living. The encouragement of her newfound friendships gave her the confidence to embark on a “*massive big exponential learning curve*” as she had no prior knowledge of local growing and soil conditions, or in large-scale land reclamation:

I learnt, or met different people who were doing great things with sustainable gardening and that was quite inspirational in helping me to get confidence to do things on my own property. (Dora)

The knowledge sharing between herself and her friends involved and went beyond being given a book to read, suggesting a useful website, informing her about a program to join, or suggesting trees to plant for increasing the amount of shade on the property. They were there “*helping me plant buddleias in the orchard*” and “*one friend was digging and digging the dirt out*”. Through this knowledge sharing and physical support *Dora* commenced a new phase in her life embracing the labour and responsibility that planning and undertaking large-scale land reclamation required, and in the process she created a new way to position herself within her marriage (*Dora* had referred to feeling ignored and excluded from decisions that were made by her husband in regard to their relocation from northern Victoria to the property where they were now living).

Leonie developed long-term friendships with the women she first met when attending a sustainable gardening program. After the course finished, they formed a group based on their mutual interest in gardening and growing food, and a desire to continue learning and practising gardening together:

I really got on with the other women in that group and we formed a garden group that met once a month and that was the start of something that lasted until last

year when two of us left to go and live overseas. So that lasted about eight years.
(Leonie)

Leonie's continuing interest in sustainable food-growing led to her decision to move overseas to work with an exemplary sustainable food project in Europe. When she returned, along with other local volunteers, she instigated a food-sharing project through the Neighbourhood House based on the project she worked on in Europe.

Tina claimed that she was “*never a scholar*”, and had spent a life-time believing that she was not clever. She was a very shy young girl, and “*tiny*”, and she would sit in the back of the school classroom and never ask any questions no matter how much she was struggling. Since coming to the computer class at the Neighbourhood House, Tina has become much more outgoing and was enjoying learning:

I'm not afraid like that now. I suppose I really spent my life like that, 'Shall I go in here, shall I go in there? I'd never been in a café on my own before, now I walk in as if I own the place ... and I think, 'What have I missed all my life?' I've missed a lot, through being shy. (Tina)

Tina recounted how she met her now best friend in the computer class she had enrolled in. When she was struggling to keep up with and understand the tutor's instructions the younger woman sitting next to her in the computer class “*who knew everything*”, helped her out:

I'd be struggling. I didn't even know what these things were called. I'd say to her, "Excuse me, what do we have to do?" She'd lean over and she'd do it for me which wasn't really helping me, but I was very grateful to her and I did learn.
(Tina)

Tina and her friend derived great mutual enjoyment from learning together, and sharing their skills and a sense of humour, inside and outside the classroom. She taught her friend how to play the card game, Patience, and later, in a burst of spontaneity inspired

by another classmate mentioning that she was learning the ukulele, bought herself and her friend a ukulele so that they could attend lessons together. In the ukulele class they were both novices, learning a new skill together. As the poetic interpretation from *Tina's* interview text reveals, in the shared and social learning environment at the Neighbourhood House, she realised that she was capable of learning new skills, despite finding it challenging. Learning to play the ukulele with others who were struggling too, one of whom was her best friend, she realised that she was not alone in experiencing difficulties in learning situations, and that this did not necessarily mean that she was not clever. Observing the struggles of others in her ukulele class she realised that learning was not just for those who have "*the gift*", everyone can learn and can develop their own ways to take themselves through that process. Being able to laugh and support each other made learning much less intimidating.

Chanda has been a keen learner all her life. One day in her English class she noticed that a group of people from her birth country were experiencing difficulties communicating with the teacher. She had no hesitation in translating the teacher's instructions for them, and the questions they asked back to the teacher. Having faced a similar experience learning English herself, she appreciated the difficulties they were facing, and was happy to intervene. As a result of taking on this role in the class she was subsequently offered a position as a volunteer tutor in a separate class offered to the group. *Chanda* experienced great enjoyment sharing her English language skills to support the group, and encouraging them to learn. At the same time she was doing this, she was learning and gaining skills as a tutor:

I'm happy that I can teach [the people]. And I enjoy to do it. If they haven't got a volunteer tutor they cannot study English. I encourage them to make them happy, 'Don't worry, you are here now, don't waste your time'. The [people] they are very poor, their parents sell the farm and pay for the ticket ...to come to Australia. [One] told me that sometimes he was very sad, homesick in the temple, and when he came here, we study and sometimes we laugh. (Chanda)

Chanda was proud that she was learning skills as a volunteer tutor, and this encouraged her to think about the possibility of studying to become a “*real teacher*”.

Leadership, advocacy, and activism: “taking up causes”

A number of the women highlighted the important local leadership opportunities that engaging with the Neighbourhood House opened for them. Leadership positions undertaken by the women within the Neighbourhood House were as teachers, program facilitators, and committee of management members and Chairpersons. Taking up these positions gave the women opportunities to learn new skills such as advocacy; they became politically aware, developed extensive knowledge about the local community, and deepened their understanding of the role of the Neighbourhood House:

I realised that people here were well not in dire straits, but they were definitely at the bottom of the list of things that were being done with any government by the way. They more or less fell through the track, the cracks. (Jeanette)

Some of the women became advocates and activists in the wider community around important local justice issues, such as family violence, disability, food security, environmental awareness and indigenous recognition.

Jeanette, and *Justine*, occupied the role of Chairperson of the committee of management in separate Neighbourhood Houses. They both had previous experience serving on committees, although in much smaller and less complex organisations entailing lower levels of responsibility. They described being in these roles as quite daunting, and being a huge learning curve. For both women it was a matter of learning on-the-job. *Justine* found aspects of the role very stressful, not the least of which was the magnitude of the task she confronted when she stepped into the role. The

Neighbourhood House was undertaking a significant restructure following a period of under-performance, and then began the process of recruiting a new manager. The huge amount of preparation and planning required had *Justine* “almost living there” for a period of time as she was determined to have things properly in place for when the new manager commenced. Leadership was collaborative. While it was stressful for her, *Justine* was not left to handle these challenges alone. Other committee members, and a local government community development worker provided extensive support to her at this time. *Jeanette* worked closely and co-operatively with the manager and respected the boundaries of their respective roles. While she understood that the Chairperson’s role was a powerful position, she did not engage in power struggles with the manager or other committee members.

Dealing with complex staffing and personnel matters was one of the most challenging aspects of being the Chairperson. *Justine* said that it was “confronting to do performance reviews” of the manager of the Neighbourhood House. When *Jeanette* stepped into the role of Chairperson she found it was more complex and challenging than being a committee member of a sporting club had been. At times she was required to deal with difficult human behaviour issues. *Justine* needed to address two bullying complaints received by the management committee. Along with the manager, she learned the correct procedure for appropriately addressing this issue:

I’d never had to go through bullying, like two issues of bullying, and going through the proper procedures, so time consuming having meetings, mediation, notes, you know, what exactly occurred. So I learnt a lot about that as well. (Justine)

Jeanette’s leadership skills were tested early in her term after she had dealt firmly with the rude behaviour of a fellow committee member:

This was when I was just chair, and he says something about shutting up, very loudly, and I said, ‘Don’t you ever talk to me like that. I said, ‘If you don’t like it

there's the door, and use it'. Anyhow he hung around for a week or so, he was quite chastened but I never got an apology, he left eventually. (Jeanette)

The same person had previously received a warning from the manager about inappropriate behaviour towards women, and following the episode with *Jeanette* had begun to spread rumours about the Neighbourhood House. *Jeanette* confronted a council staff member to explain the confidentiality issues of the situation, and warned that if the rumours continued to be spread they would take legal action. On another occasion *Jeanette* was the only Chairperson present at a regional forum. When there was a move to install her as the convenor she made her boundaries clear; that she was there to represent and support the Neighbourhood House and was not paid to take on responsibilities at a regional level.

Justine pointed out that leading an organisation such as a Neighbourhood House, although it is time-consuming and complex, provides real opportunities for skill development, knowledge acquisition, and personal growth:

I applied and got a day's scholarship ... on Governance. I just did a grant application and I got on the [regional] Community Leadership program, I did that a few years ago and I met some really interesting people who I'm still in contact with now who are very inspiring. (Justine)

Justine and *Jeanette* were both deeply committed to the Neighbourhood House and their roles, and they both derived great joy from being able to make a meaningful contribution to their communities. As they undertook the many responsibilities of their roles both women became more confident and assured in their skills and abilities, developing confidence with public speaking, and communicating with significant external stake-holders such as local government and funding bodies.

Leonie recognised that being in a leadership position contributed to her personal growth and confidence as well as building knowledge and skills. When she was a committee of management member the differing views of people on the committee about the strategic direction of the Neighbourhood House were creating conflict among the members. She took this as an opportunity to learn conflict management skills, and to see the bigger picture:

It's challenging on a personal level in that it's having to learn how to manage conflict, cos when you're in the middle of the community there's always conflict, but it's got to be managed with the whole community in mind. (Leonie)

Aside from leadership in community governance, opportunities for leadership existed in Neighbourhood Houses as teachers. Teachers are leaders and mentors in their classrooms. The women's teaching roles came about through a range of different circumstances. *Reya* and *Robyn* became teachers of curriculum-based adult education classes after starting out in less formalised teaching activities: *Reya* moved from a voluntary teaching position into ongoing paid teaching positions, and *Robyn* first began teaching a short course which later evolved into a formal education program:

My courses got turned into ACFE¹¹ pre-accredited so they went from 5-week modules to 8 weeks so I had to do a whole lot more writing. I'd write all the criteria, the content, the class activities, the homework, everything I've done all myself. Which is awesome. (Robyn).

Linda, and *Kate*, were tutors of healthy living and craft-based programs. With the exception of *Reya*, all the women began with no prior teaching experience or formal training as teachers. *Reya* became a volunteer tutor of the women's group she was attending when the manager of the Neighbourhood House was seeking someone who

¹¹ Adult, community and further education. The ACFE Board is the funding body for pre-accredited education in Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria.

the women in the group trusted and were able to communicate with. She was provided with training opportunities to build her teaching skills, and then offered paid teaching work with the group, and following this, with other classes as well. *Reya* was sponsored by her husband and lived with her in-laws when she came to Australia. Despite her prior teaching experience, she found it was difficult to gain employment as a teacher, often being told that her prior teaching experience was not recognised or relevant in Australia. Teaching at the Neighbourhood House helped her to overcome the significant loss of independence she experienced:

When I came to the Neighbourhood House it gave me that feeling that well I can do something. I have the ability I have the talent to work here, to teach the way I used to back there in my country. I used to be an intern lecturer in my country at the university. So for me to come here and not be able to continue the same thing was very discouraging, very disappointing, very depressing. When I came to the Neighbourhood House it gave me that strength, that, 'Yes, I can do something and nothing is impossible'. (Reya)

Attending professional development sessions with other teachers at the Neighbourhood House inspired *Reya*. The different approach to working with students with challenging behaviours, understanding the underlying influences and difficulties in their lives, enabled her to improve her teaching practice, by remaining patient and giving the students more careful attention. Listening to the other teachers sharing their experiences she appreciated the importance and extraordinariness of teachers:

I have learnt from their experiences that teaching is a very noble job. Maybe it's because you see a lot of people around you, then you learn from each one's experience and then you become extraordinary person. All the teachers that I have seen here they're very experienced. I have learnt that teaching makes you an extraordinary personality. They are not ordinary people ... they've got a lot of patience, they've got something inside them which they absorb, and I have to be just like them. That's what I have learnt. (Reya)

Linda and *Grace* became advocates and activists for issues they were passionate about. *Linda* put the organisational skills she had learned, and the networks she had

developed while organising a promotional event for the Neighbourhood House, into advocacy for women who had experienced domestic violence. She gathered support from local members of parliament and local services to establish a support group for domestic violence. Her own experience of domestic violence had given her insight into the lack of support services that were available to people in the community experiencing violence. At the time when she was experiencing violence, the Neighbourhood House was the safe haven where there was someone she could talk to, and support her in making the decision to leave. This gave her the strength and belief in herself to redefine herself as a survivor not a victim:

I was really lucky at that time that I had somewhere to come, and to talk about it and get some support, but a lot of people don't ... At one stage I did see myself as a victim and I'm not a victim anymore. I'm a survivor. (Linda)

Grace's ability to successfully undertake political advocacy and environmental activism arose from her experiences in the writing class she attended. She had come to the Neighbourhood House to pursue a long held interest in learning to write, and in the class she was asked to think about what sort of writer she wanted to become. Her tutor encouraged her to develop her writing as a vehicle for her interest in environmental issues and to tell stories focussing on the local area:

I started that journey of working out what sort of writer I wanted to be. I'm very interested in the environment, I have a lot to do with the environment as an advocate so [tutor] directed me towards advocacy writing. She had to teach me to stop preaching about the environment and to tell the stories about the environment. Like narratives that drew people in and therefore they became passionate and committed themselves to that. (Grace)

A proposal to establish an intensive meat processing plant on sensitive grasslands was an emerging local concern at the time and it presented Grace with an ideal issue to explore in her writing. The tutor suggested she immerse herself in the issue and to visit

the site at different times of the day to really get a feel for it, and then write about it, which she did. She was horrified when the tutor told her to write from the opposite point of view:

I just couldn't imagine doing that, so she really challenged me but of course through that process of researching and interviewing and going and having a look I realised that of course it was most important to tell both sides because then your point of view would be stronger, because you'd looked at the devil if you like. (Grace)

With the tutor's encouragement she wrote a play presenting both sides of the argument which the tutor insisted must be performed. Grace was "*really challenged*" and outside her comfort zone by this suggestion and put forward many reasons why she should not do it. She laughed as she recalled that the tutor did not take "*one blind bit of notice*" about her objections, she was "*just pushing me pushing me pushing me*". Being challenged and encouraged by her tutor contributed to Grace's ability to engage in successful political advocacy in her community by using her writing. When Grace thought the first draft of the play was too boring the tutor recommended discussing her ideas with experienced theatre practitioners. The play was brought to life with characters based on aspects of the environment that were to be affected, for example, the river became a character:

So then we had a little play. It was performed to a packed house at the local historical court house, a really good environment for a debate or for a play. That was very empowering and it enabled me to have confidence in my writing and in my capacity as a writer.

It made me realise that I had skills that I hadn't recognised myself. It made me realise that what looked like a fairly bleak prospect, I could impact, I could help change. So that was very powerful. It was a very very powerful feeling of, 'I can do this'. Because there are people in the community who have belief in me and the issues and the power of community. (Grace)

With the success of her environmental activism Grace realised that she was able to do something to bring about change, that she was not powerless. This encouraged her to pursue a long-held desire to persuade the land-care group to include an acknowledgement of respect for the traditional owners of the land and their continuing connection to country when they held significant events. She had learned the value of opening up a conversation rather than forcing a confrontation, and decided to use the meeting procedures and format to advocate for the change. Grace realised that there were several allies who would support the idea, and decided that putting an item on the agenda would allow others to engage in the discussion, and hopefully come to understand why it was important. She was surprised when a member spoke about being able to learn from indigenous people about land management:

I thought, 'here's another example of why you mustn't ever go back to the old way of badgering people about an issue', that you need to take them with you on this journey somehow. Even if it's a bit contrived, it doesn't matter, because the end product's important. (Grace)

Standing in their power: “knowing who you are and what you can do”

Courage

I've walked, *through*, that door.
It took a lot of courage for me to do that
a lot of courage.
And I think “What did I worry about?”

(Because as I say)

The people are beautiful
They treat you with respect.
I'd never had that.
Being one of the poor kids
You were always, *pushed*, aside.

(I don't know if you can relate to that or not)

I never had a lot of confidence.

But now

I just *get out* there,

I do what I want

What *I* want.

And I've also got to that age

(you know)

where I think

I'm *gonna do* what I want.

I've got more courage now

I've *walked through* that door.

(poetic interpretation from *Tina's* transcript, emphases are my own)

Participating in the Neighbourhood House was life changing for the women. Many changes occurred in the women's lives as a result of their participation in the Neighbourhood Houses. These changes were individual and varied, and included undertaking new activities and challenges, moving into new areas of life, becoming more confident within themselves, increasing and building their skills and abilities, and developing a critical awareness of their situation as women. *Tina* said that she now "*has a life*", and *Linda* acknowledged a "*really big change, a big positive change*" which she described as being given her life back.

Leonie described the change in her life as "*knowing who you are and what you can do*", which she called "*standing in her power*". She noticed that this occurred for some of the volunteers she worked with, and recognised how significant it was for them:

I saw the volunteers feel like they were standing in their power too, that they could handle situations, and even if that just meant answering the phone or greeting someone, that was hard for some people. Some of the volunteers that we worked with answering the telephone was a massive challenge. (Leonie)

The poetic interpretation of *Tina's* transcript above reveals how significantly her life had changed. She spoke about the courage it took for her to take the first step into the Neighbourhood House. Having summoned the courage, and been welcomed and treated with respect, her confidence and belief in herself has grown. *Tina* recognised that by opening the door and stepping into the Neighbourhood House she opened the door to new possibilities and opportunities in her life.

Confidence: “*I’ve grown much more confident than I was before*”

I didn’t feel confident

In the past,
I didn’t feel confident.
I couldn’t even

laugh

loudly.

(I come from a culture where it’s wrong to laugh loud with open mouth. You just have to smile, that’s it, that’s your limitation).

Now,
I am out of that dilemma, of that situation
I can tell myself that it’s ok to laugh, it gives you good health.
When I came here I saw people around me,
I found out it’s ok to laugh, nothing is wrong about it.
It gives you the strength
To talk
To share your feelings
To take the step.
You might be right or you might be wrong.
That’s how I feel about confidence.

(poetic interpretation from *Reya's* transcript, emphases are my own)

Confidence, and lack of confidence, was a recurring motif in the women’s stories. Most women recalled times in their lives when they lacked confidence and suffered from low

self-esteem. Lack of confidence hampered the women from living their lives fully; they were fearful of trying new things, of engaging in the community and the world around them, worried what others would think about them, and they believed that they did not have the capacity to learn the skills for the things they wanted to do. *Kate* said that after 15 years away from the paid workforce her self-esteem was low when she came to volunteer at the Neighbourhood House. In her role as a volunteer she increased and updated her administrative skills, expanded her knowledge and ability to work within a new workplace, and built supportive workplace relationships. This gave her the confidence to apply for a part-time paid position at the Neighbourhood House when it became available, which later became a full-time position. Working for several years had improved her self-esteem and she was feeling confident in her ability to “*do something for myself*”. Appreciation and support from other staff members for her cooking skills encouraged her to take up new challenges as a tutor, and her classes have become very popular. Although as a tutor she was nervous at first, she enjoyed the feeling of achievement and that she was doing something meaningful for others:

A beautiful thing that happened two weeks ago, I was offering a class with some [name of dishes from her country of origin] and two ladies in the class were from [same country], and the looks on their faces when they produced this bread was unbelievable. They were so happy, they don't have family here, so they've got no-one to teach them these classes, so coming to my class they said it brought them back memories from home, and smelling this bread and looking at the end product was so rewarding to them, they were so grateful, they said they had to come out here to do the class, and [laughing] they're following me with a few other classes now. In a way it was sad because they were missing their family and coming to this class that reminds them of home, but they were really happy because they've produced that thing that reminds them of home and missing their families ... I felt that I had achieved something. (Kate)

The women declared that their experiences at the Neighbourhood House, the friendships, social interactions, the learning – as participants, volunteers and leaders – resulted in them feeling more confident about themselves, their abilities and their future. They overcame their anxieties, embraced new challenges and engaged in

activities they had not previously thought possible. *Linda* said that when she was asked to organise a special morning tea, at first she doubted her ability to do it, but when the manager reassured her that she could do it, the belief that was shown in her enabled *Linda* to “draw on something that I used to be able to do”. She successfully planned and organised the event, and in the process regained some of the skills and confidence she had lost as a result of experiencing domestic violence. This experience gave her the confidence to work with another volunteer to establish a food-sharing program, to accept an invitation to participate in a regional committee, and to establish the first support group in the area for women who have experienced domestic violence. *Leonie* found that “regularity of work” as a volunteer, and doing familiar tasks in a workplace, helped her to regain her confidence in her skills and to cope better with the “maelstrom of family life”. The confidence and skills she gained were useful when she began applying for paid employment. *Tina*’s shyness had held her back her whole life. She recalled how as a young girl she was “very shy”, and was self-conscious about being the smallest person in her class at primary school. She remained shy up until she stepped through the door of the Neighbourhood House and began to participate in the computer class. As a young girl from a poor background she said that she was “always pushed aside”:

Cos I didn’t come from a wealthy family, and I didn’t dress as prettily as other girls. My mum used to make our things, as I was one of six, and she used to make our little dresses and skirts and blouses and things. I mean we were always clean and tidy but I didn’t have all the beautiful smocks and frills and lace, I didn’t have all that. So I always felt as if I wasn’t good enough I think that’s what it was. I never thought I was good enough. (Tina)

At the Neighbourhood House no-one treated her as if she was less worthy. Her confidence grew to the point where she could approach strangers sitting alone in the local café and start up a conversation with them, often recognising that there was

someone who was as lonely and isolated as she had been. When she did this she would offer them encouragement to attend the Neighbourhood House.

A lasting impression was made on *Chanda* when she participated in a class exercise to identify the things she was good at doing, such as cooking, looking after children, and managing money. This exercise taught her to value her skills and attributes, and not to blame herself for the emotional abuse she experienced from her second husband:

My second husband looked down at me, but now I'm standing up ... I haven't got chance to study because I am the eldest ... I came here and then I had a chance and I feel better. I feel like I'm not dumb like what he thought, because I hadn't got a chance. (Chanda)

Chanda believed that these lessons helped her to become more confident and improve her self-esteem. In another lesson she learned to break down her goals into small achievable steps, and this gave her greater confidence about learning:

I used to think that all English very hard, very hard to learn, but I like to learn, I just keep studying, studying studying. And the [tutor] draw the ladder, like the step, and she told us, 'Don't look. Oh too high. I cannot reach'. I can go up one step, two step, three step, and then you look at the next step, and look at the next step. And you gain your knowledge. (Chanda)

When *Tina* worked out her own strategies to help her in learning to play the ukulele her confidence and determination to keep learning increased. She recognised that if she kept trying she would find a way that worked for her, and it did not matter if her way was different from others', what mattered was that she wanted to keep trying:

Whether I'll ever be able to do some of the things I don't know. But I'll have a try. And I think that's very very important. You know we start learning new chords and things and cos I've only got small hands so my fingers bit hard for me to reach the things, but there's always a way around things. And now I'm not afraid of trying. So I can't do that that way. And now there's a couple of the chords I play, but I play them different, I know exactly how to hold my hands so I can reach the

thing, so you do master things, learn to do something differently. Cos it's not going to beat me. (Tina)

Many of the women considered that their empowering experiences were attributable to feeling more confident about themselves.

Sense of self: “I’m not a victim anymore. I’m a survivor”

Making the best of each day

I embrace every day

Every day as it comes.

Instead of looking to the future for what it *should* be

What I *should* have

What I *should* be doing

It's just, each day

Make it the best that I possibly can.

(It's really hard for me to explain)

I've just,

Like

Just, woken up.

I've been awakened.

(It's really hard for me to explain)

Knowing what's important in life

Having a healthy and happy life,

Making choices,

Thinking of consequences with each choice.

If the consequences are too in-depth, I just don't worry about that choice anymore.

I feel like I'm so much more in charge of me.

I can share that

Because we've all got it in us,

and we *can* all

we can *all*, *do* that, at some stage.

It's very empowering to finally know how much you have within.

I feel like I'm so much more in charge.

Of me.

(poetic interpretation from *Roxie's* transcript, emphases are my own)

A changed sense of self was an empowering experience for the women. This was linked to having greater confidence, and was further elaborated as a stronger sense of who they were, and a vibrant engagement with the world around them. They experienced significant changes in how they thought about themselves and how they described themselves. Whereas previously the women had been inclined to dismiss or fail to see the value of their abilities, experience, and knowledge, they began to see themselves in a more positive light. They felt more in charge of their lives, that they were entitled to a life of their own, to be in charge of their own lives, and they dared to dream.

For *Justine*, *Roxie*, *Jenny*, and *Helen* a changed sense of self was related to doing things that they previously thought they could not or would not be able to do, to being in the world in new ways. *Justine* had no previous experience in community development and thought that this would limit the contribution she could make at the Neighbourhood House. One of the many important tasks she undertook as chairperson was to renegotiate the rental lease agreement for the Neighbourhood House. To finalise this, a meeting had been arranged with representatives from the local council. This had required *Justine* to rearrange her work, make arrangements for her children, and then travel to another town. When the meeting was cancelled on the day it was scheduled, she expressed her disappointment that this urgent matter was not treated as a priority. Within the hour the meeting was rescheduled to be held at the Neighbourhood House at the previously arranged time. The many challenges she faced as chairperson helped *Justine* to realise that she had much to offer: a passion for improving community life

and learning about other people and their lives, being committed to the position and willing to undertake complex tasks, and keen to learn and increase her skills.

In the poetic interpretation above from *Roxie's* transcript she describes her sense of being awakened, that finding the strength to live each day in the best way possible came from knowing what was important in life. This realisation provided *Roxie* with a sense of being in charge of her life. *Jenny* participated on a volunteer bread-run roster which required her to pick-up bread after the bakery closed and bring it back to the Neighbourhood House to bag-up for collection the following day. Although she had considered herself to be strong and determined, this role required her to come to the Neighbourhood House independently at night, something she had not done in the past, and this taught her that she is strong enough to handle almost anything:

That really made me feel that I am strong and I can do it, I can do whatever I put my head to ... If you put your mind to something and you really want to do it or achieve it then you will. Sometimes if I come at night time here by myself to pick up bread or whatever, I'm not afraid, you know like I'd be, like I have the key, I open the door and I go in and that makes me feel not afraid of anything, I can do this on my own, you know. And I think that's to me that's quite enough for me to make me think that I'm strong enough to do that. (Jenny)

Helen loved craftwork, creating things, and although she had dreamt about opening her own craft shop it was not something that she had any plans to do. When she mentioned her dream as a passing comment to the Neighbourhood House manager and another local woman they acted immediately, securing a rental shopfront and establishing her as a business partner/retail manager. Her own craftwork, along with other local handiwork, and a range of giftware, was for sale in the shop. *Helen* was proud that her business provides a valued service to people in the town many of whom would not be able to drive to a larger town to shop:

Yeh, just, proud I guess, that I got to, to do this. Where I never thought I would, not after one little word. You know, or a few little words [laughing]. It just makes you feel good, to know that you're helping people out. I've probably learnt that I can juggle more I thought I ever could. I suppose I've learnt that I can, I can sort of hold my own where maybe I thought I couldn't as much. (Helen)

Two women, *Linda* and *Robyn*, had experienced domestic violence. While their reasons for engaging with the Neighbourhood House were not prompted by this experience, both women maintained that their connection with the Neighbourhood House played a significant role in their recovery by helping them to regain a sense of their own competence and self-worth. The caring and informed support they received enabled them to re-establish their lives, and re-build a strong sense of self. Both women testified to the profound importance of the support they received from the respective Neighbourhood House managers in their recovery. *Linda* said that she came with “*a certain strength from being a single parent*” and working, however, things changed when she was in a violent situation to the point where she had a “*mental breakdown*”. When she was volunteering she experienced doubts about her abilities and thought that she would fail, because the domestic violence situation had left her feeling a failure, and it was difficult to concentrate because of everything that was going on in her head. The Neighbourhood House offered her safety and support during this time:

I feel like I'm sort of back to my old self or I'm getting there at least. I still have mental health issues and I still have days where I'm not able to function but they're getting thin in the air they're not as, prevalent, as they used to be ... being here was actually a really good thing because it was one thing during the week that I had to concentrate on ... I'm feeling kind of normal and I think the Neighbourhood House has helped me, to be that again. (Linda)

Robyn came to the Neighbourhood House when she was in the process of establishing a new direction in her life, following her dream to establish a business teaching Multimedia. She had left an abusive relationship of 10 years in which there was “so

much fear, so much self-doubt, even my family said I looked different, because for so long I was a beaten housewife". The support and encouragement, the belief expressed in her, was crucial in enabling her to have the confidence to start tutoring, and to overcome her self-doubt and anxiety:

It's changed my life, like if you'd met me eight years ago you'd think, "Who's that shy timid girl in the corner, who looks unloved?" These are tears of joy, I just love it ... it has been an incredible, incredible journey and I think being in a place where it does feel like a second home and having a great group of people that believe in me, it just makes all the difference (Robyn)

The financial and physical vulnerability, self-doubt, and mental health impacts experienced by *Linda* and *Robyn* while living with violence were long-lasting and did not completely dissipate when they were no longer living in violent relationships. *Robyn* said that it was very damaging living with violence and abuse, and someone else's negative opinion of her for ten years, and that it has taken a long time for her to heal. Although she is now getting on with her life, the day before her first class was to start she had "*a massive anxiety attack*" because she was still was affected by the years of living with self-doubt and low self-esteem.

Linda and *Robyn* described themselves as being strong and competent before experiencing violence and abuse. *Robyn* described herself as feeling empowered in her former life, then during the abusive years she became disempowered and fearful, and now because of her participation at the Neighbourhood House, "*I've got my power back*". Both women's views of themselves underwent a transformation. Having turned their lives around both women have become keen supporters of other women living with violence, anxiety, and self-doubt. *Robyn* laughingly recalled that in her classes she is now the one who encourages other women who are doubting themselves and lacking in confidence:

There I was having doubts at the beginning, and now I'm working with people a lot of the time that don't have any confidence, so there's me going, 'I'm nurturing you, nurturing myself. That's ok everybody I'll nurture you through this' [laughing].
(Robyn)

Linda came to view herself as a survivor, not a victim. Overcoming disempowerment, being able to describe and think of herself in positive terms helped her to recognise her own strengths, and she was keen to show other women that *"I survived and you can too"*.

Going through the process of being a domestic violence survivor I don't call myself a victim cos I'm not a victim I'm a survivor. There were times during that period of time where [pause] life was really quite tough, and I think that I got the empowerment here to be able to walk away from that situation. Being here made me feel like a worthwhile citizen again, because during that situation I didn't feel very worthwhile. (Linda)

Political and social awareness: *"I didn't have a clue politically"*

Women's role

Women have a role

Out in the bush, *particularly* out in the bush

Make the cakes write the minutes do all the work

Out in the bush.

Women have a role.

Make the cakes,

write the minutes,

I love doing all that stuff,

but

I know that *women* have to do *other* things

to make sure

Their voice is heard.

(poetic interpretation from Grace's transcript, emphases are my own)

A changed sense of self was closely linked with a deepened and more critical understanding of the political environment. In the Neighbourhood House the women interacted with people with diverse lived experience. This facilitated a deeper and new, or renewed, consciousness of the social and political influences on their own and others' lives, and it facilitated cultural understanding. Some women learned about Australian cultural practices from their observations and interactions with Australian-born and long-term residents, particularly in relation to understanding matters concerning the position of women. They became aware of the different ways women were treated, and the greater opportunities afforded to women in Australia than in some overseas places. *Reya* gained confidence from realising that as a woman in Australia she was less restricted in some ways than she had been in her country of birth.

The women appreciated being in a space that was women-oriented, where they had the opportunity to observe, and to talk about their lives and share experiences with other women, friends, staff members and groups of women. These opportunities were present in class, informally, and at special events. *Linda* commented that this environment encouraged women to support one another. In the poetic excerpt from *Grace's* transcript at the beginning of this section she reflects on, and challenges, the limitations of women's gendered roles. Although she enjoyed doing those traditional activities she realised that there was much more that women could do to participate fully in the community. *Grace* lived in a small conservative rural town, and believed that it was important for women to be involved in local issues and for women's voices to be heard. Her resistance to the limitations placed on women was political and personal. Attending a "*very demanding*" yoga class challenged her physically, and helped her to resist the perception that as an older woman she was "*too old*" to do strength training yoga:

It was really good for me because it made me realise I can do stuff that is hard for my body, in a safe place ... That made a big difference, being physically capable and strong, being able to do the stuff that these young things are doing [laughing]. I can do that. Not being competitive but looking over and seeing ... 'I'm doing that almost as good'. It was good, it was very satisfying, and helped me with dealing with the issues of getting older. Because I'm 69, I'll be 70 soon, and you think, 'Oh God the body's declining'. No we don't have to think like that. We can go to Yoga and we can do things and we can write. So I think the centre here has helped a lot with that. And they don't treat you like you're old. (Grace)

Chanda and Reya came from cultures where attitudes and expectations of women, and the opportunities afforded them, were very different from those of many women living in contemporary Australia. Interacting with other women whose lived realities as women have been in very different social, political and cultural settings from their own, opened up new possibilities and opportunities for them, and offered them a chance to follow their dreams. Chanda, now in her mid-sixties, recalled that as the eldest daughter she was expected to stay at home and help with domestic chores, instead of going to school as her younger siblings did. Her lifelong desire had been to study, which she was now doing at the Neighbourhood House:

I honestly tell you, when I was a child, I learn ... [first language], a few years I learn [second language while living in exile]. I went to dressmaker's school for a few years, but most of the time, I do the housework, and I always think that, I want to do, what is something else is higher than that. (Chanda)

Chanda learned about Australian social mores when she was unsure about the appropriateness of accepting an invitation to dinner with a man she had become friendly with. She explained, “*in our culture the woman very shy, I was very shy*”. Even though Reya came from a culture where there were stringent restrictions on women's behaviour, her own family valued education and independence for women. When she arrived in Australia Reya experienced a significant change in her life: at first she was living with her in-laws, and she was isolated and hampered by her lack of English. She felt keenly the loss of the independence she had before coming to Australia:

My husband sponsored me and I was living with my in-laws, and I was not feeling empowered enough to say that, 'I am independent', which was very important for me because I had come from a background, my family has been, we have been really independent because I have taught for seven years in my own country, and then I have done my Masters so for me to not be able to work here was very difficult and very disappointing. (Reya)

Reya initially found it difficult to resist her in-laws' different set of expectations about her role as a new wife, however, the confidence she had gained through her interactions and paid employment at the Neighbourhood House enabled her to assert her independence:

I had a lot of personal issues with my in-laws ... I took a step to move out [with her husband] that's something that I feel I did good for me and for him because now we can do more stuff that we want to. That's the decision ... I felt I was empowered enough to make that decision and move out and then have your own life, deal with your own problems. (Reya)

It was important for Linda to challenge the limiting and negative attitudes about the way she wanted to live her life and she had worked hard to overcome the impacts of the controlling and abusive behaviour she experienced. Along with the physical violence, she was prevented from expressing herself:

I went through a stage through my domestic violence where he'd even gone to the point of telling me what colour my hair had to be, and for two years I had black hair ... after I'd left that situation, I decided to dye my hair a different colour every couple of months. So at the start of the year it was red, and then in March it was purple with turquoise and now it's purple with other colours. I don't know what I'm gonna do next but there's that empowerment there, to be able to move on to do something like that. (Linda)

Walking along the street one day Linda was deeply touched when a young girl came up to her and told her how beautiful she looked with coloured hair.

Meeting and listening to other women speak about their lives and challenges at the special women's days run by the Neighbourhood House was inspiring and reassuring

for Roxie. It was empowering to hear stories that resonated strongly with her own experiences and to realise that her own story was worth telling:

It was this artist talking about her artwork and her life on the property where she lives. So it was quite empowering and inspiring, listening to this lady. I just felt so uplifted and, empowered and I'm like, 'I can't wait until I'm 60 to share my story, and if she can speak of all of that so openly with this room full of 50 to 80 women, I could share my story one day too'. It's encouraging, but you can relate so much to some of their story. And I went 'Oh ok I'm not the only that had a feeling like that', it made me feel good, for days. And there's that whole vibe, women empowering each other whether you talk to each other or not. (Roxie)

Alongside shifting awareness and understanding of their situation as women, some women's characteristic behaviours and long held political allegiances were challenged. Grace said that previously she would have considered that a man with relevant credentials had more authority to speak on a matter than she attributed to herself. Now she strongly believes in her own capacity to stand up and advocate for what she believes is important, such as the Indigenous recognition statement she wanted to include in the proceedings of the Landcare group:

I would never have stood up for the issue with the statement of respect. Never. I would have left that to someone else. Possibly a bloke. I'd say [landcare colleague] because [he]'s far more qualified than I to do it, he's an anthropologist he's worked in ... with the indigenous people, he's married to an indigenous woman. I mean how much more credentials do you need? But I could see that he was hesitant he wanted it to happen, but I could see that he didn't understand the issues of community, how to get the community to accept it. Yeh, but I did it. (Grace)

Grace successfully undertook political advocacy using the writing and listening skills she developed in the writing class she attended. The tutor encouraged and challenged her to explore both sides of an argument, and to use her writing to tell local stories that would connect with others in the community. She developed her skills in opening up conversations rather than forcing confrontations. Dora enjoyed engaging in conversation with others and “*having her brain stretched*” by being exposed to different

ideas, and proposed that her political perspective and allegiances had changed due to conversations and discussions with people who were concerned about caring for the environment. Her voting preferences have changed, whereas previously she would follow her husband's lead she now expresses her own interests and values. After participating in a planning session at the Neighbourhood House in which the participants constructed a timeline she has developed a new appreciation and insight into the impact of the Whitlam government, particularly for women:

It's helped me look back on Gough Whitlam ... I didn't have a clue politically ...I've read stuff about him since ... and I can see all the really empowering things especially for women that Gough started and I think, 'Gosh why on earth didn't I see that before?', but I didn't. (Dora)

Summary

The research findings presented in this chapter illustrate the rich details of the women's life-changing experiences of empowerment women as a result of their engagement with the Neighbourhood House. The women participants' motivations for engaging with the Neighbourhood Houses were multiple, varied, and connected with their personal circumstances, and the changing contexts of their lives. They came to learn, to alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness, to meet people in their communities, and to find support following a personal crisis or relocation to a new community. Whatever their motivation for engagement, the fluidity of role boundaries and the facilitative environment of the Neighbourhood Houses enabled the women to move between participating in programs, volunteering, and taking up paid staffing positions. It enabled the women to make decisions about both the level of their participation and the kind of participation they preferred.

The welcoming and inclusive environment of the Neighbourhood House fostered a sense of belonging and a deep emotional attachment. In the social environment they made friends, received personal support, and developed strong and ongoing connections to others in their communities. Profound and transformative formal, informal, and incidental learning was interwoven throughout their engagement and participation in the Neighbourhood Houses, whether it was as participants, volunteers, or staff members. Learning was embedded within all activities. It encompassed building skills to enable pursuit of their interests and broaden their opportunities for employment, and developing understanding about their own and other people's lives and the lives of people in their communities. Learning was relational; the women learned from teachers in formal classes, and from managers and teachers in informal and personal conversations, and they learned from and with each other. They learned from conflict and from collaboration. The participatory and inclusive practices, and the social and learning processes of the Neighbourhood Houses enabled the women to become confident and skilled, and to experience and exercise control in their lives. They were encouraged to be genuine participants in the development of their own pathways at their own pace. New and unexpected possibilities and opportunities were explored and embraced; they became politically aware, and engaged in political advocacy and activism, within the Neighbourhood Houses and in the wider community.

The following chapter presents the findings from the interviews with the managers.

Chapter Six: The managers – leadership in the community

This chapter reports on the empowering experiences of the 13 managers who participated in the study. At the time of interview, 12 managers were continuing in the role and one manager had recently resigned the position. This chapter begins by introducing the managers, focusing on aspects that are relevant to this research. A detailed presentation of the findings of the thematic narrative analysis and poetic interpretation which was used to analyse the data follows. The managers' experiences of empowerment were varied, and intrinsically connected to their role and the particularities of the Neighbourhood House they were managing. The findings from the managers' stories are presented as six key themes with sub-themes. The six key themes are: New opportunities, Emotional work, Knowledge and understanding, Support and collaboration, and Meeting challenges.

The managers

The intention of this research was to explore a diversity of women's experiences of empowerment in the role of manager. The purposive sampling of managers in this research did not include characteristics such as ethnicity or language spoken. However, sampling was undertaken to ensure that there was diversity in the age-group of managers and the location of the Neighbourhood House. Information on the number of years in the position, and previous employment details were gathered at interview. Table 6.1 presents the age-group, location of Neighbourhood House, and number of years in the role for each manager. Only two of the managers had been in the role for more than five years. Most, however, were not new to the role, having been in it for between two and five years.

The number of years in the role of manager did not necessarily equal the number of years the managers had been associated with the Neighbourhood House. In several instances, the managers had been volunteers or paid staff prior to taking up the role of manager.

Table 6.1: Age-group, location of Neighbourhood House, number of years in role

Managers	Age group	Location of house	Years in role
Crystal	30 - 39	Rural	2
Elizabeth	30 - 39	Rural	3
Ayla	40 - 49	Rural	2
Raechel	40 - 49	Rural	4
Lorna	40 - 49	Rural	3
Sarah	50 - 59	Metropolitan	6
Evelyn	50 - 59	Metropolitan	3
Alicia	50 - 59	Metropolitan	4
Rhino	50 - 59	Rural	5
Christine	60 - 69	Metropolitan	10 months
Sally	60 - 69	Rural	3
Mary	60 - 69	Rural	2
Dianne	60 - 69	Metropolitan	15

In Victoria just over half of Neighbourhood Houses are located in the metropolitan area, and just under half in rural-regional areas. In this study, more participating Houses were rural-regional than metropolitan. Eight managers were from Houses in rural-regional Victoria, and five managers were from Houses located in the Melbourne metropolitan area.

The larger number of managers from Neighbourhood Houses located outside the Melbourne metropolitan area occurred as a result of two separate factors. First, more managers from rural areas expressed interest in participating. This followed an invitation to participate made at the 2015 Neighbourhood Houses Victoria annual conference. Approximately half of the managers participating in the research expressed interest to do so at this time. Second, in two of the rural-regional houses the

position of manager was a job-share position. Both managers in these positions wished to be interviewed, and they were interviewed separately.

Table 6.2: Previous occupations of managers

Administration
Architecture
Arts Management
Banking
Bookkeeping
Community Development projects
Community Services
Disability sector
Farm management
Grain buyer
Hospitality
IT consultancy
Local government
Logistics
Neighbourhood House manager/co-ordinator
Neighbourhood House Networker
Politician
Public Service, State and Federal
Retail
Shearer
Teacher
Local community volunteering
Neighbourhood House Committee member
Neighbourhood House volunteering
Not in paid work due to illness
Not in paid work due to parenting

Table 6.2 shows the previous occupations of the managers, including immediate past employment, and other employment information offered at time of interview. A point of interest highlighted by this list is the depth and diversity of skills and knowledge that the managers brought to the role, and to some extent it also illustrates the wide range of areas that the manager’s role encompasses. Information about their employment histories was not provided by all the managers.

Lack of prior experience working in the sector did not preclude their selection as managers. Several managers had no prior experience of working in the Neighbourhood House sector in any capacity. Some managers had previous connections with the sector as participants, committee members, volunteers, as staff members in various roles, and in one case as a regional Neighbourhood House networker. One manager had previously worked as a manager in a Neighbourhood House, coincidentally in the same Neighbourhood House that she was now managing. Information about the qualifications held by managers was not requested, but in most cases it was offered. Qualifications covered a wide range of fields, including architecture, finance, and teaching. Some managers stated that they had no formal qualifications prior to taking up their position as manager. In some instances managers undertook formal studies while in their role.

New opportunities: “It opened up a whole new world to me”

This section introduces the 13 managers who participated in this study and presents the range of pathways that were undertaken to becoming the manager. The managers were attracted to the possibilities and opportunities offered by the role for differing personal and professional reasons, and by practical and philosophical considerations.

The poetic interpretation from *Lorna*’s transcript below illustrates that interest in the role often arose for multiple and interwoven reasons. *Lorna* had previous connections to Neighbourhood Houses and she understood their value to the community and the possibilities offered by the position, although she was a little wary because she understood the demands of the job. It was a timely opportunity for *Lorna* as the position offered a solution to her current workplace dilemma where she was being bullied.

An ideal place

It looked like an exciting role

Twenty-five hours

About as much as I could cope with at the time

I needed a job

needed to get out of that other job

I couldn't afford to not be in a job

I applied.

It was like, *wow*

I can be a Neighbourhood House co-ordinator

(I had bumped into the Neighbourhood House sector in my life's journey for about 20 years before I ended up here).

Funnily enough I'd always joked

that being a Neighbourhood House Co-ordinator

was so far down the *crazy* path

I was never ever going to go there.

But really when push came to shove

It was an ideal space

for me, to come to.

Coming to the Neighbourhood House

was all about being able to engender a culture of being open,
welcoming.

(poetic interpretation from *Lorna's* transcript, emphases are my own)

A range of pathways, both intentional and serendipitous, led to becoming the manager.

Some managers applied for the position through a regular selection and appointment process, while others were directly appointed to the position. For some of the

managers who applied in response to an advertised position, the successful

appointment was their first connection with the Neighbourhood House. Other managers

had neither dreamt of nor intended to become the manager when they became

volunteers or took up other positions at the Neighbourhood House. In some instances, the pathway to manager illustrated the fluidity of roles in the Neighbourhood House. Volunteering and casual administration work at times provided an unexpected pathway to becoming the manager. Whether or not these managers had applied for the position through an advertised selection and appointment process, or were directly appointed to the position from another role at the Neighbourhood House, their successful appointment was based on the skills, knowledge, commitment and connection to the local community they had developed and demonstrated by working in other roles at the Neighbourhood House.

For the purposes of this study it was important to separately identify the managers' reasons for desiring the position, along with their pathways into the role, because their reasons and the means by which they came to occupy the role are directly relevant to the focus in this research on the managers' empowering experiences. However, their reasons were often multilayered and interconnected. Their reasons and pathways are presented under the following sub-themes: Combining personal and professional life, Aligning personal and professional values, and Taking up new challenges.

Combining personal and professional life

Several managers were specifically drawn to the Neighbourhood House because they perceived that the role offered the possibility of combining their personal and professional lives. The employment conditions, particularly the flexibility of the working environment, and in many instances the part-time hours, enabled the managers to undertake paid work while continuing with their parenting responsibilities. *Crystal* and *Elizabeth* were motivated by a strong desire to combine and integrate their employment and family lives. *Crystal* first became aware that the position would be advertised when

she was volunteering at the Neighbourhood House:

I thought 'Oooh there's gonna be an opportunity here' [laughing], so I just kept a close eye on the newspapers actually until... I actually came in and said, 'You know I'd be really interested in this position keep me in the loop about advertising and everything', and then, I just applied through regular channels. (Crystal)

Crystal was undertaking the primary caring responsibility for her young children, and said that the prospect of working part-time with the flexibility to arrange working times within school hours would allow her to continue to participate in the paid workforce, while at the same time undertaking her caring responsibilities. As well as the position being located in the small town where she lived, which would make school pick-ups and drop-offs easier, *Crystal* thought that it was perfect to be able to fit her working hours into school hours. However, her critical reflection on this situation showed that she was aware her current arrangements could be reinforcing a gender stereotype of women as the primary carers:

That's a constraint in a way, because it means that I will be the primary carer because I have a job where I can be the primary carer [laughing]. So it's kind of like in a way like, perfect, but also bad, although I guess having said that it doesn't have to be a woman being the co-ordinator, then the man will pick up his kids I suppose. (Crystal)

Living and working within close proximity helped to foster and establish deeper connections within the communities where the managers were living. This aspect provided the initial attraction for *Elizabeth*. She had not long moved from the city to another local town, and had been commuting to a larger town nearby for work. She and her husband then bought a house in the small town where the Neighbourhood House was located. At this stage she was not a parent, however, the position aligned with her then current personal circumstances and choices:

The week that we moved into the house I was reading the local paper. And there was an advertisement for co-ordinator of (the Neighbourhood House). And I thought 'What a fantastic opportunity to live and work in the same town'. Great opportunity to meet people in the community that we are going to be living in, and, imagine only having a 3 minute commute every day. That's just, that's exactly why we moved. Didn't want to do the being stuck in traffic every day. And so I applied for the job, and I got the job. (Elizabeth).

Elizabeth subsequently took maternity leave when expecting her first child. On her return from maternity leave she renegotiated her working hours with the committee of management to suit her parenting responsibilities. These negotiations resulted in the creation of a shared manager position.

When the position of manager was advertised, Ayla had been travelling back and forth between her work in the city and the distant rural location she had moved back to. She had become a member of the local school council, and her responsibilities in this position were becoming increasingly demanding, making the travelling back and forth tiresome. The opportunity to work close to home appealed to her, and having enjoyed working in the position previously she considered that she was well-suited for the job.

Part-time positions enabled women to work in paid employment while at the same time attending to other important areas of their lives, and pursuing other personal interests. Lorna's wellbeing was important to her following a bullying experience, and part-time hours were enough for her to cope with. She saw that the position offered her the chance to work in a safer environment, to "*escape to somewhere a bit safe, somewhere I can make this safe for me but a safe space for others as well*". Sally wanted to continue working when she left a public service regional co-ordination position and moved back to a remote rural location, although she conceded that at 66 she was probably at retirement age. It was important to have time to tend to her garden and animals, and finish building her house, and the two-day a week shared manager

position offered this possibility.

Mary knew about the Neighbourhood House from participating in various programs over many years. Coincidentally, when on long service leave, and feeling that full-time work was becoming too tiring for her, the Neighbourhood House advertised a long service leave position. She *“honestly wasn’t looking for a job”* because she fully intended to return to the long-term employment she enjoyed. When Mary saw the position advertised for a second time:

... the day it closed I walked in here, I said, ‘I don’t know whether you’ve got any applicants but you know if you’re really stuck and you think I might have something to offer, I might’. Well that was as good as, “You’re in”. And so the co-ordinator organised the committee and they interviewed me, and here I am. (Mary)

Aligning personal and professional values

The broad social justice approaches of Neighbourhood Houses were seen by the managers as offering a strong possibility of aligning their personal value stances with those in the workplace. Multiple personal value stances were identified, including social justice, community development and support, and women’s empowerment, along with recognising the importance of community connection, and maintaining the safe, supportive environment of the Neighbourhood House. Loving working with people was a recurring refrain. Crystal said that for her it was really important *“to have a job that is of benefit to the world that fits with my own values”*. Sally expressed her enthusiasm that the position aligned philosophically with her personal values and commitment to women’s empowerment and education:

I applied for it because ... I’m just totally women’s empowerment and education and, so it is to me the answer to everything [laughing]. And yeh this is a job that really fits in with my values, and indeed it does and it has. (Sally)

Christine and *Lorna* both experienced bullying in their previous workplaces. This convinced them of the importance of finding employment more closely aligned to their social justice and community development values. *Christine* undertook a process to identify her ideal job:

We worked out that I would, probably do best ... I needed to work at a more grassroots level than I had been working at before, that I needed to work in the not-for-profit sector, and that I needed to be in charge of something but working collaboratively. So when this job came up it seemed to fit all the criteria and it has. Oh, and that I needed a supportive management team. So I have all those things and I'm very happy with the process. The process was fantastic actually. It just got clearer and clearer, and it was easy to recognise, the job when it was advertised ... I just looked at that and went, 'Oh, god this ticks all the boxes', and so yeh, I feel very, I feel like I'm in the right place. (Christine)

Lorna's prior experiences in the Neighbourhood House sector and understanding of the community development practices and processes within Neighbourhood Houses made it clear that these were compatible with her own approach to community development, to “engender a culture of being open, approachable, welcoming, and developing people and allowing them to develop in this space”. She recognised that the position would offer a safe working place for her, and knew that as the manager she would be in a position to influence the environment at the Neighbourhood House to ensure it was safe and welcoming for others as well:

I saw the ad for the Neighbourhood House co-ordinator role here, and it was like a little light bulb that just went, “I can escape to somewhere a bit safe, somewhere I can make this a safe space for me but a safe space for others as well”. (Lorna)

Evelyn's commitment to community arose from her own deeply personal first connection with a Neighbourhood House when, as a widowed mother of a young child, she was very isolated. When her child was a few months old she attended the childcare centre at the Neighbourhood House and became friendly with the staff, who

were very supportive of her situation. *Evelyn* was surprised to receive an invitation to become a Board member:

I knew nothing about the local community, really. I knew where the shops were and that was about it. And it opened up a whole new world to me. The people sitting around the table, came from all aspects of community, traders, environment people, just a really diverse group. Really old founders of the House to young people coming through. It was a really great group of people. So it took blinkers off about where I lived and gave me a vision of hope that my community was there to support me. And being part of that house community, opened up doors. (Evelyn)

Both her past experience and this new experience changed her. She understood the importance of communities being connected, of identifying and addressing community need, and her strong commitment to community coupled with a concern for the future, led her into state politics. She was delighted when a position became available at the Neighbourhood House:

After politics I knew that my heart and soul was in community, politics was just a higher level. I was able to do more with the money that I was able to provide to different constituent groups, but my heart was always at the Neighbourhood House because it changed me and supported me. There was a position came here at this little House, and I grabbed it, and got it and was delighted. (Evelyn)

Part-time employment suited many of the managers because it allowed them to pursue other interests and to be employed while fulfilling family responsibilities. *Raechel*, however, was not attracted by part-time work, or the prospect of living and working in close proximity. She valued her full-time position, which she acknowledged was not often available for Neighbourhood House managers. She loved working with people, and she valued having physical distance between her workplace and her home. Choosing to work in a town more than one hour away from where she lived gave her the opportunity to enact a separation between her workplace and her home, to contain the impingement of work into her private life. The geographical distance separated

work-life from home-life, providing time for a physical and emotional transition as she drove between the two. This gave her the capacity to control and manage a workload she recognised as being substantial enough to consume her time outside ordinary working hours:

I don't live here so I drive back to [town] at night and so I'm not tempted to just sneak into work over the weekend ... the amount of work that you do and the amount of funding that you get creates a whole lot of work for the manager and you can spend all your time at work doing work stuff and not having a life outside of work and I try to make sure that balance for me is right, and not working in the town that I live is actually helping that a whole lot. (Raechel)

Taking up new challenges

The role of manager offered the opportunity to utilise and increase skills and strengths, to engage with new spheres of influence and activity, and to pursue new challenges in their working lives. Volunteering, and casual administration work, was the first step towards becoming the manager for *Sarah*, *Rhino* and *Dianne*. When they initially became involved at the Neighbourhood House they had no intention or desire to become the manager. A dynamic, and serendipitous process – the coming together of skills, knowledge, commitment, self-belief and opportunity – resulted in their eventual appointment as manager. When the position was offered to them, or it became available through an advertised recruitment process, they were at a point in their lives where they were ready to take up the opportunity and the challenges.

Sarah had been out of the workforce for several years due to a serious illness. She became a volunteer as a way of preparing to re-enter the paid workforce. Her previous experience as a bookkeeper quickly resulted in her becoming the treasurer of the committee of management, and ultimately she became the chairperson. At the time she began volunteering there were no paid positions at the Neighbourhood House.

Two years later she was heavily involved in the transition process to establish the Neighbourhood House as an independent organisation with a paid co-ordinator, attending workshops, and applying for funding. When the position was advertised she was initially reluctant to apply, believing that her lack of formal qualifications would exclude her. On reflection *Sarah* realised that during her time as a volunteer, and a committee member, she had gained valuable and relevant skills, and a great depth of understanding of the Neighbourhood House and the local community, which suited her for the position. This allayed her doubts that a lack of qualifications need preclude her from applying:

When the job came up I looked at the key selection criteria and everything like that and I thought, 'Ooh I can't do a job like that, that's way beyond my capacity, and I don't have tertiary education like that'. So I wasn't going to go for the job and I was reading into it and I thought 'I can do that job. I know all that stuff, I can do it, I'm gonna go for the job'. (Sarah)

When *Rhino* became a volunteer at the Neighbourhood House it was an extension to the substantial amount of other volunteering she was doing in the community. A friend invited her to become a committee member at the Neighbourhood House, and then, when the incumbent stepped down, she became the treasurer. As the treasurer she had full financial oversight and identified the severe impending financial crisis facing the Neighbourhood House. The severity of the situation led to the resignation of several staff members, and *Rhino* assumed greater responsibilities by stepping-up to become the voluntary interim manager. After playing an integral role in resolving the crisis she was offered the manager position on a permanent basis:

I said 'I'm happy to fulfil that sort of interim role' and that's how it started really ... we were down to one staff member ... I volunteered probably near enough to between 60 and 80 hours a week for a long time ... as manager for several months, until the subsequent offer of the paid position. (Rhino)

The pathway to the role of manager for *Sarah, Rhino* and *Dianne* illustrates the dynamic, inclusive and supportive community development process operating in the Neighbourhood Houses. *Dianne* had not completed secondary school or any post-school qualifications and maintained that when she was at school she had “*no aspirations at all, except to leave*”. After spending 12 years out of the workforce while parenting she began a casual administration position at the Neighbourhood House for six hours per week.

I'd left school in Year 10, and my background after I'd left school I worked in supermarkets, then I started doing office, administration, had children and then I came here six hours a week, and that was my pathway into, not only work but education. (Dianne)

Over the next 10 years she followed a gradual stepped progression into the manager role from administration, to program co-ordination roles, and finally to the position of manager. She enjoyed her work, and moving from one role to another became a pathway into learning and formal education which gave her confidence to continue pursuing and accepting opportunities within the Neighbourhood House.

Emotional work: “I have so much joy here because there’s so much laughter”

The whole gamut

Feelings?

oh,

you have the whole gamut.

some days it’s great

some days

it sucks

some days it’s most *frustrating*,

you go through that whole range.

You're always chasing money
that's probably the biggest worry
the most frustrating

I'll give you an example

you get some really great programs set up

program for seniors who were losing mobility

the powers that be give you all this money to do pilot programs

it's been absolutely brilliant, they just love being in here

but nothing ever happens afterwards, so we've gotta stop.

Feelings? some days it's great.

I think the positives

outweigh the negatives.

you have your big celebration end of year everybody gets their certificates -

just seeing the smiles on people's faces

the achievement

the proudness,

that outweighs a lot of the other

frustrating things.

(poetic interpretation from *Alicia's* transcript, emphases my own)

Managing a Neighbourhood House was embodied emotional work. The managers engaged with their work at a deep emotional level, and this was based on a profound belief in the purpose and meaningfulness of their work. They loved working with the people – staff, peers, and community members – and contributing to real change in the lives of community members and their communities. There were many different aspects of the work that they loved: the challenges, collaborating with community members and organisations to plan new projects and activities, “*balancing the accounts*”, and seeing the successful realisation of their efforts and the outcomes for the lives of people in the community. *Raeche* loved her job, and when people responded to their advertising, either to participate or to share their skills, it gave her a

profound sense of satisfaction realising that the Neighbourhood House was seen as an important resource for the community:

... really love when we've done some advertising of some kind ... and we get a response from what we're putting out. I love it when people are actually coming to us looking for an activity or have a skill that they want to share. I really love that we can make people feel comfortable enough to come to us as well as us going to them. I really, look there's so much, I just really love my job, I really love my job. (Raechel)

Crystal and Dianne enjoyed working under pressure because it was energising and drew on their skills. Working collaboratively is a very important aspect of the way Neighbourhood Houses operate and Crystal loved working in this way:

... it kind of draws on all the skills and the things that I like to do, I like to juggle, I like to be a bit under pressure, not too much but a bit under pressure like I work effectively like that. I like that whole collaborating so that's so important for a Neighbourhood House but I love doing that work, like that's something that I really like. (Crystal)

Dianne loved being under pressure and fully immersed in multiple tasks when she knew that her work was directed towards addressing the needs of community members:

I feel actually energised by it, when I'm really under the pump, and I'm juggling a whole lot of balls I actually feel energised by that. If I haven't got something going, I'm going, 'What's next, what's next, I need to do that?' ... I am energised by it, I love working in this sector, I love being around people. I love people seeing the success, feel passionate about our community and the broader community, but especially for our English language students and our refugees and asylum seekers. (Dianne)

The managers strongly and emphatically expressed their positive feelings towards their work. Evelyn identified the non-bureaucratic, inclusive and encouraging environment:

I love it that we're not constrained by bureaucracy, Houses are organic and they can change and adapt, and provide opportunities for people to be involved and aware of these social issues, and provide referrals and support. (Evelyn)

Sarah was unequivocal about how much she loved her job, looking forward to coming to work every day. It was a workplace where there was fun and laughter, and “everyone looks out for each other”. The managers’ love of the work was often reflected back to them by participants, Sarah noting that the participants “love our attitude, our friendliness”.

The managers’ love and commitment for the work and the people was not just a feel-good response, it was an underpinning source of strength and energy. Love of the work sustained them when they experienced doubts and questions about their abilities. They drew upon this love when they advocated and argued for their communities and to cope with the demanding workload. Ayla derived great enjoyment from organising creative workshops and activities providing opportunities for women in the community to socialise and learn together, and she advocated for her community because she was committed to ensuring that they received the services they needed. After a traumatic bushfire emergency she recognised that many community members were very vulnerable. Their emotions were still running high, and they needed practical support and information, as well as access to recreational activities to help in the fire recovery process. In order to do this she had to overcome her discomfort with speaking up in meetings and putting forward her ideas. She recalled the impact when a “very hard community member” took her to task over something she had no control over:

... it can give you that real good sense that you're, you're doing something for your community and that you're getting somewhere and you know you're offering them as much as you can. Other times it can be very straining, to say the least, especially when, if anything goes wrong we get blamed [laughs]. We've just had a recent thing a recent run-in which is part of the recovery and nobody sort of took it on board and I have and, I've been abused quite terribly

over something that you know it was not under my control anyway, and it's just a very hard community member, that I've never run into like this before. (Ayla)

This incident shook her to the point where she was prompted to reflect on whether to continue in her role, however, a friendly voice on the telephone the following day helped *Ayla* to realise that the vitriol came from “*just one*” person, and that her work was appreciated. They felt keenly when they had done all they could do and the outcome they hoped for did not result. The poetic re-presentation from *Alicia's* transcript at the beginning of this section outlines some reasons why she experienced the whole gamut of emotions in her role. Frustration, and lack of enjoyment of some aspects of the work existed alongside the enjoyment and pleasure she experienced, and on balance she said that “*the positives outweigh the negatives*”. Celebrating and recognising the participants' achievements and sharing in their sense of pride in themselves was an important means to help her to move beyond the frustrations she experienced over funding issues.

The managers' commitment and passion for the work co-existed with, and ultimately triumphed over, the times when they wrestled with doubts about themselves and their ability to cope with the heavy and complex workload, with not being listened to or appreciated, and when their efforts to develop and deliver programs to their communities were unsuccessful. It helped them to develop professional approaches to aspects of their work which they disliked, for example dealing with conflict. *Lorna* did not like it when she had to do what she called the “*hard stuff*”, dealing with conflict, much preferring to encourage people than discipline them, however, because she was strongly committed to undertaking all the responsibilities of her role she found ways to manage her personal discomfort:

I find it really hard defusing conflict and I'm expected to be the arbiter of that as the co-ordinator here. I'm much more comfortable giving praise and encouragement than I am talking to people about where they need to make improvements or how they might need to change their behaviour. I will do it, I'll fumble around and I'll try and do it as gently as possible. (Lorna)

Emotional agency and being comfortable with expressing their feelings was a strength that the managers as women brought to the role. As well as the ability to express their love for the job and the people, they were able to admit to confusion, and doubts about their ability to do the work. *Dianne* questioned why “as women” we doubt our own skills and competence, as she contemplated the nature of her self-doubt, admitting that sometimes when she felt inadequate she wondered “*how I do my job?*” She recounted her surprise at hearing a group of highly skilled and experienced women managers in her network expressing similar doubts about their competence as managers:

Our over-arching theme was, “We feel inadequate, that we’re not doing a good job”. And I’m looking at them going, ‘You feel like that, my God you are so skilled, you do so much’. And they’re saying that to me and I’m going, ‘No, you’re wrong, I’m not a really good manager, I’m not really good at my job’. I mean where the hell does that come from as women that we feel like that? So all of us and myself still at times, many many times, think I’m inadequate. (Dianne)

In some situations the managers perceived that they were not being listened to, or were being overlooked and they queried whether this was because they were women. *Sally* usually felt that she was anybody’s equal, however, she wondered whether being overlooked, not listened to or taken seriously when she was at local government meetings was because she was an older woman. This caused her to question whether there was a connection between the “*usual disempowering things that all older women have*”, that is, “*invisibility ... and people not feeling you have the gravitas*”, and the Neighbourhood House being omitted from a recent publication which included all other services and groups in the area.

That's actually something that I think I have to develop strategies for ... I find that when I feel myself being overlooked and sometimes you know, it's me representing [the Neighbourhood House] is being overlooked ... I've just gotta watch that I don't sort of get a bit aggressive. (Sally)

Knowledge and understanding: "I love to keep learning"

What I know now

Something that I know now that I didn't know before?

(That's a really hard question)

I'd have to say -

How to be a manager -

(Cos)

I've never *been* a manager before.

That would be the biggest thing.

How to be

A business manager

How to manage people

A big thing I've learnt is managing the volunteers.

How to manage people

That's what I've learnt.

(poetic interpretation from Sarah's transcript)

Managing a Neighbourhood House was a new experience for most of the managers, even for those with management skills attained during previous employment in other sectors. The experience was new because of the particularity and breadth of knowledge required, which could be gained only from within. Acquiring and developing apposite knowledge and skills was an ongoing interactive and collaborative aspect of their work. The managers embraced diverse means to do this. *Dianne explained that "I learned from everybody and I still do"*, referring to the many people and sources of

knowledge available to her. Some managers undertook formal learning to gain qualifications, and to deepen their understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and the technical aspects of their work. Much learning was informal and collaborative, facilitated by peers – other managers of Neighbourhood Houses – through mentoring arrangements, informal support and discussion, and sharing of knowledge and skills. Regardless of the means, becoming more knowledgeable and skilled in their role developed their agency and created a sense of confidence and achievement.

Soaking up knowledge

All the managers engaged with new and different areas of professional activity in their role. The broad reach of the community development and support functions of the Neighbourhood House, and the level of detailed knowledge required led *Crystal* to observe that in any new position “*you’ve just got a steep learning curve*”. *Christine* acknowledged that she had limited understanding of “*how Neighbourhood Houses work*” although she had previously worked in the wider community services sector.

Some managers embarked on an intense learning path. They were enthusiastic in their desire to learn and develop the skills required for the role. *Dianne* and *Sarah* both began at the Neighbourhood House in other roles, *Dianne* doing casual administration work and *Sarah* as a volunteer. They referred to themselves as “*being like a sponge*” in their enthusiasm to gain as much knowledge as they could. Initially, their lack of post-school qualifications contributed to their feeling inadequate and not confident about their skills. When *Dianne* began, she felt inadequate “*across a whole range of areas*”, but she became more confident as she “*sucked up as much knowledge as I could from everybody*”. *Sarah* thought she was “*not that smart*” when she began, although she knew finances “*really well*”. Over time, she assumed leadership positions at the House,

as treasurer, then chairperson, taking on greater responsibility, and attending workshops. In doing this she was learning *“more than I’d ever learnt in my whole life”*, and she realised that, in fact, she was *“damn smart”*. The poetic interpretation from Sarah’s transcript at the beginning of this section indicates that the role of manager was a new and very significant experience for her. In this role she developed the skills to manage both the business, and people-focussed, aspects of the Neighbourhood House. At Sarah’s Neighbourhood House it was particularly important to manage the volunteers well, as they were the first point of contact for community members and visitors, and they were responsible for undertaking most of the daily administrative tasks, and the community and program support activities of the House.

Being the manager opened new pathways and opportunities for undertaking formal education in areas such as community development, community education and training, and community business management. This developed the managers’ theoretical understanding of community development and increased their technical skills and proficiency. Successfully completing qualifications produced a sense of pride, confidence, and belief in themselves. Dianne *“was learning as the organisation was growing”*, undertaking several qualifications prior to becoming the manager, giving her the confidence to accept the role when it was offered to her. Lorna already had a certificate level qualification in another area, and was now studying a graduate diploma because *“I think I’ve been doing community development for the last 15 years of my career, but not actually having a theoretical background to judge that by”*. Evelyn valued the study she undertook:

I invested in myself, which I felt worthy of at this stage ... I did it a couple of years ago, so I’ve been empowered by my knowledge, my commitment to study. It’s been a powerful journey. I would not have done that outside of the Neighbourhood House sector ... without the sector so they’ve empowered me ... having a belief in yourself, ‘Yeh I can do that’, it’s very, very rewarding.
(Evelyn)

Inspiration and support

The managers drew strength and inspiration from many people, particularly their peers in the Neighbourhood House networks, other colleagues, and from committee members. Management committees were identified as important sources of internal support for the managers. Trust was an important element in creating an effective working relationship between managers and their committees, and the advice and guidance managers received from committee members was sometimes crucial to enabling them to do their job. *Crystal* considered that her good working relationship with the committee was a significant source of effective support and appreciated that she could go to them and say, “‘Ooorruuurrughg’ [laughing] and they’ll be very supportive”, when she felt overwhelmed. *Lorna* was appreciative about the two-way nature of the relationship between herself and the committee:

I feel quite empowered in that space as well, so the committee trusts me, trusts my judgement, but they also are there to be that guide and be the sounding board for ideas around where we’re going. (Lorna)

There were occasions when formal mentoring arrangements were established between managers and committee members. Establishing a formal mentoring arrangement provided certainty, confidentiality, and a guarantee of longevity and commitment to work towards a resolution. For *Elizabeth*, a mentoring relationship with two women who were formerly committee members was instrumental in supporting her through a problematic situation she faced in her first week as manager. In her first week in the position, *Elizabeth* discovered that there was internal conflict on the committee of management, and that the relationship between the Neighbourhood House and the community was “broken”, and she was ready to quit at the end the week. The two women offered to mentor *Elizabeth* and in doing so helped her to recognise and

believe in her own skills and ability to resolve the situation and continue as manager. Together they worked out a plan of action to be implemented over the following months, to address the management issues and establish a comprehensive internal policy regime:

Those people, principally women, were the ones who gave me the confidence and who kind of reinforced that, “No, you know how to do this, it’s exactly the same as what you’ve done here, it’s exactly the same as what you’ve studied, in theory, now we just need to apply it in a practical sense”. (Elizabeth)

Women were acknowledged for their pivotal role in providing support and encouragement to the managers. In her several roles and throughout her many years working in the Neighbourhood House *Dianne* recognised that it was “*mainly women that were extremely encouraging*”. *Evelyn* deliberately sought out “*very knowledgeable and inspiring women*” to enhance her understanding of gender equality and violence against women and to work in partnership with to establish new programs in her community to address these issues. Discussions with women in other networks who worked with women serving community-based corrections orders inspired her to establish a similar program. The knowledge she acquired from these partnerships and contacts made it possible for her to overcome her own limited experience and develop programs in her own community that responded to and supported vulnerable women:

That’s a very empowering thing for me as a community leader. And I’m learning all the time too. Cos this is not a specialist field for me, but I surround myself with other very knowledgeable and inspiring women. (Evelyn)

Evelyn and *Dianne* both became confident to mentor others as a result of their own experiences of being mentored. *Evelyn* undertook to mentor several managers in her network who had limited experience writing funding submissions. *Dianne* had the

courage to become a mentor because the learning and support she received from others gave her the skills and the belief in herself to do so:

Empowerment means I can actually mentor someone else and encourage them on their pathway to whatever they need to do, and to do it in a way that doesn't demean them. Give them positive feedback with some, 'Maybe you need to do this to get to that point'. I think it's given me courage to see that I can provide leadership as well. (Dianne)

The managers drew their major ongoing support from their peers in the regional Neighbourhood House networks, and the networkers. The support of the networker was vital for *Rhino* at a time when she was being bullied by some members of her committee:

... in the end I received significant support from the network, or the networker, a new networker in the ... region, that was fantastic, and without his support I probably I may not have survived it ... he was fantastic, he was on the phone to me a number of times a day. He'd be on the phone to me for hours ... to allow me to debrief. (Rhino)

Networkers offered confidential and individual case by case support to managers. Network members were an external source of knowledge and professional support for managers where they could safely and confidentially discuss their vulnerabilities and concerns, and receive wise counsel, for as *Dianne* observed, being in the position “*where the buck stops*” could be isolating and stressful. Several managers worked alone or in considerable physical isolation. *Ayla* job-shared the role in a small remotely located Neighbourhood House, and after discovering the benefits of support from her peers she was determined to make the time to attend network meetings:

I am more involved with our network meetings where I never used to be. I'll go to them all because you need their support. You don't realise how valuable they are, to speak to other co-ordinators and bounce off them, hear what they're going through and going, 'Oh God, I'm so glad you deal with that too', and just getting the ideas ... sharing that information and those emotions is probably

the biggest thing that I think I've learnt that I do differently. They are very important. (Ayla)

Encouraging, supporting, sharing experiences, and talking with one another alleviated the sense of working alone, or the necessity of finding solutions on their own to the everyday issues they faced. It was a powerful way to work, providing opportunities to debrief, give and receive emotional support, address and discuss problematic aspects of their work, share knowledge and other resources.

Increasing self-awareness and understanding of community

The managers developed highly refined understandings and awareness of the communities they were working with through their many close interactions and dialogues with community members, colleagues, and peers. A deepened understanding facilitated their ability to undertake effective community development work. As they became attuned to the diversity, the characteristics, and understood the particular needs and issues in their communities they were able to implement appropriate programs and responses, and to represent the community and advocate for local issues of concern at the forums and meetings they attended. *Mary* realised that the connections she had developed with many local groups over the four years she had been the manager had given her substantial understanding of the diverse needs and interests in her community. This enabled her to speak with some authority and represent their interests at local forums where otherwise silence would have remained around the concerns of seniors, young mothers, and the men coming to the Men's Shed:

I feel that I can talk and give reasonable answers about the community. I might have given you something in the past but it wouldn't have been as representative and knowing as it is now. (Mary)

The managers were attuned to the changing nature of the environments they worked in, and to the necessity of remaining aware of the movements and changing needs within their communities. As *Mary's* connection with the community deepened she understood that *"people have different needs, and they change over time"*.

Furthermore, they understood that not all community members wanted the same thing, for instance, some people required language classes, others were seeking opportunities for social engagement, or activities for young children. *Dianne* described the changing profile of her community from a highly culturally diverse community, with many vulnerable workers and low income families, to a community that was experiencing an influx of young families attracted by the relatively low cost of housing, which in turn was contributing to housing pressures for the poorer sections of the community:

It's a changing community. Over the last few years it's changed significantly, what with families ... I understand the diversity of it. I understand that it changes a lot and that there are particular groups and pockets of people that have more need than others, or needs in different ways. (Dianne)

Increasing their social and political awareness about the lives of the people in their communities intensified the managers' commitment to their work, and changed the way they related to others. As they became more reflexive about their attitudes and behaviour towards others, they were less inclined to be judgemental. *Mary* learned to be less judgemental by putting herself *"in other people's shoes and understand where they're coming from"*, acknowledging that in an environment that espoused access, respect, and social justice it was *"really important [that] you accept everyone"*. *Sarah* was adamant that people in her community would not be judged because of their circumstances, *"people are the way they are for a reason ... things happen in their lives"*.

As manager of a Neighbourhood House located in a diverse community, *Alicia* experienced close contact with asylum seekers and newly arrived community members. Her understanding of the needs and experiences of the recently arrived refugees and asylum seekers who were accessing programs at the Neighbourhood House deepened through discussion and observation with people whose life experiences were far removed from her own. This led her to realise that lack of contact limited people's ability to understand others' world views and was the basis of ignorance and the racist comments she sometimes heard from others:

Until coming here, I probably hadn't had much contact with CALD¹² communities and learning about some of the atrocities they've been through. I think myself, like a lot of people in our area, don't see a lot of the refugees and asylum seekers and things like that, and some of the racist comments that they make and then I always see myself getting up on my high horse and saying, 'No, you should look at it from their point of view, and this is what's happened to them'. (Alicia)

Support and collaboration: "I have a really supportive committee"

Working together

We've worked very closely
with the people who've been funded by these projects
to work in our area.
we spend, I mean
we're spending
a *lot of time* actually
just helping them
setting up meetings for them
trying to make sure

¹² Culturally and linguistically diverse

that *everything* works *together* rather than against each other
cos there is that possibility.

(poetic interpretation from *Sally's* transcript, emphases are my own)

The managers played a central role in facilitating and enacting supportive and collaborative approaches in their work. As leaders, within their organisations and in the communities in which they were located, they worked collaboratively with others, including committees of management, staff and volunteers, participants, and external organisations and groups. A central aspect of their work was managing staff and internal organisational relationships and the collaborative and co-operative nature of this was a source of strength for them because it meant that they too were supported in their work. Within their neighbourhoods and the broader community they undertook leadership roles as members of networks, community working groups, and in consultations with local groups. Their leadership, within and outside the Neighbourhood House, was characteristically undertaken co-operatively, and directed towards change and transformation in their communities, for individuals, groups and the whole community.

Working with staff

The managers played a key role in establishing a supportive and co-operative workplace for both paid and voluntary staff. A supportive and co-operative workplace enabled both the managers and their staff to undertake their work. The two sets of managers who were job-sharing the role spoke highly of each other. In the words of one manager:

*... we get on really well and that's fantastic, that's my major support ...
complement each other very well and can talk to each about any of the issues
without anyone getting precious or upset.*

Another manager considered that an advantage of job-sharing was that it overcame the isolation of the position:

... one of the most difficult aspects of the job is the isolation and I think that that's why I was quite excited about the idea of coming back in a job share, arrangement. And it was fantastic to have somebody else in, just in the place, who you could talk to, you could bounce ideas off, you could brainstorm with, and between ... and I we came up with such better plans, much more quickly having each other to work with.

Raechel spoke about the importance of having a co-operative working relationship with staff saying that this enabled a non-directive management style, and the formation of happy relationships inside and outside the organisation:

I think the relationships with the staff are incredibly important, because if you don't have a team that are on the same page as you and don't feel like they can express opinions and ideas then you're kind of running a dictatorship, which I could do [laughing]. But I try not to. I think that staff relationship is incredibly important, and happy staff make for happy relationships with external parties as well. (Raechel)

The managers identified three distinctive characteristics of the Neighbourhood House working environment; a high level of co-operation, a predominantly female workforce, and the relatively non-hierarchical organisational structure. These characteristics shaped the way that the managers viewed and expressed power in their roles. The specific nature of these characteristics varied between the Neighbourhood Houses, however, they influenced the way in which the managers developed working relationships with staff. The managers credited the female-oriented workplace with encouraging an empathic working environment and approaches which were understanding of the personal circumstances of their staff, for instance, staff members' roles and responsibilities as primary carers of young children. Alicia embraced a more nuanced approach understanding that there were occasions "to be soft, because females have a lot of family issues that they need to deal with", and compared this to a

former male-oriented workplace where her behaviour was more outspoken. *Raechel* adopted a sympathetic management approach towards “*all the issues that individuals have in their personal lives*”, regardless of whether they were important to her personally, because she believed that in order to manage successfully the things that were important to the staff needed to be important to her.

The relatively flat organisational structure enabled managers to enact co-operative, non-hierarchical working relationships that were collaborative, inclusive, and team-based. Although the managers were ultimately responsible for the operational aspects of the Neighbourhood Houses they considered the staff as a team, and themselves to be part of the staff team. *Raechel* claimed that she was very lucky to have “*a great team of people that I work with, and we truly are a team*”. Working collaboratively, rather than in a hierarchical manner was beneficial to the managers because it enabled them to manage in accordance with their values, and it meant that they were not working alone. *Lorna* noted the contrast between managing at the Neighbourhood House and her previous very directive experience in local government which was focussed on “*the lines of the hierarchy*”. She commented on the lack of formality in the way her staff related to her, “*people know I’m the manager or co-ordinator, but you know they don’t treat me like this*”. In the non-hierarchical environment of the Neighbourhood House *Lorna* could enact her vision of a transformative style of leadership, one which engendered a welcoming culture and supported personal development and “*collective*” activity:

If we’re talking about leadership styles I’d like to believe that I’m a transformative leader. I’m possibly not as transformative as I’d like to be, maybe a little bit more authoritarian, but for me the goal of a Neighbourhood House is about transformational leadership, not just within your team but within your community. (Lorna)

For *Raechel*, working collaboratively was mutually rewarding because supporting and enabling the staff to do their jobs well *“helps me to do my job well”*, it engendered trust between herself and the staff, and freed her from becoming involved in the minutiae of their work. This appealed to *Crystal* who could rely on volunteers and the skilled staff and focus her energies on the strategic aspects of her work:

...the other staff that work here are very good at what they're doing and so I know I can rely on them just to get on with what they're meant to be doing, and I don't have to poke my nose in too much into that day to day stuff. (Crystal)

Including staff in decision making further cemented a sense of trust. *Christine* suggested that an *“open and transparent”* working environment in which staff were encouraged to *“express opinions and ideas”* built trust between herself and the staff and resulted in the staff feeling happy about their work and workplace. *Christine* really enjoyed the collective decision-making process and recognised that it empowered the staff, and mirrored the community development philosophy underpinning the Neighbourhood House model of practice.

Inside the house: supporting change and development in the community

Working within a community development framework, the managers prioritised community support and development within a group rather than an individual context. However, opportunities arose for managers to support and encourage individual members of their communities to engage with their communities, build their skills, and to make meaningful decisions in their lives. Opportunities for managers to undertake community development work at a micro level with an individual community member usually occurred spontaneously and were not a formalised component of the manager's role. The managers were enriched by interactions and experiences where they were professionally engaged in supporting and encouraging individual members of

their communities. This work was enacted within the social context of the Neighbourhood House and it addressed several dimensions of community development, such as social and personal development, and economic and educational development.

Lorna considered that supporting individuals was a way of contributing to and enabling “*change at a community level*”. This work, embedded within the social and community context of the Neighbourhood House, contributed to changes in the lives of individual community members and enabled them to have increased agency within their lives. The managers attended to this development work by providing opportunities for individual community members which engaged, utilised, and increased their skills and interests, encouraged social interaction and sharing of knowledge and skills, and offered support at times of personal crisis, for instance, when experiencing domestic violence. *Christine* believed that supporting, encouraging, and providing opportunities for individual community members to achieve their goals, or pursue new areas in their lives, was ideal community development practice. She encouraged her staff to work in this way, and recalled how she demonstrated this view to a new staff member. A former participant wished to return to a supported playgroup at the Neighbourhood House because she was lonely and wanted the company of other mothers. When *Christine* spoke to the mother she discovered that she was a qualified Children’s Educator, with hopes of establishing her own playgroup. Instead of accepting her return to the group, *Christine* took the opportunity to encourage the former participant to pursue her goals, asking if she would still like to establish her own playgroup:

She went, “Yeh absolutely, I’d be delighted”. So we’ve been working with her. She has set up her own self-managed playgroup, we’ve got support from [local government]. We’re identifying who amongst the playgroup we already have we can move into her group so that we make spaces for women who are more in need to come into that group. Now that is absolute ideal practice from my perspective. (Christine)

Volunteering opportunities provided a way of supporting individual community members towards achieving their goals. When taken up they resulted in unanticipated opportunities for learning, and in employment outcomes for the volunteers. It was generally the manager's role to negotiate with potential volunteers and identify areas of work available to them, based on their skills, interests and aspirations. *Mary* arranged a volunteering placement for a young mother who had been away from the workforce for a long time. The placement used her design and writing skills to support the funding and promotional activities of the Neighbourhood House. The young mother credited this opportunity for her developing the skills and confidence to become "*an agent for positive change*" in the community, as she has subsequently employed these skills for the benefit of several other community groups. Furthermore, she was offered a few hours employment each week because of the connections and skills she gained from volunteering.

Lorna's experience with volunteers confirmed the value of her chosen way of working with the community of being "*encouraging ... not rushing ahead*", allowing people's level of involvement to develop at their own pace. Over time, *Lorna* witnessed substantial personal change and development as one volunteer became increasingly engaged in local social action concerning volunteering and food security by taking up professional development opportunities and continuing to pursue and further her interests in working within the community. This resulted in her training and obtaining employment as a community development worker.

The managers recognised that providing opportunities for individual community members in order for them to "*build to their own personal capacity*" was an empowering and satisfying aspect of their work. *Evelyn* said that it was joyful to witness the change in a single mother's life as she gradually overcame her anxiety, took up studies and

started her own business because of the supportive connection with the Neighbourhood House:

We got her to come and volunteer here on the desk, built a relationship with her, supported her anxiety, she's since gone on to do a Cert IV in Massage Therapy, she's run classes here, so from that volunteering experience, to then running her own business is probably one of the biggest joys to me. (Evelyn)

Much of the work of the managers focused on identifying community needs and developing appropriate programmatic responses. Many different small-group based programs were offered at the Houses. The programs offered in the Neighbourhood Houses encompassed several interrelated dimensions of community development: social and personal development, economic and educational development, environmental development, cultural and political development. While programs were often developed for specific purposes, for instance educational development, or to address the need for social engagement, there were other dimensions of community development evident in these programs. The social and personal dimension underpinned all programs offered in the Neighbourhood Houses. Sarah was acutely aware of people's need to socialise and have a place where they could come and talk to other people, regardless of whether they were participating in a program:

It's a big part of the house, they might not be coming for a program, just to have a chat, come in and have a cup of coffee, cup of tea, have a chat with someone, often they're sitting all chatting to each other, it's like a big family here ... I think it's very important, I don't care if no-one wants to do a program, it's about getting people connected into this house and to each other. A lot of people who volunteer here have become friends outside the house and that's what it's about ... a lot of elderly people come too, that are isolated, and they make friends here and it's wonderful, they start coming more, joining in more things and that's what it's about, everybody joining in. (Sarah)

Addressing social needs was embedded within learning and skill building activities such as crafts, English Language classes, or computers. The managers recognised

and understood that participating in a yoga class or an art class was not just about learning that skill or participating in that activity, it was about connecting and communicating with other people. *Dianne* observed that “*needs come in a variety of ways, they’re not always apparent*”. This understanding was important because many people felt comfortable to attend an activity, and at the same time fulfil a need for social engagement, whereas they did not feel comfortable to identify as lonely or isolated. Witnessing the positive impacts of participation in programs was one of the managers’ most meaningful experiences:

My enjoyment is around the workshop aspects of crafts and creativity, to me it’s one of the best ... if we get two people turning up to a workshop we’re winner, sometimes we get a lot more but not a great deal, but to me it’s the best thing it gets people out, we don’t have cafes here or a local shop or anything, it brings mainly the women together ... to me it’s one of the best things that we can do.
(Ayla)

As well as revealing her pleasure in seeing the beneficial impact of the programs she developed, *Ayla* highlighted another important aspect of the way managers understood their community development role. Many activities, whether they were regular or occasional, catered for varying numbers, and in some Neighbourhood Houses, such as *Ayla’s* which was based in a small isolated rural community, there was often only a handful of participants. Managers in small rural Houses often faced this issue and they recognised that small class sizes did not diminish the value of the programs for participants as they were vital for overcoming isolation and providing social connections with others. *Mary* explained why the importance of the work of the Neighbourhood House could not be measured purely in numbers:

I think Neighbourhood Houses are vital. And for this community, it would be a hollow place if it didn’t have this house and it’s not just me raving about Neighbourhood Houses. I just, know, our activities are small, we mightn’t have big numbers. Now the art group today, we had three here. On a good day we’ll

have five. But that is vital for those five women ... it's a place where people develop confidence and skills. (Mary)

Managers oversaw the planning and processes to develop local responses to articulated and perceived community needs and wants. They developed programs in response to the expressed needs of particular groups within a community. *Alicia* outlined the careful and extensive process she instituted for establishing programs for newly arrived groups within her community based on their identified needs:

It's not about what we think the clients want, it's what they want ... one of the things that we do during the community collaboration is talk to the groups and say, "Ok, what are your needs, and what are your wants? What can we do to build your skills to make sure that you meet those needs? What are the wants that you want for down the track?" Some of them say, "I want to communicate", or, "I want to be social", "I just wanna talk to somebody", "I wanna have a cuppa with somebody", or "I wanna make a quilt" ... it might be even down to, "I wanna make a healthy lunch box for my child", or, "I wanna go and volunteer at the school". And we have a look at those, all right so what are their skill levels, how can we fill the gaps, what skills they're missing to meet that want or need, and then we design the program around that. (Alicia)

The managers' work in establishing small group programs made an important contribution to the economic and educational development of their communities. *Alicia* was aware that many of the local communities she worked with, including disadvantaged or disengaged community members and those from diverse cultural and language backgrounds, considered that the Neighbourhood House was the "*place for people to come and build their skills that can lead into work*". *Dianne* considered that it was important to meet the needs of students who wanted to learn English, "*especially our refugees and asylum seekers*", and for people on low incomes not have to pay for learning foundation skills.

Outside the house: supporting change and development in the community

The community development work undertaken by the managers extended beyond the four walls of the Neighbourhood House and into the broader community. Within the Neighbourhood House the managers worked closely with their committees of management and Boards, staff, and participants. Externally their work was undertaken in concert with local community groups and organisations, and interested community members. At times managers took a leading role in facilitating processes whereby the community identified and defined their needs and planned ways to address them.

Taking a leadership role in facilitating and organising these events was rewarding and satisfying for managers and contributed to their increased confidence and skill in their roles. Their participation in networks and partnerships supported and inspired them, it ensured they were able to keep in touch with real community needs, and it enhanced their ability to support change within their communities:

It's silly to not be connected and then not know what other people are doing ... When you realise what someone else or a group want to achieve and you want to do the same thing, well let's do it together, and then it's bigger and better and way more effective. (Crystal)

There was great depth and breadth to the ways in which the managers worked within and with their local communities. This aspect of Neighbourhood House work took a variety of forms from large scale and whole-of-community events and activities to small intimate activities. *Sally* managed a small House in an isolated area of Victoria. In the poetic interpretation from her transcript at the beginning of this section she refers to supporting and co-operating with projects that were funded to provide arts-based programs in her area as part of a bushfire recovery initiative. After initially being “so *pissed off*” that the funding applications were submitted by a local government officer without consulting with the Neighbourhood House or the local community, her

endeavours were directed towards ensuring that the projects benefitted the community.

Large-scale activities, such as annual festivals and community markets, contributed to the economic development and sustainability of the small towns where Neighbourhood Houses were located. These events brought visitors to the town, encouraged local entrepreneurship, provided fund-raising opportunities for community organisations, and supported locally-based businesses. Along with the economic development associated with these activities, social development was a key feature. Annual celebrations and festivals provided opportunities for social interaction and the forging of new social connections and networks across the whole community. These programs, activities and services therefore made substantial contributions to the economic and social life of their communities:

As well as developing skills and providing economic stimulus we build a positive vibe and provide enriching experiences and socialising opportunities in our community. For example, through our community events we provide a variety of high calibre entertainment options locally which otherwise would not be available – this has been a growing need as our population has declined and changed over the last 30 years. By having these opportunities in town we are building a cohesive, attractive town to live in and increasing our sustainability.
(Mary)

Collaborating with organisations and community members across the wider community to plan and organise large-scale events which benefitted the local community gave the managers a sense of pride in their work and a great sense of achievement. One of Mary's roles as manager was to facilitate three major celebratory events throughout the year which brought together community groups and organisations, including the primary school and kindergarten, as local planning partners. One event in particular show-cased the town attracting large numbers of visitors, thereby contributing economically to the town's local businesses and community organisations. Bringing people together created a wonderful atmosphere in the town, and the volunteers who

contributed hundreds of hours of unpaid work felt a great sense of achievement:

I think it's really vital for our community. Makes them feel good about themselves. Empowering. It gives them, the little group, a chance to see what we can achieve when we work together. (Mary)

Elizabeth wanted to contribute to beneficial changes in the wider community. Along with a voluntary committee, and the manager she shared the position with, a new plan was developed to transform a small indoor market based at the Neighbourhood House to one which was held outdoors in the centre of town. This created opportunities for many of the local community groups and organisations to participate, to strengthen their connections with each other, and to benefit from the distribution of monies raised at the gate.

The other aspect of the market, one of the things that we wanted to do, was to work with community groups to give them fundraising opportunities. Because there are only limited opportunities to fundraise throughout the year....we have a lot of community groups, lots of not-for-profit organisations in town who share volunteers. And who essentially share funds as well, because there's only so many fundraisers that you can go to every year and give your money to as an individual. So we wanted to provide other opportunities. (Elizabeth)

Rhino organised a local summit involving more than 500 community members, to create a list of their top economic development priorities to be included in a municipal plan, and since then has seen several priorities implemented. She commented that “when you make a huge plan and it actually works I mean that’s fairly empowering as well”. *Crystal* initiated a series of community consultation forums when she realised that the voices of particular target groups would not be heard if the local government used a survey to conduct a consultation with local residents. She persuaded them that holding forums at the Neighbourhood House would be more effective in including diverse voices and opinions:

That was really about making a space for those voices and those contributions getting into the plan. I think it's very hard for families to find time for things and to prioritise things, and I was thinking having a conversation was a nice way of getting their ideas. (Crystal)

There were times when collaboration produced a different outcome from the one that was originally intended. *Lorna* had approached a local service organisation to become partners in the establishment of a community shed in a space at the Neighbourhood House. Over several months she met with a small group to discuss the ideas and concepts for a shed that would be accessible to women and people with a disability, rather than a shed that catered only for men. *Lorna* had been advocating strongly for an inclusive shed and she was concerned that the idea was not properly understood, however, they were determined to be involved. It was not until she mentioned that it would not be possible to leave projects “*lying around*” because the shed would be used by other people during the week that “*a light bulb went off*”: they realised they were at cross purposes, and “*went off, found another venue for their men’s shed*”. Despite this setback, *Lorna* supported their application for funding, and continued to build the relationship with the group:

... my presence at those meetings, my willingness to experiment with them around how we might have that men’s shed happen and a whole range of other factors including writing them a support letter for funding applications and those sorts of things have meant that we still have a very strong relationship and so they still come back, recently they said they wanna run some courses but we’d like to run them under your umbrella. ‘We’ll run them at our shed, but we’ll run them through your house’, and so I’ve built a fairly strong relationship there that previously didn’t exist, cos there were a bunch of crusty old guys who would get on whipper snippers and mowers and shovels and god knows what else. (Lorna)

Meeting challenges: “how am I going to do this?”

Being bullied

I didn’t realise what they were doing

I didn't realise that was *bullying*,

I didn't have a clue.

(I don't know how you get to your fifties and not know what bullying is)

I didn't know how to stand up for myself because I stand up for other people.

It was horrendous and it was shocking.

I'm lucky enough to have lots of good people around me

the networker, he was fantastic

on the phone to me a number of times a day

allowed me to debrief,

I had a friend from the community who was gonna come in as my advocate

he said, "Rhino I don't know if you're gonna survive this",

but it was *empowering* because I came out the other end

(poetic interpretation from *Rhino's* transcript, emphases are my own)

The managers experienced many challenges in their roles due in part to the wide range of areas the role encompassed. The challenges identified by the managers were associated with:

- a heavy and complex workload
- funding issues such as limited funding, insecurity of funding, relationships with funding bodies, and the differing priorities of funding bodies and Neighbourhood Houses
- conflicts requiring discipline procedures, such as unacceptable behaviour, bullying and sexual harassment
- Lack of recognition by external bodies of Neighbourhood Houses

The challenges were an accepted aspect of the role, and engaging with them contributed to the managers' deepening skills and competence. Sometimes a challenging situation encapsulated a complex set of responses, initially creating stress and later when successfully resolved evoking a sense of achievement. Some conflict situations were experienced as disempowering when the managers faced issues such

as being bullied. This was followed by a sense of empowerment when strategies had been put in place to resolve the situation. Alternatively, when they had limited or no decision-making power, or ability to control external influences, the challenges became frustrating and disempowering. At times the challenges they faced created doubts about their suitability and ability to do the work, for example, when called upon to discipline serious breaches of conduct. When they successfully resolved an issue, resisted pressure from funding bodies and external agencies, or stood up for themselves and the Neighbourhood House they moved beyond their hesitations and doubts and felt strong and confident about their work. There were occasions when the managers were confronted with completely new situations they had not previously experienced, or been required to manage, for example, dealing with sexual harassment.

The challenging nature of the role was not universally viewed as a negative aspect of the work. As discussed previously in the section titled *New opportunities*, some managers had applied for the position specifically because they perceived that the challenges presented by a role that encompassed such a wide range of areas, provided opportunities for professional and personal development. Once in the position all of the managers developed strategies and support systems to deal with the many challenges, and they reflected on the skills and confidence they gained from doing so.

Managing a complex workload

All the managers contended with an extremely high workload associated with the broad suite of areas the position encompassed. Whether in a large or small Neighbourhood House the managers' work extended across multiple domains and activity areas including childcare, adult education and lifelong learning, community engagement,

project management, occupational health and safety, and disability. *Mary* discovered that in a small Neighbourhood House the manager was the person who “*does everything*”. When she realised the breadth of programs and diversity of community needs she was dealing with it was “*one helluva shock*”. Larger Neighbourhood Houses employed more program and administrative staff to share areas of responsibility, but this did not diminish the complexity associated with multiple streams of work in the manager’s workload.

On any given day the managers were dealing with a plethora of tasks, encompassing responding to an incident in the childcare room, preparation of a major funding application, meeting with local networks and groups to plan a new program, responding to a complaint, supporting a woman experiencing domestic violence, and talking to participants. *Raechel* considered that working with people, giving them “*the amount of time that they deserve*” was her “*real work*”, and she strove to balance this important aspect of her work with the many administrative, financial, networking, and personnel issues demanding her time.

Dianne described a typical day as “*juggling twenty things during the day ... putting out spot-fires*”, and attending to administrative requirements. The volume of work appeared relentless and, *Dianne* pointed out, even when on leave it was difficult to find any relief:

You get to a point where you could probably employ someone else but you have to reach that point, and to reach that point you have to work three times as hard as anybody else ... There’s no stop. There’s no stop button. Even when I’m on sick leave I’m reading, I’m working. I had two weeks off, I went to two meetings, one all day and then another one a half day. You need to go overseas. (Dianne)

Devising strategies to effectively manage their time became a necessity and the managers sought to implement strategies they could sustain over the longer term. This was not easy at first, with a typical initial response being to take work home. *Raechel*

had anticipated that the workload could potentially be all-consuming and had chosen to remain living at some distance to maintain a separation between her work and home life. She still found time-management *“the hardest thing of all”*, as she was reluctant to say no to requests from community members or the committee of management. Sometimes, after having agreed to a request, she would think to herself *“how am I going to do this?”*

When *Sarah* first began in the position she took work home in order to manage and keep abreast of her workload, and she would sometimes wake in the middle of the night remembering something she had not done and get up and do it. *Sarah* stopped working long hours at home when she realised she *“wasn’t getting empowered”* by doing it and was likely to burn out. *Lorna* maintained a clear boundary between work and home-life and only occasionally took work home. She was not concerned about Neighbourhood House issues when she left work for the day, *“I think there’s a committee for that, they want to worry about that it’s entirely up to them”*.

The managers’ passion and commitment to their work competed with their motivation to establish clear boundaries around their work, even when they realised it was important to do so. *Crystal* was excited by the many possibilities and opportunities the work presented. However, she realised that with part-time hours and multiple demands on her time she needed to become more *“realistic about what can be achieved in the time frame”*, and therefore was *“really careful”* about how many things she agreed to do.

Funding

One aspect of their work over which managers had little control was funding and associated compliances. They were able to fundraise and apply for as many grants as

they could manage, while they had no control over the amount of funding available, the short-term nature of much funding, funding regimes, or the outcome of funding applications. Many managers spent a substantial amount of their time seeking funding, and accounting for the way it was expended. They carried the primary responsibility, along with the committee, of ensuring that the Neighbourhood House remained financially viable.

The aspects of funding most often mentioned were:

- Limited funding
- Short-term nature of funding
- Difficulty in obtaining funding
- Compliance regimes
- Relationships with funding bodies.

The managers were constantly vigilant in their efforts to redress these concerns, particularly as they adversely affected their capacity to meet the needs of the local community. Without adequate and secure funding it was difficult or impossible to respond to the many issues presenting in the Neighbourhood Houses, and to work with community members to identify and pursue their goals and aspirations for the future. The impact of limited funding spread across many areas of the work, and it inhibited the managers' discretionary power to determine programs locally.

Lorna observed that many people coming to the Neighbourhood House have “*really difficult issues that they are looking for someone to guide them through*”. She was frustrated that the under-resourcing of the sector resulted in a lack of available staff to spend time with community members who were experiencing personal difficulties or in need of social contact. *Alicia* was frustrated by the constant need to chase money in order to engage with disadvantaged learners and marginalised and struggling

members of the community, one of the fundamental priorities of Neighbourhood

Houses:

Further education ... the biggest issue for us is that, and I think the powers-to-be have all forgotten about this, many of the people that come here are really disengaged, or they're disadvantaged in some way. And we need to do lots of engagement with them, and those engagement activities are not funded. (Alicia)

Christine identified the lack of funding for the childcare centre at the Neighbourhood House as severely hampering her efforts to support the women in her community. She was unable to offer support to a “fabulous ... incredibly resourceful and active person” who was experiencing many barriers to finding employment, one of which was the unavailability of affordable childcare. This was a situation many of the women attending the Neighbourhood House were facing:

... that seems to be over and over the lack of childcare seems to be a thing that comes up. We could be doing so much more for our clients we can't find childcare for them. We've got a childcare place but we can't get funding for it, so we can't run it, we can't do a whole lot of things that we could otherwise do. So that's just, that's my little peeve I guess. (Christine)

Christine wanted to offer her a volunteer position immediately and to eventually offer her paid employment believing that her skills would be an asset to the Neighbourhood House. She was aware that the woman was facing other barriers to employment which the Neighbourhood House could have helped to support her through:

I would like her to work here so that she feels, valued and is able to work in a workplace even as a volunteer. So then I can write her a reference or I can be a referee for her so that when she's ready to go out and get a job, that she gets one that's a really worthwhile job. And it might be difficult for her, because she's covered, you know she speaks English as her 3rd language instead of her first ... she's a brilliant person and ... I just want to get on and do more work with her. (Christine)

The short-term nature of much program funding was disruptive because it resulted in the discontinuation of valuable community programs for groups who were socially isolated and experiencing a range of other disadvantages, regardless of the programs' value to participants. *Alicia* had received funding for an “*absolutely brilliant*” pilot program for a group of seniors who were facing loss of mobility and independence, and increasing social isolation. Despite the pilot clearly demonstrating a significant need for this program there was no further funding available for its continuation. Along with the distress this causes to the participants, and the difficulties it poses for Neighbourhood Houses to respond to locally identified needs and priorities, the workload of the managers is increased when they attempt to find other funding. *Alicia* related how a similar situation occurred with a pilot program for asylum seekers, another highly disadvantaged group living in the locality of the Neighbourhood House:

We run a number of programs for bridging visas and asylum seekers which have been really successful pilots and the government has poured heaps of money into it, the pilot's over and everything's stopped. We've reported back and given them all this great information and nothing has gone on. We sort of built people up to actually get them more involved in these activities and then it's just stopped. (Alicia)

External agencies and authorities often failed to recognise the value and significant role of Neighbourhood Houses in local communities and the opportunities they offered to community members. *Sally* battled to have local government recognise the importance of regular communication with people living in a remote community. Along with programs, access to resources, drop-in and personal support the Neighbourhood House produced a free regular newsletter containing important local and regional information. As *Sally* noted, her “*big fight is to make them realise what we do, that actually supports their work and actually reduces their work*”. Their failure to do so resulted in a protracted process to gain funding for a photocopier to print the newsletter for local distribution. *Ayla* said that lack of appreciation and awareness resulted in the

Neighbourhood House, which had intimate knowledge of local people and their concerns missing out when substantial fire recovery monies were distributed. Instead, local government used the money to employ a facilitator who relied on Ayla to provide information about the community:

I think we could have found better things for it to go to. A lot of the funding has gone, like I said, employing this facilitator, for instance he was asking the same questions and sending out the same things that we already did here. I found that was in a sense taking our empowerment away from the Neighbourhood House by employing this facilitator when they had us. (Ayla)

However, she was successful in persuading local government to allocate monies for an art project to be managed by the Neighbourhood House, despite the initial intention “to advertise that money to employ someone to come and facilitate it which would have meant we wouldn’t have had any money to do anything”.

Obtaining funding was time-consuming with no guarantee of success. The managers found ways to accommodate the philosophically different and competing priorities that existed between the Neighbourhood Houses and funding bodies. Some managers chose not to engage with particular funding regimes because of this and the stringent compliances that were required. Sarah chose not to apply for grants because they “are too far and few between, too much work to get them and then you don’t even get them after working for weeks and weeks”. Resistance was a means of taking back some control over local program decision-making, and overcoming the disempowering impacts of the way funding was administered. Lorna told a funding body to “keep their money” because accepting it restricted the activities of the Neighbourhood House. She made this decision because the Neighbourhood House had struggled to enrol enough participants in the classes, partly because local demographics did not match the inflexible eligibility guidelines. A further reason for her decision was the

disproportionate workload associated with compliance requirements for the relatively small amount of funding received. Telling the funding body to keep their money was *“one of the most empowering things”* she has done, and it freed the Neighbourhood House *“to think about what other things we can do that’s about meeting community needs”*.

External bureaucracies and funding agencies exerted pressure on the Neighbourhood Houses to operate as businesses, to diversify their funding sources, and wanted them to complete ever more detailed and time-consuming accountabilities. This pressure impacted on the workload of managers and the way that Neighbourhood Houses were governed. The amount of work involved in seeking funding, and managing compliances and accountability has increased *“ten-fold”* in recent years, contributing to the heavy work-load of managers:

We’re continually looking for sources of funding and diversifying. They keep telling us to diversify, we know we have to diversify, but that just creates more work, and more stress. (Dianne)

The managers found ways of taking back some control over local program decision-making, and overcoming the disempowering impacts of the way funding was administered.

Funding bodies focussed on quantifiable outcomes, for instance, numbers of participants in programs; and measurable outcomes, and Neighbourhood Houses focussed on qualitative and less easily measured community benefit outcomes such as community engagement and connection. Managers argued that the purpose of a Neighbourhood House was not to be a successful business, for example making a profit, rather as *Crystal* argued, it was about *“the community and about making sure that people aren’t left behind and left out of participating and feeling connected”*. *Evelyn*

advocated passionately for the importance of keeping the community focus and the “*underpinning philosophy*” of her work, at the same time as she accepted the necessity for the committee to become more corporatised and operate at a higher level of skill and strategic decision-making. The managers became skilful in balancing the conflicting sets of priorities, and just got on with it. Doing this limited the negative impact of external stakeholders. *Alicia* held the view that failure to balance these competing and at times conflicting sets of priorities would destroy the very essence of the Neighbourhood House:

The trick to making this place work really well is about being able to meet our legislative requirements but also keep that social side of things and that community inclusiveness, because without that we wouldn't have a house the way we have it. (Alicia)

Despite the dissatisfactions managers expressed about aspects of funding, when there was personal contact with a supportive and responsive officer of the funding body they believed that they would be listened to, and were positive about their relationships with the three major funding bodies for the Neighbourhood House sector in Victoria. In recent years, the move towards a highly regulated and competitive education market has been detrimental to Neighbourhood Houses. *Dianne* observed that when there was no personal contact and establishment of a supportive relationship, it created a sense of powerlessness and disconnection:

I think the distance between us and them is significant. For instance ... it's an email, and sometimes they don't even reply. So you're feeling actually quite powerless working in that space because you're just, you've got no contact. And ... used to be quite engaged with ... you know they were in [nearby suburbs], you could drop in for a coffee, you could take them out for lunch and talk, you'd ring up, they'd support you in so many ways ... they've lost funding, it's changed, so you don't actually feel supported any more. (Dianne)

Managing conflict

From time to time the managers were called upon to address contentious and problematic situations involving staff, volunteers, community members, or external organisations. These situations included breaching codes of conduct, sexual harassment, bullying, and community animosity. The managers accepted their responsibility to address the serious matters that confronted them. They drew on their deeply held values and philosophies to initiate and employ a range of strategies to ensure support for themselves, and transparent procedures for affected others. At the same time they expressed their discomfort and dislike of conflict, particularly conflicts arising from the behaviour of staff and volunteers.

They approached issues where there had been a breach of the code of conduct, or staff disciplinary concerns, patiently and respectfully. One of *Mary's* first tasks as manager was to remove from a Neighbourhood House program a person who had acted outside their authority. Acknowledging that she hated conflict, she questioned whether she was suitable for the role. She decided to approach the matter in a "*caring way*", preferring to be patient for the desired result rather than exacerbating the situation by rushing in. Dealing with the situation in this way strengthened her belief in her capacity to effectively manage difficult situations. *Evelyn* was faced with an antagonistic staff member when the committee restructured staffing arrangements. She understood that losing employment was a stressful and difficult time, and she continued to treat the staff member respectfully. During this transitional period in the organisation, she sought the support of her women and manager peers she found to be "*really really powerful, and really rewarding*".

Sarah dealt with a situation where a male committee member was sexually harassing women participants at the Neighbourhood House. She had no idea it was happening until she witnessed an incident, and confronted him. After this, another woman reported an incident to her, and although her impulse was to remove him straight away she followed due process:

I called the committee all together and he got axed of course. Yeh we had to go through the constitutional stuff, blah blah blah and then after he'd gone it came to light how many other women it had happened to. That was very disappointing. So we had to go through all the right channels to make sure that that was all put in place properly, by our constitution, I just wanted to say, 'Out, you know you're not coming back', but we had to do the right thing, go through all that sort of stuff. (Sarah)

Lorna admitted to finding conflict “really difficult”, while recognising it was her responsibility to deal with. In order to overcome her discomfort and confidently deal with a situation arising from the unacceptable behaviour of a staff member, she prepared carefully by establishing a clear, fair and timely discipline process, and a support system for herself:

I use trusted others to work out where I'm gonna go and how I'm gonna approach this, before I talk to the volunteer or to the staff member. I don't have a formal mentoring relationship with anyone but I do use trusted others to help beat out what I'm gonna say, and how I'm gonna go about it, and what treatments we're going to put in place that might help change some of the behaviours or the issues that are happening. By the time I get around to talking to the person, I'm aware of the timeliness associated with it, I'm fairly certain about what I need to say and how we might need to go about this. (Lorna)

Disciplining staff, volunteers and participants were not the only difficulties the managers dealt with. *Rhino* was bullied by some members of her committee of management. This occurred after she challenged a committee member for failing to perceive a conflict of interest between their role at the Neighbourhood House and other positions they held within the local community. The poetic interpretation above from

Rhino's transcript, talks about the fact that she was not aware she was being bullied because it was something she had never experienced:

I didn't realise that what I was facing was workplace bullying at the time. I had four or five months in which my life changed completely and not only my life but the life of a number of people on the committee because it wasn't just me that they bullied. It was me to begin with but then they bullied others. (Rhino)

The continuing situation eventually impacted on others at the Neighbourhood House, although *Rhino* endeavoured to protect staff from the worst excesses of the situation. This was difficult when computer equipment was taken from the office. She was threatened with dismissal, and a committee meeting was called to vote on this proposal, which was defeated. The bullies resigned but maintained their aggravation by making complaints to Neighbourhood House's funding bodies, causing a continuation of the grief "*and a lot of extra work*". *Rhino* survived with the support of sympathetic committee members and members of the community, along with regular, at times daily, telephone support from the regional networker: "*without his support I may not have survived*". With community and networker support *Rhino* stood up to the bullies, and was empowered by surviving the experience:

I didn't know how to stand up for myself because I stand up for other people [laughing], and it was horrendous and it was shocking and it was everything else, but it was also empowering because I came out the other end. (Rhino)

Conflicts sometimes arose from the actions of external bodies, and the Neighbourhood House managers worked with their communities or third parties to resolve these conflicts to the benefit of their communities. *Sally* was job-sharing the manager position, and following a bushfire emergency which impacted extensively and significantly on the community served by the Neighbourhood House, both *Sally* and her co-manager were frequently required to advocate and negotiate on behalf of their

community with local government and recovery services. Prior to the fire, the Neighbourhood House had an established role regularly disseminating local and other information of interest to the community in the form of a monthly newssheet, made particularly important because of limited internet coverage in the area. During the unfolding of the emergency and the subsequent evacuation, and when community members returned to their homes to assess the damage and commence recovery and rebuilding, the Neighbourhood House fulfilled a vitally important role as the main centre of communication between all parties. They hosted community information meetings, and meetings between the fire and emergency services, and supported community members who had not previously experienced such an emergency. Communication became urgent and critical, a telephone tree was established, more regular bulletins were disseminated, and this continued following evacuation to a town over one hour away. *Sally* attended every meeting during and after the fires. Both managers were coping with their own trauma and recovery requirements post-emergency. During the recovery phase, community members were traumatised, and often angry. *Sally* witnessed the community's anger over their treatment post-emergency and the slow progress of recovery efforts. She thought that there were *"real reasons for the anger"* – they felt they were not being listened to, there were often different people at each community meeting with no follow-up or acknowledgement of previous meetings and the concerns that had been raised. This caused *"incredible animosity"* at community meetings *"whenever an officer stood up in front of a group from here"*. *Sally* took it upon herself to find a way forward and resolve the situation. She brokered an agreement with a trusted local government officer to facilitate a less adversarial meeting at which only community members would be present, no emergency personnel, with the intention of establishing a community reference group. A *"very diverse"* reference group was formed from this meeting to *"put together a case for an independent inquiry"* to investigate the management of the emergency and recovery

responses. Sally was a member of the reference group, and although their requests for an independent inquiry were not successful, the meeting and its outcome illustrated that small communities who are prepared to stand up and make “a lot of noise” can be effective in achieving change in the way they are treated by the authorities:

We didn't get an independent inquiry we got an internal review ... I haven't been able to get hold of the submissions that were presented to it, I think that's a failing, I did ask ... it was the fox looking after the chook yard actually because he's the one who made all the resource decisions. That isn't satisfactory, but within that framework we still gave it our damndest, and we did get something out of it. There have been some changes. So we have got some satisfaction out of it. (Sally)

Dianne managed a Neighbourhood House located in an historic building. Without warning, she was served with an order by the local council declaring the building unfit for occupation and instructed to immediately vacate the building, which would have required moving or ceasing all the programs at the Neighbourhood House for an unspecified amount of time. Dianne was very aware of the historic role the building had played as a “place for community” and a “place of learning”, and thought that failure to save the building was “not an option”:

In 2008, the council came and said, “The building is in such a bad state of repair you need to move out”. And I'm like, ‘Oh my god’, and I went away for 24 hours and I came back and I said, ‘Show me the engineer's report that says we have to move out’. Because they'd said, “Move out”, you know, “We'll build you a brand new centre”. I went away and came back and I go, ‘No, show me the engineer's report where it says we have to move out’, and they couldn't. So we stayed. And then we started a community campaign. (Dianne)

For the next 18 months, Dianne, along with the committee and the support of local community members, led the fight with a local community-driven campaign to save the building. At issue was the council's intent to hand the building back to the state government, who did not want it, and the community's desire to have the council retain and renovate the building. For this to occur required the support of a majority of

councillors, which was not confirmed until the very last minute. Saving the building, not just for the Neighbourhood House, but for the community in perpetuity was a significant achievement for *Dianne*. She realised that if she had not taken a strong stand at the beginning by refusing to move, and demanding to see the order to vacate, the building would have been lost to the community:

So that is a significant achievement for me, with the community. I didn't do it on my own, but I guess, I stood firm at the beginning and I said, 'No we're not moving out, if we move out we'll never get back in, they'll hand the money back'. This building would have been lost to the community, and you know, even if the [Neighbourhood House] lost funding and something else happened, [the building] would still, would be here for the community. So that, for me, is a significant achievement. (Dianne)

Summary

The research findings presented in this chapter from the interviews with managers provide rich details of the multilayered and embodied experiences of empowerment, and disempowerment, associated with being the manager of the Neighbourhood House. Their experiences, enabled by the organisational culture and practices of the Neighbourhood Houses, gave them a strong sense of agency and control in their work.

The collaborative organisational culture fostered strong connections with their committees, staff, volunteers and participants, and their peer networks. This worked against the alienation that managers can feel in rigid hierarchies, or when they are responsible for making decisions in isolation. The strong emotional attachment to their work was based on the very real connections and relationships they developed within the Neighbourhood Houses and extending into the wider community, and their sense that the work they were doing was worthwhile and valued by the community.

The flexible and inclusive workplace practices of the Neighbourhood Houses exemplified community development approaches. For instance, the fluidity of role boundaries enabling managers to pathway into the role from positions as volunteers, was related to the transformative intent of community development. Other practices included opportunities to negotiate how they would fulfil their manager responsibilities, for example, to accommodate their work around parenting responsibilities, to establish job-sharing arrangements, to bring their particular skills and interests into the work, and to enact their social justice values in their leadership style. Working as the manager provided significant and diverse learning opportunities for the managers: they undertook formal qualifications, participated in professional development, learned from exchanges with peers, other community workers, and community groups, and from talking with and observing participants.

At times, the challenges and conflicts faced by the managers were experienced as disempowering, however, these were ameliorated and turned around by working in conjunction with others to develop strategies to successfully resolve conflict, and to maintain the focus of their work on the concerns and interests of the local community.

The following chapter presents a discussion based on the findings and the theoretical approach of the research in relation to both groups of research participants.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and conclusion

This research, located within the theory and practice tradition of community development, set out to explore women's experiences of empowerment with particular reference to their engagement as participants and managers in the complex environments of Neighbourhood Houses. Empowerment is a key philosophical principle of the Neighbourhood House sector in Victoria (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2003). This is evident from the statement regarding empowerment in *The Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Sector Framework* (The Framework), stating that Neighbourhood Houses are committed to empowering people in local communities in order for them to have control in various aspects of their lives. The Framework claims that empowerment results from respectful collective processes that enable community members to "meet their needs and aspirations in a self-aware and informed way" (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2003, p.4). However, the use of the term empowerment within the Neighbourhood House sector is contested. To a certain extent this is connected with notions of individualism and welfarism. It becomes difficult to talk about individual empowerment because the concept has been co-opted into the individualistic and competitive discourse of neoliberalism and it provokes fears that community development will drift towards welfare (Buckingham et al., 2004; Rule, 2006). Further, claims that community workers are "empowerers" (Rule, 2006, p.127) suggest a welfare-oriented and dependency-creating approach presupposing that the people they are working with lack agency. This attitude establishes a binary relationship between the 'empowered' practitioner and the 'disempowered' client (Pease, 2002). Ensuring that community development is political practice, not welfare or individually focussed, requires ongoing reflection and analysis of the multifaceted practices of power in Neighbourhood Houses which enable women to experience empowerment. This thesis argues that individual

empowerment is interconnected and interwoven with community empowerment when it is associated with the political practices of Neighbourhood Houses and conceptions of power and injustice. Overall, the findings of this research highlight the necessity for an expanded conception of power and empowerment and a vocabulary with which to understand and communicate the nuances of women's experiences of power and empowerment in their everyday lives (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Ife, 2016) in order to overcome a politics of despair (Mullaly, 2001).

Allen (2008) argues that "a fully satisfactory critical theoretical analysis of power needs to be able to highlight not only domination or oppression but also individual and collective empowerment and the complex interconnections between these different modalities of power" (p.163). The findings of this research acknowledge women's agency and creativity, participatory organisational styles, and resistance to the limiting effects of power, as forms of power and empowerment (Allen, 2008; hooks, 2014). Empowerment is understood as a form of power enabling the women participants and managers to "fashion themselves" (Kesby, 2005, p.2045), and to "construct new forms of subjectivity" (Van Wijnendaele, 2013, p.268) within and against the social, political, and cultural contexts and power relations of their lives. The findings show that the community development practices and processes in the Neighbourhood Houses were predominantly experienced as empowering although at times they were experienced as disempowering. On the whole, these practices and processes enabled the women to construct new subjectivities, and engage with and exercise productive, creative, energetic, and ethical expressions of power in their everyday lives (Foucault, 1988; hooks, 2014; St. Pierre, 2004; Theberge, 1987).

The two previous chapters presented the findings from the interviews that were conducted in order to answer the research question: *In what ways do women*

experience empowerment in the course of their engagement with Neighbourhood Houses? The two research sub-questions guiding this research were:

1. *To what extent and in what ways do women participants and managers experience empowerment by their participation and involvement in Neighbourhood Houses?*
2. *What processes and aspects of community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses contribute to women participants' and managers' experiences of empowerment?*

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the research questions. It uses contemporary feminist and post-structural perspectives and theories of power and empowerment, to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities and contingencies of power and empowerment as experienced by the women in their everyday lives. The discussion then turns to consideration of the key points arising from the analysis leading to a re-envisioned notion of empowerment, then discusses the contribution to knowledge of this research, its limitations, implications for practice, and ideas for further research. It concludes with a personal reflection on the meaning of undertaking this research.

Chapter Five and Chapter Six separately presented the experiences of the women participants and the managers. In this chapter, where it is relevant the two groups are identified separately as 'the women participants', or as 'the managers', and at other times they are presented together as 'the women'.

The following two sections of this chapter discuss the findings in relation to the research sub-questions.

The ways and extent to which women experienced empowerment and disempowerment in their engagement with the Neighbourhood House

The findings of this research illustrate some of the diverse and multiple ways that women in contemporary Australia experience power, disempowerment, and empowerment and the ways in which the discourses and practices of power influence people's lives "at the most basic levels" (Foucault, 1980 p.99). In relation to the women in this study, power circulated through all spheres of their lives, in relations in the work, social and learning space of the Neighbourhood House, and within their families, friendship and social networks (Foucault, 1982; hooks, 2014; Janeway, 1980; Tong, 2009). The practices and discourses of power in the social relations, interactions, belief systems, and material lives of the women in this study were fluid, contingent, and partial, as were their experiences of empowerment and disempowerment (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Foucault, 1980).

The women in this research had experienced disempowerment in their lives prior to attending the Neighbourhood House, and in some instances they experienced disempowerment while engaged with the Neighbourhood House. The women's experiences of disempowerment were mediated through multiple intersecting experiences (Carasthesis, 2014) connected with practices of power extending across their lifetimes and lived experience, at school, in their marriages and personal relationships, in their employment and post-employment lives. These experiences influenced the opportunities they either had or had not been afforded over their lifetimes. Their interactions with power had affected not only their opportunities and their capacity to act and make decisions about their lives, it had affected their confidence and self-esteem, and their perceptions and understanding of themselves and the world.

Whatever their current situation or lived experience with the inequalities of power, the women were not rendered powerless or unable to take any form of action to change the circumstances of their lives (Janeway, 1980; Pease, 2002). This research shows that when the women made the decision to alleviate their distress, and to meet their varied needs by engaging with the Neighbourhood Houses, it opened the door to far-reaching empowering experiences encompassing multiple spheres of their lives, including education, employment, family, friendships, and community. Along with the capacity to make choices and decisions to bring about desired changes in areas of their lives, the indicators of women's empowerment include, "whether women have control over their own bodies and their own resources and are able to set their own agendas based on their knowledge, their lived experience and their language" (Kenny, 2011, p.192). In contrast, disempowerment was experienced when the women were excluded from decision-making and political influence, when they were not kept informed about serious incidents in the Neighbourhood House, when they were not treated respectfully in their voluntary or employed positions as community leaders, and when they sensed that being older resulted in their contributions not being taken seriously.

Power is productive (Foucault, 1980; hooks, 2014). This research shows that, as a result of and through the course of their engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses, the women's ways of expressing power in their everyday lives produced "knowledge, subjectivity and resistance" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p.61). The women's emotional engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses and the people, and the deep levels of social interaction, commitment, and connection with community they experienced were "creative and life-affirming" (hooks, 2014, pp.90-91; Van Wijnendaele, 2013).

Traditionally, women's ways of knowing and doing have been regarded as inferior and not recognised as empowering (Belenky et al., 1997; Green, 1998; hooks, 2014; Riger,

1993). This research shows that through their engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses, the women openly resisted or unintentionally subverted (S. M. Shaw, 2001) binary views that label feelings as emotional and irrational and evidence of (women's) weakness rather than as expressions exemplifying "energy, strength, and effective interaction" (hooks, 2014, p.91).

This research shows that by following their desire for change in their lives, the women participants and managers were engaging in creative, self-, and life-affirming activities, "*enacting* care of the self" (St. Pierre, 2004, p.334) (italics in original), and care for others. In relation to this study, care of the self (Foucault, 1988) was an enacted, embodied and mutual practice. It entailed the women honouring their own needs – for learning, social interaction, personal and professional fulfilment – values, and aspirations, while respecting and supporting those of others, and produced confident, agentic, assertive, and engaged subjectivities.

In numerous ways, the women negotiated and resisted the limiting and oppressive effects of power and power relations in their everyday lives. All forms of power contain the possibility of resistance, "resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power" whether that power is emancipatory or oppressive (Foucault, 1990, p.95). The findings show that the women's resistance was expressed when they no longer subscribed to oppressive discourses and practices that resulted in perceptions of themselves as victims, incompetent, dumb, unworthy, or too old (Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007).

Whether their resistance was intentional or not (S. M. Shaw, 2001), it was a personal and individual way of exercising power in the course of their everyday lives that was a "means to deflect or subvert the numerous ways that normative discursive regimes are reproduced and maintained (Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007, p.461).

The practice and discursive environment of the Neighbourhood Houses provided a counterpoint to the disempowering discourses and practices that had influenced the women's prior beliefs about themselves, their possibilities and opportunities, and their relation to the world (Braidotti, 1994). The many conflicting discourses (Flyvbjerg, 2001) producing multiple interconnected oppressions which co-exist in contemporary Australian society produce "ideas, knowledge, texts, and sciences" (Braidotti, 1994, p.33). They shape and form subjectivities, social norms, and meanings (Braidotti, 1994; Foucault, 1980). This research demonstrates that for the women in this study the practices and discourses of the Neighbourhood Houses created an environment that enabled them to identify, challenge, and refute some of the dominant and disempowering discourses in the wider society. The dominant discourses within which the women had constructed their sense of self, and which had influenced and impacted on the opportunities and possibilities open to them, were inferiorising social constructs based on whether they were a mother or a woman or older or a migrant or poor or unemployed. The hegemonic influence of such discourses had devalued and subordinated their skills and knowledge, their social and familial roles, and their lived experience. This had resulted in them feeling less worthy, not as clever as other people, that they were unable to learn, or too old to start a new job or to learn a new skill, or that they were the lesser partner in marriage. Disempowering discourses fashioned them as victims of domestic violence, as passive, rather than as agentic in their own lives.

At the Neighbourhood Houses the women came into contact with and embraced emancipatory counter discourses regarding women, women's place in social and community life, women's capacities, and their own subjectivity, with discourses which expanded their consciousness and their social roles. The practices and discourses in the Neighbourhood House spoke of gender equality, and their right to participate on

their own terms. Within the fold of empowering discourses the women embraced activities that opened up new possibilities for them to learn new skills such as tutoring, business, writing, and advocacy, and which supported them to take up leadership positions in the Neighbourhood House and in the wider community. Discourses of inclusion, of respect, of equality, of valuing diversity and difference opened the way for the women to challenge, question, resist, and change the understandings and beliefs in which they had constructed their subjectivity and through which they experienced the world. As they became actively engaged in the Neighbourhood House, they developed critiques of the disempowering discourses influencing their lives and began to deconstruct and replace them with empowering discourses. Discourses that were democratic, inclusive, and participatory enabled the women to construct new subjectivities: women who had experienced domestic violence no longer subscribed to the disempowering discourse of victimhood, reframing themselves as survivors and advocates for other women who had experienced domestic violence; other women embraced new subjectivities as learners, tutors, as managers, and leaders in their communities.

The practices of Neighbourhood Houses are based on community development discourses and practices which are contested and contain multiple and at times contradictory discourses (Ife, 2016; Lathouras, 2012a; M. Shaw, 2008). This study has shown that the norms of professionalism, which value specialised expertise more highly than local knowledge and lived experience, were resisted when opportunities were provided for the women to take up leadership positions in the community in governance roles and as managers. Their lived experience and knowledge as community members, mothers, and in their previous employment, were considered valuable assets to bring to these roles. The managers' participatory and empathic styles of leadership, which were respectful, collaborative, inclusive, and attentive to the

personal situations of staff, resisted the hierarchical arrangements, competitive promotion structures, and individual reward systems promoted by managerialism (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017). Using collaborative leadership styles they encouraged and supported staff members to participate in planning and decision making and to take responsibility for their own areas, and they worked closely with their committees of management to develop strategic goals and policy frameworks directed towards building the capacity and improving the lives of community members. They established mentoring and peer support networks in order to share skills and knowledge with other managers and to counter the isolating effects of competitive funding regimes. Within the broader community they exercised their leadership roles co-operatively and collaboratively to bring about change in their communities. They planned and participated in processes with local organisations and community groups to create whole of community events such as community markets, celebrations and festivals, participated in community consultations with local government and community groups, acted as advocates for small groups and those not included or invited to participate. They supported the efforts of local groups to bring additional resources and new activities into their communities.

Another form of resistance was evident in the managers' strategic responses to stringent policy regimes in refusing to accept funding for community education programs when the funding specifications restricted their capacity to develop local responses to local issues. This occurred on occasions when the funding they received or were eligible to receive from a government funding body meant that community members who were over a certain age, who had a previous qualification, were not looking for work, or who were not Australian citizens, would be excluded from taking up a funded place in an education program, regardless of what their learning needs might have been.

As the women participants and managers engaged discursively and practically in processes that reframed the ways in which power was understood and exercised in their personal, civic, and working lives, they were participating in their own powerfulness (Fook, 2012) and enabling their own empowerment (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2003). The opportunity to express power by (re)framing subordinating discourses by disbelieving, refuting and resisting the limitations of previous understandings (hooks, 2014) enabled the women to experience empowerment through having an increased sense of control and agency within the personal, working, and civic domains of their lives.

Experiencing disempowerment

The findings of this research show that dominating and subjugating discourses and practices impacted on the women's lives in the course of their engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses. The instability, complexities and contradictions of power and its effects (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Kesby, 2005) were evident for the women participants and the managers due to their experiencing both empowerment and disempowerment in the course of their involvement. As the findings show, the women participants' experiences of disempowerment arose in situations where they felt that as appointed representatives of the Neighbourhood House their role was not valued or respected by people in external organisations discursively constructed as of greater importance, for example, local government. Volunteer committee of management roles, particularly office bearing roles, carried high levels of responsibility. As committee members they had many complex responsibilities: employing managers, resolving conflicts with personnel, overseeing often complex budgets to ensure accountability and financial sustainability, undertaking strategic planning, and advocating on behalf of the Neighbourhood House in the wider community. They devoted large amounts of time to

these tasks. It was disempowering to be overlooked by external agencies, or unsupported or taken for granted in their roles, and their roles and responsibilities became burdensome and difficult to sustain.

Similarly, the findings reveal that while there were many aspects of their work which the managers experienced as empowering, they experienced other aspects of their work as disempowering. Their experiences of disempowerment arose when they were unable to exercise, or doubted their ability to exercise, the responsibilities of their roles. These situations resulted from internal and external circumstances. Internally, they were associated with the pressures and demands of the work which resulted in a loss of confidence in themselves and their ability and skills to do the work. Other experiences of disempowerment precipitated by internal circumstances arose from being seriously undermined and prevented from carrying out their work, due to instances of bullying or a failure to report a case of serious misconduct which unintentionally displayed a lack of trust in the manager, and prevented timely action from being taken.

External relations of power identified in the findings as disempowering for the managers were associated with contractual arrangements and relationships with government funding bodies and other external authorities. Disempowering practices that replaced personal contact and individual organisational support and communication were associated with standardised procedures and strictly bureaucratic and hierarchical funder/fundee relationships which treated all recipients of funding in the same formal and non-personal way. Other aspects identified in the findings were the short-term nature of funding which required managers to spend much of their time applying for funding with no guarantee of success regardless of the proven or potential benefits of the program or project they were seeking funding for. When funding

organisations were restructured the reduction in staff numbers resulted in the loss of personal contact with departmental officers who in the past had maintained an interest and close connection with the Neighbourhood House, and could be called upon for advice and support. As the findings clearly indicate this left the managers with little opportunity to discuss their concerns face to face, to make representations on behalf of their organisation, or to influence policy decisions and directions. The loss of avenues of influence and control associated with the increasing inability to communicate with and advocate to external bodies, or the fear of losing this ability, was experienced as disempowering. This loss of influence and ability to advocate on behalf of their communities also arose when local authorities failed to consult with the managers, or to listen to the managers' point of view. Not being heard by government representatives in regional planning and consultation meetings, raised questions about whether this disregard was connected to age or gender and caused concern that not being heard would have repercussions for the Neighbourhood House.

The hegemonic discourses and practices associated with neo-liberalism and managerialism – competition, individualism, privatisation – have shaped the ways in which community development is practised (Burkett, 2011; Ife, 2016; M. Shaw, 2008). The findings of this research identify the contradictory regimes of power in which the managers carried out their roles. They show that the emphasis on managerialism, and competitive, contract-based funding arrangements have created competing demands on their time and their energy (Burkett, 2011). In the role of manager they were required to exercise skill in moving across and between the “ideological tensions” (M. Shaw, 2008, p.25) existing between the competing ideologies and purposes of the Neighbourhood House and those of the external organisations that fund them. They were juggling the community development intention of the Neighbourhood Houses with the bureaucratic requirements of the funding organisations.

In relation to the women in this study, the findings show the fluid, partial and contingent nature of the practices of power they experienced in their personal, working, and civic lives.

Aspects of community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses contributing to women's experiences of empowerment

The previous section discussed the ways and extent to which the women experienced empowerment and disempowerment. This section discusses the key facilitative and enabling community development processes and practices of the Neighbourhood Houses contributing to the women's ability to resist, subvert, and reconstruct relations of power. Specifically they refer to the organisational, participatory, relational (social and community connection), and learning discourses, practices and processes of the Neighbourhood Houses which the findings show enabled the women to experience empowerment within the various domains of their everyday lives. Although for clarity these aspects are discussed separately, they are understood as entangled and interconnected and were experienced by the women as interrelated.

Neighbourhood Houses are unique to their particular communities, shaped by the interactions of the people, the community development practices and processes established in response to local concerns and interests, and wider social and political forces. This study recognises that Neighbourhood Houses operate within a social, political, and cultural environment influenced by multiple and conflicting discourses and practices. It explores the contingent and partial nature of power and empowerment by showing that the women's experiences in the Neighbourhood Houses were not always empowering. The study acknowledges that the practices of Neighbourhood Houses are not able to ameliorate all of the disempowering effects of structural and discursive

forms of oppression experienced by the women. The findings of this research show that the situated, partial and contingent practices of power operating in Neighbourhood Houses reproduced, maintained, subverted, or resisted multiple and intersecting forms of domination and control in the lives of the women in this study (Foucault, 1980).

The culture of the Neighbourhood Houses, based on the principles of participation, inclusion, social connection, learning, and empowerment (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, 2003) was a culture established to resist and subvert disempowering discourses such as those of individualism, otherness, and inequality. This organisational culture facilitated the development of a sense of agency and control. For the managers, the facilitative nature of the organisational practices was associated with collaborative work practices and flexible and fluid employment practices. Collaborative work practices ensured that the managers were supported in their work by colleagues, peers, and committee members, meaning that they were not isolated in their decision making and exercising power on their own behalf. Flexible and fluid employment practices provided opportunities for negotiating working arrangements which complemented the responsibilities and interests of their personal lives; the social justice approaches of the Neighbourhood Houses complemented the managers' beliefs and values providing them with multiple opportunities to put their values into practice; and the fluid and permeable boundaries between roles provided opportunities for establishing meaningful connections with participants in the Neighbourhood House, and pathways for community members to take up the role of manager. It was an organisational culture subverting the gender and age barriers often affecting women's access to leadership roles, albeit in roles the complexities of which are often under-estimated and under-valued within the wider community. Despite critiques concerning the part-time, underpaid, and caring nature of the work, typically associated with women (Clemans, 2010), a diverse range of

women's skills, knowledge and lived experience was valued, including their local knowledge (Freire, 1970; Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011), making it possible to take up the role of manager regardless of prior employment experience or qualification level.

The participatory and inclusive discourses and practices of the Neighbourhood Houses provided multiple and varied opportunities for women's active participation and enabled them to choose both the degree to which and the ways in which they wanted to participate. Democratic and inclusive participatory discourses and practices are a philosophical cornerstone of community development for achieving social justice outcomes and empowerment for individuals and communities (Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017). Democratic and inclusive participatory practices embedded within the processes and practices of the Neighbourhood Houses enabled the women to make choices which affected their lives practically, emotionally, critically, and intellectually.

Participatory discourses and practices are often constructed as empowering (Kesby, 2005), however, they are contingent and partial forms of power: no one way of participating is empowering for everyone (Kenny & Connors, 2017; Kesby, 2005).

Some forms of participation, such as participation in decision making wherein community members have substantial control over decisions, have been considered more inherently empowering than others (Arnstein, 1969). Civic participation has been regarded as an empowering aspect of Neighbourhood Houses (Aytan, 1991; Gravell & Nelson, 1986; Kimberley, 1998; Moloney, 1985). This study identified many opportunities for the women to experience personal change and to become involved with multiple levels of decision making. Some women made substantial contributions towards social change in their communities by undertaking leadership roles, participating in organisational decision-making, and engaging with broader community activities and processes.

Ife (2016) argues that it is important to value all forms of participation rather than ranking participation according to apparently objective criteria which typically favours roles associated with “white, male, and middleclass activities” (p.280). This study identified multiple ways in which the Neighbourhood Houses facilitated the women’s participation. The women freely made their own choices and decisions about how they wanted to participate, whether it was as participants in programs, volunteers, or as managers. The participatory practices of the Neighbourhood Houses encompassed a broad range of grassroots processes and activities (Ife, 2016; Miller, Rein, & Levitt, 1995) from governance to local activism, from administration to advocacy, from teaching and program facilitation to participating in programs. The form, level, and degree of the women’s participation was not prescribed, allowing them to choose and change how they wanted to participate, and to choose when to participate. This made it possible for the women to participate on their own terms and validated their varied involvement and contributions, thus encouraging a sense of agency in their lives.

The inclusive and non-judgemental practices of the Neighbourhood Houses enabled the women to engage and participate in ways that were meaningful in the contexts of their lives. The women did not feel judged or excluded; difference and diversity were respected. Participation was fluid; the Neighbourhood Houses did not prohibit possibilities for ongoing participation or for participating in different ways in the future. For example, the study shows that some managers had begun as volunteers and participants.

Participation shaped the women’s subjectivity in multifaceted ways (Cahill, 2007; Cameron & Gibson, 2004; Van Wijnendaele, 2013). In making decisions and choices about how they would participate the women were exercising power in ways that were not limited by a particular typology of participation traditionally associated with power,

including those relating to gender. The multiple opportunities for participation available to the women participants and managers, including the fluid boundaries between roles, enabled them to shape how they would address their needs, follow their interests, use their skills, prepare for the future, act on their values, and contribute to the Neighbourhood House and the wider community. This enabled the women to take up diverse and fluid subject positions in the Neighbourhood House and in the community. In the Neighbourhood Houses they were volunteers, committee of management members, program facilitators, tutors, event organisers, and as regular or occasional program participants, and managers. In the community they were activists, advocates, facilitators and leaders. In the diverse and inclusive space of the Neighbourhood House the women participants did not feel judged or othered for their individuality, age, level of education, or religion (Archer, 2004; Burbules, 1997). This enabled them to develop social connections, friendships and relationships, and to engage in education and learning activities, thus developing a sense of agency and control in their personal, working and civic lives.

Social and community connections and relationships

The Neighbourhood Houses were much more than physical structures in particular geographic locations, they encouraged and facilitated the women to build social and community connections and relationships as a way of living and working in community. This distinguishes them from the individualistic approaches of welfarism and neoliberalism (Ife, 2016; Ledwith, 2011; Rule, 2006). The Neighbourhood Houses were places of relationship and social and community connection in which the idea and experience of community was in an ongoing process of construction and change. Ife's (2013) claim that community is subjectively felt and experienced, rather than a measurable objective entity suggests that community development is "an ongoing and

complex process of dialogue, exchange, consciousness-raising, education and action aimed at helping the people concerned to construct their own versions of community” (p.117). The women’s social connections within the Neighbourhood Houses and the broader community environment were not merely transactional, they were embodied as a sense of belonging, strengthened sense of self, and enhanced sense of wellbeing, expressed in dialogue and talk with one another, caring for self and others, friendship, and engaging in shared interests and activities (Gibbs et al., 2016; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; O’Neill, Kaye, & Gottwald, 2013; Whyte, 2017).

The findings of this study are based on the lived experiences of individual women living and working within community and interacting with multiple and diverse networks of social relationships. Community is a highly contested idea (Ife, 2012), and it is often positioned in contrast to individualism: “Community usually appears as one side of a dichotomy in which individualism is the opposite pole, but as with any such opposition, each side is determined by its relation to the other” (I. M. Young, 1986, p.5). In proposing that “community itself consists in the respect for and fulfilment of individual aims and capacities” Young (1986, p.8) appears to suggest a continuous iterative process is at play between the individual and the community. For the women in this study, empowerment was experienced within and through the social interactions, friendships, and relationships they formed as part of their participation and work in the Neighbourhood Houses. Within this relational environment the women’s personal experiences of empowerment constituted and contributed to the empowerment of communities, and both were made possible because of each other. This resonates with a Deweyan understanding of human experience, that in as much as it is personal, it is intensely social, meaning that to understand people as individuals requires understanding that they are “always in relation, always in a social context” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.2). Furthermore, this contextual relational understanding of individual

human experience counteracts neoliberal ideas of the independent individual acting in their own self-interest outside of a socio-political context.

The social and community connections and relationships the women developed through their learning, mentoring, and organisational activities arose from a desire for social contact, friendship and personal support, and for professional and peer support. Extending across different roles they subverted and challenged normative hierarchies of power, such as those associated with expertise: participants regarded Neighbourhood House staff as friends. Participants and managers became friends or developed collegial relationships, and friendships between managers and participants were born from giving personal support. Relationships which began within the Neighbourhood House in many cases became part of the women's social, learning, and personal support networks outside the Neighbourhood House. Social interaction and connection with other women was a source of pleasure and fun. It was supportive, and a safe place in which to share problems, to reflect on and question aspects of their personal and working lives that were troublesome, and to develop new understandings about themselves and their place in the world (Coates, 1996; Green, 1998). Within these dialogical and caring relationships the women felt safe to try out new ways of being, and gained a sense of their own strengths and capabilities. The managers' strong sense of agency was associated with their active role in facilitating the development of extensive networks of relationships between the Neighbourhood House and external organisations, and in fostering the relational social and working culture of the Neighbourhood Houses (Crossan & Gallacher, 2009).

Learning, awareness, and knowledge

The findings of this research show that the women's experiences of empowerment were facilitated by the two strong interwoven and interacting traditions within Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria – community development, and adult learning (Kimberley, 1998). They attest to the transformative power of the participatory and relational knowledge-making, learning and educational practices in the Neighbourhood Houses (Bradshaw, 1997; Crossan & Gallacher, 2009; Duckworth & Smith, 2018; Ollis, Ryan, Starr, & Harrison, 2018; Ollis et al., 2016; SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013). The findings highlight the interconnection between community development and adult learning in Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria showing that learning, whether it was formal, informal or incidental learning, was an intrinsic and inseparable aspect of the women's experiences of empowerment (Kimberley, 1998). Community development draws on critical approaches challenging oppressive social and cultural practices in order to improve and transform the conditions of people's daily lives. The teaching and learning practices in the Neighbourhood Houses challenged education and learning practices that undervalue the knowledge and skills of local people and those gained from lived experience. They legitimise practices of knowledge acquisition which are not associated with formal learning modes and institutions (Belenky et al., 1997; Foucault, 1980; Freire, 1970; Ledwith, 2011). The learning environment was distinguished by the complexities and diversity of the interwoven formal, informal, and incidental learning, and teaching practices based on reciprocity between teacher and learner, co-construction of curricula, and drawn from the experiences of people's everyday lives (Crossan & Gallacher, 2009; Freire, 1970; Ledwith, 2011; Ollis et al., 2016). The non-judgemental and safe learning environments supported the women to engage with formal learning and to overcome the missed opportunities and "spoiled learning identities" (Duckworth & Smith, 2018, p.157) they had carried with them over

their lifetimes. Some managers and participants had not been given or had not been able to take opportunities to learn when they were younger, and others had considered themselves as incompetent or disinterested learners. “Permeable boundaries” (Crossan & Gallacher, 2009, p.136) ensured that the women’s interests, aspirations, local knowledge and skills were relevant to learning in the classroom, and in the broader environment of the Neighbourhood House. Sharing their stories with others was a profound mode of learning within classrooms, networks, and in social interactions (Freire, 1970). In the process of gaining new skills, knowledge and awareness, the women reframed their identities (Duckworth & Smith, 2018, p.164), imagining and aspiring to new futures for themselves, their families and their communities. Learning was an iterative process. It changed the women’s meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000), their *savoir* (Foucault, 1980, p.82), knowledge of self constructed through lived experience and in relation to others (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), their understanding of the world and the way that power operated in their lives, and it changed the way they participated in the world (Freire, 1970). Learning was consciousness raising enabling the women to understand the broader social, cultural, and political forces impacting on their personal and working lives, and on their wider social and natural environments (Foley, 2001; Freire, 1970). It raised the women’s awareness of the ways in which gendered and other forms of inequality operated in their lives and their communities to disadvantage and marginalise themselves and others, and encouraged them to question taken-for-granted beliefs and values and reflect on how they wanted to live their lives. Learning led to local grassroots activism.

The women’s learning affirmed Foley’s (2001) view of learning in Neighbourhood Houses as:

... probably the most significant sort of human learning. This is learning that enables people to make sense of and act on their environment, and to come to understand themselves as knowledge-creating, acting beings. Through their participation in neighbourhood houses, women learned to overcome the fear and lack of confidence instilled in them by their gender socialization, to fight for something for themselves and to participate in difficult collective decision-making. (p.78)

The managers established their own learning communities in networks with their peers, in their relationships with committee members, and with other community organisations and groups (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As they shared their stories the women were tacitly and intentionally exchanging and learning different socio-cultural perspectives and imparting local taken-for-granted knowledge (Carteret, 2008). Sharing stories – of schooling, relationships, trauma – with managers and other participants was a profound mode of learning and awareness raising (Freire, 1970) taking place in classrooms, and in social and professional interactions. Formal classes, mentoring arrangements, professional development activities and workshops, observations, and talking to others were all considered as legitimate sources of knowledge. The managers learned from and mentored one another in the practices of community development, provided a reflective space for each other, supported skills development to manage the complexities of their roles, such as how to negotiate and manage conflict, and to meet the requirements of funding bodies, and exchanged ideas and information about the myriad aspects of their role. Some managers who had previously doubted their ability to gain professional qualifications or who were reluctant to do so, were encouraged by their peers and mentors to gain formal qualifications.

The relaxed and informal nature of Neighbourhood Houses is in apparent contradiction to the educational and social value of the learning and the resulting significant

transformations that occur in people's lives (Duckworth & Smith, 2018; Foley, 2001; Permezel, 2001; Thompson, 2015). The findings of this study challenge the hegemony of institutionalised education as the most important way of learning, and trouble perceptions that the ways of learning for the women in the small, supportive and homely spaces of the Neighbourhood Houses had little impact on their lives (Clemans, 2010). Women with no previous qualifications and incomplete schooling were able to successfully engage in a wide range of learning, at their own pace, in their own ways, and according to their interests. They were not excluded from engaging with learning opportunities, as participants or managers, on the basis of their age, whether or not they held formal qualifications, or number of years in the role of manager (Permezel, 2001).

In a further challenge to the hegemony of dominant knowledges and ways of knowing, the skills and knowledge the women in this study had gained over the course of their lives was valued: their lived experience of violence, trauma, grief, parenting, learning as an adult, living and working in the community, were valued sources of knowledge. Women with no formal qualifications were employed as managers because of their deep knowledge and understanding of the community. Women participants with no formal training became volunteers assisting teachers in classrooms, or tutors conducting classes in their own right.

This research identifies the importance of the relational environment of the Neighbourhood House in enabling and encouraging the women to learn. Learning relationships were important for the women's critical and instrumental learning. The relationships the women established with other participants or other managers – those between participants and teaching staff, between participants and managers, and those between the managers and their peers or others in their wider community

networks – supported learning within and outside the classroom and the workplace, and reshaped their attitudes to learning and themselves as learners (Crossan & Gallacher, 2009).

As the findings show, the women's learning took place formally, informally, and incidentally across the spectrum of activities offered: from observation, drop-in and casual conversations, community events, in classes and other organised learning activities, volunteering, governance, and managing the Neighbourhood House, exposed the women to myriad learning opportunities encompassing simple and complex technical and critical skills (Foley, 2001; Gutiérrez, 1994; Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Thompson, 2015). These learning opportunities produced significant changes in the women's self-esteem, their sense of purpose and emotional and active engagement in the community (Spry & Marchant, 2014).

Re-envisioning empowerment

This research set out to explore the changes that occurred in the everyday lives of women in the course of their engagement in Neighbourhood Houses. In presenting a nuanced and intimate portrayal of the women's experiences of empowerment the study provides a re-envisioned and reinvigorated conception of empowerment as it relates to the lives of women in contemporary Australia. The women participants and managers came to the Neighbourhood House seeking changes in their lives; many came following disempowering and difficult life experiences. Their stories detailed experiences of disempowerment prior to engaging with the Neighbourhood Houses along with experiences of empowerment, and in some instances disempowerment, associated with their engagement. Their experiences in the Neighbourhood Houses occurred within environments attuned to practising local social justice.

Using feminist and post-structural perspectives of power and empowerment, this research brings together the deeply personal stories of the women with “the profoundly political” (Ledwith, 2011, p.62) social justice discourses and practices of participation, social inclusion, respect and empowerment in the relational environment of the Neighbourhood Houses. In doing this, the study provides an in depth and compassionate account of the operation of power and the multiple ways in which women experience empowerment and disempowerment in their everyday lives in a contemporary Australian context.

This section presents a summary of the main points from the analysis and discussion as they relate to the idea of empowerment presented in this study as always fluid, partial and contingent. It is followed by a discussion of the contribution to knowledge made by this study, the limitations of the study, implications for practice, and areas for future research. The thesis concludes with a short reflection on my own journey in this research.

This study bases an understanding of empowerment on feminist and poststructural perspectives of power as articulated by theorists including hooks and Foucault. These perspectives are important for exploring the ways that power shapes women’s everyday lives, although they have not been used in most previous research concerned with women and empowerment in Neighbourhood Houses. These perspectives of power, unlike more structuralist perspectives, support the notion that small changes, tiny empowerments (Sandercock, 1998), challenge, resist, or subvert structures of power in women’s lives. hooks (2014) and Foucault (1980) promote the idea of power as productive, problematising the idea of power as an oppressive force, controlling and dominating people’s opportunities, thoughts and behaviour. hooks favours a view of power as creative, energetic and strong, and values participatory and inclusive

practices of power to counter prevailing views of power as controlling and dominating. Foucault's (1982) view of power as enacted, rather than possessed, occurring within all social relations in all areas of life disrupts conceptions of power as an entity possessed by elites and powerful groups in society. His view shifts analyses of power from being located within specific locations, and possessed by powerful institutions, groups and individuals, to the way that power is enacted at the micro-level of society, in the everyday lives of people in all their endeavours, including their kinship and social networks, and at work.

Power, truth and knowledge are inextricably linked, and are discursively constructed, maintained, and disseminated (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Dominant and mainstream discourses construct women's everyday experiences, women's knowledge, and women's ways of knowing as being of little social and political value and importance. This is particularly so when these experiences are played out in private and community spaces, such as Neighbourhood Houses, in spaces that have not been constructed as the domain of men. As Foucault (Foucault, 1982) discusses power always contains the possibility of resistance. In Australian society counter-discourses contradict, resist and trouble the discourses that inferiorise women's roles, lives and experiences, that define difference as unequal, subjugate minority and local knowledge, and use gender, race, class, ability, age, and sexuality to oppress, marginalise and disadvantage people.

Philosophically, Neighbourhood Houses embrace these counter discourses to provide an environment in which women are able to realise and exercise power in creative and productive ways in social relationships (hooks, 2014).

This research shows that participating, connecting with others, and learning in the Neighbourhood Houses was an empowering experience for the women participants and the managers. Being exposed to multiple encouraging and broadening practices

and discourses, they became confident and willing to embrace new ideas and activities and to imagine and establish new ways of being in the world. This affected their personal lives, their connection to the local community, and their involvement with broader political and social issues, thereby enhancing their sense of control and agency in their everyday lives.

As this research shows, Neighbourhood Houses can be described as “empowering community settings ... distinctive in their potential to simultaneously contribute to individual development ... and positive social change” (Maton, 2008, p.4). The inclusive and welcoming social and learning environment of the Neighbourhood Houses played a central and inseparable role in the empowering experiences of the women, their enhanced agency and ability to shape aspects of their lives and their community environments. The women’s confidence and sense of self was strengthened by not being “othered”, and by being free to express their individuality. The holistic approaches and collaborative practices embraced many domains of diversity – class, culture, religion, age, ability – and created a mutually sustaining, safe, and nurturing environment. The strong sense of social connection was built on diversity (Burbules, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 1994). The “ongoing negotiation” (Yan, 2004, p.56) acceptance and valuing of the women’s different interests and life experiences variously competing and co-operating with each other fostered deep emotional and social connections between women at different life stages, with varied life circumstances, and across a range of interests. By embracing opportunities which extended their personal and work-based networks, the women overcame lack of confidence, social and workplace isolation, and established a profound sense of belonging to the Neighbourhood House, and the wider community.

The many and diverse opportunities the Neighbourhood Houses provided enabled the women to reshape and reframe their lives, and to establish a sense of control in their lives. They determined the ways they wished to pursue their interests, participate and work in the local community, engage with local democratic practices, and exercise active citizenship (Yan, 2004). Learning contributed to the women's enhanced agency. It was an intrinsic aspect of the women participants' and managers' engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses. Learning was multidimensional – formal, informal, and incidental – and occurred in all the activities they undertook, as volunteers, program participants, and as managers, whether or not there was specific educational intent. The iterative and ongoing nature of the Neighbourhood House learning environment contributed to significant and empowering learning that was subjective, personally meaningful and social. Learning practices valued the mutuality of learning, and sharing of knowledge and experience across generations and cultures. Privileging learning and knowledge based on the women's lived experience, and on women's ways of knowing created a sense of agency enabling them to build on and develop their interests and skills, understanding of the community and the concerns of local people, and their commitment for their work.

The women's experiences of empowerment were both dynamic and gradual. Beginning with their initial engagement, the multidimensional and multilayered nature of participation, relationship and social connection, and learning, gave gentle encouragement and supported the women to transform many aspects of their lives, sometimes in unexpected ways. They reframed previous negative conceptions of themselves, becoming survivors rather than victims of domestic violence, as willing and capable learners on their own terms rather than defining themselves as unable to learn, and as competent and contributing community members. They explored ways to care

for themselves and others, to initiate changes in their relationships and personal lives, and to instigate work practices that were integrative and collaborative.

This research shows the fluid, ongoing, contingent, and contextual nature of women's experiences of empowerment and problematises conceptions of empowerment as a single process or particular outcome. Overall, the picture of empowerment shown in this study highlights the importance for Neighbourhood Houses, community development practitioners, and contemporary theorists to embrace a notion of empowerment as conceptually diverse, complex and multidimensional.

Contribution to knowledge

This original qualitative research contributes to knowledge by advancing our understanding of human experience by exploring empowerment as it is experienced and understood in the everyday lives of women, in particular their engagement and involvement with Neighbourhood Houses. This in-depth study focuses on contemporary women's experiences within community in a western liberal-democratic political context. It can be argued that women in contemporary Australia experience empowerment in aspects of their lives that are not available to women who live in poorer economies, or in nations that are slow in legislating for women's equality. However, this research makes it clear that experiences of disempowerment and empowerment are still relevant in Australian women's everyday lives. It remains important to explore and understand the ways in which women experience disempowerment and empowerment. This study builds upon the body of research exploring women and empowerment, and it reinforces the idea of understanding women's experiences of empowerment, not as a binary of power or not power, but as fluid and dynamic in social relations.

Accounts of women's experiences such as those in this study are partial, situated and open to contestation (Gannon & Davies, 2012). This research is underpinned by critical analysis and reframing of the concepts of power and empowerment and acknowledgment of the complexity, fluidity, and dynamic nature of power and empowerment in women's everyday lives. Throughout the research the relevance of this conceptual understanding for exploring the micro-politics of empowerment in women's everyday lives became increasingly evident. The study builds on previous research and theoretical work, and challenges the binaries that were previously used in understanding and analysing women's experiences of power, disempowerment, and empowerment. Binaries such as powerful/powerless, empowered/ disempowered, individual/community, and male/female essentialise women and operate to constrain women's agency and self-determination. This study provides an enriched, nuanced understanding of empowerment as experienced by women as they go about their daily working and personal lives.

This study extends and deepens our understanding of how the interweaving of community development and adult community education practices within the Neighbourhood Houses supported women to develop a greater sense of control in areas of their lives. The intention of this research was to explore the nuances of empowerment as experienced by women within the particular milieu of Neighbourhood Houses. The findings identified the embodied, multidimensional and multilayered nature of women's engagement with Neighbourhood Houses. They revealed the integral role played by the emotions in the women's experiences of empowerment, and the importance of formal, informal and incidental learning for creating knowledge and developing new perspectives and understandings. The multilayered nature of the women's participation and engagement was integral to the way they constructed meanings.

Ledwith (2011) suggests that “the subtle nuances of the concept of empowerment are fundamental to a community development analysis” (p.13). Participating and working in Neighbourhood Houses engaged the women with practices of power in their everyday lives. While the research focused on the micro-practices of the women’s lives in their engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses, it showed that they were experientially immersed within broader discourses that valued subjugated and minority knowledges, respected difference, and embraced inclusion. This impacted favourably on their opportunities for employment, learning, social connection, and contributed to a renewed and strengthened sense of self, and awareness of themselves and their agency in the world. Moreover, they were constituted as subjects in their own lives, rather than as passive recipients. Beresford (2013) argues that studying the way community development is personally experienced by people will produce new and important knowledge about the ways community development impacts on people’s lives.

In addition, the study contributes to the now growing body of knowledge about Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria which have been completed in the past 10 years (Brophy & Rodd, 2017; Gibson-Pope, 2017; Ollis et al., 2016; Rooney, 2008; Thompson, 2015; Townsend, 2009; Whyte, 2017). A review of the published literature found less than a handful of studies with a primary focus on women’s empowering experiences in Neighbourhood Houses. This study contributes to knowledge explicating and exploring in fine-grained detail how the philosophies and practices of Neighbourhood Houses encourage, shape, and enable women’s experiences of empowerment.

Limitations of this study

The limitations specific to the research design were discussed in Chapter Four: Research Design. Briefly, the limitations discussed were in regard to the small size of the study, conducted with 15 women participants and 13 managers in 11 different Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria, the representation of ages in the sample of women participants, the limited diversity profile of the managers, and the possibility that, for some, the focus on women may be considered a limitation. A larger qualitative study would have greater capacity to present a wider cross section of Neighbourhood Houses, participants, and managers, although it is quite possible that this would still not be considered representative of the sector as a whole.

Several general limitations are relevant to this study. The research is based on the women's experiences as conveyed within a particular time and place. It follows that the perspectives of the research participants as they were recorded in the data reflect their understandings and interpretation of their experiences at the time of interview, and it is possible that these have subsequently changed.

The research was a small qualitative study exploring women's subjective experiences of empowerment from participating and managing within the particular context of a Neighbourhood House. The research methodology was designed to illustrate the depth and richness of the women's experiences rather than attempting to provide a broad brush picture. Rich accounts provide opportunities for deep engagement with the lived experience of others by readers and to re-connect with their own memories (Chase, 2005). Consequently, the findings of this research relating to women's experiences of empowerment are not generalisable to all women participating in or managing Neighbourhood Houses.

Furthermore, research has shown, and the sector acknowledges, that all Neighbourhood Houses are different (Gibson-Pope, 2017; Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2017c; Rooney, 2008). The particular Neighbourhood Houses attended or managed by the women were experienced as inclusive, welcoming and non-judgemental. This research does not imply that the Neighbourhood Houses in this study were all the same. It does not suggest that the findings can be generalised to all Neighbourhood Houses, nor that the experiences of the women in this study can be taken as illustrating the experiences of all women who attended those particular Neighbourhood Houses. Qualitative research does not strive for representativeness (Alston & Bowles, 2012). Notwithstanding this, the findings do extend our general knowledge and understanding of Neighbourhood Houses (Patton, 2015). Importantly, with regard to empowerment and the way this is understood within the context of community development, the findings of this research promote a more nuanced view of the concept of empowerment than is found in much of the literature. Similarly, by illustrating the diversity of women's experiences of empowerment in Neighbourhood Houses the study contributes to a contemporary understanding of the concept of empowerment and the ways that power operates in women's everyday lives.

Power and empowerment are fluid and unstable. It should not be assumed that the women did not have disempowering experiences in other areas of their lives, or that they will continue to feel empowered in the same ways as they did at the time of interview. Because of the nature of this study, women who may not have been able to describe empowering experiences would most likely not have nominated themselves to participate.

My own positionality in regard to this research meant that I was not a disinterested bystander, however, I was careful not to make assumptions about what the managers

would tell me in their interviews, and not to anticipate the experiences of the women participants.

Implications for practice

Recent studies in Australia are building a compelling picture of the significant and diverse role played by Neighbourhood Houses in local communities (Bowman, 2016; Brophy & Rodd, 2017; Gibson-Pope, 2017; Ollis et al., 2016; Ollis et al., 2017; Townsend, 2009; Whyte, 2017). International studies affirm the longevity and the importance of the settlement house neighbourhood model of community practice in supporting diverse communities in many countries (Association of Neighbourhood Houses in British Columbia, 2018; Larcombe & Yan, 2010; Sandercock & Attili, 2009; Yan & Sin, 2011). Local and international studies have drawn upon several theoretical frameworks for analysis, including social capital theory (Gibson-Pope, 2017; Humpage, 2005; Larcombe, 2008; Paltridge, 2005; Townsend, 2009), and have focused on different aspects of Neighbourhood Houses, such as adult learning (Ollis et al., 2017; Thompson, 2015; Townsend, 2009), and social integration (Gibson-Pope, 2017; Larcombe, 2008; Larcombe & Yan, 2010; Yan, 2004).

This study has focused on empowerment as a central tenet of community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses because empowerment is one of the key concepts of community development. It follows from this that it is important empowerment remains within Neighbourhood House discourse and continues to inform practice. The contemporary community development context requires some “theoretical revisioning” (Burkett, 2001, p.233) of the discourses of community development relating to empowerment, inclusion, participation, and social justice. They must be critically reflected upon and understood as partial, situated, and fluid, in relation to both

individuals and communities. Understanding empowerment in this way ensures that community development practice continues to be responsive and dynamic, rather than adhering to fixed and static meanings over time.

Theoretical revisioning involves deconstructing the binaries of powerful/powerless, empowered/disempowered, and community/individual empowerment in order to unsettle and destabilise their certainties (Gannon & Davies, 2012). Binary logics “limit and constrain modes of thought” (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p.75); deconstructing binaries allows for multiplicity and difference rather than fixed and either/or thinking. This is important for contemporary community development theory and practice. Empowerment then is not associated with one particular meaning, but rather with many potential subjective meanings in the context of communities’ and individuals’ lives. In practice, there are many possible ways that women experience empowerment in their everyday lives. A common opposition present in Neighbourhood House discourse centres on the individual/community binary which positions each in opposition to the other. Communities are not homogenous, they are composed of individuals with different lived experience, hopes and aspirations, beliefs and values. It is important for practitioners to view individual and community in dynamic and interactive relation to one another, where each exists and has meaning in relation to the other, rather than as separate and in opposition to one another.

The gendered focus of this research could be construed as reinforcing the association of Neighbourhood Houses with women. This is not strongly promoted within the Neighbourhood House sector, neither are gender-based approaches to service provision favoured in contemporary social policy initiatives. This study does not advocate for Neighbourhood Houses to become women-only organisations, rather it

advocates for stronger advocacy of the social value of providing women-friendly and supportive places in communities.

A final thought regarding practice. It is my sincere hope that practitioners find this thesis, in particular the powerful women's stories, as a useful tool for inducting new staff into the sector, for encouraging reflective practice and discussion, and for promoting the social and political significance for communities of the work undertaken in the Neighbourhood House sector.

Opportunities for future research

The exploration of women's experiences in Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria in this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the ways in which women experience empowerment in their everyday lives, and the role of Neighbourhood Houses in facilitating and enabling these experiences. The research established two fundamental typologies regarding empowerment and Neighbourhood Houses: that the community development practices and processes of the Neighbourhood Houses in this study, founded on a broad platform of social justice, were intrinsic to the women's experiences of empowerment; and that the women's experiences of empowerment were contextualised, personally meaningful, diverse, and fluid.

This study explored women's experiences in a small number of Neighbourhood Houses located in Victoria, Australia, and it has provided insight into the contingent and fluid nature of women's experiences of empowerment. In response to the identified limitations of this study, future research exploring women's empowering experiences as participants and managers could extend the geographical catchment area beyond the state of Victoria to include the other states of Australia, and to Neighbourhood Houses which are located in comparable western democracies overseas. The findings suggest

that a study of women managers' empowering experiences could be undertaken as an international comparative study between countries with different historical traditions and longevity with regard to Neighbourhood Houses. Furthermore, women participants' and managers' experiences in countries with cultural traditions that are more collectivist in nature could provide a greater understanding of what empowering experiences look like across the contemporary world.

This study did not attempt to link the women's experiences of empowerment with any specific types of participation, or with the duration or intensity of their participation. How this may have influenced their experiences and the relevance of this is not known and could be explored in further research. Women's experiences of empowerment in other women-friendly and women-focused community based settings could be explored using the model and research design of this study.

Becoming researcher - some reflections on the research journey

The impetus for this research came from my curiosity about the ways in which women subjectively experience participating and managing in a Neighbourhood House. Having worked as a manager in a women's Neighbourhood House for 27 years, I was not comfortable with the prevailing attitude that empowerment was no longer relevant to the sector. My sense was that the idea of empowerment is still relevant and important for community development practice in Neighbourhood Houses. This was coupled with a strong sense of the dearth of research on Neighbourhood Houses, and the realisation that within the body of research work available the lived experience of participating and managing in a Neighbourhood House has not been explored. In particular, the lived experience of being the manager has not been presented in a qualitative study. Alongside this was a desire to explore and contribute to further awareness and

understanding of the significant impact of Neighbourhood Houses for women and local communities.

It was my intention in conducting this research to explore a diversity of women's stories, to find the common threads and to explore the differences, not to make claims for any one story as the definitive story of participating in or managing a Neighbourhood House.

Conducting the research, establishing connections with the research participants, being entrusted with the women's stories, co-creating a space for exploration of their experiences and perspectives of their own everyday experiences, was a joy and a privilege. It strengthened my commitment to honour the women's experiences and stories. Conducting research within the structures of academia is a privilege. The support of academic traditions and structures – practical workshops, and expert supervision and guidance – provided an appropriate balance between the freedom to explore ideas and interests, and the necessary rigour and guidance to remain focused and enthusiastic.

I came to this research with my questions at a formative stage. The unfolding process of carrying out this research has given me the opportunity to immerse myself in contemporary feminist and sociological theory particularly in relation to concepts of power and empowerment. Carrying out the research has been challenging, enriching, illuminating, and empowering, an opportunity to develop a greater understanding and engage with the depth of the concepts, to be immersed in the writing and thoughts of others. In bringing some answers to questions, not the definitive or only possible answers, the performative process of conducting this research has created for me a

deeper understanding and ongoing critical curiosity of the questions, and of others' points of view.

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Appendix A

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled: **Neighbourhood houses as sites of women's empowerment - a narrative study.**

This project is being conducted by a student researcher, Ursula Harrison, as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Marty Grace, Head of Social Work at Victoria University, and Doctor Tracey Ollis from the School of Education at Deakin University.

Project explanation

The research has three main purposes. Firstly, to understand how empowerment is experienced and understood by women who have been/are participants in neighbourhood houses. Secondly, to understand how empowerment is experienced and understood by managers of neighbourhood houses, and thirdly, to understand how the neighbourhood house addresses the notion of empowerment. In order to do this, women participants and managers will be interviewed and asked to tell stories about their experiences in these roles, and a small group of key personnel in the neighbourhood house will participate in a structured discussion/interview. It is important that we have a better understanding of empowerment experiences in this context because this will help improve policies and practices within organisations towards supporting empowerment outcomes, and it will assist efforts to better fund and recognise the value of neighbourhood houses in local communities.

What will I be asked to do?

Participation in this study is voluntary and if you agree to participate you may refuse to answer any question. You may also withdraw from the study at any time without reason. If you do choose to withdraw any information you have provided will be destroyed.

If you agree to participate there will be a one off interview. Interviews will go for approximately one – one and a half hours, although they may go for as short or long a time as you wish. You will be asked to tell stories about your experiences at the neighbourhood house, how your life has changed through your participation, how you felt about your experiences, what were the most significant aspects of your involvement and you can tell these stories in the way that you wish. With your permission, a digital recording device will be used to record the interviews.

What will I gain from participating?

There will be no short term benefit for you if you agree to participate in this study. Results from this research, however, may be used to highlight the value of neighbourhood houses in their local communities, and to improve services, processes and policies for participants and managers in neighbourhood houses.

How will the information I give be used?

All information provided by you in relation to the research will be kept strictly confidential. Your name or any identifiable information will not be included in the analysis, or in any written or verbal report or publication on the research. All data will be stored in password protected electronic files or in a securely locked area. The researcher is the only person who will have access to this information. The research results will be presented at conferences and published in academic journals with the aim of providing more detailed information about the ways in which neighbourhood houses contribute to social change in their local communities.

What are the potential risks of participating in this project?

Everything you say in the interviews will be strictly confidential, however, it is possible that other people may see us speaking and conclude you are participating in my research. This should be considered before you agree to participate. If you find telling stories about your life and experiences upsetting in any way, then there may be some risk in participating in this research.

How will this project be conducted?

Interviews will be conducted at the neighbourhood house or other local space. At the completion of the interview, there will be an opportunity for you to provide feedback or discuss any questions or concerns you may have. If you feel in need of support after the interview, support options will be discussed with you. A month following the interviews, you will be provided with a written summary of what was discussed, and you will have an opportunity to expand or clarify anything you may have said, or remove yourself completely from the research project with no adverse consequences.

Who is conducting the study?

Chief Investigator
Prof Marty Grace
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Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator listed above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

We would like to invite you to be a part of a study into “**Neighbourhood Houses as sites of women’s empowerment – a narrative approach**”.

“[State briefly the aims, procedures involved and the nature of the project, including a clear indication of any potential risks associated with this project]”

CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT

I,
of

(your name)
(your address)

certify that I am at least 18 years old* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study: “**Neighbourhood Houses as sites of Empowerment – a narrative approach**”,

being conducted at Victoria University by: Ms Ursula Harrison, PhD candidate

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards to me associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research project, have been fully explained to me by Ms Ursula Harrison and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

- In depth semi structured interviews

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher Ms Ursula Harrison
0478 411 002, 9387 7491

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email Researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

Appendix C

INTERVIEW FORMAT FOR WOMEN PARTICIPANTS

Neighbourhood Houses as sites of women's empowerment

Questions

1. I'd like to start by asking you to please tell me the story of how and why you became involved with the neighbourhood house?
2. What experiences or interactions have you had that you consider to be turning points or significant for you?
3. What is something that you do differently now than what you have done in the past? Why do you think you are able to do it differently – thoughts, feelings?
4. What aspects of the house were/are most important for you?
5. What does empowerment mean for you in your life?

Signal coming up to the last question

6. How did you find the experience of being interviewed?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?

Thank you for participating in the interview.

Check in that they are feeling ok.

Transcription – contact details.

Appendix D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES

1. Firstly, could you tell me how and why you came to be working in the neighbourhood house?
2. What are the most important relationships you have as manager? Why?
3. Could you talk about areas or aspects of your work that you think are empowering for you as manager? Why? Egs?
4. What areas or aspects of the work do you think disempower you as manager? Egs? -
5. What have you learnt about yourself since becoming the manager?
6. Tell me about anything that has changed in your understanding or awareness of the environment (social/cultural/political) you work in?
7. In what ways have you changed since you have been in this role?
8. What does empowerment mean for you in your work/your life?
9. How did you find the experience of being interviewed?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?

Thank you for participating in the interview. I have really enjoyed listening to your story.

Prompts

When you say you felt more confident what does that mean for you?

Were there any changes in the way you thought about things?

What did you do because you felt more confident?

In what ways do you think differently about yourself?

Can you tell me more about that?

What was that experience like for you?

And then what happened?

What did that mean for you?

In what ways has your life changed because of your involvement here?

Appendix E

LEGEND USED FOR TRANSCRIPTIONS

(.) = short pause: (___) = long pause, more than 5 secs: underlined, Bolded = spoken emphasis on word/s: CAPS = spoken loudly: (inaudible?) unable to make out the word on the recording: niiiiice etc = extended vowel sound: comma = very slight pause between words, a break for breath: (laughing) etc = participant action at the time of speaking: NH = neighbourhood houses.

Appendix F

EXAMPLE OF POETIC INTERPRETATION FROM TRANSCRIPT: EXCERPT FROM REYA'S TRANSCRIPT

It shows you umm it gives you the strength. To talk. To be able to share your feelings, to be able to take the step which you think you might be right, or you might be wrong. Because umm when I used, in the past when I didn't umm feel confident, I used to, always be, in the, in dilemma of doing things, whether I want to do it or not, whether I should do this or not, whether I should say this or not. Maybe it's not good maybe it's wrong. What if it's wrong what if it's right. So now I guess I am out of that dilemma out of that situation where I can, umm share my feelings, it's or I, I feel like yes it's all right to share your feelings, whatever you feel. It's all right if you are wrong, you can have mistakes, but you can't repeat those mistakes. If you see it's wrong maybe you won't try it again. So all of those feelings have come inside me, like I can say it. I couldn't even laugh, loudly before, but now I I can tell myself that it's ok to laugh, because it gives you good health. Umm, because I have come from a background where, it's wrong to be, to laugh, or to laugh loud with open mouth you just have to smile that's it, that's your limitation. But when I came here I saw people, I saw people around me, and then I found out that well it's ok to laugh, nothing is wrong about it. Yeh, so that's how I feel about being confident.

It's ok to laugh

In the past, I didn't *feel* confident

I used to, always be, in the, *dilemma* of doing things.

Whether or not –

I *want* to do it.

I *should* do this.

I *should* say this.

Maybe it's not good. Maybe it's wrong? What if it's wrong?

To talk? To share my feelings?

What if it's RIGHT?

Before

I couldn't even

laugh

loudly.

I come from a background where it's wrong to be, to laugh, to laugh loud with open mouth. You just have to smile, that's it, that's your limitation.

Now

I am out of that dilemma, of that situation

I can tell myself that it's ok to laugh, it gives you good health.

I saw people around me – when I came here

I found out it's ok to laugh, nothing is wrong about it.

So that's how I feel about being confident.