# The Erosion of Self: An Ethnographic Study of Women's Experience of Marriage to Alcoholic Husbands

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Abstract

An ethnographic study according to Spradley's (1979) Developmental Research Sequence (DRS) Method was conducted in order to develop knowledge about how women live out, interpret, and express the experience of living with an alcoholic husband. The discourses surrounding women whose husbands are alcoholic have been used to minimize women's experience. In addition, these same discourses have also contributed to the concept of co-dependency, an explanatory theme used in alcohol treatment programs and recent popular literature to define the wives' difficulties. In contrast, what stood out from this study is evidence of a complex interaction in the experience of women married to alcoholics involving internalization of cultural expectations, weakening of self, and embeddedness in an alcohol-dependent marriage. Suggestions for counsellors include consideration of how internalization of cultural norms and the interactional dynamics of the marital relationship seriously affect the women's experience. Further, ethnographic questions could be employed therapeutically to map out clients' meaning constructs and to develop a coherent understanding of clients' worlds. Finally, ethnographic questioning could be integrated into counsellor training programs to raise trainees' awareness of the significance of their clients' use of language.

Résumé

Une étude ethnographique, selon la méthode de la Developmental Research Sequence (DRS) (Séquence de la recherche développementale) de Spradley (1979), a été conduite dans le but de développer une connaissance sur comment les femmes vivent, interprètent et expriment l'expérience de vivre avec un mari alcoolique. Les traités concernant les femmes dont les maris sont des alcooliques ont été utilisés pour minimiser les expériences de ces femmes. De plus, ces mêmes traités ont aussi contribué au concept de codépendance, un thème explicatif utilisé dans les programmes de traitement de l'alcoolisme et dans le récentes publications populaires, pour définir les difficultés de ces épouses. Par contraste, ce qui est ressorti de cette étude est l'évidence d'une interaction complexe de femmes mariées à des alcooliques impliquant l'intériorisation des attentes culturelles, un amoindrissement du concept de soi et l'enlisement dans un mariage alcoolique-dépendant. Il est suggéré aux conseillers de prendre en considération que l'intériorisation des normes culturelles et les dynamiques interactives de la relation maritale affectent sérieusement l'expérience des femmes. De plus, des questions ethnographiques pourraient être employées thérapeutiquement pour établir les grandes lignes de la signification du construit des clientes et pour développer une compréhension cohérente des mondes de ces clientes. Finalement, un entrainement sur comment formuler et présenter des questions ethnographiques pourraient faire partie du programme de formation des conseillers pour familiariser ceux-ci avec la signification du langage utilisé par leurs clientes.

Within the last fifty years, the perspective concerning the wife of the alcoholic has evolved from that of her having a personality disorder (Futterman, 1953; McDonald, 1956) which causes her husband's alcoholism (Clifford, 1960; Whalen, 1953), to acknowledging her as an individual living in a relationship of double bind (Denzin, 1987) that may or may not result in dysfunctional coping behaviour (Orford, Guth-

rie, Nicholls, Oppenheimer, Egert & Hensman, 1975; Wiseman, 1991).
This view has merged into a systemic perspective where the behaviour
of the wife is seen as part of an interactional process occurring within
the family around the husband's drinking behaviour (Casey, Griffin &
Googins, 1993; Denzin, 1987; Steinglass, 1981). Such interactional pro-
cesses tend to undermine the couple's ability to generate positive emo-
tional feeling toward the self and other (Denzin, 1987; Wiseman, 1991).
Being married to an alcoholic involves a set of unique difficulties that
influence and change wives' self-definitions (Asher & Brissett, 1988;
Weinberg & Vogler, 1990; Wiseman, 1991). Over time, the wife may query
her identity and undergo a weakening of boundaries between her sense
of what is real and what is artificial (Asher, 1988; Jackson, 1959; Wiseman,
1991). Differences in perception between the wife and her husband
about the drinking behaviour contribute to this sense of blurred reality
(Maisto, O'Farrell, McKay, Connors & Pelcovits, 1988).

All too often, the wife attempts to escape the reality of her hus-
band's alcoholism by denying its existence (Asher, 1988; Casey, Griffin &
Googins, 1993; Denzin, 1987; Jackson, 1954; Wiseman, 1991). However,
eventually an accumulation of problems in the marital relationship leads
her to eliminate temporally possible explanations for her husband's
dysfunctional behaviour and instead develop a new perception that her
husband is an alcoholic (Asher, 1988; Gorman & Rooney, 1979; Jackson
& Kogan, 1963; Weinberg & Vogler, 1990; Wiseman, 1991).

Nevertheless, there is a potential pitfall for the wife. Within the context
of formal intervention programs for family members of alcoholics, the
"culture of codependency" (Asher, 1992, p. 190) is introduced and
stabilized in the woman's lived experience. Such programs may narrow
her identity to "codependent," enhancing her readiness for self-blaming
(Kokin & Walker, 1989). These feelings of self-blame tend to emanate
from the negative self-image which is typical of wives who have experi-
enced years of violent emotionality within the alcohol-centred relation-
ship (Asher & Brissett, 1988; Denzin, 1987). Thus, labeling a woman
"codependent" involves a social process maintained by family alcohol
treatment programs, Al-Anon, therapists, and popular literature on co-
dependency (Asher, 1992). It is not surprising that codependency is
viewed as a "feminine disease" (Kaminer, 1992, p. 14) due in part to this
social process and to women's traditional role as caretakers of the fam-
ily's emotional health (Bateson, 1989; Rubin, 1979).

With most investigations that involve women married to alcoholics,
the focal point has centred on the marital couple or family (Dunn,
Seilhamer, Jacob & Whalen, 1992; Moos, Finney & Gamble, 1982; O'Far-
rell & Birchler, 1987; Steinglass, 1981). In addition, some recent works
have questioned the wife's enterprise of labeling herself as "codepen-

dent" and in need of treatment, (Asher, 1988; Asher & Brissett, 1988; Kokan & Walker, 1989) and have stressed the social construction of the condition. For the purpose of this study the term "codependency" is used as it relates to alcohol treatment programs in relation to alcoholics' wives' difficulties and behaviours centred around their husbands' alcoholism. The definitional ambiguity of the term "codependent" corresponds to a paucity of treatment methods for the condition in the literature. No empirical research supports the concept of the phenomenon of codependency (Troise, 1992) but a retrospective-prospective study by Asher (1988) on the "moral career" of defining oneself as the wife of an alcoholic and Denzin's (1987) extensive ethnographic/phenomenological study of the alcoholic self suggest a cultural and interactional basis for the connection between symptomatic behaviour in the wives and diagnosis of the syndrome.

Basic questions concerning the experiences of women whose husbands are alcoholic remain unanswered in the literature, and treatment approaches centred in counselling theory have yet to be formulated. A rigorously applied ethnographic research approach can begin to fulfill this purpose by enabling the researcher to discover aspects of experience that reflect not only participants' cognitive understanding but also the underlying meaning of their cultural reality (Spradley, 1979). An account of women married to alcoholics, which considers their tacit knowledge (Spradley, 1979) would be appropriate as a means to examine the cultural aspects of their experience. An ethnographic method can provide such an account.

A basic assumption of ethnography is that dimensions of meaning in cultural experience can be discovered through the study of language. The ethnographic interview is a vehicle for discovering the forms of discourse through which knowledge about the informant's experience is revealed (Bertaux, 1981). Spradley (1979) refers to this discourse as a unique form of speech event.

Why is an ethnographic methodology appropriate to counselling research at this time in history? "Ethnography is an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon. Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where 'culture' is a newly problematic object of description and critique" (Clifford, 1986, p. 3). Bruner (1990) and others speak of a "contextual revolution" occurring in psychology and Waldegrave (1990) reminds us of the significance of cultural determinants in his argument for "Just Therapy." It should be noted that "culture" has been familiar turf in the field of medical anthropology (Marsella & White, 1982; Chrisman & Maretzki, 1982). Anthropological and psychiatric knowledge have been brought to bear in helping individuals and families gain cultural understanding of their illnesses. The concept of culture (Unger

& Sanchez-Hucles, 1993) is recognized by feminist scholars who advocate the inclusion of context in social science research (Gergen, 1988; Lott, 1985; Mishler, 1986). Specifically, feminist ethnography involves an examination of women's behaviour in terms of cultural contexts (Reinharz, 1992).

What exactly do we mean by the term "culture"? Culture is the acquired ideas, beliefs, and knowledge that a particular group of individuals use to make meaning of their experience and generate cultural behaviour (Spradley, 1979). Furthermore, in a dialogue between two individuals, there are "the embedded or unconscious cultural structures in language, terminologies, nonverbal codes of behaviour, and assumptions about what constitutes the imaginary, real, and symbolic" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 31). The contention here is that individuals in a shared cultural and linguistic community define and identify their experience in a common and systematic manner (von Eckartsberg, 1986). Cultural knowledge affects all areas of one's life.

An ethnographic approach to counselling research was used in the present study to serve as a vehicle to evoke cultural/historical/gender sensitivity to the difficulties of women whose husbands are alcoholic, and thus enhance counselling outcomes for this group. This article seeks to illuminate what it means to be married to an alcoholic, from the perspective of five women at this time in the twentieth century.

## TACTICS OF INQUIRY

### Identifying Informants

Leniniger (1985, p. 47) reminds us that the "selection of informants rests more on the careful identification of persons, often in advance, who are representative of the culture and who show potential to reveal substantive data . . . on the domain of study." The informant's current involvement in the cultural scene for a minimum of one year is recommended (Spradley, 1979). In keeping with these criteria, five women currently married to alcoholics were chosen who were articulate and willing to describe their experience; duration of marriage ranged from 19 to 32 years. Each of the women identified her husband as an alcoholic and volunteered to be an informant for the study. Participants were recruited from a drug and alcohol centre. Clients or wives of clients were provided with information about the study by staff members at the centre and were invited to contact the authors by telephone if interested in participation. The participant group was chosen from the first five women that contacted the authors. One woman was a full-time student, one an artist, one a technician, and two were clerical workers. Four women lived with their husbands and one had been recently separated. The women's ages ranged from 47 to 60 years. All were Caucasian.
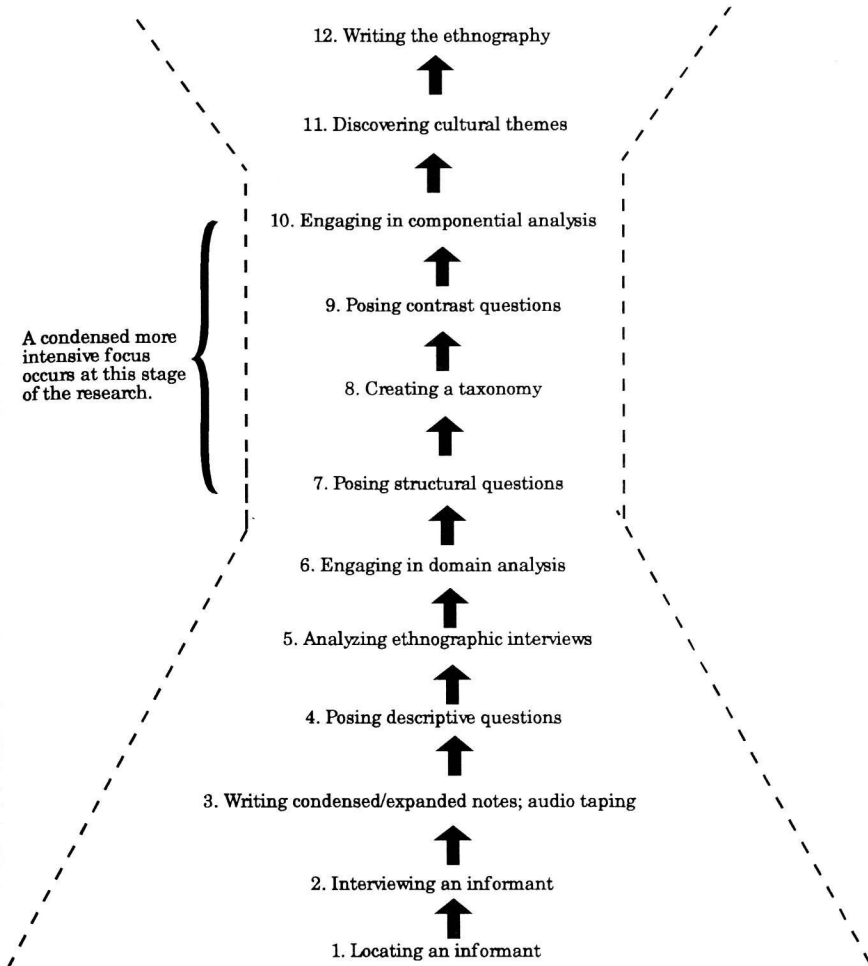
*Interviews*

A total of 10 individual one-hour interviews, all audio-taped, were con-
ducted among the women. Three participants were interviewed for 2
one-hour conversations; one woman was interviewed for 3 one-hour
interviews; and a one hour conversation occurred with one informant.
Four of the informants were interviewed in their respective homes; one
woman preferred to be interviewed at the drug and alcohol centre.
Following the first hour's interview, further interviews were arranged
with four of the informants to elaborate emerging themes and domains,
until saturation of the data was reached. The authors took the attitude
of a novice in discovering the cultural knowledge of each informant
(Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979) wherein they were the "learners" in the re-
search situation and each participant was invited to teach something
about her experience.

The ethnographic interviews were conducted and the typed tran-
scripts were analyzed according to the Developmental Research Se-
quence (DRS) Method of Spradley (1979). The DRS Method consists of
12 specific tasks whereby dimensions of meaning in cultural experience
are discovered through the study of language. By examining how the
informants used their phrases and terms, it was immediately necessary to
decode the full meaning of symbols in the culture under investigation, as
suggested by Spradley (1979). Of the 12 DRS steps, three involve posing
descriptive, structural, and contrast questions.

Descriptive questions elicit respondents' representation of some as-
pect of their culture or world (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) and help
collect an ongoing sample of their language. The following is an example
of a descriptive question posed in the initial interview with each infor-
mant: "I wonder if you could just start by telling me what it is like
to be married to your husband?" Structural questions generate the con-
structs, or domains, informants use to describe their worlds (Goetz &
LeCompte, 1984). These constructs, or domains, are the basic units in an
informant's knowledge. The following example illustrates a structural
question: "Debbie, you said that you believe you're going crazy. Are there
different reasons for believing that you're going crazy?" Contrast ques-
tions are used to discover the meanings of, and the relationships among,
the constructs that informants use (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The
following contrast question used with one of the informants elicited
valuable information: "So you see yourself living two lives. Can you tell
me the difference between the two . . . give me an example of each?"

*Ethnographic Analysis*

Four kinds of ethnographic analysis, each an additional task in the DRS
method, were used in conjunction with the various types of ethnographic
questions as a way to discover the cultural meanings that women married

12. Writing the ethnography

⬆

11. Discovering cultural themes

⬆

10. Engaging in componental analysis

⬆

9. Posing contrast questions

⬆

A condensed more
intensive focus
occurs at this stage
of the research.

8. Creating a taxonomy

⬆

7. Posing structural questions

⬆

6. Engaging in domain analysis

⬆

5. Analyzing ethnographic interviews

⬆

4. Posing descriptive questions

⬆

3. Writing condensed/expanded notes; audio taping

⬆

2. Interviewing an informant

⬆

1. Locating an informant

The dotted lines represent a shift in the ethnographic focus throughout the research process.

*Adapted from James P. Spradley (1979).

Figure 1

*Developmental Research Sequence (DRS)**

to alcoholics use and to continually clarify and validate such meanings (Hycner, 1985; Spradley, 1979). Domain analysis involves a search for domains or larger categories, each made up of similar cultural symbols. Of importance to the concept of culture is the idea that individuals organize their knowledge about their world into categories. Bruner (1990, p. 56) reminds us that if we were not capable of constricting our

world into categories or schemas, we would be "lost in a murk of chaotic experience." In taxonomic analysis, the internal structure of a domain is examined by identifying commonalty among terms. Constructing a taxonomy allows not only the content to be revealed within a domain but the structure of how all the terms are related to one another. Pieces of information that people use to distinguish differences between terms are called attributes. Componential analysis involves a search for attributes that reveal differences among terms in a domain. Lastly, the discovery of cultural themes requires a search for recurring ideas in several domains that relate to the culture. Many cultural themes are at the tacit level of the informant's knowledge (Spradley, 1979). The four remaining DRS tasks involve locating and interviewing an informant, creating an ethnographic record, and writing the final report.

*Credibility*

Credibility of the study was accounted for through the use of a dependability audit, including an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The entire data gathering process was recorded (e.g., researcher/informant relationship; specific steps of the method used; any biases and reactions involving the topic of inquiry; as well as hunches, inferences, and ideas to be applied in data collection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) ). In addition, two specific methods were employed to solidify the credibility of this qualitative study. First, during the interviewing process, each informant was asked to verify the hypothesized domains that had been explicated from the typed transcripts. Second, after analyzing the data and creating the text, consideration was given for accuracy by returning to each informant for verification of the themes (Brenner, 1985).

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TEXT

As most individuals would imagine, living with an alcoholic husband is difficult and complex. The wife lives in a world of diverse cultural meanings which she has learned in order to cope with and make sense of an alcohol-centred relationship often not seen by the outsider or casual observer. An understanding beyond this outsider's view requires an interpretation of the wife's life-space as experienced within the realm of the alcohol-dominated world she shares with her husband. It appears that the wife's experience of temporality and emotionality has been distorted through years of interactional experiences woven through her husband's "alcoholically altered stream of inner consciounsess" (Denzin, 1987, p. 18). Metaphors of "not living a normal life" are frequently used by each of the women in their narratives. In fact, this is an important part of their tacit cultural knowledge.

By carefully explicating from the text the women's use of words and phrases, a rich tapestry of common themes emerged to form a connect-

edness between their worlds. Separate strands of experience gathered from each informant were woven to create this tapestry of cultural understanding. Working through the material, it was possible to identify three common themes representative of the five women's lives. The themes are: (1) Constantly Being on Guard; (2) Living in a Pit; and (3) Push and Pull.

## Constantly Being on Guard

In contrast to normal relationships where love and affection bond two individuals, the alcoholic relationship is experienced as painful emotionality on a daily basis. Interacting with her alcoholic husband, the wife must determine whether her husband has been drinking or whether he is sober. For the wife, composing a life means integrating the ambiguous meaning surrounding these interactions. Fear and confusion, as Jackson (1956) observes, fills her emotional field of experience in anticipation of what phase of the drinking cycle her husband will be in.

When Anne was asked how she would describe her life with her husband, she gave me an example of having to be on guard when she said:

> It's extremely stressful . . . you just don't really know from one minute to the next just how things are going to be. There's never any consistency. There's constant up and downs . . . like a roller coaster . . . you're constantly in a state of tension. There's always tension or anxiety floating around you.

Debbie talked about being on guard whenever she anticipated her husband's arrival home from work. She said, "you're constantly in fear, not knowing what kind of a mood the person is going to be in when they come in the door because alcohol usually changes you so much."

In the five women's descriptions of being on guard, each of them used the terms "artificial" and "superficial" to describe how she experiences her life-space of negative emotionality. Over time, the wife's verbal exchanges with her husband are shallow, meaningless monologues. Buber (1947, p. 42) used the term "reflexion" to describe an artificial interchange as "the mysterious intercourse between two human worlds [as] only a game. . . . In the rejection of the real life confronting [her], the essence of all reality begins to disintegrate." Eventually, the spouse of the alcoholic has learned to suppress her emotions and finds herself living an inauthentic life.

Living an inauthentic life was explicitly described by each woman. In conversation, Karen said she never talked to anyone about her painful feelings and that such feelings were "almost" concealed from herself. She said:

> I was a person walking around with a shell, dressing really nicely, making sure that my hair was always really nice and so on and so forth. My make-up was always really nice so that no one would see the inner . . . I mean I was perfect at putting on that

show. . . . I guess I was doing everything on the surface and almost my feelings were probably almost in the deep freeze.

There was a pervasive lack of trust interwoven throughout each woman's descriptions of having to constantly be on guard with her husband. During conversation, Louise's implicit awareness of not trusting her husband was made explicit when she used two metaphors—"being in a void" and "an empty black space," to describe her experience of spatiality in relationship with him. She went on to say, "[it] feels like when you look at the stars at night—it's black and empty, yes, empty. That's what the void is . . . it's a lack of trust."

As the women talked about being on guard as part of their experience, for each of them, the male-female relationships have been characterized by a disparity of power—weighed heavily on the side of the husbands. As in our society, differences in interpersonal power related to gender are only recently being addressed (Bartky, 1990; Miller, 1976; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Bateson (1989, p. 39) wrote, "issues of female inferiority still arise for virtually every woman growing up in this society." The foregoing descriptions of being on guard reflect each of the five women's tacit cultural knowledge that her existence within her marital relationship is experienced as powerless. Each of the five informants entered traditional marriages at a time when inequality within the marital relationship was expected (Bateson, 1989; Breines, 1992; Harvey, 1993). But for each woman interviewed, asymmetry in the marital relationship turned to distorted forms of exploitation.

## Being in a Pit

The theme of being in a pit involves the experience of a weakening of self within the alcohol-centred relationship and of how this loss relates to each of the participant's cultural learning of being a woman in society. In other words, the wife finds herself "trapped in a pit" through the erosion of self in relationship with her husband and through the cultural myths she lives by.

For Debbie, being in a pit meant a state of confusion each time she was subjected to her husband's subversive behaviour. After each confusing interaction, she would spend days of loneliness trying to reconstruct meaning in relation to self. She described a step to being in the pit:

My whole life was confusing . . . he still, all those years, said how much he loved me and I was the world to him . . . I had that on the one hand and then how he acted was so different. . . . He would make demeaning comments to me . . . this is part of the step to being in a pit. . . . You get to the top of the slimy wall of the pit, thinking you could see daylight again, then something completely crazy would happen and you'd go back down again and try to sort yourself out.

Being married to an alcoholic is not the only reason that each of these five women struggles with her sense of self. Bateson (1989) observed that in our society, women have a tendency to believe messages of unworthi-

ness and disdain which lead to a vulnerability to distorted perceptions of themselves.

Karen spoke about how she had arrived at believing she would fail an upcoming final exam:

> The weekend before I wrote those exams [he] was awful to me. Just awful . . . just adding every bit to me to make me feel really, really low. Well, I went to my first test and I mean I blew it. I didn't even have any oxygen in my brain.

Bateson (1989) also reported that women in this society learn to assume a victim mentality and are often targets of blame, especially in situations of vulnerability. This victim mentality places the wife in a vulnerable position to receive her husband's and other's blame for everything wrong in the relationship. Findings by Asher (1988), Denzin (1987), Kokin and Walker (1989), and Wiseman (1991), support this dynamic of blame found in the alcohol-centred relationship.

The pit is a "private world of insulated madness" (Denzin, 1987, p. 146) protected from the outside by soft, padded, moveable walls where, as Denzin (1987) observed, the wife's identity is molded into a dependency on the alcohol-dependent relationship, and her self becomes entrenched and intertwined into that of the alcoholic self. Debbie described her loss of self as she became "completely cocooned in loneliness":

> It was like there's this little cloud all around it and it was soft in there and that was where I was lonely—like soft—because you could push on the walls and they'd move—it wasn't really—it was a trap but it wasn't a trap that you would fight to get out of . . . it wasn't a real place.

Caught in a spiral of isolation that involves a weakening of self and an ambiguous sense of what is real and unreal, the wife believes she is unable to change.

*Push and Pull*

> "Insulate" is what he tries to do. I think of that as soft padding like words and flowers, stuff like that and nice gestures, pushing, wolf in sheep's clothing kind of stuff. So I think of "insulate" as soft stuff. "Isolate" I think is the result of trying to do that—all that stuff about pulling and straining is the fact that I think it's just everyone's nature, either you give up or you fight. I guess the pulling is the fighting. . . . No wonder I have all this terrible indecision [about leaving the marriage] when in fact I do have all this padding.

This excerpt from a conversation with Louise illustrates the powerlessness that dominates the lives of the women talked to, and powerlessness which predisposes them to conflicts around issues of dependence-independence (Rubin, 1979). Rubin (1979) reported that most women experience conflicts especially at mid-life, around independence, separation, and individuation largely as a result of socialization processes that encourage dependency and passivity in women. However, these conflicts seem exaggerated for the alcoholics' wives, who for years have

lived in marriages defined by a cycle of dependency, which makes change extremely difficult.

Denzin (1987, p. 196) found that the alcoholic, who lives with a distorted perception of self and other, eventually moves deeper into isolation from the real world and "becomes an outsider to society." The wife's knowledge of her husband's alcoholically-clouded stream of consciousness that pushes him toward increased isolation is implicit. The centrality of isolation in the relationship is revealed in the following statement by Debbie:

> I feel that it was even physical isolation . . . at one time when I had three couples— three women I was particularly close to at work and their husbands—we used to socialize a lot. . . . He didn't like that even though he was always included and so he came up with the idea that for a year we wouldn't see anybody but each other.

The above statement supports Denzin's (1987) observation that the self-centred, self-seeking alcoholic experiences a terrifying, desperate loneliness that pervades all emotional relations with others. It appears that as the husband becomes less engaged with the "outside," his dependency needs on his spouse are increased. Louise has to "fight a huge war" against her husband's forms of control in her struggle to be more independent. She told me the following:

> I'm trying to remember some night when I was out, he talks about how he misses me and it sort of, he's just trying to crowd me in, to make my world small. Like [he says] my friends, whichever ones I bring home, which I stopped doing years ago, [that] they're trying to dominate me, for example. That's trying to insulate me so that I have no friends and only do his things.

It is no wonder that each woman believed she was "weak" and "not strong enough to leave." Rubin (1979) observed that women's early experiences of powerlessness gear them to a lifetime of conflict around issues of dependency-independence and of struggle to develop separate personal boundaries in their relationships. Karen said, "When we first got married I was a very passive person—I did not argue back at all." Rubin (1979) added that if a woman had been raised in a culture that valued her for her independence, she wouldn't experience fear each time she moved in that direction.

Thus, the five women, all from a generation that lived in compliance with the cultural norms that relegated them to domestic concerns (Dinnerstein, 1992), understood themselves through care for their families and the nurturance of relationships within them (Bateson, 1989). In conversation, Debbie reflects on her role in the marriage:

> [I believed that] to be a good wife you made a good marriage. . . . I made his whole life easy. . . . [If] he was drunk, I would drive. If he was drunk and didn't pay the bills, I'd take a second job and no matter what, I always was there to pick up the pieces and I was always there for, you know, moral support—anything.

For the women, living with an alcoholic meant "getting out of touch with your needs." The power of socialization processes that for gen-

erations have trained women for self-sacrifice, prepares them to bear guilt whenever they consider their needs (Rubin, 1979). Guilt, the "dark shadow of responsibility" (Yalom, 1980, p. 276) that can paralyze the willing process, played a central role in each woman's struggle for change.

As women encounter not only the internal pressures toward change, but external ones toward stasis, their determination and confidence tends to weaken so that future possibilities are relinquished. This was true for these women. Although conscious of the painful state of their marriages, they were unable to act on their internal struggles toward alteration. Debbie said, "I could have walked" but speaks of some pressures that blocked her way.

> I think society did expect women to stay home and either be old maids or else be married or else be a whore. Our roles were cast for us. You didn't seem to be an adventurer or free spirited woman who could be alone and respected.

Decision, as Yalom (1980) observed, means confronting not only freedom but also fearful isolation. Even though she lives separate from her husband in the same house—separated by a door with a removable bookshelf, Ann chooses to stay financially and socially comfortable as a married woman. She speaks of her fear of loneliness:

> Yeah, fear of change, fear of . . . being out there and just being on your own. Totally. Like even in this situation, even when those doors are shut, I still haven't lost him totally. Like I still know that he's there for me if I need him so I guess I'm not really 100% sure [I could leave]. . . . I think I'm dependent to a degree but yet I don't see myself as one to go out and try the world on my own.

Because most women have been forced to suppress and repress so much of their nature, they are fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity when faced with the possibility of disrupting the continuity of their lives (Rubin, 1979). Debbie said, "socially it was easy. . . . It was easier in my mind, I think it was easier to live that phoney existence than to strike out on my own. . . ." Rubin (1979) found that most women in mid-life fear divorce and are unwilling to take the risk no matter how great the personal cost. Rubin added that in reality, mid-life women reckoning with divorce, face the possibility of financial deprivation and limited social options. Limited social options for single women were a major driving force behind the wives' fear of change.

A major thread woven through the theme of push and pull is disillusionment. Phrases such as, "It's a waste of life," and "It's a big loss" illustrate the women's despair. Future possibilities with their husbands are anticipated with images of loneliness and isolation. Each at mid-life, a difficult time for most women, when old roles are shed and priorities reestablished (Rubin, 1979), the women struggle with the reality of being sold a cultural myth of family and marriage.

In summary, each of the themes organizes the wives' experience around their husbands' alcoholism and cultural expectations. Taken together, the themes refer to an interactional process that focuses on the wives' construction of meaning around their husbands' drinking behaviour. These themes do not always function at a level of conscious interpretive strategies, but rather structure the wives' experience at a taken-for-granted level (Denzin, 1987).

## DISCUSSION

Fundamentally, ethnographic research sets out to discover aspects of experience that consider not only participants' cognitive understanding, but also their cultural reality. The importance of this study is that through my search for some of the rules and maps of the culture of five women married to alcoholics, an expanded vision of the women's experience has been created.

Spradley's (1979) ethnographic interviewing methodology was rigorously applied to uncover meaning in the five women's existence, and this illuminated the impact of socialization processes on their experience. Also, the description of the alcohol-centred interactional dynamics of the marital realtionship has been broadened.

This work builds on and adds to a symbolic interaction study by Asher (1988) on the "moral career" of defining oneself as the spouse of an alcoholic husband and on Denzin's (1987) ethnographic/phenomenological study of the alcoholic self. The authors concur with Denzin's (1987) suggestion that alcoholics' partners live in a field of contrasting emotions centred around alcohol-dependent marital interaction. The authors also agree with Asher (1988) who proposes strong cultural and interactional bases for wives' ways of defining themselves and their problems.

Based on the descriptions from five informants, it is suggested that a complex interaction in the experience of each woman involving internalization of cultural expectations, weakening of self, and embeddedness in an alcohol-centred marriage that encourages women to be passive, dependent, self-sacrificing, and self-blaming, has contributed to the popular perspective of what it means to be married to an alcoholic.

The interpretation of the wives' experience in this work refers to the cognitive and emotional structures that shape their actions. The concepts of emotionality, temporality, autonomy, dependency, powerlessness, trust, guilt, self-blame, female inferiority, weakening of self, isolation, loss, and separation refer to the inner and outer forms of experience that make up the women's essential structures of existence.

The ethnographic method offers important contributions to the substantive field of alcohol studies. Except for Denzin's (1987) study on the alcoholic self which revealed insights about the alcoholic's partner, and

Wiseman's (1991) investigation which provided a symbolic interactionist perspective on women married to alcoholics, an ethnographic methodology has not been used as the route of discovery into the culture of women whose husbands are alcoholics. Using the ethnographic method made it possible to go beyond the individual's experience and to illuminate cultural structures and processes. Thus, by examining the subtleties of the women's meaning systems concerning gender socialization, a rich source of cultural knowledge has been uncovered.

*Implications for Counsellors*

With awareness that internalization of cultural norms and the interactional dynamics of the marital relationship seriously affect the wives' experience, some suggestions for counsellors are presented.

First, since the wives experience dependency and powerlessness in marriage and are already vulnerable to these issues through socialization, they present special difficulties for counsellors. Entrapment in an alcohol-dependent marriage fosters fear, particularly fear of change. Counsellors need to be cognizant of this, and respect the immense barriers that women married to alcoholics have against change (i.e. suppressed emotions, social pressures, cultural beliefs, weakened self).

Second, consideration of clients' beliefs (e.g. blaming themselves for their husbands' alcoholism) could offer a larger framework of the presenting problems. Particularly useful would be counselling strategies that encompass the understanding of problems within the cultural context.

Third, some suggestions for counsellors are based on the researcher's experience with ethnographic interviewing methodology. Integration of ethnographic questioning in the therapeutic interview would shift more emphasis to clients' use of language. This way, clients could be actively involved in shaping the meaning of their cognitive maps. Also, ethnographic questioning would elicit valuable descriptions and contrasts of clients' experience.

Finally, a counsellor training model could be developed that builds on Spradley's (1979) ethnographic questioning. Integrating ethnographic questioning into counsellor training programs could raise trainees' awareness of the significance of clients' use of language. Trainees could learn how to apply ethnographic questioning as a therapeutic tool for mapping out their clients' meaning constructs and for developing a coherent understanding of clients' worlds.

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