The Study Circle.
Participatory Action Research,
With and For the Unemployed.

"There is a whole ocean of error and a few islands of truth, and neither chart nor compass to go by. We build up the map by accumulating shipwrecks… (Connell 1983: 252)."

Mark Brophy

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the Doctorate of Philosophy in Education and Training
by Thesis at Victoria University.

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Declaration of authorship

This thesis contains no material which has been submitted for examination in any other course or accepted for the award of any other Degree or Diploma in any University. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

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Mark Brophy

Dedication – Helen Sertori, my elder sister who died of cancer in 1996. A
teacher who inspired me to learn.

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Guide to acronyms

- ◆ AAACE   Australian Association of Adult and Community Education

- ◆ AAP   Australian Associated Press

- ◆ AARE   Australian Association for Research in Education

- ◆ ABC   Australian Broadcasting Corporation

- ◆ ABS   Australian Bureau of Statistics

- ◆ ACFE   Adult Council for Further Education

- ◆ ACOSS   Australian Council of Social Services

- ◆ ACT   Australian Capital Territory

- ◆ ACTU   Australian Council of Trade Unions

- ◆AEU   Australian Education Union

- ◆ AGPS   Australian Government Printing Service

- ◆ ALP   Australian Labor Party

- ◆ AMPU   A More Perfect Union

- ◆ ANTA   Australian National Training Authority

- ◆ ANU   Australian National University

- ◆ ATSIC   Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

- ◆ ATY   Australian Training for Youth

- ◆ ANTA   Australian National Training Authority

- ◆ ANU   Australian National University

- ◆ ANZ   Australian and New Zealand (Bank)

- ◆ ASC   Australian Security Commission

- ATY   Accredited Training for Youth

- BAC   Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen

- BEAT   Bridging Education and Training

- B.Ed   Bachelor of Education

- BIPR   Bureau of Immigration and Population Research

- CBT   Competency Based Training

- CDROM   Computer Disk Read Only Memory

- CESAC   Commonwealth Employment Service Advisory Committee

- CEDEFOP   European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Translated from German)

- CEO   Committee on Employment Opportunities

- CEP   Community Employment Program

- CES   Commonwealth Employment Service

- CESAC   Commonwealth Employment Service Australian Committee

- CIS   Community Information Services

- COS   Certificate of Occupational Studies

- CPS   Committee for Postgraduate Studies

- CSU   Curriculum Services Unit

- CYSS   Community Youth Support Scheme

- DEET   Department of Employment, Education and Training[1]

- DEETYA   Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs[2]

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[1] Departmental name change to Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) in 1996.

[2] In 1998 DEETYA were disbanded and two separate departments were formed by the federal government, DETYA and DEWRSB.

◆DETYA   Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs

◆ DEWRSB   Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small
                Business

◆ DPA   Domestic Policy Association

◆ DSS   Department of Social Security

◆ EAP   Employment Access Program

◆ EEO   Equal Employment Opportunity

◆ EMB   Evaluation and Monitoring Branch

◆ EO   Equal Opportunity

◆ EPAC   Economic Planning Advisory Council

◆ EPP   Employment Preparation Program

◆ EPUY   Education Program for Unemployed Youth

◆ ERIC   Educational Resources Information Centre

◆ ESP   Employment Support Program

◆ FEU   Further Education Unit

◆ FFE   Foundation For Employment

◆ FRAGS   Faculty Research and Graduate Studies Committee

◆ GDP   Gross Domestic Product

◆ IFLA   International Federation of Library Associations

◆ IPA   Institute of Public Affairs

◆ ITB   Industry Training Board

◆ IU   International Union

◆ JET   Jobs, Education and Training

◆ LATA	Labour Adjustment Training Arrangements
◆ LBOTE	Language Background Other Than English
◆ LEAP	Landcare and Environment Action Program
◆ LETS	Local Exchange Trading Scheme
◆ LMP	Labour Market Program
◆ LNP	Liberal and National Parties
◆ LTU	Long Term Unemployed
◆ MAAT	Modern Australian Apprenticeship and Training
◆ MEd	Masters in Education
◆ MP	Member of Parliament
◆ NBEET	National Board of Employment, Education and Training
◆ NCA	National Crime Authority
◆ NEATS	National Employment and Training System
◆ NEIS	New Enterprise Incentive Scheme
◆ NESB	Non-English Speaking Background
◆ NIF	National Issues Forum
◆ NILS	National Institute of Labour Studies
◆ NWO	New Work Opportunities
◆ OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperative Development
◆PEP	Participa*tion and* Equity Program
◆ PEP	Participatory Equity Program
◆ QUT	Queensland University of Technology

◆ RCEC   Regional and Community Employment Councils

◆ REDS   Regional Employment Development Scheme

◆ SEETRC   Senate Employment, Education and Training References
                  Committee

◆ SES   Special Employment Strategy

◆ SID   Skills in Demand

◆ SIP   Special Intervention Program

◆ SJRF   Social Justice Research Foundation

◆ SPRC   Social Policy Research Centre (University of NSW, Sydney)

◆ SYETP   Special Youth Employment Training Program

◆ TAFE   Technical and Further Education

◆ TAP   Training for Aboriginal Program

◆ TEP   Training for Employment Program

◆ TESOL   Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

◆ UK   United Kingdom

◆UNSW   University of New South Wales

◆ USA   United States of America

◆ VCOSS   Victorian Council of Social Services

◆ VET   Vocational Education and Training

◆ VUT   Victoria University of Technology (or Victoria University)

◆ WMIT   Western Melbourne Institute of TAFE [3]

◆ WWOOF   Willing Workers On Organic Farms

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[3]   WMIT merged with Victoria University of Technology in 1998.

- YTI   Youth Training Initiative

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Abstract

Although considered unorthodox in comparison to more traditional research methodologies, participatory action research and the critical theory that supports such an approach has been an accepted research practice for over four decades. The fundamental aim of this methodology is to empower and emancipate marginalised groups through a collaborative and participatory research process, ensuring the research participants' "stories" are represented honestly.

Critical theory requires a researcher to initially focus on a thematic concern of social significance. In this study the concern is unemployment. This study then integrates the subjective "voice" of unemployed people in the research process. It is an attempt to conduct research *with* and *for* the unemployed participants involved in the study, not *on* them. From a critical theory methodology perspective, it attempts to challenge the notion of "blame" and the label of "deviant" the unemployed are coerced to accept for their own situation. The study therefore does not pathologise the unemployed, but seeks to address issues in relation to unemployment from the research participants' perspective.

Critical theory and action research requires the researcher to select a milieu, which grounds the process in a meaningful context. An approach to adult learning which has existed in Scandinavian countries and the USA for over one hundred years, but recently introduced into Australia and currently growing in popularity is the study circle. The study circle format is adopted in this study as the milieu to act as the catalyst for an action research process. This milieu has been selected because it reflects and endorses the fundamentals of critical theory and action research. In this way it is participatory, collaborative, empowering, and embraces the breaking down of the researcher and researched divide.

Part one of the thesis, the methodology and literature review, introduces the thematic concern of unemployment and then discusses in detail issues in relation to the critical theory/action research methodology. The milieu, the study circles is elaborated upon as well as the research method. This then is the planning stage of the action research cycle. Where methodological theory begins to be applied in a practical manner.

Part two, the study circle season, is a collaborative reflection upon the study circle season itself. It provides an overview of the study circle season and then it addresses the themes the members discussed in relation to their own subjective experiences of unemployment. Part two also attempts to establish if and how this experience was an empowering one, from the participants' perspectives.

Introduction to Part one - methodology/literature review

This thesis is presented in two parts as illustrated in the Table below.

Table one: Thesis structure

Part one **Methodology/literature review**	Part two Study circle season

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┊──────────────────────────────┐
│                                          ┊                              │
│   ┌──────────────────────┐               ┊     ┌──────────────────────┐ │
│   │ Chapter one,         │               ┊     │ Chapter five,        │ │
│   │ Thematic Concern.    │──┐            ─┊───▶ │ Overview of season.  │ │
│   │ Unemployment.        │  │             ┊     └──────────┬───────────┘ │
│   └──────────────────────┘  │  ┌────────┐ ┊                │             │
│                             ├─▶│Chapter │─┊──┘   ┌──────────▼───────────┐│
│   ┌──────────────────────┐  │  │ four,  │ ┊     │ Chapter six,         ││
│   │ Chapter two,         │  │  │Method. │ ┊     │ Concerns and themes  ││
│   │ Methodology.         │──┤  └────────┘ ┊     │ raised.              ││
│   │ Action research.     │  │             ┊     └──────────┬───────────┘│
│   └──────────────────────┘  │             ┊                │            │
│                             │             ┊     ┌──────────▼───────────┐│
│   ┌──────────────────────┐  │             ┊     │ Chapter seven,       ││
│   │ Chapter three,       │──┘             ┊     │ Individual accounts. ││
│   │ Milieu.              │                ┊     └──────────┬───────────┘│
│   │ Study circle.        │                ┊                │            │
│   └──────────────────────┘                ┊     ┌──────────▼───────────┐│
│                                           ┊     │ Chapter eight,       ││
│                                           ┊     │ Conclusion.          ││
│                                           ┊     └──────────────────────┘│
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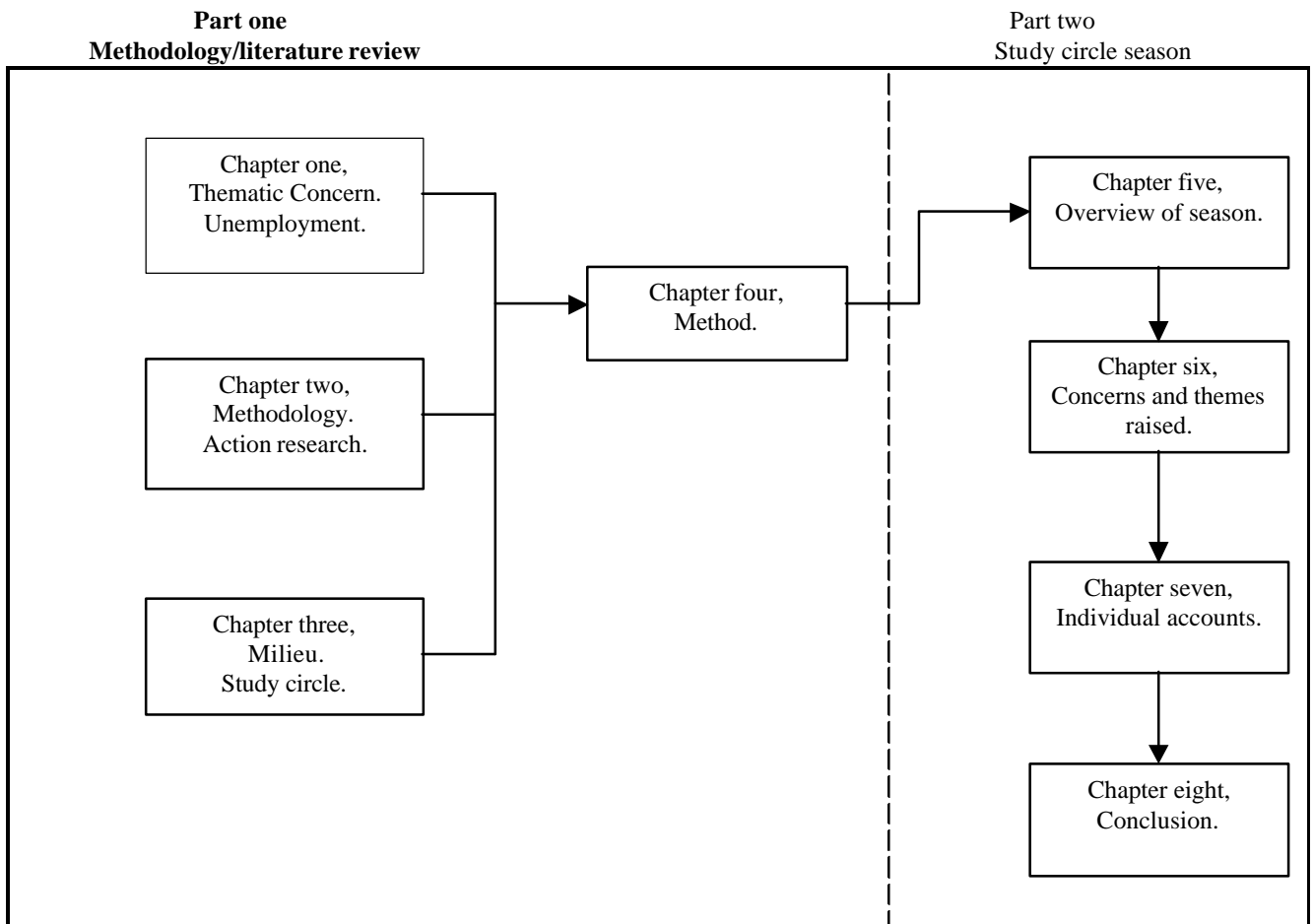
Note: To assist the reader, this Table will be reproduced throughout the thesis and the relevant area of discussion will be portrayed in the shaded box in bold.

Part one initially examines the thematic concern of this research – unemployment. The underlying methodological direction of the study is then discussed drawing upon the relevant literature in relation to the methodology and the research milieu – the study circle. Action research commences with a thematic concern, in this case, unemployment

and then establishes a milieu, in this case, a study circle, to address the thematic concern (Kemmis and McTaggart 1990).

Part two then provides an overview of the study circle season, as well as focusing on the concerns and themes raised during the study circle from a group perspective. Individual participant's accounts of the study circle experience are then reflectively analysed and finally the conclusion is presented.

Chapter one - Introduction

Table one: Thesis structure

**Chapter one,
Thematic Concern.
Unemployment.**

Chapter four,
Method.

Chapter five,
Overview of season.

Chapter two,
Methodology.
Action research.

Chapter six,
Concerns and themes
raised.

Chapter three,
Milieu.
Study circle.

Chapter seven,
Individual accounts.

Chapter eight,
Conclusion.
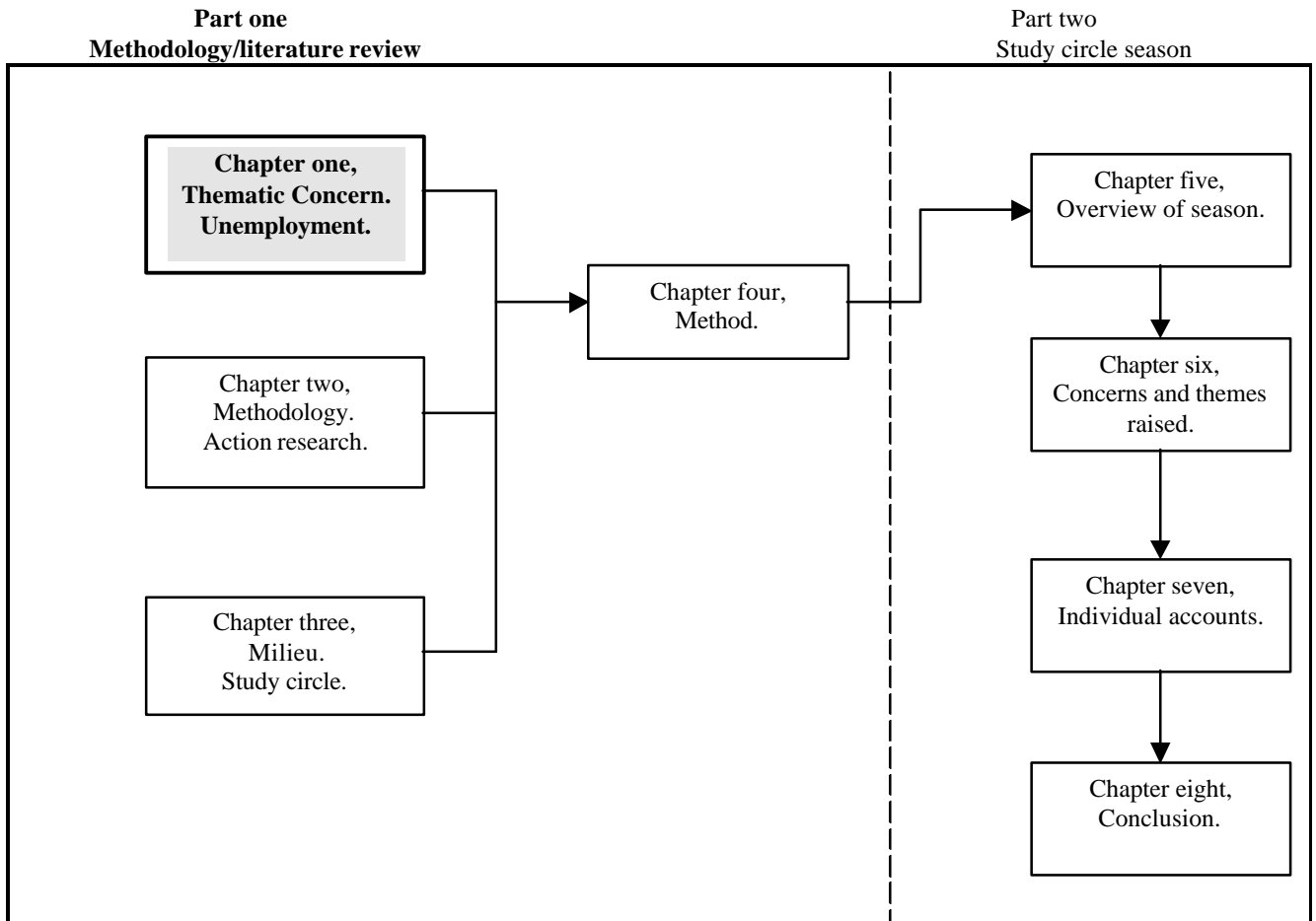
1.1   Introduction

As illustrated in table one, Part one comprises four chapters. Chapters one, two and three somewhat stand alone and are then linked within Chapter four. Chapter one initially details the manner in which the thesis is structured. Historical research antecedents, which determine the direction of this research, are elaborated upon and then the research aims and significance of the research, from a practical and theoretical perspective are presented.   The Chapter then addresses the thematic concern of the research –

"unemployment" - and then clarifies issues in relation to unemployment levels and the definition of unemployment. The Chapter then embarks on an historical critical analysis of the issue of unemployment within the Australian context and specifically the current government's policy platform. By deconstructing a number of commonly held myths in relation to unemployment and the unemployed, this Chapter attempts to demonstrate that our society's dominant assumptions go a long way to establishing and reinforcing beliefs that create a sense of disempowerment for the unemployed.

Chapter two then presents details in relation to the larger paradigm and methodological theory from which this research is based. Initially, the relationships between the recognised range of methodological paradigms available are discussed. The Chapter then focuses on these research paradigms and critical theory is discussed in detail addressing the tensions between these research orthodoxies. The notions of empowerment, agency and validity are expanded upon. Finally, participatory action research and emancipatory action research are discussed with reference to issues such as bias, validity and subjectivity. The Chapter also comments on the challenges facing the critical researcher in relation to traditional and conservative academic environments.

Chapter three reviews the relevant literature in relation to critical and empowering educational initiatives. It introduces the milieu and as such provides a detailed exploration of what study circles are, as well as their pedagogical theory and practice, including existing research findings in relation to study circles in Australia and overseas. The Chapter provides theoretical and practical guidance and informs on the conduct of the study circle undertaken in this research.

Chapter four then focuses on details in relation to the methods employed to conduct the research, based upon the action research stages of plan, act, observe and reflect. It details specifically the planning stage of organising the study circle, deciding on what data to collect, how observation will be conducted and refinement of issues in relation to triangulation, validity and reflective analysis.

In effect, Part one of the thesis begins by establishing why the researcher is interested in the issue of unemployment. From this basis, a methodology which attempts to truly assist the unemployed in the areas of social justice and equity is sought. From here a "vehicle" or milieu to enact the methodology is identified (the study circle). Then the details in relation to the method are refined.

Part two of the thesis introduces and reports on the results of these efforts.

1.2   The thematic concern – research purpose

Research, especially action research, does not stand alone. It sits within an historical context of inquiry. The impetus and motives behind this research stem from over eight years' professional work as a teacher and program coordinator with unemployed learners at TAFE and university levels, as well as from research and studies carried out during this time at under-graduate and post graduate levels. It is therefore relevant to provide some background on the ideas and themes presented in previous research.

Specifically, research conducted during 1996 highlighted the ways in which Australian government policy and dominant ideology adversely affected those who were disadvantaged through unemployment (Brophy 1996). That research attempted to establish, from the participants' perspective, whether Labour Market Programs (LMPs) have in any way empowered the unemployed. Of particular interest was the tendency of various policies, courses and LMPs, supposedly designed to assist the unemployed that fundamentally ignored and failed to officially address the disabling effects of unemployment. In other words the one common factor attributable to all people on such courses is their unemployed status. Yet this factor is dismissed and not discussed. The findings of this previous research therefore determined that historically, LMPs have a disempowering effect on the unemployed and that there is little or no allowance within contemporary curriculum for addressing these concerns of the unemployed (Brophy

1996). The "voices"[4] (in the research) of those who were experiencing unemployment spoke for themselves. For example, when research participants were asked *how* and *why* unemployment occurs, and if they perceived that "change" was possible, responses included:

'You're not going to change it. There's always going to be unemployment.

There's nothing we can do about the unemployment problem.

It's out there, the government, the system.

You wouldn't feel like you could change anything' (Brophy 1996:65*).*

However, the study also investigated whether from the perspective of the participants, the engagement in empowering activities, and working towards change and action, were worthwhile issues to explore. When participants reflected on these possibilities the responses included:

'Well if it gives people an idea of how to start off.

You can sort of start thinking about how to fix it.

You can get a better understanding.

It would be really good to learn something like that.

To be involved in starting up some small group or action plan or something.

Somebody might notice you.' (Brophy 1996:66).

This earlier study also argued that many factors contribute to and compound the problem of the structural inequality of the unemployed (Brophy 1996). The research demonstrated that LMP participants believed that focusing on unemployment issues in a program or

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[4] The use of the term "voice" in research can be traced to a study conducted by Belenky et al. entitled: "Women's ways of knowing in 1986" (Sanguinetti 1992). In this longitudinal study of 135 women of different backgrounds, metaphors of "voice" were used repeatedly to describe the women's experiences such as "speaking up", "saying what you mean", and "not being heard". "Voice" was

course would have a positive effect on themselves and others (Brophy 1996). Research by the Further Education Unit (FEU) in Britain in the late 1980s also revealed that many unemployed individuals wanted the opportunity to understand the socio-political context of unemployment (1990). Furthermore, it was established that if and when group discussion wandered (or was directed by a teacher) "unofficially" – outside of curriculum objectives - into addressing issues of unemployment, it was seen as a positive opportunity to share experiences (Brophy 1996). As action research operates in a cyclic manner, the reflections of the previous research are the rationale for this further cycle of research. The reflections indicated that participants did want to discuss issues in relation to unemployment. Therefore this cycle aimed to enact and respond to this reflection.

1.3 Research aims

In response to the reflections that participants raised in relation to discussing issues on unemployment in the previous research, the intention of this study was to respond to those reflections by employing an action research approach, which enabled this discussion to take effect. A context or milieu was therefore needed to act as a "vehicle" for the research process.

In order to respond to the needs raised by participants in the previous research and to explore the opportunity of empowerment, this research again adopted an action research methodology and applied the Swedish study circle[5] as the milieu, for the action research. The research focus concentrated on investigating if, how, and to what extent the Swedish study circle promoted empowerment within a group of unemployed individuals. Specifically the aims were:

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used to depict personal development – "the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were integrally connected" (Sanguinetti 1992, p. 18).

[5]   Discussed in Chapter three.

General aim

To determine whether, and investigate how, a Swedish study circle contributes to the empowerment of the unemployed research participants, both at an individual and group level.

Specific aims

a.   To explore the potential of a critical-action research methodology to advance understandings in relation to unemployment;

b.   To utilise Smith's (1993b)[6] three tiered framework of empowerment as a basis for organising and analysing data;

c.   To gather data by conducting beginning, mid and end interviews with each participant, recording and transcribing meetings, and collecting any documentation produced; and

d.   To uncover, analyse, validate, triangulate and document how participants discuss issues in relation to unemployment, how they feel, and what action and/or change occurs during the study circle season.

The above general aim and specific aim 'a' can be seen as the overarching or overall aims of the research, while specific aims 'b' and 'c' are organisational aims. These aims are all planned for and discussed in Part one, while specific aim 'd', the analytical aim, is addressed in Part two.

1.4   Significance of research

The need for alternative approaches to researching unemployment

There are several aspects of significance that apply to this research. Firstly, there is emerging evidence which suggests that many issues, including unemployment, should be researched from alternative perspectives. Historically, the negative social, physiological and psychological effects of unemployment have been well documented (Western and

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[6]   'Potential's for Empowerment in Critical Education Research,' in *Australian Educational Researcher.* Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 75-93. Discussed further in Chapters two and four.

Pettit 1999; Kermond 1998; Feather 1992, Winefield 1995 in Creed, Hicks and Machin 1997; Webber and Campbell 1997; Saunders 1996; Baker 1993; Gilbert in Easterbrook 1993; Wilson 1992; Waters and Crook 1990; Western 1989; King in Read and Alder 1988; Bekke, et al in Hogan 1985 - Vol.1). These researchers have demonstrated that many unemployed individuals experience compounding personal and domestic problems and are denied opportunities to contribute to society. For individuals, unemployment can result in any combination of the following: loss of income, boredom, isolation, depression, social stigma, increase in crime and crime victimisation, imprisonment, lack of routine, absence of contrast between work and leisure, suicidal thoughts and suicide, increased stress, mortality, deterioration of family relationships as well as a decline in morale, self-esteem, self-respect, and sense of personal worth.

Research also exists which attempts to quantitatively measure and analyse these negative effects of unemployment on mental health, psychological well-being and behaviour. These works have encompassed a range of theories such as Jahoda's latent function analysis and Warr's Vitamin Model (Feather 1992). Other approaches include the analysis of self-concept, as well as the use of stress and coping theory, learned helplessness theory, expectancy-value theory, attribution theory, social cognition and self-efficacy theory, unidirectional or asymmetrical causal structures and criminal embededness (Hagan 1993; Feather 1992; Thornberry and Christenson 1984).

Although this psychological research and related theories have made a major contribution in regard to measuring, analysing and validating the debilitative effects of unemployment, it has been argued that there has been an overreliance on this type of psychological research (Eardley and Matheson 1999; Jones 1995; Munford 1994; Burchell 1992; Reinharz 1992; Rodgers and Wilkinson 1991; Waters and Crook 1990; Connell et al. 1982; Rose and Rose 1976). For example Eardley and Matheson state in relation to research into unemployment: "… attitudinal surveys can only go so far in answering … questions. In-depth explanation is also required in order to understand …" (1999:32). Over sixteen years ago Connell was even more critical: "It is notable that through a

decade of vehement criticism of "empiricism", good old conventional survey research has plodded along regardless, regularly training new graduate students, regularly turning out its crop of polls and attitude surveys regularly filling its journals" (1983:244).

Furthermore, it has been argued that psychological theories, although concerned with cognitive processes at an individual level, do not thoroughly investigate the nature of the social environment that shapes an individual (Burchell 1992). Veno and Thomas note that:

> 'Clinical psychology has traditionally defined the "normal" and then defined actions and behaviours outside this range as "deviant" or "pathological"'(1992:24).

Or, as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi state:

> 'Psychology has since World War 2, become a science largely about healing. It concentrates on repairing damage within a disease model of human function. This almost exclusive attention to pathology neglects the … individual and the … community' (2000:1).

It has also been argued that psychology tends to utilise specialised approaches and methods that may restrict the actual research (Burchell 1992). In response to this, several psychological researchers and political scientists have recommended an increase in sociological research interventions to contribute to, and assist in, efforts to explore unemployment in different ways (Seligman and Csikszentimihalyi 2000; Creed, Hicks and Machin 1997; Pernice and Long 1996; Winefield et al. 1993; Burchell 1992; Feather 1992; Patton and Noller 1990). These researchers, from disciplines including medicine and psychology, claim that issues such as unemployment need also to be researched from various perspectives (Creed, Hicks and Machin 1997; Burchell 1992; Feather 1992; Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988). For example Feather states "... the psychologist does not have exclusive rights to the analysis of unemployment effects ... Some important questions ... are more in the domain of the sociologist" (1992:315).

As Probert, Wiseman and Watts state in relation to this specific study, "Critical theory, emancipatory action research and standpoint theory[7] are uncommon approaches used to address unemployment, but these methodological frameworks and techniques are utilised in this research in an attempt to shed new light on the crippling problem of unemployment" (Probert, Wiseman and Watts 1998:17).

This research is therefore significant, as it is a response to the emerging need of alternative research approaches to build on existing knowledge in relation to unemployment. However at this stage, it seems appropriate to briefly address some of the reasons why more post positivist research approaches into unemployment are not more common[8].

Firstly, there is the argument that "… sociology has a somewhat marginal status in the Australian system" (Waters and Crook 1990:18). It has been suggested that in order to gain credibility a number of sociological and educational researchers embrace psychological frameworks of behaviourism to offset any potential empirical criticisms (Connell et al. 1982; Rose and Rose 1976). The view that "What is important to behaviourism is what can be measured" (Rose and Rose 1976: 126) may motivate the researcher to satisfy an empiricist perspective by attempting to "measure" behaviour. Although this research into behavioural psychology is useful, its abundance is problematic, as all behaviour is interpretive, whereas " … classic category reductionism, where all aspects of human activity ... are defined as behaviours ... This type of reductionism is at its worst ... [unable to] … see that the contradictions between individuals are themselves a part of and contained within the overall structure of society" (Rose and Rose 1976:126). Furthermore, "The exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline [psychology] results in a model of the human being lacking positive features" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000:1). Jones even goes so far as to state: "We should oppose excessive reliance on "reductionism", which poses

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[7]   These aspects of the research are discussed in detail in Chapters two and four.
[8]   Discussed further in Chapter two.

grave dangers to democracy and personal autonomy" (1995:257). Lather states, "Positivism is not dead … What is dead, however, is its theoretic dominance and its "one best way" claims over empirical work …" (1991b:9). Alternative sociological research approaches are uncommon, and therefore should be employed to balance the overall knowledge pertaining to important social issues.

Secondly, some alternative research approaches may be considered too dangerous, radical and foolhardy. For example, the traditional and accepted positivist research approaches, often employed by psychologists, essentially aim to explain and predict; they focus on constructing deductive statements that can be applied to other contexts (Sarantakos 1994; Waters and Crook 1990). On the other hand post positivist approaches to research, including critical educational and sociological methodologies that are interested in understanding "people", and aim to critique social reality, emancipate and empower disadvantaged people and even offer possible solutions (Sarantakos 1994).[9] Specifically, critical theory and action research attempt to abandon conventional "scientific", minimal and preconceived categories as they are seen to somewhat legitimise dominant relations (Kellehear 1993; Gancian 1992), and may maintain the stereotypical assumptions pertaining to certain groups (Fetterman 1989). For example, as Hagan states: "American discussions of unemployment and crime often are empirically and ideologically confounded by issues of race" (1993:486). Critical sociological approaches also focus on internal processes *in relation to* the social landscape that surrounds them (Waters and Crook 1990). Critical research attempts to explain, critique, and empower (Sarantakos 1994). It "... is interested in the way individuals make sense of their own lives" (Pierce 1995:571). This research is therefore an attempt to study the issue of unemployment from an underutilised methodological perspective.

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[9] The notion of empowerment is discussed in detail in Chapters two and four.

The need for more research into the area of unemployment

In returning to the area of significance of this research, the second aspect is that many sociologists have noted the lack of substantial research in relationship to disadvantaged groups, including the unemployed. This has been seen to perpetuate powerlessness and to limit any attempts to alleviate disadvantages (Saunders 1998; Brown 1996; Munford 1994; Connell 1993; Reinharz 1992; Rodgers and Wilkinson 1991).

> 'Australian research on people's personal or ethical evaluations of their unemployed fellow citizens is rare' (Eardley and Matheson 1999:11).

Furthermore:
> '… although it is clear that unemployment remains a matter of deep public concern, there is little detailed information available on what people think the Government should be doing to solve the problem' (Eardley and Matheson 1999:31).

Moreover, this scarcity often results in misinformed views and social division:

> 'The Government must show leadership by educating the community about issues of unemployment, rather than allowing uninformed attitudes to develop that place the blame on people who are its victims' (Boreham and Chamberlin 1996:A4).

The need for research into unemployment to be based upon a collaborative and democratic methodology

Giddens (1999a and 1999b) offers some valuable ideas and direction in relation to the negative attitude towards governments in their ability to address such important social problems as unemployment. He suggests that "… although democracy is spreading over the world … there is widespread disillusionment with democratic processes" (1999b:72). He explains that the level of trust in politics has dropped and uses the example of fewer people in the USA turning out to vote and cites surveys indicating that many people are uninterested in the political process (Giddens 1999b).

The authority, power and deference that governments used to command have also waned due to globalisation and its decentralisation, open frameworks and active communication (Giddens 1999b). Opinion polls show that many people have lost trust in orthodox political processes and their traditional symbolism, disenchanted by pomp and circumstance, old boy networks, backstage deals and corrupt self interest (Giddens 1999b).

However Giddens states, "Diminished trust in politics and other authority figures is sometimes taken to indicate general social apathy … [however] … it does not – perhaps the opposite" (1999a:80). Furthermore, "… some people see contemporary society as fragmented and disorganised, but in fact the opposite is true. People are getting more involved in groups and associations than they used to" (1999b:77).

For example groups such as Community Aid Abroad, Greenpeace and Amnesty International are powerful single issue groups. In Australia alone there is an abundance of community organisations. The Directory of Self Help and Social Action Groups (1998) lists over seven hundred small and large non government organisations and community groups in Victoria alone from ethnic support groups to environmental groups and social action groups.

The Victorian Community Groups and Services (http:/www.vicnet.net.au/vicnet/com.htm) on the internet, lists pages of groups such as resident associations, urban action groups and consumer rights groups. Several other Community Directories listing other organisations are also available.

These small initiatives focussing on specific issues, demonstrate how citizens are indeed active in their society's political process. It is the "little" politics that empowers and enables people to create change, rather than the "big" impersonal politics.

The initiatives that such groups employ may seem ineffectual, however small action can be profound. Dodson, in relation to Aboriginal Reconciliation has stated "… small initiatives such as flying the Aboriginal flag from the town hall, could be hugely symbolic and inclusive, giving people a feeling of esteem and pride" (in Westerman 2000:1).

Giddens suggests small single issue groups are therefore "… at the forefront in raising problems and questions that may go ignored in orthodox political circles" (1999b:77). He states that forty per cent of Americans belong to at least one group that meets regularly (1999a), and that special interest groups and activists address many issues that orthodox politics cannot (1999b). As a result he argues that a deepening of democracy is required, where "… we need to democratise above as well as below …" (1999b:75). This he terms as "democratising democracy". "Democratising democracy means having an effective devolution of power … we should also be prepared to experiment with alternative democratic procedures, especially where these might help bring political decision making close to the everyday concerns of citizens" (1999b:76, 77). This particular research therefore exemplifies this practice by conducting a study with study circles on the issue of unemployment. Giddens also suggests we need to re-establish direct contact with citizens, through "… experiments with democracy" (1999a:75). Moreover, "Political parties will have to get more used to collaborating with single issue groups" (Giddens 1999b:77) and "Governments should be prepared to contribute to such endeavours as well as encourage other forms of bottom-up decision-making and autonomy" (Giddens 1999a:84).

Giddens recognises that small groups have limitations and problems, but he also suggests that there is evidence within these groups of a rich civic life (1999a). Furthermore, he also contends that "… one might be forgiven for thinking that some problems are simply intractable, without hope of resolution" (Giddens 1999b:81), he states that: "Nothing comes without a struggle. But the furthering of democracy at all levels is worth fighting for and it can be achieved" (1999b:82). Related to this, in Britain the Blair Government has established the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) which aims to address the social

inequalities between neighbourhoods. (The Central Office of Information 2000a). Blair states that his Government must: "… develop ways to put deprived communities in the driver's seat" (in the Central Office of Information 2000a:2).

A theme that emerges from the SEU publications is that the decision making and problem solving in relation to social issues of social problems needs to be addressed by those directly affected and involved.

"Key Policy Action Team recommendations … seek feedback from everyone with an interest in deprived neighbourhoods" (National Strategy for Neighbourhood Research Execution Summary 2000:3). "Communities themselves ought to be the best advocates of their own interests. And the best solution will be those that include their input and have their support or participation" (The Central Office of Information 2000a:4).

"Without effective self help it is unlikely that any other purposes of community regeneration … will provide long-term solution to long-term problems" (The Central Office of Information – PAT9 2000b:1).

Giddens uses a Swedish example:

> 'One model is the approach used in Sweden twenty years ago, when the government drew the public directly into the formulation of energy policy. The government, unions, parties and education agencies set up day-long courses on energy. Anyone who took such a course could make formal recommendations to the government" (Giddens 1999a:76).

Swedish civic educational initiatives also include study circles, which are discussed in detail in Chapter three. There are many advocates, both in Australia and North America, who believe that the option of study circles should be considered further. For example, Peak, after visiting Sweden, remarked:

> 'The study circle has been a most successful means of providing non-formal adult education. The concept has been exported by the Swedes to [other] countries as a tool for ... adult civic education ... the study

circle model should or could be imported into our country ... for the growth of the individual and for movement towards a more democratic society' (1990:165).

The need to conduct research into study circles

The above discussion leads to the third area of significance in relation to this research, the need to explore the study circle approach as an alternative adult educational practice.

Or as Oliver states in relation to the United States context:

'No promise can or should be made for the introduction of study circles into our advanced, technologically based, communications-orientated society. But it seems an idea worthy of experimentation - worthy if only to prove that the individual citizen has views that should be heard in policy making' (1987:145).

Furthermore:

'… if enough organizations in our country adopt the study circle idea as part and parcel of their mission and philosophy, we have both a study circle movement and an adult education movement - steps towards the goal of a learning society' (Oliver 1995:14).

In Australia, at Federal Government level there has been endorsement for further educational efforts to explore the potentials of study circles. In 1994 the Civics Expert Group published a report entitled "Whereas the people…Civics and Citizenship Education". The twenty-first recommendation of this report reads:

'The Commonwealth should support the preparation of study circle materials by adult and community education providers … and support their dissemination' (Civics Expert Group 1994:27).

There are also a few organisations in Australia, which are promoting and exploring the use of study circles. These organisations have endorsed and supported this research. For example Shires states: "Your work is significant as it will help inform, provide direction and greatly assist future developments" (see appendix 1). And Peak, who helped develop the Discovering Democracy learning circle program: "… we have been most interested to

learn of your progress … Learning circles[10] are increasingly being considered by all levels of government in Australia, for a range of educational needs, and your research will prove valuable" (see appendix 2). The significance of this research is supported further when considering that no study circles have been conducted, assessed or researched into the area of unemployment itself. Shires and Crawford recommend in their evaluation of Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circles in Australia: "Consideration should be given to encouraging greater use of learning circles within universities and TAFEs … as a professional development tool for service sector workers … particularly in … unemployment (1996b:iv)[11].

1.5 Unemployment

As mentioned previously, this research represents a further stage of enquiry into the issue of unemployment. This section therefore introduces the issue of unemployment in relation to previous research, and also grounds the critical research direction of the study. As will be discussed in the methodology and method Chapters, this research is based upon critical theory. As such, this review of literature is a critical text analysis as is customary in critical research approaches. Critical researchers view images, representations and information derived from such texts as books, films, media, policy, television, magazines, research, evaluations and so forth, as social creations and constructions, which can either empower or constrain, but nonetheless reflect the interests and values of the creators themselves (Smith 1993b).

A critical text analysis also seeks to deconstruct or rethink questions and expose the rhetorical, discourse, assumed truths and resultant colonising trends in these information sources and their power to position us all to view dominant ideas as unproblematic and

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[10]   Prominent advocates for study circles in Australia have adopted the term "learning circle" rather than study circle. AAACE has endorsed this change as "learning" is seen to have greater appeal than the word "study" which may suggest a traditional type of teaching/learning and/or negative experiences. Both study circles and learning circles within this thesis can therefore be considered synonymous (Gibson 1998).

[11]   This report is elaborated upon further in Chapter three.

natural (Smith 1993; Fairclough 1989). As Berger and Luckmann state: "… social order is a human product, or, more precisely, an ongoing human production … Social order is not part of the "nature of things", and it cannot be derived from the "laws of nature". Social order exists *only* as a product of human activity" [original emphasis] (1991:69-70).[12]

This section therefore attempts to demonstrate how the dominant ideology and government policy not only blames the unemployed for their own situation and labels them as "deviant", but is also predominantly ineffective in alleviating the overall problem of unemployment. Arguably this is the reason why the unemployed themselves are blamed, as governments cannot afford to accept that unemployment is a major problem they are ultimately responsible for.

In essence, it is the reason the researcher, who has worked with unemployed individuals for many years, has decided to conduct the research; it is the thematic concern.

There are two matters that need to be raised and clarified at this point in relation to unemployment and the following discussion. Firstly, there is an abundance of literature which claims to uncover the causes of Australia's high unemployment levels, and supplies a range of measures to address the problem (Hellyer 1999; Eardley and Matheson 1999; Saunders 1998; Stilwell 1997; Moore; Liberal/Nationals 1996; ARIS 1995; Carson and Doube 1995; Davidson 1995; Dollery and Webster 1995, p. 7; Bessant 1995a; Blandy 1994; Byrne and Buchanan 1994; Carson and Doube 1994; Hughes 1994; Roth 1994; CEO 1994; Freeland 1994; Jones 1994b; Sloan 1994; Sloan and Wooden 1994; Boeri 1994; Webber and Campbell 1994; Probert 1994; Winefield et al. 1993; Buchanan 1993; O'Connor, Maher and Rapson 1993; Probert 1993a; Probert 1993b; Smith 1993a; Castle 1992; Rodgers and Wilkinson 1991; Jones 1990; West 1987;

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[12]   Discussed further in Chapter two.

Hartmann 1985; Handy 1984; Brewer 1980; Windschuttle 1979). This range of views and opinions has been compiled and categorised previously by this researcher (Brophy 1997; Brophy 1996). A summary of these potential unemployment "cures" can also be found in the discussion guide for this study (appendix 2 pp14-17).[13]

What is relevant within the context of this research is that this long, continual, and exhaustive debate on how to address the problem of high unemployment has resulted in little or no action or effect over a considerable time on unemployment levels.

It is therefore not the intention of this study to further debate these views or suggest other "cures" or panaceas for unemployment. In some respects therefore this research is sympathetic to the ideas discussed by Graham at the Sixth National Conference on Unemployment (1999), where she expressed concern that so much political and academic effort is invested in how to solve and what should be done about *unemployment,* rather than focusing on the *unemployed* individuals who are directly affected.

The second matter therefore for the reader to consider is that amongst all the perceived "panaceas", there is little "voice" representing the unemployed themselves. This study then is an attempt to give "voice" to and reflect upon and empower those affected: to view unemployment from the perspective of the unemployed, in a "bottom up" rather than a "top down" approach. The theoretical foundations for this approach will be discussed in detail in the methodology Chapter.

This Chapter now seeks to explore the reasons why the unemployed have been excluded from the debate on unemployment. This study also does not suggest "answers" nor ever pose more "questions" in relation to unemployment. What is sought here is that perhaps, the unemployed could (or should) be consulted to see if they can raise the "questions" (or

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[13]   Although categorised, it is acknowledged that different views can overlap, mix and merge to create even more "solutions". Furthermore the list is not exhaustive.

answers) themselves. This section firstly addresses the problematic issue of defining unemployment. It then traces and critiques the historical developments of Federal Government initiatives in LMPs from the 1970s to the present. It is argued that the dominant assumptions which pervade the myths of unemployment are indeed disempowering, as they tend to blame the individual for her/his situation, rather than focusing on the social, structural, economic and political contributing factors. That is, unemployment as a form of deviance is socially objectified as knowledge, as a generally valid "truth" about reality (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Effectively, individuals learn this objective "truth" in the course of socialisation and then internalise it as a subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1991). This section thus begins to examine how, why and by whom these "objective truths" are formulated, and focuses on the resultant effects of such truths for the unemployed individual labelled "deviant".

Historically, there have been several technical definitions of unemployment available, which attempt to give a picture of Australia's unemployment situation. The former Commonwealth Employment Service (CES)[14] provided one source of statistics, which compared the number of unemployed as a percentage of the total labour force (Baker 1993). The Department of Social Security (DSS) defined the unemployed as all people in receipt of unemployment benefits (Baker 1993). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducted surveys and used a specific criterion to define unemployment, ie. if an individual is: fifteen years and over; not employed at all during the week of survey; has actively looked for full and part time work during the last four weeks; and was available for work within the week (Baker 1993). The ABS therefore defines "employed" as any person who gains any paid work at all during a specific week regardless of the number of hours worked (Castle 1992). The Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA)[15] also carries out its own research into unemployment statistics (Baker

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[14]   CES and DSS were merged in late 1998 to become one organisation – Centrelink.
[15]   DEET changed to DEETYA in 1996, then DEWRSB in late 1998.

1993). Other organisations that measure unemployment levels include banks such as the Reserve, Westpac, and the ANZ which analyse job advertisements in newspapers (Baker 1993). The Federal Parliament, the Senate and the Economic Planning Advisory Council (EPAC) also conduct research which measures unemployment levels in a variety of different ways (Baker 1993).

It is therefore important to emphasise the fact that the term "unemployment" is extremely difficult to measure or define as it is a technical term that is often manipulated in different ways (Jones 1990). No uniform measure of unemployment exists, and therefore it may be postulated that registered and published figures are almost meaningless (Jones 1990). One ABS study concluded that there are up to six very different definitions of youth unemployment alone, and the estimates between these unemployment groups range from very high to very low (Bessant 1995b).

Furthermore, although official unemployment levels in Australia over the past two decades have hovered around the ten per cent mark, many analysts suggest that these published figures grossly underestimate the true levels of unemployment and that a more realistic estimate should be placed at twenty per cent (Kenny 1993; Jones 1990). For example in 1992 the EPAC commissioned the Australian National University (ANU) to look at unemployment and they found that the "real" unemployment rate was close to twenty per cent (Baker 1993). The same report also criticised the ABS data collection methods and criteria (Baker 1993). In May 1999, ABS data showed that fourteen and a half per cent of people aged between fifteen to nineteen years were "at risk", that is not in full time education and either unemployed, in part time work or not included in statistics (Dusseldorp 1999).

The cause of uncertain statistics on unemployment is due to several reasons. People who give up the search for work often are not counted as part of the labour force, and those who work only a few hours a week are sometimes deemed employed (Baker 1993). This is not to say that these people may be undertaking very worthwhile activities while not

being a wage earner. There are also the "under employed", "mis-employed", "marginally attached", and "semi-employed" (Buchanan 1993; Jones 1990; Sinclair 1987). In 1992, one hundred and forty six thousand people were classified as discouraged job seekers and not included in statistics (Baker 1993). Youth also exhibit abnormally high levels of underemployment and hidden unemployment as compared to other groups (Whitfield 1993). Some analysts have placed youth unemployment alone as high as fifty per cent (Hewson and Disney in Wilson 1992). A comprehensive study conducted by Monash, Melbourne, Flinders and ANU universities in 1998 found that for every young unemployed person counted in official statistics, there was at least one more not counted who was not studying or working (Horin 1998). In the same report it was noted that "… unemployment statistics are a poor indicator and only told half the story" (Horin 1998:14). Moreover, many unemployed women workers are hidden amongst classifications (Bittman 1992). In 1999, the Federal Treasury issued a media release, "Winter Economic Round Up". It was reported that, "… it is not possible to encapsulate all the aspects of teenage unemployment in a single measure and that alternative measures … which are more appropriate in assessing the extent of the problem … are required" (Murray 1999:1). All these factors lead to the conclusion that "official" rates will always underestimate the actual levels of unemployment.

As Connell noted even back in 1983:

> 'Governments and companies lie and suppress information as a matter of course; information, when let out, is often distorted and sometimes invented; dominant groups shape the words we have to talk with, the concepts we have to think with. Our mass media are a sea of manipulative fantasy and half-truths. Such basic facts as unemployment statistics are currently among the chief works of imaginative fiction in the western world' (vii).

1.6   Government initiatives

During the Great Depression the most common way for Australian governments to tackle unemployment was to provide relief work which entailed labouring tasks for which there was no market demand and for considerably less than market rates (Windschuttle 1979).

Alternatively, many of those unable to secure work were sent to prison under vagrancy laws (Windschuttle 1979).

After World War 2, due to a relatively low unemployment level, these relief work initiatives ceased. The CES was formed and sharp increases in unemployment levels during the 1970s resulted in a host of new ideas and schemes to tackle the ever increasing number of unemployed (Windschuttle 1979).

Many of the introductory major government LMP interventions in the 1970s for the unemployed in Australia, were designed primarily to assist those re-entering the workforce (Jones 1994b; Carson and Doube 1994; Windschuttle 1979). Most programs targeted specific unemployed groups and subsidised employers to employ the jobless (Jones 1994b; Windschuttle 1979). Yet many of these initiatives were considered "… to be of a questionable nature" (Windschuttle 1979:227). The community continued to have the same *number* of unemployed, and many studies showed that the only major benefit was to employers in the form of cheap labour (Jones 1994b ; Hogan 1985).

The 1980s saw the continued maintenance, and introduction of even more programs to assist the unemployed (Jones 1994b; Hogan 1985). Some programs did create new jobs (Castle 1992). However a rapidly rising unemployment rate forced the policy focus from long-term labour market restructuring to short-term "mopping-up" exercises and relief schemes by the late 1980s (Jones 1994b; Castle 1992; Windschuttle 1979; Brewer 1980). In retrospect, the government's response to increasing unemployment during the late 1970s and early 1980s was seen to be predominantly reactionary, aimed at diffusing anger and hiding unemployment levels (Carson and Doube 1994; Brewer 1980).

In 1985, the Kirby Report was commissioned to review and summarise the effectiveness of LMPs. The report established that many marginalised groups were missing out on assistance, and recommended that LMPs should place an emphasis on long-term goals, provide vocational training and increase work placements. Yet despite the report's

recommendations, the trend of tackling unemployment with predominantly short-term initiatives continued (Jones 1994b; Carson and Doube 1994), and protests from advocates for long term structural change were largely ignored (Jones 1994b, O'Connor, Maher and Rapson 1993).

In 1994 the Labour Government unveiled its *White Paper* entitled "Working Nation", which attempted to readdress the problems of the labour market by creating yet more new LMPs. However the target unemployment rates of Working Nation were fundamentally linked to an improved economy (CEO 1994:113). For many analysts, it was predicted that the higher rates of employment growth stated would never be achieved (Greenlees 1995; Longo 1995b; Lydall 1995; Wooden 1994; Sloan 1994; Blandy 1994).

After the federal election in March 1996, the Hawke/Keating Labour Government was replaced with a Liberal/National Coalition Government. The release of the new government's "Reforming Employment Assistance" policy during August 1996, by Vanstone, the then Minister for the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), terminated the Working Nation policy. This new policy was the foundation and springboard for a range of labour market reforms in existing structures, the creation of new ones and a change of focus on LMPs that exist today.

Although much policy documentation could be critically examined, it is perhaps fitting to focus on this current "*Reforming Government Assistance*" (1996) policy momentarily as an example of how a perceived "reality" can be constructed and used to pacify the unemployed. As Henry states:

> '… policies come to be framed in certain ways – reflecting the ways in which economic, social, political and cultural contexts shape both the content and language of policy documents … policy texts represent the outcome of political struggles over meaning. Ambiguity occurs … tension and contradiction … in the resulting policies themselves' (1996:7).

Graham states, in relation specifically to this policy:

> 'It seemed to me that these policies, and the knowledge they embody, assume the form of being neutral, operating to uncover a naturally existing order in relation to unemployment. In fact, such policies are far from neutral …' (1999:12).

The underlying principles for reform that the Government has based its decisions upon are outlined in Chapter Two, pages five to thirteen of the policy document. This chapter is in three parts, entitled:

- 'Background to Australia's labour market assistance policies;
- International Research; and
- Australia's recent experience' (Vanstone 1996:5, 6, 8).

In the section "Background to Australia's labour market assistance policies", the document states:

> 'In 1985 the ... Kirby Inquiry criticised the proliferation of LMPs established during the preceding decade ... but the structure of intervention continued to be focused on programs rather than clients (Jarvie and McKay 1993) and a multitude of complex programs soon reappeared' (Vanstone 1996:5).

In reality, this "multitude of complex programs" was exactly what the Kirby Report had recommended. In the same reference cited by the policy, Jarvie and McKay recommended that:

> 'LMP assistance is just one of a range of assistance available to clients ... in these strategies the focus *is on the clients and their needs*, not on programs and services ... delivery in DEET ... has become *increasingly client focused* with structural reforms ... and *client targeted* operational planning [emphasis added]' (1993:6).

The 1996 Liberal/National policy states: "A new framework: client-focused, not program driven," and "Under these reforms labour market assistance will be client-focused"

(Vanstone 1996:15). Yet assistance already was, and had been for three years, "client-focused" according to the reference quoted in the government policy itself. The Ministerial Statement goes on to state:

> 'In its August 1995 review of LMPs the CESAC [Commonwealth Employment Service Advisory Committee] echoed some of the criticisms of the Kirby Committee. It called for major changes ... and ... noted that current administrative arrangements were "an impediment to maximising outcomes" and described the complex array of guidelines ... as "baffling" to all but the very experienced (CESAC 1995:xi)' (Vanstone 1996:5).

The CESAC Review of LMP is a comprehensive sixty page evaluation. This criticism is presented as only a "consideration" in the Executive Summary (CESAC 1995:xi). In the Findings section of this review, it is recommended that: "… *some* streamlining measures should be introduced ... to simplify procedures" [emphasis added] (p. 35). It did not call for a *major change* as stated in the Ministerial Statement. It could be argued that the Liberal/National policy is a misinterpretation to the CESAC Review. For example in the CESAC review, under Recommendation Five, it is suggested:

> 'CESAC sees that further rationalisation of DEET LMPs is desirable ... For example ... the LEAP [Landcare and Environment Action Program], JobSkills and NWO [New Work Opportunities] programs ... could be synthesised to form a single program' (p. xiv).

Furthermore, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) reference cited in the policy advises:

> 'Recommendation eleven: The Council recommends that the NWO program, the JobSkills program and LEAP should be amalgamated into one employment-based training program incorporating the best features of the three programs' (NBEET 1996:xiii).

In response to this, the Liberal/National Government abolished all three programs (along with JobTrain, the Special Intervention Program (SIP), Australian Training for Youth

(ATY), Skillshare, Job Clubs and many others (Vanstone 1996). The Liberal/National policy also proposed that:

> 'The requirement to meet numerical targets ... has tended to take precedence over the needs of the individual' (Vanstone 1996:6).

This criticism of the previous Labour Government's approach to LMPs is perhaps well-founded. However the problem of being "target driven" is not addressed adequately in the policy. Agencies and organisations responsible for assessing, training and assisting clients to gain work receive "Payments [which] will be weighted towards outcomes" (Vanstone 1996:45).

Previously, providers were required to meet numerical targets. That is, the number of LMP participants placed into employment, further education or training. Now, the pressure and resultant problems may well be greater as "targets" now equate with financial viability, which arguably takes precedence over individual client needs.

Under "Principles for Reforms - International Research", the policy states:

> 'According to the OECD [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development], programs that are broadly targeted ... often have no significant impact. The OECD concludes, "targeting appears to be a crucial design feature determining the success of training programs"' (OECD 1996:6 in Vanstone 1996:6).

Careful targeting is indeed considered vital. For some time now, the OECD, has called on member countries to carry out specific targeting:

> '... broad ... programs aimed at large groups of the unemployed have seldom proved a good investment ... Careful targeting will pay dividends. All the key actors at local level - employers, trade unions, educational institutions and local government - should be involved in a combined effort to develop training programs that respond to local needs' (OECD 1994:37).

Arguably, the wide range of targeted LMPs that existed before the Liberal/National parties were confusing to some, but nonetheless it was an attempt to carry out specific and careful targeting. However twelve specifically targeted programs were abolished during 1997 (Vanstone 1996:30). Many of these directly involved trade unions, educational institutions, local government and employers (ie. NWO, LEAP, JobSkills and Skillshare). In the new policy, trade unions and local government are not mentioned, and educational institutions rarely. Under Principle Five, the Liberal/National policy states:

> '... after access to .. government funded employment services [will] be provided through an integrated service delivery agency - a "one stop shop". This would make the link between receipt of income support and active job search clearer and more explicit' (Vanstone 1996:13).

It is debatable if a "one stop shop" equates with "careful targeting". As the OECD has stated, broad initiatives are seldom successful. Furthermore as Graham states, this "… unemployment policy tends to position subjects in ways which do not necessarily capture the complexity of life" (1999:3).

The Liberal/National policy goes on to claim:

> 'Wage subsidies generally have good outcomes and are regarded as effective ... The consensus is that they should be of short duration with further access to employer subsidies' (Vanstone 1996:6).

However there is much historical evidence that suggests these schemes are relatively ineffective. Skill enhancement is marginal, it is rather a form of cheap labour for employers who tend not to retain employees after the subsidised period. It promotes the acceptance of wages lower than minimum legal levels and low wage competition, the casualties are the disadvantaged who are recycled into unemployment (Burgess 1995; Dollery and Webster 1995; Probert 1994; Hawthorne 1994; Winefield et al. 1993).

The policy then rationalises wage subsidy schemes utilising an OECD reference:

'... the OECD acknowledges that substitution and displacement [16]should not be seen as shortcomings ... Self employment assistance schemes are viewed as having good outcomes ...' (OECD 1995 in Vanstone 1996:6).

However the OECD has also determined that:

'Many new jobs are likely to be low productivity, low wage jobs ... employment subsidies for the creation of low wage jobs should be avoided' (OECD 1994:33).

In reality the claimed high success rates of sixty to seventy per cent with wage subsidy schemes are incorrect. In reality the "net" additional employment is more in the region of only fifteen to twenty per cent. The difference between gross and net results is due to labour turnover or substitution, "deadweight"[17] and displacement (Carson and Doube 1995; Byrne and Buchanan 1994; Castle 1992). For example, there is clear evidence that employers substitute subsidised labour for unsubsidised labour. (Carson and Doube 1995; Byrne and Buchanan 1994; Castle 1992).

The Liberal/National policy goes on to inform of OECD recommendations:

'Direct job creation programs have high unit costs and have shown little success (OECD 1996:7)' (Vanstone 1996:6).

The OECD however, also claims:

'... effective public employment service is a key element in making active measures more effective ... *Ensuring* that the public employment service has access to ... the availability of training or *job creation*

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[16]   Substitution: - The notion that an employer secures financially subsidised labour in place of unsubsidised labour. (Carson and Doube 1995). The implications of this action result in no new positions being created therefore no reduction in overall unemployment levels. This equates to a financial cost to the government with nil return, while providing a financial windfall for employers and therefore increased profits and often a lower income for the workers themselves. Displacement:- Where a subsidised employee replaces a non subsidised employee (Carson and Doube 1995) Not only resulting in the above substitution effects, but also creating insecurity for existing unsubsidised labour.

[17]   "Deadweight" – Whereas there is little or no actual productive labour function for the subsidised employee to carry out. (Carson and Doube 1995) This is perhaps the most wasteful of all outcomes due to wage substitution as all parties potentially loose.

programme places can serve as a 'work test' for benefit claimant'
[emphasis added] (OECD 1994:37).

However, job creation programs can be successful. British economists and researchers
have demonstrated that the programs are effective as there is always some type of
worthwhile work people *could* do (Winefield et al. 1993; Jones 1990). Such schemes
however do need to be carefully planned (Carson and Doube 1995; Jones
1990;Windschuttle 1979). Job creation in the areas of environment, health, public
transport and education are arguably more socially beneficial than wage subsidy
programs in some private industry areas such as commercial advertising or tax
minimisation (Stilwell 1994). Estimates place the net employment effect of job creation
schemes at forty seven per cent (Carson and Doube 1995). This is nearly four times more
effective than a wage subsidy approach.

In the section addressing "Income support arrangements", the policy states:

> 'In looking at this issue OECD ... policies include .... applying benefit
> sanctions to enforce job search requirements' (Vanstone 1996:7).

The specific OECD reference that this claim is based on is not cited. This omission seems
even more odd when the OECD in 1994, stated that this type of action had a questionable
impact and did not equate with increased employment (Boeri 1994). An Australian study
into unemployment benefits from 1950 to 1989, came to the conclusion that:

> 'Unemployment policies which focus on [reducing] benefits are
> unlikely to have any effect on unemployment rates' (Dollery and
> Webster 1995:7).

Furthermore "Reducing benefits, at best, just forces people into an overcrowded low-
wage labour market" (Giddens 1999a). An OECD report cited often in the policy's
"Principles for Reform", states clearly:

> 'Curbing social spending [i.e. unemployment benefits] requires detailed
> scrutiny of existing and planned social programs ... This is a difficult
> task, which is unlikely to yield results ...' (OECD 1994:55).

Moreover, in a recent study by Graham into the effects of this policy in rural areas she states in her conclusion:

> '… with such limited regional resources and support for development it would seem that all the regulation and surveillance in the world will not 'recruit' unemployed people into jobs that don't exist' (1999:14,15)

Under the "Lessons from Australia's recent experience" section, the policy states:

> 'Qualitative evidence obtained in the Working Nation evaluation ... suggests that case management can play a useful 'deterrence' role. Rather than face the scrutiny of case management, many jobseekers who could easily find work, or who were already employed, chose to leave the CES register' (Vanstone 1996:8).

The *actual* quote from this evaluation is:

> 'Case management has been effective in deterring *some* income support recipients ... For example, when *some* jobseekers were told that they had been referred to case management ... they stopped claiming unemployment allowances. Case managers *believed* that case management was effective as a deterrent ...' [emphasis added] (DEETYA 1996:34).

This is not *"evidence"* of *"many"* clients *"leaving the CES register in the face of scrutiny"*. Rather, it was *"believed"* that *"some stopped claiming allowances"* due to case management.

The evaluation concludes by reporting that:

> 'Further work is underway to validate these *perceptions'* [emphasis added] (DEETYA 1996:36).

The assertion hidden in the rhetoric that there are widespread fraudulent claims is ill-directed and fuels the "dole bludger" myth. For example, a "dob in a dole bludger" hot-line run by the Government, uncovered only twelve complaints, nation-wide, within two months (Aug-Sept. 1996), but received one thousand eight hundred and fifty-eight calls from people seeking information in relation to LMPs that had been cut (Herald Sun 21 Sept. 1996). McQueen asserts:

'Policy changes have licensed … abuse, even though most of those who are taken off benefits are victims of administrative errors …' (1998:59)

Research in Britain in 1996 uncovered that the official estimates of alleged welfare fraud had been doubled by including "… misdemeanours, trivia and mistaken action of … an increasingly complex system" (Pilger 1998:105) Furthermore, "… in one year alone, 1996, 3.5 million of benefits were not claimed because people were unaware they were eligible or because they were too proud" (Pilger 1998:105).

The Government's approach to tackling unemployment is based on two premises. Firstly, it believes that employers are restricted in their endeavours to employ because of "arthritic" labour market regulations such as the "unfair dismissal law" (Carney 1996:A25). Secondly, unemployment will not be reduced until national savings and rates of economic growth increase as well as low inflation and a balanced budget (Carney 1996; Colebatch 1996b).

'We won't get real movement on unemployment until we get small business booming' (Howard in Colebatch 1996b:A7).

'You won't reduce unemployment until you can get a higher rate of growth' (Howard in Tingle 1996:A2).

The Government therefore believes that by reforming the labour market and creating lower wages, employers will be more able to employ new workers. It is seen that the level of wages is a major determinant of employment, and that the labour markets, like all markets, needed to be freed from restrictions that prevent wages from finding their "natural" level (Bessant 1998). However, this economic logic was seen to be flawed by the OECD itself. The OECD has stated that there is no evidence to suggest that lowering wages help workers find work (Colebatch 1996a). Furthermore not only is there little academic evidence to support such a claim, but "… for many economists and social scientists the rise of relative wages has *not* been a major contribution in the growth of unemployment (Tunankar and Waite 1998; Daly et.al. 1998; Salverda 1992; Rice 1986)" [original emphasis] (in Bessant 1999). In 1998 Saunders questioned the economic policy reforms that have been in existence for the past decade:

> 'This is an old message and a dangerous one. It is premised on the notion that we must 'get the economy right' before we can afford to address ... social policy concerns. We must first bake the cake, then worry about how to cut it up. It adopts an experienced view of the world that is at odds with a reality in which economic incentive and social protection are interconnected in many complex ways' (Saunders 1998:b22).

Meanwhile the Government's abolition of all LMPs, and the lowering of wages, resulted in initially only a small change in unemployment (Davidson 1996). At the same time the OECD was recommending that training and improvement of overall aggregate demand were more important (Colebatch 1996a). A further myth in relation to the lowering of wages is the assumption that lower wage rates equates to reduced costs of production, leading to less expensive manufactured goods and enhanced ability to compete with countries that have low labour costs. However the OECD has stated that "...the overall impact of imports from these countries is too small to account for a significant part of current unemployment" (1994:28).

Research conducted around this time by Chapman and Kapuscinksi, predicted the long term unemployed number to be two hundred and thirty five thousand by 1999 (Chamberlin 1996b). These projections were based upon an eight and a half per cent unemployment rate over the following eighteen months (Chamberlin 1996b). Mansfield, assistant secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) also stated that cuts to LMP would lead to a blowout in unemployment:

> 'It wouldn't surprise the ACTU if unemployment levels rose to nine percent by the end of the year. There is a fundamental retreat by the Federal Government from its commitment to take effective action to reduce unemployment levels' (in Skelton and Painter 1996:2).

By November 1996, Australia's unemployment rate had risen to nearly nine per cent nationally and nine and a half per cent in Victoria alone (The Age Editorial 1996). However throughout 1997 and 1998, the unemployment rate did decline slightly, but still remained officially above eight per cent (Hawke 1998). Any claim of success by the government for holding unemployment levels at this rate were nullified by OECD data

which demonstrated that Australia's unemployment rate was over one per cent higher than the OECD average, and had been for over fourteen years (Hawke 1998).

In mid 1999 the then Federal Minister for Employment Services Abbott, coined the unfortunate expression of "job snob" (Colebatch 1999a). Fundamentally the reason for high unemployment, according to Abbott, was "… a culture of entitlement … [the unemployed] have become habituated to a life on welfare … the problem is not so much a shortage of jobs as a shortage of jobs that people are prepared to take" (Colebatch 1999b: 10).

However there is also the argument that the unemployed are casualties of changing labour market conditions (Stilwell 1994), rather than being "work shy", lazy or welfare cheats. For example, a survey conducted by the ABS in 1997 of eight hundred and seventy five thousand Australian job seekers found that many spend periods of time "churning" that is, moving in and out of short term jobs with gaps of unemployment in between (Kermond 1997). In twelve months alone, from mid 1995 to mid 1996, one hundred and fifty nine thousand job seekers spent the whole year churning (Kermond 1997).

The dole bludger myth, which is promoted both overtly through the media and covertly by those employed, ensures that the unemployed remain disempowered by suggesting that those who do not find work are lazy, unskilled, "work shy", or seeking to gain and maintain a financial advantage at the expense of the "tax payer". There is a "… suspicion among the community that many unemployed do not really want to work" (Smith 1993a:42). Further, Morgan Polls have shown that alarmingly half of fourteen to seventeen year olds attribute unemployment to personal unwillingness to work (Arndt 1999:4). And proponents of the "dole bludger" myth are busy finding "… specific measures to reduce the disincentive to work" (Moore 1997:289).

However the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee (SEETRC) found that some people were so desperate that they would often offer to work

for nothing (Baker 1993). This desperation is perhaps the rationale for the "Work for the Dole" scheme. Here an unemployed person's desire to remain active and contribute to society is transformed into a coercive initiative. However there is little evidence to suggest that forcing people off, or reducing unemployment benefits, provide more jobs (Burgess et al. 1998:442; Bainbridge 1997:28). In a paper presented at the Fifth National Conference on Unemployment at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in 1998, a group of economists from the Department of Economics at the University of Newcastle had this to say in relation to the "Work for the Dole" scheme and the New Zealand equivalent "Workforce":

> 'These reforms mean that the state now spends less on the unemployed, the unemployed have been singled out … many fundamental rights of the unemployed have been compromised. In addition, there are serious theoretical and empirical doubts as to how effective such programs are in securing a transition from unemployment into permanent employment. Work for the Dole scheme is fundamentally flawed, because it is premised on a misdiagnosis of the main cause of unemployment. The creation of a more compliant stock of unemployed workers with minimal skill gained from six months of part-time community work will not lead to full employment … it severely compromises the human rights of the unemployed …' (Burgess et al. 1998:17).

Furthermore, this policy:

> '… now puts us in breach of a number of international covenants and conventions Australia has signed and ratified. (The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and several International Labour Organisation Conventions)' (Tomlinson 1999:7)

Growing research evidence suggests that those most marginalised in the labour market must accept, or are coerced to accept, work that is poorly paid, casual in nature, with health and safety risks, and without benefits available to other workers (Longo 1995b). Research from the University of Adelaide found that the jobs available to the unemployed tend to be temporary, contract oriented, casual, risky and offer none of the benefits available to full time workers (Longo 1995b; Baker 1993). The high turnover of disadvantaged workers is often cited as a cause of peoples' unemployability, whereas

perhaps the real reason is the lowly paid and poor quality jobs disadvantaged and marginalised people obtain. As Eardley states "… it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that the phenomenon of working poverty in Australia is real and growing" (1998:34).

Although unemployment has been an important cause of poverty and inequality, another cause is that of the growth of poorly paid work (Rance 1994). Winefield et al. (1993) concluded that working in an unsatisfactory job may be just as debilitative, if not more so, than being unemployed, in relation to psychological well-being (1993). High unemployment also has a disproportionate effect at the bottom end of the labour market (Wilkinson 1991). A fifteen year study conducted by the ANU concluded that because job offers in poor areas are low, this also reduces the quality of work available (Gregory 1995). Research conducted by the Sydney based Dusseldorp Skills Forum entitled "Australia's Youth: Reality and Risk" in 1998 uncovered "… the trend for school leavers to be caught in a cycle of insecure and low-paid, part-time jobs which were likely to be a trap, not a stepping stone" (in Horin 1998:14).

Australia is, in effect, going through a period of relative sustained growth due to labour market reforms, low interest rates, as well as tax and welfare reform, that according to current accepted economic theory, should result in lower unemployment levels (Colebatch 1999b). However increased growth and output is not creating enough full time jobs as existing employees are working smarter and harder (Colebatch 1999b). The only job growth at this time is in part time work, in effect seventy five per cent of the net job growth in Australia in the decade up to 1999 was in only part time work (Colebatch 1999b). "Australia has never had a period in which so much growth had delivered so few jobs" (Colebatch 1999b:10). Furthermore in other OECD countries which were experiencing slower economic growth than Australia, unemployment levels were actually reducing (Colebatch 1999b).

1.7   Chapter summary

A key concern within this research is that the continual dominating ideology, including past and present labour market policy and programs has stigmatised and continues to compound the negative effects of unemployment on individuals who are already disadvantaged through structural inequality. The responsibility of unemployment is too often not put on our society's inability to provide enough jobs or other options, but is placed squarely on the individual unemployed person's shoulders.

As Graham states:

> 'Some would agree that neo-conservative posturing places the unemployed as needing to be policed and controlled, as if wrong-headed welfare state intervention or deeply ingrained personal or cultural disposition (to evil, apathy, laziness, madness, stupidity or the like) are the 'cause' of unemployment' (Graham 1999:1)

Historically, policy responses by alternative governments to unemployment have continuously focused on personal deficiencies rather than on addressing institutional inequities. The perception of individual inadequacies justifies a policy response that assumes that unemployment is caused by a lack of personal work ethic and motivation. This promotes the perception of unemployed people as non-productive, if not parasitic, members of the community. This also reflects an assumption that unemployed people are not doing enough to find work and must be coerced into more concerted job seeking activities.

Policies therefore have been enacted to shift the responsibility to unemployed people for their own predicament by portraying them as victims of their own indifference and laziness. By focusing on character deficiencies that are purported to cause their unemployment, it moves the focus away from structural problems to personal problems. It becomes something the individual is solely responsible for, negating both the government's and the community's obligation to address the problem.

This "deficit" construction of unemployed people becomes a useful rationale for devaluing unemployed people's rights and entitlements (Croce 1999). If their inability to achieve certain standards is due to their own behavior, it justifies denying them access to other rights and entitlements (Croce 1999). The failure of our society to see the unemployed as vital members of our community is evident in many of the public policies concerning unemployment.

This section therefore asserts that as existing research has been "done on" the unemployed, has measured, categorised and identified inequalities and structures, there is now a case to conduct research "with" and "for" the unemployed, from their perspectives, focusing back on the society that structurally exploits them.

The above discussion also highlights how government policy historically and at present is not reducing unemployment levels to any large extent. The debilitative effects of unemployment have been researched, panaceas have been postulated. This research aims to refocus on unemployment from a different perspective, being an agent for emancipation, empowerment and change for the actual people facing unemployment

Chapter two - methodology

Table one: Thesis structure

Part one	**Part two**
Methodology/literature review	Study circle
season	
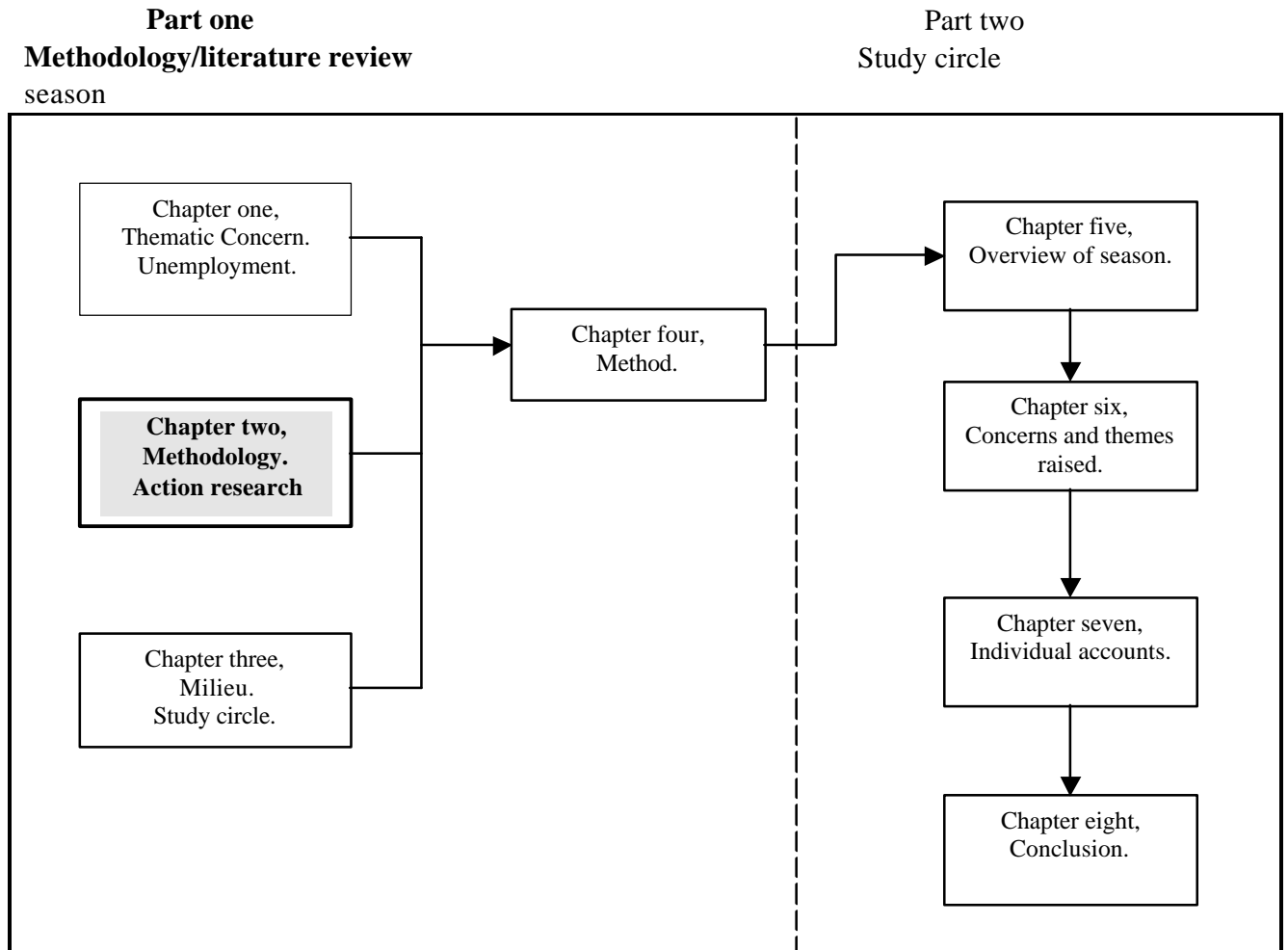
2.1   Introduction

Within this Chapter the methodological approach utilised in this study will be discussed and supported by addressing critiques from, and the relationship between, critical theory and other dominant theoretical research paradigms such as positivism, interpretivism and post modernism. "Methodology usually refers to the general approaches to research, while method refers to techniques for gathering evidence" (Gancian 1992:625). Therefore "… methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (Harding 1987:3). The specific method (or data collection techniques or

research tools) will be described and elaborated upon later in Chapter four. The methodological approach elaborated upon here will be refined to eventually address the notion of emancipatory action research, which will be discussed and critiqued. Within this Chapter research methodological issues such as bias, validity, subjectivity, intervention, agency and empowerment will all be addressed.

2.2   Research paradigms

To contextualise and justify the chosen methodology for this research and to acknowledge alternative methodological approaches, Lather's (1991) illustrative categories of research paradigms are utilised as a basis for discussion:[18]

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[18]   Smith (1993b) has also utilised this Table. The Table has also been slightly altered here to include aspects derived from other literature discussed throughout the Chapter.

Table two: Paradigms

Research paradigms[19] ➔	Structural			Post structural
	Positivist[20] (quantitative)	Post positivist[21] (qualitative)		Post modern
Examples of methodological approach ➔	Experimental. Behavioural. Empirical.	Interpretive. Naturalistic. Phenomen-ological. PAR.[22]	**Critical Theory** Feminist Theory. **EAR.**[23]	Post paradigmatic diaspora
Research aims ➔	Predict/ Explain	Understand/ Describe	**Emancipate/ Empower**	Deconstruct.
Is method purposefully interventionist? ➔	No	Sometimes	**Yes**	No

(Lather 1991:8)

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[19] A "paradigm" defined within this context: "… determines the criteria according to how one selects and defines problems for inquiry and how one approaches them theoretically and methodologically … how a problem is formulated and methodologically tackled" (Husen 1997, pp. 16, 18).

[20] "Positivist" is seen here to be: "… modelled on the natural sciences with an emphasis on empirical quantifiable observations that lend themselves to analysis by means of mathematical tools. The task of research is to establish causal relationships, to explain" (Husen 1997, p. 17). This research paradigm is therefore based upon a functional-structural, objective, rational, goal directed and technocratic approach (Husen 1997, p. 19). Sometimes referred to as empirical (Popkewitz 1984).

[21] "Post positivism" is seen here to be: "… derived from the humanities with an emphasis on holistic and qualitative information and interpretive approaches" (Husen 1997, p. 17). This research paradigm is therefore based upon interpretive, humanistic and subjective approaches (Husen 1997, p. 19).

[22] Participatory Action Research.

[23] Emancipatary Action Research.

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This Table is for illustrative purposes only, as it is recognised that the categories themselves are somewhat contestable. The Table is referred to throughout this Chapter to provide a structure for discussion.

The bold and shaded portions of Table two highlight the methodological direction of this research and the discussion to follow within this Chapter and justify the research methodology undertaken here, while making comparisons and critiques to other research methodologies and models.

At the top of Table two, there are two distinct research paradigms depicted, structural and post structural (Walker and Evers 1997; Husen 1997). However below these categories in Table two, Lather (1991) proposes three separate research paradigms. That is, positivist, post positivist and post modern. At this level, prior to the 1960s, educational research, not unlike research in other disciplines generally followed the dictates of traditional, objective, scientific or as depicted "positivist" paradigms and methodologies (Burns 1995). Fundamentally, this positivist (traditional) research approach views the role of the researcher as committed to the discovery of "truth" by means of using reliable research instruments and rational discussion as well as being prepared to offer evidence for claims made (Humphries 1997). An important aspect of positivist research, which assists in increasing credibility, is the requirement of neutrality in the construction of any scientific knowledge (Maguire 1996). In effect, "The production and dissemination of scientific knowledge is legitimated on the grounds that it represents the disinterested pursuit of truth" (Humphries 1997:4). This issue will be returned to in later discussion.

However since the 1960s and 1970s there have been strong and extensive moves by educational researchers to adopt more qualitative, naturalistic or, as depicted post positivist, subjective or even post structural/post modern subjective methodologies (Burns 1995). Wadsworth suggests these changes have even been occurring for the past

seventy years or more (1993b). Essentially these "Alternative approaches ... embrace more particular emancipatory goals and claim empowerment for specific oppressed groups" (Humphries 1997:5). Although questioned and critiqued by advocates of positivist or "quantitative" methodologies the utilisation of these non-scientific, qualitative, methodological orientations has become an accepted practice by many Australian researchers (Burns 1995; Kellehear 1993; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

The ongoing debate in relation to the validity of separate research orientations, traditions and paradigms is prominent within the literature and will be elaborated upon later in this Chapter (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996; Burns 1995; Kellehear 1993; Smith 1993b). Nonetheless what is certain is that "… changes in how scientists… see the world has led to a paradigm shift … [where the] understandings that our perceptions of the world are much more a result of our own perceptions, and relative to our value-driven purposes, than was previously thought" (Wadsworth 1993b:1). As Lather remarks: "... a definite critique of positivism has been established ... our challenge is to pursue the possibilities of a post positivist era" (1991a:2).

However this post positivist area itself is seen to be in flux. Fetterman argues: "… no single qualitative approach exists" (1991:1). Nonetheless, qualitative research in education has historically been influenced mainly from the social sciences (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996). Within these social sciences, the qualitative research orientations most commonly used have been either interpretive or critical (Smith 1993b), as shown in Table two. It is this latter method, the critical, which has "… undergone rapid growth and continual blending and reconceptualisation in recent times" (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996:595; Smith 1993b). Therefore within this post positivist paradigm these two separate umbrella methodological approaches, interpretive and critical, are presented as different methodological approaches. This view is supported in other literature that notes similar distinctions between paradigms such as either symbolic (qualitative and interpretive) or critical (Walker and Evers 1997; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

2.3   Relationship between paradigms

Before focusing on methodological approaches and specifically critical theory in more detail it is relevant to momentarily address the view of the "separateness" of paradigms and the commensurable nature of each paradigm. Walker and Evers (1997) provide "views" in relation to paradigms that even question the existence of separate paradigms altogether. Briefly these three major views in relation to research paradigms are considered either "oppositional diversity", "complementary diversity", or "unity" (Walker and Evers 1997:22).   Oppositional diversity holds that there are "… epistemologically different paradigms which are incommensurable" (Walker and Evers 1997:22). In reference to the two umbrella paradigms under "structural" presented in Table two, positivist and post positivist, Walker and Evers assert that the oppositional diversity view is one of mutual incompatibility between each (1997).[24] In other words, there is neither agreement (nor even understanding) between researchers from the different (positivist or post positivist) paradigms. It is perhaps questionably accepted that the two paradigms may research the same phenomenon, but nonetheless compete and debate the integrity and legitimacy of their methodological theories with little or no attempt to empathise.

The complementary diversity view holds again that each paradigm is distinct and incommensurable, but not competitive and is considered equally appropriate depending on the context of the phenomena being researched (Walker and Evers 1997). Each paradigm therefore recognises the authority of the other. The complementary diversity view does not seek to discredit entirely other oppositional paradigms. Therefore it is not as confrontationalist as the oppositional diversity view.

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[24]   The post structural or post modern paradigm will be elaborated upon later in this Chapter. Of concern here (particularly to a post modernist), is that Walker and Evers (1997) make no mention of post modernism as a recognised paradigm within this reference. Furthermore, Holbrook even suggests that it "... has only been over the last decade that research method texts have included qualitative research!" (1997:60)

While both the above views endorse varying degrees of division in research, the "unity view" asserts that the whole idea of different paradigms is mistaken. This view claims that both can be brought into a productive relationship together, and that all researchers operate in the same (ie: structural) paradigm (Walker and Evers 1997).

This prescribed unified approach to educational research is arguably attractive and has been convincingly supported by many research theorists (Zeller 1997; Walker and Evers 1997; Keeves 1997). Perhaps the most compelling argument of endorsement is that a universal research paradigm may result in "… unprecedented levels of research validity" (Zeller 1997:827; Walker and Evers 1997). However it has been admitted that it would be extremely difficult to implement, due to the methodology loyalty most researchers have (Zeller 1997). Furthermore, academic structures tend to be unsympathetic to methodological diversity. Researchers are often comfortable in their own methodology and advocates of one methodology may look with scepticism upon those who are experienced in their methodology and other methodologies as well (Zeller 1992). As Eisner explains :

> 'The politics of method are not solely rooted in matters of epistemology; they also stem from human frailties … Our methods and our power are intimately related to the games we are adept at playing. When the prospect of a new game arises, we quite naturally assess how good we are at playing it. The prospect of losing competence or sharing turf, is not, for most of us, attractive; the familiar is much more comfortable' (1988:18).

Furthermore, perhaps many researchers who are enthusiastic about a unity view do not, in reality, accept or practice it. As Connell comments: "The ambition to produce a generalised science is at odds with practical demands" (1993:111). Or to go one step further, a unity approach could be seen to be even unethical for some: "The habit of mind that balances one extreme position against another and settles for something in the middle shows a preference for comfort, not truth" (Connell 1983:242).

Arguably, it is difficult to envisage that such a unity view could ever be possible, as the status of positivist knowledge has historically been privileged over other forms of knowledge (Humphries 1997). Traditional research approaches have been sanctioned by the state and their dominance is based upon the authority of a research community concerned about the truth of claims to knowledge and appeals to a strict set of rules and ideas about the construction of knowledge. This authority polices the enforcement and exclusion of alternative research approaches (Humphries, 1997). As Edwards and Usher state: "… scientific knowledge and its assumptions of its own legitimacy as a discourse of truth about the world result in the exclusion of other … forms of knowledge and a denial of legitimacy" (1994:158). This is evident in Hammersley's (1995) work where, for example, he declares feminist, anti-racist, critical and emancipatory research "truths" outside of the norms of legitimate research and dismisses them as being prejudiced, and ideological.

Defining the merits of any or all of these views eventually becomes a cumbersome philosophical, theoretical and academic exercise. Although relevant within discussion on methodological theory, within this research context, such discussion would somewhat compromise the aims of the eventual methodology of this study. This is elaborated upon further later in this Chapter, but the main issue raised by the above discussion is that politics seems to be inherent in discussions on paradigms, methodologies and research. The possibility for methodologies to be reconciled and unified without compromising integrity is indeed a challenging task. With the historical dominance of the positivist paradigm, it is questionable that a truly unified approach to research that justly accepts the post positivist paradigm, beyond the rhetoric of well intending methodological theorists is possible. The whole nature of paradigms themselves is therefore political. This in itself supports critical theory's notion of research being explicitly a political and subjective act, and therefore credible in its own right.

2.4   Critical theory

Critical theory recognises and accepts the notion that all paradigms have an inherent political subjectiveness as the above discussion illustrates. As Oakley states: "All research is political … [although] the "cookbooks" of research methods largely ignore the political context of research" (in Roberts 1990:54-55). Critical theory could be seen to be supportive of the complementary diversity view discussed above, in that it makes no claims of superiority over any other methodological paradigm (Lakomski 1997). Rather, critical theory separates itself and stands away from other paradigms, as per Lather's (1991) depiction in Table two, and theoretically does not indulge in debating the relevance of paradigms, only defending its own. Interpretivists are left to criticise positivists for reductionism, and positivists to criticise interpretivists for their relativism (Lakomski 1997). Furthermore positivists could arguably be labelled relativist as well, from a post modern perspective.

One of the advantages of adopting a critical theory research approach therefore is that "It is possible to have a social science which is neither purely empirical nor purely interpretive" (Lakomski 1997:169). In this sense, critical theory asserts that it can escape some criticisms levelled at it by both positivists and interpretivists, and be practically and politically more emancipatorily desirable. As Walker and Evers suggest: "… critical theorists go one step further [than interpretivists]" (1997:24), as is reflected in Table two, with Lather separating the interpretivist from the critical into two separate sub-paradigms.

Lakomski (1997) explains and rationalises critical theory by pointing to the fundamental historical problem of social science, that is the relationship between theory and practice. Drawing upon Habermas, she states:

> '… the connection between knowledge and social action has become an instrumentalist one, a relation which assumes the neutrality of science. Science is considered to be free of values and cannot,

therefore, give people any guidance on how to conduct their lives. This development is the result of the victory of 'scientism' or positivism, which, … presents itself as the only valid form of knowledge. As a consequence, it has become impossible … to reflect critically on current forms of domination since even they appear as problems which are solvable by technical means. Habermas' aim is to restore to theory the dimension of *reflection* and present a social theory which … rewrites theory with practice' [emphasis added] (1997:169).

Habermas contends that human interests are not reliant upon empirical facts about human beings nor based upon a historical subjectivity, but rather upon human conditions and interaction (Lakomski 1997). Critical theory is therefore considered "… a "socially just" educational theory and practice, which is fundamentally *reflective* in nature" [emphasis added] (Lakomski 1997:168). Habermas also contends that critical theory needs to address the practical concerns of disadvantaged groups and their social identity in an egalitarian manner that fosters a continuous learning experience and creates identity formation[25] (Habermas 1978).

A critical methodological approach to research "… rejects scientific endeavours and questions entrenched power structures" (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996:592). Critical approaches attempt to address issues in relation to the traditionally marginalised, oppressed and silenced (Smith 1993b; Lather 1991) and research aims are commonly directed towards emancipation and empowerment as depicted in Table two (Smith 1993b:83). Table two also illustrates that the aim of positivist research is to predict or explain behaviour, interpretive approaches try to understand or describe and post modernism deconstructs, but critical approaches emancipate and empower. As Haraway states: "We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made … in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life" (1988:580). Critical educational research therefore endorses a deliberate and controlled action, and is a practical call for change and participation that is implicit in its aims of emancipation and empowerment (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Hartsock 1987).

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[25]   Identity formation – a forming of values and norms (Habermas 1978).

Perhaps one of the strongest rationales for utilising a critical theory methodology in this research is that although unemployment itself has been extensively researched utilising positivistic and hybrid quantitative and qualitative interpretive methodologies, there is little research into unemployment from a critical social methodological perspective (Burchell 1992; Feather 1992; Waters and Crook 1990). This use of hybrid methodologies in itself confirms that post positivistic research methodologies and methods have been embraced and accepted by positivistic researchers (ie. complementary diversity), especially for those who subscribe to or endorse a unity paradigm view. Moreover, it has been suggested that social problems such as unemployment need to be addressed, tackled and researched from a range of methodological perspectives as discussed in Chapter one. As Jones comments: "We should oppose excessive reliance on reductionism [either interpretive or positivist] ... We should apply more flexible intellectual approaches to problem solving" (1995:257). Furthermore: "Positivism is not the only true way to do science. It is only one of many possible interpretations" (Gancian 1992:624). A critical theory approach does not therefore relegate other interpretative, positivist, or even post modern research as irrelevant.

Based upon the complementary diversity view it should be an accepted practice for critical social science to be somewhat grounded and complemented by positivist or interpretivist findings without a paradigmatic debate or critique (Schmuck 1998; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Sarantakos 1994). The main contention here is that this research attempts to employ a underutilised methodology in relation to unemployment and utilise the findings produced from other research approaches to ground, assist in validation, support, and eventually reflect upon, yet not indulge in patronising the unity paradigm view as discussed earlier.

Critical research approaches also advocate the careful thinking of ethical issues in relation to research participants. For example, the standpoint theory approach as

advocated by Harding (1993) suggests that activities that occur at the bottom rather than the top of our social hierarchies can provide the best starting points for thought and knowledge. Harding asserts that it is important that critical research approaches insist on studying up, rather than studying down (1997).   Standpoint theory therefore endorses that critical methodologies need to focus on the most marginalised groups of our society (Connell 1993; Harding 1993; Haraway 1988).

Standpoint theory also aligns itself closely to Connell's first principle of educational justice: "… the interest of the least advantaged" (1993:43). By utilising standpoint theory a study can thus be directed and grounded by the views, opinions and beliefs of the research participants themselves. In this way the research attempts to assist in developing critical thought and practice, while also helping to serve the interests of disadvantaged individuals (Smith 1993b). It also provides the opportunity to think through issues from the standpoint of the research participants, by giving voice to their experiences, desires and needs, thus contributing to the overall collective knowledge and understanding of unemployment. Connell provides an elucidating example, from a teaching perspective, of this approach: "If you were to teach about race relations … "racism" is a qualitatively better organising concept than "natural inferiority"" (1993:39).

Similarly, Wadsworth uses the phrase "critical reference group", referring to the intended "beneficiary" of the research, explaining the concept in terms of *who* the research is intended to benefit (1993b:2). Research *on* people, she contends, is research that has: "… been done on people … where the researcher has come in to do "their" research … which will get at a truth the researcher is seeking – a "truth" which may not be recognised by the researched or may even be harmful to them" (1993b:2).   This approach could be placed in the positivist section as depicted in Table two. An example of how top down initiatives, from a policy perspective, can result in ill-informed initiatives is given here by Henry during the ANTA Research Advisory Committee annual conference in 1996:

'VET[26] has been a top down, rationally driven policy agenda … defined by a small group of influential key players … the failure to achieve equity goals was part of a broader failure to engage local interests in national policy goals, reflecting the earlier conclusions of Knox and Pickersgill (1993:27) … An imposed rational … structure may give formal equity, without advancing substantive equity' (1996:5).[27]

Moreover, Burrows observes "Educational history demonstrates that top down reform and restructuring are destined to have little impact …" (1999:9) Alternatively, research *for* people, Wadsworth suggests, is where the "… researcher has seen themselves as acting in the ultimate interests of the client group. However without the first hand participation of the clients themselves, the … researcher may remain on uncertain territory with regard to whether they really "got it right" for the critical reference group" (1997:2).

Furthermore, research *with* people is where the researcher has "… come to identify the need…to work "with" clients … However … slippage from clients' interests may occur. This can often happen subtly and entirely unintentionally, [and] … relates to the unequal power relations that prevail, and which shape the "voice" of the client and limit and restrain the times when this voice can prevail against that of the researcher" (Wadsworth 1993b:2). Both of the above approaches to research could therefore be aligned with either a post modern or interpretive approach to research as per Table two.

Alternatively, Wadsworth (1993b) and Lather (1991) advocate a research approach that involves research done *"for"* and *"with"* the participants or critical reference group, on *their* issues. This approach expects the researcher to "… reverse relationships of power

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[26]   VET (Vocational Education and Training) initiatives in Australia have fundamentally been driven by the Training Reform Agenda instigated by the previous Labor Government, and aims to increase Australia's international competitiveness. Industry driven curriculum and competency based training approaches are fundamental to VET. In this sense all the training is focused upon gaining skills to meet industry demands. Arguably this is behaviourist and therefore is critiqued by educationalists who subscribe to a humanist style of education (Probert, Lim, Wiseman and Watts 1998).

[27]   It is relevant to relate this quote to later discussion centred on the applicability of VET courses for disadvantaged unemployed participants. As well the later discussion on study circles in Sweden (Chapter three), where state policy is influenced by 'bottom up' study circle initiatives.

until … the researcher is working with the client group on the clients' interests and issues" (Wadsworth 1993b:2). Wadsworth suggests that this approach is, however difficult as it rests on "… respect for [the clients'] experiences and a profound trust in their judgements about what is in their interest … researchers often feel afraid that the topics … that they … have identified … might have to go out the window. There is fear that … understandings might be rejected by the client group" (1993b:2). This issue is revisited in Chapter three in a practical discussion in relation to adult learning approaches.

2.5   Critical theory/Post modern tensions

Post modernism as depicted in Table two is located within the post structural paradigm. Lather chooses to include this paradigm yet many writers and methodological theorists either ignore or give cursory mention to this paradigm altogether (Keeves 1997; Walker and Evers 1997; Lincoln and Guba 1984). Post modernism can be seen as a movement that questions the rationality of human nature and other epistemologies (Burns 1995). Post modern researchers subscribe to the notion that there are a variety of different subjectivities and realities. It challenges the determinist and structural mode of explanation for social phenomena put forward by both positivists and post positivists (Humphries 1997). Rather than viewing societies as developing and progressing in a logical manner, post modernists emphasise *difference* and the *particular* (Humphries 1997).

However, fundamental post modernism, although important in questioning the dominant ideologies is at times seen by post positivist researchers as "… not having the radical edge of critical theory" (Moseley 1995:62). The challenge faced by the critical researcher is therefore not only the critique by positivistic scientists as mentioned previously but the ideological divide by the supposed ally, as will be explained later, post modernism (Hartsock 1987). An effort to reconcile these differences is important for critical theorists, as Connell warns: "It has long seemed to me that dogmatic and

exclusive theory is the kiss of death for a movement that claims to be democratic, radical, participatory. The essence of contemporary radicalism is participation – mainly as a practice, but also as an idea" (1983:253).

Fundamentally, the post modern criticism toward critical theorists is based upon the problematic notion that critical research compromises individual differences. Post modernism is also critical of positivism primarily as post modernists "… reject traditional assumptions about truth and reality …" (Tong 1992, p. 217). Proponents of post modernism subscribe to the notion that social criticism tends to be "… ad hoc, contextual and plural" (Hartsock 1987:190). Furthermore, post modernists refuse "… to construct an explanatory theory [but recognise and therefore endorse] … plurality, multiplicity and difference" (Tong 1992:217). Post modernists also claim that both positivists and post positivists are structural (as per Table two), and employ research approaches that produce metanarratives which they dismiss as authoritarian (Humphries 1997:5). The argument that post modernists utilise, as Sanguinetti explains, towards critical theorists is that they may:

> '… construct culture conflict as a traumatic problem … This stereotype, constructed by social workers and others, reflecting their professional role as helpers … is a kind of cultural imperialism, seeing … victims; it is a deficit model, carrying the underlying message that diversity is a disadvantage, and overlooking the advantages of having access to more than one set of cultural experiences. There is an implication that the mainstream experience represents the unproblematic 'ideal' … [alternative] community life is 'less than' and to be remediated' (1992:9).

Furthermore it is argued by post modernists that it may be presumptuous to assume that particular groups are marginalised, or feel that they are marginalised, that perhaps they wish not to change, nor have any "researchers" enter their world and advise them on how

to address their "false consciousness" (Sanguinetti 1992).[28] These arguments are also similar to the interpretivist critique of critical theory.

However many antecedents demonstrate that marginalisation such as separation and isolation from others, experiences of powerlessness and meaningless as a result of seeing only limited purposefulness are evident (Brown 1991). For example Brown's (1991) "structural dimension", argues that "… marginalisation has at least three stages. At the first stage the marginal do not reap the benefits of economic progress. At the second stage they are deprived of productive power. At the third stage they are deprived of the power of decision" (Brown 1991:43). Alternatively this third stage could be seen as "… exclusionary agenda setting" (Hendey and Muller 1998:347).[29] Nonetheless, a post modern response to this argument, which is pertinent to this actual study, is that it "… can also be very depressing to focus on problem areas, such as unemployment, where there are no clear answers" (Sanguinetti 1992:10). In other words, for some, this research ends here … For example to demonstrate how foolhardy it is sometimes seen to entertain the notion of discussing the issue of "unemployment" with unemployed people from a teaching perspective is that there tends to be resistance by both teachers and students to the idea of exploring the issue of unemployment during class time (Brewer 1975; Winefield 1993; Patton 1990). Furthermore it has been found that many teachers do not discuss unemployment with students as they perceive their aim as teaching for work (ie. success), not unemployment (ie. failure) (Patton 1990; Winefield 1993). To discuss unemployment would therefore be seen as defeatist, yet it could be argued that unemployment affects a significant proportion of people either directly or indirectly and is often a key political issue during the election of governments.

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[28]   'False consciousness' is a Marxist term used to describe the situation where the proletariat fails to perceive what they believe to be the true nature of its interests and does not develop revolutionary class consciousness (Abercrombie et al. 1988). As a hypothesis, it is argued that the poor have been socialised to accept the dominant values of elites and to fail to recognise their own objective interests (Headey and Muller 1998).

[29]   A hypothesis established by Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963, 1970), in relation to the 'second face of power' where power is allegedly characterised by exclusionary agenda setting; elites exclude the interests and demands of the poor from policy agendas (in Headey and Muller 1998).

In response to this impasse considerable literature has been produced by critical theorists which demonstrates an ambivalence towards the politics and practice of post modernism due to the apolitical stance adopted (Husen 1997). For example, "What is missing … in post modernism is the passion, the anger, the fury, that marks ... a political movement determined to bring about real change" (McLellan in Hyde 1996:5), and "Post modernism is seen not to make any efforts towards a reasoned *community* and *collective* purpose, action or struggle" [original emphasis] (Lather 1991:40).

Many critical researchers therefore express frustration with the inability of post modernism to move beyond a multiple interpretative analysis, as this example demonstrates:

> 'As educators we have an obligation to be true to our values (critical - questioning - agents of empowerment) even when they come into conflict with the students' frame of reference [and] political and economic constrictions in current education' (Moseley 1995:66).

Some views are even more critical "Post modern theories ... deny marginalised people the right to participate ... post modernism represents a dangerous approach for marginalised people to adopt" (Hartsock 1987:191).

Foucault has also been criticised for viewing the social arena as a myriad of unstable power relations (Hyde 1996). He tends to disregard any evidence of institutionalised power relations that may oppress and dominate certain vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, although Foucault was committed to ending injustice, it has been suggested that he failed to prescribe any concrete direction to alleviate unjust power relationships because of an adherence to fundamental post modernism (Hartsock 1987). Habermas, in critiquing Foucault's post modernist stance, suggests: "Subjects who constitute their own worlds … drop out; consequently, all intentional integrating achievements disappear from view. This wipes out all the hermeneutical tracks that point the way into society for an action theory starting with the actors' own self-understanding." (Habermas 1997:47) In this way, some critical theorists argued that to

enact action and change post modern theory alone could be generally restrictive (Hartsock 1987).

Yet for some, post modernism and critical theory are synonymous and can work in unison (Moseley 1995). That is, both react against and question the status quo imposed by positivists as to how knowledge is constructed and by whom. Post modernists, like critical theorists tend to critically question entrenched, hegemonic power relationships.

This challenge of transforming post modern thought and enacting post modern practice is being contested (Lather 1991). Humphries asks, "Can we appeal to a metanarrative of emancipation whilst retaining a concern with the particular and the local?" (1997:8). The largest challenge therefore of critical research is to confront, as Lather terms it "… the central paradox of critical theory" (1991:65). That is, the understandings, knowledges and meanings that emerge from research need to be grounded in relation to the understandings of the participants themselves. Yet the research must seek to enable participants to re-evaluate themselves and their situations. Perhaps one way of addressing this paradox is to disregard the notion of dichotomies.

It has been suggested that a main feature which unites many feminist theorists, despite differences in methodological approaches, is the commitment to ways of knowing that avoid subordination and question dichotomies that surround issues of knowledge creation such as objective/subjective, reason/emotion, grand theory/lay theory and researcher/researched (Williams 1993). For example, there may not necessarily be a dichotomy between accepting one's life as it is and being active in changing structures. Learning skills, knowledge and information may simultaneously be a way for one to gain access, participate in a society, and understand and question that society making decisions about how one lives and what changes are possible (Sanguinetti 1992). This approach, termed "radical (or critical) pluralist" by some, is perhaps the impetus needed to reinstate a concerted effort for change (Hyde 1996). Or perhaps this quote sum up the tensions between methodologies "… accepting a reality in which truth does not lie in

one orthodoxy or another but can exist in a different way in each. It means accepting ambivalence as a part of life, an ambivalence in which the vision of possibilities is always balanced by the peripheral visions of realities" (Sanguinetti 1992:25). This also suggests that critical theory should accept the complementary diversity view of paradigms as Connell again warns of the dangers of adhering to a definitive ideology:

> 'Of all the magnificent variety of ways to go wrong, the one that is most seductive for the Left, and the most destructive in the long run, is theoretical dogmatism. There is an endless temptation, when confronting power structures and trying to mobilise people who by definition tend to be powerless and poor, to seize on and solidify a dogma. It can be a genuine shield against cooperation, a means of guaranteeing at least a verbal militancy. It also can become a talisman, a magical guarantee that right will triumph in the end if only one keeps the faith and rejects all modifications and alternatives. That happened with Marxism, and is one of the reasons why most serious socialist thought now goes on outside the Marxist framework …' (1983:252).

However, from a feminist perspective McNay (1992) states:

> '… feminists cannot afford to relinquish either a general theoretical perspective, or an appeal to a metanarrative to justice. I contend that gender issues cannot be fully comprehended without an understanding of general social dynamics, nor can gender oppression be overcome without some appeal to a metanarrative of justice' (1992:7).

Harding once stated that we find ourselves in a "… puzzling situation whereas a search for a successor science epistemologically robust and politically powerful enough to unseat the Enlightenment version, is in tension with a post modernism which struggles against claims of totality, certainty and methodological orthodoxy" (in Lather 1991:82). Humphries almost pleads "Surely it is possible to recognise the particularities of struggle without abandoning metanarratives of emancipation and justice" (1997:7).

The above discussion identifies the tension between the critical and post modern, but does not negate either. What it suggests in the context of this study, is that critical research is in a state of relatively early growth and attempting to be empathetic to post

modern thought. It also indicates to the critical researcher potential pitfalls, problems and issues.

Due to the issues stated above, it is apparent that with critical theory "… there is little agreeance on establishing methods …" (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996:593). Nonetheless, action research is a popular methodology, born from critical theory as represented in Table two. Its applicability and relevance are discussed in the next section.

2.6   Participatory action research

Historically, in Australia the popularity, credibility and use of action research can be traced back to the introduction and evolution of Women's Studies officially into academic institutions. For example:

> 'The women's studies course which emerged at Flinders University in
> 1973 … pursued the radical educational goals of group self management
> and assessment … The course had marginal – indeed, precarious –
> status in the University … But it was marginal in a more purposeful and
> deliberate way … in that the participants wanted the course to remain
> on the edge of the university in order to better involve women from
> outside the academic community' (Sheridan 1992:63).

Eventually many other researchers adopted action research to address issues and concerns with other marginalised groups. An extensive plethora of literature now supports the utilisation of critical action research as a legitimate sociological and educational research approach (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996; Noffke and Stevenson 1995; Peirce 1995; Burns 1995; Jones 1994a; Smith 1993b; Connell 1993; Lather 1991b; Waters and Crook 1990; Sears 1992; Wadsworth 1987; Lather 1986; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Connell et al 1982).

Kemmis and McTaggart have stated "... there is a commonality of interest between action research and critical social science" (1990:36). The fundamentals and foundation of critical theory have been adopted by advocates of action researchers including

Kemmis, McTaggart and Kincheloe (Smith 1993b; Carr and Kemmis 1990). Noffke and Stevenson, from a United States perspective, state: "The work of Kemmis and McTaggart and others in Australia, built on a broad-based effort for collaborative curriculum planning and social justice agendas, articulate a vision of action research, through the use of critical theory, in which teachers are participants in the project of human emancipation" (1995:34).

Action research therefore rests within the critical research orientation (Smith 1993b). It is also supposedly interventionary by nature. Interventionist, in that it aims to intervene into the personal, social and political (Jones 1994a; Smith 1993b). That is, it is dedicated to the goal of creating whatever open ended possibilities of transformation are possible (Peirce 1995). This is highlighted in Table two. It is a political process committed to the aim of improvement through emancipation and empowerment (Burns 1995). Action research however has also been historically used to explore the role of social science in initiating changes in many fields such as industry, community and even the military (Noffke and Stevenson 1995). Since the 1970s, there has also been a proliferation of meanings and uses of the term, both in the UK and the USA, however in Australia, especially with the work of Kemmis and McTaggart, the critical theory aspect of action research has largely remained intact (Noffke and Stevenson 1995).

Action research is undertaken to improve rationality and social justice (Burns 1995; Henry and Kemmis 1985). It begins with a thematic concern that raises the problematic nature of a particular issue, and includes a general idea that some kind of improvement or change is desirable (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Action research is also an educational research process whereby the researcher and the researched collaborate and share in the design and conduct of the research process. Strategies of action are then planned, implemented and subjected to observation with research participants who are integrally involved in all research activities (Burns 1995:291). Noffke and Stevenson add "… it assumes that understandings and actions emerge in a constant cycle, one that always highlights the ways in which educators are partially correct, yet in continual need

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of revision, in their thoughts and actions" (1995:4). Also as Cook and Garrow, feminist researchers state "Ideally feminist [action] research includes an action or policy component aimed at social transformation or simply improving the conditions of particular [marginalised groups]" (in Gancian 1992:626).

"Those in power are sceptical of the critical nature of action research, especially if the questions challenge hegemonic interests and structures" (Reinharz 1992:191), yet this is its very purpose. In this way, action research, has arguably gone some way to providing a vehicle for women's emancipation and empowerment, and can be adopted by other disadvantaged groups, for example, in this case the unemployed. However it needs to be realised that feminist research inroads are problematic, as Connell alerts:

> '… men's interests and perspectives have … shaped the applications of scientific knowledge … Further, there is an argument that the character of scientific discourse itself, its abstractness, its ban on emotion, its orientation to power over nature (experimental manipulation), grow out of masculine ways of viewing the world and are sustained by a patriarchal social order. Alongside the textbook account of science … there has also been a less noticed account that has stressed intuition, practical experience and personal involvement … It is, in fact, only when we give full weight to these dimensions of intellectual work that the true importance of universalising arguments and representations can appear. These do not in themselves define intellectual work. But their relation to intuitive and particular knowledge is vital in giving intellectual work *critical* potential, ability to subvert' [original emphasis] (1983:240).

The three major principles that guide participatory action research and that need to be embraced are: participation, action, and commitment to a more just social order (Noffke and Stevenson 1995).

Participation

Participation is a key principle, in that participatory action research intends to "... break down the researcher/researched divide and democratise the consumption of research" (Connell 1993:120). It is participatory in that it expects and encourages the researcher and research participants to collaboratively engage in a strong degree of involvement and participation in the research process (Sarantakos 1994; Smith 1993b; Connell 1993; Lather 1991b; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). The participation aspects of action research are also considered an essential ethical consideration (McTaggart 1997). It also supports the attempts of research participants to gain control over their own situation (Holmstrand and Harsten 1991). It is research by the participants and for the participants, not about the participants (Jones 1994a). As Kemmis and McTaggart remark "It is not research done on other people ... It does not treat people as objects for research ... It is not "the scientific method"" (1988:22). In effect, a participatory method rejects the separation between researcher and researched (Gancian 1992).

To achieve concrete transformation action research requires a theory of change which links researcher and research participants in a common task in which the duality of the research and practice roles is transcended. It requires joint participation and collaboration in the process of social transformation, expressed in the decision making process. "It is therefore democratic in operation" (Burns 1995:305). Furthermore, this participation is enhanced with equality as Connell asserts: "Equality without a practice of participation remains a myth; participation without equality is endlessly vulnerable to corruption. The stresses this relation can produce are no doubt familiar to everyone who has tried to work democratically in a hierarchical institution, from a university to a paint shop" (1983:253).

However, Wadsworth cautions "… helping from a position of altruism may not lead far, and may risk reproducing the existing oppression" (1993b). A recognition of bonds of oppression which unite is required, whereas the oppression of one is the oppression of all, so all can work together" (Wadsworth 1999b). However, although this common ground is of benefit, it is not guaranteed that all action research can reach its goals

(Wadsworth 1993b:3). Participatory action research also questions the inequalities that are produced and maintained by the unequal power relations in our society (Peirce 1995). In recognising itself as a way to improve the social situation through intellectual effort (Popkewitz 1984), the research approach therefore needs to be openly and explicitly committed to a more just social order and attempt to critique and question the status quo (Lather 1986).

Action research is also commonly located in an historical context and examines how past and present socially accepted assumptions in relation to the media, policy and programs all contribute to the current social conditions (Peirce 1995). "Action research, then, is about taking everyday things in the life of education and unpacking them for their historical and ideological baggage" (Noffke and Stevenson 1995:5). Chapter one of this thesis is representative of this "unpacking" of socially accepted historical assumptions in relation to unemployment which is the thematic concern of this action research study.

Action

One of the main criticisms of action research is that the methodology itself has been restricted by prescriptive explanations and has therefore lost its emancipatory intention to actually change social structures (Smith 1993b). That is, there is the concern that some action research may fail to encompass a great deal of action (Burns 1995; Smith 1993b; Lather 1991). In effect, in reference to Table two, action research may slip across to interpretivist and fail to be emancipatory or interventionist in its aims. Reinharz states "... research may uncover needs, and policy may address them, but without action there is no reason to expect those policies to be implemented" (1992:179). Smith, in relation to non-participatory and non-interventionist critical research states "... no matter how elegant their design or how rigorous their execution, their social significance is limited" (1993b:89). In effect, as action research has become an accepted and legitimate methodology, its potential for action may be diluted by applying processes, structures,

stages and so forth. It could be suggested that the initial feminist advocates for an action research methodology may be disheartened to view the sometimes rigorous "steps" of action research as they are depicted in some educational (or social) research methodological texts (perhaps even masculinised?). Noffke and Stevenson allude to some potential problems: "As action research struggles to gain legitimacy within academic circles … there is both the potential of new and more just educational practice and the problematic that such research may be used to create a new *authority of practice"* [emphasis added] (1995:7).

Feldman (1995) also comments about this problem, in regard to the "Hundred Schools" Project he coordinated and facilitated in the United States.[30] Due to the prescriptive nature of the action research involved he labelled it "institutionalised action research", in the sense that the institution derived the benefits of action research, but not the participants.

> 'This differs from the forms of action research in which teachers engage in the process … That is, institutionalized action research focused not on the development of the participants but on the development of the program' (1995:190).

Feldman goes on to warn: "… there are signs that action research has become hijacked in the service of technical rationality … The result can be … a re-emergence of hierarchicalized specialist functions to control and regulate practice" (1995:194).

McTaggart therefore suggests that researchers try to avoid being a "slave" to the action research cycle steps, to not impose the cycle, but "… let it evolve in a fluid and natural manner" (VUT 1997). Brennan also comments that using a methodological research model is a logical approach to conducting research in a coherent and economical manner, but may be dangerous if looked upon as a rigid set of principles: "… the very tools which are necessary for research practice to exist interrupt the practice under

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[30] Scope, Sequence and Coordination (SS and C) was an U.S. initiative to increase scientific literacy in all levels of schools. The '100 Schools' Project was the Californian effort of the project, which operated in high schools with an action research approach (Feldman 1995).

investigation, altering its logic" (1997:6). Perhaps then, the danger of following methodological protocol is that participatory action research may become non-participatory and non-interventionist.

It has also been suggested that any action research that is non-participatory and non-interventionist is unable to measure up to its political, empowering or emancipatory purposes (Smith 1993b). Smith states: "Experience is demonstrating that participation and intervention are necessary ... for achieving the emancipatory goal of transforming relations of domination" (1993b:89-90). Although helpful in its ability to be politically conscious-raising, the non-interventionist methodological approach perhaps falls short. As Acker, Barry and Esseveld state: "… an emancipatory intent is no guarantee of an emancipatory outcome" (in Smith 1993b:77). Brennan points to the problem of "… intellectualist bias which entices us to construe the world as a spectacle, as a set of significants to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically" (1997:6). Effectively, a participatory approach aimed at empowerment through action and struggle in an intervening manner has arguably the most potential to complement to the tradition of critical research. It needs to be acknowledged however that non-interventionist, non-participatory action research where there is no explicit observable action or change with participants, policy or structures can nonetheless be relevant and useful in certain circumstances and contexts. Such participatory action research approaches may lack in their participatory nature or be non-interventionist, but predominantly utilise such methods as critical policy analysis and critical text analysis (Smith 1993b:86). (Sometimes referred to as "content analysis" or "document analysis").[31] This type of research is sometimes conducted "on" the participants, possibly "for" but not "with" the participants in a collaborative manner and may also be considered interpretive. The question needs to be asked - how much "action" (if any) occurs with action research? To reflect this, as Table two depicts, *participatory* action research is placed under the interpretive methodological approach, as is could be seen to be sometimes non-interventionist as will be explained later.

It is also relevant to note that intervention is sometimes not entirely possible or applicable, but may ground further action research cycles. For example this particular research is grounded by previous action research (and cycles before that), that demonstrated that LMP courses are problematic in that they do not address the issue of unemployment (Brophy 1996). In the previous study mentioned in Chapter one, it was essential to establish if any change was perceived as desirable for the course participants themselves before progressing onto action and change in a participatory and interventionist manner in this research. The previous action research cycle, although non-interventionist, was a preparatory, reconnaissance stage or cycle, thus grounding and providing the thematic concern for this cycle of research. That is, the *reflections* of the previous research cycle, are the impetus for the *planning* and *action* of this research cycle. Furthermore, Burns (1995) describes how action research can be either a professional development activity or a political process. As professional development, action research can raise awareness for the researcher and readers to guide them to future research initiatives.

Commitment to a more just social order

A further criticism of participatory action research is the perceived ineffective use of any information derived from action research studies to actually change teaching and educational practices. It has been well documented that there is a huge plethora of books, articles and other information in relation to educational research, but "… does it influence teachers, practitioners or policy makers even if they read it?" (Burns 1995:302). Connell argues: "There are many academic journals ... mostly with very small circulation, mostly with no readership among teachers and no impact on policy makers" (1993:116). Even if teachers read or hear about research, "… they are slightly, or often not at all influenced" (Burns 1995:302).

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[31]   Chapter one Section 1.6 is an example of this critical policy analysis.

There is also the criticism that academic research is often left "… on the shelf to gather dust" (Jones 1994a:47). Various academics therefore argue that much research is often ignored or made inaccessible. As Kellehear remarks: "Another ethical issue concerns the use to which research may be put. Some research is acquired through significant expense of time and convenience ... and then the findings simply rest on library shelves. Much thesis work for higher degrees suffers this fate, a practice which is arguably irresponsible" (1993:12). This is not to say that research which is participatory and interventionist, will not suffer the above fate as well, but if it is sincerely action orientated, participatory and interventionist, the experience has a high likelihood of creating change *during* or *after* the process on the individuals involved and others they come into contact with. Perhaps then this type of research has higher probability of effecting change, even if only for the individuals involved in the research, which is after all the purpose of action research, to emancipate and empower the disadvantaged research participants.

It is therefore the political process of action research that needs to be adopted and re-instated to enact action and change. As Kemmis (1997) asserts, perhaps the ethical aim of action research should be social action. This action could be individual, group, political, or personal. The criticisms therefore noted above by Connell (1993), Burns (1995), Jones (1994a) and Kellehear (1993) are perhaps more applicable to traditional, empirical research, while the action researcher needs to focus and aim towards participation, collaboration and action.

In order to distinguish the interventionist and participatory style of an action research methodology from a non-interventionist and non-participatory one, the notion of *emancipatory* action research is adopted here to highlight it as a distinctive approach. As Table two and the previous discussion reflect, participatory action research *can* slip back to an interpretive methodology, however emancipatory action research remains critical and aims to emancipate. This is yet a further refinement of the methodology, which is explained in more detail in the next section.

2.7   Emancipatory action research

By reviving the essence of the critical theory foundation of action research, perhaps the above shortcomings in the development of action research can be addressed, for action research is designed not only to explain and understand social reality, but is also an attempt to change it (Smith 1993b).

> '... the value of action research ... is determined by the extent to which the methods and findings make possible improvements in practice' (Burns 1995:303).

As Lather (1991) and Smith (1993b) both contend, action research should be an attempt to translate critical thought into emancipatory action. To accomplish this, they suggest that action research needs to be deliberately interventionist, and not compromise this intervention by strictly adhering to a prescribed approach. Smith recognises these two alternative directions that critical educational theory may follow (1993b:84). The first direction encompasses the aim of empowerment through utilising research methods such as critical ethnography, policy analysis and text analysis as discussed previously (Smith 1993b:84). The second direction includes approaches that encompass the notions of participation, but also includes and makes explicit the commitment to action. Smith terms this "emancipatory action research" to differentiate itself from participatory action research (1993b:84). In other words, it can be seen that perhaps there are two strands of action research, the participatory and the emancipatory. It is this latter approach that is attempted in this research.

An objective of this research is therefore to enable the researcher and researched to work collaboratively in relation to the design, direction and conduct of the research (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). However, it also needs to be interventionist in nature into the personal, social and political as Table two demonstrates (Smith 1993b). It encompasses deliberate and controlled action and is a practical call for change and participation (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Hartsock 1987).

The above discussion not only highlights the potential problems and challenges in utilising a critical research methodology, but also the fundamental differences the approach adopts as compared to traditional positivist research methodologies. A further difference is also in the way data is analysed. This is discussed in the next section.

2.8 Reflective analysis

> 'As a research method, action research is cyclical, that is, it does not progress from an initial question to the formulation of data collection, analysis and conclusion … The process does not end, as with traditional notions of research, with richer understandings of education for others to implement; rather it aids in the ongoing process of identifying contradictions which, in turn, help to locate spaces for ethically defensible, politically strategic action' (Noffke and Stevenson 1995:4-5).

In the cycle of "plan, act, observe and reflect" of action research, reflection is a key theoretical component. From an analytic perspective the methodology endorses a *reflective* analytical approach as illustrated below in comparison to other methodological analysis.

Table three: Methodology - data analysis[32]

Methodology	Approach to data analysis
Experimental	Structural, linked to discovering and uncovering "truths"
Interpretive	Interpret, Describe
Critical	**Reflective**
Post modern	Deconstruct "truths"

(From Noffke and Stevenson 1995; Smith 1993b; Reason 1990)

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[32]   This Table also acts as an adjunct to Table one.

Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) note that the analysis of data within an action research or critical theoretical research approach is reflective, rather than structural or interpretive. They state that, "Reflective analysis is largely subjective and it is not possible to specify standard procedures for doing this type of data analysis" (1996:571). Furthermore critical researchers do not view data as something which contains facts that need to be "discovered" or "uncovered", but rather "… data is constructed during research, and if reflected upon is somewhat self validating[33] because it grasps and reflects reality" (Reid 1997:59).

"When inquiring into matters of concern … " as Wadsworth states, "… the researcher embarks on collecting data, analysing it and reflecting upon conclusions to guide them towards change and improvement" (1993b:1). This is sometimes referred to as a sociological and reflective investigation into human agency (Peirce 1995). It is interested in how individuals make sense of, interpret and act upon their own experiences (Peirce 1995).

Reason describes a cycle or loop of reflective analysis as: "… moving to and fro between reflection and experience …" (1990:45). This he suggests can be individually based, where each person operates individually, on their own and reflects upon their individual experiences, with ideally a group reflection at the very beginning or very end. Alternatively, it can be collective, where the researcher and participants "… always reflect together; and they always experience together … interacting as a group … What is essential here is to ensure that each person has a say in the reflective phase; and is fully involved in the experience phase. This is to ensure that co-operation is based on comprehensive individual participation" (Reason 1990:45).

As well, reflective analysis can be interactive, whereas "… a balance is sought between some individual research cycling and some aspects of collective research cycling … [where] separate individual cycles of experience and reflection can be followed by

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[33]   Issues in relation to validity are discussed later in this Chapter.

collective reflection" (Reason 1990:45). Reason (1990) suggests that action research, which is most valid, is one that can maximise both the individual and collective, thereby becoming interactive.

Reason offers an interesting framework to work by "My reflection needs to be both autonomous, and fully open to influence by my experience, your experience, your reflection on my experience, your reflection on your experience, your reflection on my reflection and visa versa …" (1990:46). This thoroughness, and realisation of the researcher's subjectivity is vital, however even this can be problematic. As Humphries warns:

> 'As researchers, commitment to self-reflexivity is fundamental, although this can deteriorate into self-indulgence which places the researcher as norm … A self-critical account that situates the researcher at the centre of the text can perpetuate the dominance our emancipatory intentions hope to fight. Our own frameworks need to be interrogated as we look for the tensions and contradictions in our research practice, paradoxically aware of our own complicity in what we critique' (1997:8).

Reason suggests that the balance between reflection and experience be seen as critical in relation to validity. Too much experience will result in a "supersaturated inquiry" or too much reflection can result in "intellectual excess" (1990:48). "The only guideline I can think of … is that the inquirers monitor the ratio …" (Reason 1990:49).

After each experience phase, Reason (1990) suggests three lines of thought for reflection; the descriptive, the evaluative, and the practical. In the descriptive phase, the researcher describes "… what went on, framing lucid descriptions. When evaluating, they are judging how sound and well founded these descriptions are; that is, how well they cohere with the recollected, presented content of the experience phase" (Reason 1990:49). The practical phase entails - in light of the description and evaluation "… what sort of content to explore in the next experience phase …" (Reason 1990:50). The details of the planning and the operationalisation of the reflective analysis within this specific study are addressed throughout the method section of the thesis, Chapter four.

Discussion thus far in this Chapter has highlighted and alluded to the notion that empowerment is an important aspect and aim of critical/action research. This next section therefore addresses the term empowerment and as such assists in consolidating the methodological approach adopted for the study.

2.9   Empowerment

It is relevant to elucidate firstly, on three points in relation to the notion of empowerment within a critical research context

Firstly that empowerment is an implicit component of critical action research. As Smith states: "… critical educational research is empowering because of its emancipatory intent ... All descriptions of critical research share a common critical emancipatory language" (1993b:77). Empowerment is therefore conceived as a process (the research itself) of social action that promotes participation by individuals and groups in order to gain control over their social situation (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988). As Smith states: "… empowerment itself can be constructed [and] ... is conceived ... from the discourse of critical social theory [as] being concerned with a political reading of the world and the unmasking of false consciousness" (1993b:77). Alternatively the process associated with "… disempowering individuals is often clouded and disguised by rhetoric and practical illusions that place blame on the disempowered themselves. At this level the power dynamics which institutionalise and limit real choices is unveiled" (White and Wyn 1998:26). For example, from a feminist perspective, Connell comments on how the traditional/patriarchal research ideologies undermine ideas of equality, emancipation and empowerment. "It is no accident that the patriarchal reaction against women's liberation has focussed, not on feminist accounts of women's experience, nor on the strategies of constructing women's culture, but on ridiculing the generalisable claim to equality" (1983:240).

Often advocates of other paradigms will question the empowering aspects of critical theory. This is due to the positivist interpretation of "power". If power issues are evident, and acknowledged by the positivist researcher, then it is a problem that needs to be addressed through the greater reliability of research instruments and application of ethical standards (Humphries 1997). Alternatively critical, action and feminist researchers recognise the complex dynamics of researcher-researched relationships (Humphries 1997). As Humphries suggests; "The uncovering of power as intrinsic for all social research demonstrates that instead of a scientific community which is autonomous and free from political interest, we now know that an intimate relationship exists between the projects of science and other intellectual and political interests in the cultures where science is practical" (1997:6).

Secondly, it is recommended within the literature that critical education research does not rely solely on statistical data to measure empowerment in an objective manner (Peirce 1995; Connell 1993; Popkewitz 1984). Often studies of this nature identify the process of action and empowerment by using methods such as document analysis, interviews, anecdotes and tape recordings to firstly record, then validate with the research participants any subjective indications of action such collaborative action, questioning assumptions, developing scepticism, recognising prejudices, authentic participation and planning activities to reflect upon during reflective analysis (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Carr and Kemmis 1990; Smith 1993b).

Thirdly, it needs to be acknowledged that the term has been compromised in some quarters in contemporary rhetoric. For example, a corporate executive may be empowered by his/her employer to retrench half the existing staff, to alleviate any ill feelings or sense of shame or guilt. Perhaps a salary bonus may empower the corporate "hit man" (sic) to perform better. In this sense, the term empowerment can also be used to exploit. In a review of the publication *The New Work Order: Behind the Language of the new Capitalism* (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996), reviewer Black identifies that: "Workers are led to believe they are newly "empowered" in a "liberated" workplace

involving "trust" and "collaboration". But these … capitalists texts use language co-opted from critical pedagogy are deceiving" (1997:108). Lather states in relation to her use of the term empowerment:

> 'My usage of empowerment opposes the reduction of the term as it is used in the current fashion of individual self-assertion, upward mobility and the psychological experience of feeling privileged … I use empowerment to mean analysing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognising systematic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives' (1991:3-4).[34]

From a medical perspective, Wallerstein and Bernstein give an example in relation to the notion of monitoring the process of empowerment within a research environment:

> '... empowering effort ... involves much more than improving self-esteem, health efficacy or other health behaviours that are independent of environmental change...empowerment embodies a broad process that encompasses community collectiveness, self development, improved quality of life and social justice' (1988:380).

This quote also supports the earlier discussion on how unemployment historically has been researched in Chapter one. That is, the empirical researching of positivist causes and effects of unemployment are vast, further supporting the uptake of alternative approaches.

In the 1980s a number of programs, research and literature both in Australia and internationally, promoted the inclusion of a critical, educational approach into programs for the unemployed (Geers, Nielsen and Darling 1992, Watts and Knassel 1985; Hogan 1985; West 1987; Hartman 1985).[35] Unfortunately most ceased for numerous reasons including higher unemployment rates and an increased emphasis on economic

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[34]   Furthermore empowerment, in relation to critical theory, although closely aligned in principle, is in this research context, not one of 'empowerment evaluation' as discussed by Fetterman, Kaftarian and Wandersman as the empowerment evaluation movement in the publication *Empowerment Evaluation. Knowledge and Tools for Self-Assessment and Accountability* (1996).

[35]   Elaborated upon further in Chapter three.

rationalism to solve unemployment as discussed in Chapter one. However some recent researchers have specifically urged the exploration of critical theory and empowerment in courses for the unemployed (Creed, Hicks and Machin 1997; Moseley 1995), although such initiatives are currently rare, and presently non-existent in relation to unemployment, hence the need for this research.

Recent examples of critical research addressing other disadvantaged groups do however exist. For example, Wallerstein and Bernstein (1988) conducted what they termed "Empowerment Education" in an effort to reduce alcohol and substance abuse among youth. Sears (1992) utilised critical theory to explore the experience of homosexuality within a learning environment, and Jones conducted participatory action research for women's empowerment in the South Pacific (1994a). Through reflective inquiry approaches, such as observation and unstructured interviews, it was established that the collaborative and participatory focus of these studies enabled research participants to reflect upon and analyse their own experiences thereby creating the impetus for action and change.

In order to further refine the notion of empowerment in relation to critical theory, Smith (1993b) provides a framework, or "spheres" of empowerment. This framework will be utilised in this research, and will be applied to the method and analysis. To verify its applicability two other noted theorists echo Smiths notion of empowerment occurring in stages, and in a linear manner. Sanguinetti (1992) describes five stages of a "journey and learning continuum" to "find a voice", while Veno and Thomas (1992) describe three "developments". It is relevant to note here that those levels closely correlate with the flow of overseas study circle discussion guides which are described in Chapter three (see also Appendix three). The Table below is presented to demonstrate how they all mesh together, as well as assisting in the following discussion.

Table four: Empowerment levels

Smiths' (1993b) "Spheres"	Sanguinettis' (1992) "Stages"	Veno and Thomas' (1992) "Developments"
	Silence	
	Received Knowledge	
Self-growth	**Subjective and procedural Knowledge**	**Positive Self Concept**
Political Consciousness raising	**Constructed Knowledge**	**Critical understanding of social and political environment**
Collective action / struggle		**Skills and resources for social and political action**

Sanguinetti's first two "stages" could perhaps be labelled pre-Smith; they are:

> '… silence … [that is] passive, subdued, subordinate, able to make little meaning of … experiences as the result of … isolation and demeaning circumstances … [and] Received knowledge; the assumption that all knowledge and authority originates outside the self with a focus on listening and black/white moral positions and solutions' (1992:19).

From here, Smith, drawing on many other researchers and authors in the area of critical theory, asserts that there are three interrelated spheres of empowerment: self growth; political consciousness raising; and collective action/struggle (1993b).

Smith's first sphere of empowerment as self-growth he explains as:

> '... based on a heightened self-awareness, the unblocking of repressed feelings, or growing recognition that personally constraining perceptions are socially constructed rather than personal pathologies. Empowerment at this personal psychological level increases an individual's self-esteem and personal confidence while decreasing feelings of guilt, self-denial or inadequacy. The outcome is enhanced personal autonomy, self-determination, assertiveness, and a commitment to take greater responsibility for shaping one's life.' (Smith 1993b:78)

Sanguinetti's equivalent stage arguably rests within here: "… subjective knowledge … truth shifts locale … [people] become their own authorities: the "inner expert" can negate answers that the outside world supplies" and, "Procedural knowledge … thinking within systems and using methods to learn, and questioning the premises of those systems and methods" (Sanguinetti 1992:19). Veno and Thomas describe this stage as "The development of a more positive self-concept, or sense of self competence." (Veno and Thomas 1992:25)

Smith's next sphere of empowerment, "political consciousness-raising", is concerned with growth and participation in decision-making. The challenge at this level is to promote a more profound scepticism of routine common-sense understandings and practices and to confront the constructedness, interest-serving and oppressive realities of dominant cultural norms and practices (Smith 1993b). It is to challenge the bureaucratic rationality endemic in our system (Smith 1993b), and to ask "Why are we systematically excluded and marginalized?" (Hartsock 1987:190). It is to begin to consider the "… political nature of all cultural symbols and institutional practices we commonly take as non-political, and to see one's situation in a new light" (Smith 1993b:80). The emphasis

at this level is on reinterpretation; the translation of commonsense understandings into a social and political framework (Smith 1993b).

Lather (1991) also recognises this sphere of empowerment as enlightenment or liberation from understandings constrained and refined through false consciousness. "Given the reciprocally confirming nature of hegemony, our common sense ways of looking at the world are permeated with meanings that sustain our disempowerment" (Smith 1993b:80). This level of empowerment also focuses on the fundamental contradictions which help dispossessed people see how poorly "ideologically frozen understandings" serve their interest (Lather 1991). Furthermore, Sanguinetti's next stage reflects Smith's second, as: "Constructed knowledge … an integration of previous stages; recognising that knowledge is constructed by the knower" (Sanguinetti 1992:19). Moreover "When we wake up to the reality of how powerlessness is drummed into us, everything begins to change." (Shields 1991:14) Veno and Thomas describe this level as "The development of a more critical understanding of the surrounding social and political environment" (Veno and Thomas 1992:25).

Smith's third sphere of empowerment, collective action/struggle, is a socio-political concept that goes beyond "participation" and "consciousness-raising" (Smith 1993b:81). Simply changing understandings, or the way we name reality, is not to actually change reality. Rather, Smith argues that this sphere encompasses:

> '... understanding how ideas, practices and institutions may be systematically distorted by the way in which power is socially organised. In effect, to change practices requires more than a change in beliefs; it requires a change in the structures, which have significantly conditioned and shaped those beliefs. False consciousness, therefore, cannot be overcome at the level of ideas. It can be overcome only through practical political action which is oriented towards changing the social matrix in which an individual's subjective understanding is structured' (Smith 1993b:81).

Veno and Thomas describe this stage as "… the development of skills and resources to achieve social and political action." and "The development of a more critical

understanding of the surrounding social and political environment" (Veno and Thomas 1992:25)

Smith, Sanguinetti and Veno and Thomas however, all note that these phases are interrelated and overlap.

Sanguinetti (1992) also discusses a separate and important dimension - the notion of both individual *and* social empowerment. Individual empowerment is seen to encompass notions of self directed learning, similar to Smith's first and second levels. "Social empowerment on the other hand occurs when social reality is bought into the context of … personal experience linked to … problem-posing and dialogue … investigation through dialogue, seeking the root causes … and the skills and opportunities needed to participate in changing the situation" (Sanguinetti 1992:8). Both individual and social empowerment, are therefore considered contingent upon each other.

However these separate individual and social dimension of empowerment, as well as the idea of levels discussed above, are questioned by some feminist theorists who tend to embrace individual and social, or personal and political holistically with no rigid distinctions in relation to areas, phases, spheres or types of empowerment (Sanguinetti 1992). Empowerment is seen as "… the process by which an individual's socialising influences are revealed, compared, contrasted and analysed within a group setting" (Sanguinetti 1992:10).

Nevertheless perhaps the levels described do need to work in a linear manner while addressing both personal and political issues. As Sanguinetti cautions; "What sense would it make to … briskly [go to] … the stage of "constructed knowing", when … subjective voices … have not yet been found" (1992:19). For example, she cautions that limited empowerment "… could lead to the false notion that if you get language (or other) skills you will get access. This could lead to self-blame and disempowerment"

(Sanguinetti 1992:7). Furthermore as Brown notes: "If … strategies remain primarily oriented to encourage people only to change at a personal level, and so fit in as best they can and manage the status quo … then their marginalisation will be reduced in only small ways" (1991:43). Veno and Thomas also state that "Empowerment can be seen as a *process* of developing skills and competencies …"[emphasis added] (1992:25).

To further place this linear theory into context, the example of programs designed to assist the unemployed can be used. Programs that aim to train people in skills, or provide work experience are often touted as being excellent in raising participant self-esteem (Chamberlain and Hughes 1997; Carson and Doube 1994; Hawthorne 1994). It could be argued that much of this self-esteem is the kind described in Smith's first level, however the programs do not promote the type of empowerment described in the second or third phases. Even the lucky few who do "act" and get a job or other outcome are perhaps only partially fulfilling the third stage (explicit action), but do not pass through the second stage (raised consciousness). Furthermore, for the majority that don't achieve any outcome, and remain unemployed, the partial empowerment – self-esteem – may be soon lost as suggested by Brown (1991) and Sanguinetti (1992).   A further issue to address, in relation to the specific research participants of this study is the compounding levels of disadvantage they face, as discussed in Chapter one.

Shields cautions:

> 'Those who experience more oppression, such as women and minority groups [and unemployed], have many more layers of resistance to get through.   These layers are both external and internal – because oppressive beliefs easily become internalised. Not only do we believe the oppressive attitudes and limitations and accept them as reality, but furthermore we perpetuate them by limiting others' (1991:13).

In reality, different theorists and researchers may adopt and dismiss several aspects in relation to the above phases of empowerment. Whether or not there is a linear development is perhaps not vital and should not be a reason to abandon a critical research project altogether. Furthermore, it could be stated that all people often "visit" all three stages from time to time, either at an individual or social level. Some may be

aware, conscious of this subjective knowledge, or it could occur at times when it is applicable, or even intuitively. What is important in this context, from a critical theory perspective, is that this cognition be recognised as not an adjunct to life, but integral to one's existence in contemporary society. Different people may actually be at different "levels" or alternatively a person may have existing views, opinions and ideas that are empowering but unable to articulate their understandings. The fundamental point here is that, at the very least, one should be able to have the opportunity to *exercise* and *practice the process* of empowerment, just as importantly as exercising or practising a skill. Any empowerment or action that results is also subjective, so that the definition of what constitutes action will be different for each person.

It needs to be acknowledged however, that from a research perspective the attempt to "empower" research participants is problematic. Although emancipatory research approaches view traditional or positivist approaches as deeply implicated in power, and try to equalise the power relationship between researcher and research subjects, both approaches are implicated in power (Humphries 1997). This is also a fundamental critique levelled by post modernists at critical theorists.

The very act of engaging in and conducting research is an act of power, so that the actual effort to liberate or empower, goes someway to actually maintaining and perpetuating the relations of dominance (Humphries 1997). As Foucault suggests, research projects may aim to uncover power relationships and "… to loosen, or even to break them, but none of these projects can simply, by its nature, assure that people will have liberty …". However, he goes on to state … "Liberty is a practice" (1993:162). Empowerment therefore, cannot be handed to one group by another. Any attempt by a researcher to share power inevitably implicates them in the power process (Humphries 1997).

In relation to the above issue, Humphries (1997) offers some valuable advice in relation to empowerment in an emancipatory action research context. He warns of the danger of

the researcher depoliticising research activities. That is, falling into the seductive, traditional research view of "disinterested truth" previously discussed in relation to positivists. Humphries highlights four different unacceptable empowerment cultures that may develop in relation to research:

> 'Containment – where the demands of oppressed groups are incorporated or accommodated without a radical reordering of social structures.
>
> Collusion – where subordinate groups accept unequal terms and in turn obtain resources in competition with other oppressed groups.
>
> Within existing socially powerful groups – it is not the oppositional agency of the poor and disenfranchised, but the enforcement of the concerns of hegemonic groups; and
>
> Empowering nihilism – leads to the identity of the other being appropriated by marginalised groups to form a clear, strong identity and sense of power. At the same time this identity is disrupted by a confirmation of the characteristics displayed by them as of the essence of their alien nature, therefore requiring containment' (1997:7-8).

Humphries therefore warns:

> 'Any notion of emancipatory research needs to recognise these contradictions, and must refuse a naïve and self-deluding approach. It will acknowledge the *practice* of liberty – it is not something which, can be conferred. It is not something gained once and for all, but has a view of power as fluid. A back and forward movement rather than binary, which is available to dominated groups which, is multifaceted and contradictory; which recognises both discursive and material realities; which is historically and culturally specific; and which is grounded in the struggle for survival of the most disadvantaged and the poorest, not in privileging of the researcher or other groups as the norm' [original emphasis] (1997:8).

The above issues have important implications to this research and highlight the dangerous pitfalls a critical research project can fall into. The researcher needs to make themselves aware of these potential problems and try to refine the research method as best possible, for as Humphries (1997) states the emancipatory researcher needs to

make explicit any power politics. In Chapter four, these issues are tackled again and an attempt to reconcile them is carried out.

In conclusion to this section it is important to note here that previous action research discussed in Chapter one had recognised, that the unemployed considered that a program which assists in empowering them would be useful, relevant and beneficial (Brophy 1996). This current research therefore is a response these findings, and attempts to respect and recognise the post modern critique of critical theory as discussed earlier.

2.10   Agency

In relation to critical theory, a separate key theme to elaborate upon and define is agency. As Sanguinetti states: "Moving to new ways of thinking may involve a possibly traumatic restructuring of … personal relationships. [Therefore] Any notion of empowerment must prize … agency" (1992:21). Agency, in its broader sense, can be conceptualised as, "… the exercise of will and conscious action on the part of human subjects", or "… conscious, goal-directed activity [in terms of] a collective or individual" (White and Wyn 1998:316- 317). Or as Hooper-Briar and Lawson state: "… an ongoing process…the continuous efforts of all of us to make, to gain, and exercise greater control over decisions that affect us, our lives and families" (1995:23). White and Wyn offer some valuable ideas to elaborate on different types of agency, which they describe as "deterministic", "voluntaristic", or "contextual" (1998:314).

Deterministic agency, White and Wyn (1998) explain, recognises structural disadvantages. "Victims" can be predicted and grouped in an empirical manner using for example, physical, age, and class dimensions. For example, the status of unemployment would be seen as a predestined outcome, where the unemployed people are powerless to actively challenge their situation. They are restricted by external constraints. This is somewhat of a fatalistic and hence deterministic view, which perhaps

denies any real agency (White and Wyn 1998:318-321). That is, the unemployed individual subjectively views themselves as a victim of structural disadvantages.

From a methodological perspective, Giddens offers some valuable insights into this deterministic view: "Many interesting cases for social analysis centre upon the margins of what can count as action – where the power of the individual is confined by a range of specifiable circumstances. But it is of the first importance to recognise that circumstances of social constraint in which individuals "have no choice" are not to be equated with the dissolution of action as such" (1986:15). Giddens suggests that just because individuals "have no choice" does not mean they don't autonomously act or exercise agency. However: "… some very prominent schools of social theory, associated mainly with objectivism and with "structural sociology" have not acknowledged the distinction. They have supposed that constraints operate like forces in nature, as if to "have no choice" were equivalent to being driven irresistibly and uncomprehensively by mechanical pressures" (Giddens 1986:15).

Alternatively a voluntaristic perspective of agency encompasses the notion that the disadvantage is a matter of individual choice. This view renders structural constraints and the process of social division in society as either invisible, inevitable or irrelevant. It is therefore the "free will", and a conscious individual choice to be in the disadvantaged position (White and Wyn 1998). For example, in relation to the previous discussion on unemployment, it is the individual's own "fault" that they are out of work. This perspective is easily recognisable under any "dole bludger" rhetoric. This view of agency can be seen as fundamentally negative and deficit based, where self defeating behaviour and feelings are the result (Hooper-Briar and Lawson 1995).

Brunner's research, which aimed to empower students through an action research approach, is a relevant example of how volunteeristic agency can sometimes retard an emancipatory effort:

'My initial attempts at creating empowering practice floundered when students did not readily accept my efforts. I felt threatened and out of control … I got the impression that they were not taking me seriously … a few students listened while many listened halfheartedly, misunderstanding what they did hear. Finally, a student angrily challenged me on classroom rules, claiming that the way I did things was not the way the [other] teacher did things, and others expressed similar resentment at my having changed things … [I] gave the students what they seemed to want, lots of rote work. I converted all my group lesson material to overhead notes from which I lectured, and which students copied in their notebooks. The students behaved much better and seemed overall to be happier. I had reproduced, against my will, those disempowering practices that had been employed … before my arrival' (1995:64).

It needs to be acknowledged that in societies such as ours, arguably many people become quickly accustomed to traditional didactic styles of learning. This conditioned habit is extremely problematic for the educator who wishes to employ empowering learning approaches. This issue is followed up later in Chapters three and four.

This quote is also indicative of a research approach *for* the participants, which can be problematic as discussed earlier in this Chapter (Wadsworth 1997).

Alternatively, the contextual perspective of agency recognises that the individual is affected by the real disadvantages that exist, but also realises the complexity of what people learn about and how they are socially and politically situated (White and Wyn 1998). A contextual perspective of agency therefore, focuses on how the disadvantaged: "… negotiate, contest and challenge the institutional processes of social division" (White and Wyn 1998:324). For example, the unemployed individual maybe aware of the restrictions of structural disadvantages and recognise this restrictiveness, but does not view him or herself as a victim, nor to blame themselves for their situation, but looks at what can be done within the context they are in. White and Wyn see this as the preferred model of agency to focus on, as it also encompasses both the individual/personal and social/political (1998:314).

In relation to the discussion on psychological/behavioural research in Chapter one, and the notion of agency, Giddens has some reservation in relation to "… the shortcomings of orthodox social scientific theories" (1986:7). He presents the following diagram:

Table five: Gidden's concepts of agency/action

Discursive Consciousness

Practical Consciousness

Unconscious Motives/Cognition
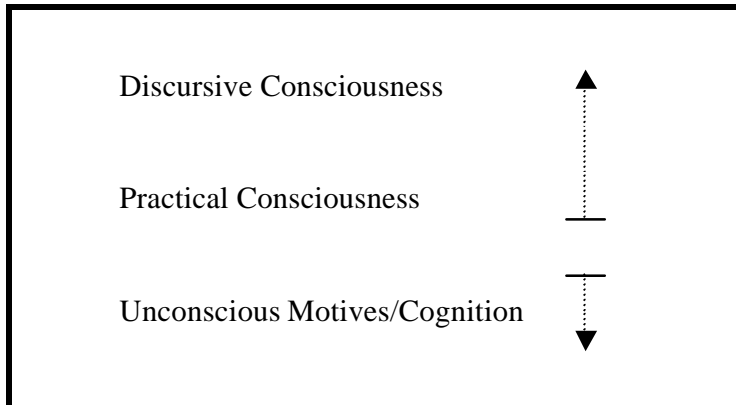
(Giddens 1986:7)

Rather than adopting the traditional psychoanalytical view that unconscious motives determine practical and discursive consciousness, Giddens suggests that: "It is the characteristic of the human agent or subject to which structuralism has been particularly blind" (1986:6). He states: "Between discussion and practical consciousness there is no bar; there are only the differences between what can be said and what is characteristically simply done" (1986:7). For example Hooper-Briar and Lawson, in relation to family welfare suggest "… all views of "dysfunctional families" do little to move us to empowerment" (1995:24). Furthermore, in relation to addressing issues of individual difference (agency) pertaining to post modern thought, and empowerment, White and Wyn offer a framework that assists:

> '… we need to be able to situate the pertinent place of choice in contemporary society – to comprehend the ways in which a plurality of personal decision-making and individual actions are in varying ways socially patterned … the exercise of agency … is ultimately bound up with the ordered nature of human experience. Hence, the playing out of agency at a concrete level is always undertaken within the context of particular structural settings and parameters' (1998:325).

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In a sense, this equates to focusing on the sociological rather than a psychological/pathological perspective. White and Wyn argue: "The goal of a liberating social science is to understand how social life is shaped by structural relations in order to expand the scope and potential of human agency" (1998:316). With this in mind, critical research can therefore aim to achieve the following: "In the end, the major issue … is how best to maximise the range of meaningful choices available" (White and Wyn 1998:326).

Furthermore, White and Wyn suggest that any research that intends to address contextual agency must place, "… social practice at its centre," and that "Such experiences are essential to raising consciousness about relationships and issues" (1998:324). That is, the research needs to be a participatory and an active experience.

2.11   Bias, subjectivity and validity

Noffke and Stevenson (1995) state that action research "findings" are always provisional and that the reports of action research are offered as a reflection of what has happened so far. Green (1999) asserts that action research results are always tentative as they reflect the uniqueness of one particular research situation. This issue is discussed later in Chapters four and five, however due to the issues disclosed above, validity, in relation to action research can only be internal (Green 1999; Smith 1997; Burns 1995).

Nonetheless as mentioned earlier in this Chapter, the most enthusiastic critics of action research, the traditional positivists perceive the main problems of action research as bias, subjectivity and validity. Essentially positivists subscribe to the concept mentioned earlier of "disinterested knowledge", that is "… an innocent knowledge untainted by a political agenda" (Humphries 1997:2). Such knowledge of course could be used in unethical or oppressive ways, or towards a market orientation, or ideological ends. The researcher may have "concerns" on how the knowledge is abused, but this is beyond their control. Their goal is to achieve an accurate representation of reality (Humphries

1997). This disinterested truth almost takes on a guise of non-responsible innocence. Value free, therefore presumably harmless, however examples of how traditional research methodologies adversely affect our society are plentiful, for example silicon breast implants, thalidomide, nuclear power, economic theory, etc.

Criticisms by positivists levelled at critical theorists and action researchers in relation to bias and subjectivity are however nullified by the critical theorists argument that all research is biased and subjective in its own way, quantitative "… empirical and scientific methodologies have entrenched political bias themselves" (Burns 1995:305). Burns, argues that: "conventional research maintains an hierarchical relationship ... [and creates] ... näive, imposing, assumed truths ... [that are] manipulative" (1995:306). Burns also contends that: "... empiricists hide political interests behind questionable notions of objectivity" (1995:306). One critic even suggests that: "Mainstream researchers live patronisingly in a delusion of relevance" (Maruyama in Smith 1993b:76). Harding also states: "Traditional empiricism holds that scientific method will eliminate any social bias … however … authors of the favoured social theories are not anonymous … The people who identify and define scientific problems leave their social fingerprints on the problems and their favoured solutions to them" (1987:184).

For example, in 1999 it was reported in the "Journal of the American Medical Association" that authors of empirical medical research funded by drug companies into the cost effectiveness of drugs "… put a positive spin on neutral or negative data and a neutral spin on negative data …" (Button 1999:15). Furthermore:

> 'Analysis of articles published in the past decade on six new cancer drugs found almost forty per cent of independently funded studies come to negative conclusions compared with only five per cent of drug firm-funded studies' (Button 1999:15)

Also, it has been argued that clinical psychology can be value laden in supporting societies status quo (Veno and Thomas 1992). Because "normal" is defined, "deviancy" can be uncovered;

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'The orientation of many psychologists towards accepting the status-quo is a clear example of the role that values play in shaping psychological practice … In research, values influence the choice of research problems, how research questions are framed, how research is conducted and how findings are interpreted' (Veno and Thomas 1992:24).

The danger therefore is that this perceived "disinterested truth" upon traditional clinical psychological practice is based does indeed contain implicit values (Veno and Thomas 1992:25).

Alternatively, critical researchers accept that values enmesh all human behaviour including research (Veno and Thomas (1992). However, as Fine warns, "… because critical researchers acknowledge that politics saturates all research and are usually the ones who "come clean", we run the risk of being portrayed as distinctly "biased" and thus discounted" (1989:589). Nevertheless: "… personal passions and collective politics fundamentally ground our political scholarship" (Fine 1992:viii).

Therefore, emancipatory action research argues that all research is value-laden and is inevitably political (Humphries 1997). Unlike positivists, who will refine a method to ensure neutrality, action researchers see neutrality as problematic in that no knowledge can be free from social construction (Humphries 1997).

The methodology adopted for this study therefore explicitly directs the researcher to be involved. In action research the researcher needs to be an "active" participant (Jack in Gluck and Patai 1991), to work on equal terms with participants, and to be immersed in the culture (Burns 1995; Fetterman 1989), as well as to be empathetic and recognise the oppressive forces that affect us all (Wadsworth 1993b). However, as noted previously, "… the researcher's mere presence may have a profound effect on the research participants" (Burns 1995:13). Possible "… bias and influence are indeed potential major limitations" in action research (Burns, 1995:13). In order to address these limitations Burns and Lather suggest that the researcher provides a promise of autonomy and

subsequent trust, in concert with collaboration, authenticity and a self-critical attitude towards preconceptions (Burns 1995: Lather 1991).

Research such as this is also sometimes criticised for being too subjective (Burns 1995; Patton 1990). However it is argued that the acknowledgment of subjectivity is what gives critical methodology its strength (Kellehear 1993). Furthermore, Fetterman states: "The subjective reality each individual sees is no less real than an objectively defined and measured reality" (1989:15). Critical theory asserts that all research is subjective and that this subjectivity should be acknowledged and addressed in methodology and analysis (Sears 1992; Lather 1991). It is also contended that the collaborative nature of critical methodology increases internal validity (Lather 1991). In an empirical sense, "validity" is the success of a method measuring correctly that what it was intended or designed to measure (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1984; Chaplin 1975). However in qualitative research it is defined in terms of a deep knowledge of social phenomena developed in an intimate relationship with data (Zeller 1997). These issues in relation to adequate validity and reliability in qualitative research orientations are also a common positivist criticism (Burns 1995). Yet as Kellehear claims: "… issues of reliability and validity are of little concern where the central issues concern the nature of meaning, experience and power" (1993:42). The "reliability" of any method utilised in research is the extent to which repeated use of the same method, under the same conditions, will produce the same results (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1984). However, Burns contends, "… action research can really only possess internal validity as it is a one-off intervention in a specific context. The results, findings and recommendations can only have relevance for that unique setting" (1995:301). Furthermore, "… reliability, the extent to which findings can be reproduced in another study using the same method, has been discarded by researchers as not appropriate in both interpretive and liberatory/critical forms of inquiry" (Smith 1997:242). Other issues in relation to validity are discussed further in Chapter four. Also positivist critics sometimes contend that qualitative research is interpretive, however it could be argued that the "… assumed strong reliability and validity which comes about by strict adherence to empirical

protocol gives only a strong impression and illusion of reliability and validity in positivist research" (Kellehear 1993:39). The methodological approach adopted in this study does not assume to be totally conclusive and arrive at a concrete "truth", but reflective and an adjunct to complement and contribute to the body of research knowledge in relation to unemployment (Carr and Kemmis 1990). Furthermore, there are arguably no ends to the cycles of action research, there are no "findings" as positivists would seek. If there are any such "findings" in action research they are provisional and tentative (Noffke and Stevenson 1995). In assessing the impact of the subjective and objective aspects of action research, Kemmis and McTaggart state that action research "… treats people as autonomous, responsible agents who participate actively ... [and] work together as knowing subjects and agents of change and improvement" (1988:21). Furthermore:

> 'Action research is not just about hypotheses testing or about using data
> to come to conclusions. It adopts a view of social science which is
> distinct from a view based on the natural sciences (in which the objects
> of research may legitimately be treated as 'things'); action research also
> concerns the 'subject'...' (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988:21-22).

Therefore the ideological and political interests that guide the focus and conduct of action research need to be openly acknowledged (Bredo and Feinberg, Lather in Smith 1993b). It is this open ideological stance that action research adopts which is arguably its strength, not its weakness.

2.12   Chapter summary

Having firstly addressed the thematic concern of this action "… research–unemployment in this Chapter". This Chapter has provided the theory behind the methodology to be utilised – action research.

Within this Chapter critical theory and action research has been placed into context in relation to the separate methodological paradigms. The politics of paradigms themselves have been highlighted which in turn rationalises the use of critical theory and

action research as a legitimate methodology. Along with addressing the positivists critique of action research possible reconciliation with post modernism has also been discussed. The potential problems associated with action research, such as reverting to prescriptive non-participatory and non-interventionist approaches has also been addressed, and the methodology refined to become emancipatory. Key concepts such as empowerment and agency in relation to critical theory have also been critiqued.

Finally, issues in relation to analysis, bias, subjectivity, validity and the problematic nature of applying alternative research approaches have all been raised.

Within the next section of the Thesis, Chapter three, the milieu: study circles are introduced. As will become evident within the Chapter the study circle approach has the potential to become an effective vehicle to enact action research. Rather than "re-invent" or construct a critical pedagogical approach from theory, the study circle has been selected for this research.

Chapter three - Study circles – the milieu

Table one: Thesis structure

Part one   Part two
Methodology/literature review   Study circle season

Chapter one, Thematic Concern. Unemployment.		Chapter five, Overview of season.
Chapter two, Methodology. Action research.	Chapter four, Method.	Chapter six, Concerns and themes raised.
Chapter three, Milieu. Study circle.		Chapter seven, Individual accounts.
		Chapter eight, Conclusion.
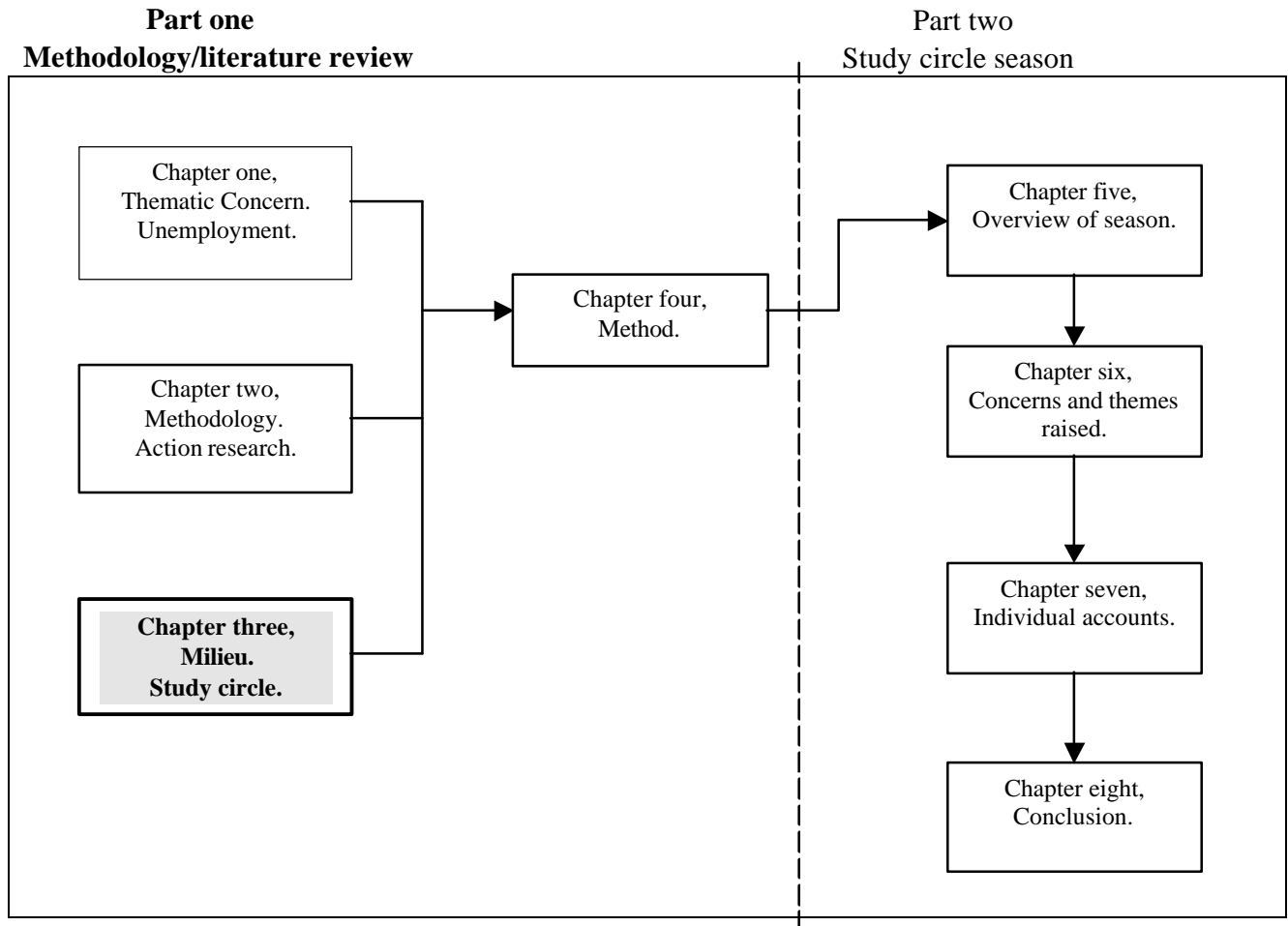
3.1   Introduction

Having elaborated upon the thematic concern of the research: unemployment, and outlined the methodology: critical theory and action research the milieu for the action research study; study circles, their history, relevant research, and the theory and practical application of study circles, along with a rationale is addressed here.

Firstly however the Chapter briefly addresses and critiques contemporary education and training initiatives, dictated by policy, directed towards increasing people's employability. A range of alternative pedagogical approaches to assist the unemployed

are then reflected upon, which helps furnish a brief discussion on a range of adult education models.

In order to address a research concern, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) state that a milieu creating certain kinds of opportunities and potentials, needs to be identified and integrated into an action plan. Within this research, the study circle is the designated milieu. A collaborative and participatory environment where members share experiences and work towards personal and social change (McCoy et al 1996; Oliver 1995; Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992; Peak 1990; Oliver 1987; Brevskolan 1980). The utilisation of study circles as a milieu is applicable from a critical theory perspective, in that critical theory endorses: "... methods such as combining social action with research" (Gancian 1992:623). Wadsworth (1993b), as well as Shires and Crawford (1999a), also endorse action research that encompasses a collective approach, and specifically suggest the use of study circles as an appropriate milieu.

Study circles are a program with an international tradition that aims to address the concerns of participants and empower those who are disadvantaged.

> 'The Swedish people seem to be a step ahead in the adult education movement in their insistence on the link between adult learning and the problems and issues adults face daily … [Study circles are] a simple, effective and manageable means to enhance citizen discussion' (Oliver 1987:xi)

However, before supplying the reader with an understanding of the fundamentals of study circles and how they function and operate, as well as rationalising their use as a valid tool for a critical research approach, this Chapter initially, briefly looks at contemporary approaches in education to tackle high unemployment levels. Some examples are then given of ideologically similar types of educational initiatives to those of study circles. This is presented to illustrate the contrast between traditional modes of educational and current VET initiatives. This comparison is then further elucidated upon in a discussion on various pedagogical approaches to learning. The pedagogical theory of study circles is then addressed, along with overseas and domestic research and

experiences of study circles. The Chapter then details the practical process and application of a study circle within this research context.

Historically Government labour market initiatives in the form of LMPs have predominantly been focused towards labour market skills training, presuming that this will increase the opportunity of the unemployed to gain work. The effectiveness of this is even questioned in Federal Government reports. As a paper presented at a DEET Evaluation and Monitoring Board (EMB) conference in 1993, stated, "We [DEET – EMB] have not tried to test … nor do we know the extent to which lack of skills is currently a major barrier [for the unemployed to gain work]" (Jarvie and McKay).

This is exemplary of the notion that there has been historically, an absence of comprehensive and publicly released LMP evaluations (Burgess 1995), and furthermore few evaluation studies have assessed the psychological effects of these courses (Winefield et al. 1993). Those assessments that are available do not give a clear indication of LMP "success", because this term has multiple meanings depending on definitions. The OECD has become aware of this problem and recognises that "… program results are complex and incomparable (Boeri 1994; de-Vries 1989).

The prevailing view that dominates is that education and schools are flawed because they do not provide adequate training for employment, but this is arguably misdirected criticism (Coates 1993). As Bessant asserts:

> 'The indictment of education and training systems and the requirements that they respond to economic rationalist definitions of national priority may receive some support in terms of public opinion. Yet the recession and indeed the whole economic crisis since 1975 was not the product of a poor education system' (1995:268).

As Winefield et al. add, "Those who choose to blame low educational and training standards overlook the fact that economic factors have predominantly been the main contributing factor to high unemployment" (1993:151).

The previous Labour government's White Paper noted that education and training do make a difference, young people who do not finish their schooling, statistically face longer periods and higher rates of unemployment (CEO 1994). There is much supporting evidence to back up the claim that those who leave school early are disadvantaged and therefore more susceptible to unemployment (Western 1989; Polk 1988). However, in relation to a critical aspect of this argument, Probert states "… what has been missing from the debate around unemployment has been any recognition that the problems the unemployed face are structural, cultural and social" (in Rance 1994:1). For example early school leavers often belong to a number of disadvantaged or marginalised groups including, disabled, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, homeless, LBOTE and so forth (CEO 1994). Low education levels are only part of the problem, often compounding by other structural inequalities.

As Giddens states:

> '… the idea that education can reduce inequalities in a direct way should be regarded with some skepticism. A great deal of comparative research in the US and Europe, demonstrates that education tends to reflect wider economics inequalities and these have to be tackled at their source' (1999:110).

The problematic notion of coercing the unemployed onto VET courses was highlighted in State-wide project conducted by Chamberlain and Hughes (1997). Local unemployed were referred to a VET program which provided training in job search, retailing and computer skills. The findings would not surprise those who have worked with disadvantaged:

- '… school failures may be a recent experience affecting self confidence and may contribute to preconceived expectation of failure.
- Literacy may be seen as measures of intelligence rather than as a skill the participant has yet to reach competency in.
- There can be out of class issues affecting performance, commitment and attendance, for example homelessness, family breakdown, poverty and relationship issues.
- Poverty and basic nutrition are sometimes important issues' (Chamberlain and Hughes 1997:17-18).

Issues and recommendations from the study suggest:

- 'Support for young persons needs to go beyond the course. This means employing notions of pastoral care.

- Develop mechanisms and structures to ensure a long term commitment to unemployed young people.

- Incorporate life long learning philosophies for this client group, for example, medium and long term tracking of program participants' (Chamberlain and Hughes 1997:18-19).

There are many other similar recommendations in the study, but what is fundamentally important here is that "packaged", competency based VET training alone are perhaps not adequate for some disadvantaged groups. Furthermore a concentrated effort in providing the unemployed only with vocational training is of questionable value, and in some cases could even be cruel and detrimental as it may raise false hopes as discussed in Chapter two. These issues are raised again later in this Chapter.

3.2   Examples of alternative educational programs for unemployed

The projects discussed below are examples of educational initiatives designed to assist the unemployed without primarily focusing on skill attainment. Rather they attempted to empower the participants by providing a wider context and addressing the issue of unemployment itself. These attempts are briefly explained here to illustrate educative examples that hold similar ideals to those of study circles. These examples also further assist in clarifying the meaning of "empowerment" as discussed in Chapter two. The programs described here date back to the 1980s and there is little evidence of these types of programs continuing in the 1990s.

Perhaps this is due to the 1990s decade being a somewhat neo-liberal, era where social justice issues have tended to become secondary concerns to individual needs, wants and

aspirations in our society, as well as the popularised notion of blaming the unemployed for their own situation. This is ironic, as it is also the decade that has seen the largest rises in unemployment in Australia's history since the Great Depression.

REPLAN

The REPLAN project was introduced in Britain in the 1980s in an attempt to respond to the needs of the unemployed by providing "Structure and a sense of purpose for unemployed individuals" (FEU 1992:43). REPLAN was fundamentally described as a program designed "To promote the development of educational opportunities for the unemployed" (Geers, Nielsen and Darling 1992:51).

An attempt at setting a progressive conceptual framework for a new type of curriculum was one of the first objectives undertaken by REPLAN (FEU 1990). Building upon previous research, program objectives other than vocational aims, were developed for the courses (Fordham 1992; FEU 1992; FEU 1990; Walters 1988; Watts and Knassel 1985). Until REPLAN, very few projects had been concerned with helping the unemployed understand the causes and context of unemployment, or to explore alternative forms of social, political, community or individual action in relation to their unemployment (FEU 1990). The project was fundamentally a response to research which had demonstrated many unemployed individuals wanted the opportunity to develop and understand the socio-political context of unemployment and so this was taken into account while planning the curriculum (FEU 1990). Previous examples of good practice and four years of planning and research conducted by Watts and Knasel (1985) resulted in developing a conceptual framework for curricula aims and content (FEU 1990).

After the initial planning, the final curriculum objectives were:

- *'employability* - to help unemployed people develop knowledge, skills and attitudes which would increase their chances of finding and keeping a job;
- *coping* – to help unemployed people to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes which will help them to cope with being unemployed;
- *context* - to help unemployed people understand the extent to which the responsibility for being unemployed lay with society rather than with the individual, and to explore possible forms of social, political and community action related to unemployment;
- *leisure* - to help unemployed people develop knowledge, skills and attitudes which would help them to make use of their increased leisure time;
- *opportunity creation* - to help unemployed people develop knowledge, skills and attitudes which would enable them to create their own opportunities and independence while realising the structural constraints which inhibit' [emphasis added] (FEU 1992:43).

Unlike contemporary Australian LMPs, the *vocational* content of the course was not the predominant focus. Rather it was complementary to the coping, context, leisure and opportunity creation aspects of the curriculum. Much of the early REPLAN project work was also carried out in an action research mode (Fordham 1992). As Fordham states: "… it had to be for there to be much chance of success. Many project workers were feeling their way, asking questions about what the unemployed wanted" (1992:225-226).

Initially much scepticism existed in relation to REPLAN, but it turned out to be particularly successful in fulfilling its objectives of helping to create relevant education for the unemployed (Fordham 1992). REPLAN raised awareness of issues and possibilities amongst participants, created collaborative networks and stimulated new educational initiatives some of which have become "… embedded into a number of educational institutions" (Fordham 1992:225). The success of REPLAN was seen to be due not only to focusing on the traditional vocational training to improve employment opportunity aspects, but also focusing on coping with unemployment and the

exploration of new possibilities (FEU 1992). Furthermore, perhaps part of REPLAN's success was that it was organised "… from the bottom-up rather than top-down" (Fordham 1992:226). This also suggests that such approaches subscribe to Harding's views on standpoint theory, as well as Connells (1993) least advantaged and Wadsworths (1993) critical reference group discussed in Chapter two.

A key feature of REPLAN projects was the negotiation between teachers and learners, and emphasis on the notion of learner choice (FEU 1990:42). Due to this, the professional development for teachers involved in such projects was considered vital for them to become accustomed to new styles of group facilitation and sharing functions (FEU 1990; Walters 1988). Some teachers were initially uneasy about negotiating a course with others, and questioned the positive aspects of simply listening to a student (FEU 1990). Eventually however teachers focused on either individual development and self improvement, while others worked at community involvement, and helping learners acquire skills and knowledge to enable the learners to play an active role in reshaping their community (FEU 1990). It was recognised therefore that it was essential that learners become involved and active in negotiating learning agendas and shaping the program (FEU 1990).

Research into REPLAN demonstrated that with this joint negotiation in course planning and content, the learners enjoyed feeling that direction was their responsibility, and that their opinions were respected (FEU 1990). Furthermore, this enabled the teachers to see the benefits of tailoring the course to the learners" "… *actual,* rather than *perceived* needs" [emphasis added] (FEU 1990:43).

REPLAN therefore recognised the need for a balance and a plurality of approaches between educational, vocational, personal and social objectives (FEU 1990). It was realised that staff working in REPLAN projects needed to be dedicated, committed, willing to learn and listen in order to gain an awareness of the problems created by unemployment (FEU 1990). Teaching practice that placed the learner first and

maximised learner participation was considered vital (Fordham 1992). Traditional institutional boundaries and frameworks were therefore seen to be a barrier to creating a truly student-centred participatory action research approach (FEU 1990). The REPLAN project also recognised that contemporary society requires citizens who are "… imbued with a sense of personal autonomy, self reliance and adaptability" (FEU 1990:9).

An evaluation of REPLAN concluded that "All the groups, without exception, are now self-motivating. They work together to devise their own program of learning and negotiate with tutors or outside experts. Members have gained confidence to go out and do things they would never have attempted before" (FEU 1990:9). Furthermore, "The REPLAN model may have much to offer. The Council of Europe has already recognised this through its recent work on the long term unemployed" (FEU 1990:9). "Others, both within and outside the UK, should begin to do the same" (Fordham 1992:228). In 1991, REPLAN was discontinued as the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in Britain began a separate new initiative – "People, Learning and Jobs" (Fordham 1992).

Pioneer Work

In 1980, the Trades Union Congress in Britain moved a motion: "… to consider ways in which the interests of the non-employed could be represented …" (Ward and Forrester 1989:54). Union members wanted to establish a community of interest between those who had to work for their livelihood and who wanted to work (Ward and Forrester 1989). They wanted to include the unemployed into their union structure, as they felt at the time that the government was trying to "drive a wedge" between workers and the unemployed (Ward and Forrester 1989).

After three years of planning, during 1984 a partnership between the Trade Union Congress, unemployed and the University of Leeds in Britain, resulted in the implementation of the Pioneer Work program designed to assist the unemployed (Ward and Forrester 1989).

The innovative aspect of these courses was the adoption of a student-centred action research approach (Ward and Forrester 1989). That is, the unemployed people were directly involved in curriculum discussions from the outset and the content focused on what they regarded as interesting and relevant (Ward and Forrester 1989). Initially, the university was not accustomed to developing initiatives not under its own control (Ward and Forrester 1989). This required the university staff to learn a great deal about the "real world" of unemployment and how individuals respond to such a personal crisis (Ward and Forrester 1989). However, it was later recognised that the university staff nonetheless had expertise in organising, facilitating and developing appropriate pedagogical approaches while the unemployed contributed to the actual curriculum content (Ward and Forrester 1989).

The courses therefore combined theory, practice and personal experience about the causes of, and responses to unemployment (Ward and Forrester 1989). The course was essentially based on a *social purpose* model[36] that seeks to raise consciousness and action through critical educational practice (Ward and Forrester 1989:59).

However it was found that most educational resources servicing the needs of the unemployed focused towards vocational training. One problem that was encountered was that alternative applicable resources were lacking (Ward and Forrester 1989). However the partnership that developed between the union, the unemployed and the university in this case resulted in research and reports that developed into an important servicing element for ongoing policy debate and discussion for many regions (Ward and Forrester 1989). The most important and relevant aspect of this initiative was that these courses not only helped the participant but also contributed to providing a forum and voice for the unemployed (Ward and Forrester 1989).

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[36]   These, and other models of education, are discussed later in this Chapter.

Participatory Equity Program (PEP)

PEP, not to be confused with the Participat*ion And* Equity Program initiated by the Australian Commonwealth Government in the mid 1980's aimed at increasing secondary school retention levels (PEP Committee 1985), was an innovative program introduced by the Australian Labor Government in 1983. Originally it aimed to attract young people into programs that would teach them vocational skills (West 1987). However the success of these programs became evident as students started to participate in planning, implementing and evaluating the curriculum in relation to their own needs (Hogan 1985 - Vol. 1). A comprehensive research report in 1985 demonstrated remarkable changes in participants' concepts of themselves upon completion. Some participants stated "Look at us now, we're part of the community. We've been doing something for the community and showed them we aren't dole bludgers" (Hogan 1985 - Vol. 2:6-119). It is relevant here to recall and compare the similarity of quotes contained in Chapter one in relation to previous research (Brophy 1996). One teacher commented "An increase in confidence was shown - the improvement in their communication skills was striking" (Hogan 1985 - Vol.2:6-122).

Unfortunately funding of PEP was halved in 1985 due to the Kirby Report and its Traineeship recommendations (West 1987), as it was felt at the time that the PEP programs were not adequate enough as a preparatory course for Traineeships (West 1987).

Orebro-model

During 1982, a Swedish scheme developed by municipal authorities and the Swedish Labour Union in the city of Orebro was initiated to try and help youth unemployment in the area (Hartmann 1985). The scheme was extremely promising as it encompassed several specific goals "To overcome the passive acceptance of their fate by the unemployed young people through a variety of activities mainly organised by other

young people" (Hartmann 1985:80). Secondly was "… to raise the awareness of their abilities and the structural limitations imposed on young unemployed" (Hartmann 1985:80).

The above are only a few examples, however what begins to emerge is a central theme that these initiatives provide an opportunity for the participants to have a voice, to collaboratively work together in designing the aims and goals of an educational program. The participants' real, and not perceived, concerns are recognised and addressed.

3.3   Models of adult education

The above examples also reflect a change of learning focus, where the issue of unemployment is addressed from the learner, rather than the teacher, institutional, state or dominant ideological perspective. In effect these examples demonstrate an attempt not only to engage in, but to promote critical emancipatory teaching and learning, "… to examine the psychological and cultural assumptions of curriculum that may constrain the way teachers think feel and act; and to examine the processes within teachers and learners that may allow us to consent to conditions that are oppressive" (Newman 1995:25).

One way of exploring the commonalities of the program initiatives previously described, and to refine their empowering potential is to look at separate distinct educational and philosophical foci that tend to underpin pedagogical approaches in deciding what content should be included in a program for specifically unemployed people. Ward and Forrester (1989) offer four alternative approaches in regard to adult education. They are the *Educator*, *Vocational, Social Purpose* or *Student Centred* approaches.

A parallel can be drawn here from the discussion in Chapter two in relation to the methodological approach a research project can adopt. Specifically Wadsworth's (1993b) and Lather's (1991) notions of research "on", "with", "for" or alternatively

"with and for" the research participants. The above pedagogical approaches could be equated with - Educator: - "for"; Vocational: - "on"; Social purpose: - "with"; and Student Centered:- "for and with". This discussion therefore begins to provide a nexus between the theoretical, as elaborated upon in Chapter two and actual pedagogical practice.

Ward and Forrester (1989) present these models within the context of adult learning and disadvantaged learners, especially unemployed. By analysing each, and utilising the input from other authors with experience in LMPs and similar areas, a pedagogical approach that is able to address the issue of empowering the unemployed through education, begins to emerge.

The first role is that of the *Educator,* an idealistic and holistic approach towards the learner. REPLAN and Pioneer are examples of such programs that recognise that teaching needs to focus on providing opportunities for both individual development and self-improvement. The focus concentrates on the learner and is seen by some authors as "therapy-based", by easing the process of adjustment and acceptance (FEU 1990; Ward and Forrester 1989). However this therapy-based approach is arguably seen as problematic as contemporary teachers are severely restricted in their ability to devote the time to counsel learners in an effective manner, while also adhering to institutional course and curriculum requirements. Some teachers may even regard this role as beyond their professional duties (Brophy 1995).

The second role is that of *Vocational.* Most courses designed to assist the unemployed encompass this vocational focus of attaining skills to improve employability across the entire curriculum which encourages a behaviorist, didactic approach (Ward and Forrester 1989; Polk 1988). In other words, "shaping pegs" to fit the available employment "holes" (FEU 1990). Training is therefore seen as the route to obtaining a job (Ward and Forrester 1989). This vocational model focuses on work related competencies and largely ignores both individual and group needs. As Shields

recognises "Growing up in our culture usually does little to prepare us … Most social institutions, and the education system in particular, encourages us to conform to the existing social systems rather than think we can change them" (1991:14) Similarly, the lack of attention to the learner and to wider issues pertaining to the learner, may not necessarily encourage adequate empowerment to any great extent (Chamberlin and Hughes 1997).

In effect what is largely ignored in advocating such an educational approach for unemployed are the many compounding disadvantages the unemployed face that may initially cause unemployment or are directly attributable to becoming unemployment (Chamberlain and Hughes 1997; Rance 1994; CEO 1994; Western 1989; Polk 1988). For example, findings in research by Chamberlain and Hughes (1997) in relation to VET courses for unemployed youth included:

- 'Issues that are particular to young people as adult learners need to be acknowledged …,
- Classroom behaviours may be challenging. This does not necessarily reflect an unwillingness to learn but rather reflects strategies, habits and behaviours developed to disguise a lack of learning skills,
- Teachers may be seen as authority figures and resented,
- Even at the end of the course, participants may have no idea what they want to do for work' (1997:17).

In their recommendations they state

- 'Teachers must learn to relate to them … understanding the particular and specific issues facing each young person,

- Acknowledge the diversity of skills, abilities, aspirations and goals of individual young people' (1997:19).

The third alternative teaching approach which could be applied to courses to promote empowerment is the *social purpose* (or critical) theory approach (Moseley 1995; Ward and Forrester 1989):

'Critical educational theory, as its name implies, rests on a critical view of the existing society, arguing that society, is both exploitative and oppressive, but also is capable of being changed ... what essentially defines critical educational theory is its moral imperatives and its emphasis on the need for both individual empowerment and social transformation' (Suda 1992:47).

Moseley suggests that such a teaching approach is equally relevant and important as a vocational approach (1995). In relation to the Pioneer work project, it was asserted that the social purpose (critical theory) model engaged consciousness and empowerment (Ward and Forrester 1989). The learner acquired knowledge and skills which enable them to "… play an active role in the re-shaping and adaptation of the social and economic life of their community" (FEU 1990:10).

The social purpose model however can be seen also as sometimes problematic, in that the "…content may not connect with the students on the whole" (Moseley 1995:66). That is, it may be considered not relevant to the participants' own context, as discussed in Chapter two in relation to empowerment and agency. Some participants may therefore perceive that content that possibly empowers, may not be specifically relevant for them (for example, does not provide skills for employment). Furthermore, subjective definitions of what constitutes empowerment may differ between individuals. This is a fundamental criticism and exposes some of the deficiencies of the social purpose model. That is, the argument follows that everyone's reality differs, so there is no collective resolution for any oppressed group. This argument also echoes the post modernist critique of critical theory discussed in Chapter two.

The fourth approach, a *student centred* (or liberal) model of pedagogy has a strong emphasis on personal development and tends to encompass orthodox teaching practices as well as keeping the content within the learner's own framework (Moseley 1995; Ward and Forrester 1989). Perhaps as Illich states: "Most learning is not the result of

instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting" (1972:39).

This liberal approach, on its own however may also be insufficient. As Britzman (1991) observes in relation to student teachers "… student teachers do not set out to collude within authoritarian pedagogy. Nor do they desire to suppress their own subjectivity or those of their students. Just the opposite: they usually begin with the intentions of enhancing student potential and find this intention thwarted by socially patterned routines" (1991:237).   Mullaly attempts to redress this problem in relation to undergraduate social worker training: "We still teach about counselling and care, but at the same time we say we have to reshape these structures that are hurting people and do some consciousness raising with some of the victims" (in Rance 1998:36).

However, a combination of a social purpose (critical theory) approach and a student centred (liberal) model of pedagogy may be more applicable (Moseley 1995). This integration could complement the vocational content, and also focus on issues of relevance to the learners. Aside from political and structural issues, content which focuses on unemployment could also encompass such components as basic survival skills, coping skills and highlight that an individual's worth is not solely reliant on occupational status or wealth, but on what they do in their lives to fulfil their utmost potential personally and to help others. Such initiatives may arguably help the unemployed cope with the reality and effects of unemployment (Winefield et al. 1993).

However, any such curriculum initiative would need to be well-structured and planned, as these unemployed people from previous research recognise:

> 'It would have to be simplistic at the start ... and perhaps delve deeper into it later on, once they [course participants] get their confidence.
>
> Depends upon the content, you got to really talk about it and know how you're going to approach it.

… you'd have to have a good program' (Brophy 1996).

It is relevant to mention at this stage that the teachers in LMP courses who work with unemployed are often confronted with the personal, political, bureaucratic, and social issues that their students face in relation to unemployment (Brophy 1996). Many teachers working with the unemployed may therefore incorporate some discussion of unemployment and empowerment issues into their courses, often as a reaction to participants' requests (Brophy 1996). That is, there will often be some effort to empower participants in courses by experienced and astute teachers, who are aware and sympathetic of their students needs (McRae 1992; Read 1988; McGregor 1982). Moreover, often educational practitioners will report, write and carry out research into the areas of developing classroom practices that encourage critical thinking to address their students needs (McRae 1992; Read 1988; McGregor 1982). In many cases, however this is done informally and at the teacher's discretion, it is incidental, at the "coal face", and effort at a micro level. As Burrows states "… we have established debate, research and … some curriculum and pedagogical change … But they are still largely innovations championed by the few and not central to the full voice of collective struggle around progressive educational practice." (1999:9) It needs to be asked why this knowledge and understanding doesn't flow "up" the system, and become explicit within institutional protocol and curriculum training packages such as the REPLAN example discussed earlier. Perhaps Burrows provides the reason; "DETYA money is … allocated on a grace and favour basis to "safe" and ideologically driven projects ... professional educators [have] been treated as largely irrelevant to design and evaluation of educational reform" (1999:9). There is also an ironic contradiction here, whereas explicit in many job descriptions, organisational policies and even Federal Government tender requirements is the need for professionals who are working with unemployed participants, to be both sensitive to the needs of their students and knowledgeable about the effects of unemployment. For example in the Tender Application for Work For The Dole in 1999 a specific Selection Criteria is "Outline your Organisation's experience

and skills of proposed personnel, especially in dealing with unemployed people" (DEWRSB, 1999:43). The pragmatic reason for the exclusion of alternative educational aims perhaps is that any training provided for the unemployed, by the state, to assist the unemployed, is required to be vocational and accredited. Alternative content would, therefore be considered irrelevant. However, Abbott warned over twenty years ago in relation to LMPs, that they were "… concentrating too much on training people to meet employer labour market needs and not enough on the needs of the individual" (1978:218). This issue is raised again in the conclusion of this Chapter in relation to the study circle approach. Funding for program delivery is contingent upon such content being excluded in a LMP. The educational examples above demonstrate how programs can however include content which assists in empowering participants, however as Christie states: "Australia has a long history of initiating such programs, but they have been fragmented and unable to evolve in a structured manner" (1998:88). This then leads to questions. How can such content be institutionalised? Is there an approach that is robust, internationally recognised, popular and has a history of longevity and sustainability?

Burrows' poses a confronting question. "Have we let the need to defend the very foundations of … education against the ravages of economic rationalism condemn our voices to death through conservatism?" (1999:9). Essentially, the concern here is that although historically, there have been many attempts by individuals and institutions to design and run programs that pass control, direction, content and power to disadvantaged groups, their sustainability and longevity is susceptible to government and social ideological change. Furthermore, efforts, even down to individual teachers in their own classrooms attempting to foster critical thinking amongst learners is an example of such an effort. Society needs to recognise and officially sanction such approaches to learning, instead of viewing them as covert, "leftist" activities by non-curriculum focused radical teachers. What is intriguing is that the study circle in Sweden is not only endorsed by the state, but promotes the critiquing of state's

decisions by its own citizens. As the following discussion demonstrates, this is mainly due to the institutionalisation of study circles within the Swedish society.

3.4   Study circles - Introduction

The study circle concept is generally regarded as having been the result of civic movements in Sweden during the late nineteenth century (Christie 1998; Peak 1990; Hall 1993; Oliver 1987). Although there is also the suggestion that study circles originated from the Oxford Movement in England during the 1860s (Peak 1990). Alternatively, some American authors claim that study circles originated from the Chautaugun Movement in the United States of America (Christie 1998; Peak 1990). In Sweden, the commencement of the study circle movement has been attributed to a time when the state of Sweden was unable to support its population which was facing rural poverty, over crowding in urban areas, illiteracy, inequality, rising alcoholism and threats of social unrest (Torstensson 1994; Oliver 1987).

Initially, during the 1890s Sweden went through a period of rapid industrialisation (Torstensson 1994). Many Swedes migrated to the USA, and rural populations decreased as people moved to urban areas seeking employment (Torstensson 1994). Many trade unions were founded during this time as well as the Social Democratic Party in 1889 (Torstensson 1994). Several trade unions began to set up libraries funded from donations, union fees and fees from borrowing (Torstensson 1994). At the time these libraries were regarded as the most important means for the working classes to attain education after leaving elementary school (Torstensson 1994). Initially, efforts were made to encourage people to meet and study together in an effort to curb the spread of alcoholism (Christie 1998).

Olsson, from the International Order of the Good Templers, and regarded as "the father" (sic) of study circles, has been accepted as the person who popularised and promoted study circles in Sweden (Hall 1993). In 1902 Olsson began promoting study circles

within the workers' libraries (Torstensson 1994). He believed that it was not effective for people to sit at desks in a school-like course and atmosphere after having worked all day (Torstensson 1994). The study circles were so popular that by 1917 there were two hundred and fifty-four study circle libraries operating in Sweden (Torstensson 1994). In 1912 the Swedish Parliament decided to grant state subsidies for these libraries (Torstensson 1994).

The successful development of study circles in Sweden as discussed by Torstensson (1994) can be attributed to a Swedish concept of "folkbildning", which he suggests is difficult to translate. Fundamentally however it entails how the Swedes have avoided class conflict and confrontation by pursuing "integrating" alternatives. "Folkbildning" is a term that seems to encompass the notion that education and knowledge for all, helps the society as a whole. Torstensson (1994) discusses how this occurred in Sweden in the early twentieth century by looking at three separate views of class in Sweden at the time.

Firstly the socialist or left wing view in the late nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, held that workers should enlighten themselves and acquire enough knowledge to be able to be independent and judge matters in relation to their society. As Olsson stated in 1911, "It isn't the intellectually badly off crowd of serfs with their bitter rage, but the self-educated free team of workmen [sic] with their fervent indignation that will win the final and concluding battle for the material and intellectual emancipation of the class" (in Torstensson 1994:7). This, Torstensson suggests, was "… a typical socialist-emancipatory view of "folkbildning" from those days" (1994:2).

Secondly, the moderate conservative, mainstream, liberal or philanthropic view of "folkbildning" which recognised that the Swedish society at the time had class divisions and along with rapid cultural changes, this division could result in social problems. Hildebrand in 1901 stated:

> 'If all what is new only was in the favour of the higher classes, the
> difference between them and the lower should increase rapidly, not only

concerning tangible assets but also in reflecting upon life and society. The people will burst into two halves, with different cultures and who in no sphere can understand each other. A people, which is too much divided, especially mentally, is surely doomed' (in Torstensson 1994:2).

Hildebrand recognised that the educated upper class had a social responsibility to the undereducated lower class for the benefit of the society as a whole. Torstensson (1994) suggests that this view attempts to organise the working class, so as workers, through studies, become moderate and realise that all classes in society have a common interest in developing and improving their society as a whole rather than overthrowing it. "Folkbilkdning" in this sense, equates to cooperation between classes through education.

Thirdly is the upper class or conservative and paternalistic view of "folkbildning". In Sweden many factory owners in the late nineteenth century actually founded libraries themselves for their workers (Torstensson 1997). At the turn of the century, Torstensson suggests that the upper classes increasingly realised that the lower classes could not be regarded as a "… rude, ill-bred and threatening amorphous mass" (1997:3). It was a time of swift change in Sweden, and the upperclasses need to circumvent possible threats from workers. As Torstensson states: "The threatened classes gave money to organisations that threatened them! That of course they did because they thought that the threat to it could diminish!" (1997:7). In other words, they avoided confrontation through integration thereby maintaining the prevailing social order with minor changes. Conservatives at the time realised that some reform needed to be carried out if they wanted to preserve their rule and their privileges (Torstensson 1997).

In 1912, Sandler, a former Swedish Prime Minister, stated: "The object of workers' education is to turn workers into active citizens ... study circles supply the demands for self-activity" (in Oliver 1987:4). In 1905 the state began to grant money to libraries, and from 1912 to study circle libraries (Oliver 1987).

By the 1920s, unions in Sweden were striving to bring workers further into the political process. Study circles thus became the prime vehicles to create educational opportunities for the educationally disadvantaged. Study circles focused on how individuals and communities could actively participate in the democracy to the extent that eventually, study circle initiatives would affect political decisions (Oliver 1987).

From these beginnings, study circles were so prolific that the political party that evolved, the Social Democrats has dominated Swedish politics throughout the twentieth century (Christie 1998).

> 'Since many of the country's [Swedish] leaders have emerged from the study circle movement, they are themselves sensitive to the importance of the study circles as vehicles for citizens to understand public life and issues and to enhance individual self-esteem and personal growth' (Oliver 1987:39).

Furthermore, in Sweden: "… the state has never shied away from the idea that well informed, educated people will resist any erosion of their civic and human rights" (Christie 1998:81).

3.5 What is a study circle?

The Swedish study circle is considered an effective vehicle through which empowerment and change can be activated (Oliver 1987). Although they can affect government policy, Charpentier states, study circle content "… is not initiated by the state, and not organised from the top" (in Oliver 1987:42). Study circles utilise the experiences of ordinary people as a starting point to create knowledge (Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992). Study circles are also effective environments for individuals who are unaccustomed to studying to take part in education in a manner quite unparalleled by other forms of voluntary education (Brevskolan 1980).

Gibson (1998) and Oliver (1987), drawing on Blid's earlier works, present a set of pedagogical principles for study circles. These are presented here as a compilation from both authors:

- Equality and democracy among circle participants – power belongs to all group members, not just one, all members are, simultaneously both teachers and students. There are no 'teachers' or 'textbooks';
- Liberation of members' inherent capabilities and innate resources – dependency as commonly seen in a classroom situation is reduced;
- Co-operation and companionship – members help each other and share progress and setbacks. They do not compete and it is a secure and safe environment. The process aims to identify common ground, but does not aim for consensus;
- Study, liberty, and member self-determination – freedom of the study circle and its right to set its own objectives that recognise the individual interests of all members. This autonomy however does not negate frameworks and the responsibilities of the group;
- Continuity and planning – there are no limitations on how often the group meets, however good resources will encourage continuity. The members plan goals, but may change them upon mutual agreement;
- Active member participation – the essence of a well functioning study circle. People learn best when active, in conversation, cooperation and with joint responsibility;
- Use of printed study material – provided to all participants for session preparation. The material should be short, simple, concise and relevant, with discussion questions which require analysis; and
- Change and action – never a guarantee, but study circles are for people who wish to learn and act. This could involve both the group and/or individual members. The process does not necessarily prescribe an action, but allows the group to explore options (Gibson 1998; Oliver 1987).

Study circles are a type of small discussion group consisting of between five to ten members, democratic and highly participatory (Gibson 1998; Leighninger 1996). Members usually agree to meet several times to explore and learn about a particular social or political issue in a collaborative manner (Peak 1990; Brevskolan 1980). They may be perceived as a type of "focus" or "discussion" group from a cursory observation, however marked differences exist. Gibson cites three; "Learning Circles are focused on a particular topic or issue and may be more sympathetic than discussion groups, … based on common reference material, which may not be the case with discussion groups [and] … they are also intended to have action outcomes which may not be the case with discussion groups" (1998:4). Furthermore they are different from a

public meeting as they do not begin with specific desired outcomes and a comfortable open setting needs to be provided for everyone to explore issues (SCRC 1999). Members also try to remain neutral while letting discussion flow (Oliver 1987)

Theoretically, study circles also do not imply a specific educational approach or a special method in relation to management, yet they do demand and entail special kinds of logistics. For example there is a brief "guide" to remind members of their responsibilities during discussion (SCRC 1995). They are:

- Listen carefully and actively.

- Maintain an open mind.

- Try hard to understand the point of view of those with whom you disagree.

- Help keep the discussion on track.

- Speak freely, but don't dominate.

- Talk to the group as a whole, not the leader/co-ordinator.

- If you don't understand, say so.

- Value your own experience and understanding.

- Be prepared to disagree.

- Don't get aggressive.

Effectively the major characteristic of the study circle is the collective nature of learning. In a dialogue with other people, members constantly appraise knowledge, compare notes and help each other to achieve new insights and find new knowledge (Brevskolan 1980). The knowledge members acquire bears a direct relation to the practicalities of their everyday lives. They are able to study at their own level, and their studies are always directed by their own needs. The knowledge communicated in the study circle is not however universal and common to all. Each member receives and

processes the material corresponding to her or his needs, at the same time learning how to utilise his/her knowledge and look for more information (Brevskolan 1980). That is, study circles work to empower members by encouraging members to analyse ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognise systematic oppressive forces, and work to change conditions both individually and collectively (Lather 1991).

Another distinctive characteristic of the study circle and its deviation from traditional forms of education is reflected in the terminology used in study circles which aims to prevent members associating traditional schooling to study circles in any way (Brevskolan 1980), as the Table below demonstrates:

Table six: Terminology

'Traditional schooling	Study circle
Teacher	Circle leader
Pupil	Member or Participant
Lesson	Meeting/Session
Class room	Study room
Teaching	Studies
Textbooks	Study material/Discussion Guide
Term	Study season'

(Brevskolan 1980:18).

Traditional school terminology is therefore abandoned, as it may conjure up notions of competition and demands for achievement, elimination, teachers providing initiative and transmitting knowledge, and pupils uncritically absorbing what they are taught (Brevskolan 1980). Furthermore, in Sweden, government funding for study circles is granted only on the understanding that it will not be used to offer courses that lead to qualifications (Christie 1998). Educational effort in a study circle therefore does not demand any reward in the shape of money, merits, qualifications or promotion.

Another important aspect of the study circle is that it is based upon the premise that people have an innate desire to learn (Brevskolan 1980). Experience of the growth of one's knowledge and of one's improving ability to understand and interact with the surrounding world is seen to be sufficient reward in itself (Brevskolan 1980).

There are three different roles participants of a study circle may assume - coordinator, leader or member. A study circle co-ordinator (sometimes referred to as the organiser) selects the initial reading material, and arranges the logistics and administrative functions of meetings (SCRC 1993). The members agree upon the study circle leader (sometimes referred to as facilitator). S/he leads the group and ensures that discussion is lively, and focused (SCRC 1993). The leader also assists members by providing information and ensuring that everybody takes part in the discussion, but the leader is not there to teach, rather to act as a guide and assistant and participate in the circle as one of its members. As well, the leader may also be the same person as the co-ordinator and it is not uncommon for members to share the leadership role as co-leader (SCRC 1993). All members in the study circle take on an equal share in responsibility for ensuring that studies are meaningful (Brevskolan 1980). Moreover, each member is also responsible for others and not only for themselves (Brevskolan 1980). Members "own" the study circle and work to ensure a democratic and collaborative environment is maintained (SCRC 1993).

However it is acknowledged that the knowledge and experience which participants bring to the circle is never enough and that new information constantly needs to be supplied in order for the group to progress (Brevskolan 1980). This information is acquired by ascertaining facts, reading study material, going on field trips, consulting outside specialists and so forth (Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992). A further benefit of having prepared material is that it enables study circle members to engage in private studies between meetings. The study circle material provides a foundation or framework on which participants can base their activities, both during and between sessions. Study material needs to be brief and members need to receive it several days in advance

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(SCRC 1995). Material ideally needs to encompass basic information that the members can study individually, and relate to their own problems and experience. The set tasks encourage the members to analyse, discuss, critique and refer back to their own experiences, but it also encourages them to go to other sources of knowledge. It can never be the aim of a study circle to learn the contents of a textbook (SCRC 1995). One thing which all study material has in common is the aim of its design, which is to make it easy for the members themselves to decide the pace and direction of their work dependent upon their level of aspiration (Brevskolan 1980). Study material in overseas countries such as the USA and Sweden is presented in a format that is known as a "discussion guide". Several of these discussion guides are referred to later in Chapter four however, they all have certain commonalties. They are on the whole brief and easy to read booklets that have clear session sections. They all start from the personal experience and perspective of an issue or problem, progress onto the politics of the issue by presenting different ideological view points in relation to the issue, then, finally give examples of action. In this way their structure is very similar to, and reflects Smith's (1993b) spheres of empowerment previously discussed in Chapter two. All sections are furnished with an array of insights and challenging questions. Also members can meet where they like - in each other's homes, for example, and the members of the circle decide the dates and times of meetings (Oliver 1987). Examples of discussion guides are contained in appendix three.

The aim of the study circle can thus be defined as "greater understanding" or insight into the topic being addressed. Through studies, members are able to put their lives into perspective and view topics within a wider social context (Brevskolan 1980). The philosophy of the study circle therefore implies that knowledge cannot become living and important until it corresponds to personal needs and experiences.

As Gibson states in relation to circles coordinated by himself "The overt intention of this study circle has been to increase the political literacy of participants" (1996:8).

3.6 Study circle experiences - internationally and in Australia

To further furnish an understanding of study circles and their applicability as an action research milieu, a brief overview of local and international research and reports on study circles are elaborated upon here.

Sweden/Scandinavian countries

Research on study circles conducted by the Swedes has predominantly been orientated toward assessing and changing actual study circle practice, rather than "measuring" educational outcomes. Although most of this research has praised the study circle, some potential problematic issues have been highlighted (Oliver 1987).

Bystrom, in a study founded by the National Swedish Board of Education, ascertained that some circles deviate from the espoused ideals. The most common deviation was what he described as "school class" (Oliver 1987). That is, members can sometimes become passive and the leader an instructing teacher. The reasons presented for this occurring was unprepared leaders, overregulation and the leader perceived too much by members as a "content expert" (Oliver 1987). Other circle problems Bystrom uncovered were the "coffee party", where the "social" took precedence over learning, and the "therapeutic group" where individual personal problems dominated over the study circles content (Oliver 1987). Bystrom also found reasons for circle dropouts including "lack of time" and a "fear of new experiences" (Oliver 1987).

In a separate, elaborate study of seven trade union study circles, Bystrom contends that the success of a study circle largely relies on:

- 'Making practical use of the knowledge acquired;
- the potential to transform conditions as powerful motive forces; and
- differences of experience and background between members regarded as an asset' (in Oliver 1987:65).

Bystrom concluded by highlighting three critical factors that in his opinion influence the success of study circles:

- 'The circle leader and member preparedness;
- a link between knowledge, skills and application'; and
- a common objective between leader and members (in Oliver 1987:66).

This final factor reinforces the collaborative, and therefore action research approach to this study. As discussed in Chapter two, Burns (1995) and Gancian (1992) both suggest that the researcher and researched work together in a common task. In separate research by the Study Department of the Salaried Employees Educational Association in Stockholm, it was determined that for a circle to be successful, it "… needs time to jell" (Oliver 1987:65). Holmstrand and Harnsten (1996) also emphasise the importance of the early stages of circle development. Usually a great deal of time must be devoted to describing and defining in detail the problem that the circle sets out to work with.

The Committee on Methods Testing in Adult Education in Sweden conducted research in 1974 across one hundred and ten nation-wide study circles with over one thousand study circle members in total. This Committee found two factors it believed ensured that study circles operated effectively. Firstly, the most important quality desired by members of their leaders was the ability to be clear and succinct. Secondly, members wanted leaders who didn't make members feel inferior (Oliver 1987). However both Klint and Bystrom agree that the leader's role is complex, as the leader needs to create a "positive group atmosphere" [and] "be familiar with the subject matter" (in Oliver 1987:65-6).

As mentioned previously, research into study circles by the Swedes has predominantly focused on the process of refining study circle practice and processes rather than measuring "outcomes". Strict empirical research which measures actual "learning" in any way is limited and seems to have been neglected by the Swedes. Perhaps an oversight, but the reasons may run deeper into the psyche and cultural differences

between Swedes and other western cultures where the importance of process and outcomes in some of adult education are viewed differently. The following North American experience offers some insights.

United States of America and Canada

In 1984 Oliver visited Sweden to investigate the study circle phenomenon as a potential "… instrument for social change" for the USA. In 1987 the results of his work were published in a text entitled - *"To Understand Is To Act - Study Circles - Coming Together For Personal Growth and Social Change"*. In this publication Oliver expressed concern in relation to research conducted by the Swedes on study circles: "Most reports ... have uncritically praised the study circle movement ... [however] there have been few methodological orientated studies of the Swedish study circles ..." (1987:63). As an example, Oliver refers to one study in particular, that of Bystrom (1976), and claims that within this study there is "… little attempt to gain some insights into this complex phenomena beyond the anecdotal evidence that tends to pose for research" (1987:63). Oliver could not find any positivist or empirically based Swedish research which determined study circle effectiveness and his frustrations (and veiled threat) are evident in the following remark: "... self-criticism is especially valuable because any assessment of Swedish study circles and of their feasibility in the United States must take into account the research that has been done by the Swedes" (1987:63). All research results, annoyingly for Oliver, were interpretive. Yet Oliver maintained his interest in study circles and eight years later appears to alter his views on methodology in an article entitled *"Is the United States Ready for a Study Circle Movement*?" published in the journal *"Adult Learning"*, Oliver states: "Just evaluating knowledge gained, short changes the study circle process" (1995:16). Furthermore, "Just a few years ago, we were asking if study circles were a more effective learning format than ... other forms of adult education. The questions were based on what participants learned; the subtle and more sociological nuances of the study circle were overlooked" (1995:15). In this article, Oliver discusses Swedish research in different terms: "... most of the

evidence is anecdotal ... It works" (1995:15), and he supports the need for further qualitative research on the effectiveness of study circles. Rejecting the rigid "methodological oriented" studies he yearned for in 1987, by 1995 Oliver was suggesting: "... research on study circle effectiveness ... could benefit from other types of questions:

- 'Will organizations adopt study circles as a continuing basis, institutionalizing the concept?
- Will organizational members and community residents participate, and return for more?
- After the study circles, can we expect: - New forms of collective ideas and action, or a willingness to act?' (1995:16).

This quote suggests that Oliver had warmed to the Swedish ideological stance towards study circles, and perhaps sympathetic to critically based theoretical research approaches.

Supporting this view in relation to the assessment of study circles, are the opinions put forward by Leighninger, Director of the Study Circle Resource Center[37] (SCRC) in the USA, who states: "It would be a mistake to look at study circles only in the context of the specific outcomes that they produce" (1996:41). Leighninger also remarks: "Study circle outcomes are difficult to quantify, and unable to be evaluated as they encapsulate citizen involvement ..." (1996:39). Both Oliver's (1987) and Leighninger's (1996) comments here are therefore supportive of the critical theory methodology chosen for this study as they suggest that the outcomes of study circles are not able to be empirically and quantifiably measured. Similar types of comments and observations were also made in relation to the Hooper-Briar and Lawson (1995) experience in relation to their efforts into interprofessional collaboration and service integration with schools and families.

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[37] 'Center', rather than 'Centre' – American spelling.

Prior to this, in 1978 Kurland was one of the first to enthusiastically initiate an extensive program of study circles through a consortium based in the New York State. Kurland believed that study circles would "… help solve some of our current problems," and serve as "… a systematic means for engaging large segments of the general public in serious discussions of public policy issues" (Oliver 1987:105). Kurland also wanted "… to spread the concept of study circles as a learning tool ... [and] establish regional centres to form study circles in New York State ... then across the nation" (in Oliver 1987:105). The consortium was initially able to launch some "parenting" circles and several firms started to adopt the study circle approach. Unfortunately the spread of study circles did not extend beyond New York State perhaps because Kurland's plans were considered too ambitious (Oliver 1987). Some critics perceived study circles as just another adult education methodology and the format was unable to be adopted in any organisations (Oliver 1987). As mentioned earlier in this Chapter, both Gibson (1999) and SCRC (1998) highlight how study circles are fundamentally different to other forms of adult education, even discussion groups and meetings. This USA example here again reflects the problems of initiating study circles into cultures that are unaccustomed to exploring such critical approaches to education. Furthermore, management critics in this particular instance also argued that study circles did not generate enough revenue for the institutions involved (Oliver 1987). This again represents a fundamental different ideology as to the purpose of learning. Although not successful, Kurland's consortium was considered "… a noble attempt to systematically introduce study circles into existing practices in the USA" (Oliver 1987:105). Nonetheless soon after, further attempts were made to introduce study circles into the USA.

Oliver reports on two case studies in his research. Firstly, the Domestic Policy Association's (DPA) National Issues Forum (NIF) in Dayton, Ohio, which was launched in 1981 and aimed at "… bridging the gap between citizen and policy maker" (Oliver 1987:109).

Prior to utilising study circles, in 1986 the DPA-NIF had over two hundred community forums operating nationally with one hundred thousand participants (Oliver 1987). A seminar format was utilised where small discussion groups were conducted which would then report back to a plenary. The main aim of the Association was to try and draw large audiences, this was attempted by inviting and promoting well known public speakers (Oliver 1987).

The problem, which emerged with this format, was that the *size* of audiences was perceived to be more important than the actual quality of dialogue and level of participation. In retrospect, the DPA-NIF realised that the ill-perceived aim of attracting a large *quantity* of people took precedent and somewhat compromised the *quality* of discussion. Also, the focus was *on public judgement*, that is, agreeing or disagreeing, voting, debating and politicising, as opposed to *public opinion* based on experiences to provide substance to views (Oliver 1987).

In an attempt to correct these problems, the study circle format was adopted by DPA-NIF in 1985, and a number of pilot seasons were conducted to assess their effectiveness. Study circle topics ranged from tax and welfare issues to Soviet-USA relations and were conducted in universities (Oliver 1987).

At the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, four pilot study circles were conducted, and Buskey at Nebraska University stated: "… we encouraged moderators [leaders] to focus on discussion rather than turn the forum into a classroom" (in Oliver 1987:116). At Mississippi State University, the DPA-NIF study circles resulted in the establishment of a local Human Resources Council, an umbrella group aimed at improving communication among welfare agencies (Oliver 1987).

Moreover, in Tucson Arizona, it was observed that the role of "issue expert" shifted from lecturer to participant (Oliver 1987). In Grand Rapids, Michigan, it was also reported that: "The study circle format helped us overcome two obstacles from the prior

years - not enough preparation and not enough time for discussion. By concentrating more on quality discussion rather than on quantity, that is, *number* of participants, we enhanced our program immeasurably" [original emphasis] (Eschels in Oliver 1987:115).

It was also reported that all of these pilot study circles were relatively inexpensive, easy to promote, and meeting venues were easily found (Oliver 1987). Kinghorn, the National Co-ordinator of the DPA, observed during the piloting that: "... we want to keep our ideas coming from the grass roots up, and study circles seem an ideal vehicle to accomplish this purpose" (in Oliver 1987:119). This is yet another example of how study circles work from the "bottom up" and echoes Harding (1993) Connell (1993) and Wadsworth (1993) views in Chapter two.

The second case study reported by Oliver (1987) was conducted by the Brick Layers and Allied Craftsmen (sic) (BAC) International Union (IU). The Union, historically, did not have effective member educational programs. The Union President Joyce, was aware that the study circle format had been successfully used in Sweden for many years and decided to attempt to introduce study circles into the Union (Oliver 1987). Twenty-seven experimental pilot study circles were conducted in North America during 1986, attracting two hundred and seventy local union members across fourteen USA states and two Canadian provinces. Topics included the current problems faced by the Union and alternatives for the future. Careful planning of topics and sessions were arranged, leaders were trained, newsletters published and trials conducted. As part of the leader training, it was stressed "… that the study circle was to be a dialogue ... [and] that no majority votes or consensus would be sought" (Oliver 1987:125). Eventually after three months, the number of circles grew from twenty-seven to thirty-five, and all were conducted in areas of high unemployment, (Oliver 1987) as with this research. These circles ran between May and August 1986, after which time, IU circle leaders met to report back on the twenty-seven pilot study circles (Oliver 1987).

Early reports demonstrated good attendance, no recruitment problems and serious and substantive discussion. Some of the responses given by circle leaders throughout the USA included:

> 'There was so much to discuss ... we forgot the time - I couldn't turn them off.
>
> Our group met for over two hours ... I had to call it a night to get them to break up.
>
> Some of our guys came with simplistic views, but after our discussion, realized how complex the problems are' (Oliver 1987).

The resultant evaluation of these pilots pointed to several important issues:

- 'Materials (both video and print) were crucial to success of the study circles, and leaders needed to follow plans; and
- Study circles were not a normal meeting, and all members needed to be aware to stay neutral and let discussion flow' (Oliver 1987).

A number of problems were however highlighted:

- 'Work commitments hindered some from attending meetings;
- Depth of discussion may have been improved by inviting 'outsider experts';
- Sessions tended to run overtime;
- Leaders sometimes had problems keeping members focused on specific issues;
- Some members had not read preparatory materials; and
- Some circles were slow in starting up' (Oliver 1987).

A summary qualitative and quantitative questionnaire was distributed to circle members after completing the study circle season. The results demonstrated that eighty-three per cent of members believed that a study circle was an opportunity for everyone to present their views and fifty per cent wanted more "outsiders" (ie: politicians, educators, professionals in field, etc.).

When asked how effective as a means of education study circles were, eighty-nine per cent of members considered them as useful while fifty-six per cent felt better informed and twelve per cent had not changed their opinions (Oliver 1987:136).

Some qualitative responses were also requested in the questionnaire and included, "I learned something and got to express my views - views that might not come out at a regular meeting. Some new ideas came out and most of the members were able to voice their frustrations and have their concerns addressed. Friendly and informed - the atmosphere provided for a free expression of ideas. Even though some problems were not resolved, I believe everyone left with a much better understanding of the issues. It's the way to go, to make the member ... know that his [sic] ideas and voice do mean something. We need more of them - it makes us feel involved. Listen to what was said. We are important to. Thank you for asking my opinion on the issues" (Oliver 1987:134-139).

Oliver (1987) reports that this case study of twenty-seven pilot study circles was extremely successful. Joyce concluded that union members appreciated having their views shared, and that union leaders found members' views valuable. Joyce termed study circles as "miniature democracies, highly participatory, [and] neutral and unconstraining" (in Oliver 1987:138-9). Furthermore: "We are the first Union in North America to attempt to adopt the study circle format. Democracy requires an ongoing dialogue between leaders and the people they serve ... This is what the study circles are about" (in Oliver 1987:140).

In 1989 the SCRC was established in America and the study circle idea started to spread on a wave of credibility (Oliver 1995).

> 'The success of study circles in fostering ... grass roots problem solving has attracted a great deal of interest from foundations and from government at every level' (Leighninger 1996:40).

The SCRC continues to promote the idea of study circles with a large range of diverse organisations. It has thirteen thousand organisations and individuals on its database, has published literature, and has a home page on the Internet – http://www.cpn.org/sections/affiliates/study_circles.htmlx (Oliver 1995). SCRC has also

developed many community wide programs on a range of economic and social issues from foreign policy and capital punishment to race relations and gay rights (Gibson 1998) (see appendix 3 for examples).

The range of supporting organisations and the topics for study circle use has widened dramatically in the USA. For example in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, local police facilitated a three year program of study circles with local citizens, resulting in a nineteen percent fall in violent crime within one year (Leighninger 1996).

A perusal of the Internet also reveals other study circle initiatives throughout North America. Amongst these are "A More Perfect Union" which focuses on topics such as identity, community bonds, cultural diversity and so forth (http://www.pbs.org/ampu/tampu/html), the Sufi study circle in Toronto, a discussion group on Islamic mysticism (http://www.campuslife.utoronto.ca/groups/sufi/whoarewe). The Prince Georges County's study circle on race relations (http://www.naco.org/archive/cnews/97-02-17/race.htm) (Gould 1997:1), and the International Study Circles Project (http://www.tsl.fi/isc/edu1.html).

Tanzania

In the early 1970s, Blid developed a study circle program entitled "*People are Health*" in Tanzania (Hall 1993). Seventy-five thousand study circle leaders were trained in six weeks, and then went on to facilitate a twelve week study circle season (Hall 1993). The first campaign began in 1973, and was reintroduced in both 1980 and 1981 (Oliver 1987). The circle format was used to increase public awareness of health issues, and to raise literacy rates (Oliver 1987). In the late 1960s, eighty percent of the Tanzanian population was considered illiterate, by 1981, this rate was reduced to twenty per cent, attributed mainly to the effectiveness of the study circle program (Oliver 1987:60-61). It has been estimated that over two million Tanzanians participated (Oliver 1987:61). It is also relevant to note here that although, according to Blid a key principal of effective study circles is relevant printed learning reference material, illiteracy itself should not be

seen as a deterrent as learning circles can be supplemented or even based on graphic resource material as well as visual, video and audio tape resources (Gibson 1998).

Australia

Historical evidence exists of sporadic interest in study circles within Australia dating back to the last century with the Mechanics Institute (Gibson 1998; Christie 1998). The Army Education Corps also used study circles format both during and post World War 2, on programs focussing on current affairs (Gibson 1998). Churches began using study circles on overseas aid and world development in the 1970s and study circles addressing topics on economics were initiated by the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union during the 1980s (Gibson 1998; Gibson 1996; Crombie 1996).

In 1987, Costigan and Letcher published a report on a study circle they initiated on the topic of *"Learning for Social Justice"* (Costigan and Letcher 1987). In their report, they discuss issues of "cross-fertilisation" with adult educators and "grass-roots people". Again a further example of how the study circle is complimentary to action research "bottom up" approach (Harding 1993, Connelly 1993, Wadsworth 1993) was a feature of their study circle (Costigan and Letcher 1987). They utilised the study circle model to conduct their season and secured the services of a study circle expert to facilitate proceedings (Costigan and Letcher 1987). Eventually, the study circle season culminated in the preparation of a booklet and a presentation at a joint conference of the Australian Association of Adult Education and the Australian Association of Community Educators held in Canberra in December 1986 (Costigan and Letcher 1987).

Reflecting upon this study circle season, Costigan and Letcher (1987) highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the process. The benefits were:

- '… an evolving and involving process has commenced;
- sharing issues that concern us at the local level;

- aware of the wide implication of these issues;

- lots of discussion;

- renewal of old contacts, making of new friends; and

- a paper delivered to conference as well as a booklet and overheads' (1987:47).

Some of the problems encountered included sporadic attendance. However this disruption of communication was alleviated with the use of post and telephone (Costigan and Letcher 1987).

Other problems included;

- 'Domination of the process by task orientation;

- Omitting initially to clarify the function of a study circle; and

- Establishing a convenient venue' (1987:44, 47).

More recently, in the early 1990s, several noted Australian adult education academics started exploring the potentiality of study circles. After visiting Sweden in 1990, Peak stated: "The study circle has been a most successful means of providing non-formal adult education in a developed society ... Whether or not the study circle model should be or could be implemented in our country can be debated by adult educators" (1990:165).

This interest and growth in study circles rose dramatically during the mid 1990's due to the activities of the Australian Association of Adult and Community Education (Inc.) (AAACE).[38] The AAACE registered the name *Study Circles Australia"* as a subsidiary of AAACE and produced several publications based on SCRC books, but adapted to

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[38] The AAACE Australian Adult Association of Community Education was formed in 1989. Located in Canberra, it is the peak organisation in the field of adult and community education, financially supported by the Federal Government through the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). AAACE's main function is to provide information, research and advice to the adult education training sector, and the Federal Government including DEETYA and ANTA (AAACE 1995) (DEETYA in 1998 split into two departments, DETYA and DEWRSB).

apply to a local Australian context such as *"A Guide to Training Study Circle Leaders"* (AAACE 1995) and *"Guidelines For Effective Study Circles"* (AAACE 1994). AAACE also developed kits that were used during 1995 that focused on blue green algae (in partnership with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission), and in 1996 on dryland salinity (Gibson 1996). The AAACE also initiated a study circle project on landcare in partnership with the Department of Primary Industry and Energy (Crombie 1996). Effectively from the early 1990s, the AAACE has been developing and promoting study circles as an alternative methodology in adult education (Crombie 1996).

The study circle received another boost in Australia when a report to the Federal Government on citizenship education - *"Whereas the people ... Civics and Citizenship Education"* was released in 1994 (Civics Expert Group 1994). The report's terms of reference included: "… to recommend a non-partisan program to enable all Australians to participate more fully and effectively in the civic life of our country and thereby to promote good citizenship" (Civics Expert Group 1994:2).

The twenty-first recommendation of this report was:

> 'The Commonwealth should support the preparation of study circle materials by adult and community education providers ... and support their dissemination' (Civics Expert Group 1994:27).

As a result of the Civics Expert Group's report of 1994, in 1996, the AAACE was awarded a contract to develop study circles in the area of civics education (Gibson 1996). However due to a change of Federal Government during late 1996, this decision went under review until finally the contract was secured and pilot circles commenced in late 1998 with the learning circle title *"Discovering Democracy"* (Gibson 1998).

Several other study circle programs and resources had been developed during this time, such as *"Changing Times – Australia and Asia"*, sponsored by Community Aid

Abroad which resulted in the formation of over one hundred different study circle groups, and the Aboriginal Reconciliation study circle program, sponsored by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, where over three thousand groups were involved (Gibson 1998). In 1997 *The Age* ran an article on these study circles, including quotes from members who believed it had been a worthwhile and successful idea (Button 1997). "People are optimistic the study circles have bought changes, however small" (Button 1997:A25).

In 1999, the film "*Whiteys Like Us*" was released at the Melbourne Film Festival. Produced by Zubrycki and directed by Landers (1998) the film is a one hour documentary which focused on one study circle through its eight sessions and examined the impact the process had on the members' lives (Woodward 1999). In a review of the film, Woodward states: "The internal workings of this group and the individual responses to it provide a glimpse of how Australians have reached this difficult, critical, and complex nexus of indigenous and non-indigenous relations and how "ordinary" Australians grapple with the issue this evokes on a personal basis" (1999:52).

The documentary portrays the members working together during the sessions, but is also interspersed with comments by several members, individually, between sessions. Leaving aside the topic of Aboriginal Reconciliation that the film addresses, there is an insight into the study circle process itself as an alternative learning approach.

Some members commented upon the difficulties and frustration associated with a new and unfamiliar learning approach after the first session.

Judith: *It completely lacked any structure. If you've got two hours you*
           must have a little bit of structure. We should have used the white
           board more.

Brian: *It was good to get the notes and I read through the notes when got home and realised there was probably 30 points to discuss and I think we discussed one in all of it* (Landers 1998).

After the second session members reflected upon the frustration associated with tackling such a sensitive issue, and having to deal with the maze of views and opinions each member was expressing.

Carolyn: *I actually felt so wound up I felt sick.*

Judith: *If it goes on the way its going on, I think its going to be destructive more than constructive.*

Bere: *I thought the whole thing was going to fall apart over the bickering* (Landers 1998). .

At one point the camera slowly pans down the hallway past two classrooms in the Manly Community College Sydney, where the study circle sessions were being held. A sign "Cake Decorating" is outside one room, and in each room adult students are seated behind rows of desks quietly concentrating on their activities. In stark contract, the sound over is of the study circle members passionately debating issues, talking over one another and arguing about sensitive issues in relation to aboriginal reconciliation.

During the fourth session of the season the following discussion occurs.

Lesley: *You haven't got any sense on how to run a meeting!* .
 Bere: *I'm not running a 'meeting'.*
Sandy: *It's like we haven't made any progress* (Landers 1998).

Two members actually walked out during the sixth session, making a total of four members who had left the session up to that point, although one of them returned later in the season.

The above indicates, the uneasiness associated with study circles; a democratic, but difficult process. It also again highlights how a season needs time to develop and form.

By the sixth session members attempt to come to terms with the process in different ways. These quotes are from interviews between latter sessions and give a firsthand insight into how study circles are a difficult personal process that requires collaboration.

Bere: *'We started off hoping someone would gently explain to us and show us what reconciliation is all about and how to go about it, and teach us what to do. And then to find all we've got is each other, which is frightening, because instead of everyone having the same ideas obviously we've got wide divergence of ideas. Which then makes you wonder if yours are right, wrong or indifferent. And to still have to keep trying to find common ground, and if we can't agree amongst ourselves what hope do we have of trying to spread the ideas and make reconciliation work.*

Sandy: *There's a lot of tolerance and acceptance of the diversity of the opinions in the group. But the good thing is that feeling of being able to discuss those things in a way that just doesn't seem to be available amongst family and friends.*

Hugh: *Going into groups and watching the interaction and feeling the interaction, which is more important, feeling the interaction and allowing people to, shall we say, exhaust themselves. You don't get anywhere until everyone's exhausted what they want to say or thump the table about. And then you can start and find some common ground that everyone's starting to acknowledge, that perhaps I can change, or I've learnt something. By that stage they've learnt something about the other side, recognise there are other points of view that have to be considered' (Landers 1998).*

At the completion of the season several members comment on potential courses of action, either individually or collectively.

Sandy*:* *'I don't know where you take it from here. Like it would be nice to get together sometimes, to do things, together, to see where we all are further down the track. What we've done with what we've learnt.*

Lee: *I think we've explored the issues and become more aware of things. We will know how to stand up and defend certain situations, and put the aboriginal peoples case forward more.*

Darren: *It has had benefits for me because I don't shut up about it now. I talk about it to just about anybody I meet. And some of the conversations I've had from people I'm working with, or people I'm moving or whatever, I've had some pretty good eye opening discussions out there in the outside world. It's got me moving, that's for sure.*

Megan: *My husband was saying 'Oh your going off to therapy'. I think that initially when he said that, I really was resentful and kind of outraged in fact. No, it's about social justice. It's about education, self- education and all these kinds of really great things. It's not about therapy. But I have to say that while it is about self-education, it's also about therapy. I feel like it's a really good start. It's the only place to start. I mean step one is figuring out what you think' (Landers 1998).*

This documentary provides an excellent graphic visual portrayal of the initial frustrations associated with study circle and the eventual maturity of the season and the members. It is evident that the members initially felt the experience was very foreign and even threatening. However, as the season progressed, an understanding developed. They were not competing with each other, nor instructed by an expert. They only had each other, and their own personal experiences and knowledge to lead them. They needed and had to rely, collaborate and trust in each other to learn.

Up until 1996, no formal, thorough evaluations had been conducted into the AAACE or any other study circle initiatives within Australia (Gibson 1996). Furthermore like Sweden and America, Crombie (1995) echoed the perception of the study circle's problematic nature of applying quantitative educational evaluative initiatives: "It is more difficult to evaluate the educational outcomes of such a project - the impact on participants' attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours - even if there were a great deal of money to be devoted to this purpose" (Crombie 1995:7).

Nonetheless, the AAACE included feedback survey instruments in each kit forwarded to different organisations (Crombie 1995). The objective of the survey was not however to measure educational attainment, but to establish the quality and effectiveness of the kit itself, and to find out how it was being used in practice (Crombie 1995).

In the Blue-green Algae study circle participants stated that the process made them:
- '... question their individual day to day actions and make some changes;
- seek further information ... led to a sense of empowerment among participants;
- share their new understandings of the issue with other groups and individuals in a variety of settings; and
- question the type of detergents to buy and what goes down the drain' (Gibson 1998:12).

Initial feedback and anecdotal evidence was thus generally positive, and as a result of the study circles, articles, letters to editors and meeting presentations were conducted by members (Gibson 1998).

Then in 1998-1999, Shires, a study circle leader with many years experience in both Sweden and other countries, and Crawford, Director of Capacity International, coordinated an extensive evaluation on the Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circles (Shires and Crawford 1999a, 1999b). The evaluation drew on five hundred evaluation forms completed by approximately seventy separate study circle groups. While this initially seems a reasonable number, to draw some conclusions, the report does highlight that the sample was only reflective of three percent of the two thousand three hundred groups (Shires and Crawford 1999a). Nonetheless, the report increases its validity by also taking into consideration a number of other secondary data sources, such as:

- 'Boughton, B. and Durnan, D. (1993). Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circles Project: Final Project Report;
- AAACE (1993). Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circles Project: Mid Project Report;
- AAACE (1994). Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circles Project. Random Survey;

- AAACE (1994). Study Circles Report (Stage 2);
- AAACE (1994). Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circles Project: In Depth Evaluation; and
- The Marlow Hampshire Report. Evaluation of the Australians for Reconciliation Project (1997)' (Shires and Crawford 1999b:2).

The report was also supplemented by running focus groups, interviews, discussions and evaluating written reports with study circle leaders, members and stakeholders across every state in Australia (Shires and Crawford 1999b).

In effect, this report by Shires and Crawford represents the most thorough evaluation of study circles conducted in Australia thus far, even taking into consideration its limitations. Some findings from the evaluation are as follows: "Respondents overwhelmingly reported their participation as a positive experience. Even some of the concerns expressed (too much material/too little time) suggest the learning circles succeeded in stimulating interest" (Shires and Crawford 1999a:21). Seventy-two percent of respondents stated that they had taken some sort of action by the end of the season (Shires and Crawford 1999a). Group action included visits to exhibitions of Aboriginal art, organising film nights and public forums (Shires and Crawford 1999a). Individual action was taken by writing to the media, school talks, written protests to governments, articles for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission, as well as the ability to tackle prejudices and interest in reading more on the issue (Shires and Crawford 1999a).

Interestingly, when asked if they would consider using the study circle approach to learn about other issues, the majority responded positively, and amongst the example of topics, "unemployment" is listed (Shires and Crawford 1999a:15). When asked what was the most satisfying aspect of participating in a study circle, the most frequent responses were the "… sharing of experiences, learning more and hearing/learning about others views" (Shires and Crawford 1999a:8). One recommendation in the report was that leader training is vital, suggestions include trainer-training, instructional videos, participation before facilitating, workshops and so forth (Shires and Crawford 1999a/b).

These recommendations reflect other findings discussed in this Chapter and again highlight the *difference* of the learning experience that occurs in comparison to other traditional views of education.

The report also highlighted the importance of initial meeting sessions, that the facilitator devolve responsibility to the members and "… that it is important to empower participants …" (Shires and Crawford 1999b:ii). In future recommendations the report suggests: "Consideration should be given to encouraging greater use of learning circles within universities and Tafes", and "Consideration should be given to marketing learning circles as a professional development tool for service sector workers (particularly in health, *employment*, and training and social services)" [emphasis added] (Shires and Crawford 1999b:iv).

Aside from these AAACE initiatives to promote study circles in Australia, the Brotherhood of St Laurence has also developed a resource entitled "*The Future Of Work Discussion Kit*" (1996). This kit was one of many initiatives as a result of the "*Future Of Work*" project undertaken by the Brotherhood of St Laurence during the 1990s (MacNeill 1995).[39] It focuses on employment, and was developed with input from a

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[39] The 'Future of Work' project combined a range of activities including research, policy development, seminars and the fostering of community discussion (MacNeill 1995). Its umbrella aims are to improve the position of the disadvantaged and marginalised, prevent inequality and

variety of sources including the Victorian Women's Trust and the AAACE (Pine, Jackson and MacNeill 1996). Utilising the AAACE's Aboriginal Reconciliation study circle kit as a model, the authors developed an arguably user-friendly resource with less bulk, containing overheads, handouts, and easy to follow text. It was also not as detailed as the Aboriginal Reconciliation Kit.

Although it is encouraging to see several initiatives in place to develop study circles in Australia, it is pertinent to highlight that evaluation and research into study circles is still somewhat lagging in Australia. Of the evaluations that have been conducted, two concerns emerge. Firstly, issues and problems in relation to the process and practical problems of study circle implementation and conduct echo those of previous overseas research and evaluation (Oliver 1995). Secondly, as Shires and Crawford highlight, the issue of how study circles should be evaluated, also reflect the prior discussion in relation to the USA experience with Oliver and Leighninger (Shires and Crawford 1999a:).

A final relevant issue is that there is no indication that any study circles have been conducted, let alone evaluated into the issue of unemployment in this country.

3.7   Key principles of establishing a study circle

The above review of literature pertaining to study circles assisted in organising and planning this research. It also highlighted key issues and potential problems that needed attention, when planning, recruiting and conducting the study circle. These initial issues, gleaned from the literature review, are presented here, and further refinement of these issues is elaborated upon in Chapter four where the thematic concern, milieu and methodology are meshed together.

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attempt to ensure that all Australians have a meaningful place in society and an adequate standard of living (MacNeill 1995).

Planning

Being prepared is critical (Oliver 1987). Aside from organising a convenient venue (Costigan and Letcher 1987), collecting resources, recruiting members and organising refreshments, schedules and agendas for each session needs to be compiled prior and in between each session. As well agendas and relevant study material also need to be forwarded to all participants before each session (Costigan and Letcher 1987; Oliver 1987).

A "plan of studies" also needs to be developed and agreed upon by all members (Brevskolan 1980). But these plans needs to be flexible, as nothing can be prescriptive (Gibson 1998). The effectiveness of the learning circle also relies upon the establishment, clarification and acceptance of the rules and conventions (Gibson 1998; Costigan and Letcher 1987).

The development of detailed planning for each study circle beyond the first initial meeting is problematic as a study circle's pace and direction needs to be fundamentally determined by the participants themselves and must not be too task orientated (SCRC 1999; Brevskolan 1980). However resource material, in the form of a discussion guide, needs to be either secured or developed beforehand in relation to the topic that the members are going to address. It needs not to be prescriptive, but provide an impetus and be a contingency to promote and keep discussion focused (Oliver 1987). The location and environment for sessions also needs to be comfortable, planned for, and not reflect a formal or intimidating learning atmosphere.

Number of members

Ten members are recommended as the maximum number of participants in a study circle (Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992), although study circles can operate efficiently with only five participants (Gibson 1998; Brevskolan 1980). If attrition occurs early, the literature suggests that replacements can be recruited (Brevskolan 1980). However it is recommended that once a group has met two or three times, new participants may

disrupt the cohesiveness, bonding and culture formed between original group members (McCoy et al. 1996). Also it is relevant to highlight as discussed earlier in relation to the DPA-NIF experience, that study circle effectiveness should not be solely based on the number or quantity of members, but on the *quality* of discussion. (Oliver 1997)

Member profile

Study circle literature emphasises that a diverse membership ensures that a range of experiences and opinions are voiced and shared in relation to the topic (Oliver 1987; Brevskolan 1980). For this reason, it is important that a wide range of different people and perspectives exist within a group, in terms of age, gender, work experience, ethnicity, level of education, language background other than English (LBOTE), marital status, number of children, length of unemployment, past occupations and so forth (Sarantakos 1994).[40]

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[40] It is relevant to note here that a claim could be made that unemployed people, who are the research participants/study circle members in this research, are an homogeneous group, therefore not a diverse sample. However there is the reality that unemployment can occur to almost anyone, and the diversity of people in or out of work is broad. This is discussed again in Chapter four in relation to sample size.

Leaders

Leaders are required to have some expertise and knowledge of the area being studied and be able to pass on information in a clear manner (Oliver 1987; Brevskolan 1980). Shires and Crawford suggest that this aspect is so vital that leaders may even need to be pre-trained (1999b). The leader is also ultimately responsible for keeping the circle focused and for collaborating with other members. Essentially however, as previously stated, the leader is simultaneously a member, and all members have an equal share of responsibility for ensuring those studies are meaningful (Shires and Crawford 1999b; Brevskolan 1980). It is also possible that other members may share leadership during the season (Brevskolan 1980). No one member alone should be considered the sole expert in a study circle and it is important that the leader establishes a culture of shared co-operation on equal terms (Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992). A good leader is therefore considered vital to an effective study circle operation (Shires and Crawford 1999b). It is also important that the leader not fall into the role of a teacher, and assist in devolving and sharing the responsibility of leadership (Shires and Crawford 1999b; Oliver 1987).

Length of season

Although there is no prescribed maximum limit to a study circle season, it is recommended that the circle operate for at least twenty hours and incorporate at least seven meetings (Brevskolan 1980). The option to continue meetings past this point can be provided to take into account any unforeseeable circumstances that may require the circle to operate for longer. For example, work not completed, waiting on correspondence, further debriefing, members feeling that their work is not complete and so forth. The ultimate decision to extend should be the members' choice. The literature also demonstrated that good attendance could be a problem at the commencement of the season (Costigan and Letcher 1987; Oliver 1987).

Initial meetings

It is recommended that perhaps the first two to four meetings be devoted to defining and describing the key problems that the circle sets out to address in detail (Shires and Crawford 1999a; Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992; Oliver 1987). As mentioned previously, research on study circles in Sweden has determined that a successful circle "… needs time to jell" (Oliver 1987:65). The idea of study circles in this research context is relatively new to all members which although may be quite stimulating and motivational, nonetheless it may possibly take some time to become adjusted to this new way of learning. Furthermore, it is suggested that members may experience a fair amount of uncertainty and that periods of doubt, questioning and perceived ineffectiveness are an inevitable aspect of any creative activity (Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992).

In summary the above discussion highlights several points. Study circles need to be:

- Well prepared for and use printed study material (a discussion guide) that members are willing to read yet be simple and manageable.
- Democratic, participatory, co-operative and promote equity.
- Set agreed upon and achievable objectives and remain focussed on those issues.
- Have a positive atmosphere where the expression of ideas can be heard in a neutral non-judgemental forum. Knowledge is generated from the "grass roots" or "bottom up" and this will take time.
- Acknowledge that "gross roots" and "bottom up" knowledge is legitimate and valuable, while realising it may take time for the season to develop or "jell".
- A vehicle that links knowledge with application and is action orientated.

However, study circles should not attempt to be, or develop into a public or formal meeting focus or discussion group, lecture, lesson, or class. Nor should it be a "coffee party" or therapy session.

3.8   Chapter summary

In Sweden, there are now over two hundred thousand individual study circles that are currently attended by approximately one and a half million Swedes every year, which represents nearly a quarter of Sweden's adult population (Gibson 1998; Brevskolan[41] 1980). Some estimates place participation at over two million (Abbott 1978).   The Swedish Government spends five hundred million American dollars on this non-formal adult education (Christie 1998).

> '... [A study circle] enables a citizen to offer an opinion on a level where it is likely to be heard' (Oliver 1987:143).

The study circle movement has been embraced at a national level in Sweden. For example: "One particular use for the study circle has been to address pressing national issues. In Sweden a national study circle program preceded the referendum on future use

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[41]   This is not the actual authors' name. No authors' name is provided in the text. The 'Brevskolan' organisation is credited with the authorship.

of nuclear power, and in Norway a similar program was conducted before the referendum on entry to the European Common Market" (Gibson 1998:6). Strawn describes how effective this has been in relation to debating the use of nuclear energy as a future power source in Sweden: "Swedish leaders received highly accurate readings of current popular thinking on this volatile issue" (in Abbott 1978:219). As Abbott suggests: "What politician would overlook the recommendations of constituents who spend an entire semester studying and discussing an issue?" (1978:221).

Oliver, who also explored the potential of study circles in Sweden and has written extensively on the subject, states in relation to the effect of study circles in the USA: "…[it] helps us overcome our complacencies and fears, our sense of powerlessness in public life and in our organisations" (1987:144).

Abbott, after visiting Sweden, and investigating study circles warns of the danger of: "… concentrating too much on training people to meet employer labour market needs and not enough on the needs of the individual … One solution to this dilemma …, would be to open the decision making process to mass participation; the workers themselves could be encouraged to actively participate in solving society (as well as personal) problems such as unemployment and job dissatisfaction" (1978:218). As the study circle approach is also a group process, this can increase its effectiveness, "Personal empowerment is infectious. It has the effect of helping others see new things as possible and inspiring them to act on that insight" (Shields 1991:13). Furthermore as mentioned previously in this Chapter, study circles have been effective in areas of high unemployment (Oliver 1987; Abbott 1978), and in the Australian context, evaluations of study circles indicate that "unemployment" is an issue which many people consider should be a study circle topic (Shires and Crawford 1999a/b). Finally, "The study circle concept has proven successful in Sweden. Uniting it with the awesome potential of the education technologies now available could add a powerful new weapon against unemployment to the arsenal of human progress" (Abbott 1978:22).

The study circle approach can also be seen to meet many of the requirements of critical theory and action research as discussed in Chapter two. That is collaborative, non hierarchical, based upon practice, not theory, a "bottom up" initiative, reflective, subjective, democratic, participatory and co-operative. Whether or not study circles themselves are totally reflective of action research or are a practical application in response to critical theory is nonetheless contestable. Arguably some may view the above discussion on study circles as an example of a good solid non-threatening lower middle class education strategy and disregard them as an inappropriate action research milieu. This may be so, however, discussion thus far has attempted to demonstrate that if study circles are conducted properly they may perhaps be a vehicle for empowerment and increase the agency of marginalised peoples.

Furthermore, the general aim of this study is to establish:

> '… whether, and investigate how, a Swedish study circle contributes to the empowerment of the unemployed research participants, both at an individual and group level'.

In other words, this study is an attempt to investigate the worth of study circles themselves.

Having established the thematic concern, unemployment, in Chapter one, and discussed the methodology to be employed in this research – action research in Chapter two, Chapter three has attempted to demonstrate that the study circle approach may prove to be a relevant and applicable milieu for this emancipatory action research study into unemployment. The next Chapter now merges the thematic concern, methodology and the milieu, to focus on the practicalities of planning how the research progressed. That is, the plan, act, observe and reflect components of action research and the practical application of the study circle milieu.

Chapter four - Method

Table one: Thesis structure

Part one
Methodology/literature review

Part two
Study circle season

Chapter one,
Thematic Concern.
Unemployment

Chapter two,
Methodology.
Action research

Chapter three,
Milieu.
Study circle.

Chapter four,
Method.

Chapter five,
Overview of season.

Chapter six,
Concerns and themes
raised.

Chapter seven,
Individual accounts.

Chapter eight,
Conclusion.
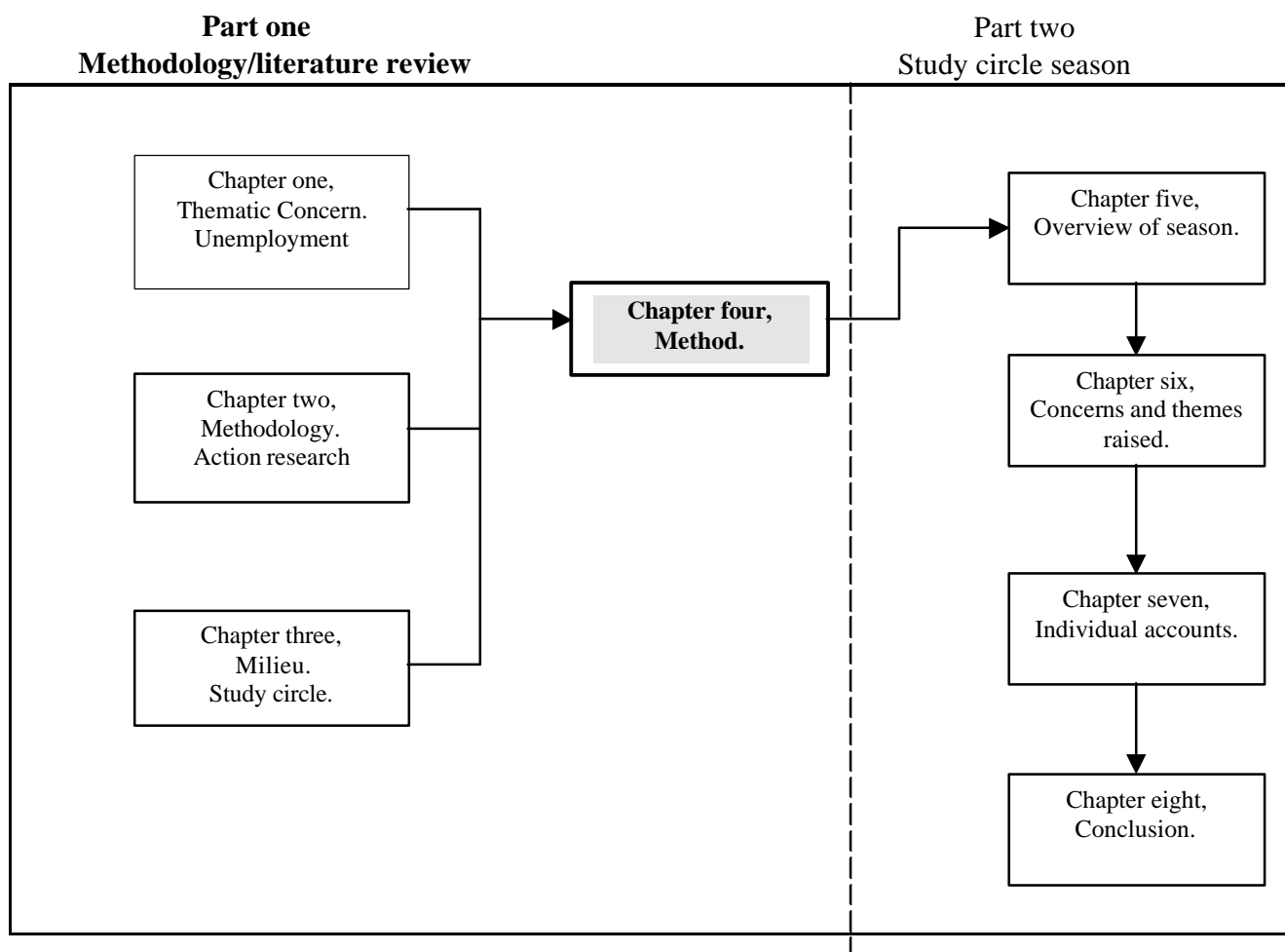
4.1   Introduction

This Chapter now merges together the theoretical understandings of the thematic concern, methodology and milieu as illustrated in Table one, and discusses how the understandings of the first three Chapters were applied to a method that had practical implications.

Traditionally, action research involves four distinct phases of a research cycle; planning, action, observation and reflection (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). However as mentioned previously, these phases should not be overtly prescriptive, rather the cycles should evolve naturally through the research process (McTaggart 1997).

Based upon the discussion in the previous Chapters on methodology and study circles, this Chapter elaborates on the actual methods used to carry out the study. In an action research sense, this Chapter therefore explains the preparatory stage of the action research cycle. The three key areas of the research that required planning were:

- The organisational and practical aspects of conducting the study circle season itself (that is; preparing and *plan*ning the milieu before initiating the process or *act*ion).

- The methods to be used to collect data (that is; planning how to *observe and record* any action that occurred).

- The pre-planning and preparedness of issues such as triangulation, internal validity and reflective analysis (that is; preparing for the *reflect*ive stage of observation).

In some ways, these areas tend to overlap, as action research is action orientated, theoretically it is sometimes considered that there is no actual distinction between the research function and practice function (Jones 1994a; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

4.2   Planning the study circle

Within the tradition of action research as discussed in Chapter two, the researcher would need to be a study circle member themselves, to be immersed and participate in, the process (Burns 1995, Lather 1991b, Connell 1983). This could be considered to influence researcher subjectivity, however as discussed previously, subjectivity is viewed in a different light in critical/action research methodologies as opposed to empirical approaches. However in line with critical theory, standpoint theory demands that the knowledge derived from the research needs to be from the participant's perspective. In effect the researcher needed to be fully aware of his/her influence on the research process and actively attempt to maintain a "low key" approach. The challenge was to be present, participate and listen, but not overtly influence the participants or data. It was vital

however, that no matter how problematic the development of planning and the associated responsibilities were, eventual responsibility needed to be owned by the research participants.

This was obviously a challenging factor that needed to be addressed, as Lather warns:

> 'For those interested in the development of a praxis-orientated[42] research paradigm, a key issue revolves around this central challenge: how to maximise self as a mediator between people's self-understanding and the need for ideology critique and transformative social action *without becoming impositional'* [original emphasis] (1991:64).

4.2.1   Developing the discussion guide

The initial planning of the study circle season, which needed to be done due to academic protocol, was predominantly guided by the insights and knowledge presented in Chapter three on study circles. One important initial task therefore was the preparation of a discussion guide.

In Chapter three, it was established that prior to commencing a study circle season careful planning needed to be carried out, which included the development of a discussion guide. A search for many months, almost worldwide was fruitless in trying to uncover a suitable and applicable resource for the purpose of focusing on the issue of unemployment from a study circle perspective.[43] Some were partially applicable however most were from overseas. *"The Problem of Full Employment - An Outline For Study Circles"* (Robinson 1943), was useful but extremely dated. *"Welfare Reform. What Should We Do For Our Nations Poor?"* (SCRC 1992), had useful content that could be incorporated, but did not focus specifically on the issue of unemployment and was not Australian. *"Shaping The Future. The Future Of Work Discussion Kit"* (Pine, Jackson and MacNeill 1996), seemed

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[42]   Praxis; "… the continuous interplay between doing something and revising our thought about what ought to be done" (Noffke and Stevenson 1995:1).

[43]   Similar to the 'Pioneer Work' example discussed in Chapter three, most educational and training resources for the unemployed focus on VET or job search skills (Ward and Forrester 1989).

applicable initially and was local, but under scrutiny it was lacking for the following reason. The resource was originally adapted from a kit entitled *"Women Shaping the Future"* by the Victorian Women's Trust (Pine, Jackson and MacNeill 1996). Although the discussion guide was sympathetic to gender inequalities in relation to the labour market, this specific issue was seen as only one of many issues in relation to unemployment. The focus of the above text dealt mainly on gender issues and the meaning of work. Both were legitimate concerns but it was felt that the study circle discussion guide for this research needed to be broader in order to encompass a range of issues in relation to unemployment, yet be brief and precise. Also, the author Macdonald from the Brotherhood of St Laurence was contacted and visited in relation to this resource. Her view having used the discussion guide herself was that sessions she conducted using this resource tended to "fade out" at the end. She found no distinct action occurred nor was there a clear end or finality to the program.

However a resource entitled *"A Working Society?"* (Coventry 1997) produced by the Salvation Army did contain much relevant content. Although not written in a study circle discussion guide format, the document provided ten different brief and concise views on the issue of unemployment, including causes and possible solutions. This resource was also written in a similar format and style to the discussion guides produced by AAACE and SCRC. It eventually provided some relevant content for the discussion guide developed for this study.

The final discussion guide was based on topic content that derived from the above texts as well as Brophy (1996), Borland (1995), Jones (1995), Windschuttle (1979), and many articles from metropolitan newspapers.

The format and structure of the discussion guide was also complemented by utilising instructive references including: *"Guidelines For Organizing and Leading a Study Circle"* (SCRC 1991a), *"Guidelines for Creating Effective Study Circle Material"*

(SCRC 1994), *"Guidelines For Effective Study Circles"* (AAACE 1995), and *"Guidelines For Developing Study Circle Course Material"* (SCRC 1989).

Examples of other discussion guides and kits were also utilised to develop the discussion guide (see appendix 3). An attempt was made to reflect the flow, structure and format of existing published study circle discussion guides including: *"American Society and Economic Policy. What Should Our Goals Be?"* (SCRC 1991b), *"The Busy Citizen Discussion Guide"* series including: *"Civil Right for Gays and Lesbians"* (SCRC 1993a), *"Sexual Harassment"* (SCRC 1993b), *"Youth Issues, Youth Voices"* (SCRC 1996), *"Violence In Our Communities"* (SCRC 1994), *"Education in Our Communities"* (SCRC 1995), *"Racism and Race Relations"* (SCRC 1994), and the local *"Australians For Reconciliation Study Circle Kit"* (1993).

While compiling the discussion guide and prior to the study circle season two important concerns highlighted by the literature review needed addressing. Firstly, the researcher although becoming more knowledgeable in relation to the pedagogical theory of study circles had up until that stage of the research never been a member or leader of a study circle. Secondly, it could be presumed that there would be little chance that the potential members would have direct experience with the study circle learning format as well.

To address the first concern and gain some practical experience in a study circle the researcher contacted the AAACE and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to establish where and when a study circle would be conducted on Aboriginal Reconciliation. Fortunately the Uniting Church in Williamstown, Melbourne was about to commence a study circle where a group of about seven members met once a week at a domestic residence in Williamstown, Melbourne. Being a member for nearly two months in July and August of 1997 was useful. The primary purpose was to "experience" a study circle, and to furnish any theoretical understanding with a practical experience of being a member.

This exercise constituted a preliminary, informal research reconnaissance exercise and professional development in light of information derived from the literature review regarding study circles. The experience was valuable and strategies were adopted and implemented for this study, including the idea of forwarding a letter to members between sessions (see appendix 4). The study circle progressed well, the group bonded, guests were invited, documentaries viewed and discussion and activities were planned and carried out. The process did result in some action initiatives. In February 1998 a page length column was placed in the local paper, funded by members and donations consisting of a formal apology to the indigenous people of the area for atrocities carried out by previous white generations. There was also a display, which was organised for the Williamstown Heritage Festival in April 1998, outlining reconciliation issues. However, there was a perception, later informally confirmed by the co-ordinator that there were some problems with the process. Firstly, the discussion guide was quite large, cumbersome, and contained an overabundance of information with sixty-five pages (A4 size). Comparatively SCRC kits are approximately twenty-five to thirty pages (B3 size) (see appendix 3). Neither was there the ranges of "views" that are normally associated with a traditional study circle discussion guides from overseas.

Aside from this, the kit was arguably sparse in regard to thoroughly covering the study circle process itself, including the leader and member roles and principles for discussion, further highlighting the need for members to be aware and knowledgeable of study circle principles.

As with previous research findings discussed in Chapter three, and from my own experiences of study circles, the members looked to the co-ordinator for direction (MacDonald also mentioned this in regard to the Future of Work Discussion Kit). This perhaps relates back to the difference between Australian and USA cultures and Scandinavian cultures. In our Australian culture, teaching, training, lectures and meetings tend to have one person who acts as the expert, who is in charge and leads the group, and is considered the authoritative figure. We perhaps are conditioned at an early age in our

society to accept this "way" of learning. That is the "expert" or authority, although perhaps eclectic and utilising a variety of novel learning approaches, s/he is still the person everyone turns to when there is a pause, gap or ending after a summation. The coordinator of the Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circle discussed with me how the group members always looked to her for direction. She was aware that the leader role needed to be shared but had difficulty trying to pass on the responsibility to other members in a tactful manner. I observed this occurring during the season and was also passive like other members, not being active in taking up the role as leader. The old habit of the "teacher-learner" power relationship seemed to be a strong, socially conditioned factor. As discussed in Chapter three, the literature had highlighted this potential issue and although a common problem in countries outside of Sweden, it can sometimes even be a problem there as well.

Gibson refers to this potential problem:

> 'We know that facilitation is particularly important and that for some groups this can be a problem. We also know that learning circles do not always work easily with people who expect an authoritarian, didactic style of learning and are unable to cope with a different process. The skill of the facilitator is particularly important in these cases' (1998:9).

Moraitis suggests an alternative reason for members being reserved: "… there are difficulties with this [study circle] approach. It presupposes that individuals … feel they have the confidence and competence to criticise, to entertain alternative views and to advocate a position" (1996:16). In planning the study circle season the challenge therefore was how to address these extremely important issues; firstly how study circles are very different to traditionally accepted ways of learning: secondly how to encourage members to take up, feel confident and accept the role of leader; and thirdly, how to ensure the leadership was effective and not revert back to a traditional authoritarian or didactic style.

In an attempt to address these problems content from "*A Guide To Training Study Circle Leaders*" (AAACE 1995) was referred to and integrated into the early sections of the discussion guide. Although a difficult, cumbersome and perhaps dangerous tactic due to the extra content being included in the guide, previous literature, as discussed in Chapter three, showed that this issue was critical enough to require it to be addressed (Shires and Crawford 1999a; Costigan and Letcher 1987; Oliver 1987). This, it was perceived, would enhance the quality of the study circle season, as each member would progress through the early sessions learning what a study circle was, and how to be a member and leader whilst also addressing the topic (thematic concern) of unemployment. Law (1997) in her action research adopted the notion of "intentional nudging" to encourage participants to take control and decide on the groups direction.

To evaluate the guide's applicability and relevance, Gibson highlights key features that successful study circle material needs to be: "… it should be written in clear and simple language, and be both succinct and authoritative … Issues [should also be] … divided into manageable portions" (1998:4-5). Furthermore, Gibson claims that materials should provide the following elements:

- 'Basic information about the learning circle process.
- Guidelines for a productive discussion, which includes ground rules.
- Structure and continuity for several sessions.
- A means to personalise the issue. Open ended discussion questions for each session that requires members to consider and value people's varying attitudes and experiences. This localises the information and makes it more relevant. It also starts where the learner is.

- A fair and balanced presentation of a range of commonly held views on the issue. This helps take the material beyond being information transfer and into the area of information appraisal.

- Opportunity to consider possible action and change' (1998:4-5).

The final draft of the discussion guide consisted of eight sessions and was originally intended to reflect the number of times the group was to meet (appendix 2). It was expected that the researcher would need to lead the group initially, but would devolve and "intentionally nudge" this responsibility as quickly as possible to other members.

4.2.2 Recruiting members

A flyer requesting voluntary study circle members was developed and circulated by mail, fax, notice boards, and personally to numerous organisations and groups during February and March 1998 (appendix 5.1). These included:

- Case management organisations in Footscray and Sunshine;
- Centrelink at Footscray and Newport;
- Melbourne City Mission, Footscray;
- Footscray CES, Footscray;
- Western Melbourne Institute of TAFE (WMIT), Footscray[44];
- Victoria University, Footscray;
- Bridging Education and Training (BEAT), Footscray;
- Victorian Unemployed Workers Coalition, Melbourne;
- Council of Adult Education, Melbourne;
- Footscray and Newport Skillshares;
- Uniting Church, Williamstown;
- Williamstown Coffee House, Williamstown;
- Brotherhood of St Laurence, Carlton;
- Breaking the Cycle, Newport;
- Yes West, Sunshine and Footscray;
- Welfare Rights Unit, Collingwood; and
- Unemployed Workers Support Group, Melbourne.

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[44]   WMIT merged with Victoria University later in 1998.

A media release (appendix 5.2) was also developed and information was placed in two local newspapers: the Williamstown Advertiser and the Western Independent (appendix 5.3). A brief presentation and request for members was also conducted with students in two LMPs at WMIT. Finally, the local state ALP branch was also kind enough to include a flyer in its monthly mail out. This type of approach is supported by Reason as he suggests that "action research groups are often set up through some form of advertising to a likely population" (1990:22).

Volunteers started telephoning in mid March 1998. Two saw the flyer though the Brotherhood of St Laurence, two from Newport Skillshare, one from Footscray Skillshare, one from WMIT, three from the Victorian Unemployed Workers Coalition, one through word of mouth and one from the local newspaper. In all a total of ten inquiries. Once this prescribed number of interested participants of five or more was achieved, a date was set to commence the study circle season.

This response rate was disappointing considering the extent to which notification was circulated. Although open to conjecture, reasons for the low response rate could be attributed to several factors. Firstly the word "study" in study circle possibly reflected a negative image to some people who have had ineffective experiences with education (as discussed in Chapter two). At the time this was briefly discussed with AAACE staff and even they were considering altering the name in some way. However it was decided to stay with the "study circle" term as it was believed that with the popularity and publicity of the Aboriginal Reconciliation study circle effort, some may make a positive connection. A second reason for low response could have been due to the recommendation in study circle instructional literature that a sponsoring organisation oversee and endorse study circle initiatives to assist in promoting and recruiting (SCRC 1989:4), for example church,[45] community groups, public and private organisations or businesses. Perhaps the absence of an official alignment with a specific organisation caused the reduced effectiveness in recruiting members (although Victoria University was

[45]   As with the Aboriginal Reconciliation study circle with the Uniting Church in Williamstown.

noted on flyers). Thirdly, a separate but related issue is that of personally contacting prospective members. The literature suggested that this was an effective method in recruitment strategies (SCRC 1989). Although this approach was done on a small scale, with the two presentations at LMPs, it could have perhaps been broader. Fourthly, at the time of conducting this research the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), Centrelink, training providers and case management were going through massive changes in response to new Commonwealth Government legislative changes and the formation of the Job Network and Employment Services initiatives.[46] Many LMPs were being wound down and it could be argued that during times of change many people may have been preoccupied, pensive in relation to change, and reserved in taking up new commitments. The fifth reason for low numbers could also have been that the study circle was directly related to academic research. Perhaps this was intimidating on its own and furthermore, those who withdrew for various reasons after being briefed about the study may have felt that they were under scrutiny or investigation with the notion of signing consent forms, offering personal information and having themselves questioned and recorded. This is often the case with welfare recipients as they constantly feel under surveillance from beauracracies (Winefield et al 1996).

Finally, the literature had informed that often "fear of new experiences" could be reason to withdraw from a study circle just before commencement (Oliver 1987). All these causes are open to conjecture. Some, all or none may be accurate, however it is relevant to reflect upon these possibilities as part of the research process and may assist in flagging possible challenges that other study circle initiatives may face. Nonetheless, the required minimum number of five or more members for commencement was achieved, and the possible problem of selecting a diverse sample from many applicants was also alleviated.[47]

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[46]   The Job Network has since replaced the former CES. Job Network members include three hundred private and community organisations as well as Employment National, which is government owned. Job Network providers receive government funding on a contractual basis to assist the unemployed into work (Rance 1999).

After initial inquiries, potential participants were firstly mailed a kit containing:

- A letter (appendix 6.1).
- The flyer (appendix 5.1).
- A copy of "Guidelines for Effective Study Circles" (AAACE 1995).
- Victoria University Consent Form (appendix 7).
- A Participant Information Form (appendix 8).
- A Background Information Form (appendix 9).
- A copy of the pre interview questions (appendix 10.1).[48]

After a few days individuals were recontacted to confirm if they still wished to participate. One declined at this stage. A meeting was arranged with the nine that accepted to check what days and times for the study circle sessions suited each participant. Individual pre study circle interviews were then planned at various locations for individual participants[49]. All interviews (including mid and end) were conducted at a location preferred by the participant. As Fetterman states: "In order to help the interviewees feel more comfortable and at ease…the interviewer should meet the individuals … on their own "turf"" (1991:12).

A site for study circle season was organised through Victoria University at the Institute for Youth, Education and Community in Footscray. After contacting all participants and establishing a time and day that suited them all, a two hour session was arranged to commence on April second, 1998 at three fifteen p.m. Scheduling of further meetings would be organised according to the collective wishes of the membership. This (two hours over eight weeks) is the frequency of study circle sessions and duration of season recommended by Gibson (1998).

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[47] The issue of samples will be addressed later in this Chapter.
[48] Rationale elaborated upon later in Chapter.
[49] Details in relation to the content of these interviews are discussed later in this Chapter. The locations of all interviews are noted on all transcripts (appendix 11, 18 and 19).

Each pre interview meeting with applicants progressed in the following manner:

- Discussing the research and study circles.

- Answering any questions the potential members may have had.

- Reconfirming their wish to participate.

- Completing Victoria University Consent Form and Participant Information and Background Forms.

- Conducting pre study circle interview (tape recorded).

- Informing participant that transcripts would be forwarded to them to check, change, edit and confirm.

- Clarifying first session time, date and location.

Following these interviews participants were sent a letter and copy of their interview transcript for checking and editing (appendix 6.2 and 11.1 to 11.5). This exercise constituted the first individual "loop" of experience and reflection at an individual level (Reason 1990). As the participants were able to edit their own transcript it was also envisaged that this would create an initial feeling of collaborative trust (Burns 1995; Lather 1991).

During this initial pre study circle individual meeting a number of issues emerged which were considered to need addressing prior to the season commencing. Several members asked various questions, wanting to know more about the research, my background, why I was interested in unemployment and more about study circles. A further letter was therefore sent out on March thirty to address these questions and concerns, and also to again to remind participants of the study circle commencement date, time and location (appendix 6.2). Although participants had combinations of different concerns, it was appropriate to address all issues raised in the individual interview sessions with all participants via the letter (aside from any confidential matters). It was important to start off with openness, demonstrating how the experience would be shared by all. As Lather

suggests; "… self disclosure on the part of the researcher … encourages reciprocacy" (1991:60).

Prior to the first meeting, four posters were prepared and displayed on the wall. One was entitled "Members' Guide" with the abridged ten key principles for effective discussion taken from "Guidelines for Effective Study Circles" (SCRC 1995) (appendix 12). Another poster was entitled "Issues", but not filled out (appendix 13, completed version). This was intended to act as the focus for what the group decided were important issues to tackle during the season. A third poster entitled "Objectives" intended to cover what individuals wanted from the experience, included two initial objectives: "To become effective study circle members and leaders" and "to explore the issue of unemployment in a democratic and participatory manner" (SCRC 1995) (appendix 14). A fourth poster entitled "Groundrules" encompassed how the group would operate and guidelines on how members would interact on a personal level with each other (appendix 15).

Although nine potential participants were met and interviewed, eventually only five of the original nine decided to participate. The reasons for this attrition have been discussed previously. This made a membership of six altogether including the researcher. Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee guidelines required that all participants select a pseudonym of their choice to be used in all interview and session transcripts as well as in the final thesis.

4.2.3   Sample size

Sample sizes are considered not of paramount importance in either critical theory or emancipatory action research as previously discussed in Chapter two. Rather, critical research aims to be reflective in nature, whereas this one study circle with a small representation of the sample population intends to raise tentative and provisional findings which others can reflect upon in relation to their own context (Burns 1995). The emphasis in this study is therefore "depth" not "breadth". It is recognised that it is not possible, nor

is it the intention here to form reliable generalisations from a basis of the eventual six participants. However as Gall, Borg and Gall state: "… a study that probes deeply into the characterisation of a small sample often provides more knowledge than a study that attacks the same problem by collecting only shallow information on a large scale" (1996:231). Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter three, Kurland's and the DPA-NIF study circle experiences in the USA demonstrated the potential problems in relation to aiming for quantity rather than quality.(Oliver 1997).

Nonetheless, it could be argued that the approach adopted in this study is a convenient available self selecting sample approach often used by educational and action researchers (Patton 1990; Best 1977). Patton, in an earlier publication contributed some noteworthy advice to those who criticise non specific sample approaches to reduce credibility:

> 'It is worth remembering that some of the major breakthroughs in knowledge have come from studies with small sample sizes. Freud's work was based on a few clinical cases. Piaget significantly changed educational thinking about how children learn with an in-depth study of two children - his own. There are even rumours that Newton's major contributions in physics began with the study of a single apple' (1982:218).

He also advises those who find the idea of research with small samples unreasonable, with the following amusing insight: "... the next time you go for a physical check-up I hope you'll insist that they take all your blood - not just a sample" (1982:218).

A separate but relevant issue that Fetterman alerts researchers to is: "The selection and definition of the culture or subculture and problem, respectively, constitute significant ethical decisions" (1989:128). In this sense this research can be seen to fulfil the above ethical criteria as the participants self selected from the prompts in the recruitment flyer. That is; unemployed and interested in the issue of unemployment. The definition of this "culture" is therefore a response to the flyer; furthermore no applicants were screened or excluded from participating. This may suggest that the research participants consist of

those who are predisposed to being "active" (de-Vaus 1995). However, aside from the necessity that research participants in any research need to be volunteers for ethical reasons, study circle protocol endorses the voluntary nature of participation. Furthermore, active and interested participants would assist catalytic validity.[50] As de Vaus explain, this can be problematic in relation to sampling, but the voluntary nature of participation is vital:

> 'Voluntary participation, however, conflicts with the principles of representative sampling…[because]…Given the choice, certain types of people (e.g. those groups with low levels of education, from non-English speaking backgrounds) are more likely than others to decline to participate…However, compulsory [participation] is not the solution…it is best to maximise and do all we reasonably can to encourage voluntary participation.' (1995:332)

There is also the issue that the actual researcher was not unemployed. However as Fetterman (1989) and Burns (1995) state in relation to action research, the researcher needs to be immersed in the culture and work collaboratively with the research participants (as also discussed in Chapter two). The issue of unemployment was of concern to the researcher and this needed to be expressed to the participants to demonstrate a commonality of concern amongst all. Therefore these mutual concerns over the issue of unemployment, which needed to be discussed with participants, were articulated at the pre-meeting stage and followed up in resultant correspondence (appendix 6.2). This, it was considered further rationalised the inclusion of the researcher in the process as discussed in Chapters two and three.

In relation to the discussion on reflective analysis in Chapter two, validity in participatory research is also strengthened when high convergence is employed. In relation to the experience and reflection phases, Reason suggests that cycling is maximally convergent when all parties explore the same "aspect" of an inquiry repeatedly (1990). In this particular study there were six participants (including the researcher), and eight study

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[50]   Catalytic validity is explained and discussed later in this Chapter.

circle sessions, therefore as Reason (1990) emphasises an "aspect" or thematic concern (in this case, unemployment), is explored up to a total of forty-eight times within the study circle season. Aside from this, each participant was individually interviewed, pre, mid and at the end of the season[51] (plus twenty-five), and a post study circle meeting was conducted after the season (plus six). This therefore constitutes a total of seventy-nine occasions where the same thematic concern was explored, thereby providing high convergence.

Reason states "The strength of total convergence is that it does revise that one aspect very thoroughly, with a maximal number of feedback loops" (1990:46). The method adopted to collect data with this study was seen to be fulfilling this requirement that Reason suggests increases validity.

Finally, in relation to suggested study protocol discussed in Chapter three, the literature suggested that study circles are able to operate efficiently with as little as five, yet no more than ten members (Gibson 1998; McCoy et al. 1996; Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992; Brevskolan 1980). The final membership of six therefore exceeded this minimum requirement.

4.3 Planning the data collection

'Researchers are not so much owners of data as they are 'majority stakeholders' who … give participants a public forum for critique' (Lather 1991:58).

In relation to action research, Kemmis and McTaggart state that "observation" needs to be tentatively planned in advance, but the "subject matter" of observation "will always be action" (1988:13). Observation therefore needed to document action but action would "take place in real time" and would be "fluid and dynamic" (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988:13). Furthermore as Reason (1990) suggests there needs to be a balanced cycle of experience and reflection, both at individual and collective levels.

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[51]   Interviews and post study circle meeting are discussed later in this Chapter.

As stated in Chapter one, the organisational specific aim 'c' of this study was "To gather data by conducting beginning, mid and end interviews with each participant, recording and transcribing meetings and collecting any documentation produced". The following data collection methods were therefore employed;

- After each session, the researcher summarised the main themes of discussion. These interpretations were then forwarded in a letter sent out to all individual participants before the start of the subsequent session. At the commencement of each subsequent session, these themes were discussed and collectively agreed upon prior to the session commencing.

- Study circle sessions were tape recorded, transcribed and made available for participants to view later in the season.

- Resources, documentation and information produced by participants during the study circle season were all collected.

- The semi structured interview schedule was given to participants beforehand for the interviewee to review and consider responses. Pre, mid and post study circle interviews were conducted individually with each participant. These were tape recorded, transcribed and given to participants to check, clarify, edit and validate.

- A draft of the thesis was sent to every individual participant after the study circle season to peruse, check and respond to how their quotes and the reflections had been presented within the context of the thesis, to further validate.

- The group met again at a post study circle meeting a year later to discuss their views and opinions concerning the draft of the thesis and to contribute further to the reflections contained within.

The above methodology was also seen to fulfil the Code of Ethics of the Australian Association for Research in Education in that; "Participants in research should be involved in the planning and conduct of the research and in preparation of the findings,

where ever this will be of benefit to them and will not jeopardise the efficiency of the research" (Bibby (ed) 1997:118).

4.3.1   Correspondence

Critical research procedures endorse the inclusion and involvement of research participants (Smith 1993b). Therefore, between each study circle session or as Reason (1990) would suggest, after each "experience phase" members were mailed a letter briefly presenting general themes that emerged from the previous session and a tentatively agreed agenda for the next session. They were then requested to critique the contents of this correspondence at the commencement of the following session (Kellehear 1995) (appendix 6). This was done to minimise the danger of imposing meaning as highlighted by Lather: "Meaning needs to be constructed through negotiation" (1991:110). Therefore interpretation was developed by both researcher and research participants to increase internal validity (Kellehear 1995; Fetterman 1989).   That is, to ascertain that these reflections emerged from the actual study circle session itself.   In effect the letter described, from the researchers perspective, what issues emerged and what future direction was agreed upon for the next session. The researchers description of events was then discussed by all members at the commencement of the following session to ascertain whether these recollections were valid. A tentative agenda, was also included with each letter that had been agreed upon in the prior session. This agenda was revisited again at the commencement of each session. This approach, the descriptive, the evaluative, and the practical are the three areas of reflection that Reason (1990) suggests need to be included in action research. This process also enabled planning to be flexible and was carried out eight times as is represented in the Table below:

Table seven: Data collection, correspondence

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                                           │
│                                         ┌───────────────────────┐         │
│                                         │ Letter forwarded to   │         │
│   ┌───────────────────────┐             │ participant before next│        │
│   │                       │             │ session with reflections│       │
│   │ Study circle session. │────────────▶│ and tentative agenda. │         │
│   │                       │             │                       │         │
│   └───────────────────────┘             └───────────┬───────────┘         │
│                                                      │                     │
│                                                      ▼                     │
│   ┌───────────────────────┐             ┌───────────────────────┐         │
│   │                       │             │ Contents of letter    │         │
│   │                       │             │ discussed and         │         │
│   │         Data.         │◀────────────│ validated at start of │         │
│   │                       │             │ session.              │         │
│   └───────────────────────┘             └───────────────────────┘         │
│                                                                           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```
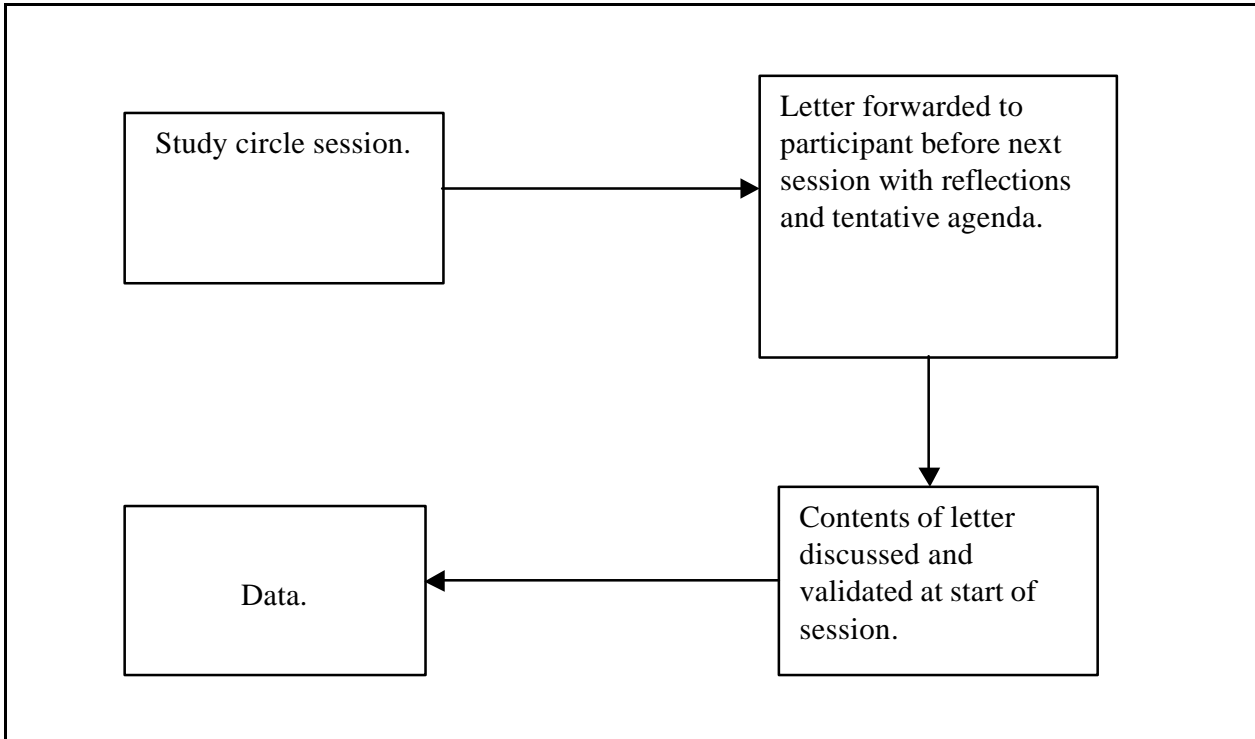
In effect, interpretation and analysis was collaboratively performed in a reflective manner throughout the entire research process. The researcher's reflections were not strictly imposed and participants were able to develop their own interpretations (Kemmis and McTaggart 1990). A further benefit of this method was that participants could reflect on the letter on their own, individually before meeting again as a group. In this way the individual and collective were both addressed with the one method (Smith 1997; Reason 199). It was also considered that this letter would also act as an impetus and prompt between sessions to keep participants thinking about the issues and process and help them prepare for the next session. In this way it also considered to be a good vehicle to promote and strengthen internal and catalytic validity (explained and discussed later in this Chapter) by keeping participants focused on the process and thinking about the issues.

Fundamentally internal validity in action research is tied to how closely the researcher's understandings are to the research participants' understandings (Kellehear 1993). Smith, using the term "face validity" states; "This is the return of data to the participants for analysis and interpretation to increase credibility of data" (1997:242). An effort to maximise the internal validity of this research was made via participant input (Lather 1991). The convergence of the researcher and participants via the dialogic design of the research was therefore intended to strengthen validity (Kellehear 1993; Lather 1991).

4.3.2 Session transcripts

It was planned that all study circle sessions were to be tape recorded and transcribed in full as soon as possible after each meeting (see appendix 16). The transcripts would not only be a valuable source of raw data for the reflective analysis stage of the research but also assist, as Reason (1990) suggests, in the direction of future circle sessions. The transcripts would therefore provide the opportunity to reflectively analyse discussion and "pick up" any discourse that may otherwise be missed (James 1994). The transcripts would also be used to help clarify themes which helped focus further study circle season direction. By taping study circle proceedings the researcher was also able to concentrate on the group more effectively, listen to all members and "be present" rather than spend time writing notes (The transcripts are contained in appendix 16).[52]

The literature stated that action research needs to create open-ended possibilities and that therefore the "unexpected" is common in critical research (Kemmis 1997; Peirce 1995; Wadsworth 1993a). For this reason the unexpected needed to be planned for and contingencies put in place for any data that needed analysis and reflection in relation to firstly, the study circle process itself and any themes that emerged from the study circle session discussions and secondly, the research process itself. It was envisaged that the recording and transcribing of all sessions would achieve this. The analysis of the

transcripts would be done manually rather than using any technical or mechanical approach that may be reductionist or lead to quantitative results rather than qualitative reflections. This is discussed further in Chapter six.

There was also the collection of any "hard" data in the form of articles, handouts or written material produced or received by study circle members. This data was collected and utilised to further support internal validity.

This process was carried out eight times and is represented in the Table below.

Table eight: Data collection process, session transcripts

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
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│   ┌─────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────┐              │
│   │  Session tape   │─────────────▶│   Recording     │              │
│   │   recorded.     │              │  transcribed.   │              │
│   └─────────────────┘              └─────────────────┘              │
│                                            │                        │
│                                            ▼                        │
│   ┌─────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────┐              │
│   │                 │              │   Transcripts   │              │
│   │      Data.      │◀─────────────│    given to     │              │
│   │                 │              │  participants to│              │
│   │                 │              │    validate.    │              │
│   └─────────────────┘              └─────────────────┘              │
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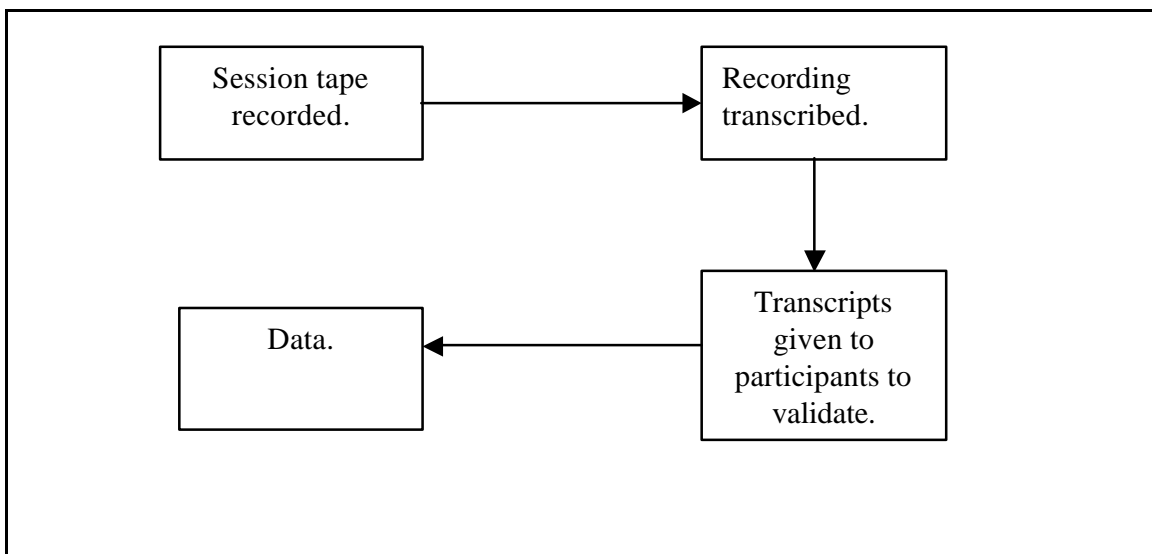
[52]   Unfortunately the fifth session transcript is not available as a technical problem occurred with the Dictaphone. However, the themes and general essence of the session was captured by further discussion during session six and correspondence (discussed further in Chapter nine).

4.3.3 Interviews

The semi structured interviews with participants were conducted at the beginning, midway, and as soon as practical after the study circle season. A semi structured interview approach was adopted as it adhered well to the action research tradition of flexibility and responsiveness (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988) and offered the liberty and option to explore, clarify and elaborate on responses (Burns 1995; Turney and Robb 1971).

A semi structured interview approach also "… tends to provide relevant and valuable data" (James 1994:284), by clarifying issues, and investigating misunderstandings (Burns 1995). These factors, together with having worked with the participants for some time in the case of the later interviews, would assist in ensuring the collection of meaningful data. As Fetterman states: "... working with people ... for long periods of time is what gives ... research its validity and vitality" (1989:46). All interviews were recorded with the consent of each participant. Taping interviews "… allows the researcher to engage in informal and semi structured interviews without the distraction of manually recording devices" (Fetterman 1989:81). They also "… capture ... quotations ... while maintaining a natural conversational flow" (Fetterman 1989:81). The semi-structured approach also allowed for digression and clarification as "... the researcher is an active participant in qualitative research and [needs to] immerse [him/herself in the interview and] … try to understand the person's story from his/her vantagepoint" (Gluck and Patai 1991:19). As a result the actual discourse in the interview transcript questions, although fundamentally similar, do differ on occasions. This was perceived as acceptable as with critical research "It is important to express an opinion at particular times … the interviewer should not come across as a passive object with no moral code or personality whatsoever" (Fetterman 1991:17).[53]

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[53] It is also pertinent to note here that the study circle transcripts could be perceived to contain some subjective opinions by the researcher. This was done to primarily be an active 'member' and be involved in discussion as well as to elicit deeper responses. As Lather suggests, action research

The interviews would also help clarify, assess and reflect upon the effectiveness of the study circle over the study circle season from the participants' individual perspectives. As Fetterman states: "The objective is to learn from the interviewee" (1989:56). The individual interviews would also provide the opportunity to address Reason's requirement (1990) to balance individual and collective research cycling (see Chapter two). Smith warns of a "… consensus tyranny" and suggests it is essential to attend to the group as a whole and to the individuals …" (1997:186). In effect, as well as experiencing and reflecting upon the study circle season as a group each participant was able to reflect individually at the mid and end interview stage. Moreover, the mid and end points of a circle season are considered excellent times to assess the actual study circle's effectiveness (SCRC, 1995). Sequential interviewing is also recommended in critical research as it facilitates collaboration and a deeper probing of issues (Lather 1991).

This interview process was carried out three times (pre, mid and post session) and is represented in the Table below:

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should be conducted in an: "… interactive, dialogic manner that requires self-disclosure on the part of the researcher which encourages reciprocity" (1991:60).

Table nine: Data collection process, interviews
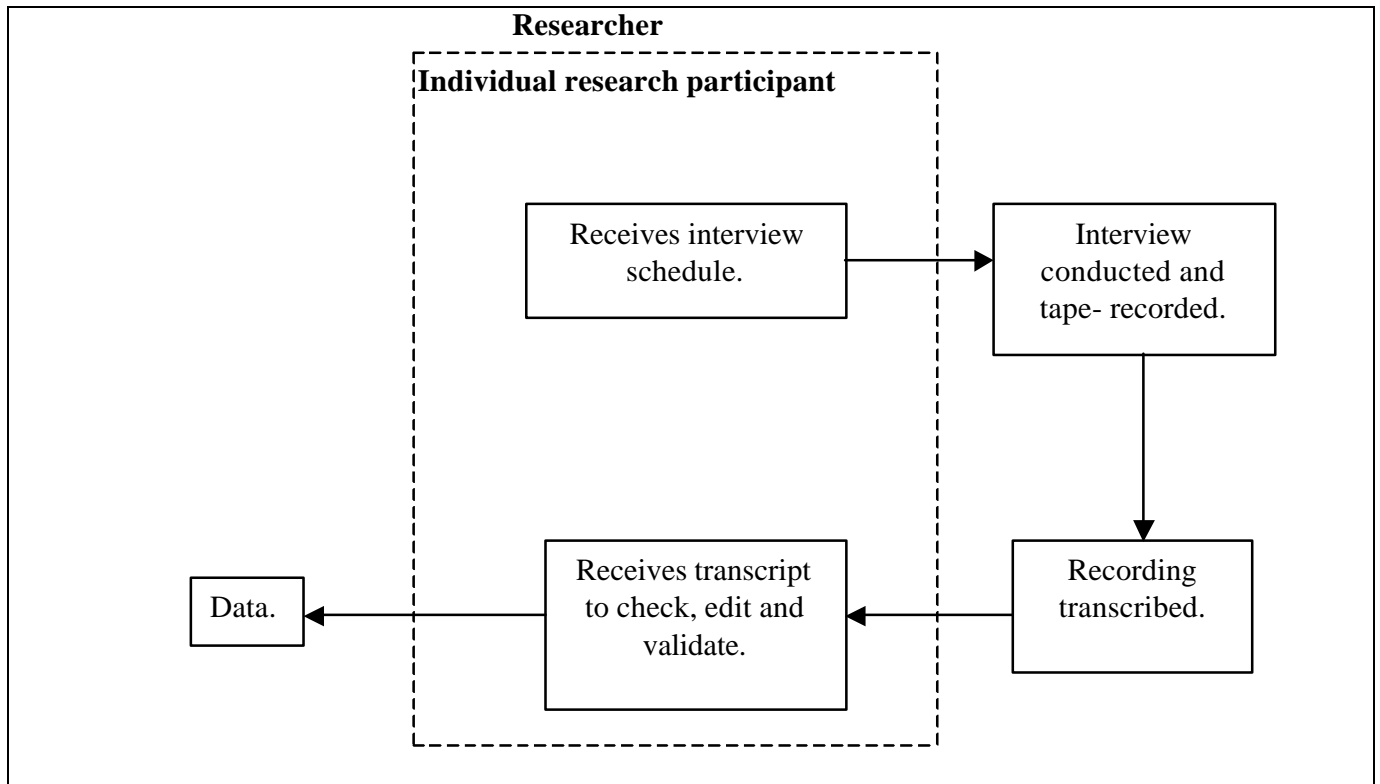
Internal validity is thus improved by relying on both the session and interview transcripts to triangulate (Burns 1995).

As stated in Chapter one, specific aim 'b' of this research was "To utilise Smith's (1993b) three tiered framework of empowerment as a basis for organising and analysing data". To achieve this aim the interview schedule was based upon these three spheres as discussed in Chapter two (Smith 1993b), and had been piloted in previous research (Brophy 1996), although not specifically utilised in a formative critical emancipatory action research study such as this (as discussed in Chapter two[54]). It was important to recognise however that

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[54]   Furthermore, this previous research was not longitudinal, and also participants were undertaking a LMP at the time (Brophy 1996). All participants in this study were not undertaking a LMP program at the time of the pre interview, or during the study circle season, although some had previous LMP experiences.

Smith's stages are malleable and not prescriptive (Kellehear 1993:35) because within critical research methodological frameworks should not necessarily be "… the container into which the data should be poured" (Lather 1991:62).

Questions one to six of the interview schedule were structured in the same manner for all participants, and were ordered in the following manner: Questions one and two concerned the "self-growth" sphere. Both used the word "you" and focused on the personal and individual. They attempted to ascertain if the study circle sessions addressed participants' concerns, situations and contexts.[55] More specifically question one focused on the affective domain of learning and self-esteem in relation to the personal experience of being unemployed, while question two dealt with the personal, and "how you deal with unemployment". Questions three and four led into the "political consciousness raising" sphere, that is, the structural nature of unemployment. Both questions used the words "group" and "talk about" to address the social and political area. Questions five and six looked at the "collective viewpoint action sphere". The word "group" was again used to reflect the collective. Question five addressed the "why" and "how" of unemployment, whilst question six addressed action and change. The questions therefore addressed all of Smith (1993b) three levels while inclusive of both individual and social aspects.

The first part of every question was closed. The initial response to each question could therefore be a simple "yes" or "no" with some possible elaborations. The responses to the initial questions would indicate what aspects of unemployment were discussed (in relation to the mid and end interviews). If the answer to the first part of every question was "yes", further clarification was sought to find out what was discussed. More importantly however, participants were then asked if this discussion "was relevant, useful, and important or not", and asked to explain why. If the answer to the first part of every

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[55]   In relation to the pre-interview, the introductions to each question were framed slightly differently as compared to the mid and end interviews. This was done because participants had not yet experienced a study circle, so firstly it was ascertained if they had been on a LMP. If they had, they were asked if any discussion into unemployment had occurred on the previous LMP. If they had not been on a LMP they were asked if they believed that such content would be relevant, useful or worthwhile.

question was "no", participants were then directly asked if they believed that including such content "would be relevant, useful, and important or not", and asked why (the interview schedules are contained in appendix 10).

To further validate, and ensure that participants considered issues thoughtfully and formulated appropriate responses, a copy of questions was given to participants prior to all interviews. This was seen to help reduce the chance of spontaneous responses and is also a common strategy that is used in action research practices to empower participants (Fetterman 1991). Furthermore, participants were later given back the interview transcripts to review, edit or alter to ensure their own "voices" were documented and not misinterpreted. As Lather proposes in relation to interviews: "… it means for interviews to be co-authored and negotiated in a conscious effort to democratize the research situation" (1991:58).

The pre interview therefore provided the opportunity to firstly pre-empt any emerging issues or concerns in relation to the research or study circle season so as to enable the researcher to be more prepared both before the season, and complement any later reflections. These pre interviews can also be seen as part of a collaborative exercise to include the research participants in the planning stage of the research. A joint researcher and research participant activity which helped in raising issues and in promoting interest in the thematic concern, therefore catalytic validity and also allowing participants to contribute to the design and direction of the study circle season and to refine the method further.

This data is therefore presented here, in this method section of the study for two reasons. Firstly to demonstrate how the participants were included in the planning stages of the action research cycle, before the action and observation stages began in earnest in the form of the study circle season. Secondly, data from the pre and mid/end interviews cannot be compared. This is due to both the nature of the questions themselves and consequentially the responses. The pre interviews were conjecture. In the pre interviews

members were asked if they thought certain content would be useful. They were asked to imagine and suppose if certain content would be beneficial. The pre interviews were therefore pre-emptive. By the mid-interviews, members would have commenced and experienced part of a study circle season and therefore could be asked if it *had been* useful and beneficial. In other words, they would then be commenting on a real experience as opposed to an imagined one.

Therefore, the reflections and tentative findings of this pre interview are presented in this Chapter as they can be considered to be part of the planning stage of the action research cycle, as the study circle season had not yet begun.[56] That is they are not the *result* of action research but rather are part of the planning stage.

In order to ensure the responses to this pre interview had integrity, trustworthiness and internal validity, after transcription the members checked and edited their responses and then re-checked their responses a second time when the thesis was near completion (ie. member check, discussed latter).

The questions, responses and reflections of the pre interview are presented here**:**

Responses to questions one and two – empowerment through self awareness - (“*Were you able/would it be useful to discuss your own personal experience of unemployment and discuss how you deal with unemployment?*” – appendix 10.1).

Two participants had previously been involved in LMP courses that had actually addressed these concerns, their comments further validated the discussion in Chapter four in that discussion of this kind is not uncommon in LMPs.

Paul: *... Not too much was done, there was just a bit of talking ... We did it in groups ... Challenge, kids, future. What's in it for me, what's in it for the employer ... Expressing my opinions, hearing from other people – what their thoughts are* (appendix 11.1:1).[57]

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56   Profiles of each individual participant are provided in Chapter five.
57   Referencing of participant quotes denote appendix number then page number.

Francis: *Yes I was able to do a small amount … I chose to bring my own personal experiences in … Yes I found it useful in that I was able to express my opinions about some of my feelings about situations, and receive suggestions as to different alternatives to handling the situations* (appendix 11.2:1).

These comments generally indicated that such content was useful. The positive aspects to emerge were that the sharing of experiences might assist individuals and the group as a whole to lessen feelings of isolation. However there was conditional approval by some, emphasising that these personal issues need to be carefully dealt with and motives clarified.

Paul: *It would be useful. But it's a very personal thing, and each person handles it in a special way* (appendix 11.1:2).

Francis: [Useful] *For assisting you to come to terms with where you are … to feel supported … more confidence and feel better … being emotionally supported in a way* (appendix 11.2:2).

Pam: *I think that if people are on labour market programs, they're with other people who are unemployed, so it would be good to talk about their experiences … I think the result of that can be not blaming yourself for situation … I suppose it depends on your situation as to whether it's a safe environment to do that* [discuss unemployment] *and what the motivation of the person in investigating that discussion is* (appendix 11.3:1).

Barbara: *… being unemployed is a very isolating experience. Amongst my own personal friends, I find that they don't understand. So … being together with other people who are unemployed, and being able to make sense of your experience, share your experience – is very important … hear how other people deal with it … ideas can be shared* (appendix 11.5:1).

Several responses highlighted the relevance of such content in a course, and questioned both the purpose of LMPs and the ability or experience of the teachers or trainers involved to cope with this content.

Francis: *I think it would be useful, but it wouldn't necessarily be very important, however it would certainly be useful* (appendix 11.2:2).

Pam: *I think it's good to discuss experiences of being unemployed. I don't think a labour market program is necessarily the best place to do that* (appendix 11.3:1).

George: *I don't think it would have been considered relevant* [in a previous LMP course]. *I think it's extremely relevant. It should be allowed, but because of the nature of the institution it would have been considered irrelevant, not worthy of discussion ... it should have been ...* [but] *I don't think the way things are set up would allow that to happen* (appendix 11.4:1).

These responses relate back to the discussion at the end of Chapter three. That training for the unemployed has become so vocationally entrenched that the prospect of looking at the issue of unemployment or personal issues in relation to unemployment seemed irrelevant and even foreign to some (Shields 1991). Yet as both Abbott (1978) and Christie (1998) agree, a training course for unemployed would seem to be an extremely appropriate opportunity to discuss matters of unemployment.

Responses to questions three and four – empowerment through political consciousness raising - ("*Was the group able to/do you think it would be useful if a group could talk about who in our society are most affected by unemployment and possible solutions or ways to fix unemployment?*" – appendix 10.1)

Participants gave reserved approval, voicing their concerns over the sheer enormity of the problem of unemployment. As Shields states; "The denial of power is as endemic to our culture as the denial of feelings" (1991:12).

Paul: *It could be helpful, but it's very difficult. It's entrenched – long term unemployment in our society now...we're in the middle of it ... it's very hard to cure or fix* (appendix 11.1:2).

Barbara: *Probably useful ... I feel really powerless in response to fixing unemployment ... I'm not saying it's not useful or important. I'm just saying it's really hard for me, difficult to respond, to become enthusiastic about* (appendix 11.5:2).

Relevance of such content in a LMP emerged again, whereas perhaps LMPs are seen to be primarily associated with skill attainment therefore the issue of unemployment should not necessarily be discussed however, it is was also seen as a logical opportunity where unemployed people could share experiences and work together.

Pam: *... I wouldn't see that as a prime discussion that I would be wanting to put forward ... I don't know that labour market programs are what I would see as the first priority as to where that's done. But given that people are in labour market programs, I think it would be a good thing if there was the opportunity to do that* (appendix 11.3:2).

One participant highlighted the need for such discussion to be pragmatic, well planned for and not imposed.

George: *Potentially if enough people were interested in it. If it wasn't something that was imposed ... people may develop some sort of solidarity, or understanding of why they were in their present situation ... if it was a well grounded discussion and not just theorising* (appendix 11.4:2-3).

However, again there was the concern about sharing personal information.

George: *It would have to be done well and done with an understanding of peoples' position and not imposed on people* (appendix 11.4:3).

The opportunity for sharing and supporting each other within a group rose again with a number of responses.

Paul: *It's always useful to talk about unemployment, the options, what people can do, share experiences, ideas, things like that* (appendix 11.1:2).

Francis: *I think that that type of thing would be very useful, and I think that it's also very important ... It would open up a lot of the important aspects or ways of solving the problem of unemployment. I know it would certainly assist me in that regard* (appendix 11.2:2).

Pam: *Sharing goals and ambitions. Supporting each other with projects ... Talk about the valuable things we are doing. I think then when we get together we can support each other* (appendix 11.3:2).

George: *... people may develop some sort of solidarity or understanding of why they were in their present situation* (appendix 11.4:2).

Responses to questions five and six – empowerment through collective action - (*"Did the group/do you think it would be useful to talk about how and why unemployment occur in our society and try and make a change in relation to the problem of unemployment?"* – appendix 10.1)

Once again, most responses encompassed reserved approval, as Paul stated:

Paul: *It would be useful but I can't see it curing anything ... Yes, but it's very difficult* (appendix 11.1:3).

The practical aspects were highlighted again along with reservations relating to imposed ideals.

Pam: *It could be useful. I mean it could be an academic, theoretical thing that didn't have any practical application and people might not want to do that ... it depends on useful to whom. Like what's useful to government ... is probably not the same as what's useful to the people who are drawn into* [a] *program* (appendix 11.3:2).

George: *It could be useful. It would have to be done well and done with an understanding of people's position and not imposed on people if it was based on concrete understandings of the likelihood that things are going to change, or – that they could change* (appendix 11.4:3).

Again, one participant gave reserved endorsement due to addressing such a difficult issue.

Barbara: *Yes I think it would be useful but that powerlessness stuff comes up again, and I sort of think what am I going to do? Take to the street with banners? I don't know what to do* (appendix 11.5:2).

Two participants reflected upon the positive opportunity to share:

Pam: *... looking at what the individual can do – ourselves, like not just looking at it and just saying, you know, it's too much ... everybody's got bits and pieces of information...so sharing them builds up a common body of knowledge* (appendix 11.3:2).

Barbara: *Yes I think so ... again that different light on it, compared with if you're thinking that you're the only person that's lost your job because you've failed or something* (appendix 11.5:2).

One participant gave unreserved endorsement:

Francis: *I think it would be extremely useful and extremely important because this is the core of the problem* (appendix 11.2:3).

At the end of each interview participants were asked, "Is there anything further you would like to add?" (appendix 12.1) A number of participants made follow up comments. As Kemmis (1997) and Wadsworth (1993a) suggest the unexpected often occurs in research and needs to be planned for in advance. The interview was an opportunity to elaborate on feelings and opinions that may otherwise remain unsaid. Some comments revolved around, and supported the notion that discussion on unemployment could relieve feelings of failure and be a practical way to take positive steps.

Francis: *... I believe that addressing the core issues of unemployment could be of benefit all around* (appendix 11.2:3).

Pam: *... I think, to share experiences with other people in the same boat ... It tends to happen in society at the moment that the victims are blamed for things that they have no influence or no power* [over], *or very little, but they weren't the major players in the situation. Messages are promulgated that unemployed people are responsible for unemployment ... I think the ... thing is firstly realising that it's not the fault of the individual ... if you look at what the real causes are. It counteracts that oppressive, debilitative ... thing ... But looking at what people can do ... there's lots of different things that groups can do with a positive action* (appendix 11.3:1).

Barbara: *Yes I think that that ... big picture is important. Again there's that feeling, in the isolation of unemployment, that it's just you, that*

somehow you've done something wrong, or failed. And when you start to look at the societal picture, you see patterns and inevitabilities that are important (appendix 11.5:1).

Barbara: *... looking at my responses I think the questionnaire's been useful in terms of helping me work out the strengths of my feeling that lock into that powerless feeling. And if some ... discussion or whatever can help to change that, I think that that's a great thing* (appendix 11.5:2).

One participant reiterated the importance of structuring the discussion, especially in reference to power relations.

George: *... if people were in control of their education and their training, or had a much higher degree of control, it would have been useful. But there would have to be a different political environment surrounding it ... People need to have good political education in these areas* (appendix 11.4:2).

In effect, as mentioned previously, this pre interview can be seen as part of the initial planning stage of the action research cycle. Although the study circle had not yet commenced the concerns, opinions, fears and hopes of each individual and the group had been established and could be taken into account before the action stage. The key aspects raised by the group during the pre-interviews that helped further inform the action stage included the following:

- Fundamentally, members wanted to be involved in a discussion where they could share feelings and ideas and perceived the study circle as a worthwhile opportunity to achieve this. This aspect validated the reflections contained in the previous action research cycle as discussed in Chapter one (Brophy 1996). Before commencing the study circle participants were given the opportunity to explore the benefits of being involved in a collaboration research process. This also provided catalytic validity.

- The power relationships and politics along with the interests and identifying all stakeholders needed to be acknowledged, addressed and reconciled. The open ideological stance that critical theory endorses, and the recognition that all research is subjective as discussed in Chapter two enables the researcher to work collaboratively and with trust. In this Chapter the effort to work with and reflect with the research participants on the issues raised has been discussed.

- Any such program would need to be well planned and conducted with knowledgeable and sympathetic direction. This Chapter has attempted to demonstrate that the study circle season met these criteria of preparedness. Significant effort was involved in constructing the discussion guide and overall planning for the season.

- Concerns raised needed to be arrived at from the group and not be imposed by an external doctrine or authority. This aspect mirrors the points raised by Harding (1993), Connell (1993) and Wadsworth (1993) in Chapter two, whereas action research needs to "study up", recognise and focus on the knowledge that the marginalised and disadvantaged research participants offer. In other words the study circle needed to involve the participants. It needed to be, as Wadsworth (1993) suggests, for and with the research participants or the "critical reference group" as discussed in Chapter two.

- Content needed to be practical not theoretical. This aspect reflects the discussion in Chapter two on the issue of agency. The enhancement of agency as suggested by White and Wyn (1998) needs to place social practice at its centre. In other words, critical theory/action research in unison with the study circle should be a practical and not theoretical exercise, meeting the real needs of the people involved. This practical aspect endorses Giddens (1986) views as discussed in Chapter two.

- Group members needed to feel safe. As will become evident in the second part of this thesis, participants were able to collaboratively decide on the ground rules and conduct of the study circles so that autonomy and trust between participants would be maintained.

The importance of these issues, which emerged amongst the research participants in the pre interview generally, reflects the discussion raised in Chapters one, two and three. In effect, their concerns confirmed and validated the literature in relation to study circles, action research and previous research reflections as well as highlighting any potential problems. Furthermore, "… decisions about aims involves a process of negotiation, and all members have an important part to play in the process … their contributions are important" (Kemmis and McTaggart 1998).

4.4   Planning triangulation, validity and reflective analysis

In order to ensure "data trustworthiness", it was necessary to plan and put into place certain contingencies to ensure that the reflective stage was well informed. As Lather

states: "… the minimum requirement for assessing validity in new paradigm research should enlist the techniques of triangulation, reflectivity and member checks" (1991:66).

As explained in Chapter two, action research can really only possess internal validity (Breen 1999; Smith 1997; Burns 1995; Noffke and Stevenson 1995).

The use of triangulation, the incorporation of more than one technique of data collection, helps verify and internally validate the action research process (Burns 1995; James 1994; Wright 1991; Fetterman 1989). Triangulation is also critical in ensuring data trustworthiness (Lather 1991). Several internal validity checks were planned and incorporated into the study to meet these requirements including catalytic validity, a recommended approach in critical research. "Catalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses and energises participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it" (Lather 1991:68). Lather also states: "Catalytic validity is premised ... in the desire to consciously channel ... so that respondents gain self-understanding and, ultimately, self-determination through research participation" (1991:68).

Reason explains catalytic validity as "What are the possibilities for human experience and action?" (1989:243). He goes on to state: "This seems to be a question of great importance, but one which is not included in traditional approaches to validity" (1989:243). Lather comments: "Of the guidelines proposed … this is by far the most unorthodox; it flies directly in the face of the positivist demand for researcher neutrality" (1991:68). Catalytic validity explores the potential of agency as discussed in Chapter two by demythologising the cognitive psychological understanding of behaviour. Catalytic validity supports the notion that individuals think about their actions in relation to their practical needs within their own context. In this way, this type of research is unpredictable, outcomes are not necessarily fully known, and there are many associated risks. By recruiting "active" people for the research, allowing them to be involved in the planning stage via the pre interview, the attendance at study circle sessions, reviewing

correspondence between sessions, having interviews conducted and gaining access to the raw data to verify and validate the methods here attempt to promote this catalytic validity. This is seen to constantly energise, channel and refocus the participants on the issues of unemployment and the study circle process.

This involvement and collaboration with research participants is considered fundamental to the interpretation of data (Lather 1991). Participants need to be actively involved in the construction and the internal validation of meaning (Lather 1991). It is "A dialectical view of truth … including the notion that there are always emerging possibilities …" (Reason 1989:243).

Triangulating any analysis with data obtained by interview transcripts and any relevant documentation also enhances internal validity. The data therefore was constantly being constructed during the research process. By also being participatory and reflective the data becomes "… self validating" (Reid 1997:59).

Member checking of the near completed draft thesis by all research participants also enhanced internal validity. Member checking[58] is "… the process of having … individuals review statements made in the researchers report for completeness" (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996:576). This also increases face validity, as with the correspondence mentioned earlier it returns the data back to the participants to increase credibility (Smith 1997). Furthermore: "Face validity is operationalized by recycling description, emerging analysis, and conclusions back through at least a subsample of respondents: "Good research at the non alienating end of the spectrum goes back to the subjects with the tentative results, and refines them in light of the subjects' reactions" (Lather 1991:67-68). In this research participants were sent a copy of the draft thesis twelve months after the study circle season ended and asked to peruse, check and edit the emerging analysis and description. The group then met again to discuss and validate the contents. As Kemmis and McTaggart state: "… reflection recalls action that has been recorded in observation"

(1998:13). Furthermore, it is advised that this reflection should be aided by discussion with participants (Kemmis and McTaggart 1990). Therefore a group meeting format was adopted for the final post study circle meeting. As Lather suggests: "Debriefing sessions with participants provide an opportunity to look for exceptions to emerging generalisations" (1991:64). Reason (1990) also suggests that an action research method that includes both individual and collective inquiry as well as group reflection at the end of the research process increase internal validity. This process is depicted in the following Table:

Table ten: Member check process
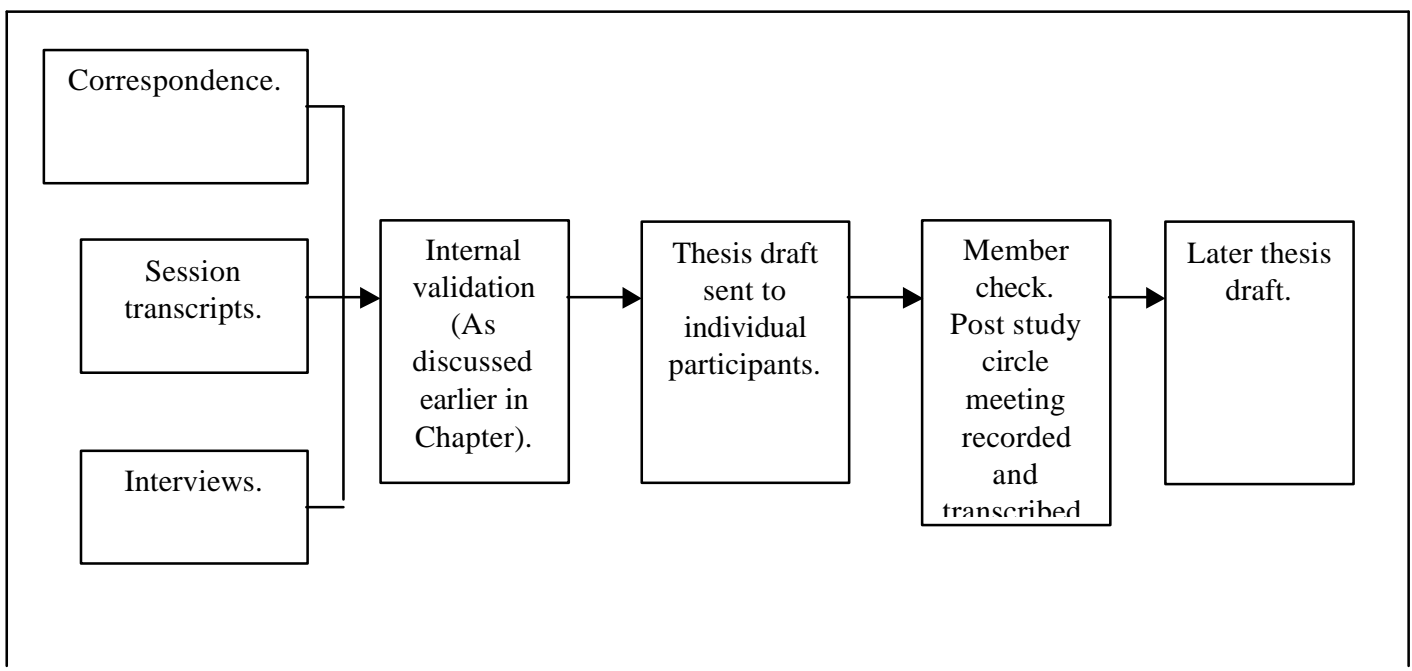
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│ │ Correspondence.  │                                                      │
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│ │ Session      │  │ Internal     │ │ Thesis draft│ │ Member    │ │ Later    │ │
│ │ transcripts. │→ │ validation   │→│ sent to     │→│ check.    │→│ thesis   │ │
│ │              │  │ (As          │ │ individual  │ │ Post study│ │ draft.   │ │
│ │              │  │ discussed    │ │ participants│ │ circle    │ │          │ │
│ │              │  │ earlier in   │ │             │ │ meeting   │ │          │ │
│ │              │  │ Chapter).    │ │             │ │ recorded  │ │          │ │
│ ┌──────────────┐  └──────────────┘ └─────────────┘ │ and       │ └──────────┘ │
│ │ Interviews.  │                                    │ transcribed│            │
│ └──────────────┘                                    └───────────┘            │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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As Roberts states: "An additional source of validation, although a rather more indirect kind, is through a content analysis of professional literature" (1981:12). This is also carried out in the reflective analysis stage of the research process, whereas literature, which is associated with the themes, is included for further validation.

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58   Alternatively described as 'participant verification' (Keeves 1997, p. 284).

Several factors however were foreseen that could affect internal validity. Firstly that time would pass between first meeting and interviewing each participant to post study circle interview stage (two to three months) and then to the post study circle meeting (twelve months). This time lapse could affect the eventual final reflections in a variety of ways that are independent of the research process (Burns 1995). Secondly the pre study circle interview may cause the participants to be sensitised to the issue of unemployment thereby producing a bias in the study circle season data. Thirdly bias may arise due to the voluntary nature of participants in the research and lastly any dropouts may adversely affect the sample; (Burns 1995). These issues are addressed in later Chapters.

4.5   Chapter summary

In relation to the above issues it is important not to lose sight of the essence of critical research and emancipatory action research, as both McTaggart and Wadsworth state, action research is different from conventional research as action research is more interested in authenticity, usefulness and trustworthiness, rather than reliability and a search for 'truth' (VUT 1997).

Gluck and Patai remind the researcher: "… in an unethical world, we cannot do truly ethical research" (1991:150). Furthermore, "… it is essential that the relationship between researcher and researched be a collaborative, non-deceptive, non-exploitive one" (Wine in Finn and Miles 1982:70). However difficult, by incorporating the several validity checks as discussed above, this research has attempted to assist "… to validate feelings and activities that have been ignored or devalued in traditional research … The emphasis is on accurately portraying or "giving voice" to people's experience" (Gancian 1992:626).

In some respects what is even more important than validity or reliability in emancipatory action research is respect, as Gluck and Patai claim: "… respect is a minimum condition if we are not to treat others as mere means to our own ends – if we are not in other words, to reproduce the very factors of discrimination that we seek to challenge" (1991:148).

Moreover, "… when we do interpretations, we bring our knowledge, experience and concerns to our material" (Gluck and Patai 1991:73). Therefore no method is truly neutral (Finn and Miles 1982).

Finally in relation to the potential critique of the "generalisability" of any reflective findings, Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) provide a valuable insight, in that with critical research reflections the responsibility of extracting any generalisations from these reflections are placed with the "consumer". That is, the reader and user of the research relates the reflections to themselves. Each consumer then determines the subjectively the reflective analysis, its representativeness and its applicability within their own context with their own inferences, realising that the methodology and validity enacted in the process provides the trustworthiness and credibility of any subjective reflections. Or as Noffke and Stevenson state: "… there are no "ends" to the cycles, points at which others can implement what they have found … "findings" of [action] research must be provisional" (1995: 6-7). Alternatively Burns explains:

> 'Those who conduct quantitative educational research believe that practice will improve because of the findings of their studies. They assure that the discovery and publication of truth will in due course and almost by the very nature of things, bring about change for the better. The action-researcher argues that it is the responsibility of practitioners, in contrast to investigators to take findings into account' (Burns 1995:301).

To illustrate this point, there was an interview on the ABC "Lateline" television program with Greer, in relation to her recently published book, "*The Whole Woman*", the interviewer, Jones, asked: "In this book are you telling us …", whereupon he was interrupted by Greer: "I'm not telling you anything. I describe the world as it is. I'm asking you what will you do about it?" (ABC TV, March 1999). This issue is raised again in Part two of the thesis.

As Lather states, it is important to "… build a minimal degree of reciprocity into … [a] research design" (1991:57). She also urges the "giving back" to participants, a picture of

how the data are viewed "… both to return something to research participants and to check descriptive and interpretive/analytical validity" (1991:57). Because of this, the research participants in this study have been included in the following ways:

- Able to view and read the Application for Candidature.

- The viewing of interview schedules before being interviewed.

- Proof read, view, edit and change their interview responses via a written transcript.

- Able to view and edit the actual session transcripts.

- Work together collaboratively, to determine the issues and objectives, ground rules and direction of the study circle season.

- Meet collaboratively to set new session agendas.

- Able to alter, change, edit, or correct the researchers written interpretation and reflections of each session.

- During the process meet with the researcher individually three times (during interviews).

- Meet as a group up to nine times (eight sessions plus member check).

- Privy to viewing a later draft of the thesis itself. Each participant able to have their own copy.

- A later, post study circle meeting to discuss the draft of thesis, and reflect upon the session as a whole.

As Lather states: "… if… trustworthy data is desired we must formulate self-corrective techniques that check the credibility of data and minimise the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence" (1991:66).

Finally, within this Chapter the general aim and specific aims of the research have been addressed in relation to the method in the following ways. Firstly the overarching aims of the general aim and specific aim 'a'.

'To determine, whether, and investigate how, a Swedish study circle contributes to the empowerment of the unemployed research participants, both at an individual and group level.'

'To explore the potential of a critical – action research methodology to advance understandings in relation to unemployment'.

As discussed the methods utilised have subscribed to the action research methodology discussed in Chapter two.

The organisational aims of 'b' and 'c':

'To utilize Smith's (1993b) three tiered framework of empowerment as a basis for organising and analysing data'.

Smith's levels are utilized within the interview method as discussed:

'To gather data by conducting beginning, mid and end interviews with each participant, recording and transcribing meetings, and collecting any documentation produced'.

The planning of all interviews, transcribing of meetings and collection of other relevant data has been included in the method plan as discussed.

Finally the analytical specific aim 'd':

'To uncover, analyse, validate, triangulate and document how participants discuss issues in relation to unemployment, how they feel, and what action and/or change occurs during the study circle season'.

Plans for validation, triangulation and the collection of data have therefore all been formulated.

Introduction to Part two – The study circle season

Table One: Thesis structure

Part one
Methodology/literature review

Part two
Study circle season

Chapter one, Thematic Concern. Unemployment.	Chapter five, Overview of season.
Chapter two, Methodology. Action research	Chapter six, Concerns and themes raised.
Chapter four, Method.	Chapter seven, Individual accounts.
Chapter three, Milieu. Study circle.	Chapter eight, Conclusion.
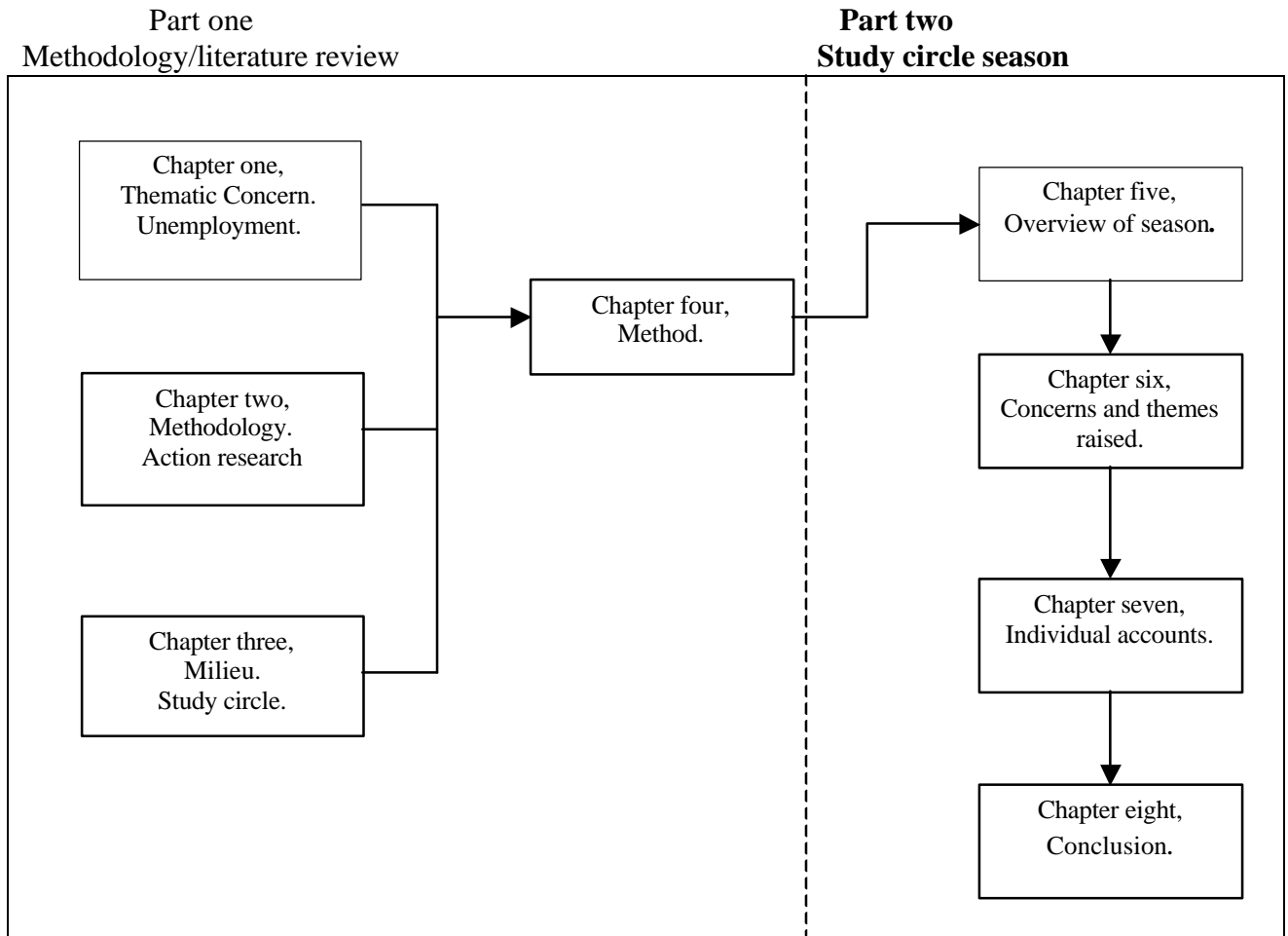
Part one of this thesis has detailed the planning stage of the action research cycle. As part of the planning, it also included the preparation required for the action and observation stages.

The next four Chapters, five to eight encompass Part two of this thesis. Part two is representative of the reflective phase of the action research cycle of this study.

This introduction begins by briefly outlining each Chapter. This is followed by a discussion which revisits the methodology and method discussed in Part one. Several issues are then discussed before presenting the reflections.

Chapter five firstly provides a profile of all study circle members[59] and attendance details. A general overview of the season is then given by utilising data generated by the correspondence. This Chapter serves as a "picture" of the season to place the remainder of Part two into context. Chapter five is also a preliminary attempt, through reflection, to establish if and how the study circle contributed to the empowerment of the members as a group and individually.

Chapter six then reflects upon the concerns and themes that the members discussed as a group in relation to the thematic concern: unemployment, during the season. Chapter six predominantly utilises the data from the session transcripts and reflects upon the knowledge that individual members bought to the study circle and then discussed as a group. It is also representative of the standpoint theory discussed in Chapter two, in that the knowledge accumulated during the season is from the standpoint of the members themselves. That is, "bottom up" rather than "top down". Reflections contained in this Chapter are then triangulated against those of Chapter five.

Chapter seven then turns the focus from the group to individual members. The mid and end interview transcripts are initially utilised in this Chapter. The Chapter then attempts to establish, from the member's perspective, whether or not the study circle season was considered to be a worthwhile, useful and empowering experience. Chapter seven then utilises data from both the interviews and session transcripts to create a chronological reflection upon each member's experience. The post study circle meeting data is then reflected upon to again establish, from the member's perspective, if the study circle contributed to their empowerment. These reflections are then further triangulated against those from Chapters five and six.

Chapter eight, the Conclusion, then provides the provisional reflections of the study as a whole.

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[59] The term 'member' rather than 'research participant' are used often in Part two as it identifies each person as a collaborative member of the study circle season.

Methodology - revisited

Before presenting the data and the reflections in the following Chapters it is relevant to revisit some of the prior discussion on methodology. Six issues of concern emerge which need reconciling before presenting Part two. This is done to assist in clarifying any concerns in relation to issues such as validity, bias and subjectivity.

Research "aims" in action research

The first issue to address is that of how the aims for this study should be viewed. As will be elaborated upon later, the use of terms such as "analysis" and "aims" is problematic within an alternative research methodology such as critical theory. Traditional positivist philosophy expects that research be conducted according to several epistemologically accepted norms.

These norms are understood through the rhetoric of positivist language associated with method and methodology. However, within the context of this study, where an alternative research methodology and epistemology is used, these terms fundamentally carry an alternative meaning. This is discussed in detail later in this section. The general aim and specific aim 'a' explore the potential of a critical/action research methodology to advance understandings in relation to unemployment; both could be seen as overarching aims that encompass the entire study.

General aim

> 'To determine whether, and investigate how, a Swedish study circle contributes to the empowerment of the unemployed research participants, both at an individual and group level'

and Specific aim 'a':

a   'To explore the potential of a critical-action research methodology to advance understandings in relation to unemployment.'

Inherently, by conducting the research itself these aims are addressed. Discussion in relation to these aims is contained in Chapters two and three.

Specific aims 'b' and 'c' then become organisational aims:

b   'To utilise Smith's (1993b) three tiered framework of empowerment as a basis for organising and analysing data'

and

c   'To gather data by conducting beginning, mid and end interviews with each participant, recording and transcribing meetings, and collecting any documentation produced.'

Their intention is to assist in arranging and shaping the data to aid analysis. Specific aim 'b' is addressed later in Chapter seven, while the efforts to achieve specific aim 'c' are contained in Chapter four on Method.

Specific aim 'd', the analytical aim, is therefore addressed in this Part two of the thesis and attempts to assist in reaching the general aim and specific aim 'a'.

d   To uncover, analyse, validate, triangulate and document how participants discuss issues in relation to unemployment, how they feel, and what action and/or change occurs during the study circle season.

In light of the methodology used here, it is relevant to reflect upon these aims in the context of action research and critical theory.

As already discussed in detail in Chapters two and four, critical theory, action research as well as empowerment are all *processes*. It is therefore important in this research to focus on whether the *process contributed* to the member's empowerment. As Alston and Bowles state:

> 'Unlike positivist researchers who seek to examine a social situation and to determine what is happening, action researchers do not leave the research field as it was when they entered. The intention is that the research *process* itself will *create* change'. [emphasis added] (1998:167).

The empirical researcher therefore seeks to uncover a definitive disinterested truth, for example measuring research participants before and then after an experiment and looking for an observable change. Although this may be applicable in some research contexts, the methodology here as previously mentioned is mindful of the process of action, from the subjective viewpoint of the participants themselves.

The general aim therefore asks if, and how, the study circle *contributed* to the member's empowerment. In recalling the discussion in Chapter two, empowerment, from a critical theory perspective shows a process of social action that promotes participation by individuals and groups to analyse and recognise oppressive forces so as to gain control over their situation. (Smith 1993b; Lather 1991; Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988).

Therefore what is being sought in Part two, to meet the aims from an action research perspective, is to establish if the study circle allowed the members to go through a process where they could work collaboratively, act upon and gain some control over their situation.

The aims therefore do not explicitly demand the researcher to establish if the study circle *caused* empowerment, nor to empirically measure any definitive cognitive, behavioural or other objective and empirical "disinterested truth" change over time. It is research *for* the research participants (Wadsworth 1993b).

From a critical theory perspective, recalling discussion from Chapters two, three and four, action research is not research *on* participants, rather it is done *with* and *for* them, on *their* issues (Wadsworth 1993b) This study therefore should not be *about* them, but for them (Jones 1994a). Action research does not treat participants as objects (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988) Action research does not subscribe to the notion of an objective scientific "disinterested truth" (Humphries 1997). Neither does

action research seek to uncover evidence, explanation or prediction but rather descriptions and understandings (Reid 1997; Smith 1993b; Lather 1991; Haraway 1988).

Research protocol

The second issue to address is that action research needs to be flexible and not prescriptive. Many noted authors on action research believe that the action research process has become too prescriptive and therefore restrictive (Green 1999; Cook 1998; Burns 1995; Smith 1993b; Lather 1991). Noffke and Stevenson (1995) inform action researchers that there is no singular authority on how action research should be analysed or presented. Green (1998) warns that much literature on action research uses words such as "should" and "appropriate" which suggest there is a "right way", therefore all other ways are flawed. McTaggart (1997) suggests that action researchers not be a "slave" to procedures, frameworks, and protocols, but let the process evolve on its own. Cook (1998) also states that adhering to structure in action research limits opportunities and narrows the focus of research. These notions of such flexibility may be considered radical and totally contrary to accepted research orthodoxy, however Cook (1998) suggests that the "rigour" so often required in traditional research is questionable and often equates to just "neatness". Green states "… good action research *demands* that we show a willingness to step outside our usual frames of reference …" [original emphasis] (1999:121).

Subjectivity

The third issue to address is that of the subjectivity of action research. Action research explains and describes the actual lived experience of individuals so it is inherently subjective, therefore its validity is often questioned. Understandings in action research emerge from the participants' and researchers' subjective perspective (Reid 1997; Connell 1993; Harding 1993; Wadsworth 1993b), not from an objective research interpretation, which would be the case if the methodology was empirical.

As mentioned previously in Chapter two and four, action research "findings" or reflections are indeed subjective. However, from a critical theory perspective

subjectivity is recognised as existing in all research approaches, even if the methodology suggests otherwise. This then becomes the strength of action research: its openness to the effect of subjectivity on any research. Therefore the subjective description and interpretations of action research are considered just as valid as any objectively researched fact in the case of empirical research. In other words, the subjective reality of an experience is considered of no less value than a supposedly objective "truth".

Empirical researchers may suggest that the subjectivity of critical theory and action research is unethical. However as Wadsworth states:

> '… within the action research framework it is unethical not to evaluate one's own work – and this reflexive work is seen as part of the web of mutual and shared evaluative activity by all participants … "unethicality" arises traditionally from within a positivist epistemology where it is seen as philosophically possible (and desirable) for the observer to be entirely separated from the observed' (2000:1)

Smith states in relation to critical theory that the researcher needs to view the research participants as "… active subjects of the world, and that "objectivity", in the usual sense to detached determination of observations and facts, is not possible" [in critical research] (1997:181). Schmuck suggests that when gathering data in action research it is necessary to obtain "… subjective responses, such as their [the participants] perception, concepts, feelings, attitudes and values" (1998:51).

This is an important and fundamental principle as the members themselves were aware and even sensitised and perhaps sympathetic to this research. The meetings, pre interviews and correspondence that occurred with the members prior to the study circle season are testament to this. This effort by the researcher to focus participants on the study circle season that they were about to undertake not only assisted in the preparation for the season and developed a trust, openness and rapport with all members, but was vital in ensuring that catalytic validity was employed in the research to motivate, energise, build interest and sensitise the group prior to the action stage.

To objectively determine if the insights, views and issues reflected upon in Part two were *caused* by the study circle is therefore not entirely relevant to the action researcher. What is important is if the *process* enabled these insights to be discussed, shared, purged and *therefore contributed* to each member's empowerment and if this can be *seen* to occur during the research process taking into account both the researchers' and participants' subjective interpretations. In other words did the process *allow* the members to "voice" their concerns, did they feel confident and safe in their ability and speak up about their feelings and concerns.

Within this research, subjectivity therefore cannot be and should not be interpreted in an empirical manner. It needs to be understood from the perspective of the critical theory paradigm as discussed in Chapters two and four. The validity of this subjective reality is also tied up with dominant notions of what exactly constitutes "knowledge". As Smith (1997) explains, understandings and new knowledge only seem to be accepted if they are codified and systematically incorporated into a dominant system of knowledge; we have finite boundaries that define "facts" and knowledge. However by doing this, "… we devolve the potential of peoples' everyday experiences because they do not live up to standards determined by some external body" (Smith 1997:244). Action research however recognises and accepts the potential of individual participants.

> 'Working within a PAR [Participatory Action Research] approach requires having faith in the ability of people to develop higher levels of disconcertment … A group of people undertakes and sustains inquiry because the process is relevant and legitimate for them; if it was not, they would stop.' (Smith 1997:244)

Action research therefore does not overtly rely on statistics, levels, tests or other definitive measurements to prove *empowerment* or action has occurred. However do any interpretations and reflections necessarily constitute action and empowerment as such? Giddens suggests, "Many … cases for social analysis centre upon the margins of what can count as *action* … confined by a range of specifiable circumstances" [emphasis added] (1986:15). Therefore an objective, clinical empirical research method applied to a process that results in identifying no change might indeed be incorrect. For example, if the researcher is attempting to "measure" action or change

and "discovers" that none has occurred, does this then negate any subjective experience of the research participants who do suggest action *has* occurred? Alternatively action research, being fundamentally subjective and interpretive, does not seek to create such deductive objective truths, but is interested in disadvantaged individuals and *their* subjective reality (Sarantakos 1994; Waters and Crock 1990). As discussed in Chapter two, empowerment, agency and action should not be "given", bestowed or presumed, they are practiced in action research and therefore any evidence as such will be subjective and interpretive (Humphries 1997).

Giddens suggests that it is important to recognise that if action is *perceived* by the researcher to not occur, then this should not "… be equated with the dissolution of action as such" (1986:15). Furthermore Green (1999) suggests that if the definition of "action" is overtly objectified and clinically "measured" then any notion of action is "… detached from its agent and develops consequences of its own" (Green 1999:120). Such an approach therefore questions an individual's ability to subjectively interpret whether action has occurred from their own perspective. As Humphries (1997) and Fetterman (1989) ask, is the subjective reality each individual experiences any less important or relevant to an objectively defined and measured reality? In this research, therefore, it is the participants who primarily determine if action has occurred from their subjective perspective of the experience.

Furthermore, Hooper-Briar and Lawson (1995) warn that any attempt to "measure" research participants may also create an assumption of dysfunctionality to start with. In the case of this research, this would suggest that those who are unemployed already have some existing deficiency that needs some sort of externally controlled intervention to "fix". Once categories are constructed, stereotypical assumptions can also be made to legitimise domination (Kellehear 1993; Hagan 1993; Gancian 1992; Fetterman 1989). Furthermore, in Chapter three several noted authors on study circles agreed that it is not applicable to empirically "measure" the effectiveness of study circles in a traditional scientific research manner (Leighninger 1996; Oliver 1987; Peak 1990; Shires and Crawford 1999a).

As Smith states:

'The point is who determines what is relevant and legitimate. If people are faced with the *imposition* of external notionally based criteria about acceptable standards and requirements, they lose ownership over their process. … Determining the measures and criteria of validity in order to judge, "Is this 'good' PAR?" or "Are the data and findings legitimate?" is … arrogance … Those questions douse the flames of peoples experiences and actions … popular knowledge is constantly being created in daily experiences … [yet] … the legitimacy of such knowledge … is constantly being devalued and suppressed by the dominant science' [original emphasis] (Smith 1997:245).

Validity of reflection

The fourth issue to address is the validity of the documentation of the action research experience. In other words, having legitimised the subjective lived experience and its validity, this does not necessarily guarantee that the researcher's interpretation is valid. The task of the researcher therefore becomes one of documenting and representing the experience as truthfully as possible. Smith (1997) suggests that the participants have a vital role in assisting the researcher in validating the documentation.

'Participants can establish the space that they need to validate their progress by "checking-in" on feelings and thoughts; having regular validations; raising, exploring, and clarifying ideas, emotions, and reactions … [while] … creating trust, participation and a safe climate – People's work has validity because it is real – it happens' (Smith 1997:246).

Although Gall, Borg and Gall propose that "… it is not possible to specify standard procedures … " (1996:571), in relation to ensuring a high degree of internal validity, Reid advises that "… data is constructed during research, and if reflected upon is somewhat self validating because it grasps, and reflects reality" (1997:59). However, too much reflection can also result in "… intellectual excess" (Reason 1990:48). This also relates back to the issue of how validity is viewed from the perspective of different paradigms. As discussed in Chapter four, this interpretation of what constitutes validity differs from that of empirical research, but nonetheless holds true for a critical theory (Walker and Evers 1997).

With this in mind the challenge within this study was to try to remain flexible, while collaboratively letting the members subjective experiences emerge from the data. At the same time ensuring the integrity or the internal validity of the research was strengthened. It was therefore important to ensure that a high degree of internal validity was built into the research in an attempt to maintain integrity. To ensure this, members were collaboratively involved in the developing of the data and the construction of meaning throughout the study.

The following discussion gives examples of how this internal validity was addressed in the research. As discussed in Chapter four, all data was checked for accuracy and internally validated by the study circle members themselves both individually and collectively as recommended by Reason (1990). To further enhance internal validity and ensure the reflections contained in Part two are attributable to the study circle season itself, triangulation and a member check were carried out as discussed in Chapter four.

Smith (1997) and Lather (1991) suggest four areas be addressed to ensure internal validity in relation to action research is maintained. They are: triangulation, construct validity, face validity and catalytic validity. All of these areas of validity have been addressed in Chapters two, four and this section. Triangulation has been incorporated by utilising multiple methods as discussed in Chapter four. By building into the method the constant reflection on the themes discussed via the correspondence, construct validity is incorporated. Face validity has been addressed by returning all raw data back to the members for reflection, and also the carrying out of a later member check.

The study circle season itself ran over an eight week period and the continuous correspondence, reorienting and refocussing during the season was intended to enhance catalytic validity. As there were no dropouts during the season, and all members were able to contribute to the member check more than a year later, it would appear that the effort to enhance catalytic validity and keep members focussed was effective.

Furthermore, Burns (1995) as discussed in Chapter four, draws attention to several other factors that may have an adverse effect on internal validity, including the length of time of a study. It is suggested that reflections emerging from data may be the result of factors other than the study itself. People are exposed to a range of experiences over time and the longer the length of time, the more possibility there is of external experiences being attributed to the study itself.

To alleviate any adverse effects in this area, the weekly correspondence to participants during the season was intended to keep the members focussed. All questions in the mid and post interview specifically included reference to the study circle experience. At the post study circle meeting the draft of the thesis sent out prior to meeting was intended to keep members focussed and help them reflect back on their experience. Finally in the post study circle meeting the discussion specifically focussed on the study circle season.

Another issue raised by Burns (1995) is that members may be sensitised to the topic of the research, in this case unemployment, which may produce biased results in the final reflections. This concern again raises a methodological paradox. Catalytic validity is the refocussing and energising of members on the process and issues being tackled, which was carried out as previously explained. However, this internal validity issue suggests that an objective stance be taken. In other words, should members be intentionally sensitised to the issues or not? To obtain a non-bias result the answer is "no". To ensure catalytic validity the answer is "yes". One way of tackling this issue was to use different methods, which resulted in both group and individual reflections. In this way the threat of group consensus or "tyranny consensus" as discussed in Chapter four was alleviated. Members acted as a group during the study circle season and at the post study circle meeting, yet were able to reflect individually between sessions while reading the correspondence and during the interviews as well as while reading the draft thesis. In each case, individual reflections were brought back to the group and shared with each other. Although this could be seen as resulting in a high level of subjectivity, catalytic validity endorses high levels of subjectivity which is not only acceptable from a critical theory perspective, but necessary (Schmuck 1998; Smith 1997).

The final factor that may affect internal validity is the voluntary nature of any research and any potential dropouts. However, discussed in Chapter four, voluntary participation is unavoidable in *any* research that wishes to be ethical. People cannot be forced into being research participants. In relation to action research several authors even demand that voluntary participation is necessary by people who are already interested and enthusiastic about the research issues, therefore enhancing catalytic validity even further (deVaus 1995; Burns 1995; Fetterman 1989; Reason 1990).

In some respects this reflects a distinct advantage that action research has over empirical research in relation to validity. Empirical researchers must work with volunteers, and the bias and subjectivity this creates will always effect their "findings" no matter how much research rigour is applied. The action researcher however accepts, embraces and even fosters this subjectivity. Subjectivity therefore becomes the ally of the action researcher while with the empirical researcher, subjectivity is considered a contaminant.

Furthermore it is recommended from a study circle perspective as discussed in Chapter three, that participation needs to be voluntary. The problem of deciding which participants to select from a large sample did not occur with this study, therefore issues such as demographics, which may be deterministic, are alleviated.

As described in Chapter four, validity in the form of reflection was built into the study in order to ensure data trustworthiness. After each session correspondence was forwarded by the researcher containing initial reflections in regard to the session discussion.[60] This was always received by members prior to the next session (see appendix 6). Members had a reminder of the session and an overview of what the researcher believed had occurred in the previous session. This initiative provided the opportunity for members to validate the issues the researcher had gleaned. Then together with all members at the commencement of the subsequent session the contents of this correspondence was checked and validated (see appendix 16). This

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[60] The contents of these letters can be further validated and supported by reviewing the actual transcripts contained in appendix 16.

validation occurred collaboratively as these examples from the fourth, sixth, seventh and eighth sessions demonstrate:

Session four

Barbara: *I had a couple of points that I've written down, just with that third paragraph [of the letter, correspondence sent to members] - 'employed people tend to view the unemployed as a threat ... .' At the time I think we talked about like how it's not all employed people who do that.*

Mark: *Oh okay. Some?* (appendix 16.4:3)[61].

Session six

Pam: *I think you've ... got the sense of it in the letter you sent us.*

Paul: *Yes, yes.*

Pam: *It sounds quite accurate to me.*

Paul: *Yes very accurate.*

Mark: *I did have a sentence in there, I took it out. I said, in some ways ... it could be argued that it was a negative discussion, last week's meeting, but as Paul said, it was like a purging.*

Barbara: *You mean negative in terms of the direction of it ...?*

Mark: *Yes it was a lot of personal stories about people and about the experiences of unsafe work ... and from ... an outside point of view, you could say ... it was slightly negative. But then at the same time, it was positive.*

Pam: *I think the negative thing - a lot of it was negative things about current jobs ... all of us have had stressful or unhealthy or negative experiences with work as such. So that, when we are looking at unemployment, it's not just that 'we haven't got jobs', the problem is also the conditions around jobs?*

Barbara: *Yes, yes.* (appendix 16.6:1-3)

As well as verifying, and if necessary altering the reflection in the correspondence, the group was also able to establish future agendas. As Reason (1990) suggests, after

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[61]   Appendix 16, session 4, page 3

initially describing the experience phase and validating with participants, it is then important to plan the next experience or action phase. This "tentative agenda setting" approach therefore provided the opportunity for all members to work together collaboratively in setting the future direction of each session and therefore the season as a whole. This was done by all members discussing a possible agenda for the following week at the end of each session. This was then included as "tentative" in the correspondence. At the commencement of the next session, after discussing the letter's contents, the group then addressed and negotiated the agenda and direction of that particular session together. The subsequent sessions' interpretations were therefore internally validated each week, followed by the agenda setting before each session. This example demonstrates both the reflective validation and the agenda setting:

Session eight

Mark: *... Now the letter I sent out, has anybody got any comments about that?*

Pam: *… I think third paragraph where you've got at the end ... that actively looking for work is in itself hard work, while I don't disagree with that, that wasn't the point that I was making.*

Mark: *Oh, okay.*

Pam: *And I think we talked a little bit about actually living on a low income being hard work -*

Mark: *Okay.*

Pam: *In that, you tend to go to a lot of trouble to repair things, get things cheap, borrow things ... all that ... stuff uses up time and energy. And I think that's really important because I think there's a misperception generally in the community that if people are not actively looking for work they're having an easy time.*

Mark: *... okay, good. Anything else about that letter?* [pause] *Okay what about the agenda that is there?*

George: *Just the phrase of it - this part where it says 'fascinating if not interesting'. Does that mean interesting if not fascinating - does that mean not fascinating?*

Mark: *I think that's just a problem with me … Thank you. Yes … okay, good.*

Barbara: *I thought the agenda was fine, but I wondered whether we'd get through it really* (appendix 16.8:3).

In other sessions there are examples of members themselves, not the researcher, carrying out this validation task themselves, such as here in the seventh session:

Session seven

Pam: *I asked people what … work they'd do if we were guaranteed a living income irrespective of what we did. And the things that were mentioned by people were: appreciation for what I do; doing something I can do well; getting satisfaction from completing something like a publication or project; being on a health farm; doing something physically and mentally healthy; not having a distressful amount of stress; autonomy; not working to someone else's timetable; being able to make decisions about what I do and how and when and where; working collectively or being in a team; getting encouragement from other people or colleagues; doing something worthwhile; working towards a fairer society; working in more than one place or job… like … a combination of manual work and desk work … spending some time in the country; travelling; and not working full time … Yes. Is there anything else that you remember?* [pause]

And when we talked about alternatives, as well as the one's that you listed there … George was talking about living on a low income, like if people get the dole or they get some casual work or something and choose to live on that income and do their real work which they're not paid for, like…the environment or something like that. That's a choice of not having a job as such.

Mark: *But doing work.*

Pam: *… yes … well they may do some casual work. George for example does some paid work, but it's not their vocation in life. It's a way of getting income to do what's really important. And I think that choice to live on a low income, the fact that some people do that, is important because it kind of challenges the prevailing attitude or idea that you have to have a job. And there are some people that are able to live on a low income and say 'hey I'm doing this and I'm okay'. It makes other people think.*

Mark: *Yes.*

Pam: *And I think it lessens the fear that there are a lot of people around that say, you know, their working conditions are terrible but 'at least I've got a job'. It's like, what would happen if you lost your job? It would be just terrible! And I mean it is terrible for some people, I'm not denying that. But also I think it's important that there are some people that are okay without a job.*

Francis: *Yes* (appendix 16.7:1-2).

Further validation was achieved by providing the transcripts of each session, as well as the interview transcripts (pre/mid/end), to all members to check, alter, edit, adapt and generally clarify their responses as mentioned in Chapter four (see appendices 13 to 15).

The organisation of a "member check" also occurred when a draft of the thesis was available. The negotiated discussion is presented here:

Session four

Mark: *... I was thinking about ... what I write up at the end of the day, how to confirm this with all the members. And I thought what I'd do is maybe leave it open and give a couple of scenarios. And the first thing I've done is that ... I've got the...transcripts sitting there. So if anybody wants to look through them ... you can have a look at what happened during the ... meetings ... The other thing I thought was that ... the quotes that I use out of the interviews or out of the transcript that relate to you personally ... I'll send them to you for you to verify and check what you think of those quotes. So the first thing is the transcripts. And the interviews you've seen ... if you want the quotes let me know because ... I'll send it to you for you to have a look at and make comments ...*

Alternatively you might want to say ... "what context is that quote used or how is it used?" So the other option is that if you like ... I'm prepared to send you a draft to see how your quotes are used in the context of the research. So there's those three options - there's the transcripts sitting there and plus other raw data, the actual quotes or excerpts, and then how those excerpts look in context.

George: *Well there's another option. We could collectively look at ... you could do both ... if it's a collective project, I reckon it needs to have that. I mean it mightn't take all that much time.*

Barbara: *Well my feeling is that, like I've actually done stuff with a book with someone, where she sent me individual quotes and I can't see that that is as appropriate for this. Just for me I'm not speaking for anybody else. But maybe looking at it in context ...*

Mark: *Okay ... that makes sense. So what about if ... I had a draft of the final document ... and then I send it to everybody and then I arrange*
a separate meeting ... and we'll all meet with it and talk about what's in there.

Barbara: *Yes. You need to make the distinction. I mean you're wanting us, you're doing this so we can check what we're being quoted as said, rather than us doing a critique of your document?...*

Mark: *... that would be the exercise - is that the meaning or how it's interpreted, is how you would interpret it.*

Barbara: *Yes that makes sense to me.*

Mark: *So do you think the best way is to get like a final draft?*

Barbara: *Yes ...*

George: *And then have that discussion, that general discussion?*

Barbara: *Because I mean you might say, all sorts of things, but it can be made to look totally different by its context.*

Mark: *Things can be misconstrued. They are all the time. So yes. Would it be okay if I, when ... it gets close to that, that I send that off?*

Barbara: *Yes.*

Mark: *Okay good* (appendix 16.4:1-3).

During the post season meeting or the member check twelve months after the end of the study circle season both Francis and Barbara make specific comments about the draft thesis. The full transcript of these meetings is contained in appendix seventeen and is discussed in further detail later.

Francis: *I just felt it was very comprehensive ... It just seems to be clearly documented in what you've written here. It's very similar to what was covered in the sessions.* (appendix 17.1.1)

Barbara: *Its really clear... to read this sort of stuff that's reasonably heavy going for me. And it was sort of clear and easy to understand* (appendix 17.1:1)

Smith (1997) discusses how action research data needs to pass the test of participant confirmation. By this he means, "… the participants are able to recognise the data as congruent with their experience. People validate their own knowledge …" (Smith 1997:249) To do this Smith suggests that the researcher "shows reflexivity … by regularly returning data to participants …" (1997:249) The objective of the above discussion is to demonstrate how this was planned for and carried out during this research.

The relevance of reflections

Having established the validity of the participants subjective lived experience and the documented account of these experiences, the fifth issue of concern becomes how the interpretations, findings and reflections of action research should be viewed and their relevance and applicability.

Action research does not aim to uncover "findings" of those sought by empirical researchers rather it seeks reflection. Furthermore these reflections are always tentative and provisional (Noffke and Stevenson 1995). Reflections in action research are therefore interested in how the individuals make sense of, interpret and act upon their own experiences. In other words, their experiences are articulated and shared, their "voices" are heard. As a group they can then explore and analyse these feelings, interpret them and then develop ideas and action. (Pierce 1995) It is then the practitioner, consumer or readers responsibility to subjectively decide on whether or not the reflections are applicable, relevant and useful to their own context (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996; Burns 1995). "Reflective analysis is largely subjective …" (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996:571).The consumer can then ask themselves if these subjective interpretations of the reflections suggest alternative ways to act or change practices in the future (Schmuck 1998).

As Green states:

'… the outcomes of action research are not in the form of neat generalisations that can be applied … its whole rationale is based upon the uniqueness of the particular … learning situation … action research does not attempt to produce results that are immediately transferable to other situations. That does not mean that it can have no effect … It is this recognition of the uniqueness of each learning situation that, I believe, lies at the heart of action research.' (1999:106-107)

Noffke and Stevenson (1995) explain how action research "findings" are always provisional:

'This reflects not only issues of validity or alternative interpretation of events recounted, but also the cyclical, ongoing nature of action research and the tremendous power the status quo has over all of us. Reports … are offered as the best narrative of what has occurred thus far' (1995:6).

White and Wyn (1998) suggest that action research explore how best to maximise the range of choices people have. Pierce (1995) believes critical theory should be dedicated to whatever open ended possibility that presents themselves. Noffke and Stevenson (1995) suggest that action research does not end with definitive truths and Humphries asserts that "Action research does not provide emancipation gained once and for all, rather it is grounded in the struggle for survival of the most disadvantaged" (1997:8).

Any notion of action therefore needs to subjectively emerge from the data, which is the result of a collaborative process, however "In the collection of data, or evidence, related to practice, action research emphasises the educator's own, often intuitive, judgements … within those of others involved in the process" (Noffke and Stevenson 1995:7)."

Researcher/researched

The sixth and final issue in relation to validity is that of the relationship between researcher and researched.

From a research perspective, as discussed in Chapters two and four the literature provided ample evidence to suggest that the researcher-researched divide would be

potentially problematic. Although aware of and prepared for this concern, the issue did come up and is therefore addressed here.

As discussed in Chapters two and four, action research ideally attempts to reject a rigid separation between the researcher and researched and favours methods that give research subjects more involvement (Gancian 1992). Methodologically, action research insists on the direct involvement of the researcher, to be active, work on equal terms, and become immersed in the research process (Wadsworth 1997; Burns 1995; Gluck and Patai 1991; Fetterman 1989). Wadsworth suggests that researchers break out of the traditional role of "… objective interpreter and judge, and the determiner of which truths apply", and into a "… facilitator of group processes, scribe, advisor, collector of comments" role (1997:4). However the literature also highlighted the dangers and limitations of such an approach (Wadsworth 1997; Burns 1995). Wadsworth warns that while in theory the researcher may be striving towards a facilitator role, in practice: "… they frequently get mixed in more or less uneasy combinations, and it is almost always a case of having to try to approximate the new role" (1993b:4). However the literature also suggested that these problems maybe curtailed by incorporating trust, collaboration, authenticity, and a self critical attitude in the research process (Burns 1995; Lather 1991).

In practice this research demonstrated that the distinction between the researcher and the researched was indeed problematic as it impinged on the process. The comments that the members made demonstrate this. As one member noted early on:

George: *I reckon it's complicated a bit by your position - the fact that you're the researcher … because ... with the educational background that you've got, it's a project that you're interested in that's allowing a number of people to be altogether. But because you've been at university for say two or three years, that you've got all this cultural capital ... so I mean the idea that I'm an expert in some areas, might fall away to some degree* (appendix 16.2:6).

In Chapter three on study circles, Oliver (1987) suggested that at times members could become passive if they perceived the leader as a content expert. George and

Pam raised this issue after the study circle season, during the end season interview (appendix 19) and the post study circle meeting (appendix 17).

George: *... this is a process, the study circle in this instance is ...part of your research work ... it was ... still within a structure that was determined elsewhere ...* [Moreover] *it had the constraints of it being under the parameters of the research project which I think creates inhibition* (appendix 19.4:6).

Pam: *I think that part of the problem is that people like yourself who've got the resources ... are not directly affected. There is a difficulty there with a group trying to empower itself when the person leading it isn't one of the affected people ... I don't think it makes it impossible, but I think it makes it difficult to do ... I don't know how it would've been different ... I don't think the group we had there would've organised itself without you ... It would be different, but I've got no idea in what way. Maybe getting onto more action stuff* (appendix 19.3:8).

Pam: *It seems to me a pity that the research process involves a huge amount of your time going into writing the project up.* (appendix 17.2.1)

The idea of reconciling this problematic tension of being researcher and participant was difficult and was representative of the "slippage" that can occur in action research as discussed in Chapter two (Wadsworth 1993b). By interpreting the above members' comments it is evident that this research was limited in its ability to reconcile this researcher-researched divide. This may have been due to the researcher being somewhat inexperienced in study circle protocol as well as with a truly *emancipatory* action research approach. However did this in effect compromise the integrity of the data and consequent reflections? As George mentions, the researcher's presence created "*inhibition*" and "*passivity*", and Pam states that if the researcher was not there, the group "*May be getting into more action stuff*". Perhaps this demonstrates how important catalytic validity is, in that the researcher needed to be even more emersed and subjective than originally intended. However Francis had a different view:

Francis: *I was intrigued that it's studying the fact that we're studying. An interesting concept, but in actual fact, it didn't seem to*

create any problems at all from my point of view. (appendix 17.1.3)

Furthermore, George and Pam had spoken about being research participants previously, and George especially, spoke of what a negative experience that was (appendix 14.4:5). Perhaps this negative and sceptical view of "research" is justifiable when one's experiences of research is that of being done "on" as discussed in Chapters two and four. After all, scepticism is arguably healthy and an important component of both critical research and study circles.

However comments from two separate members suggested that there was an attempt by the researcher to reconcile this issue and create a collaborative research environment.

Francis: *I would like to commend … taken very good care of … issues, and given everybody a fair go at contributing, making sure that everybody's had a fair proportion of time to contribute to every single item of discussion* (appendix 16.8:31).

Barbara: *It's been a really, really worthwhile experience coming along. I mean you've treated us well in every possible way, and I've felt acknowledged"* (appendix 16.8:26).

These comments occurred late in the season and supports Wadsworth's (1993b) view that power relationships between researcher and researched take some time to reconcile in action research. Furthermore, perhaps both parties, the researcher and researched are able to exercise different types of power: "We [the researcher] assert power by inserting ourselves into their world unbidden and asking for their stories, they [the research participants] also assert power by gratifying or denying our request" (Gluck and Patai 1991:196). Holbrook also offers a revealing insight into this issue "So much of the debate on ethics revolves about taking a paternal role toward the researched, so little of it concerns the potential harm to the researcher …" (1997:62)

Within this Introduction to Part two an attempt has been made to demonstrate how research aims need to be interpreted and perceived differently according to the methodology used. The aims for this research therefore should not be understood as

empirical aims. The above discussion also argues that the methodology used here, action research, needs to be flexible and not prescriptive. The validity of the subjective lived experiences of research participants in action research has also been addressed.

The validity of action research reflections and results are unique experiences applying to a specific context yet of value, as has been discussed. This section has also explained how Part two of this thesis, the reflection, has been validated with the members constant cycling and reflection. Finally the issue of researcher and researched has been discussed.

The structure of the remainder of Part two is depicted in the Table below:

Table eleven: Structure of Part two

Research focus	Main source of validated data	Chapter	Objective
Individual and collective.	Correspondence.	**Five** Overview of season.	To address research aims.
Collective.	Study circle transcripts.	**Six** Concerns and themes raised.	To triangulate.
Individual.	Interview transcripts.	**Seven** Individual accounts.	To triangulate.
		Eight Conclusion.	Member check and validation.

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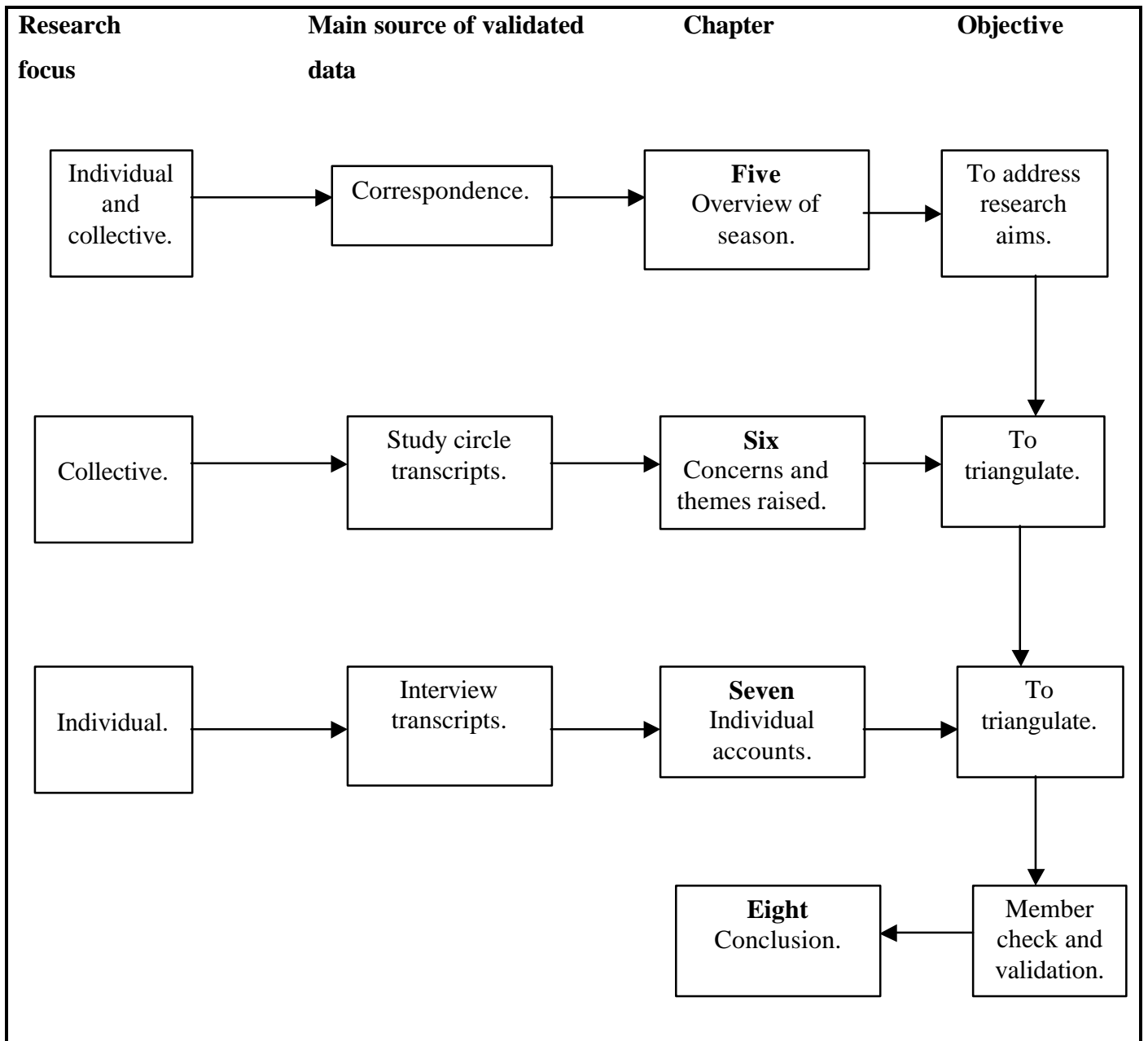
Chapter five - overview of season

Table One: Thesis structure

Part one
Methodology/literature review

Part two
Study circle season

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┊───────────────────────────────────────┐
│  ┌──────────────────┐                        ┊                                        │
│  │  Chapter one,    │                        ┊      ┌────────────────────────┐        │
│  │ Thematic Concern.│                        ┊      │    Chapter five,       │        │
│  │  Unemployment.   │────┐                    ┊   ┌─▶│  Overview of season.   │        │
│  └──────────────────┘    │                    ┊   │  └────────────────────────┘        │
│                          │   ┌────────────┐   ┊   │             │                      │
│                          ├──▶│ Chapter four│──┊───┘             ▼                      │
│  ┌──────────────────┐    │   │  Method.   │   ┊      ┌────────────────────────┐        │
│  │  Chapter two,    │    │   └────────────┘   ┊      │    Chapter six,        │        │
│  │  Methodology.    │────┤                    ┊      │  Concerns and themes   │        │
│  │  Action research │    │                    ┊      │       raised.          │        │
│  └──────────────────┘    │                    ┊      └────────────────────────┘        │
│                          │                    ┊                 │                      │
│  ┌──────────────────┐    │                    ┊                 ▼                      │
│  │  Chapter three,  │    │                    ┊      ┌────────────────────────┐        │
│  │    Milieu.       │────┘                    ┊      │   Chapter seven,       │        │
│  │  Study circle.   │                         ┊      │  Individual accounts.  │        │
│  └──────────────────┘                         ┊      └────────────────────────┘        │
│                                               ┊                 │                      │
│                                               ┊                 ▼                      │
│                                               ┊      ┌────────────────────────┐        │
│                                               ┊      │   Chapter eight,       │        │
│                                               ┊      │   Conclusion.          │        │
│                                               ┊      └────────────────────────┘        │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┊───────────────────────────────────────┘
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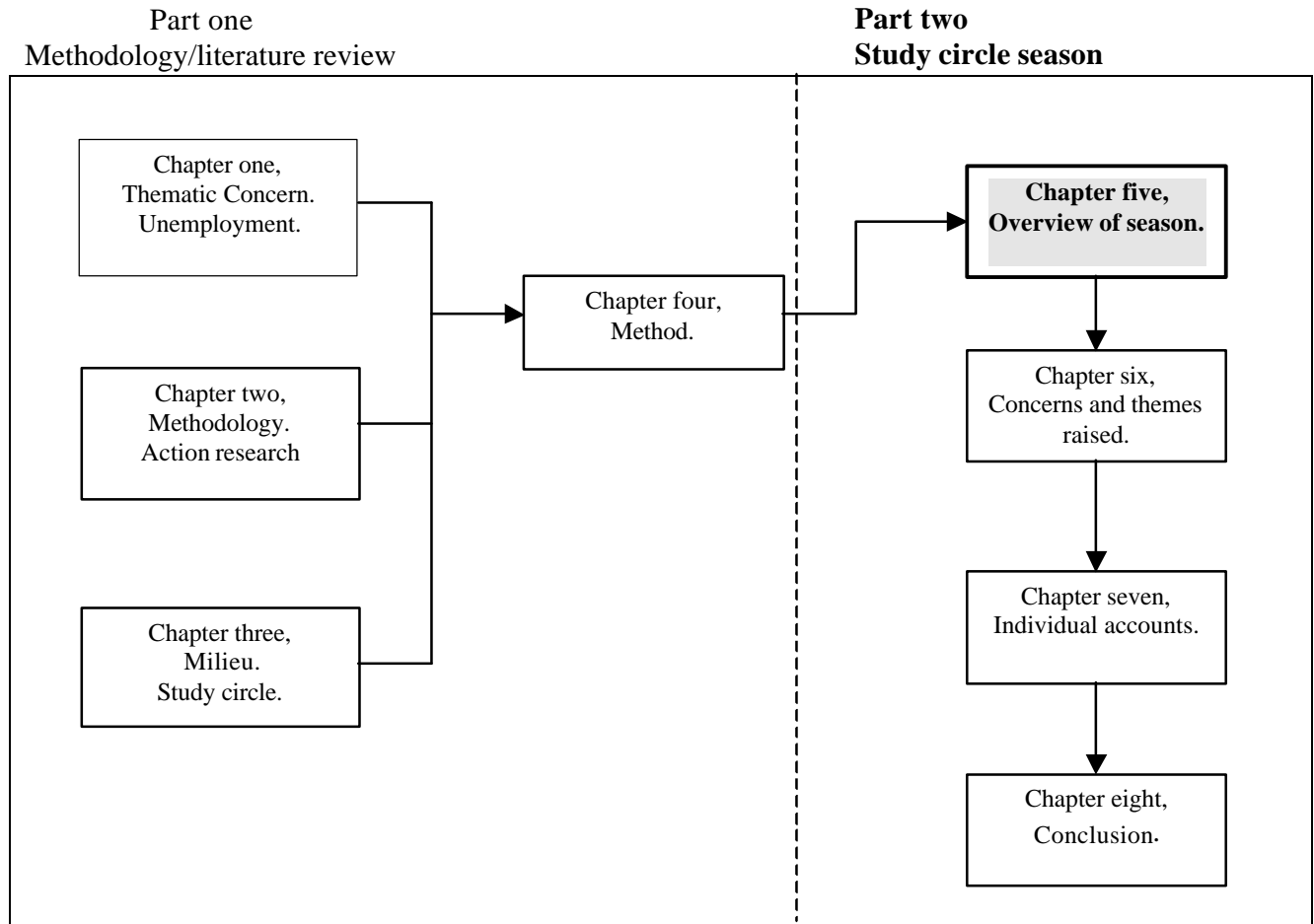
5.1   Introduction

Chapter five firstly presents an individual profile of each study circle member and
attendance details. A general overview of the season is then given by utilising data
generated by the correspondence. This Chapter provides an overall description of the
season to place the remainder of Part two into context. Chapter five is also a
preliminary attempt, through reflection, to establish if and how the study circle
contributed to the empowerment of the members as a group and individually as per the
general aim;

'To determine whether, and investigate how, a Swedish study circle contributes to the empowerment of the unemployed research participants, both at an individual and group level.'

5.2   Study circle member profiles

Of the nine individuals who participated in the original pre interview, five eventually became study circle members. The remaining four were unable to commit to the study circle season for various reasons, outlined in Chapter four.[62] Of the final five members (excluding the researcher), two were female and three were male. Length of unemployment ranged from zero to nine years (mean: three years, median: four years six months).

Ages ranged from forty-one to fifty (mean forty-five, median forty-five).   Formal education levels ranged from year nine to graduate diploma level (two not yet completed year twelve, one undergraduate, one graduate, and one post graduate). One member George considered himself semi-employed.

George*:*   *Well I'm partially employed, but you can consider in some ways that is not employment. It's just something that adds a bit of extra money to a benefit that allows me to live, otherwise I'd be starving. So as far as employment of a worthwhile nature, it isn't* (appendix 11.4:4).

The range of previous work experiences was diverse, from self employment and labouring to teaching, market research and community work. Geographically, members came from Melbourne's northern and western suburbs, which tend to be Australia's most adversely effected areas of high unemployment (Hudson and Rollins 1997; Borland 1995; Probert 1994).   In relation to gender, previous education, location and employment experience, the membership was diverse, however the ethnic background and age range was narrow. As discussed previously the bias from such small samples is problematic from an empirical research stance, however the importance of sample

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[62]   Pre interviews were however conducted with all nine potential members, although their transcripts were not used in the study.

sizes are not of the utmost importance to the critical theory researcher (Smith 1997; Borg and Gall 1996). Rather "… the uniqueness of each learning situation … lies at the heart of action research" (Green 1999:107). Furthermore, unbiased sample representativeness is almost impossible with any research which adheres to ethical considerations, as participation in all research should be voluntary (de-Vaus 1995). Nonetheless the representativeness of this sample is bias from an empirical perspective in areas such as the age range. In regard to the representativeness, at the time of this research being conducted in relation to Australia's unemployment rate of eight per cent, twenty two per cent of the unemployed at the time were aged forty five to fifty (Wooden 1999) and thirty two per cent had been unemployed for over one year (Hancock 1999). Therefore if one wanted to establish the representativeness of this sample then it is reflective of those unemployed people who are not NESB, in their mid forties and have been unemployed for over a year.

Each member's profile presented here incorporates the individual's own words. These profiles were developed from content from the Background information forms, the pre interviews and study circle sessions. They include self-descriptions, individual rationales for joining the study circle and the ambitions and aspirations of how they would prefer to reconcile life and work. Each profile was also internally validated at the post study circle season meeting. These profiles have been read, checked, edited and altered by the members themselves.

Paul

Paul was forty years old and had a year nine education, Paul was, at the time, undertaking a literacy and numeracy course at the Council of Adult Education, and had been out of work for nine years – *"I've been unemployed since '89..."* (appendix 16.3:1). Paul had worked previously as a factory process worker. He lived in a unit in Melbourne's outer western suburbs and had previously participated in Jobtrain and (SES) [63] LMP courses.

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[63] Special Employer Support.

I've come here to sort of learn from people's different experiences and take in what I can ... (appendix 16.3:1).

[I've joined this study circle] *... for the general information ... and to meet new people ... maybe* [obtain] *fresh ideas so I can cope in my own life with unemployment* (appendix 16.1:5).

Paul's aspirations were modest - to be appreciated for his efforts.

I want to help people where I can ... do something worthwhile so that after the day's done, you know you've achieved something. I think, that's for me, working with people somehow, helping them in different ways (appendix 16.6:16).

I guess I want to be in some kind of position where I'm appreciated for what I do at the end of the day. You know you've done a worthwhile thing, you just want it appreciated - what I've done and what I am ... Whether that's employment or voluntary work of some kind. I just haven't had that. A pat on the back when you've done a good job. I haven't had very much of that in my life. That's what I'm looking for (appendix 16.6:17).

Francis

Francis was fifty years old. He had completed year twelve and a certificate level course in electronics, lived in an inner western suburb of Melbourne, and had been unemployed for four months. As Francis states:

'I've been in Melbourne looking for work since January. ... I've been working solidly in electronics up until the last six years or so. When I lost my business, I got myself a job in Brisbane, came back here, didn't get anything. Went to Sydney, got a year and a half of work or so. I'm looking for work now' (appendix 16.3:1).

'I was self-employed, since before leaving school basically. Had a bit of self-employment right through to the last few years ...' (appendix 16.2:1).

Francis had previously participated in a NEIS[64] LMP course and had worked in the electronic design and manufacturing industry as well as some taxi driving and a period of self employment running a karaoke business. Ideally he wanted to work in sales, live music or the entertainment industry.

> *I can offer the study circle the input of my own experiences from my own point of view in my current situation. My previous point of view was as an employer when I had my own business, and just general personal experiences and opinions about employment, education and so on. And I'm looking forward to being able to find this a positive experience* (appendix 16.1:2).

> *What I hope to gain from the study circle is the opening up of different possibilities for myself and others in dealing with the problems of unemployment - finding solutions. And also to just get a bit more rapport in relating to other people about the same subject. People who know all about the subject from their point of view* (appendix 16.1:2).

> *I see this as being a possible opportunity to create some synergy with some other people in the group, and come up with the some ideas where we can actually contribute* (appendix 16.2:1).

Pam

Pam, was fifty years old had been unemployed for six years she lived in a house in a Melbourne inner northern suburb. She had a degree in teaching and had worked as a primary school teacher for twenty years.

> *... I got stressed out with that* [teaching] *and left. And spent a lot of time trying to work out what was the right way to go from there ... I worked in a hospital for awhile to see if I wanted to do something paramedical, and decided that the hospital was not where I wanted to be. And then settled on community development and studied that...Community development of organisations got slashed. I finished the two year course at TAFE, and then went over and did the third year at uni, at VUT.[65] And since then I've done mostly unpaid work. I'm involved in an organisation that got defunded and they all lost*

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64   New Enterprise Incentive Scheme.
65   Victoria University of Technology.

their jobs...I'm still spending a lot of time doing unpaid work for that.
(appendix 16.1:4).

Pam's reasons for joining the study circle were:

I've kind of had the idea of getting together with people in the same situation from a long time back. And when I've got really hassled with the DSS, and I've thought I've needed support from other people that knew what it was like, and share strategies and support each other (appendix 16.1:4).

... because I think there's a real need for people to get together. There's a lot of unemployed people who need a group (appendix 16.1:4).

... with the study circle, I'm wanting to get a bit more information on unemployment. I think at the moment I don't ... take it in very much. I've got a very general view, but I haven't got the facts and figures in my head and I think ... I just don't take it in. Yes a bit more information and also interaction with other people, and I see this as one way of getting together with other people who are unemployed and networking and making contacts (appendix 16.1:5).

Pam also wanted a certain amount of autonomy in her life:

I think I'm pretty happy doing what I'm doing now. Like doing the things with XXX,[66] and I think it was somewhere near the ideal when we had a small collective and we had that control ... we weren't working for anybody else ... (appendix 16.6:19).

George

George had completed year eleven, and two years of a Media Arts Degree, he was forty-five years old. He classified himself as "*partially employed*" (appendix 11.4:4) and ideally wanted to create documentaries or carry out research work. Previously, George had worked for VicRail and undertaken a variety of gardening, factory and market research work. George lived in a unit in Melbourne's inner northern suburbs.

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[66]   Pam requested that this organisation not be named.

... I've probably had very little paid employment over a period of twenty-five years ... At the moment ... going back into part time work ... made me realise just that it's created a lot more conflict for me because of the work I'm doing ... how frustrating it is to have so much of your time being used in ways that ... aren't really beneficial to yourself or other people (appendix 16.2:1).

Well the reason I wanted to sit down and talk to people in this group was to ... at least get some idea of what people are thinking about these questions ... more and more people haven't got any control over their education, and unemployed people have less and less control over their education ... and whether there are means whereby people can get around it ... so that they can have an education system of their own (appendix 16.2:3).

... basically just to see what people are thinking, so that, because I had thought of putting in a paper for this conference.[67] *Yet it says here - who are the participants? The conference aims to attract professionals working in political science, sociology, economists, those working in human services, counsellors, community and private sector, trade unionists, and those involved in public policy development. You may have noticed an absence there* (appendix 16.2:3-4).[68]

George wanted to reconcile the links between what he saw as meaningless work, stress and illness in his life. Perhaps a health farm or overseas trip?

I ... got sick again and worried about ... not being able to do part time work. But I think a lot of the reasons I get sick are basically worrying about the amount of things that need to be done. I'm trying to do quite a bit of research work, and I just never seem to get to the end of it ... So the elimination of stress I think would be great. Because I'm going to have to tell this person that I can't do this work on the weekend, and then that probably means I get put back, the lack of control ... So where you've got a situation where people haven't got control over their employment ... So I think that would make people a lot happier, if they didn't have to do ridiculous work ... that was the whole thing about stress. Stress creates ill health, probably for more and more people. And the people just have to cope with it ... But I'd like to go

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[67] Fifth National Conference on Unemployment, RMIT, Melbourne, 1998.
[68] At risk of stating the obvious, the actual 'unemployed' were not mentioned under the list of participants for this national conference on unemployed on the publicity flier (see appendix 16).

overseas, I've never had enough money to go overseas. (appendix 16.6:17).

... everybody who is unemployed ... develops different strategies to cope with the situation. And sometimes they're much better than the strategies of people who have been politically organised about unemployed issues. So they're much more practical and less ideological ... I wouldn't be saying - 'oh well this should be done.' I'd be saying - 'well these people think this and these are the practical problems that people are trying to cope with, and try to make concrete what the problems are' (appendix 16.2:4).

Barbara

Barbara, was forty-one years old, had a Graduate Diploma in TESOL[69] and had been unemployed for four months. She lived in a house in an inner northern suburb of Melbourne and ideally wanted to work in the adult education field. *"I worked for twenty years in* [education]*..."* (appendix 16.3:1). Barbara had also recently worked in Jobtrain courses.

And [what I hope to gain, is the opportunity to meet] *... with other unemployed people ... and getting some more information, because I think I have a lot of information that's in my head to know when I hear or read something, whether I think it's okay or not. But not enough to kind of draw it out and be articulate. So I think I'd like some more information ...* (Barbara, appendix 16.3:1).

Barbara's employment aspirations reflect the pressure many people experience in employment:

Really working out what I really want to do. What my passion is. And then working out how you can organise that into a job. And dealing with the personal stuff, the stress stuff at the same time ... in teaching there's actually lots that I really like about it. But there's not enough time. Everything is always done under pressure - prepare this by tomorrow. So working part time is one option. But it'd be nice to have a job that you were actually paid for enough time to do the job. That would be really good (appendix 16.6:21-22).

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[69]   Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

I'm actually quite attracted to ... seeing it [work] in terms of variety, and not using your brain all the time, incorporating more ... manual skills ... I mean I'm still working it out too, but I would follow up my personal growth, and somehow being a facilitator for that with others, is something that I would like to do. I also actually really enjoy curriculum design ... With a friend we got a little consultancy job writing a reading and writing assessment test for a nursing organisation ... There's something about actually doing a ... confined task that's quite separate from teaching class after class (appendix 16.6:16-17).

5.3 Attendance

The study circle season commenced on April the second, 1998 at three-fifteen p.m. and the first session ran for two hours. A round table format was selected in a comfortable lounge room of a house owned by Victoria University in Footscray. A light meal was provided, and most other arrangements were left open for discussion. After the first meeting, members decided to meet weekly and run the sessions for two hours with a twenty minute break included. Attendance was sporadic at the start but eventually improved.

The member's attendance record is presented in the table below:

Table twelve: Study circle season attendances

Member	*Session*								
	1: 2/4/98	**2: 9/4/98**	**3: 16/4/98**	**4: 23/4/98**	**5: 30/4/98**	**6: 7/5/98**	**7: 14/5/98**	**8: 21/5/98**	**Individual member attendance**
Paul	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	**7**
Francis	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	**5**
Pam	✓	X	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	**6**
George	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	**6**
Barbara	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	**6**
Mark	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	**8**
Total attendance per session	**4**	**4**	**6**	**4**	**5**	**5**	**5**	**6**	

Total member attendance ranged from sixty two per cent to one hundred per cent, with an average attendance at each session of five members. Members overall, averaged six and a half sessions each. This result reflects and confirms the attendance problems raised in Chapter two, including those of Costigan and Letcher (1987) and Oliver (1982). However, once the group started there was no dropouts or attrition, which is unusual in longitudinal studies (Winefield, Tiggeman and Winefield 1991). In effect this assists in strengthening internal validity as discussed in Chapter four (Burns 1995; Winefield, Tiggeman and Winefield 1991), and also reflects that once someone starts a study circle season there is the high likelihood that they will continue as the benefits of participating become more apparent. (Oliver 1987) It is also evident that total attendance numbers gradually improved as the season progressed.

5.4 Overview

In relation to the previous discussion in Chapter two on methodology, Reason (1990) describes a "loop" between experience and reflection. Within this context each study circle session can be seen as a group experience and the correspondence sent by the co-ordinator (researcher) to other members between meetings as the reflective aspect of this loop. In the reflective stage (ie. the letter), Reason's three areas were addressed. That is:

- 'The description' – The researcher interpreted and described what they thought had occurred during each session.

- 'The evaluation' – The members, having received the correspondence a few days later, had time to read and think about its contents which were then always discussed at the start of each subsequent session so members themselves could judge and make comments on how well founded the descriptions and interpretations were. The descriptions of the sessions contained here are based upon this internally validating process. In other words participants were able to firstly, at an individual level, after receiving the letter and later as a collective at the start of a session, collaboratively determine that the contents could be ascribed to the study circle meetings. Furthermore in latter triangulation, members viewed a draft of the thesis. Their final input, including any alterations upon the reflections are included within the discussion.

- 'The practical' – The tentative agenda, in light of the previous experience phase, was a guide to help assist the members decide what issues to explore in the next session (or experience phase). This agenda was also discussed and agreed upon at the start of each session.

Over the length of the season the above reflective loop was carried out eight times.

These descriptions of each session below have therefore been collaboratively developed and agreed upon by all members. Although this assists in research rigor, the reflections are nonetheless still provisional and open to subjective interpretation. However later triangulation goes someway to shedding further light upon these provisional findings.

It is also relevant to recall the critical theory definition of empowerment as discussed in Chapter two. That is, a process that promotes participation by individuals and groups in order to gain control over their social situation. (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988)

Therefore what is being sought here, within this Chapter is to establish if, as the research aims state, the study circle process *contributed* to the empowerment of the unemployed members.

5.4.1 Session one – Second April 1998 (three fifteen to five fifteen p.m. full transcript appendix 16.1)

In the first session, only four members attended, Paul, Francis, Pam and Mark. The session started with general introductions from each member. Questions were put up on a white board in the room. "What do you hope to gain from the study circle?" and "What can you offer the study circle?" as prompts for initial discussion. This information also assisted in developing the member profiles presented earlier in this Chapter.

As per study circle protocol, the ten points in the *"Members' Guide"* were initially addressed (appendix 12). The first session of the study circle season seemed to go well. Parking vouchers (for those who drove), and the discussion guides were distributed

(appendix 2). Those who were present made a few tentative organisational agreements that needed to be discussed, possibly modified, and then agreed upon by all members at the next session. These initial agreements were:

- Start time three-thirty p.m., run for an hour, break for twenty five minutes, and then finish an hour later around six p.m.
- Meal provided. The co-ordinator to arrange.
- Sessions to be conducted weekly.
- The need to establish ground rules for the group to adhere to, for example confidentiality, and continuously review and update them.

Aside from these organisational matters, the group discussed the objectives of the study circle. At the time tentative objectives, aside from those on page four of the discussion guide, were posted:

- Information sharing.
- The opportunity to interact (and enjoy!).
- Exploring the possibilities of such a forum.

Issues to emerge during the session were:

- The meaning of "work".
- DSS benefits.

However, it was agreed that all objectives needed to be open for discussion and possible alteration and/or addition during the next study circle session with other members who were not in attendance. The group also focused on the importance of understanding study circle member and leader roles, and how these should be clear before the group explored the topic in earnest. A loose agenda for the next session was compiled, but it was realised that it also needed to be agreed upon (and possibly modified) at the start of the next session.

The tentative agenda was:

- Introductions from those who attended first session.

- Introductions from new members.
- Discussion of the objectives, both from individual and group perspectives. Try to reach some general agreements.
- Address and discuss ground rules, then continuously review and update.

Break*;*

- Attempt session one activity 'B' page five, of the discussion guide – (appendix 2) to increase the knowledge and skills of study circle member and leader roles.

It was anticipated that this activity in itself might help clarify the group's objectives further. Included in the letter to members was the following:

> 'If anyone would like to be a leader for the next session, please let me know. I realise it is early days and some of you may feel comfortable with me as leader. Please remember though, a central objective of study circles is that they are facilitated, conducted and 'owned' by group members – not the co-ordinator. I feel that if we focus on how to be a leader early, some of you may feel more comfortable trying it out.

> For those who attended the first study circle session, please let me know if you think I have interpreted our first meeting incorrectly or inadequately' (appendix 6).

5.4.2 Session two – Ninth April 1998 (three thirty to six p.m., full transcript appendix 16.2)

In the second session only three members attended. Paul and Pam who attended the first session did not arrive and George who was unable to attend the first session was attending his first. Present therefore were George, Francis and Mark.

After agreeing on the tentative agenda set out, general introductions were again carried out, followed by a discussion on the objectives agreed to in the first session. Although the attendance number was low, it seemed a good opportunity for the new member George to contribute.

The list of issues expanded from the first session from:

- Meaning of 'work'.
- DSS (later changed to 'Income Security' in third session).

To include:

- Education.
- Unemployment Conference (George had suggested that perhaps the Fifth National Conference on Unemployment may provide opportunities for the group).

Up to this stage, progress was relatively slow. The eight sessions in the discussion guide (appendix 2) were intended to reflect eight sessions of a season yet the group had hardly covered any material in the discussion guide by this stage. The basis of much discussion had been on what issues the group would address and the ground rules. This seemed to be taking a considerable time to achieve, however it was important that the group as a whole needed to decide what directions to take. The discussion guide was after all just that – a "guide". Also the sporadic attendance of members also effected progress. As the literature had suggested, study circles take time to develop and attendance can be a problematic issue (Shires and Crawford 1999a, Costigan and Letcher 1987, Gibson 1998, Oliver 1987). Patience was needed.

Correspondence after this second session included the following:

> 'The second session of our study circle season, although low in numbers, went relatively well. We refined our objectives and ground rules and made some minor changes. There was some discussion in relation to education and an unemployment conference to occur later this year. These issues, along with others raised in our first session, will be useful to tackle in the latter stages of our season.
>
> In our next session, we will begin on our topic in earnest. We will focus on personal experiences and views in relation to unemployment and attempt to find any common ground we can all agree upon' (appendix 6.4).

5.4.3   Session three – Sixteenth April 1998 (three thirty to six p.m., full transcript appendix 16.3)

A full attendance for the first time. Session one from the discussion guide was covered (appendix 2), and all members had the opportunity of addressing their personal experiences of unemployment. The group further discussed the option of taking some action in relation to the unemployment conference coming up later in the year. Ground rules were again covered and the agenda was set for the next meeting (appendix 6.5).

At this third session, the group was able to openly discuss concerns about the experience of being unemployed. Several points emerged which were validated with all members at the start of the next session.

Members spoke of frustration, lack of identity, anger, despair, indecision, lack of self esteem, lack of structure, not knowing what to do, and isolation associated with being unemployed. These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter six. However positive factors associated with unemployment such as a sense of relief, freedom, and the opportunity to become involved in other activities and seek new life directions were also mentioned. These opportunities nonetheless were seen to be limited due to several factors such as impoverishment associated with lack of money, health concerns such as depression and government agencies exerting power and using surveillance to put pressure on the unemployed.

The group also discussed the different views between those who have a job and those who don't. Employed people were perceived to view the unemployed as a drain on their taxes. It was felt that some employed people resent and are often even hostile towards the unemployed. Members suggested that these views made them feel like "losers", causing them to blame themselves and believe their unemployment was due to their own fault. The group also touched on the idea that even some unemployed resent other unemployed. The suggestion was put forward that perhaps hostility towards the

unemployed, by the employed, is due to the perception that the employed feel threatened and fearful that they may lose their jobs as well.

In relation to the paired listening exercise, in the discussion guide (appendix 2) the group generally regarded it as a worthwhile exercise. However some felt that when listening, there was a strong urge to speak and when speaking, an uneasiness and desire for the other to participate in the conversation.

Two other issues also came up in discussion:

- The group saw some opportunities for the Unemployment Conference, from "picnic to protest" to presenting a paper. There was some division regarding these ideas, but the division we had was seen as healthy. This was seen to be the true challenge of a study circle - how or if a general agreement could be reached in a democratic way. It was felt that perhaps as the season progressed, agreement might emerge. The decision on the Conference was deferred to a latter session; and

- It was agreed that new members only be accepted up to the fourth meeting.[70]

The following tentative agenda was set out for the next session:

- Brief review of ground rules, guidelines and objectives.

- Discuss points presented in correspondence, agree, disagree, alter, etc (appendix 6).

- Work through discussion guide, pages seven to nine (session 2 Appendix 4).

- Summarise.

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[70] As discussed in Chapter three, McCoy et al. (1996) recommend that no new study circle members be accepted after the second or third session due to the possibility of disrupting the cohesiveness and culture of the original group.

5.4.4   Session four – Twenty third April 1998 (three thirty to six p.m., full transcript appendix 16.4)

Pam was unable to be at this session and Francis had obtained some part time work, and was therefore also unable to attend (although he returned later to the seventh session). In Chapter three, with USA research on study circles, it was noted that work commitments could hinder attendance (Oliver 1987).   Present therefore were Paul, George, Barbara and Mark.

The members worked through session two of the discussion guide, pages seven to nine (appendix 2) and discussed the views presented. Opinions varied amongst members as to the causes of unemployment, however it was generally agreed that the notion of the unemployed being lazy was a "myth" taught to many people generation after generation. Personal experiences revealed that the causes of unemployment can be attributed to several factors including poor work practices, health and safety, preferred work opportunities not available, downsizing, heavier work loads, the casualisation of the workforce and/or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The group then had a "discussion" about the above discussion. The focus of this "reflective discussion" was a turning point. Members wanted the discussion to go deeper and perhaps focus on specific issues, work and learn together and explore action options in response to the issues raised so far. It was felt that although it is relevant to discuss experiences, the members needed to explore why they happen and what we can do about them.   For example, the issue of unsafe work practices may cause unemployment, but why do these practices exist in the first place?

For this reason, members decided that at the next session, the group firstly cover session three, page ten - "Looking at Discussion Leadership" of the discussion guide (appendix 2) - briefly, to finish discussion on the leadership role. Another member, who felt comfortable with the role, would then possibly take up the leadership. It was

decided that the discussion guide would not need to be used further, unless members wanted to return to it later in the season.

It was also decided at this session, that when a draft of the thesis was ready, it would be distributed to all members and the group would meet again to discuss and verify its contents. The tentative agenda for the next session was as follows:

- Review ground rules, etc.
- Discuss points raised in correspondence (ie. letter).
- Session three as per discussion guide (appendix 2).
- Discuss specific issues of concern to all members - ie. those raised at previous session or earlier ones such as unsafe work practices, level of benefits, meaning of 'work', income security, education, others?
- Summarise.

5.4.5 Session five – Thirtieth April 1998 (three thirty to six p.m.)

Unfortunately the fifth session was not recorded due to a technical fault with the Dictaphone. The loss of this raw data required a recapitulation of the session. The following discussion demonstrates how this took place:

Mark: *Just to start off, I had a slight technical hitch last week, and nothing came out through the recording.*

Paul: *What a shame.*

Mark: *… Now I've thought about this, and … there's a couple of things we could do - and that is we could either run around everybody … to get their interpretation of the last meeting … Or, we could, if I could ask everybody if they wanted to … to write a few points about the last meeting … Doesn't have to be long … but just to write down a few points as they come.…*

Pam: *I think you've … got the sense of it in the letter you sent us.*

Paul: *Yes, yes.*

Pam: *It sounds quite accurate to me.*

Paul: *Yes very accurate.*

Pam: *I suppose there was also that point where we were trying to push a bit further into the reasons for the unemployment that came from the sort of structural situation -*

Mark: *Like the organisational stuff?*

Pam: *Yes the organisational stuff where, say, in the teaching situation, it being due to ... political decisions and all that ... stuff.*

Mark: *... like the pressure trickling down, money and budgets and cost cutting?*

Pam: *Yes. And I think that was ... George's, I mean he has to say whether he agrees or not, but I think that was his ... where he was trying to drive to - all right you've lost your job, but apart from your personal circumstances, what caused you to lose, in a bigger sense, caused you to lose your job?*

Mark: *Oh okay. So both the organisational structures and political structures. Ideologies all those ... things. The big umbrella picture.*

Pam: *Yes. Yes. The big picture as well as the personal.*

Mark: *Okay. Anything else?*

Paul: *No.*

Barbara: *Oh well I think what was probably most pertinent about it was the ... flow of discussion, and the ease ... that people talked, and that stuff came out. It's like, I mean that's what you lose from losing the tape, is the ... flow and jelling of the communication* (appendix 16.6:1-5).

Francis was the only member not in attendance at this session. Present therefore was Paul, Pam, George, Barbara, and Mark.

By all accounts, members found the fifth session extremely worthwhile. After a brief discussion about the contents of the previous letter and session three of the discussion guide, George led an insightful, personal and profound discussion, which allowed each member to share their experiences and feelings regarding the loss of their employment. The issue of "unsafe work practices" was explored as a possible contributory cause of unemployment. In some ways a useful, learning and purging exercise and beneficial as members were further able to share experiences and further empathise with one another.

In some ways, the event of unemployment for whatever reasons was seen as an opportunity to investigate alternative ways of life. For example, Paul and Barbara had been exploring changes of career, while Pam and George had been pursuing activities other than traditional paid employment. It is on this issue of "alternatives" that the group decided to discuss in more detail during the next session it was decided that Pam would lead the group.

A collection of articles supplied by George was shared amongst the study circle members to read in preparation for the sixth session (appendix 21) in which he would lead a discussion on the issue of income security. The tentative agenda for the next session was as follows:

- Introductions and discuss interpretations contained within letter.
- Alternatives. Pam to lead discussion.
- Income Security. George to lead discussion.
- Summarise and plan for next session.

5.4.6   Session six – Seventh May 1998 (three thirty to six p.m., full transcript appendix 16.6)

All members attended except Francis who was working. Present therefore was Paul, Pam, George, Barbara and Mark.

The sixth session was informative with Pam leading a discussion focusing on the issue of "alternatives". Members shared information and learnt about organisations and schemes including LETS,[71] WWOOF,[72] Labour Cooperatives, Food not Bombs, living on a low income, unpaid work, and the notion of "choice".[73]

Members discussed what their ideal work-lifestyle might be if they had the choice. Some members felt that if the problems many people in our society face were alleviated then this alone would create an environment where ideal lifestyles could be attained. Discussion then turned back to the theme, which the group touched on the previous session – stress, and more specifically, where stress comes from, the causes, and how to address it from a personal and social/structural perspective.

As what seemed to becoming the regular case, time ran out again. The group was unable to follow up on the income security issue and did not fully cover the alternatives issue. The tentative agenda for the next session was therefore as follows:

- Introductions and discuss interpretations contained within correspondence.
- Final discussion on alternatives. Pam to lead discussion.
- Income security. George to lead discussion.
- Consideration of linking back to discussion guide for next session. Barbara to lead discussion.
- Summation and plan for next session.

5.4.7   Session seven – Fourteenth May 1998 (three thirty to six p.m., full transcript in appendix 16.7)

All members attended except George. Present therefore was Paul, Francis, Pam, Barbara and Mark.

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[71]   LETS – Local Exchange Trading Scheme (see appendix 16.6 for description).
[72]   WWOOF – Willing Workers on Organic Farms (see appendix 16.6 for description).
[73]   These and other alternatives are described in detail in appendix 16.6

The seventh session progressed well, and the group seemed to be developing good rapport and bonding. The group agreed that we had an interesting and diverse study circle membership.

Unfortunately George was ill, so we decided to delay the income security topic. Francis was able to return to the study circle due to losing employment, however a phone call during the session resulted in Francis regaining his job.

We covered the points raised in the last letter and Pam contributed with detailed notes encapsulating the sixth session. From here, Pam led a discussion to further explore the "alternatives" topic. This progressed onto addressing the resources wasted in job searching and adhering to bureaucratic protocol and rules. It was generally agreed that the Centrelink requirements to demonstrate a concerted effort in job searching can often be a waste of everything from travel, stamps and envelopes, to employers and job seekers time and effort. The financial component came into the discussion and there was consensus on the notion that actively looking for work on restricted budget is extremely hard work.

It was then agreed that the members would return to the discussion guide. The membership covered The Free Market and Public Sector Job Creation viewpoints (appendix 2). This was an opportunity to learn about these concepts, thrash out ideas and attempt to understand conflicting viewpoints. The group ran out of time to formally summarise the session, however from most comments it seemed as though members found the session enjoyable.

It was decided that for the next session, the eighth and final of the season, that the tentative agenda would be as follows:

- Introductions and discuss interpretations contained within correspondence.
- Income security. George to lead discussion.
- Discussion guide, perhaps viewpoints three, four, six and seven.
- Discussion guide - session five.

- Summarise.

5.4.8   Session eight – Twenty first May 1998 (three thirty to six p.m., full transcript appendix 16.8)

In the final session, all members attended. After initial introductions, and checking and reviewing correspondence (appendix 6), George led a productive discussion on the issue of income security. From the reference material George produced (appendix 21), it was established that the cost of living for many people is above their actual welfare payment. All of the members themselves had experienced this first hand. This issue raised questions including those in relation to the actual *in*security many people feel, perceived welfare fraud and the distrust of government and non-government organisations that deal with the unemployed. Although opinions varied, it was generally agreed that the level of income support that the unemployed receives should be more. The group returned to the discussion guide and the viewpoints on pages twelve to sixteen (appendix 2). The group then individually summed up their own feelings about the session, and the season as a whole. (Details of which are elaborated upon in later Chapters).

5.5   Emergent issues in relation to study circle process

Before reflecting upon the themes the group discussed and the individual experiences in Chapters six and seven, this section will address a range of aspects in relation to the actual study circle process and protocol that became evidence during the season.

These issues include the development of objectives, issues and ground rules along with time management, previous learning experiences of members, leadership role, the applicability of the discussion guide, study circle resources and new ways of learning.

This content to follow has been validated by firstly requesting members to check and edit transcripts and then read how their voices are placed within the study by perusing a

draft of the thesis. Finally a member check was carried out at the post study circle meeting.

Objectives

The objectives of the group were established early on in the season and finally agreed upon by all by the third session. The first two objectives here were pre posted by the researcher, as suggested from the text *"Guidelines for Effective Study Circles"* (SCRC 1995). The final agreed upon list of objectives are in the following Table:

Table thirteen: List of objectives

- To become effective study circle members and leaders.
- To explore the issue of unemployed in a democratic and participating manner.
- To increase general understanding.
- To share information.
- To identify values.
- To address personal concerns.
- To build morale.
- To interact and enjoy.
- To explore possibilities.
- To look at what the general sense of concern and ideas for solutions among group members are.

(appendix 14)

All members were able to contribute to these objectives.

Francis: *I think if all of our aims[74] and what we want to get out of it are all put down, and then we can probably make it more specific to something which has got a common thread to all the goals that everybody has* (appendix 16.1:6).

Francis: *I think the goal can be very valuable as a direction to take ... goals will need to be changed, as our initial goal, apart from the obvious one of working on the study circle, is very likely to change as we get more into it ...* (appendix 16.1:7).

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[74]   In the following extracts, some members refer to the 'goals' and 'aims'. These are in actuality, the 'objectives' developed by the group, displayed on a poster and worked through by the membership, as mentioned in Chapter four. The final agreed list of objectives is contained in appendix 14.

Pam: *Do you think morale raising is useful? It's pretty depressing*
being on a low income, not being able to get a job if you want
to get a job ... Being together with other people with similar
concerns ... really helps to give direction (appendix 16.1:7).

Although members discussed the objectives thoroughly, it did take considerable time to agree on the complete list. This is discussed further later in this Chapter.

Issues

The group collaboratively developed a list of issues that they wanted to discuss and work with. This list took up to the fifth session to finalise. The agreed list of issues is presented here, with the corresponding session that the issue was agreed upon.

Table fourteen: List of issues

•	Meaning of work	Session two
•	Income Security	Session three
•	Education	Session three
•	Unemployment Conference	Session three
•	Unsafe work practices	Session three
•	Deteriorating conditions	Session five
•	Alternatives	Session five

(appendix 13)

Pam: *I think you mentioned before about looking at the concept of*
'work' and I'm quite interested in that ... And when you start
looking at work, it doesn't really make sense (appendix 16.1:6).

Pam: *Can I just say, the second issue titled 'DSS', I'd like to think*
about it a bit more broadly and maybe call it 'income security'
or 'guaranteed minimum income' or something that
encompasses more than just the DSS (appendix 16.3:2).

At times discussion deviated away from these issues, but this was not considered to be detrimental at the time as the literature review had suggested that the process not be too dominated with a task orientation (Costigan and Letcher 1987; Oliver 1987). Although this literature suggested that this could be a problem, in most cases discussion was still

relevant, although leaders at times during the sessions did need to refocus discussion on several occasions.

During the development of the issues list and the whole season, it was presumed that these issues were a reflection of group consensus, however some comments made by a several members later on in the season demonstrated that perhaps the "issues" list was not a true reflection of what *all* members wanted to address. For example, Pam ran the sixth session, which focussed on the issue of "alternatives", and George stated during the session:

George: *'Well I knew I was going to find this session pretty frustrating, because my idea of alternatives … is that basically things do have to change right across the board …'* (appendix 16.6:28).

Upon reflection, in the end interview Pam stated in relation to her experience of leading this session that:

Pam: *… some of the time I thought when I talked about what was happening for me the other members of the group looked blank. I remember sometimes seeing* [others] *looking interested to ask questions about what I was talking about and it seemed like the other people were somewhere else* (appendix 19.3:1).

As George states here, he was hesitant in initially bringing up issues important to him at the start of the season, for fear that the group may reject these issues:

George: *… I'd prefer much more of a debating … situation, because I feel I want to bully people … I was frustrated by it in the sense that I thought 'right, the solutions that people are advocating … aren't adequate to the situation' … I don't think alternative activities are a solution. I don't think just … trying to gain the skills that might give you a job in the future, are a solution, partially because … people might spend a lot of time trying to get those skills, and there still mightn't be work around. So … people need to look at the whole question of social change, social revolution, social restructuring. I think I'd bowl people over with that, so … I was restraining myself … And the way it could be done, if at the start people said 'right, these are the*

issues I want to discuss. I think ... social change is imperative, radical social change is imperative, I want to put that on the agenda. I don't want to feel like I have to ... bottle myself up. But I felt like ... I didn't want to ... just roll over people, because I know I can do that at times (appendix 19.4:9-10).

It is evident therefore that perhaps more time should have been invested in developing the list of issues, however several members felt too much time was already spent in the introductory sessions on objectives, issues, ground rules, and so forth as discussed previously. Perhaps it was more an issue of "jelling" or developing trust between members, as it took up to the fifth session to finalise this list of issues. Alternatively, and perhaps more accurately, the reason for the non-consensus on issues may have been due to the diverse nature of the group. Pam picks up on this:

Pam: *I think unemployment creates a sense of being bogged down or overwhelmed ... your own situation can get in the way of supporting other people. With Paul, I was glad that he had started something, which looked like a positive change. I think it was interesting just listening to Francis because his point of view was really different to mine ... Because their* [remaining member's] *experiences were different, in that I was looking at the quality of work. I don't think that was so much an issue for the others. It was more - can you get a job or can't you? Rather than being able to think about options ... I think that we didn't discuss very much how it* [unemployment] *actually affected us. I remember talking to Francis, he was really clear on how it was for him and the stress about, really needing a job and needing that income, and being very focused on that* (appendix 19.3:6).

Although unemployment was an umbrella concern for all members, there was perhaps a range of unspoken issues that each member had. Some were articulated and are evident from the discussion thus far. However, an attempt was made to encapsulate them post season and they are presented here. These interpretations have been read, checked, edited and discussed at the draft and member checking stage.

Francis: *To get a job, financial security and re-enter the workforce.*

Pam:	*To consider and explore alternative ways of living in contemporary society out of the paid workforce.*
George:	*To explore and carry out action that encompasses radical social change across the board.*
Barbara:	*To increase confidence, express opinion, become assertive, break isolation, learn more about the issue of unemployment and get a secure job.*
Paul:	*To pursue personal development and undertake training to improve employment opportunities.*

The above reveals a more accurate reflection of what the real issues were for the members. Why some of the above did or did not emerge is open to conjecture. What is important is that some issues did not emerge. Perhaps more time needed to be spent on identifying the issues as George suggests:

George:	*I think that there should be an initial session, the one where people are thrashing out … what areas that they want to discuss, that should be involved. People should … talk about whether that is what they want to do … it maybe a bit hard, because people may not … know … and agree. But even if they do agree, they may not … know what to do. They might be … going in a bit blind* (appendix 19.4:6).

The approach that George alludes to could be adopted, that is to carry out a preliminary cycle of action research with perhaps a larger sample. For example, conducting workshops that focus on identifying the issues, followed by the translation of these issues into a discussion guide for piloting. This method has indeed been used in developing study circle discussion guides previously (Shires and Crawford 1999 a/b). However as mentioned in Chapters three and four, the season was planned using an abundance of resources pertaining to study circles, and the procedures endorsed for developing discussion guides. At the time this was considered adequate. In retrospect however, the alternative approach recommended above, that is, initial focus groups with a pilot, is an obvious provisional finding and recommendation of this study. However, even if a pilot was conducted a further potential problem may be that the

issues that emerge from the pilot may not be relevant to the members of later study circle groups as Pam picks up:

Pam: *For me I think there was a limit to what I could share with the other people in the group, in that I think we were coming from a different experience of unemployment. And it was very useful to get a better idea of other people's experiences. But so far as getting personal support, I think maybe we had quite different needs. So I would see some limitations as to what that particular group of individuals could do together* (appendix 19.3:5).

A further proposition to raise here is the notion of the "levels" and "stages" of empowerment, and the linear development of empowerment as discussed in Chapters two and four (the issue of empowerment is discussed in more detail in Chapter seven). Lather (1991), Shields (1991) Veno and Thomas (1992) and Smith (1993b) all subscribe to the notion that empowerment is a linear process that basically progresses from the personal through to consciousness raising and critical understanding to eventual social and political action. It is perhaps possible that individuals at any point in time may be moving along this continuum and are therefore situated in different phases in relation to different issues. Therefore although a group of people may all similarly be concerned in relation to a specific issue or topic, their individual interests, focus and concerns are also related to an empowerment level. The difficulty is agreeing on issues may be related to these levels. That is, it is the level that a particular member wishes to address rather than the issue itself. For example George, who is clearly frustrated at discussing "self-growth" or "political consciousness-raising" and wishes to address issues in relation to "change and action" (appendix 19.4:10). As he states in the post study circle meeting:

George: *Yes ... Well I'm left with a sense of, my quotes are saying 'we need more, we need more', and other people are sort of taking things on a much more even keel.* (appendix 17:1:19)

Yet other members may want to, or need to systematically go through each level. Both Sanguinetti (1992) and Brown (1991) suggest, along with study circle protocol, that a

linear process is most effective. This way all issues can be "swept" along. No one is lost in the process. The challenge is how to make the process relevant to those who want to "jump ahead" without losing others, or excluding levels. It is therefore imperative that content be carefully considered and somehow be contextually relevant for each individual member.

Ground rules

Ground rules were negotiated by all members, thereby ensuring collaboration.

Mark: [Let's] *start maybe another chart with ground rules?*

Francis: *Yes*.

Mark: *And we develop them as we go?*

Francis: *Exactly* (appendix 16.1:11).

Francis: *Yes, that's excellent. That helps hone in on a set of goals and*
                get the ground rules agreed on more solidly. One thing we have
                to get an agreement on is ground rules (appendix 16.1:15).

The ground rules were therefore based upon concerns raised by members of the circle.

The final list of ground rules, developed by the group as a whole are presented here.

Table fifteen: List of ground rules

• All views to be respected.
• Disagreement and conflict are useful, but disagreement should not be personalised.
• It is important to hear from all. People who tend to speak a lot in groups should give others the opportunity to speak.
• Tolerate uncertainty
• Information shared in confidence should not be repeated outside the circle.
• No new members after the fourth session.

(appendix 19)

One issue was the likelihood of disagreement.

Francis: *I think it's important that we have disagreements ... And I think we need to allow anyone within the group the opportunity to speak out and point out if anybody's not participating simply because they disagree. I think disagreements should be encouraged* (appendix 16.1:9).

The possibility of misunderstandings was also taken into consideration.

Francis: *I think it's important that we point out to the group on a regular basis that it's important that anybody who's not understanding, let's us know for two reasons. One is, if one person doesn't understand, the chances are there will be more than just one person who doesn't understand. And the other thing is, that it makes it really hard on that one person if they don't understand to continue to participate in the group. It's very stressful and tiring and not very productive from that point on* (appendix 16.1:10).

Confidentiality amongst the group was also seen as important.

Pam: *Under 'ground rules', I would like it if the group could clarify what people say outside the group, like if someone said to their friend: 'oh there's this person in the group, he used to be an engineer ... ' that might not be okay, and I think it would be good if we were all clear about what people were going to say or not say* (appendix 16.1:10).

Francis: *I just think it might be worth expanding on that information shared in confidence should not be repeated outside the circle. I'd like us to all feel free to contribute and, just to make it clear ... if I share something, it's my responsibility to let the group know whether that's something shared in confidence or whether it's not. As I believe that we'll be going out and we'll be sharing some of what's been said in the group* (appendix 16.3:3).

Francis: *No I think that there needs to be some responsibility taken. If somebody says something they want to be confidential, I think it's their responsibility to say that it is. And I think that, on the converse side of that, every member of the group needs to respect confidentiality. And basically not gossip* (appendix 16.1:11).

The literature had suggested that the establishment of common ground rules, agreed by all as important for the success of a study circle (as discussed in Chapter three). In retrospect, this (along with objectives and issues) took considerable time to achieve, arguably due to people meeting for the first time and engaging in a new process. Similar experiences in other study circles were discussed in Chapter three (Shires and Crawford 1999a; Landers 1998; Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992; Costigan and Letcher 1987; Oliver 1987). Perhaps this expense on time and related frustrations are inherent in any process where a negotiated curriculum is the objective rather than an imposed doctrine of learning. Furthermore, a full quorum of members did not occur until the third session, nearly half way into the season, which hindered the opportunity for all to agree early on.

George: *... we felt like we were doing things, which we really didn't want to do. Going through all the different ... rules ...* (appendix 19.4:7).

Francis: *There's quite a lot of time and effort spent in working out ground rules ...* (appendix 16.8:28).

Paul: *Yes. Far too much time ... We spent far too much time* (appendix 16.8:29).

Francis: *I'd like more of the discussion on the employment things, and less time spent on the administration and the ground rules* (appendix 16.8:27).

This was obviously a concern that reduced the effectiveness of the study circle, however upon further reflection a couple of members explored reasons and rationales for this slowness in the end interviews.

Paul: *Because of your inexperience with study circles, at the start you spent too much time on the ground rules, and I thought that was a bit unnecessary ... But that's understandable ... I can't criticise that totally. It depends on the group.* (appendix 19.1:6).

Pam: *I noticed that a number of people said 'oh we spent too much time on the rules and stuff', but I saw that differently. I thought that probably whatever we did spend time on, would be a drag because the group ... hadn't jelled. I thought it was the process rather than actually what we were doing that made it slow at the start ... I think at the beginning it was difficult ... because we were going over things again ... it was a bit lacking in substance ... Yes I'm sure there must be something you can do about it ... I haven't got the answer to that problem ...* (appendix 19.3:1-2).

Francis: *... well I was frustrated with the fact that time seemed to be going so quickly. I wanted to get involved in the actual study group and not be spending so much time on setting the rules and bits and pieces. Of course I wanted my own way with some of the rules, but I was very happy with the way the rules and everything turned out.* (appendix 17:1:7)

However, George raised the issue that perhaps a facility for even more discussion should be created:

George: *I ... feel frustrated and wanted to say a lot, I think there probably needs to be a process inserted in where people who feel that they are impatient ... need to say it, so that they can stop themselves from talking too much in some ways. Just to indicate that there are reasons why they ... feel the need to do that* (George, appendix 16.8:31).

Holmstrand and Harnsten (1992) make particular mention to the feelings members have of uncertainty, doubt, and questioning the effectiveness in the initial sessions of study circles. They suggest that such feelings are inevitable in any new and challenging creative activity. As George states in the post study circle meeting.

George*: It did sort of take about four sessions to actually establish. I think people were still uncertain about the process and also, to some degree, the external problems that people had to chew through for themselves ...* (appendix 17:1:4)

However as discussed in Chapter three, it is not uncommon for study circles to take a considerable amount of time to form. (Holmstrand and Harnsten 1996; Oliver 1987).

Perhaps this is acceptable and what needs to change is the desire of urgency, and to manage this uncertainty. Some of the quotes from the film "*Whiteys Like Us*" (Landers 1998) given in Chapter three echo the same experience occurring with that group.

Judith: *It completely lacked any structure. If you've got two hours you must have a little bit of structure. We should have used the white board more.*

Brian: *It was good to get the notes and I read through the notes when I got home and realised there was probably thirty points to discuss and I think we discussed one in all of it* (Landers 1998).

Nonetheless the final agreed list of ground rules was however eventually agreed upon. Fundamentally, members saw difficulties in spending a lot of time on issues, objectives and ground rules, but some saw how this needed to be done, and one member even wanted more discussion.

Time management

Two members suggested a longer season:

Barbara: *I have really probably enjoyed the most of anything, going through these different solutions and I wish we'd had longer to do it really, because I'm not quite yet at the point where I ... feel like I've got the whole ... overview. But I've found it incredibly stimulating and it's ... helped me to ... put bits and pieces together that I've thought about before* (appendix 16:8:26).

George: *Maybe if it'd gone on for twelve weeks rather than eight weeks, which I think is probably better, or a half year ... close to a half year, maybe a half year might be a bit long ...* (appendix 19.4:10).

Pam recognised the dual time constraint of both conducting research and co-ordinating a study circle:

> *... I think that, that's a kind of difficulty with it being a research project. I think it's involved a lot of work for you in kind of doing the transcripts and the interviews and things like that ... I think we spent a bit of time with you interviewing us and us kind of all interacting with you, and I think that it could've been organised a little bit differently so that that interaction, or the time you've put in with all of us, there might've been a better way to go* (appendix 16:8:28).

And George suggested more preparatory content on actual study circles at the start:

> *Also ... a bit more on all the stuff about the study circles and what the history of them have been ... get done in probably ... the first meeting. Or ... that that information is available to people beforehand.* (appendix 16.8:30).

However, Barbara believed the opposite:

> *... well we talked quite a lot, and you gave us quite a lot of information about Swedish study circles ... So we did talk quite a lot about study circles...* (appendix 16.1:1).

While others thought more time should have been invested in individual experiences:

Francis: *Due to the time pressures, some of the other aspects such as sharing individual experiences and exploring other possible solutions, may be of more value* (appendix 19.2:2).

George: *... perhaps there could be a longer period of time so people get to know each other a bit more ...* (appendix 16.8:30).

The amount of time for the group to form was also perhaps an aspect that reduced the circle's effectiveness.

Pam: *I think to some extent it gets better as it goes on. I think inevitably a group doesn't work so well at the start ... I think some of that was just the difference in the people, that we were at different stages and doing different things* (appendix 19:3:1-2).

All of the above suggest that members wanted a longer and more thorough season. This reflects findings from other study circles as discussed in Chapter three (Shires and Crawford 1999a; Oliver 1987). Also as Wadsworth states in relation to action research: "Time and lack of it is a critical barrier to [researchers] working in these ways [action research] with groups" (1993b:7). However as noted in previous research in Chapter three, concerns about lack of time do indeed suggest that study circles are successful in stimulating interest (Shires and Crawford 1999a).

Previous group experiences

Several members had experienced other types of group learning previously. They reflected upon these experiences during the season and made comparisons with the study circle process.

Pam: *... I tried to find unemployment support groups, and it seems that there aren't really many around ... I started one, and we had about six people who met weekly for awhile, and that went pretty well. But then they got courses or moved or got part-time work or different things, and the group dispersed ... I think it's just one of the things that happens with unemployment organisations. They are a real changing population. There'll be people here next week, and not here the week after and that kind of thing ... so it's been a bit frustrating trying to organise something that I think is really needed and it's been a real battle* (appendix 16.1:4).

Francis: *My previous experience with discussions in the past, have mainly been an atmosphere where there has been a lot of judgement, lack of real listening, a lot of opinions firmly held on to and not all that much openness. There have been exceptions to that ... When I was learning at a Life-Line counselling centre, about really listening and giving the other person the opportunity to speak, and just let go of all the judgements, that really taught me a bit about listening ... And I find the same ... openness here to a large extent, and I appreciate that* (appendix 16.3:10).

George: *Well I think what people have said, it appears that this group is ... probably much more positive and open, than a lot of other peoples' experiences ... I'm part of a discussion group on political issues, and that is less structured and ... the processes are there as a matter of course.* (appendix 16.3:10).

Barbara saw the benefits of working in a small group:

I think the very small group size is perhaps something that wasn't intentional but a group size of about five or six is really very ideal for allowing people to have a lot of say, to get a lot of personal talk in.... I've found it helpful when I've talked to people who are like me, for example, when I've bumped into other students that'd done community development, and they've talked about how it is for them not being able to get a job in community development, and we've related a bit more because we've had a similar understanding (appendix 19.5:6).

Leadership[75]

A number of issues emerged which related to the leadership role. Firstly the effort to devolve leadership responsibilities from the initial leader (researcher), to other members. Members attempted this as these examples illustrate.

In the second session, George asked Francis if he wanted to lead.

George: *Well Francis, can I ask you a question? If you were asked to be the leader at some stage ... to keep things flowing, to make sure everybody gets a chance and understands everything, what would your reaction be to that? Would you want to be a leader? Do you think that's a process that everybody can share, and that you could be part of?*

Francis: *I wouldn't want to be a leader, because I would much prefer to be a contributor, actually contribute to the discussion. I feel that that* [being a leader] *would stand in my way of doing that.*

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[75]   Within this section, leadership is considered specifically in relation to the study circle process. The researcher/researched relationship was addressed separately in The Introduction to Part two.

> *The leader's going to have to stand back a little bit ...*
> (appendix 16.2:7).

Then again in the fourth session, George and Mark both ask Paul and others to lead:

Mark: *... thinking about this, would you be able to do the leadership at the next meeting, or the meeting after that ... even if it was half a meeting..*

George: *I was going to ask, on my way here, and over the last couple of hours, I've been thinking of ... something that came up in the last couple of sessions ... But ... I know Paul and Francis ... had suggested that they'd feel uncomfortable being the leader.*

Mark: *Fine.*

George: *Do you say that Paul?*

Paul: *Yes.*

George: *And I think Francis said that as well. But I thought it would be a worthwhile question to ask, why do people feel uncomfortable with being a leader, like is it something that they've just never had the chance to experience?* (appendix 16:4:13).

Eventually however George did lead the fifth and part of the eighth session, Pam the sixth and part of the seventh and Barbara part of the seventh. This effort to devolve the responsibility of leading and controlling the discussion onto the members was utilised by Laws in her action research. " 'Intentional nudging' was the principal method used to encourage participants to take control of the research process … we believed it aptly described a process by which we would bring participants together to … decide for themselves …" (Laws 1997:45).

Discussion guide

In the discussion guide, a listening exercise was included as suggested in "*A Guide to Training Study Circle Leaders*" (appendix 2:pp.5-6), (SCRC 1995c). This exercise was intended to be carried out in the first session, however it was delayed until the third

when all members were present. It was seen as an important exercise in developing the skills of listening to assist in empowering members, who perhaps had not ever had their concerns about unemployed listened to in an effective manner as Shields states:

> 'Can you remember a time where you felt really listened to? What difference did that make? Can this kind of total listening offer anything in our troubled world – a world that seems to cry out for decisive action? I believe it can and that it has proved to be a powerful tool for social change and empowerment' (1991:45).

The initial responses to the exercise were generally positive.

Francis: *It created better rapport and communication. I found that I was feeling some of the same feelings as the other person was feeling. And I found it really easy to listen as I was listening to someone who is coming from a pretty similar background to where I'm coming from … I like to be listened to, though I probably more liked listening than being listened to.* (appendix 16.3:8-9).

George: *Oh yes, it was good. And also I reckon the quality of our responses were a bit more alike than they were forty-five minutes ago* (appendix 16.3:9).

Barbara: *Yes I think there's always that tendency to … want to put something in, but it's actually really nice to be given the space to say what you've got to say, and finish it without being interrupted. I mean people will often interrupt for really good reasons. But it's really nice to be able to take some thoughts through to their logical end. And for someone to give you their undivided attention. It's great* (appendix 16.3:9).

However some comments suggested the exercise was a bit constraining.

Pam: *I couldn't do it. I found that I was asking questions that were kind of indicating what I thought. I just couldn't resist …* (appendix 16.3:9).

George: *I just found it a bit constraining ... because I've been trying to work on solutions to all these problems ...* (appendix 16.3:9).

Barbara: *... but one thing that I did remember was ... like early on where we had ... a dual thing going, of trying to learn how to be leaders and learn how to listen and stuff like that, at the same time as doing the topic, and that was a bit uneasy, it didn't quite jell* (appendix 16.8:29).

Paul: *... that little activity, the listening session, I thought that was a bit unnecessary myself, for adults.*

Mark: *Okay.*

Pam: *Oh I liked that.*

Francis: *I understand how you feel about it. From my experiences, with the majority of adults there is benefit for it. And yes it can seem a very trivial exercise.*

Paul: *Yes I thought it was ... like something that high school kids would do.*

Barbara: *I think that that may have been so for you, you know, but I have been in groups and worked with groups of adults who don't know how to listen. And I mean even if we do know how to listen ... I just still find ... even myself needing to be reminded about listening.*

Francis: *Yes me too* (appendix 16.8:30-31).

In the eighth session the group reflected upon the discussion guide's appropriateness. The discussion guide was the main resource that was worked upon in the first two sessions. From there the direction of the season was set by the members themselves, midway George, Pam and Barbara led sessions, then in the final session the discussion guide was re-used.

Pam: *... I felt the discussion guide was really good. But we didn't use it for the middle, and it seemed to wander a little bit ... I think I'd use the guide unless there was something that people were really committed to and wanted to explore. For example, we had that issue about people losing their jobs, which we really*

wanted to do, and that seemed to work. I think it wandered when people did things that they didn't have a real passion for doing, for example the income security idea ... They've got to really want to do it or else I think it's better to follow the study guide (appendix 19.3:7).

Barbara: *... I enjoyed working from the study guide ... I found the study guide really, really good as well, and really quite focused, because it'd been ... carefully put together. And I thought that really helped the discussion* (appendix 16:8:29).

George: *But yes I was definitely going through those sheets, well I missed ... last week's one, it was probably important ... but I think it was really useful to be able to go through those processes where we had set ideas for us to work through* (appendix 16:8:27).

Having a non prescriptive text is also perhaps an unusual experience as Barbara observes

Barbara: There was a bit of conflict around the status of the study guide, and whether we should be following the study guide or not following the study guide. (appendix 17:1:6)

Resources

A number of members brought up the need to include more resources into the process.

Francis: *... I'd like to see more resources coming into the group, possibly outside speakers, or people who actually are providing the services, employers, or somebody who could speak a little bit from their perspective and contribute to the group enough to liven up the discussion with something which nobody in the group knows anything about* (appendix 16:8:28).

Paul: *More of, I think different speakers ... more resources come in* (appendix 16:8:29).

Paul: *... you could get different speakers in from time to time, not just unemployed people. You could get politicians in, you could*

get employers in, you could get ... union people in, a whole spectrum of people from the community. It would be a good learning experience ... yes that'd probably be logical growth of the study circle. Don't just have unemployed people there ... because you're getting just one side. Get other people... That's very important I believe because ... it's all right unemployed people getting together and talking that's great, it's wonderful, but you're just getting one side all the time. You're coming from one viewpoint mainly (appendix 19:1:6-7).

Pam: *I think we're getting a bit more information now and people have been bringing a few cuttings and things, but at the beginning it seemed that there wasn't enough substance. So I would've liked some handouts and maybe resources, although not from an employer because I think, you know working from our experience to the structural issues is really important ...* (appendix 16:8:28).

George: *Yes resources, there might be ... some films or some of the late night* [shows] *... 'Lateline' ... some of those would've been useful, that maybe people could take home and ... watch on VCRs, so they at least get around. There's probably been about four or five over the last couple of years that would be worthwhile* (appendix 16:8:30).

Pam: *It seems to me a pity that the research process involves a huge amount of your time going into writing the project up. It would be more useful for the participants if some of this time could instead go into running the sessions.* (appendix 17:2.1)

The literature, as discussed in Chapter three, had demonstrated that the introduction of guest speakers, videos, and other resources are of benefit and enhance the study circle process (Shires and Crawford 1999a/b; Holmstrand and Harnsten 1992; Oliver 1987). The BAC-IU pilot study circles in the USA suggested that "... depth of discussion may have been improved by inviting outside experts" (Oliver 1987:130), and that fifty per cent of members thought more outsiders should have been included in their season (Oliver 1987). A visit by Shires was planned for the mid-point of the season, but did not eventuate as he had an urgent matter to attend to. However members themselves bought in several resources in the form of articles (appendix 21). Nonetheless the above

comments reflect that, as study circle co-ordinator, the researcher could have done more planning and preparation in this area.

New ways of learning

There were a number of comments by members in relation to reconciling how study circles were different to other forms of learning they had experienced, as well as working through these differences and becoming accustomed to a new process. Comparisons were made.

George: *I'd say I'm impatient to ... move on into other directions ... So I'm probably jumping ahead, like I feel a bit impatient, but I've been through all these sort of things - morale building, personal concerns ...* (appendix 16:2:2-3).

Francis: *You're increasing general understanding, sharing information, identifying values, you have personal concerns about the education system not being effective ... you're actually building morale by actually sharing - as far as I'm concerned. I don't know how it is for you. And I'm feeling that we're interacting, and I'm enjoying it.*

George: *Right, okay.*

Francis: *And I'm looking forward to the exploration of possibilities coming out of this* (appendix 16:2:3).

The study circle terminology, as per Chapter three, also created some angst:

George: *Most people would be, I think, used to the term facilitator rather than leader. Would you agree with that? A facilitator is a person who keeps the discussion going* (appendix 16:2:7).

As did, defining exactly what the leader's actual task was:

George: *... I think people are more used to discussion groups than study circles. And in discussion groups, people don't have a leader*

as such … There might be a dominant person, somebody who's got more knowledge, or is the loudest or, more aggressive, or whatever. But for people to become leaders is … a very unusual prospect for people I'd say (appendix 16:2:6).

As covered in Chapter three, the word "study" in study circle has recently been altered to "learning" by AAACE in Australia, due to the negative connotations the term "study" may have. George's comments suggest that perhaps an alternative to the use of the word "leader", should also be used, perhaps "facilitator". In some references, study circle leaders are actually referred to as facilitators (SCRC 1993). In retrospect, perhaps the term facilitator should have been used during this research.

In the fourth session, George and Barbara attempt to clarify the study circle process in relation to values and opinions:

George: *… is this an ongoing process, so that if people's underlying values are continually being brought out, that when a different value comes along, people will be used to the idea that there are underlying ideas being held, and not everybody is on the same level?*

Barbara: *Oh no I reckon it would be something that would be an ongoing thing through the process.*

George: *So is it trying to develop a base? So that everybody is being brought out to the extent that - not only what their saying, but they've got particular value judgements behind it … ?*

Barbara: *We all do come from whatever values. And say, without taking the man's name in vain, say my father was here, and he would tell you that the problem with unemployment was that women were in the workforce and migrants were in the workforce. I mean, we would have to incorporate that into our discussion, and if you questioned him further…back to personal experiences … I think that that in a way is getting back to…your values* [which] *tend to come through your experiences, and so you find out that somebody has had some experience at a certain time in their life where this happened or that happened or whatever, and you gradually begin to see*

where the person is coming from, which won't make you agree with their values but it will help you to understand and tolerate their values ... Yes to help you accept the differences between other people ... Well I think the difficult thing really is ... coming to terms with the opinions of someone who is right on the other side and ... my first reaction is usually 'oh you right wing whatever!' And you then put the person into some ... stereotype ... whereas in fact you need to actually take each person as they come and talk to them about their ideas ... it may be that they've taken their ideas from somewhere else ... but they're entitled to their opinions (appendix 16:4:15).

George again raises some concerns in relation to the study circle process during the fourth session. He viewed the process as perhaps being too restrictive and too focused on the individual. He suggested the group should address more concrete macro or social and structural issues, questioning why oppression exists, and developing knowledge.

George: *... things just seemed to be ... a bit abstract last week. And I was thinking that perhaps something to be more concrete, would be ... asking those questions about why people became unemployed, but to look at it in a broader, rather than just saying it was 'downsizing' or just one of those general things, or 'health' or whatever, is maybe if we look collectively at a broader way of what had happened, like whether a whole industry - like education - what was the whole process behind the education industry deciding to get rid of teachers? ... Well I'm having problems with the notion of a study circle.*

Mark: *Okay, fine, fine.*

George: *Because they just seem to be pushing people in a particular direction and not...taking, well if there's action just at the end, I mean that ... seems like, well okay you sit around and have a general discussion, but I reckon you need to be developing a pretty good social knowledge of why things have happened, not just ... saying, 'I was downsized' or 'bad health' or whatever. Is that in a whole industry there might be a lot of bad health ... so people don't just ... see it as their own problem. And then ... at the end, everybody brings their problems together and says let's do something about it - all our individual problems. But people will have a knowledge that there are bigger social problems to tackle, rather than just individual problems.*

Mark: *Yes larger, structural problems?*

George: *Well … what way you look at things - binoculars backwards or front. Like … by the end of it, if you looked at, if we're talking about just our individual problems and then leading to social action.*

Mark: *Perhaps. It could be individual, it could be group …*

George: *But I had this idea that the study circle would be actually trying to get to terms with what was happening. That people would be developing their knowledge. And … getting down to study certain things … a bit more concrete data. Actually bring things in, and … say, well this is what's happening to my situation.*

Mark: *Fine, yes. So you're suggesting to look at one specific industrial case?*

George: *No, no. Well … the suggestion I had was that rather than to try and expand the idea of what had happened, like rather than just - 'you lost your job because of stress' - to try and expand the idea of why there's a lot of stress probably affecting thousands of people, rather than just in one school. And in the warehouse industry or store work, this might be happening in a whole area.*

Mark: *Okay.*

Barbara: *That could've come into it. There's no reason why that … information couldn't have come into the discussion though. Like when we were talking about our individual cases and ours, particularly when we were trying to get a consensus about beliefs about unemployment, it seemed to me that we could have actually like thrown a lot of stuff in there* (appendix 16:4:17-18).

As mentioned previously, the season did take time to develop, the unravelling of a number of issues and concerns took time. This discussion does reflect an uneasiness,

frustration and anxiety in getting the process moving quicker. However in the eighth session and at the end interview, members had the opportunity to reflect upon the entire process and how it was different to other forms of learning and the discussion is somewhat more positive towards the process.

Paul: *... a study circle's more casual and, you know, you're more social ... And it's totally different to structured training programs ... I suppose there's another point, we didn't have to do the study circle, while a lot of programs are mostly compulsory. And they don't want to be there sometimes. Yes so that's another difference I think. Yes it's probably better, you know, you can't force anyone to do things. I think you get the best out of people when you don't force people to do anything ... I've probably learnt things that doesn't come to mind straight away. Yes just life skills, you learn different things ... Some basic tips of surviving on the dole ... not to get down-hearted, that you're in the same boat as many other people ... they were listening, people listened and understood* (appendix 19:1:4-5).

Francis: *... the experience in the study circle was the only one where sharing of my own personal experience was validated and encouraged, and hearing other people sharing their experiences ... And I found it, while ... being unemployed, to be the most helpful really ... at many, many stages I felt that I was able to express my concerns* (appendix 19:2:4).

Pam: *Hearing people's experiences, getting together and having some food. And the kind of exchange of ideas and debate* (appendix 16:8:28).

Pam: *... it's different from a course, in that it's relying more on people's experience rather than providing information ... we've all participated. And I think participation increased as the group went along ... As time went on, the group became more active...a study circle is learning about unemployment, whereas Job Training programs are for learning about jobs and specific things about jobs, like how to get them ... I think I've got a better idea of really different points of view, yes ...* (appendix 19:3:4-5).

George: *... it was interesting hearing a number of different experiences...to hear a small business person and...somebody who'd been ... a factory warehouse worker ... It's interesting the way people's perspectives change .. there is a lot more activity going on among people who are unemployed than is normally credited. That ... people get on with their lives basically ... the idea you have of people unemployed is that they become static ... and they become this victim. It was obvious from that group of people, that there are things which do victimise us when you're unemployed or semi-employed. But that people have got a lot more resilience ... And the difference of experience - that people aren't going to do just one thing, one political solution or social solution. Although I was fairly frustrated. I was thinking 'oh everybody should ... start, you know, getting together'. But obviously that's not going to happen ... So yes just to know that there are always a number of different responses ... the emphasis was on people talking about their experiences, and you normally don't get that because ... the most that your allowed in Skillshare programs is about five percent of the time for actually people to give themselves a social context for unemployment. So here you've got ... nearly eighty to hundred percent of time in that, so that's a massive difference. And they are quite different in that they're not vocational ... The study circle isn't trying to socialise people or direct people into employment as such ...* (appendix 19:4:9).

Barbara: *... I got a great deal again out of some of the personal sharing that we've had, and just meeting everyone ... I really enjoyed a couple of sessions where we interacted personally but also went that bit deeper ... I disliked I think just a couple of times when I felt the discussion got really a bit unfocused and we seemed to ramble on quite a bit without being quite directed about where we were going. But you know that might've just been my own interest levels as well ...* (appendix 16:8:26).

Barbara*: It's* [study circle] *less formal. It's less involved around 'right' answers, so there was a real sense of being able to freely state your own opinions. Even if I knew that they were filled with prejudice or whatever, that there was a freedom to put those things out, rather than being told 'look there's a right answer here, this is the way that things are' and being allowed to ... evolve your own opinions* (appendix 19:5:6).

At the post study circle meeting (member check) a year later, two participants again made reference to how study circles differ from other educational approaches.

Francis: *In fact it was one of the few occasions I really had to share with other people unemployment issues without ever been looked down upon as being unemployed or being seen as a victim for being unemployed.* (appendix 17:1:7)

Barbara herself a teacher, made this comment:

Barbara: *Reflecting now back, I think the experience of the study circle itself and thinking about, you know, because of having a teaching background, thinking about that way of organising learning, has been interesting to me.* (appendix 17:1:17)

Chapter summary

As both Oliver (1987) and Costigan and Letcher (1987) state in Chapter three, the "grass roots" focus of study circles are considered one of its greatest assets. As such the reflections on the study circle learning experience had some positive and negative elements for members. On the positive side, members felt the benefits were:

- Listening to different points of view, personal experiences and trying to understand them.

- Exchanging ideas and sharing, hearing about what others are active in and becoming active in yourself.

- Being able to express your own points of view, concerns and talk about personal experiences.

- Getting together, participating and social interaction in a structured yet relaxed environment.

- Being acknowledged and not getting down-hearted.

- Allowing personal opinions to evolve.

- Going through a process that was not compulsory and wasn't attempting to socialise you.

On the negative side, members felt that during the study circle season:

- Discussion at times became unfocused and off track.

- The mixing of topics and learning about study circle processes simultaneously was problematic.

- The researcher was too intrusive during the start.

The points presented above assist in highlighting several issues to guide any further exploration into the use of study circles. These are:

- Discussion can wander off the topic or issue at hand. This is not detrimental, however the leader needs to monitor this and refocus the group if necessary.

- If further study circles into unemployment were to be trialed, workshops and pilots with unemployed people may need to be conducted to determine the full range of issues that are of concern to all unemployed people.

- A significant challenge is the group being able to become accustomed to a new way of learning while also focusing on the study circle topic.

- Ground rules need to be determined, and will take time. Perhaps at the commencement of a study circle all members need to be aware at this, but also realise that this time is needed to help the group bond and form. Inherent in the process is the considerable time taken for the group to develop, and agree upon protocols. It is necessary but nonetheless frustrating.

- Perhaps the term 'leader' needs re-assessing, as well as the hesitation of members not wanting to be a leader themselves. Although over time, members did feel more comfortable with the role.

- A broad range of resources, such as guest visitors, excursions, activities, reading material etc. needs to be planned for.

- Study circle leaders need to be highly skilled and experienced. As Shires and Crawford (1999a) suggest, perhaps specific study circle leader training needs to be undertaken before attempting to conduct a season.

As stated earlier, the general aim of the research asks if and how the study circle process contributed to the empowerment of the members. That is, were they able to participate and gain any control over their situation?

Although attendance was sporadic at the commencement of the season and it took a significant amount of time for the group to form and agree upon the objectives, aims and guidelines, the above validated reflections suggests that, from the members subjective view, all members were able to participate in the process. Three members George, Pam and Barbara even led latter sessions. The reason for this participatory action can largely be attributable to the participatory nature of study circles themselves, as discussed in Chapter three.

The members were also able to delve into their own experiences and feelings in relation to their unemployed situation. Although they were obviously unable to gain control of unemployment in the broad macro sense, arguably they were able to explore what unemployment is, its causes, possible solutions and alternative ways to define themselves other than paid work in relation to their own situations. The agenda was also theirs and they were able to control what was discussed.

In relation to the issue of internal validity one may be tempted to ask the question; did the study circle *cause* these insights? This is indeterminable, in an empirical sense, due to the methodological principles of critical theory and action research. The methods used here are not designed to "measure" even though the research aims may be perceived as suggesting otherwise. Standpoint theory, critical theory and the study circle approach all propose that the resultant "knowledge" of any such research should come from the members subjective reality. As Smith (1997) states in relation to critical research "… people are active subjects of the world: their needs are the point of departure for knowledge production and justification (not knowledge for its own sake)" (181). Schmuck insists that action research is "… gathering data about … [peoples] … subjective responses, such as their perceptions, concepts, feelings, attitudes and values" (1998:51).

Nevertheless, does the above data reflect that the members acted? It is evident here that they were able to have their own views, opinions, insights and beliefs expressed and shared. Although it could be argued that this conclusion is subjective and interpretive, the high level of internal validity ensures that the reflections here are trustworthy. Schmuck (1998), Gall, Borg and Gall (1996), Noffke and Stevenson (1995) and Burns (1995) all propose that the practitioner, consumer or reader of any tentative and provisional reflections need to then subjectively judge them on their applicability and relevance to their own context and consider if they suggest alternative courses of action.
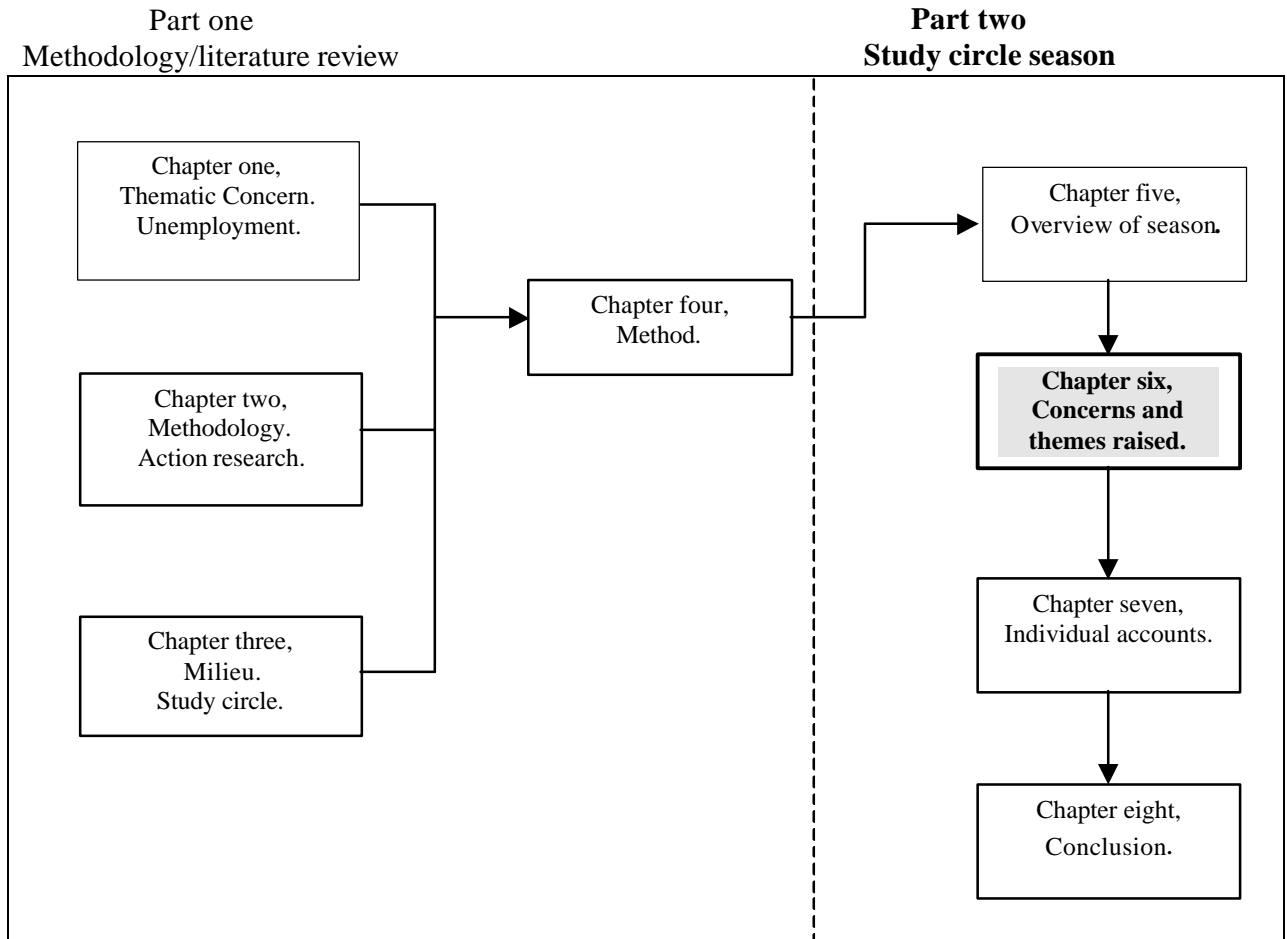
Furthermore the question of internal validity needs to ask the question: Did the study circle process contribute to the member's empowerment and were they able to share collaboratively and participate in a process that assisted them to gain some sort of control through understanding their collective situation in regard to unemployment? On this point, the internal validity in critical theory is not strengthened by what the researcher objectively determines. It is via the members themselves through the emerging validated data that determines internal validity. The answer to the above question is in the data, and through further triangulation in Chapters six and seven further clarification emerge.

This again raises the question of subjectivity of research. Empirical researchers will ask; How can you let research participants themselves determine findings? As highlighted in the previous discussion in Chapters two, four and the Introduction to Part two, action research *is* "overtly political …" (Smith 1997:177) and *is* "… openly ideological research …" (Lather 1986:63)

The above reflections are therefore tentative and provisional, yet "trustworthy". Further, this trustworthiness can be strengthened by further triangulation. This is attempted in the following Chapters.

Chapter six - reflecting upon the themes

Table one: Thesis structure

Part one
Methodology/literature review

**Part two
Study circle season**

Chapter one, Thematic Concern. Unemployment.		Chapter five, Overview of season.
Chapter two, Methodology. Action research.	Chapter four, Method.	**Chapter six, Concerns and themes raised.**
Chapter three, Milieu. Study circle.		Chapter seven, Individual accounts.
		Chapter eight, Conclusion.

6.1   Introduction

Having provided a brief overview of the study circle season in Chapter five, and established initial reflections, this Chapter goes into more detail in relation to the main concerns and themes[76] that were discussed by the group during the season. Within the

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[76]   Many relate to the 'issues' listed in appendix 13. However their titles have been altered to suit the discussion here.

literature, the terms "issues", "set of issues", "topics", "units" and "themes" are all used interchangeably with similar meaning. To avoid confusion, the term "theme" is adopted here to define the major issues and concerns that emerged from the session transcripts in relation to the topic of unemployment (Burns 1995; Kellehear 1993; Patton 1980). By comparison the next chapter, Chapter seven, focuses on the individual experience of each member.

This Chapter therefore primarily utilises the text from the sessions where issues in relation to unemployment were explored, as this was the thematic concern of the study as discussed in Chapter one. It is, as Reason (1990) would suggest the reflection upon the "collective experience" of the group, while Chapter seven reflects upon "individual experiences".

In order to reflect upon the action stage, critical research requires a thematic analysis be carried out whereby themes need to be sought as they emerge from the raw data (Kellehear 1993). These themes "… grow out of the context" (Lather 1991:62). Looking for patterns becomes a form of analysis in itself (Fetterman 1989). Furthermore "… the data are constructed during research, and if reflected upon is somewhat self validating because it grasps and reflects reality" (Reid 1997:59).

Each individual theme, drawn from the internally validated data provides a sample of the discussion that took place during the season. In effect the themes emerged from the data and then the members reflected upon the themes individually and then as a group. As such they therefore represent a valid account of the member's experience during the season.

These themes also assist in addressing the research aims. That is, did the process contribute holistically to the groups' empowerment? Were they able to participate, articulate their concerns, share ideas, feelings and possible solutions or actions that would assist them to gain control over their situation?

As discussed previously, the outcome of action research is not to clinically "measure" change or find a cause and effect, as would be the case with an empirical research approach. Any indication of change needed to emerge from the data via the member's own subjective experience. For this reason analysis was conducted manually. All data were displayed or categorised in a traditional content analysis approach. Care was taken to ensure any categorisation was as true as possible to the original voices the data recorded. Consequently the material was sorted and sifted over for a long period of time. Entire session transcripts were laid out and emergent themes identified. A mechanical or technical approach to analysis was deliberately avoided as it was perceived that such efforts may lead to over simplification. By manually analysing the data; flow and context were considered. Effectively a "hands on approach" which "listened" to members and gleaned the essence of discussion.

The different themes that emerge and are reflected upon here, occurred at different stages of the season. As such, it is problematic to construct a complete chronological framework of analysis in relation to specific discourses that could clinically "measure" change. This would be reductionist and limit the member's "voice" in relation to their concerns (which as previously discussed action research demands addressing). Furthermore, it would be difficult to draw any definitive conclusions in relation to possible "change" based upon the comparison of discourse between totally unrelated themes, such as the discussion on how to survive on unemployment benefits with the discussion on free market economies.

As mentioned previously, too much research rigour can sometimes restrict research opportunities (Reason 1990). As Gancian states, action research needs to "… validate feelings and activities that have been ignored or devalued in traditional research … The emphasis is on accurately portraying or "giving voice" to peoples experience" (1992:626). Therefore, although the themes are presented here in an approximate chronological order of when they were discussed throughout the season, each one stands alone as an important concern raised by the membership.

Nonetheless, what emerges from the themes discussed within this Chapter is a development and evolution during the season which reflects both the study circle process, as discussed in Chapter three, and the linear nature of the empowerment process discussed in Chapter two.   This is discussed in further detail later.

With such a large amount of data to analyse (that is; eight sessions of two hours or more), the decision of inclusion and relevancy or exclusion and irrelevancy could have depended on the frequency of responses (Stanley 1990). However Rose et al. state: "To rely simply on the frequency with which things are said is often to be naï ve" (1985:72). Therefore, rather than frequency "The trick is to compare comparable items during analysis" (Fetterman 1989:90). This was the approach adopted to determine the themes in this Chapter.

Study circle transcripts were reviewed to determine the major themes of discussion. The data suggested themes, which were then checked back with the members. Within each theme the participants' own quotes have been used to give them "voice", and to recognise their opinions and attitudes as valuable and worthwhile contributions in the overall discussion of unemployment. Their quotes have been perused, checked and validated by themselves twice individually, once when transcripts were available, then at draft thesis stage, then once again a year later as a group at the member checking stage. The interpretations upon each theme following their quotes in the text are the original reflections authored by the researcher, then further internally validated at the post season meeting stage (ie: member check). To complement and further validate these reflections, existing research findings and literature have been included at relevant points as recommended by Schmuck (1998) and Roberts (1981). As Roberts states: "An additional source of validation, although a rather more indirect kind, is through a content analysis of professional literature" (1981:12).

What becomes evident in the emergent themes contained in this Chapter is how the flow of the themes reflects a journey from the sharing of the personal experience of unemployment and its negative effects, to then focussing on external factors such as

bureaucracies and financial constraints. The themes then reflect the consideration of what choices, options, or action, individuals have available to them when faced with unemployment. The theme of alternative action other than paid work is then followed by a discussion on structural alternatives. This flow is not only commensurate with that of the linear development of empowerment discussed in Chapter two but also the focus of study circle discussion guides as elaborated upon in Chapter three.

The reason for this could be attributed to the structure of the discussion guide for this study as explained in Chapter four. However, as noted in Chapter five, the group decided to totally leave aside the discussion guide by the fifth session and did not return to it until the eighth and final session. During this period from session five to seven, the group predominantly focussed on the agreed upon list of issues replicated here from Chapter five, with the corresponding session that the issue was agreed upon.

Table fourteen: List of issues

• Meaning of work	Session two
• Income security	Session three
• Education	Session three
• Unemployment conference	Session three
• Unsafe work practices	Session three
• Deteriorating conditions	Session five
• Alternatives	Session five

It is therefore difficult to attribute this development of themes from personal, to external, to alternatives, to structural on the discussion guide alone. The following table gives an overview of what was discussed at each session, where the topic emerged from and who led the session.

Table sixteen: Season development

Session	Issue discussed	Source of topic	Leader	Comments
One	General introductions. Individual feelings of being unemployed.	Discussion guide.	Mark	Very poor attendance.
Two	Introductions. Meaning of 'work'. Education/ training. Introduce ground rules, issues and objectives.	Discussion guide and list of issues.	Mark	Poor attendance, new people, time spent re-introducing.
Three	Introduction. General thoughts on unemployment.	Discussion guide.	Mark	First full attendance.
Four	Causes of Unemployment.	Discussion guide.	Mark	Group decides to address list of issues, not the discussion guide.
Five	Unsafe work practices. Deteriorating working conditions.	List of issues.	George Pam	Members start taking up leadership role.
Six	Personal alternatives. Bureaucracies.	List of issues.	Pam	
Seven	Personal alternatives. Bureaucracies.	List of issues.	Pam Barbara	Group decides to return to discussion guide for final session.
Eight	Income security. Structural alternatives.	List of issues. Discussion guide.	George Mark	

Before presenting the discussion and details of each theme, a summary is presented here.

- Unemployed people could be informed about the range of ways, and what options are available to them in regards to alternatives such as job modularization, co-operatives, WWOOF, LETS, etc.. It was considered that governments should encourage and promote these alternatives, perhaps even through the use of study circles themselves.

- As the nature of 'work', and therefore employment has changed dramatically in recent times, so too should the notion of unemployment. By adopting a new identity, the unemployed might not be treated as inferior to those who are lucky enough to secure paid employment.

- The unemployed are perceived as an undeserving tax expense. Many people in paid employment may dislike the unemployed however they themselves are at risk and maybe fearful of unemployment.

- The debilitative psychological and physiological effects of unemployment that the group experienced, such as despair, stress, depression, frustration, embarrassment and feelings of worthlessness along with the isolation, impoverishment, stigma and self blame all confirm (and validate) the abundance of existing research to be referred to in this Chapter and Chapter one.

- Personal experiences in dealing with bureaucracies, especially those related to servicing the unemployed were seen as extremely inflexible. Not only is the experience full of guilt and suspicion, but the threat of financial penalties results in clients falsifying information and "working the system" to ensure survival. Private industry bureaucracies along with job application processes were also seen as a large waste of time and money for all concerned.

- The financial constraints of being unemployed make it very challenging to just live day to day. Benefits are too low which makes it difficult to look for work, enjoy any leisure activities and explore alternatives. It seems few realise or understand how little this benefit is.

- Tax issues were seen as complex, however what was realised was that the information provided by governments is distorted, and the whole tax system seems to benefit the wealthy and punish the poor.

- Structural alternatives in response to unemployment such as a guaranteed income, public sector job creation and free market ideologies were all discussed and explored. Many were seen to have advantages and disadvantages, however time limitations restricted further discussion.

- Education and training were seen as difficult to undertake when benefits were so low. Also the relevance of training and education were seen as questionable when it wasn't seen to prepare people for work or develop critical minds.

- Women's position in the labour market was seen to be in a state of flux. Many were thought to be working harder than men are and yet not being financially rewarded.

6.2 Redefining 'unemployed' and 'work'

In the first session, while discussing the issue of "Meaning of work" Francis and Pam explored the theme of how to define themselves while unemployed.

Francis: *Instead of us defining ourselves being unemployed ... define ourselves as ... being in the process of finding ourselves the employment that we desire* (appendix 16:1:8).

Pam: *Like work's being defined as something that people don't want to do, so they have to get paid for doing it. But then a lot of things that people do for work, other people do for pleasure - like digging a garden or something. And really the whole concept of work is a bit 'off'* (appendix 16:1:6).

In the final session, this theme emerged again, however this time it was addressing the definition of "work" itself.

George: *Well I would say that it's already been redefined by quite a large percentage of people ... It's not that they didn't want to work, it was that they didn't want the work that the government was ... providing for them. And they'd already sort of redefined work* (appendix 16.8:17).

Francis: *One thing that's changed is 'conventional' work has decreased. A lot of conventional work is now being done by machines, and I think the redefinition of work is becoming more and more crucial...for example, the work that women do in raising children, and some of that's being handed over to men now ... is not being financially rewarded in an area where it is financially very stressful in running a family* (appendix 16.8:17).

Barbara: *Well there are family allowances and things like that I suppose which are sort of the only acknowledgment* (appendix 16.8:17-18).

The group recognised that both officially and unofficially the notion of "work" was seen to be in a state of flux. It is being redefined, because what constitutes "employment" has

changed. This in turn means historical presumptions in relation to what constitutes unemployment also needs to be redefined, and individual identities reassessed.

Back in 1993, research conducted by Queensland University predicted that by the end of that decade one quarter of Australian workers would be in casual jobs with poor working conditions (Milburn 1993). However, this prediction was reached in one year (Wooden 1994). In the last ten months of 1997 alone Victoria's full time employment fell by nineteen thousand while part time employment rose by eight thousand four hundred (Davidson 1997). An ABS survey in 1997 established that two thirds of all jobs found were casual and lasted less than a year (Kermond 1997). This contraction of full time jobs and rise of part-time employment was also seen as a prime factor in the growth of income inequality (Davidson 1995:23). Since 1976, nearly eighty per cent of all new jobs have been in the bottom twenty-five per cent of the weekly earnings distribution (Probert 1994). A report published in mid 1999 by the OECD focussed on the lack of adequate income, training and support for the ever increasing numbers of part time workers across the world (Colebatch 1999b). This OECD report also highlighted that part time jobs are not necessarily a way to secure full time work, and questioned any policy which focused only on an increase in part time work (Colebatch 1999b).

For example, in one case, eighty per cent of research respondents in a study by the University of New South Wales noted an increase in demand for temporary staff, as such staff are less costly and restrictive "Flexible staffing means ... it is easy to retrench ... with a couple of hours notice" (Boreham et al. 1993:15). The reason for this phenomenon is summed up by Hellyer:

> ''Shareholders' value, recently adopted by the OECD as the primary responsibility of corporations world wide, is to be achieved at the expense of fair wages, safe working conditions and protecting planet earth as a safe haven for generations yet unborn. Efficiency overrides all other considerations such as justice and compassion' (1999:84).

During the third session, where there was the first full attendance, Paul, in response to the prompt questions in the discussion guide (appendix 2, page 5), queried why so many people resent the unemployed.

Francis: *Employed people ... resent the unemployed ... Employed people know that their taxes pay the dole ... and a lot of employed people believe that unemployed people are unemployed because they're just not willing to go to the trouble or effort required to get themselves work. And a lot of employed people see unemployed people as a threat. They seem to be worried it might be contagious, or it brings up a realisation for them that their job security might not be all that great, or that the unemployed person is a threat to their own job* (appendix 16:3:10-11).

Paul: *Probably they might be frightened of losing their job* (appendix 16:3:11).

Francis: *And it also brings people closer ... to actually seeing how easily they could be unemployed themselves* (appendix 16:3:11).

Barbara: *Yes, I reckon. It's fear* (appendix 16:3:11).

George: *... I think there's probably more generosity towards older unemployed people ... and I think young people probably stand out more distinctively against the older people. They're dressing differently, a lot more tribal and stuff like that. Leading all these weird lifestyles at the moment* (appendix 16:3:11).

Pam: *... I think some people have compassion ... Let's not forget the positives* (appendix 16:3:11).

The group thought that perhaps the employed resent the unemployed because they feel they don't try hard enough to get a job, fear them, see them as a threat to their own job, or as a tax expense. Nevertheless the employed were perceived as beginning to recognise that unemployment may occur to them due to downsizing, restructuring and so forth, therefore creating a sense of empathy with the plight of the unemployed. They are perhaps scared that their jobs are not secure.

Alternatively, there are strong assumptions that pervade our culture which ensure that those who are still at school or university, and those who are fortunate enough to enjoy adequate employment, although aware of high unemployment levels, tend to think that unemployment will not affect them personally (Winefield et al. 1993). Research has demonstrated that if people are led to believe that they can get work, they are unlikely to question why there are so few jobs, or to direct their attention towards a system that denies many of them work (Winefield et al. 1993). Although university graduates may consider themselves as having an advantage in the competitive labour market, they too are at risk of becoming unemployed. In 1999 it was reported that "… highly educated youth is outstripping demand" (Bessant 1999:12). These graduates are often unprepared for the experience of unemployment and may also face a decrease in self-esteem and an increase in depression if, and when, they are affected (Winefield et al. 1993; Patton and Noller 1990). For those with secure employment, the *"compassion"* that Pam eludes to may be curtailed by the relative advantages these people have in regard to the labour market, for example the ability to gain work is largely linked to one's existing occupational and social status, as well as social networks. Only thirty per cent of job vacancies are actually advertised whereas seventy per cent of positions are filled through social and professional networks (Baker 1993). Those who are employed and in managerial positions, have existing occupational networks and financial resources which dramatically increase their chances of obtaining work (Aris 1995; Athanasou 1994). As a result, disadvantaged groups such as the long term unemployed, women, sole supporting parents, those from outer working class suburbs, rural areas, LBOTE, disabled, Kooris, aged, and youth are severely limited in employment opportunities (Kermond 1998; Carruthers 1994; Athanasou 1994; Winefield et al. 1993; Gittins 1993; Colebatch 1993c; Bittman 1992). Fitzgerald, President of the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) observes:

> 'Most Australians do not understand how very critical the unemployment problem is. We are almost getting to a point where eight percent is acceptable. Many families are almost getting into a life cycle of unemployment' (in Pegler 1996:A5).

6.3   Psychological and physiological effects of unemployment

All members spoke about the effects of unemployment on themselves personally, the stress and the pressure that unemployment brings with it and ways to tackle and address this stress. During the second session, where the attendance was still very poor, Francis was the first to share his personal frustration of unemployment.

Francis: *... my experience of being unemployed includes feelings of worthlessness, more and more despair as family commitments are not met, and the financial stress, frustration at not being able to do certain things. And I really get down about that* (appendix 16:2:1).

In session three, as a response to the prompt questions in the discussion guide (appendix 2.5) the full membership were able to share their feelings of unemployment.

Pam: *I think one of the most painful things is they've kicked you, and they're just going to kick you down further* (appendix 16:3:7).

Francis: *Frustration. Being angry with people who say that it's easy to get a job out there ... Despair* (appendix 16:3:6).

George: *Isolation ... And impoverishment* (appendix 16:3:7).

George: *… it's not only fear, it's that increasingly people are being told that they are in control of their destiny if they keep on putting themselves first ... So people are being mobilised more and more to blame themselves for their lack of success* (appendix 16:3:12).

George: *I found it really frustrating a couple of years ago, finding that people who had unemployed children in their family, would ... cover up the unemployment ... But they could be as equally dismissive of unemployed people down the street …'oh they must be bad unemployed people'… so it's all a disguise* (appendix 16:3:8).

Barbara: *… the stigma and peoples attitudes and that kind of thing*
                (appendix 16:3:8).

Paul: *When people ask me what I do, and I say unemployed, you*
                feel all embarrassed to say. You shouldn't, but you do a bit
                (appendix 16:3:8).

If unemployed individuals cannot find work, they often see themselves as "… failed members of a "reasonable" society, rather than victims of an unjust social system" (Winefield et al. 1993:148). The status of being unemployed is therefore stigmatised as illegitimate (Waters and Crook 1990), and this stigma can be so powerful that people sometimes withdraw altogether from social contact, possibly one of the most debilitative aspects of unemployment (Brewer 1980).

However, there is much evidence to demonstrate that the ability to obtain worthwhile employment has little to do with one's skills, knowledge, and ability. Rather, unemployment tends to occur by accidence of birth including such factors as what suburb you live in and what school you went to (Winefield et al. 1993; Jones 1990; Maslen 1989). Jones argues that the occupational future of most Australians can be predicted with a high degree of accuracy by asking only three questions: "Where do you live? What school did you go to? And what do your parents do?" (1990:157). Winefield et al. (1993) also indicates that there are three major predictors of unemployment: LBOTE, low socio-economic status, and an unemployed immediate family member. The executive summary of a recent study conducted by the National Institute of Labour Studies and Flinders University of South Australia, states: "… continuing disadvantage in the labour market seems particularly high for two … groups … indigenous youth and NESB immigrants" (Vanden Heuvel and Wooden 1999:iii).

Research also shows geographical differences in Melbourne in unemployment rates, which vary up to thirty-two per cent across suburbs (Longo 1995a; Borland 1995; Lipski 1995; Probert 1994). For example Melbourne's northwestern suburbs, the geographical region of all the study circle members in this research, have consistently had higher unemployment rates than other areas in Australia for over half a decade (Longo 1995a).

A fifteen year income distribution study established that in poorer suburbs, unemployment rates of thirty-seven per cent exist, compared with five per cent in high socio-economic areas (Lipski 1995). National research conducted by the University of New South Wales on geography and employment over the period 1976 to 1996 concluded that:

> 'The overall results indicate that significant differences between low status and other [areas] have risen since 1976. That is, Australian cities have become more socially stratified …. In summary, geography apparently matters!' (Hunter 1996:32)

In 1997 the reported unemployment rate in Footscray was eighteen per cent, while in Camberwell it was five and a half per cent and Sandringham had the lowest rate in the state at four per cent (Hudson and Rollins 1997). In March 1999 official youth unemployment in Footscray rose to thirty-five per cent (The Western Times Editorial 1999). Jones offered an interesting insight into these discrepancies during the 1980s:

> 'The collapse of employment in manufacturing is not causing great distress in Bellevue Hill, Toorak or St Lucia. Students from Cranbrook or Scotch College feel no alarm if they cannot get apprenticeships in sheet metal work or jobs on car assembly lines. Girls from PLC or Merton Hall do not lie awake at night fretting that they will not get jobs at Safeway or McDonalds. Whoever imagined that they would?' (1980:14).

Unfortunately, dominant ideologies, government policy and the media, reinforce the assumptions that those who do not obtain a job should feel personally responsible (Eardley and Matheson 1999; Winefield et al. 1993; Smith 1993a; Rodgers and Wilkinson 1991; Hogan 1985, Vol. 1; Brewer 1975). For example, radio commentator Alan Jones labelled Byron Bay, where many unemployed are trying to adopt alternative lifestyles, as "The capital of the self-indulgent bludging unemployed", and the *Sydney Morning Herald* concluded that unemployment is a "moral and individual problem" (Channel 9; Sydney Morning Herald 7/7/93 in Bessant 1995a; Jones 1994b;)

In 1998, a study commissioned by the Federal Government undertaken by Roy Morgan revealed that young people are portrayed by the media as "bludgers, lazy and complaining" and media items concentrated on "drugs, violence, theft and unemployment" (MacDonald 1998:1). It was found that the media: "… seemed to appeal at a disturbingly emotive level using sensationalism as an effective tool" (MacDonald 1998:1). Furthermore, Eardley and Matheson state "The media both responds to public desire for exposure of deviant behaviour and fosters belief in personal unwillingness to work as the root cause of joblessness" (1999:10).

This stereotyping although irresponsible is powerful in its ability to influence public opinion. The idea of an underclass responsible for their own condition draws heavily on English political economic history where moralising about self inflicted unemployment is combined with notions of welfare dependency (Bessant 1995a). Neoliberalist government policy also plays a formative role in creating a climate of informed opinion that allows the problem of unemployment to be shifted to the unemployed, holding the unemployed themselves entirely responsible (Wilkinson 1991). The previous government's *White Paper* also purported to have revealed a strong community concern that some unemployed may not be making sufficient effort to find employment (CEO 1994).

Current Federal Government policy tends to locate the problem of unemployment with the unemployed, and uses this logic to coerce the unemployed, while rewarding employers with subsidies and incentives (Webber and Campbell 1994). Studies of public perceptions consistently reveal the unemployed to be amongst the least popular welfare recipients (Smith 1993a). Furthermore an alarming research finding by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, had found that most unemployed individuals themselves assert, without any supportive evidence, that other unemployed do not try hard enough to get work (Brewer 1980). As Eardley and Matheson state; "… it is hard to escape the view that, by international standards, Australians appear to take a relatively hard line on the responsibilities of unemployed people …"(1999:31).

In relation to the psychological and physiological effects of unemployment, discussion focussed back on this theme later in the season. In the sixth and seventh session, Pam led a discussion on the issue of alternatives, and although the members deliberated upon the pros and cons of such approaches (discussed later) an underlying uneasiness emerged. To adopt one of these alternatives was seen to require confidence, energy and money, however the negative psychological impact of unemployment was seen by some to be the main issue to tackle first, before considering such options.

Pam: *In that book, 'The Tiger's Mouth'[77] … it's got this little picture of a person with a fence around themselves, like they're a monument 'you are an important environmental thing worth preserving kind of thing'… it's important to preserve you* (appendix 16:6:18).

Barbara: *For me working on stress is largely about the inside stuff, like ironing out the creases that get me to perceive the world in a more stressful way … learning to know what I can deal with and what I can't deal with, and how much of it I can deal with … But that has involved accepting that … I don't think I'll ever work full time again…I don't know whether that means that there's a fault in the society that I can't work full time. I don't think it really matters … I think it's sort of coping with reality* (appendix 16:6:21-22).

Paul: *… I'm … a shy nervous … person. I was worse years ago. I find it very hard to keep to other people's timetable … other people's standards. I've got to do it in my own time …. And people get pretty impatient with me. They don't understand why I'm like that. You don't measure up … I can't be pushed to do anything. And sometimes that doesn't come up the benchmark …. When I get that extra pressure, and sometimes it's not needed, then I get stressed and I start to go downhill* (appendix 16:6:23-24).

In the final session Francis gives a practical solution to overcoming the barriers to employment.

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[77] "*In The Tiger's Mouth. An Empowerment Guide for Social Action*" Shields. K, (1991) Newtown, Millennium Books.

Francis: *… being over forty-five … getting back into the workforce, there's a lot of resistance to you doing that. Basically I have to not let people know my age until I've actually sold myself into the job …* (appendix 16.8:21).

The group agreed that unemployment was financially and psychologically stressful, frustrating and despairing. There was also the stigma, feelings of worthlessness, embarrassment, and self blame. Looking for work was also seen as hard work in itself, both emotionally and financially. By keeping the blame on the unemployed, many remain passive and disempowered.

Being blamed for problems over which people have no control, inevitably causes the unemployed to question their self worth which can lead to marginalisation, alienation, disempowerment and anger (Rance 1998). It has been argued however that if an unemployed person is aware of the structural inequalities, can remove the blame from themselves and are able to re-define their attitudes towards work the experience of unemployment may no longer be a significant personal debilitative crisis as well as alleviating negative physical and psychological effects (Winefield et al. 1993).

However, any hope of achieving this is hampered by comments such as these of the Federal Government Minister for Employment Services who introduced the label "job snob" in mid 1999, insinuating that unemployed people who did not accept low-status jobs were being too selective (Colebatch 1999a). Furthermore, some economists wish to tighten work tests for the unemployed so that unsuitable jobs have to be accepted after a certain period (Moore 1997).

6.4   Education/training

Education and training was a theme discussed in early sessions, however members did refer back to this issue later in the season.

Francis: *… in my business, I was ready and willing and able to take on two trainees … and having the phone ring all day really showed that there was a big gap in what was provided for*

young people. The applicants for the positions … were just simply following what they were taught at school to do, which for me as an employer, did not impress me very much … So it just occurred to me from that experience, that what they are taught at school, does not seem to me to produce an end result of people being employed (appendix 16:1:3-4).

George: *But to actually try to work out ways where you could have an education system which doesn't just fit you into a job - but where you developed a critical … sense of where you were going. Like workers' conditions … and what social changes are necessary. So I was thinking that a good idea would be to create something like a counterinstitution, a counter educational institution … probably like a free university … because the educational system is more and more directed to people just being cogs in the machine at the moment* (appendix 16:2:2-3).

George: *Another thing that I expressed besides frustration, is that with your labour market programs, now that they've been eliminated, people are going to have to pay more and more to actually get that training. It's harder and harder. So that people are being pushed down. There are limited opportunities for training …* (appendix 16:3:7).

George: *The way that Social Security has changed in the last decade, has meant that people have been put on this continual mill of training. And the changes in the nature of training generally has meant that people are being told that they have to train for life, and they're always on the go. So people I think are always competing against each other* (appendix 16:3:12).

Francis: *Yes. And it's been said that our school systems have basically been designed around a rural farming community, and the education system has not actually moved through the industrial age into the information age at all. It's two ages out of step with where we are right now* (appendix 16:7:36).

Overall the group felt that education and/or training in either secondary, university or VET were seen to be ineffective. It was considered that this learning did not adequately prepare people for work nor did it attempt to critique contemporary society. The notion of

lifelong learning was also seen as limiting not only on one's stamina to "keep up", but also financially stressful.

In relation to education and training for the unemployed, it has been suggested that both the Labour and Liberal/National Government approaches "… just shuffles the deck" (Moseley 1995:65). For example, in Winefield et al. (1993) published a ten year comprehensive longitudinal study from 1980 to 1989 into youth unemployment and concluded that courses designed to develop skills only resulted in reordering the unemployment queue. "No amount of training or work experience can get the unemployed back to work if jobs do not exist" (Buchanan 1993:76). Training for the unemployed is therefore questionable unless a realistic job creation program is in place.

Unemployment arguably is a structural problem and the emphasis of governments on the supply or demand side rather than job creation compounds this structural problem (Castle 1992). Unemployment is therefore a long run structural phenomenon, not merely a feature of the economic recession (Stilwell 1994; Polk 1988). It has been suggested that LMPs in the United States and Canada have done nothing to boost employment, and have only resulted in the driving down of wages and conditions due to the free labour employers receive from many of these programs (Rance 1998). A similar situation exists in Australia (Bainbridge 1997). Furthermore, Mullaly claims in relation to training the unemployed: "… what you've done is make the competition for scarce jobs a little stiffer" (in Rance 1998:36).

6.5   Working with bureaucracies

The effectiveness of both government and non government organisations related to unemployment were discussed.

6.5.1. Government organisation

This theme arose early in session seven while Pam was leading the discussion on alternatives. The option of self employment or voluntary work was raised, however it was seen how difficult these options were while government bureaucracies preferred the unemployed to focus all their energies on job searching. Members discussed how the restrictive flexibility of the DSS[78] often forced them to consider falsifying some information.

Paul: *… you cheat a little bit and falsify your forms.*

Pam: *But I think the distrust almost forces you to lie … because you're mistrusted so much, they put all these obstacles in the way … I started off thinking I've got no problems, I'll just be honest. But as time went on, it got more and more difficult to be honest. Because I could see, that if you say this, then something's going to happen and you're not going to be able to do that, so it's better to say this …*

Barbara: *… I don't like telling lies either … I'm going to start work Monday week and I was just finding it really hard to do this business of still applying for jobs when I know that that work is actually coming up. And I rang up the DSS and spoke to them on the phone and I said, 'look I know I'm starting work on the twenty-sixth May, do I have to keep filling in the jobseeker diary blah, blah, blah' and they said 'if you're not actively looking for work, we'll cease payments' … and I said to them 'look I understand that, but can you see the situation, I'm ringing up employers, sending in applications, where I know that I'm not going to be able to take up the work, and … it's wasting the employer's time and it's wasting my time' …*

Francis: *I don't understand, I still don't understand why it has to be inflexible …*

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[78]   DSS merged with the CES to create Centrelink shortly after this research was conducted in late 1998.

Barbara: *It's lack of trust that's why it's inflexible.*

Francis: *Yes.*

Paul: *Yes* (appendix 16:7:15-18).

Barbara: *Like that's part of my personal make-up, is that I am honest and … it's partly because I have a heavy sense of guilt, which would mean if I told lies, I'd lose a lot of sleep over it. And often it's not worth my while telling lies …*

Paul: *Yes, you suffer because of it.*

Barbara: *And yet it's because of huge abuses of the system that you get the lack of trust happening as well. It's a bit of a vicious circle.*

Pam: *I don't know if there's evidence of huge abuse.*

Francis: *… the system encourages people to lie because otherwise there are certain personal things or certain aspects of the job search which become increasingly difficult if you follow all their rules… Doesn't actually force you, but it gets pretty close to it …*

Barbara: *It's a bind. But why should I … lower my values because I'm dealing with an … elephant of an organisation … So I have to make my own judgements there. So I declare all my income and I lose part of my dole because I've worked for two days … I'm sure that lots of people don't put down their income … I can see a way of looking at it where you can say that nothing is an abuse of the system. But on the other hand, I think really large amounts of dishonesty … are an abuse of the system. And that that does contribute to people not trusting, yes.*

Francis: *Well if you look at those figures in the paper which say you cannot live on the amount that you are paid by the Social Security, the majority of people do live on it, quite a few of them, I would guess would be able to achieve living on it by having other sources of income for example, or other things outside of the system, outside of the rules of the system.*

Barbara: *Yes, well that's right. And that's how they would be able to achieve living on it? And other people who might honestly declare their income, will get taken off it. And so what's the fairness there?*

Paul: *I believe you can work the system without stealing or cheating ... you can learn the system and work it to your own advantage.*

Francis: *It's possible but it requires ... an incredible amount of skills ... I'm not in the position of knowing how to work the system to my advantage, it's a lot more straightforward for me to simply put a few white lies or be a little bit dishonest to get myself into employment faster. And there's a risk there that I'll be caught up and get into trouble and be worse off ... the system itself is so inflexible ... and will not give, or will not allow anything which is ... outside of the way that the rules are written and interpreted ...* (appendix 16.7:18-19)

The theme of dealing with government bureaucracies was again raised in the eighth session. George was leading a discussion on the issue of income security and these points were raised.

Francis: *I really thought that was very relevant that comment of social insecurity ... the way that the benefits are administered. As you said about the fact that they can all of a sudden make a decision sometimes retrospectively, and then you need to pay it back. There is not very much infrastructure for looking at individual cases and what individual hardship particular people are going to incur in repaying the amount, especially when it comes to ... people with children who have ongoing expenses, the amount of insecurity and worry that creates within individuals as far as I've seen, has been absolutely horrendous. And sure, some people might say there are places like 'Welfare Rights' and all that type of thing, but ... It's a very small minority who have a working knowledge of how to do an appeal.*

Barbara: *... I guess I was also thinking of the broader work contacts where security is on the way out ... so that even last year when ... I got my job, my six month*

contract, and I went back to work, but I still didn't feel like I could spend any money or buy any clothes or whatever, because at the end of the six months I didn't know if I was going to have a job or not. And as it turned out I saved so effectively, that when I became unemployed again, they wouldn't give me the dole.

Francis:　　　　　　　*Even that aspect where you are punished rather than rewarded for your efforts in providing for situations is … the Department of Social insecurity … it's teaching people to be financially insecure, and dependent on the system, unless they have enough self-determination to tell the system where to go* (appendix 16:8:8-14).

Francis*:*　　　　　　　*It's frightening too because a lot of the forms and information required by the department is difficult enough to understand, and very easy to make mistakes and errors in, and the people who check these forms … they're always listening for people trying to cheat the system. And a genuine error is so often interpreted as being an attempt to cheat the system … You're basically guilty until proven innocent in the case of filling in a form, which is a frightening aspect of it. My former partner has been caught in that very situation a number of times. She would have been better off in quite a few instances to have not been honest, and simply filled in the form to her best advantage rather than … attempt to be honest.* (appendix 16:8:13)

Barbara*:*　　　　　　　*… if you give one little bit of false information or whatever, you're … up for all these reprisals, but you know where are the reprisals on these people at the other end of the system?* (appendix 16:8:13)

The group felt that the whole culture of government departments, whose role it is to help unemployed people, appears to the unemployed to be one of distrust, inflexibility, complex procedures and depersonalising. There is suspicion on both sides that each expects the other to take advantage. The unemployed are, in most cases made to feel guilty and dishonest as well as liars, abusers of the system, thieves and extortionists. Such

a self-fulfilling prophecy coerces some to "work the system", tell lies or falsify information in order not to suffer from financial penalties. The notion of the "Department of Social *In*-security" was telling.

Mullaly states: "As long as the public is led to believe that unemployment is caused by the absence of a work ethic amongst the poor, governments are let off the hook … Commonwealth Government programs are, at best, an excuse for doing nothing …" (in Rance 1998:36).

6.5.2. Non-government organisations

In the eighth session the difficulties associated with bureaucracies also focussed on non-government organisations.

Francis: *Looking at some of the ways that some of the social support people such as church groups, Salvation Army, St Vincents de Paul, uses their dollars, how much benefit they can contribute to people with how many dollars, compare that with how much benefit* [government agencies provide] *... probably one of the biggest differences between the two is that the social support provided by some of these other people, is just incredibly generous, whereas very little genuine social support is given in addition to the money by the government agencies. And still the government agencies are probing fairly deeply into people's lives, and that's one of the criticisms of some of the other organisations - Salvation Army, St Vincents de Paul and so on - they want to find out a bit about people's lives as well. I don't know whether it's more or less than government, but both government and the individual organisations do probe into people's lives to quite an extent.*

George: *I've worked on* [a] *committee of the north western suburbs, that had ... some of the welfare agencies on that board ... and I was having to argue continually against them, as far as getting money out and distributing it. I'd say 'look people just need the money' and people would say 'oh they're going to use it on drugs or they're going to use it on alcohol'. So it wasn't a very generous attitude at all ... I've hated the times*

> *when I've had to go to the Salvos for food parcels or whatever. It's a really demeaning process.*

Francis: *Individual agencies in different suburbs, they differ so much. And how demeaning and controlling that they can be ... I can imagine in some of these areas where there's a large demand, there's a fair chance that they could be pretty controlling. And fearful that people might be misusing their money. 'Misusing' in their terms translates into different choices in the use of money ... I mean this was government money that was being filtered through the agencies. The agencies had control over it. But a thousand dollars would come through, which was meant to ... look after all the poor people in Brunswick and Coburg and Fawkner for, I don't know, two months, and it'd all be gone in two days.*

Pam: *It's a pretty difficult situation for them. I mean to know what to do with it - how to ration it out* (appendix 16.8:10-11).

The group felt that non-government welfare organisations to varying degrees, like government bureaucracies were suspicious of the unemployed, as to how clients may use money, as well as probing into personal lives. They are also perhaps not as generous as their marketing depicts them as being.

6.5.3. Employers

In the seventh session, while looking at alternatives, Pam expressed the frustration and time wasted in looking for work, which reduces an individuals time and effort in exploring alternatives. This is also an example of how discussion sometimes wandered during the season. Although not totally relevant to the list of issues, the group felt this discussion was important. This demonstrates how study circle content belongs to the group. It is not restrictive in its content. It is able to immediately address concerns that are relevant to the group at a particular time.

Pam: *I think that there's a huge waste of resources that people are being trained in writing resumes and spending a huge amount of time and energy, I mean it must cost businesses too ... I've spoken to people that've sent out two hundred job*

descriptions. Well just the postage and photocopying on that is quite considerable, before they even get to interviewing people, but ... we unemployed people are under this huge pressure to go searching for jobs whether we want them or not. But the cost of that is that we waste our time and energy, waste our money, businesses waste their time and energy and money ... (appendix 16:7:14).

Francis: *... the whole structure of the 'looking for jobs' business is structured on the basis that there's very limited number of jobs available and it's very hit and miss to get the position that you want. And from a prospective employer's position, it's real tough because most of them are busier than they'd like to be, and it's very time-consuming for them to have to deal with all these applicants, not knowing which particular applicant's going to be useful to their organisation. The big risk is that they'll take on somebody and they'll be unsuitable. There's some very onerous regulations [regarding the] ... provision for some new applicant for a job. And ... the prospective employer has big fears of being caught up in turmoil ... as well as that, there's all these equal opportunity regulations, anti-discrimination regulations ... I find it's just so inefficient the whole thing* (appendix 16:8:23-24).

Members felt that with a limited amount of work available, the resources, time and money that both the employer and job seeker expend is extremely ineffective. Adherence to regulations was also seen as a hindrance.

However, it has also been suggested that employers erect "systematic barriers" to employment opportunities. Private employment agencies often consider sex, race, ethnicity, class, skin colour and disability aspects as more important than professional experience when recommending clients for employment (Hawthorne 1994; Boreham, Roan and Whitehouse 1993). A comprehensive report by the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research found that skin colour and age over professional experience were major determinants for employers to hire engineers (Hawthorne 1994). Furthermore, the report found that it was not uncommon for unemployed LBOTE engineers to be told by potential employers: "I'm not employing you because you're better qualified than I am" (Hawthorne 1994). Some employers have even been known to refuse to interview long

term unemployed applicants altogether (Webber and Campbell 1994). Similarly, a DEET EMB conference paper stated that an evaluation of pilot arrangements to assist the older unemployed shows that the systematic barriers facing this group - including the attitudes of employers limit the effectiveness of LMPs (Jarvie and McKay 1993).

In 1999 a study by the City of Maribyrnong found that unemployed youth in Melbourne's western suburbs who lied about their address, got jobs ahead of those with identical qualifications and experience who revealed their true western suburbs address (Gough. 1999). This demonstrates that there are many barriers to employment and that a substantial amount of the cause of unemployment does rest with employer attitudes. Disadvantaged groups are in effect limited in employment opportunities, this further questions the notion that everyone has an equal chance of getting a job (Carruthers 1994; Athanasou 1994; Winefield et al. 1993; Gittins 1993; Colebatch 1993b; Bittman 1992).

6.6   Individual alternatives in response to unemployment

Initially, the theme of alternatives was raised in the fifth session while members were sharing their experiences and feelings regarding their loss of employment. It was suggested however that unemployment might be an opportunity to explore alternative life arrangements other than paid employment. This was listed as an issue and was discussed in the sixth and seventh session.

Pam led the discussion as she had prior personal knowledge and experience in relation to a number of alternatives. Ideas discussed included Local Exchange Trading Scheme (LETS), Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF), multi-skilling, consultancy, voluntary work, reorganising work time, living on a low income, as well as Labour Co-operatives and Food not Bombs[79].

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[79]   For a detailed description of such programs see appendix 16.6.

6.6.1   LETS

George commented on the LETS scheme:

George: *... the criticism I've got of it is that it's too individually based. It probably could be used collectively, if enough people ... said 'let's get a project together and ... make our services available to a bunch of other people'. I put myself down in LETS for actually sitting down with people and providing a ground plan for their organisation. Nobody's ... rung me up though ... if they had a problem like if they wanted to raise money or gain access to resources or whatever, I was going to sit down with them and say look, you can quite easily do this and this and this ... But the other thing is that, I thought people in LETS could provide group training ... this might be a bit formal for people, some people in environmental areas might want to do training on a less formal basis* (appendix 16.6:11).

6.6.2   WWOOF

George again had reservations about the WWOOF scheme:

George: *Seems a bit of an uneven exchange to me. Because if people are putting in like a day's work and they're getting accommodation, it ... seems a bit unfair.*

Pam: *Well I think some people use it for travel, like XXX [80] did it in Canada when he was travelling around, so it's a good way to kind of see the countryside and I think also some people like to learn about farming ... And when I did it, I went to a few places and they didn't have much work, we just had a good time really. I mean some of them can be terrible. XXX went to one where there was just one chap and he was really depressed, and the place was run-down and pretty horrible, and it was a pretty miserable stay and he moved on as soon as he could. So it has its ups and downs ...*

George: *I think I read about it somewhere in America, where people were bringing the seedlings, for some reforestation project, and it just ... seemed like people were really working their guts out for the love of reforestation sort of basically ...*

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[80]   Name deleted on Pam's request.

From what you've said now though it sounds more positive,
especially the training (appendix 16:6:9-10).

6.6.3   Job modularisation

This was a term coined by Letcher, author of the job search publication *"Making your Future Work"* (1997). The term is used to describe the way people can construct their working life using a variety of employment options, such as part-time, contract, casual and self-employment as well as voluntary work and further education and training.

Barbara: *… that book by - it's called 'The Future of Work' - Letcher.*
And that's just more about … taking the … increasingly part
time nature of work and the casualisation of work whatever,
and using it to your advantage by, … choosing a … central
area that you actually really care about a lot which is … the
centre of your work focus, and then building other … blocks
of part time or casual work that you can place in around that
… That's the concept, and I've actually found that … it's
something that is actually being suggested to people through
Careers Counsellors at the moment. So an example might be
that if you were a teacher, you might have a core of either
private studies and a two day a week job … and then you
might have other small jobs.

George: *I think it depends on how far up the tree you are … the*
money tree. Because you could probably … work out means
to subdivide your work up … but not everybody's got that
level of skill, and there's just not the market. The market's
been saturated. Like somebody I know went into desk top
publishing, and when I asked him, how's that going, he
doesn't do that any more because it's too competitive …

And even … a lot of professionals have become consultants.
They're getting about a quarter of the amount they used to …
get - out of their core income because it's so competitive.
And also, as things become outsourced, the companies have
got more of a buyer's market as well. And in Australia, one
of the conservative economists has done stuff on people going
into part time work, and they're not doing too well …

Barbara: *It depends what your skills are doesn't it.*

George: *Yes. There's a bloke ... a young guy, very enthusiastic, he's working on servicing all these different companies. But he'll ... say 'I'm in a privileged position, not everybody can do what I'm doing'. He knows that it's very rare.*

Barbara: *... I suppose the interesting thing about it is, it was an approach of saying 'well look, this is the reality. This is what's actually happening. So let's find a way of making it work to our advantage'* (appendix 16:6:13-14).

6.6.4   Voluntary work

Voluntary type work was also discussed in the seventh session as yet another alternative to paid employment.

Pam: *Like I registered myself as doing voluntary work with XXX*[81] *And that meant that when I handed in my dole form each fortnight, I just put 'approved activity' or whatever it is, and I didn't have to put the two jobs, and that was fine for me, and it ... reduced the stress a bit ... And Centrelink has sent out information to organisations saying, 'we want to make it easier for people to do voluntary work, and you can do this and do that'. But when I rang up the number, the person there didn't know anything about it.*

Barbara: *... on Monday I'm going into the Volunteer Centre because, to do the course I want to do next year, I have to have done volunteer counselling. And they're just incredibly set-up with volunteer stuff to give to people. And I mean really when it comes to looking for jobs, often working in a voluntary capacity is the way in.*

Barbara: [The Volunteer Centre has] … *this huge database of stuff and organisations ... I knew about Life Line, but I didn't know about anything else ... And they just sort of said 'oh look, we've got this counselling, that counselling' ... and they all have courses involved ... courses that you do before you start doing it ... the organisations provide their own courses ... So I mean there are mechanisms there.*

Paul: *... Mainly op shops and church groups ... They mainly get older people, younger people don't seem to be interested to*

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[81]   Name deleted on Pam's request

do those sort of things - shop work, store work ... It was all right, yes…

Barbara: *Voluntary work saved my life in 1995. I'd come out of hospital, I was very unwell and depressed and whatever, but I couldn't stand sitting around at home doing nothing. So I went to this Volunteer Centre and ... they took me through ... their whole register, and I did a day a week at Fitzroy Legal Service, and a day a week at 3CR, and a day a week at a local bookshop, and ... had a great time. Made friends.*

Paul: *Yes, it's a social outlet isn't it?*

Barbara: *Well yes, it means you're working with people ... I started a radio course at 3CR ... I was doing reception, telephone stuff that I hadn't done before. So yes that was picking up skills.*

Paul: *I was at World Vision for a little while. I was in the donations unit, that was fun. They trusted me ... I suppose over a period of time I was ... starting to think I would like to get paid for it ...*

Francis: *… I was doing some work for the Music Broadcasting Society at one stage ... but one of the things I found in general …is dealing with out of pocket expenses. Some organisations do pay and some organisations don't. And when I'm strapped for cash, I find it real hard just to pay for a few little items - you know something forty or fifty cents. And I'd go home that much lighter at the end of the day. It's a huge problem.*

Francis: *So that's one of the problems - and the majority of voluntary organisations don't have provision for that. And unless I'm on a reasonable income, it can be a big problem for me to involve myself in something like that ... the travel can be a big one.*

Paul: *When I was at World Vision, they used to be ... down Burwood Highway ... Bit far to travel* (appendix 16.7:10-13).

6.6.5   Living on a low income

In the sixth and seventh sessions, resigning oneself to living on a low income was also discussed as yet another option to paid employment. This was seen by some members to be an opportunity for people to do "real work" or "important work" as some members explain.

George: *... there's always been like tens of thousands of people who ... actually turn the inner suburbs into areas where people can live on low incomes ... using benefits to do things, so there'd be a whole lot of things that aren't formal processes. They'd be people like musicians, and people into drama and artists ...*

Barbara: *It's ... unofficial too. People who get benefits and that allows them to do real work. It's the government's paying them to do work that they wouldn't pay them to do deliberately. But people are using the systems that way. If you can live on a low income, you can get the dole and do the ... work that you really want to do ...* (appendix 16:6:14-15).

Pam: *... if people get the dole or they get some casual work or something and choose to live on that income and do their real work which they're not paid for, if somebody gets the dole and works for the environment or something like that. That's a choice of not having a job as such.*

Francis: *... look at for example nature, you've got fields out there, you've got trees, and fruit and production ... and we place ourselves in these cities where you actually require a certain amount of money to survive. And it is a very unnatural ...*

Pam: *... George for example does some paid work, but it's not their vocation in life. It's a way of getting income to do what's really important. And I think that choice to live on a low income, the fact that some people do that, is important because it kind of challenges the prevailing attitude or idea that you have to have a job. And there are some people that are able to live on a low income and say 'hey I'm doing this and I'm okay' ... there are a lot of people around that say ... their working conditions are terrible but 'at least I've got a job'. It's like, what would happen if you lost your job? It would be just terrible! And I mean it is terrible for some*

people, I'm not denying that. But also I think it's important that there are some people that are okay without a job (appendix 16:7:2).

Nonetheless some members found the option of living on a low income a compromise due to financial reasons.

Francis*:*   *... not having any money ... and at the same time, not feeling all that good to be able to do a decent presentation on selling myself or what I can offer (appendix 16:7:23).*

Barbara: *I want to earn some money, yes. I'm tired of living without money. This job is not ... the career I've been looking for, but I can do it, and it will pay me some money* (appendix 16:7:3).

Overall, members felt that the financial restrictions of being unemployed create obstacles in attempting to pursue possible alternative approaches other than paid employment.

Francis: *... a lot of people would like to do some things which are creative and produce an income. But they feel like they're prevented from doing that because they either lose other income, or they lose side benefits. So there are a lot of creative things that people could be doing, which they're simply choosing not to do because of what they lose from doing it ...*

Pam: *I think there are other things too that stop people doing those things. I've had a bit of contact with ... the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme, and it seems that a lot of people who go through that are not able to get the businesses off the ground because, well for one thing it's so hard to get the money to do that.* (appendix 16:7:6-7).

The day to day difficulties of living on a low income was also raised.

Pam: *... I think that it's not really recognised that living on a low income is work in itself, like everything becomes so hard. Like you can't have a car ... And it just takes up so much time working out what's the cheapest* [public transport], *and*

<div style="margin-left: 2em;">

can you get a concession on it, and if you can't buy a new one can you borrow someone else's? (appendix 16:7:24).

</div>

Francis: *I find that when I do work, there's the cash flow to enable me to do a lot more than when I'm on the dole, and there's lots of little things that I could be doing that could either be personally rewarding or financially rewarding which I'm basically stymied because of the lack of cash flow* (appendix 16:7:23).

In the eighth session the impact of living on a low income arose again while George was leading a discussion on income security from the list of issues.

George: *… I've been at the DSS and I've had to indicate what … my outgoing costs were, because I'd been overpaid. And what I listed was just the basics and that … left me with almost nothing … as though you are just … meant to exist as a food machine … roof over your head, and that's all, as though there was nothing else to your existence …*

Francis: *… such items as entertainment … which for me … as a Social Security recipient without other sources of income, seem an incredible luxury which … I could not afford.*

George: *… the way that the government, media and politicians have been able to bash … the unemployed people is to say that they would prefer to live on benefits rather than get a job. But these … things indicate that … it's hard work just getting by.*

Francis: *There are some people who prefer to just live on the dole … But each individual has their own creative way of working around it, and it's pointless classifying everybody who's unemployed in that type of category because you've got people ranging from people who try really, really hard to get work, or would be trying if they had the resources, through to people who are actively seeking that particular role of simply living on the dole themselves* (appendix 16.8:5-6).

Barbara: *… I think people's entertainment needs, are genuine needs … I certainly don't wipe entertainment out of what I do, when I'm unemployed … I do that by … supplementing the dole, but there are still things you can do fairly cheaply that allow*

for entertainment ... I think, to not incorporate entertainment as part as people's needs, would be ... a bad thing.

Francis:	A lot of people I've come across who are relying on Social Security, they don't spend money on entertainment other than having a working television set

Francis:	Everybody's got their own priorities and ... certainly entertainment and leisure are off - the first to go ...

Paul:	... why is the dole so low? Why does the government want that?

Barbara:	I think ... that they don't want the dole to be a livable wage, because if it was a livable wage people wouldn't have the impulse to get off it ...

Pam:	I think part of the reason why it's so low is to force people into poor conditions, willing to take any job, in that industry wants cheap labour and malleable labour ... [and] people will put up with extra shifts and things that they .... Like if the benefits were higher, people wouldn't take jobs that they really didn't want (appendix 16:8:7-9).

Francis:	I think the majority of the population wants it [unemployment benefits] to be so low, because a large number of working people resent having to pay taxes especially knowing how large a proportion of it is being spent to support the unemployed. And there's a tendency for people to blame the unemployed people rather than look at the system which is creating this level of unemployment.

George:	... people are living on benefits ... in contrast to the way they're portrayed in the media, as though they're ... living a life where everything's wonderful, is that they're ... just basically scraping by.

Barbara:	Like I actually have in the past appreciated, you know, living in a country where there is a safety net system, against many, many countries where there's not ... but you need to be able to live on it (appendix 16:8:10-12).

Members felt that the many financial necessities that a paid worker takes for granted become unreachable for people on unemployment benefits. For example a car, or the

expenses in keeping a car on the road, travel, modest entertainment, the related costs in job search, a television set and unexpected expenses such as the purchase of prescription glasses and even food expenses, all become difficult to meet. Trying to budget and meet these expenses takes considerable time and it is hard work to just "scrape by". Some workers may resent the unemployed as not only a drain on taxes, but that because they don't work they are somewhat idle. However, members felt that being on the dole is neither interesting nor fun.

In light of this, advocates for a deregulated market still urge that unemployment benefits should be cut further: "Reduce the amount of unemployment assistance by, say, twenty per cent …" (Moore 1997:289). Furthermore: "… generosity accounts for a significant proportion of Australian's existing rates of unemployment" (Moore 1997:291). Patterson, Chief Executive of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has also called for changes in social security payments, stating that if his recommendations of reducing benefits were adapted "The unemployment problem in Australia could be eliminated within five years" (in AAP 1997:2). This is despite evidence to the contrary (Colebatch 1996a, Davidson 1996, Saunders 1998, Boeri 1994, Dollery and Webster 1995 OECD 1994, Giddens 1999). As Giddens states; "Reducing benefits to force individuals into work pushes them into already crowded low-wage labour markets" (1999:110)

According to OECD standards, the level of income support unemployed people receive in Australia is "… extremely low" (Castle 1992:80). In world terms, the OECD has stated that Australian Government spending on unemployment assistance is amongst the lowest in the western world (Colebatch 1993a). Out of twenty countries surveyed, Australia spent point three of one per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on helping the unemployed; seventeen other countries spent twice that level and eleven spent at least three times as much (Colebatch 1993b). The seriousness of this is exemplified by the OECD requesting all member countries to increase income support to the unemployed on social justice grounds (Boeri 1994). Saunders has called for: "… [an] immediate increase in social security …" to redress the inequity in Australian society (1996:365). And in 1999 a United Nations report claimed that "… inequality in Australia was among the

highest in the Western world" (Gray 1999:11). Furthermore, this inequality is compounded by the upper and middle classes of Australia capturing a large proportion of the country's welfare effort (Bradby 1997). Both the Chief Economist of ANZ and a Commonwealth Commission Audit found that the top twenty per cent of Australian households with the highest income received nearly eleven billion dollars of cash and non-cash welfare benefits annually (Bradby 1997). This has been described as "inefficient" and the "… curtailing of benefits to this [upper and middle class] group … would go a long way towards winding back the budget deficit" (Bradby 1997:1)

Aside from having one of the most unequal distribution of income of western countries, historically Australians are also one of the lowest taxed people, as a percentage of GDP, of all OECD countries (Kerr 1993; Davidson 1992). Only Turkey and the United States are taxed less, while twenty-one other countries are taxed more including the United Kingdom, Japan and Germany (Kerr 1993; Davidson 1992). Yet a recent study suggests that fifty-eight per cent of Australians think less money should be spent on the unemployed (Arndt 1999).

The problem with the logic of the tax drain or dole bludger myths that permeate our society, is that protests from employers and employees (those with work) who complain about the burden they must sometimes carry, see only the individual unemployed person and the amount of money they receive in benefits, and do not question the *total amount* of unemployed persons (Probert 1993a). To take this further, the question could be developed from "why are so many out of work?" to "why doesn't the labour market employ?" (Buchanan 1993). Research conducted with Australian businesses found that employers often endorse Government policies, but these policies give them little reason to employ more staff (Tingle and Colebatch 1996).

These attitudes are further enhanced by the strong neo-liberal individualistic nature of our ideology. As Stilwell states: "Do we want to emulate the USA where labour market "flexibility" and wage cutting has produced a massive class of the "working poor" only a step above the extensive "underclass"?" (1997: 30).

Members discussed, elaborated upon and critiqued a number of personal alternative modes of work other than the traditional. Most were seen to require some type of compromise or access to resources in order to achieve. Upon reflection, it was considered that it would be a worthwhile exercise for unemployed people to discuss and debate all, some, others or a range of personal alternative initiatives so as at least people can be made aware and make informed decisions to adopt any or a combination of the above options. Also raised was the notion that perhaps governments need to disseminate information in relation to such alternatives, as Giddens suggests in relation to alternative approaches, "Governments should be prepared to contribute to such endeavours, as well as encourage other forms of bottom-up decision making and local autonomy" (1999:84).

In Australia, as with other countries as mentioned in Chapters one and three, there has been efforts to advance such bottom-up initiatives via the use of study circles, but not specifically with the issue of unemployment (Civics Expert Group 1994). Perhaps a study circle format which embraces the topic of "alternatives" for unemployed people could be a useful endeavour.

6.7   Structural alternatives in response to unemployment

After discussing the range of personal options available to unemployed people, Pam raised the idea of looking at structural alternatives in the seventh session.

Pam: *Well I suppose there's two ways of going. I mean we could*
             talk about what each of us might do to change our own
             situation, or we could talk about what needs to change
             structurally to make working environments more like the
             things we are talking about, where workers in general get
             appreciated and get autonomy and get work satisfaction ...
             (appendix 16:7:23).

It was therefore decided by the group to return to the discussion guide in the eighth session where several structural alternatives could be explored. This theme was based around the "viewpoints" and question prompts contained in the discussion guide from

pages twelve to sixteen (appendix 2). The viewpoints from the discussion guide are reproduced here under each theme. Viewpoint five "Co-operative Community Approaches" (appendix 2:14) was not addressed as it was felt this area was covered thoroughly in the previous discussion on alternatives (appendix 16:8.4). Viewpoint seven, "A Radical Solution" (appendix 2:15) was also not covered due to time constraints.

6.7.1 Free market

The first viewpoint described in the discussion guide is reproduced here;

"1. The Free Market

This is a popular approach with many governments around the world at the moment, and is based upon the notion that governments need to somewhat take a back seat and stop interfering with private industry and the 'market'. If governments stop spending time and money on regulations and control of industry, then the free market can adjust and take care of itself. In the past, governments invested too much in public sector spending, which resulted in overspending and the closure of some private industries due to a shortage of business.

We should keep doing what we are doing now, as it will reduce taxes, make industry more efficient, reduce inflation and eventually provide more jobs.

Reducing Australia's high unemployment levels could be achieved a lot quicker if we sped up this free market reform. For example unemployment benefits are a high tax payer expense and promote a cycle of dependency. The government should reduce or cut unemployment benefits and leave the job of looking after the unemployed to charity organisations. Unemployment is an individual problem. If benefits were cut, people would find a job very quickly. We are too generous towards the unemployed. Sometimes being on the dole is better financially, than having a job. Also employers find it hard to employ people due to high wages and regulation. If we deregulated, lowered wages and reduced benefits, we would reduce unemployment levels in no time. The USA has a deregulated labour market and their unemployment levels are about half of what ours are" (appendix 2)

Members responded the above theme drawing upon their own knowledge as well as their own beliefs and opinions.

Francis: *Yes I think we are currently a long, long way away from free market position here, because for example the labour market in Australia is very, very heavily regulated in just about all areas apart from sub-contract clothing manufacturing where wages of two dollars fifty an hour are quite prevalent.*

Pam: *But that is the logical conclusion isn't it, like if you have a completely free market, that then workers in Australia get paid the same as workers in Korea … And they get … probably less than two dollars fifty an hour.*

Pam: *… a completely free market means exploitation of workers … and it doesn't create jobs, like there's no logic there, that … making industry more efficient eventually provides more jobs, because there's nothing to stop the people who run the business using the profit for themselves.*

Paul: *The strong will be stronger, the poor will be poorer.*

Francis: *… if you have a free market, you have a large number of employers competing for labour. There'll be … a lot of employers who couldn't give a damn about the welfare of their workers, and there'll be some employers who really do care and continue to care. And they'll be a big demand for people to get into positions of working for an employer who does care. And there'll be a lot of people who perpetually attract poverty who will insistently work for an employer who does not care. And I think that, yes just taking the free market approach … a lot of people would be … hurt, and yet then again a lot of people would benefit. But another aspect of the free market, certain things do need to be fought for. Like we've had free market policy in Australia for imported goods. But it really isn't a free market because some of what we are competing for is actually subsidised in the other country, so it is not a genuinely free market and our government, or us, have not stood up about the fact that it is not a free market in some areas.*

Barbara: *If America is given as an example of how the free market economy works ... the unemployment levels are about half of what ours are, but I would say that there'd be a lot of people who would be under-employed. The idea of unemployment becoming something that's an individual problem that's dealt with by charity I think is a real worry ...*

Pam*:*   *... unemployment levels in USA are about half what ours are ... I mean I think they only appear to be, but there are things like for example, they've got about four per cent of their workforce in prison, which reduces the unemployment figures quite substantially because they're not counted* (appendix 16.8:12)

The free market approach was looked upon sceptically by the group. Members were unsure of its merits especially when the world is not a free market in its totality. The example of the USA as a reflection of a successful free market was also questioned.

One of the common arguments put forward by supporters of free-market ideologies to curb high unemployment levels, is the comparatively low unemployment levels in other countries. However: "International comparisons are usually fraught with danger" (Howard 1984:8). This is especially true of the USA.

For example in 1993 in the USA more than eight million people were unemployed (note also how a low percentage does not necessarily constitute low numbers). However a further six million were working in precarious part time work and wanted to work more, and over one million were discouraged and had given up hope of looking for work altogether. This equates to sixteen million unemployed, or thirteen per cent of the USA workforce (Rifkin 1996). In Washington DC alone forty-two per cent of the African-American population aged between eighteen to twenty-five are not included in statistics as they are either in jail, on parole, awaiting trial or being sought by police (Rifkin 1996). Moreover, it was reported in 1997 that the main reason the USA has a low unemployment level was because of the high crime and incarceration rate in comparison to all other OECD countries (Hewett and Davidson 1997). In 1997 the prison population combined with those caught up in the criminal justice system equated to four per cent of the US

workforce, and an estimated further three per cent lived off the proceeds of crime (Hewett and Davidson 1997).

Similarly, in Britain it is estimated that the pool of discouraged jobseekers is growing at one hundred and fifty thousand a year. So, on a conservative estimate official levels of three million jobless means at least four million people would work if they could (Merritt 1982). Furthermore, from an economic perspective, free market economic ideologies are not sympathetic to labour participation rates. For example Hellyer has conducted a comparison of two key historical eras of USA economic policy (1999). Firstly, the twenty-six years from 1948 to 1973 where Keynesian[82] economic theory was followed, and then secondly 1974 to 1997, a twenty-four year period of free market economic dogma (Hellyer 1999). While in the earlier period, unemployment rates in the USA averaged nearly five per cent, Hellyer found a forty two per cent increase in the average unemployment rate in the second period (1999). Descriptions of the USA as a successful and ideal model of a fair and equitable free market capitalist society is questionable as Hellyer states "In 1973, just before monetarism assumed the academic throne, the richest ten per cent of American families with children made twenty one times more than the poorest. By 1996 the richest ten per cent made three hundred and fourteen times more than the poorest" (1999:97).

According to one perspective, the solution to solving Australia's unemployment problem lands in the lap of economists. The argument generally espoused by past and present governments is that deregulation and an improved economy will create higher levels of employment demand. Theoretically, this demand will then create a void, which the existing unemployment fills. As Moore, states "… substantive deregulation of the labour market … is the most important measure required to reduce unemployment" (1997:289).

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[82]   An explanation of Keynesian economic theory is provided in appendix 2.1; 'Key Terms'.

Yet Windschuttle (1979) asks whether unemployment is inevitable under capitalism. To the economist, unemployment is generally regarded in an impersonal and objective manner. People are turned into numbers, and numbers into statistics. These statistics are then used as a tool to manipulate levels of inflation (Burchell 1992). In this sense, unemployment is considered a "price worth paying" and "no bad thing" as Menzies once claimed, as the presence of unemployment exerted a downward pressure on wages and inflation therefore avoiding a balance of payments crisis (in Burchell 1992:352 Lamont, Treasury Questions, Hansard, London, 1991). Economist Thornton[83] observes: "Australians prefer unemployment of around ten per cent, as long as they themselves are not one of the unlucky ten per cent. Powerful individuals may indignantly deny this, but their conduct and their attitudes make their implicit attitude clear" (1998:43).

However some noted business leaders recognise the injustice of economic rationalism and its effects on unemployment. Fraser conceded that banks were not doing much to reduce unemployment and their record on jobs is mediocre: "… eight percent is still a very high level of unemployment" (in Skelton and Painter 1996:A2). Fraser also warned that labour market reforms need to be handled sensitively and that advocates of deregulation often regard people as "… chattels or financial products" (in Skelton and Painter 1996).

The Governor of the Reserve Bank, MacFarlane, and Salmon of the Business Council of Australia, both agree that although industrial relations reforms may promote faster growth: "… [the] effects on unemployment are less certain" (in Henderson 1996:A15).

Furthermore, some economists have long recognised that market forces have never succeeded in establishing full employment (Jones 1990). Castle (1992) predicted that despite government initiatives, unemployment would continue to be a major problem. Mitchell and Watts state: "Australia's persistently high unemployment rate is largely the outcome of [labour] demand deficiencies" (1997:443). Perhaps governments are not

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[83]   "Henry Thornton is the *nom de plume* of a prominent economist" [original emphasis] (Editor, *Quadrant*. October 1998, p. 42).

seriously committed to reducing unemployment due to many macro economic benefits. Furthermore, economic rationalism and right-wing political initiatives are notorious for blaming the poor and unemployed for their own plight (Rance 1998). This situation Rance suggests is problematic and illogical:

> 'Devotion to the free market on the one hand, and to the traditional family and nation on the other, is self contradictory. Individualism and choice are supposed to stop abruptly at the boundaries of the family and national identity, where tradition must stand intact. But nothing is more dissolving of tradition than the 'permanent revolution' of market forces. The dynamism of market societies undermines traditional structures of authority and fractures local communities; neoliberalism creates new risks and uncertainties which it asks citizens simply to ignore' (1999:15).

6.7.2 Public sector job creation

This was the second viewpoint contained in the discussion guide and is reproduced here.

> **"2. Public Sector Job Creation**
>
> This approach is sometimes referred to as Post-Keynesian. Unemployment could be fixed quickly if governments stopped privatising and spent money on employing more staff in our utilities (ie. gas, water, telephone, electricity, etc.), and infrastructure (ie. public transport, roads, parks, hospitals, schools, libraries, etc.). The problem with unemployment is that the private sector can't provide enough jobs for us all. The government, the employer of the last resort, has a responsibility to its people to provide a job for all those who want to work. The initial cost of employing several thousand people by governments would quickly be offset by the extra money these workers would have in their hands. The money would be spent in public and private industries therefore creating a cycle of increased spending by all, which would eventually benefit us all" (appendix 2).

The group discussed this theme.

Paul: *I don't know. It's hard. Depends what the government spends their money on. Whether it's people in office blocks, you know, pushing pens and papers around, or if it's infrastructure …*

Barbara: *So the opposite of public sector job creation is what Kennett's been doing for the last number of years ... Like cutting back the public service and privatising ... I think it's a good thing to ... create more employment, and I think it's a good thing not to privatise all those ... bits and pieces ...*

Francis: *My biggest concern with public sector job creation is that the majority of expenditure would not add value. It would not provide better services ... and not provide very much more amenities to the public in general. Whereas expenditure on some of these things within a private enterprise would have to add quite a considerable amount of value ...*

Paul: *Then why can't the government have value added jobs?*

Francis: *There's no reason why they can't. Their past performance they have not added the amount of value that is basically expected. And in fact government services, a lot of government services now are providing far more value per unit dollar than they ever had in the past.*

Pam: *When you say 'value', you mean 'financial value'?*

Francis: *Services provided to customers per dollar are probably greater than they ever have been. How many passengers are moved per railway employee? How many school children are taught to a certain level of literacy per education department employee?*

Barbara: *But it actually doesn't work that way, because by cutting back numbers of teachers, sure you can say that more kids go through, but because there's less time for individual attention, how many kids learn all the way through? And what about quality of service as well as efficiency.*

Francis: *Yes. Well there's a certain percentage decrease in quality ... but has the percentage decreased in quality as much as it has decreased in terms of staff? It would appear that ... maybe get ten per cent decrease in quality for a ten per cent decrease in staff, I don't know.*

Barbara: *Yes that's looking at these things that are all about ... like the most essential things like education and whatever, in terms of number crunching you know. And it's not the way I look at education or health services or even people's experiences on a tram or a train ... child protection for example which is just*

inadequate. And I think that the cost to our community is going to be huge, when children are being abused and being reported and there's no staff to do anything about it. Then those children grow up to be abusers and that raises the population that we have in the jails and mental institutions and that kind of thing ...

Francis: *It sounds to me as though you have a lot more trust in the institutions than I have ...* (appendix 16.7:30-33).

Barbara*:*   *I mean unemployment is probably a complex thing rather than a simple thing, but ... I know that it's not because people are lazy. And I don't think it's because there are not enough jobs. I think they could create more jobs if they wanted to create more jobs. You know downsizing has certainly been chucking people out onto the footpath ...*

Barbara*:*   *I'm suggesting that there could be enough jobs if there are enough needs ... I don't have a job at the moment because ... migrants needing English, are not being funded by the government. But it doesn't mean that the people don't need the English classes. So it's about who decides to put what money where ... Well yes, there's the 'dole bludger' argument, the 'not enough jobs' is often the 'if those migrants hadn't come there'd be no unemployment' ... I'm just showing here that you can actually re-interpret those in different ways* (appendix 16:4:6-7).

Barbara: *Yes there's heaps of work to do.*

Paul: *Yes, yes.*

George: *Too much work to do.*

Paul: *Too much work to do ...* (appendix 16:4.7)

The success of job creation was seen to be dependent upon what type of work was created, and whether it would be efficient. The quality versus quantity issue was also raised, with the example of classroom sizes. An interesting angle used to counter this problematic comparison was that people are fundamentally not lazy, and that high unemployment is due to limited employment opportunities.

6.7.3   Redefining work and a guaranteed income

The viewpoint from the discussion guide (appendix 2) is reproduced here and was discussed in the eighth session.

> **"3. Redefining Work and a Guaranteed Income**
>
> We now live in an era where the whole idea of what 'work' means needs to be rethought. Our society accepts people who work and get paid for their work, but undervalues those who work and are not recognised through wages. Volunteers, mothers and people active within the community carry out extremely important and valuable work, but this work is considered less worthy than paid work by the majority of our society.
>
> Unemployment also equates with poverty. We need to recognise all workers and maintain the living standards of those who carry out unpaid work by providing a guaranteed minimum income. We are a relatively affluent country and it is a sad reflection upon us that many of our citizens struggle to acquire basic services such as child care and health care. No government has the right to push people below the poverty line. This is what has happened in the USA with no guaranteed minimum income level. Although unemployment levels are low, a large proportion of those working are in effect, the working poor.
>
> The idea of employment should be redefined and we should separate the idea of income being connected to work. Instead 'work' should mean the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities.
>
> Through community debate and educational programs, we could redefine what 'work' means and consider innovative ways to value, acknowledge and reward the work efforts of those who don't receive income from work, such as many women. To some extent this is done at present with carer and parental allowances. Tax benefits or discounts could be other ideas to explore. This approach could improve our society's cohesiveness through cooperation, trust, networking and mutual benefits" (appendix 2).

In relation to this theme George commented on how current unemployment benefit allowance levels restrict peoples ability to create worthwhile community initiatives.

George: *The reason … my expectation of what people should get as a*
            guaranteed payment is so high, is that … it means that

*people could ... have enough money to do ... organised
things with other people. So they could collectively use that
money to work with other people on projects ... even if you
... were able to ... live reasonably well on payments ... you
haven't got money to really co-operate with other people –
to...say 'I want to use this as a collective project or I want to
hire space that cold be used for something'.* (appendix
16.8:14).

The members felt that a guaranteed income was seen as an opportunity for those outside
of the paid workforce to contribute to society and be rewarded financially. Francis, in
response to this viewpoint opened up the discussion of how woman are not adequately
recognised or financially rewarded for their efforts.

Francis   *It mentions here how women in the home are not financially
                 rewarded for the services they provide, which has a lot of
                 social benefit and other benefits which are probably a lot
                 greater than the benefits people are producing in the
                 workplace. And yet they are not being paid dollars for it ...*

Francis: *... I think the government reflects what they believe is the
                 general public's opinion. And it's interesting that women
                 have had the right to vote for quite a number of years, is it
                 that the governments are out of touch with the general public
                 ... Is the general public's opinion really that women don't
                 have ... a need to be financially rewarded for what they do?*
                 (appendix 16:8:15)

Barbara: *I think there's more an assumption about how society is,
                 which is a nuclear family, and that for many years there's
                 been that assumption that the man actually works for two.
                 And I mean you're looking at ... old, old values here. I'm not
                 saying that's the way it is, but I think that that's the old
                 values. And I mean increasingly when you look at family
                 statistics, that ... nuclear family ... really is beginning not to
                 exist nearly as much any more. But those attitudes which ...
                 say the man works for two - is the breadwinner of the family -
                 still exist. I don't think it's that women don't want to be
                 acknowledged for the work that they do. I think that they're
                 stuck in a social concept.*

Francis: *Women really do want to be acknowledged for the work they
                 do, but do they want to be acknowledged financially or is*

being acknowledged in other ways more important to them, and should that exclude being rewarded financially?

Pam: *… I think that there's a need to re-define work and to count women's work and raising children … only certain kinds of work are actually counted in economics …* (appendix 16:8.16)

Francis: *We now get a situation where childcare has got a certain price tag on it per hour, and a lot of women have to go out to work to support the family financially, and it's … like treading water for them in a way, because such a large percentage of their income actually goes into childcare.* (appendix 16:8.17)

George: *… women have … changed, especially with the amount of women who got university educated probably in the 70s and … there's a huge amount of political and cultural change that's come from that.*

Francis: *I've been amazed at the number of families where the woman has the ability to earn a larger number of dollars per hour than the guy … And yet the woman has chosen to stay at home and look after the family. So it's basically costing the family a lot for the woman to stay at home…* (appendix 16:8.18)

George: *I suppose probably women have got more things to do, so they have to be more flexible … whereas with men the roles are much more defined.*

Francis: *They have been in the past, and now men are in complete turmoil as men's roles are being less rigidly defined as they were before. Now men have more choices to participate in their family …*

Barbara: *I'm not sure. I find it really hard to generalise about all women or all men. I just find it too bigger a thing to do. And you know certainly I'm not in a family situation, and I don't know I've met some pretty inflexible women in my times. And I've been inflexible myself at times. So yes … there are probably grains of truth in all … things that have been said …* (appendix 16:8.20)

Members felt the role of women in the workforce has changed dramatically. Historical notions of "men being the breadwinner" were seen to be redundant. It was recognised that women not only tend to work harder than men, but that they are also less financially rewarded for their work.

6.7.4   Reorganising work time

The extract from the discussion guide (appendix 2) is reproduced here and was discussed in the eighth session.

> **"4. Reorganising Work Time**
>
> The reason we have unemployment is because there are too few jobs for too many workers. Also, those that do have full time jobs are working longer hours, making it even harder for those without jobs. What we need to do is share the amount of work that is available fairly amongst all those who want to work. A redistribution of available work would quickly solve unemployment. This could be done in many ways. We could restrict overtime, introduce a four day working week, early retirement, extra annual leave, job sharing, etc .. Employers may claim that it's more expensive to pay the same wages for less work, but if negotiated properly, perhaps employees and employers could each give a bit and a compromise may be met. Workers might make a slight salary sacrifice if the return was an assurance that our unemployment problem could be solved, and they would have long term job security. The only problem that may occur is that some workers may want to work more to get more money to 'keep up with the Joneses'. These people need to be convinced that the extra leisure time they have may be used to increase quality family time and engage in other pursuits like community groups, sport, education, etc" (appendix 2).

The group then focussed their discussion on exploring this theme.

Francis: *The reorganising work time, flexi-time created a lot of opportunity for a lot of people to be more creative in the use of their time. It assisted a number of people in more efficient travel arrangements rather than having to travel peak time, enabled people to participate more in family activities instead of being stuck at the desk when the kids have got something important that they would have loved to be at …*

And there's still a large number of businesses who don't even think of the possibility of flexi-time, or don't even seem to know what it is. And I think ... a lot of the workers can be very rigid themselves ... very fearful of things about the time that they work or the amount of money that they're paid, and tend to not trust systems which allow for flexibility.

Barbara: *I guess I've got some questions about it ... we could restrict overtime, introduce a four day working week, early retirement, extra annual leave, job sharing, etcetera [and] I think lots of those things would be good, but I don't know how, you could introduce a four day week across the board. I think ... you'd get all ... different resistances in different professions ... in theory it seems a fine idea to me, early retirement, that's ... fine, but it leaves a lot of people in a really bad state where they've got, twenty or thirty years of their life still to go, and they've been told they can't work any more ... there are real ... consequences. Now I could see, if you're combining that with ... work [that] is less attached to income or whatever, and you're asking people of a certain age to ... move into another very useful ... working occupation that isn't paid in the same way or ... that works on some different structure ... you might be able to make it work. But I can see some problems ... in actually just ... laying down laws for people ...*

Pam: *... I'm thinking that reorganising the work time ... is based on an assumption that there is a specific amount of work to be done which can be shared fairly, which is a nice idea, but I think that it is false. That there isn't a specific amount of work. And I think that a lot of the work - the so called work - that's around now, is kind of artificial work like advertising useless products is not what I think is real work. And I think there's a danger in not looking at what work is, if we are sharing work around or creating more work that doesn't really need to be done. Like some of the things in the tenders in The Age, I look at them and I think 'what is that about?' You know, 'what's it for, what's the point in it?*

Francis: *Yes, at the same time as that's happening, there's an incredible amount of work which isn't being done.*

Pam: *Yes.*

Barbara: *Yes, that's right, yes I agree.*

Francis: *And there's been no attempt at encouraging that to be done.*
            That's an area of government which I think is so much
            neglected, and it's an area where the government could
            provide some direction to society that actually benefits the
            society (appendix 16:8:13-22).

In theory, members thought that this viewpoint did provide opportunities and possibilities
however the effect to overcome existing accepted work practices was seen to be
problematic for both the employer and employees positions. Even if work time was
reorganised, members felt that the whole idea of what constitutes effective work would
need to be addressed.

6.7.5   Tax reform

The viewpoint from the discussion guide is presented here.

> "**6. Tax Reform**
>
> Unemployment could be reduced if our tax system was changed. The
> major problem is that although governments are often stating that
> unemployment is bad and must be fixed, they themselves know that a
> high unemployment level results in a healthy economy. A high supply of
> workers, with a low amount of demand in jobs puts pressure on keeping
> wages down. Employers can virtually give a job to the lowest bidder!
> Because wages are low, products and services can be made cheaper.
> Prices of goods and services, including money itself, don't rise so inflation
> is stopped and interest rates are low. Economists and politicians are well
> aware of this phenomenon and are happy to keep interest and inflation
> rates low, while shedding "crocodile tears" for the unemployed. Anyone
> with a job, loan, mortgage, business, or who is happy to have stable
> prices, should be thanking, not blaming, the unemployed. What we need
> are brave politicians who can make decisions that keep our economic
> growth healthy while promoting employment growth with tax reform.
>
> Loopholes that allow the wealthy to pay a lower amount of tax than
> workers need to be closed. A luxury tax should be introduced as well as a
> millionaire tax on inheritances. Australia is the only developed country in
> the world without an inheritance tax on the rich. Tax revenue could be
> further increased by taxing the highly paid more. Tax on capital gains,
> shares and superannuation could be increased, and an employment levy
> tax could be introduced to help reduce unemployment. All, some, or a
> combination of tax reform ideas such as these, would enable governments

to balance their budgets more easily and spend money on strategies to reduce unemployment" (appendix 2).

Barbara: *Well yes that's the whole thing isn't it. It's the total inequity of the tax system as it stands.*

George: *I think the problem is the whole nature of tax itself. Is that tax is taken by a centralised organisation and it's ... seen as an individual contribution, whereas once again, we don't have control of it, just as we don't have control over work, we don't have control over what happens with tax and how it's taken from us and how it's distributed ...*

Francis: *... people on a larger income, it becomes very financially beneficial to them, to invest a lot of money in tax reduction. Whereas a person on a very low income really cannot afford to spend much money in tax reduction.*

Barbara: *Yes well I think ... that the loopholes are, you know there should be luxury taxes, inheritance taxes, I think what we've said a few times tonight, which is that the people who really can get away with paying virtually no tax, that we should find ways of getting them to pay tax.*

Francis: *It really irks me the idea of a luxury tax and so on, in that I think that's what happened with fringe benefits tax has simply reduced the employer opportunities a lot. Because a lot of businesses which basically stayed alive because of the fact of the incentives to running a business, that there's fringe benefits and so on. A lot of those businesses employed a lot of people. And a lot of employers have simply said well 'what's the use of it? You've got to work all these long hours, you don't get any of the fringe benefits no more, so let's just sell out, close up shop.' You know, while it's painful to sack all these workers, it is just so painful to keep on running a business which is not making much money, where there's not much rewards.*

Paul: *People say that people who've got money don't really produce a lot to get to that stage, you know, so you're stopping productive people, or people who could be productive ...*   (appendix 16.8:13-25).

The group felt that the tax system and the issues related were considered too complex for the group to tackle in the little time available. It was felt however that governments

distorted economic and unemployment information to their own advantage. Also that the tax system is lacking as it disadvantages those on a low income, and that those on high incomes can invest in schemes for avoiding tax. This knowledge required to avoid tax was seen to be possessed by those classes on high incomes, while those on low incomes, or in low socio-economic geographic areas faced the high likelihood of remaining in poverty.

6.8   Chapter summary

The themes discussed in this Chapter reflect the issues and concerns of the study circle members during its eight week season. These reflections are summarised here:

- Unemployed people could be informed about the range of ways, and what options are available to them in regard to alternatives such as job modularization, co-operatives, WWOOF, LETS, etc.. It was considered that governments should encourage and promote these alternatives. Perhaps even utilising a study circle format.

- As the nature of "work", and therefore employment has changed dramatically in recent times, so too should the notion of unemployment. By adopting a new identity, the unemployed might not be treated as inferior to those who are lucky enough to secure paid employment.

- The unemployed are perceived as an undeserving tax expense and although many people in paid employment may dislike the unemployed, they themselves are at risk and maybe even fearful of unemployment themselves.

- The debilitative psychological and physiological effects of unemployment that the group experienced, such as despair, stress, depression, frustration, embarrassment and feelings of worthlessness along with the isolation, impoverishment, stigma and self blame all validate the existing research and literature referred to in this Chapter and Chapter one.

- Personal experiences in dealing with bureaucracies, especially those related to servicing the unemployed, were seen as extremely inflexible. Not only is the experience full of guilt and suspicion, but the threat of financial penalties results in clients falsifying information and "working the system" to ensure their own survival. Private industry bureaucracies along with job application processes were also seen as a large waste of time, money and resources for all.

- The financial constraints of being unemployed mean each day is a challenge. Benefits are too low which makes it difficult to look for work, enjoy any leisure activities or explore alternatives. It seems few realise or understand how little this benefit is.

- Tax issues were seen as complex, however what was realised was that the information provided by governments is distorted and the whole tax system seems to benefit the wealthy and punish the poor.

- Structural alternatives in response to unemployment such as a guaranteed income, public sector job creation and free market ideologies were all discussed and explored. All were seen to have their advantages and disadvantages, however time limitations restricted further discussion.

- Education and training were seen as difficult to undertake when benefits were so low. Also the relevance of training and education are questionable when it wasn't seen to prepare people for work or develop critical thinking.

- Women's position in the labour market was regarded to be in a state of flux. Many were seen to be working harder than men are and yet not being financially rewarded.

In relation to the aims of the research, it needed to be ascertained whether the study circle process, and the resultant themes and discussion presented above were representative of a contribution to the groups empowerment. Whether or not the insights expressed above previously existed in the member's minds is inconsequential as discussed previously, it is nonetheless "knowledge" that reflects their own subjective reality. What is important here is whether the members were able to freely discuss their own concerns in a collaborative and participatory manner and whether the data and themes provided an emergent "knowledge" in relation to the members perceptions, feelings, attitudes and values. The answers to these questions were again subjective and interpretive. However the high level of internal validity, as discussed previously, allows the reader licence to accept that the reflections contained here are trustworthy. Taking this into account the reader then subjectively ascertains if these tentative and provisional reflections are applicable, relevant and useful to their own context (Gall, Borg and Gall 1996; Noffke and Stevenson 1995; Burns 1995).

Of particular note in this Chapter is how the evolvement of the discussion and consequential themes demonstrated and reflected upon the spheres of empowerment as discussed in Chapter Two. That is, from the individual experiences of the members, the self esteem, to the exploration of individual alternative options other than paid employment to alternative structural/social issues. This also mirrors the development of other study circle seasons as discussed in Chapter three.

An aspect of this study to raise here is how this pattern occurred, even though the discussion guide was put aside for several sessions during the mid season. That is, this evolvement cannot be attributed entirely to the discussion guide. It occurred almost naturally, via the members' own list of issues. Although the discussion guide may have "set the scene" early in the season, the group was able to continue on with their own issues under their own control.
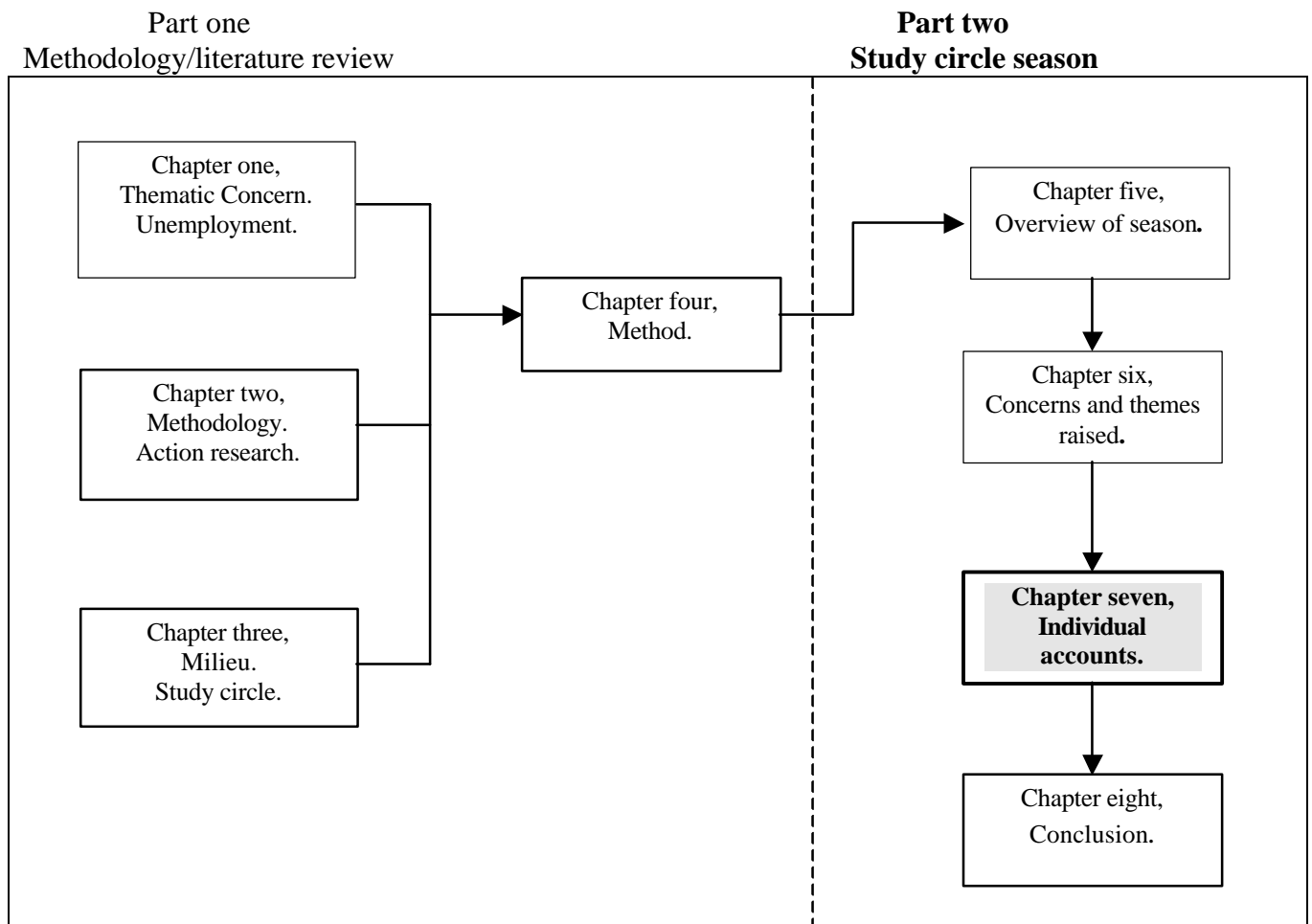
In Chapter five it was argued that the validated data demonstrated that, at the very least, members were active during the study circle season. They all contributed to the content, direction and discussion. This Chapter demonstrates that many themes were explored and views shared. The knowledge shared was from them, it is from their subjective standpoint, and not imposed. The tentative reflection thus far from Chapter five shows that the members contributed to the process and Chapter six shows they were able to contribute to the content of discussion.

Moreover, the flow of themes during the season demonstrates a sequence of discussion that commences at the personal, to the external, to the structural. This reflects the linear development of empowerment discussed in Chapter two, and study circle process in Chapter three.

In Chapters five and six reflections have been provided. Although it is evident that the members did discuss and explore many issues, a further triangulation is carried out at an individual level as Reason (1990) suggests. This is explained in the next Chapter.

Chapter seven - reflecting upon the members' individual experience

Table One: Thesis structure

Part one	Part two
Methodology/literature review	**Study circle season**

```
Chapter one,
Thematic Concern.
Unemployment.

Chapter two,                    Chapter four,        Chapter five,
Methodology.                    Method.              Overview of season.
Action research.
                                                     Chapter six,
                                                     Concerns and themes
                                                     raised.
Chapter three,
Milieu.                                              Chapter seven,
Study circle.                                        Individual
                                                     accounts.

                                                     Chapter eight,
                                                     Conclusion.
```

7.1   Introduction

Chapter five provided an overview of the study circle season and Chapter six reflected upon the themes discussed during the season by the group. Both have contained emerging tentative reflections based upon the validated data.

This Chapter now changes the focus of reflection from the group to the individual experiences of the members and assists in triangulating the reflections of both Chapters five and six.

In this Chapter, firstly the mid and end interviews are discussed and reflected upon. Smith's (1993b) three tiered framework of empowerment is utilised to analyse the responses. As

discussed in detail already in Chapters one, two, four and the Introduction to Part two, objective measurements are highly questionable in action research methodology and any reflection here must not be considered definitive, but as an adjunct to previous reflections in assisting to triangulate. Therefore, although Smith's (1993b) definitions in relation to each level are included here in an attempt to establish if member's responses reflected the level, Smith (1993b) himself as well as Sanguinetti (1992) and Veno and Thomas (1992) all regard that these levels interact with each other and are interrelated and holistic.

The Chapter then merges and triangulates data from both the interviews and sessions to create a chronological reflection from each member's individual perspective. This enabled the members to express how they felt about the experience from their subjective individual view, with their "voice". This is not to suggest that the researcher is objectively measuring "change" or "action" in a clinical manner as discussed in the Introduction to Part two. Any interpretation of change or action that may have occurred needs to emerge from the subjective, yet validated data, which comes from the members' "voice" themselves. In other words, can any change be *seen* to occur?

The post study circle meeting (member check) that was conducted a year after the study circle season ended, is then discussed which includes the members own subjective opinions in relation to if and how the study circle process contributed to their empowerment. This further triangulates any reflections ascertained.

7.2   Interviews

The mid interviews were conducted between the fourth and fifth session of the study circle season. The primary purpose of the mid-interviews was to reflect upon, from the members' perspective if the study circle experience thus far, had been an empowering experience based upon Smith's (1993b) levels described in Chapter two.

Fundamentally, data from the pre, mid and end interviews cannot be compared. This is due to both the nature of the questions themselves and consequentially the nature of the responses. The pre interviews were conjecture. In the pre interviews, members were asked if they *thought* certain content would be useful. They were asked to "imagine" and "suppose" if any

discussion into unemployment would be beneficial. The pre-interviews were therefore pre-emptive and were primarily used to assist the planning stage as discussed in Chapter four.

By the mid interviews, members had commenced and experienced part of the study circle season and could therefore be asked if it *had been* useful and beneficial. In other words, they would be commenting on a real experience as opposed to conjecture. Furthermore this Chapter focuses at an individual level, rather than the group as discussed in Chapters five and six.

Responses are encapsulated later in the Chapter, in Tables sixteen and seventeen, in an effort to determine if the mid and post interview responses can assist in determining if the study circle experience contributed to the empowerment of the members.

As discussed previously all members were given a copy of the interview schedule (Appendix 10) prior to the interviews so as they could give consideration to their responses. Interviews were also conducted at a location chosen by themselves. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then returned to the member to edit, alter and validate.

The members responses in relation to Smith's (1993b) levels of empowerment are presented here, firstly the mid interviews, then the post interviews.

The responses here, to questions one and two are an attempt to establish if the individual member felt that the study circle experience had helped contribute to their empowerment relative to Smith's (1993b) first level, that of self growth as discussed in Chapter four. In other words, did the study circle experience *allow* them to collaboratively articulate and share their views, opinions and knowledge in a safe environment where others empathised and listened? Some responses reflected a partial effect. This is noted at the end of each question discussion, and again at Table sixteen and seventeen.

Responses to questions one and two – empowerment through self growth - ("*Have you been able to discuss your own personal experiences of being unemployed and discuss how you deal with unemployment?*" – appendix 10.2).

Overall members stated, to varying degrees, a feeling of being able to discuss the personal experience of unemployment during the first half of the season, and most found it useful and relevant.

Paul: *Very good ... Our personal experiences of being unemployed, personally, and as a group. Learning from other people, their experiences. It's all been really good ... You learn from other people. You get to realise that you're not the only one in the boat. There's plenty of other people out there who are unemployed, going through the same sorts of frustrations and so on* (appendix 18.1:1).

Francis*: ... I was able to discuss my experiences ... relate my own personal experiences to the rest of the group ... we started to build up a rapport in relation to various issues, and secondly, hearing other people in seeing possibilities or maybe even other possibilities that I may have missed ... I felt as though I was able to discuss quite freely about unemployment ... I felt as though it was useful and relevant* (appendix 18.2:1).

Some members however felt that the depth of discussion did not progressed enough and more discussion was needed.

Paul: *Sort of* [discussed how to deal with unemployment], *not that deeply* [but] *it would be* [useful to include more], *it gets people to express, get things off their chest and so on* (appendix 18.1:1).

Barbara: *... I think we've had lots of opportunities to do that. ... It just connects you somewhere, rather than being isolated ... Peripherally I think it's been brought up* [how to deal with unemployment]. *But it probably could be talked about in more detail I think ...* (appendix 18.5:1).

Pam: *A bit ...* [however] *a fair amount of* [discussion] *... has been on the organisation* [of the study circle, which] *... limited the opportunity to share mine and also to hear how it really is for other people. Like there's been little bits ... but I don't really have a detailed perception of how people are going really with it … I'd like to share that more ...* (appendix 18.3:1).

George: *... it's been a bit limited...I'd say that everyone has ... said, to some degree, what their experience has been of*

> *unemployment. But I don't think it's probably stretched out ... partially due to people being a bit hesitant and not knowing each other. But there has been a degree of people expressing to each other what's happened to them ...* (appendix 18.4:1).

From the above responses, Francis and Paul felt that Smiths (1993b) level of "self growth" had been discussed during the season while Barbara, George and Pam all felt that discussion was limited in this area. These responses are reflected in Table sixteen.

Responses to questions three and four – empowerment through political consciousness raising – ("*Do you think the group has been able to talk about who in our society are most affected by unemployment and possible solutions or ways to fix unemployment?*" – appendix 10.2).

The following responses indicated that most members felt that the discussion within the circle had not developed far enough to reflect Smith's (1993b) second level, that of political consciousness-raising as explained in Chapter four. However member's comments alluded to a keenness to tackle issues in relation to this second level at a latter stage in the season and viewed such discussion as potentially useful and perhaps the next logical step in the season.

Paul: *... I think it's useful, to talk about unemployment, all the facets of it. You get to realise what's happening out there ... it's still very difficult for any one little group or one person to fix. We've all got our different ideas on how to fix certain things - whether we're right or wrong I don't know. ...* (appendix 18.1:2).

Francis*: I find that generally talk of that type, a lot of it is hearsay and not necessarily true … I'm unsure. On one hand it would provide something useful. On the other hand it does take up time* (appendix 18.2:2).

Pam: *No I don't remember that* [discussion about who in society are most affected by unemployment] *coming up … I think there's the personal solutions, as to what each of us is doing. And I think it's good to have support with whatever people decide they want to do. But also I think it's vital for the whole country, for us to be talking about the situation in which - I think we would all agree that the current situation is not a good one. So I think we need general education in the community about solutions, and for people to work on those* (appendix 18.3:1-2).

George: *I don't think we've really touched base on that all that well. I think we're starting to ... I was raising some of those questions last week, trying to get that ... sense of ... why people become unemployed ... I think that is an imperative. Basically because ... if we're going to be successful, we need to actually know who is the most affected by it. ...* (appendix 18.4:2).

Barbara: *We've mainly talked about ourselves I think ... whether we've targeted that question, I'm not so sure ... Yes. I think it would be good ... I don't think we're up to that point really ... I think that's a logical outcome of where the discussion is going* (appendix 18.5:1-2).

Paul, Francis and Barbara were partial in response to this second level while Pam and George felt that the group had not delved into issues adequately thus far. This is also reflected in Table sixteen.

Responses to questions five and six – empowerment through collective action - *("Do you think the group has been able to talk about how and why unemployment occurs in our society and do anything to try and make a change in relation to the problem of unemployment?" –* appendix 10.2).

Again, the responses reflected some progress towards Smith's (1993b) third level, that of collective action/struggle as discussed in Chapter four. However, there was anticipation that more discussion in this area would occur later in the season.

Paul: *Yes we've been talking about that ... In general yes. Gives you some ideas about how to tackle personal problems about being unemployed … We haven't done anything at the moment. We've done a lot of talking, and ideas have been expressed. It's just a start ...* (appendix 18.1:2).

Francis*: … there was only a small amount of that mentioned - how or why unemployment occurs ... I think it would be very useful … It would enable possibilities of looking at how to reverse the unemployment process. The main contributions were in relating and sharing experiences* (appendix 18.2:2).

Pam: *… I think there are some more things that would be good to be covered. And some things like the unsafe work practices have come up, but I think there are still more issues that it would be good to discuss. I think it's probably too soon for that. We're still getting off the ground* (appendix 18.3:2).

Barbara: *Yes well that was the focus of last week's meeting ... I think it was useful and relevant, and yet there was something about it that left me feeling a little bit unsatisfied ... I mean the things that were offered to us were fine, in terms of globalisation, downsizing and whatever, but I felt I would've liked to have found out more about each of those. I think the main thing it's done, is to actually go to the study group. But apart from that, again I see that as coming further down the track* (appendix 18.5:2).

George: *Well to some degree. ... I think there was a pretty good discussion in the last session. But there's a lot more that could be gone into. I'd say, that I didn't think the group had been able to do anything to try and make a change in relation to the problem of unemployment. And then I was thinking, that's probably my perspective, ... I found it a bit slow, and then I realised that for the other people, they probably, well my presumption is that they wouldn't have ... sat around and discussed some of these issues. They mightn't have talked about it with friends. I don't know whether that's true, I'm just assuming that. So that has been a change in relation to the other members of the group. ... So that's a starting change in the normal relations that unemployed people do have* (appendix 18.4:2-3).

Most responses indicated that this level had not been entirely addressed. Francis, Paul, George and Barbara were partial while Pam's response indicated that she felt that this would occur later. These responses are also encapsulated in Table sixteen later in this Chapter.

The end interviews had two purposes. Firstly, having completed the entire season of eight study circle sessions the same questions in relation to Smith's (1993b) levels were asked to ascertain from the members' individual perspectives if they again considered the process an empowering experience. Secondly as a triangulation exercise to assist in increasing the internal validity of other data and reflections.

Responses to questions one and two – empowerment through self growth – *("Have you been able to discuss your own personal experiences of being unemployed and discuss how you deal with unemployment?"* – appendix 10.3).

Most members considered that the study circle season had helped them share and explore the personal experiences of unemployment.

Paul: *It was a really good experience ... And it was really good to share experiences and learn from other people's experiences too ... I felt comfortable with them ... the personal problems coming with unemployment. We did discuss all of them. And it did come up, all those matters ... and we talked about methods and stuff ... it's always good to learn from other people. It's always beneficial, real good* (appendix 19.1:1).

Francis*:* *When various topics were discussed in the study circle I was able to share my own experiences of what happened when I'd been through that particular instance. For example, what it feels like to be unemployed or some of the difficulties of being unemployed etc ... I felt that it was very, very helpful ... It made me feel a lot better about myself. In one way, knowing I was sharing exactly the same experiences as other people were going through. I didn't feel like I was on my own in that. I felt supported as being part of a group. And just being able to share that with somebody else and be part of other people sharing their own similar experiences ... I was able to discuss a certain amount of how I felt with unemployment. My own personal situation, I feel like I was not dealing very effectively with it. However I was able to discuss that, and it did contribute a little bit practically. It certainly contributed a lot emotionally. I feel a lot better ...* (appendix 19.2:1).

Barbara: *In the beginning it was done in a structured way, where we sat down and talked in pairs and did our listening exercise. Later we probably got into more depth about it, when we looked at our personal experiences in relation to the other side of the coin, like what was happening in the job situation. There was a session* [the fifth], *I think ... after George ... made those suggestions...It was that really ... boomer ... session ... it broke down the sense of isolation and helped to ... work in how your personal experiences linked in with what else was going on. Like there's that tendency to think about your personal experiences being the cause of your unemployment. But it helped to ... broaden out the other factors that were affecting you as well.* (appendix 19.5:1).

Pam: *... I talked a bit about some of the hassles I've had with the DSS, and particularly ... the process of leaving teaching ... there were some things that I didn't talk about, but some things I talked about quite a bit ... I talked about how I felt leaving the job. I don't think that we discussed like how it is fully now, or how I feel about that ... we talked a bit about the practical things about being on a low income and how that affected us. I think it affected us differently. We talked about health issues and we talked about public transport and things like that. I think everybody mentioned depression in some way or another* (appendix 19.3:1).

However George intimated that perhaps the personal sharing of experiences was superficial:

George: *... it appeared that we were ... getting down to actually talking about what our experiences of unemployment were. But I think ... we probably unloaded a bit of a burden, but ... it wasn't in the way that I'd normally talk about it. Basically because I didn't really know the people all that well. So it was almost like a bit of a perfunctory. You can't just ... say it once, and that covers everything that you've experienced ... Like* [the] *last session I gave, the thing about ... dealings with the DSS, Centrelink, and how frustrating that was. But I think I was doing it in a more abstract way rather than actually talk about just how depressing I found it ... I realised it just ... took a bit pressure off for me* (appendix 19.4:3).

These comments can again be related back to the issue raised in Chapter three in that study circles tend to take a considerable time to develop.

The response to questions one and two in the end interviews here related to Smith's (1993b) first level of "self-growth". Smith (1993b) defines this level as a heightened self-awareness and the unblocking of repressed feelings. In relation to this level of empowerment, the responses here indicate that members found the study circle an opportunity to open up and express how they felt in relation to how unemployment affects them personally:

Francis: *I was able to discuss a certain amount how I felt* (appendix 19.2:1).

Barbara: *... it helped to ... broaden out the other factors that were affecting you* (appendix 19.5:1).

Pam: *I talked a bit about some of the hassles I've had with the DSS ...* (appendix 19.3:1).

George: *But I think ... we probably unloaded a bit of a burden* (appendix 19.4:1).

Smith (1993b) also claims that this first level of empowerment involves increasing an individual's self-esteem and personal confidence. Comments from members suggest that they became confident in being able to express their own views:

Paul: *... I felt quite comfortable sharing my experiences* (appendix 19.1:1).

Barbara: *... we looked at our personal experiences ... in relation to the other side of the coin ...* (appendix 19.5:6).

Pam: *... some things I talked about quite a lot* (appendix 19.3:1).

George: *Like the last session I gave* (appendix 19.4:3).

According to Smith (1993b), self growth also encompasses a decrease in feelings of guilt or inadequacy. These comments below suggest that members felt confident and safe enough to share the negative feelings associated with unemployment in a non-judgmental environment.

Paul: *Yes we did share how we deal with unemployment* (appendix 19.1:1).

Francis: *It* [the study circle process] *made me feel a lot better about myself* (appendix 19.2:1).

Barbara: *... it* [the study circle process] *broke down the sense of isolation* (appendix 19.5:1).

Pam: *I think everybody mentioned depression in some way or another* (appendix 19.3:2).

George: *From time to time ... Dealings with the DSS and Centrelink and how frustrating that was* (appendix 19.4:3).

Finally, Personal autonomy, self determination and assertiveness are also components of Smith's (1993b) first level of empowerment. These remarks indicated that members felt better about themselves in light of the study circle experience and had considered practical ways of addressing the problems of unemployment.

Paul*:*   *It was a really good experience* (appendix 19.1:1).

Francis*:*   *I felt supported as being part of a group* (appendix 19.2:1).

Barbara: *... we talked about the financial situation a lot ... and how to survive on $150 a week ...* (appendix 19.5:2).

Pam: *We talked a bit about practical things about being on a low income ...* (appendix 19.3:2).

George: *I realised it just ... took a bit of pressure off me* (appendix 19.4:3).

Although members had revealed some reservations, as previously discussed, arguably the study circle experience went some way to reaffirming "self growth" for these members. It seems to have provided the opportunity to exercise and explore the area of self growth from an individual perspective.

The responses of Paul, Francis, Barbara and Pam all demonstrate that they had the opportunity to discuss issues in relation to this level while George was partial as is depicted in Table seventeen.

Responses to questions three and four- empowerment through political conscious raising *- ("Do you think the group has been able to talk about who in our society are most affected by unemployment and talk about possible solutions and ways to fix unemployment?"* – appendix 10.3).

Views were divided in relation to this level. Barbara's response was partial, as she thought that although discussion had started in this area, it was restrictive due to time. Francis also was partial, as he believed he was the only one who had contributed to this level.

Barbara: *... we talked about the financial situation. I think we could have gone into that more actually ... people without education, people who are living in poverty, people who perhaps have had less than adequately paid jobs ... because it made me look at society in a total ... way. And look at ... that vicious sort of cycle of poverty ... when we talked about ... free market ideas or this idea or that idea, are they able to change that cycle of poverty?... I think we definitely were heading in that direction ... Like it was there, it was on the agenda, we just ... didn't make it, we ran out of time* (appendix 19.5:3).

Francis: *I think more emphasis was on such things as the experience of being unemployed and some discussion about the overall aspect of unemployment. The group didn't, in my opinion, touch very much on the big picture or solution to unemployment, though I did contribute a few suggestions and possibilities* (appendix 19.2:2).

George considered that the study circle provided little opportunity to pursue discussion in relation to this level.

George: *… I don't think we really sort of touched on that all that well. I mean my ideas on what the solutions are, are quite different from other people. So I might've found it very frustrating …* (appendix 19.4:4).

Although Paul felt the discussion reinforced his views, he nonetheless felt that the opportunity to discuss issues in relation to this level were present. Pam also thought discussion during the last few sessions focused on this level.

Paul: *… lots and lots … I found the whole process interesting, but I suppose it reinforced my opinions and stuff like that* (appendix 19.1:2).

Pam: *… I think we talked about quite a lot of things in the last two sessions. Distributing work more evenly, and we talked about the alternatives … I think people mentioned what they were doing* (appendix 19.3:3).

Upon reflection, in relation to Smith's (1993b) level of "political consciousness-raising" it is suggested that this level promotes skepticism of common-sense understandings and challenges rationality.

Members had the opportunity to discuss how sceptical they were about potential solutions to unemployment and how governments need to accept responsibility and how individuals themselves could adapt or change.

George: *… I think more is needed that just hearing viewpoints* (appendix 19.4:5).

Barbara: *… we talked about … free market ideas. On this idea or that idea, are they able to change that cycle of poverty? … it's a feeling that the government and society as a whole, needs to take some responsibility and address the problem* (appendix 19.5:3).

Pam: *… people mentioned what they were doing … Francis talked about changing his strategy … Barbara and Paul talked about career changes* (appendix 19.3:3).

Smith (1993b) also claims that this level results in people asking why exclusion and marginalisation occurs. Although the reasons were not totally elaborated upon, some members indicated that they were aware of the structural factors that caused disadvantage.

Paul: *People like low education, people from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak, people with bad health ... reasons why unemployment is there?* (appendix 19.1:2).

Barbara: *People without education. People who are living in poverty* (appendix 19.5:3).

At this level Smith also suggests that people are able to reinterpret accepted understandings. In this regard members had the opportunity to criticise commonsense understandings, discuss alternatives and view issues from a variety of perspectives.

Barbara: *... because it made me look at society in a total ... way. And look at ... that vicious sort of cycle of poverty ... We were starting to look at some alternatives* (appendix 19.5:3).

Francis*:* *... employment as we've known it in the past, is tending to decrease and people's own initiative and own creativity is becoming more important now ... looking at the different alternatives to employment as possibilities* (appendix 19.2:2).

Pam: *... and we talked about the alternatives* (appendix 19.3:3).

In summary however the responses on the whole suggest that the members were not able to fully exploit the opportunity to discuss issues at this level.

Barbara: *I think we could have gone into that more ... we definitely were heading in that direction ... we just ... didn't make it, we ran out of time* (appendix 19.5:3).

Francis: *I think there were a few instances when we were speaking about that...The group didn't, in my opinion, touch very much on the big picture* (appendix 19.2:2).

George: *I don't think we really sort of touched on that all that well* (appendix 19.4:4).

Although open to conjecture, the possible reason for this area not being worked upon thoroughly again could have been due to the amount of time the group took to form as

discussed in Chapters five and six. This then resulted in delaying any progress across the whole season.

As depicted in Table seventeen, Pam and Paul's responses indicated that they thought this level was addressed, however Barbara and Francis were partial while George believed this level was not explored at all.

Responses to questions five and six – empowerment through collective action - *("Do you think the group talked about how and why unemployment occurs in our society and do anything to try to make a change in relation to the problem of unemployment?"* – appendix 10.3).

Responses to these questions validate some of the reflections contained in earlier discussion. That is, that time constraints were seen to be a problem, that the season focused too much on individual issues and there was not enough time to broaden out discussion into socio-political areas, which may have resulted in more concrete examples of action.

However some theoretical ideas were explored. The main benefit of the process seems to have been the action involved in actually participating in the study circle and sharing opinions, views and feelings.

Paul: *…I thought…it was good to talk about it…I think both personal and collective has been empowered by each other, by learning from each other. I think yes, it's a small step along the way of, you know, curing unemployment ... We're just a little group, you know, when there's thousands of unemployed out there* (appendix 19.1:1-2).

George: *… but it was going through individual experiences of why ... I think it was too individualised ... it was relevant in the sense of what was missing, in that it just showed that ... that approach* [study circle] *isn't adequate. Because you've got downsizing, it* [the study circle] *doesn't ... say why downsizing is occurring. It doesn't go into broader questions of why those processes occur* (appendix 19.4:5).

Francis: *I might be a little bit biased in that because I have my own beliefs, I believe a lot of it stems from our education system. Knowing why it occurs is informative but also useful because it also gives me some guidance as to what I need to unlearn or learn anew … They* [the members] *shared together. There was a commitment to further action, though we ran out of*

time, but further action could follow up after what we've done. I'm not aware of any other outcomes ... Yes I think that their sharing was the biggest contribution and the biggest assistance for people making a change (appendix 19.2:2-3).

Barbara: *I think we talked about it at a personal level as to why people lose their jobs. And it came up with each of us in the room, having some ... slight ... health problem or whatever, that influenced that. So if you're in the competitive rat race, we're all slightly at the edge of the competitive rat race where, we're less likely to be the winners in some way ... if you're looking at that ... 'survival of the fittest' ... thing. I don't see myself as terribly unfit if you know what I mean. I see that I can work. I'm not on any disability pension or anything like that. But because of having stress problems, I can't solve my problem of getting money by just working thousands of hours, which other people can do ... I think we all felt that there was something very empowering about that group and about that set up. We dibbled and dabbled with - would we do anything about the unemployment conference and around the edges of a few things - and I guess to this day I ... still wonder what exactly you can do, I don't think there are easy answers ... to what you can do about unemployment. But we also talked about it in terms of the various ... wider social theories I suppose...the whole capitalist competitive 'survival of the fittest' type thing, means that, if you're not able to...run that extra mile to be able to ... push yourself that extra degree and whatever, well you're not seen as attractive by employers. But it indeed doesn't mean that you haven't got very valuable things to offer the workforce* (appendix 19.5:4).

Pam: *Well looking at the bigger picture, participating in the group and being able to talk about it more, is in itself contributing to a change. It changes things if people are more articulate about it.* (appendix 19.3:4).

In reference to Smith's (1993b) third level of action, he describes this as understanding how ideas and practices are systematically distorted by the way power is socially organised. These comments below show that the study circle process allowed some members to discuss and understand how and why unemployment occurs.

Paul: *... we all basically understand why there are a high number of unemployed out there. Social and economic reasons ...* (appendix 19.1:1).

George: *... people do get a sense, you know, broaden up the idea of why unemployment occurs* (appendix 19.4:5).

Barbara: *... we're all slightly at the edge of the competitive rat race where, we're less likely to be the winners ...* (appendix 19.5:4).

Smith (1993b) also suggests this level encompasses a change which requires more than change in beliefs. It requires change in structures. These comments suggest that members started to explore the idea of change, however only in a minor ways.

Pam: *I think, participating in the group and being able to talk about it more, is in itself contributing to a change* (appendix 19.3:4).

Francis*:* *... sharing was the biggest contribution and the biggest assistance for people making a change* (appendix 19.2:3).

Barbara*:* *... we dibbled and dabbled with – would we do anything ... and around the edges* (appendix 19.5:4).

Francis*:* *I believe a lot of it* [problems with unemployment] *stems from our education system* (appendix 19.2:2).

Finally, Smith claims that this level encompasses practical action towards change in subjective understandings. Francis and Pam's comments here demonstrate that the experience may have changed how they view the issue of unemployment.

Pam: *I think it changes things if people are more articulate about it* (appendix 19.3:4).

Francis*:* *Knowing why it* [unemployment] *occurs is informative but also useful because it also gives me some guidance as to what I need to unlearn or learn anew* (appendix 19.2:3).

Francis: *There was a commitment to further action, though we ran out of time, but further action could follow up after what we've done* (appendix 19.2:3).

Paul began to explore the idea that study circles may be of use in helping the unemployed.

Paul: *I think yes, it's* [the study circle] *a small step along the way of, you know, curing unemployment* (appendix 19.1:3).

And Barbara's comments suggest that she viewed the barriers that stop her from working as issues she could overcome.

Barbara: *… if you're looking at that … 'survival of the fittest … thing' I don't see myself as terribly unfit if you know what I mean. I see that I can work* (appendix 19.5:4).

Paul, Francis, Barbara and Pam all thought this level had been addressed, however George was partial, as depicted in Table seventeen.

The following Tables are presented to graphically illustrate the above discussion. Firstly the interview schedules (appendix 10) were given to each member before each interview. This allowed them the time and space to consider their responses. After each interview the tape recordings were transcribed and given back to each member to verify, edit and alter. After this member edit stage, the transcripts were reproduced with the changes included (appendix 14 and 19). These transcripts were then, again given back to members to check. At the end of the season a draft of the thesis was compiled, including the reflections discussed above and Tables sixteen and seventeen. This draft was sent to all individual members approximately a month before the post study circle group meeting, which was conducted one year after the end of the study circle season. Each member was then able to again check, edit, alter, clarify and validate how their "voices" were reflected upon in the documentation. At the post study circle meeting, the discussion was recorded and any necessary changes to the reflections were included (appendix 17). In this way each member was able to validate their "voice" twice on their own and able to validate how their experience was interpreted by the researcher once on their own, then again as a group. This reflective cycling of the data helped improve trustworthiness. It validates the subjective lived experience of each member and validates the final documentation as representative of the subjective lived experience.

It is also relevant to note here that the following Tables should not be viewed as definitive. For although they have been validated, they are nonetheless tentative and provisional "reflections" of a one off unique learning situation. They are *not* "findings" in an empirical sense.

Furthermore, although the Tables delineate between Smith's (1993b) spheres of empowerment, empowerment is also considered to be a holistic concept as discussed in

Chapter two. The Tables therefore should not be considered as definitive, however later in this Chapter there is an analysis and reflection presented from a holistic empowerment perspective, incorporating members' quotes from several data sources. This later discussion therefore attempts to internally validate the discussion here.

The vertical "level" column is indicative of Smith's (1993b) levels. Participants' names have then been placed under "yes", "partially", or "no" depending on their considered responses to the questions asked in relation to Smith's levels, in the previous discussion.

Table seventeen: Mid interviews

LEVEL	Did the members' responses indicate that the study circle had contributed to their empowerment?		
	YES	PARTIALLY	NO
Self growth	Francis Paul	Pam Barbara George	
Political consciousness - raising		Francis Paul Barbara	Pam George
Collective action/struggle		Francis Paul Barbara George	Pam

Table eighteen: Post interviews

LEVEL	Did the members' responses indicate that the study circle had contributed to their empowerment?		
	YES	PARTIALLY	NO
Self growth	Paul Francis Barbara Pam	George	
Political Consciousness - raising	Pam Paul	Barbara Francis	George
Collective action/struggle	Paul Francis Barbara Pam	George	

In reflecting upon the above diagrams, it could be stated that generally as a group, there is a "drift" from the "no" to the "yes" of the membership as a whole from the mid interview to the post interview. Of particular note is that this drift tended to be stronger in Smith's (1993b) first and third levels. In particular, Pam, Paul and Barbara's responses suggest a greater drift than Francis does, whereas George 's response remains static.

7.3 Chronological reflection

Aside from the above reflections the opportunity to integrate data and establish a chronological flow of comments during the season was available. A mixture of session transcript statements, triangulated with interviews is presented here to reflect upon and ascertain if any individual members felt that the study circle experience contributed to their empowerment. The content of this discussion has again been validated with all members. They have read and edited these reflections themselves. This is representative of the cycling between individual and collective, which increases internal validity as discussed in Chapter two (Lather 1991; Reason 1990).

Paul

Prior to the study circle season in the pre interview, Paul was resigned to believing that the problem of unemployment was entrenched, and could not be addressed by an individual effort: *"There's no simple answer* [to unemployment] *... It's entrenched, long term unemployment in our society now, I don't think any one person or thing has got an answer ... It's very hard to cure or fix"* (appendix 11.1:3).

By mid season although still reserved, Paul begins to be open to the possibilities of discussing unemployment: *"It's such a deep, entrenched thing, it's very hard to cure. But you've got to start somewhere ...* [and] *I think it's useful, to talk about unemployment, all the facets of it. You get to realise what's happening out there"* (appendix 18.1:3).

By the completion of the season Paul has found further benefits by participating and felt that the sharing of ideas had been worthwhile: *" ... It's been fascinating and very interesting to go through these topics and hearing everyone's opinions and ideas about different things"* (appendix 16.8:26).

Paul even suggested some insightful propositions: *"Study circles are a great idea. They're worthwhile. I think they can be quite productive, you know. Not just a little group here and there, but other groups and other topics, you know, it could really start something. It could ... hopefully change things. Not just one or two here or there, but lots and lots of them"* (appendix 16.8:26). These comments are very similar to those of Oliver's study (1987) discussed in Chapter three.

This statement in the post season interview is powerful, especially in light of Paul's comments from the pre interview: *" ... by learning from each other. I think yes, it's a small step along the way of, you know, of curing unemployment"* (appendix 19.1:3).

Francis

Francis was initially apprehensive and thought study circles may be of use: *" ... addressing the core issues of unemployment could be of benefit"* (appendix 11.2:3).

Near the completion of the season, Francis states: *"I love these discussion times – I mean really,* [topics such as] *"finding work" and a "guaranteed income" is very, very interesting"* (appendix 16.7:35).

In the final session, Francis states: *"Well for me I've really found it opens up a lot of questions, a lot of thoughts of different possibilities as far as social structure and so on. But personally, it's certainly made me feel a lot better within myself and so on"* (appendix 18.8:25).

Upon reflecting on the entire season, Francis commented: *"*[I've] *... definitely had changed opinions. Quite a lot ... regarding the situation for other unemployed people ... I now have a realisation of the broader aspects of the unemployment question for unemployed people. And a broader number of choices as to possibilities in employment other than just straight having a job ... I definitely learnt. I learnt that the exercise of sharing of experiences with others is a lot more valuable than I would've ever thought possible in this situation ... as the sharing was coming from people who really know about the situation of being unemployed, as against the usual advice which seems to come from people who are already in employment. They don't understand the unemployed state ... I have changed. I am a lot more accepting of some different points of view on people who are unemployed. And open to more possibilities ... than my narrow opinion that I had previously"* (appendix 19.2:4).

Pam

Prior to the study circle season, Pam had some reservations: *"It could be useful. I mean it could be an academic, theoretical thing that didn't have any practical application and people might not want to do that"* (appendix 11.3:2).

At the eighth session, Pam stated: "… *we had a mixture and a link up between personal experience and looking at economics and things, and kind of seeing why and how what's happening to us is happening to us, and how that's systemic. So I found that really good, and the diversity of people's experiences too I think was really useful. And seeing some common threads in that ... I mean all of us have had fairly different experiences of unemployment, but there were a lot of common threads despite those differences"* (appendix 20.8:26-27).

George

Similarly, George had initial reservations: *"Having discussions, sort of airy-fairy discussions … It could give people false hopes"* (appendix 11.4:3).

In mid season, George was starting to glean some benefits: *"… some of the worthwhile things … have started to happen to some degree, is that people talked about insecurities, the psychological insecurities, not just the idea of being demoralised, but … what people's expectations of themselves are, and how they're coping with that. And I think that's been for me, quite useful"* (appendix 18.4:1-2).

Moreover: *"I was thinking … that* [there] *has been a change in relation to the other members of the group. It's been viewed to some degree socially and politically as well as personally. So that's a starting change in the normal relations that unemployed people do have"* (appendix 18.4:3).

George's insights into perhaps how a study circle may be of benefit for him personally began to emerge near the end of the season. As he stated himself, he began to question his own "black and white" attitudes: *" … Barbara I've just been stewing on what you've been … saying. It maybe that what I'm saying is too black and white, but what I was trying to say is that I think there are processes under way … whereby there have been cultural changes which are normally not acknowledged, and they mightn't be as … hard and fast as what I'm saying. But people have actually created new forms of work and new ways of doing things, which normally don't get acknowledged"* (appendix 20.8:22).

Barbara

Prior to the study circle season, Barbara voiced feelings of frustration in relation to tackling such an issue: *"I feel really powerless in response to fixing unemployment"* (appendix 11.5:1). Moreover: *"… I suppose if someone said to me today we're going to talk about how to fix unemployment, then I'd say 'it's too big for me'"* (appendix 11.5:2). And: *"I … think what are you going to do, take to the street with banners? I don't know what to do"* (appendix 11.5:2).

At mid season, Barbara was keen to learn more, and had derived some benefits: *"I mean the things that were offered to us* [in the study circle] *were fine, in terms of globalisation, downsizing and whatever, but I felt I would've liked to have found out more about each of those"* (appendix 18.5:2). Furthermore: *"I think the main thing it's done, is to actually go to the study group. But apart from that, again I see that as coming further down the track if we're talking in terms of practical action"* (appendix 18.5:2).

Near the end of the season, Barbara began to suggest some innovative ideas and possible action: *"Do you know any film makers? Because I keep having this idea that we should be doing a short film on the day in the life of an unemployed person"* (appendix 16.7:16).

By the end of the season, Barbara talks about some of the structural issues that affect the unemployed, as well as recognising the personal value in the study circle for herself: *"… it made me look at society in a total way, and look at, well, that vicious cycle of poverty when we talked about free market ideas … it's a feeling that the government and society as a whole, needs to take some responsibility and address the problem … we also talked about it in terms of the various wider social theories I suppose … if you're not able to sort of run that extra mile, to be able to push yourself that extra degree and whatever, well you're not seen as attractive by employees I don't think. But it indeed doesn't mean that you haven't got very valuable things to offer the workforce"* (appendix 19.5:3-4).

Upon reflection it can be seen that the above excerpts suggest that the study circle experience did contribute and assist members in having the opportunity to raise their knowledge, "rekindle" or exercise their existing knowledge, in an emancipatory and empowering manner.

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In relation to the discussion in Chapter two on the notion of empowerment, members were exploring a range of experiences and areas of empowerment. As Pam stated "*I think people were at different stages ...*" (appendix 19.3:1). In this way, the study circle provided the opportunity for members to explore, purge and make explicit their needs, experiences and expectations. In other words, they could talk about what they *really* thought and felt; their voices were present and have been validated here.

7.4 Post study circle member check

This section reports on the post season meeting which was conducted on the twenty-eighth May 1999, one year after the end of the study circle season. George, Francis and Barbara attended while Pam and Paul's views were obtained during the following week. Complete transcripts and data are contained in appendix seventeen.

Members spoke of what they had been doing, their memories of the season and the effects it had on them.

Paul: *Since the study circle, I travelled around Australia on a coach tour for two months. I've continued my literacy, numeracy and information technology studies in the Adult Basic Education Department. I study four days a week. I've concentrated mainly on study, as job prospects are not improving.*

I found the study circle helpful. I gained an insight into unemployment. It didn't help me get employment, but improved my confidence a little and gave me extra contacts.

Doing the study circle has made me more confident in talking with other people. (appendix 17.3:1)

Francis: *I've been solidly employed and most of my focus has been on work, getting an income, arranging to get myself into some sort of accommodation, and paying off some of my debts from when I was unemployed, and just generally trying to get myself organised.* (appendix 17.1:16)

... I felt that I got a lot of what I needed at that time, from being part of the group. (appendix 17.1:10)

I got some self-confidence, relatedness with people especially with people in a like situation ... (appendix 17.1:16)

More effective in communication. More self-confidence and certainly improved my enjoyment of life and life situations a lot more. (appendix 17.1:16)

I've involved myself into discussions more openly from the study circle, including discussions about the study circle, unemployment, and been able to relate more to people, both employed and unemployed ... (appendix 17.1:16)

Pam: *Still doing mix of casual work and unpaid work.* (appendix 17.2:1)

I think when I first heard about the study circle, I hoped it would lead to something like an ongoing group or lobbying or community education – like the group getting something published or organising a community forum. But I was probably the only person with these sorts of ideas. (appendix 17.2:1)

... good for unemployed people to be able to get together and discuss the issues in a safe environment, some people don't get the chance to do this at all, and maintain awareness that the problem is systemic – not our fault. (appendix 17.2:1)

George: [Since the study circle] *I've probably been working more the jobs that I've been* [doing] *part time.* (appendix 17.1:18)

Looking at the transcripts, I just felt that I was surprised that people had got so much out of it ... And it's frustrating, having to assess how critical I was of it, and not realising that people had sort of got a lot out of it. So a bit of self-reflection I suppose. I had to face up to quite a bit of self-reflection, self-analysis. (appendix 17.1:18)

An awareness of the way different groups of people who are unemployed are reacting to it, that I hadn't come across before. (appendix 17.1:18)

... having to reflect on the way that other people see things ... taking other peoples' opinions on board. That's it ... it's part of a process of change. (appendix 17.1:19)

Barbara: *Since the study circle finished, I worked for some time teaching.* (appendix 17.1:16)

I actually feel a lot more confident a year later now. But at that particular time, I was feeling lacking in confidence about myself, not feeling sure of putting my ideas forward and stuff, and I felt safe in the group. (appendix 17.1:12)

... the extra confidence that perhaps came from being in the group, I mean, what more action do you need than that? ... that's a really big action as far as I can see. That's empowerment isn't it. And I would say that I experienced the group as an empowering thing in the ways that I've said, and what we're talking about there is the personal input, like personal self-confidence gained by several members of the group, and the empowerment if that's a sort of action that came from that. (appendix 17.1:10-11)

After the study circle and it's been rekindled again tonight, I realise how much I just actually enjoy sitting around talking about ideas and whatever with people. And I've sort of been interested in actually going to another study circle. In terms of unemployment ... feeling a bit more informed about listening to what was on the news and that sort of thing. (appendix 17.1:17)

Well at the time it was sort of an oasis for me really. It was a real amount of support at the time, and that whole thing of being able to talk to other people, break down the isolation, express my opinions. (appendix 17.1:17)

I think it was something that was a very positive experience for me, and you know, it takes its place alongside other positive experiences. (appendix 17.1:18)

In the above comments Paul, Francis and Barbara all state that the study circle experience improved their confidence. Francis and George discussed how the experience had enabled them to be more accepting of alternative opinions, while Barbara and Pam both thought the experience was informative and raised their level of awareness. From the above comments it is reasonable to state that, upon reflection, participants felt the study circle experience did have a positive empowering effect upon them. In relation to Smith's (1993b) levels, the main effect seemed to be in the self growth area (ie. raised confidence) and consciousness raising area (ie. considering alternatives and higher levels of awareness).

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter two there are many theorists who believe that much academic research, even action research, has little influence on others (Burns 1995; Connell 1993; Jones 1994a; Kellehear 1993). However, the above comments go someway to

demonstrating that action research *does* have the potential to effect the people it aims to empower. The members have also validated the above discussion.

7.5   Empowerment from members' perspective

In relation to the aspect of action, some participants commented that actually attending and being involved in the study circle itself constituted action.

Although the researcher may come to the conclusion that the study circle was to some degree an empowering process, did the members believe this to be the case as well? What firstly is their subjective definition of empowerment, and did *they* believe the study circle process to be an empowering one?

The opportunity to further enhance the internal validity in this study was available by, firstly asking the members during the end interview what empowerment meant to them and secondly, if they believed that the study circle process was indeed empowering. Responses to these questions could be considered somewhat subjective and interpretive, but are nonetheless valid, as they are indicative of the lived experience of each member and the group. It also assisted in further triangulation and internally validating the process. As the discussion in Chapter two and four suggested, members should be included at all stages of action research, including the interpretation of meaning (Smith 1997; Burns 1995; Lather 1996; Wadsworth 1993b).

Participants were therefore asked what the term "empowerment" meant to them, and if they felt, upon reflection, that the study circle had been an empowering experience. Responses to the first part of this question included:

Paul: *To have skills and knowledge and know the ways of using these skills and knowledge to the end goal* (appendix 19.1:5).

Francis*:*   *… empowering would be to give me the feeling that I have the ability to act on a particular situation. That I am actually enabled to act to a greater extent than I was before being empowered* (appendix 19.2:5).

Pam: *I think it's a mixture of personal and political. So it's about people getting in touch with the power within to change their situation and to change the structures and the situation that affects them. I think part of that is contact with other people who relate to that, and support from other people. Part of it is knowledge about the situation, like consciousness raising which changes the perception of being on your own, or your situation being your own fault. Seeing it as being something wider in society that's affecting a lot of people and being something that people can work on changing* (appendix 19.3:7).

George: *I find it a term which I've reluctantly used, but I think it's been imposed by sort of middle class ... social service industries. And often it seems to be a word that's used which actually disempowers people ... I think it normally means that ... people come into a middle class political process, if they...take on ... some of those roles, then they become ... similar to what a lot of middle class social movements think are worthwhile political activities, is that those people become empowered ... I'd say empowerment is when people actually do become empowered. But I think in a lot of processes where people are seen in the normal discourse of empowerment, is that they ... get involved in political processes that actually disempower them. Which basically...you become part of ... a protest movement which doesn't really change anything, but ... it gives you a feel good ... [however] I think people ... continually empower themselves* (appendix 19.4:11).

George's response here highlights the problematic interpretation of the word "empowerment" as discussed in Chapter Two. That is how some critical theory terminology has been seized by the right and given new meaning. (Gee, Hulland and Lankshear 1996, Catlan 1991, Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988). In some ways this could be seen as deceivingly co-opting an emancipatory discourse and its meaning.

Barbara: *Empowering means to me that it's opened up some area of growth. That I've come out of that situation with not just more knowledge, but somehow being more myself than I was before* (appendix 19.5:7).

Participants were then asked if they considered the study circle experience to be an empowering one:

Paul: *Oh yes, ye*s (appendix 19.1:5).

Francis*:*   *Yes. Yes I think and I feel that it was definitely empowering. Allaying some of my fears and feeling more in touch with other people in a similar situation. And it opening me to more possibilities* (appendix 19.2:5).

          It certainly empowered me in some of my conversations with people.
          (appendix 17.1:1)

Pam: *To a limited extent. I don't think any of us are going to kind of radically change our lives, but I think that it's important to talk about it, see how the issues affecting people, get some more information, know that other people are doing something about it* (appendix 19.3:8).

George: *I feel frustrated by it. I suppose I'll put it into context, something that I was going to say, that with all the work that's been put into this process ... that you've put into it ... is that I think there is a political process of actually looking at labour markets ... I think what is needed is a radical critique of the institutions that unemployed people have to go through. And I think that going to study circles is sort of a bit of sideline activity in contrast to it* (appendix 19.4:12).

Barbara: *... I think the empowering bit in terms of becoming more myself is that in that study circle format of being non-judgemental and that whole thing of being able to explore your own opinions and in regard to both personal issues and those more theoretical issues. Yes so that's the bit of...actual personal growth in terms of allowing me to become a little more assertive about my own opinions I suppose, and a little more trusting in my own opinions ... And in the theoretical sense where I really, I would've loved to have done even more, but I found that looking at those different scenarios, I feel like now I have a vague idea of what the free market economy is. And just a vague idea of what the sort of jigsaw puzzle pieces are that we're dealing with in the economic scenario, which will then help me to go out and read the newspaper more and build on those and to have knowledge. Yes so there's a knowledge area and a personal growth area ... [It was]* definitely empowering* (appendix 19.5:7).*

Pam and George's responses did not necessarily suggest that study circles do not empower. Rather, perhaps for some, study circles do not go far enough but as Paul states: *"... it's a small step"* (appendix 19.1:3). The responses here are also similar to those of the AAACE study circle evaluation discussed in Chapter three. In that evaluation it was found that the experience "… led to a sense of empowerment among participants" (Gibson 1998).

It needs to be noted here that these immediate reflections above were not validated with the members. By this stage of the research the members had already received a draft of the thesis and had met to discuss its contents. The above reflections are the researcher's interpretation that were not cycled back to the members.

Upon reflection, these responses collectively, do encompass Smith's (1993b) three levels to varying degrees. That is:

- The self, the personal, addressing fears, gaining knowledge, personal growth, learning about the self and even the 'feel good'.

- The political conscious raising, both personal; the listening, sharing, understanding others and not feeling alone, as well as political; the wider society, the issues.

- The action – exploring possibilities, able to act and change situations, being motivated to read and learn more as well as wanting to create radical change to the institutions that oppress.

7.6   Chapter summary

An attempt to provide valid reflections in the above discussion has been addressed by allowing a high degree of member subjectivity to be applied. That is, internal validity was addressed by allowing members to read, check and edit their quotes and to be involved in the construction of meaning and even of the term "empowerment" itself.

The contents of this Chapter can therefore be seen to be trustworthy which, as discussed previously, is of paramount importance in critical theory.

The reflections obtained here, with the interviews, chronological reflection and member check suggest that change did occur. The discussion in relation to Smith's levels and Tables twelve and thirteen are also suggestive of change. The chronological reflections demonstrate that from an individual perspective, members found the experience beneficial. Together with the member check for validity, it is reasonable to suggest that the study circle experience, in relation specifically to the members here, proved to be an empowering experience. Furthermore, concerns by some members in relation to running out of time to address issues, further suggests the process did stimulate interest, as with the research conducted by Shires

and Crawford (1999a). Triangulation with the reflections contained in Chapters five and six further supports this observation.

Chapter eight - conclusion

Table one: Thesis structure

| Part one | Part two |
| Methodology/literature review | Study circle season |
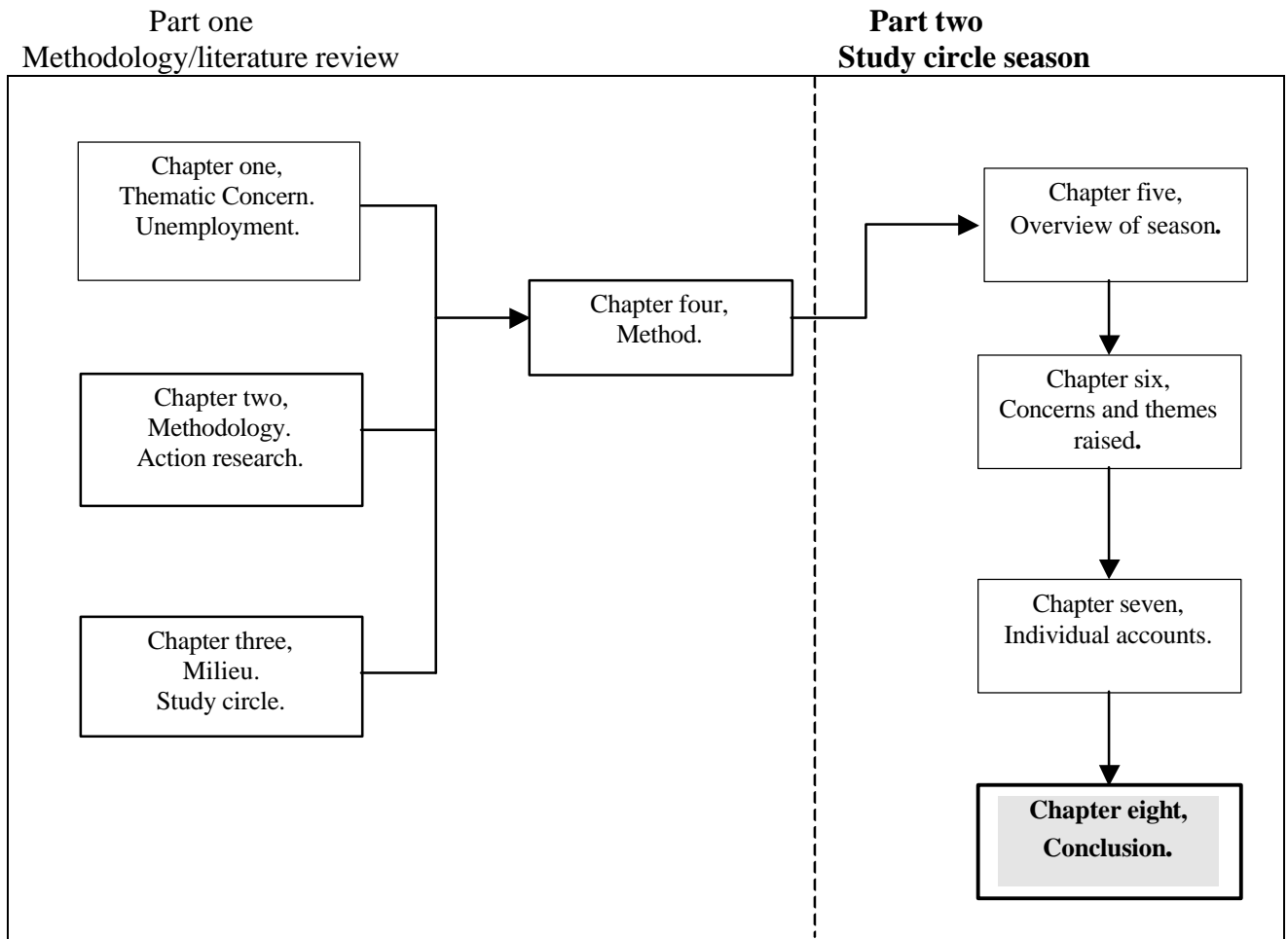
The above table depicts how, within Part one of this thesis the thematic concern was identified and elaborated upon in Chapter one. Chapter two introduced the methodology and provided the detailed theoretical grounding for the study. Chapter three then addressed the milieu and provided details in relation to study circle theory and practice. This review of literature on the thematic concern, methodology and milieu were then merged in Chapter four, where details in relation to planning the overall method of the study were refined.

Part two then reflected upon the action and observation stages of the action research cycle. Firstly in Chapter five a portrait of the season as a whole was presented. Chapter six then reflected upon the concerns and themes the membership discussed

during the study circle season while Chapter seven reflected upon the individual members' views of the study circle experience.

In this Chapter the reflections in Chapters five, six and seven are consolidated and bought together to provide a summary. As mentioned earlier, in empirical research objective "findings" are uncovered, however in this case "reflections" are sought, as critical theory and action research are subjective "Action research, as an alternative to traditional research, helps educators reflect on their practice …" (Schmuck 1998:20)

Furthermore these reflections should not emerge from the researchers' subjective perspective alone, rather determinations need to emerge from the data, which are collaboratively developed with the direct input of the research participants. In other words, "findings" could be considered objective, while "reflections" are subjective. Although this may be considered somewhat interpretative, the reflections here have been validated as discussed earlier, and are therefore trustworthy. That is, the participants themselves have verified the reflections as indicative of their experience. This Chapter now summarises these reflections.

In Part two, Chapter five demonstrated that all members were able to participate as a group. Attendance, although sporadic at the start of the season improved significantly as time progressed. Attrition did not occur which further supports the value of the experience from the members perspective. Guidelines, agreements, objectives and agenda were all collaboratively negotiated and agreed upon by the group. The membership, in effect, gained control over the study circle process as the season progressed. On the positive side the group were able to participate in:

- Listening to different points of view, personal experiences and trying to understand them.

- Exchanging ideas and sharing, hearing about what others are active in, and becoming personally active themselves.

- Being able to express personal points of view, concerns and personal experiences.

- Participate and socialise in a structured yet relaxed environment.

- Be acknowledged and motivated.

- Allow personal opinions to evolve.

- Go through a process which was not compulsory and made no attempt to indoctrinate or persuade them.

On the negative side, the group felt that during the study circle season:

- Discussion at times deviated off the topic.

- The mixing of the topic (unemployment) and learning about the study circle process simultaneously was sometimes cumbersome.

- The researcher and research focus was intrusive during the initial sessions of the season.

It was also established that:

- Although discussion can wander off the topic or issue at hand this was not necessarily considered detrimental, however the leader needed to monitor this and refocus the group if necessary.

- If further study circles into unemployment were to be trialed, workshops and pilots with unemployed people may need to be conducted to determine the full range of issues that are of concern to all unemployed people.

- The group faced a significant challenge in becoming accustomed to a new way of learning.

- Ground rules needed to be determined, and this took time. Perhaps at the commencement of a study circle season all members need to be aware of this, but also realise that this time is needed to help the group bond and develop. Inherent in the process is the considerable time taken for the group to form, develop, and agree upon protocols. Members need to be aware that although this is frustrating, it is nonetheless necessary.

- The term 'leader' may require re-assessing (perhaps 'facilitator'), as well as the hesitation of members not wanting to undertake a leadership role, although over time, members did feel more comfortable with embracing the leader role.

- A broad range of resources, such as guest visitors, excursions, activities, videos and reading material needs to be planned for and included.

- Study circle leaders need to be highly skilled and experienced. As Shires and Crawford (1999a) suggest, perhaps specific study circle leader training needs

to be undertaken before attempting to conduct a season. This leader would commence the season then later on devolve leadership responsibilities to other members. (This was the case in the Aboriginal Reconciliation Study Circle documented in the film "*Whiteys Like Us*" (Anderson 1998) elaborated upon in Chapter three.)

As stated earlier, the general aim of the research asks whether the study circle process contributed to the empowerment of the members and were they able to participate and gain any control over their situation. Chapter five demonstrated that although attendance was sporadic at the commencement of the season and it took a significant amount of time for the group to develop and to agree upon the objectives, aims and guidelines all members were nonetheless able to participate in the process. Four out of six members were involved in leading seasons (George, Pam, Barbara and Mark).

Members were also able to delve into their own experiences and feelings in relation to their unemployed situation. Although they were obviously unable to gain control of unemployment in the broad macro sense, they were able to explore what unemployment is, its causes, possible solutions and alternative ways to define themselves other than in terms of paid work in relation to their own situations. The agenda was also theirs and they were able to control what was discussed.

Part two, Chapter six ensured that the members' "voices", their concerns and issues were represented in this study. All members, as a group were able to contribute to the themes, sharing their collective knowledge and experience. The themes discussed reflected the key issues and concerns of the study circle group during its eight week season. They were:

- Unemployed people should be informed about the range of ways, and what options are available to them in regards to alternatives to paid employment such as job modularization, co-operatives, WWOOF and LETS. It was considered that governments should encourage and promote these alternatives, perhaps within a study circle format.

- As the nature of 'work', and therefore employment has changed dramatically in recent times, so too should the notion of unemployment. By adopting a new identity the group felt that the unemployed might not be treated as inferior to those who have secure paid employment. Arguably this may increase motivation to explore alternatives rather than remain despondent and passive victims.

- Often unemployed people are incorrectly perceived as an undeserving tax expense. Many people in paid employment may dislike the unemployed however the group believed that employed people are potentially at risk and may be fearful of unemployment themselves.

- The debilitative psychological and physiological effects of unemployment that the group experienced, such as despair, stress, depression, frustration, embarrassment and feelings of worthlessness along with the isolation, impoverishment, stigma and self blame all confirm and validate the existing research referred to earlier in this study. Propaganda, which blames the unemployed, is irresponsible and hinders personal agency, motivation and opportunity.

- Members' experiences in dealing with bureaucracies, especially those related to servicing the unemployed, were seen as being extremely inflexible. Not only is the experience full of guilt and suspicion, but the threat of financial penalties may result in clients falsifying information and 'working the system' to ensure economic survival. Private industry bureaucracies along with job application processes were also seen as being a significant waste of time, money and resources for all concerned.

- The financial constraints of being unemployed make it very challenging to just live day to day. Benefits were considered too low which makes it difficult to look for work, enjoy any leisure activities or explore alternatives. The group felt that few employed people realise or understand how little this unemployment benefit is.

- Tax issues were seen as complex, however what was realised was that the information provided by governments is distorted, and the whole tax system seems to benefit the wealthy and punish the poor.

- Structural alternatives in response to unemployment such as providing a guaranteed income, public sector job creation and free market ideologies were all discussed and explored. Many were seen to have advantages and disadvantages, however time limitations restricted further discussion.

- Education and training were seen as difficult to undertake when benefits were so low. Also the relevance of contemporary training and education were viewed as questionable by the group when it was seen to not prepare people for work or develop critical thought.

- Women's position in the labour market was seen to be in a state of change. Many were considered to be working harder than men are and yet not being equally financially rewarded.

The data and resultant themes described above provided an emergent "knowledge" in relation to the members' perceptions, feelings, attitudes and values from their

viewpoint. It was an example of "bottom up" or standpoint knowledge as discussed earlier.

Of particular note was how the evolvement of the discussion and consequential themes demonstrated and reflected upon the spheres of empowerment as discussed in Chapter two and this also mirrors the development of other study circle seasons as discussed in Chapter three. That is, the flow of themes during the season demonstrated an evolution of discussion that commenced at the personal, to the social, then external and structural. This also reflects the linear development of empowerment discussed in Chapter two. Furthermore, this evolvement cannot be solely attributed to the discussion guide alone as it occurred almost consequentially, via the members' own list of issues. Although the discussion guide was used early in the season, the group was able to continue on with their own issues under their own direction.

Chapter six demonstrated that many themes were explored and views shared. Of importance is that the knowledge shared was from the members themselves, it is from their subjective standpoint, and not imposed. Together Chapters five and six therefore demonstrated that the study circle process allowed members to share their feelings and ideas in a safe environment and allow them to discuss a range of issues of relevance to themselves.

In Part two Chapter seven, the initial discussion in relation to Smiths (1993b) levels demonstrated that the study circle did result in assisting in empowering all individual members, except for George. However, the chronological reflection and post study circle member check indicated that all individual members found the study circle process contributed to their empowerment.

The excerpts suggested that the study circle experience contributed and assisted members in having the opportunity to raise their level of knowledge or to "rekindle", articulate and share their existing knowledge, in an emancipatory and empowering manner.

In relation to the discussion in Chapter two on the notion of empowerment, members' experiences covered a range of areas in relation to empowerment. As Pam stated "*I think people were at different stages ...*" (appendix 19.3:1). In this way, the study circle provided the opportunity for members to explore, purge and make explicit their needs, experiences and expectations. In other words, they could talk about what they *really* thought and felt; their voices were heard and their opinions were validated. For example, Paul, Francis and Barbara all stated that the study circle experience improved their self-confidence. Francis and George discussed how the experience had enabled them to be more accepting of alternative opinions, while Barbara and Pam both thought the experience was informative and raised their level of awareness. From this it is reasonable to state that the study circle experience did have a positive, perhaps sometimes subtle, empowering effect upon all members in different ways. In relation to Smith's (1993b) levels, the main effect seemed to be in the self growth area (ie. raised confidence) and consciousness raising area (ie. considering alternatives and attaining higher levels of awareness).

As discussed in Chapter two there are many theorists who believe that much academic research, even action research, has little influence on others (Burns 1995; Connell 1993; Jones 1994a; Kellehear 1993). However, the reflections contained in Chapter seven demonstrated that action research *does* have the potential to effect the people it aims to empower. In other words this research experience itself affected the research participants in a positive manner. Research was not done "on" them, they were not treated as objects. Members were active participants in the research and were able to assess its effectiveness themselves.

There is also the issue that relates to the definition of empowerment from a critical theory perspective. Empowerment is essentially a *process*, which can be viewed as holistic or consisting of levels or spheres as discussed in Chapter two. Alternatively the subjective interpretation of what constitutes empowerment from the members perspective is equally as valid and should compliment any externally determined interpretation.

This subjective interpretation of empowerment from the individual members' perspective also demonstrated that all individual members felt the experience was

empowering. As Paul states: *"… it's a small step"* (appendix 19.1:3). The responses here are also similar to those of the AAACE study circle evaluation discussed in Chapter three. In that evaluation it was found that the experience "… led to a sense of empowerment among participants" (Gibson 1998). Although George and Pam were somewhat conditional, their responses do not necessarily suggest that the study circle did not empower. Rather, perhaps for them the study circle did not go far enough.

This reservedness by George and Pam therefore does not directly suggest that the study circle did not contribute to their empowerment. Both felt that the study circle was not sufficiently radical or action based *enough* and commented on how the study circle may have been more effective if the season was longer, was not part of a formal study and developed more quickly. As mentioned previously, several members felt that the study circle may have resulted in more action if it was not part of a research project. Alternatively perhaps the research needed to sensitise and energise (catalytic validity) participants more. Furthermore, this attitude by members demonstrates an interest and keenness to develop ideas and action further, which is commensurate with a positive experience.

Chapter seven therefore suggests that the study circle did contribute to the empowerment of individual members.

The collective responses to the member check also encompassed Smith's (1993b) three levels to varying degrees. That is:

- The self: the personal and if members' felt they were able to address fears, gain knowledge and learn about themselves.

- The political consciousness raising: both personally and collectively, the listening, sharing, understanding others and not feeling alone, as well as political; the wider society, the issues.

- The action: exploring possibilities, able to act and change situations, being motivated to read and learn more as well as wanting to create radical change to the institutions that oppress.

The reflections in Chapter seven, with the interviews, chronological reflection and member validation check all indicate that empowerment did occur. The discussion in

relation to Smith's levels and Tables twelve and thirteen also suggest the study circle was an empowering experience for the members. Furthermore the chronological reflections demonstrated that from an individual perspective, members found the experience of benefit.

By triangulating Chapter seven with the reflections contained in Chapters five and six together with the member check, it is reasonable to establish that this one study circle experience, in relation specifically to the members here, in this unique context, was an empowering one.

Overall these three chapters in Part two demonstrated that the group was able to voluntary share their experiences, express their views and ideas and socialise in a safe and relaxed environment where they felt acknowledged and had control and ownership of the agenda.

Part two also shows that although individual members may have been at different stages of empowerment, and these differed in relation to issues of importance overall the group moved along an empowerment continuum from self esteem to action, albeit predominantly at a personal level. This is evident through the interviews, chronological analysis and the members' own subjective interpretations of the study circle experience and the interpretation of empowerment.

The first obvious reason for this empowerment is due to the collaborative and participatory nature of study circles themselves, as discussed in Chapter three. This, coupled with the methodology itself required a high level of openness and transparency with the members and an effort to break down the researcher/researched divide, as discussed in Chapters two and four.

In effect the study circle format was the link between theory and practice. Action research and critical theory were utilised to provide the theoretical foundation and the philosophy and principles of the research, while the study circle approach itself was the structural tool utilised to apply the theory in a practical manner. In this way it could be argued that study circles act as a method in themselves in applying action

research. A participatory, collective, collaborative and action based framework to adopt in a context where action research may be conducted.

Members also often commented on how they felt able to express their views and opinions safely in a non-threatening environment. This therefore can be seen to enhance opportunities for open critical discussion to take place.

This study also supports the discussion in Chapter two on study circles. In effect it validates previous observations in relation to study circles both in Australia and overseas. Namely:

- A study circle season does take time to develop. Issues of leadership, rules, objectives and attendance are all seemingly problematic at the commencement of a season but this does improve after several sessions.

- A study circle topic may need to be trialed and tested with the potential audience and target group, to ensure that any discussion guide provided is relevant and addresses the real, not perceived concerns and issues of the membership.

- Leaders of study circles need to be well aware and perhaps even formally trained in how to conduct a study circle season and the underlying pedagogical philosophy.

In relation to the issue of unemployment, many factors were discussed. Predominantly the issue of addressing alternatives to that of paid employment along with the negative identity of the unemployed were the major themes.

Although the use of study circles with the unemployed participants here may seem appropriate and effective in this specific context, there were many issues, highlighted throughout the thesis (such as time to bond and bridging any researcher/researched divide) that would require further and continuous revision and cycles of research.

> ' understandings and actions emerge in a constant cycle, one that always highlights the ways in which educators are partially correct, yet in continual need of revision' (Noffke and Stevenson 1995:4).

Nonetheless this study has explored an alternative pedagogical approach to collaboratively working with the unemployed and also adds to the body of knowledge in relation to the subjective experience of unemployment.

There is also a significant amount of raw data which may provide scope for further analysis using other methodologies. Furthermore, along with the affect that this research had on the members as stated earlier, several initiatives have occurred between the actual study circle season and the final draft. This again constitutes further action.

Action originally suggested by the study circle member George, that occurred due to this research was the presentation of a paper at the Fifth National Conference on Unemployment at RMIT in Melbourne on October first 1998 entitled: *The Study Circle: Participatory Action Research with and for the unemployed"* (Brophy and Shires 1998). Furthermore, a paper was also presented at the Fifth UNESCO-ACEID International Conference in Thailand in December 1999 entitled *"Study Circles - An Innovative (and Inevitable?) Pedagogy for the Next Century"* (Brophy 1999) and a Poster Presentation at the Victoria University's Faculty of Human Development Conference on October thirty-first, 2000 (Brophy 2000).

Furthermore extracts from a draft of this thesis are currently being used by a training provider to submit applications to Centrelink in Canberra to conduct Learning Circles with the unemployed (see appendix 1). These are similar to the results of the Costigan and Letcher (1987) study circle discussed in Chapter three where study circles resulted in the compilation of conference papers. Furthermore the discussion guide developed for this research has been used with groups of unemployed people at the job network provider, Jobs Plus of Victoria University on several occasions.

In conclusion, I will quote from the final paragraph of my Masters Thesis completed in 1996, which provided the impetus for this study.

> 'This then, is the completion of another cycle of action research. In a sense my previous studies and research, as well as this thesis and my professional work have been a continuous process of action research. And although as each cycle ends and new questions are

raised, there are many problematic issues in relation to unemployment and LMP courses that remain consistent. I am now of the opinion that the next cycle of enquiry must encompass action. To take the notions presented here off the paper, away from theory and into LMP courses' (Brophy 1996:81).

In the tradition of action research, the reflections contained here in the conclusion should become the motivation for further stages of planning for yet more action research cycles.

Possibilities could include:

- Key stakeholders along with government and external bodies associated with dealing with unemployment and unemployed people could investigate and determine what issues, concerns and topics are relevant to unemployed peoples situation. Perhaps by using informal focus groups, a discussion guide could be compiled from the data.

- Study circle facilitators need to be properly trained in all aspects of the philosophy and pedagogy of the study circle approach. Perhaps this training could be conducted by those already experienced in leading study circles.

- A structure needs to be set up where the emergent issues, concerns and suggestions by the members (that is, their "voice") can be listened to and acted upon either by the group individuals, or external bodies.

I believe that study circles will not "cure" unemployment, however this research has demonstrated that the study circle could be of enormous benefit for the unemployed.

An approach that is worthy of consideration on a wider scale and requires attention and further investigation.

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