In this article we describe a unique qualitative research design in which we used our own lived experiences as the basis for understanding theories of the self. Our purpose in this study was to (a) broaden current understandings of self theory, (b) juxtapose theories of the self with lived experiences of selfhood, and (c) use these new understandings to inform health care practice. The participants were four Canadian middle-aged female academic and health care practitioners. We conducted unstructured, open-ended interviews. Through a collaborative, interpretive process, four recurring themes emerged from the women’s narratives: struggling for authenticity, inner knowing, changing over time, and the contextual self. We address the need for practitioners to understand theories of the self—their own and their clients—and how these theories impact their clinical practice.

Until recently, research concerning selfhood has centered predominantly on core, singular, and relatively stable constructs of the self. Postmodern theorists are currently deconstructing long-held assumptions of selfhood (Anderson, 1990, 1998; Cushman, 1990). Hermans and Kempen (1993) write about a multivocal, dialogical self, while other theorists promote the concept of possible selves—a future self that is designed and shaped by the “now” or present self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). White and Epston (1990) emphasize the self structure as a narrative, in which the self is both author of one’s own story and at the same time a character or actor in the larger cultural narrative. Such postmodern views demonstrate a vision of the self that is constantly evolving over time.
Feminist theorists are also rigorously engaged in advocating for new developmental theories that acknowledge gender differences in the formation of self (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Davies, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Weedon, 1987). Women’s scholarship has played a significant part in questioning androcentric assumptions, particularly as they pertain to women in midlife (Gilligan, 1982; Ussher, 1989; Yoder & Kahn, 1993). Such questioning involves a shifting concept of self that emphasizes social relations and social practices in the formation of selfhood (Burkitt, 1994). Feminist theorists argue that primary relationships are significant in the formation of personhood (Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1978; Rosaldo, 1974). Furthermore, they address the influences of power relations (Weedon, 1987) and the social contexts of women’s experiences in identity formation. These feminist contributions feature women’s own voices as a central part of generating this knowledge. An understanding of selfhood can be broadened by listening to the life stories of individuals as they share their struggles and ways of defining themselves (Archer, 1994).

In keeping with these postmodern and feminist perspectives, we, the authors, embarked on an exploration of how our lived experiences interfaced with these theories. The original intention was to form a reading group and to engage in a critical analyses of the literature on theories of the self. As health care practitioners, we were concerned with mainstream models of development that describe a healthy self as singular and relatively stable. We also had concerns regarding theories that portray the singular self progressing through well-defined stages (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1994). A self conceived outside of these parameters may be regarded as “disordered,” or “underdeveloped.” We began to question our own clinical practices. We asked ourselves, “How can we promote a view of the self as fluid, constantly in process, and multiple?” “How can we speak to women in our care without pathologizing their lived experience?” “How do we work with women who may be constrained by rigid, confining models of development?”

Through the process of reading, conversing, and struggling with these difficult questions, we formulated an innovative research approach. In this article we present the results of a collaborative, feminist study in which we held dual positions as both researcher and participant. The purpose of this study is to (a) broaden current understandings of self theory, (b) juxtapose theories of the self with our own lived experiences of selfhood, and (c) use our new understandings to inform health care practice. The research question that guided our inquiry was, “Based on your life experiences, what is your personal theory of the self?” Significant insights emerged from this research about the implications of self theory on current health care practices for women.
METHOD

As feminist researchers, we paid attention to certain guiding principles while we embarked on this collaborative project. We did not clearly articulate these principles in advance, but became aware of them as we began our research. We used interviewing strategies that would facilitate descriptions of how the various self theories related to our lived experiences. Traditional approaches to interviewing are typically based on a hierarchical relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer. By adopting a feminist approach to data collection (Oakley, 1988; Reinharz, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1979), we were able to establish research relationships that were nonhierarchical, wherein we acknowledged the positionality of both the researcher and the researched in the process. We shared personal and professional experiences in order to deepen our understanding of the complex issues discussed in the literature. We strove to understand the connections between theory and our lived experience, between self theory and everyday practices.

Although we came to the project with diverse research experiences such as ethnography (Spradley, 1979), phenomenology (van Manen, 1984), survey research, and traditional qualitative content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), we attempted to ‘‘bracket’’ our former experiences and allow our present research roles and tasks to guide our research steps. Our epistemologies were congruent with constructivist theory (Mahoney, 1991; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995), in which the subject (or self) is seen as an active, meaning-making process. We located ourselves within the interpretive turn (Denzin, 1997) in which the researcher turns toward the question with a complete openness rather than being led or constrained by prescribed methods. Thus, we were continually assessing the appropriateness of the progressive steps of our research process. This assessment required negotiation, striving for consensus, and being open to explore innovative ways of conducting research.

Procedure

Our research team was composed of four female academics and health care practitioners at midlife who shared both an active interest in researching women’s development and who had a desire to explicate a personal theory of the self. Among ourselves we conducted four individual semistructured interviews and two group interviews. Each member of the research group was present during the interview sessions. Each research participant was interviewed and audiotaped for one hour by another researcher in the presence of the research team. Because of this unique research design, issues of confidentiality were carefully considered. Using
feminist process, we continually monitored our engagement in the research process. A high level of trust among the researchers was established.

Upon completion of each interview, group members posed questions to the interviewee; audiotaping continued during this time. These questions were open ended and involved clarification concerning the content. Each member of the research team took a turn being the interviewer and the interviewee over a five-week period. The audiotaped sessions were free-flowing, open, dialogical interactions that focused on each participant’s understanding of her lived experiences of self. All audiotaped sessions were transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The interview transcriptions were distributed to each research participant. Each participant checked her own transcription for accuracy and began listening for meaning units and possible categories. Each participant then individually coded her own transcript and provided the research group with a list and description of her own codes and a copy of the coded transcript.

The research team met and discussed each other’s coded transcripts; similarities and differences among the members’ codes were noted. this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authentic self</td>
<td>Being authentic, congruent, appropriate; the sense of knowing a truth; having integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>Sensing clarity about self, roles, meaning-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>Difficulty in defining self: parts, roles, distinct/not-so-distinct selves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Expressions contradiction, ambiguity or fragmentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualized self</td>
<td>One’s context; shaping mechanisms; being socialized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core self</td>
<td>A core, cohesive, static or fixed self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolving self</td>
<td>Changing over time, being in transition or process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative cases</td>
<td>Exceptions to agreed upon categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>Self-in-relation; relationships with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>References to the literature on self theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendent self</td>
<td>Descriptions beyond the physical self; soul; higher self; spiritual self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Cognitive frameworks; being aware or conscious of self or self-process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voicing self</td>
<td>Internal critic or dialogue or coming to find one’s voice; also being silenced or not voicing the self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Description of the categories
group meeting was audiotaped. Another group session followed, which consisted of searching the codes for commonalities. From the collective codes, 13 categories were identified (Table 1). The participants then recoded their original transcripts using the common categories. Data obtained from these group meetings contributed to the analytical constructs of the study.

At this point in the project, members of the research team analyzed the categories and established a preliminary thematic analysis. A discussion of the categories resulted in a consensus on four main themes. The research group then worked in pairs. Each pair examined two different themes. Team members then collaboratively initiated the writing stages of this research project.

FINDINGS

Four main themes emerged from the narratives of the participants in this study. These themes are outlined below, with examples for each.

**Struggling for Authenticity**

Authenticity is described as the ability to conform to an original way of being, closely enough to produce essential features as real or genuine (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1989). Nonetheless when these definitions are applied to human experience, authenticity becomes ambiguous. Although for some of the participants being authentic was considered an important characteristic to strive for, others were not that convinced that it was even possible given their understandings of postmodernity. However, all of the participants experienced some kind of struggle when thinking of themselves in relation to an authentic self. Terms such as “frustrating,” “painful,” “emotional,” “paradoxical,” and “contradictory” were used to describe such struggles. Some of the women viewed themselves within these struggles as moving toward authenticity, while others felt the intense draw to succumb to cultural expectations of prescribed roles (Rubin, 1979).

To illustrate, a fine line between her possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and socialized self (Marcia, 1994) was described by one participant: “It is that constant struggle for balance between who I think I am expected to be and who I would like to be that is difficult and I can cross over that just so easily. It is very fragile.” Another woman described the struggle as one that required that she be true to herself, and she stated that she felt most inauthentic at times when she was “deceiving herself.” The process of “finding her truth” had been difficult:
It has not been an easy thing to become more aware of myself in order to be authentic. It’s like that inauthentic self or that loss of self. It seems to fall back into the way I felt for 20 years when I was married. It’s just like a loss. It was sort of my dull period of my life—my black period of my life.

One woman talked about her intense struggle to be authentic when obliged to adopt various roles in her life. The tension between maintaining a separate sense of self while simultaneously fulfilling stereotypical gender roles was intense. Feelings of being trapped in rigid roles were experienced as a struggle for authenticity. Another coresearcher also referred to feelings of fragmentation while switching from one self to another. Throughout the course of one day she was mother, student, teacher, friend, and counselor. She felt overwhelmed by the complexity of her life. Although she experienced a rich diversity of multiple selves, there were days when the multiplicity seemed fragmented and disjointed. In her narrative she said, ‘‘Making the switch from teacher to student to then going home and being a wife sometimes seems really exhausting.’’ It was not easy to fully commit herself to her work with contradictory cultural expectations. Rubin (1979) referred to a woman’s struggle with immersing herself in her career while still being defined as ‘‘mother’’ and ‘‘wife’’ as problematic. She stated that, ‘‘No matter how important her work or how successful she may be at it, the tasks by which she is defined, judged, and validated are those of the family’’ (p. 110). Each woman expressed this conflict as a dominant issue in her life.

Another participant’s discussion of authenticity pointed to intrapsychic struggles: ‘‘In the moment I feel fully myself and . . . yet when I am outside of that experience, I wouldn’t describe myself as that person.’’ This participant expressed her intrapsychic struggle with authenticity as an experience of feeling fragmented. Hermans (1992), however, has a different perspective on this struggle. Rather than describing multiplicity as fragmentation he speaks about the shifting capacity of the self: ‘‘the I has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The I fluctuates among different and even opposed positions’’ (Hermans, 1992, p. 363).

Understanding their lived experiences of authenticity relative to the literature was a difficult task for the women in this study. In reviewing the literature on multiple selves, the concept of authenticity was scarce. The women posed queries that illustrated the complexity of their understanding of the multiplicity: ‘‘Where is truth when there are multiple selves?’’ ‘‘Which self reflects the true self?’’ and ‘‘How can we be true to ourselves in the different contexts of the self?’’
An example of struggling to be authentic within a multiple selves perspective was expressed when a participant stated that at times she felt a sense of comfort around the image of a unified, cohesive self. Yet, at other times she fully embraced and experienced her multiplicity.

I see myself according to different theories on different days. There are some days that the whole multiple self idea really fits for me and I think I have this really rich kind of life. And yet on other days I feel really fragmented. So there’s ambiguity and contradiction. It is really confusing.

The participants acknowledged their desire to hold onto the notion of a unified, cohesive self and yet intellectually recognized the lived experience of multiplicity. This incentive to find unity and cohesion was described by Sampson (1985) when he referred to the work of Prigogine and Derrida. He concluded that quests may actually obscure the natural coherence of the self:

The fact that the underlying reality is an open process that cannot be grasped in any absolute or final sense, making both certainty and mastery problematic, does not make our world and our lives either chaotic or incoherent. We need to revise our understanding of coherence, releasing it from the ties that currently bind it. Our common sense experience of an orderly and coherent world does not demand our currently dominant personhood ideal for its realization. Indeed, that ideal may mask the real coherences that are otherwise available. (Sampson, 1985, p. 1208)

**Inner Knowing**

The concept of “inner knowing” emerged through descriptions of intrapsychic processes and were described as a “felt sense of consciousness of being” and “self-as-knower.” These themes were characterized in a variety of ways by the participants. At times “soul” became the only adequate descriptor. Resorting to the mysterious language of soul enabled the group members to attempt to understand the elusive nature of these intrapsychic experiences. Moore (1994) refers to such elusive qualities in that the “soul lives in the realm of imagination, and influences the direction and quality of life through a kind of poetics, a language of image and symbol” (p. xiv). When reflecting on her interview, one participant spoke metaphorically and referred to her inner knowing as “an ancient, inner and quiet thing. . . . It is always there; I can’t find it all the time, but when I am quiet and not expecting it I can get in touch with it.”

Feelings of knowing or consciousness of being were often accompanied by a sense of clarity and understanding. Such insights were verbalized as
times when the women felt clear with who they were. They had a sense of a singular author scripting various selves into a cohesive narrative. This experience of knowing was not entirely intellectual. There was also an emotional component that helped the participants become aware of these items. One participant described the experience of an inner knowing as a form of embodiment:

I’m really aware in the moment about myself, pretty much all the time now. That feels really good and has to do with being very much connected with my feelings and my body. I’ve learned that if I don’t pay attention to my body and my feelings I go down the wrong track.

Even though each of the women had experiences of ‘‘inner knowing,’’ there still remained some skepticism regarding the possible illusion of it all, as the following quote suggests:

When I talked about a transcendent self, I’m talking about a spiritual self and even though this is contrary to my beliefs about self as a process, I need to hold onto this belief about an inner knowing that is connected to some universal spirit. This part of my self is starting to sound like a core self—so there’s a lot of contradiction here. Why can’t it be both—an inner, embodied, transcendent self living simultaneously with an everyday fluid and multiple sense of self?

This skepticism is also reflected in the self theory literature where there are two main schools of thought. Early developmentalists described a central, core self while recent postmodernists write about a self with ‘‘no fixed and central identity—around no soul or mind. These things are but the illusions created in discourse and can be removed by deconstruction’’ (Burkitt, 1994, p. 10). Despite the growing body of postmodern theories suggesting the illusion of a unified, transcendent self ‘‘most people still work with . . . and take for granted that the personality of an individual is given at birth by some inner soul or by genetic inheritance’’ (p. 9).

**Changing Over Time**

A common focus within the interviews, and during subsequent discussions, was the participants’ perceptions of historical, as well as ongoing, changes in self. As women at midlife, the participants shared a number of similar experiences. These included struggles with choices counter to cultural norms, self-discovery through the research process, and a sense that their self-awareness had been enhanced over time.

The participants spoke of their awareness of being shaped throughout their lives by cultural norms. The significance of such socialization processes on women’s identity has been addressed by various theorists
Conceptualizing the Self

of women’s development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Fisher, 1979; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1978). One participant spoke with anger about being confined in the caregiver role: “I’ve spent 30 years of my life giving, you know, putting others’ needs first, being a caregiver . . . all those rules . . . that we have for women.” She went on to speak of the development of a clearer sense of self over time. Later, during a discussion of this process she added, “So it has to do primarily with time left and being a woman who has been strongly influenced by the cultural norms throughout my life and I am learning to let go of some of that.” For this participant the idea of limited time left seemed to accelerate her honouring of self. The research process itself created changes in the self-concept of each participant. During the analyses of the interviews, the women were challenged to examine some of the personal meanings attached to the language they used. For example, the code word “understanding” was agreed upon to categorize certain statements within the interviews. In the process of decontextualizing and recontextualizing within and between transcripts it was discovered that the researchers had different definitions of “understanding.” For some, it represented a cognitive process, and for others it meant an embodied knowing. Peck (1986) posits that self-definition is a measure of self-knowledge and is a construct best understood through extensive interviews. It was through many intense discussions during this research project that the participants became more self-aware, evolving in the moment as coresearchers. One participant stated, “This study has been like a self-discovery group for me in terms of my own developmental process and how I define that for myself.” Indeed, self-discovery as a part of the research process itself has been addressed in the literature (Bruner, 1986; Rocoeur, 1977; von Eckartsberg, 1971).

The use of metaphor was another participant’s way of describing her developmental process. Water became a symbol for a self-in-process: “The water is always changing, transforming, becomes ice, evaporates.” Throughout her interview she described herself in process, moving forward “like a slinky, folding forward.” For her, believing in a self that is continually evolving meant giving up the idea that the self is fixed, static, or core, or something she depends on that provides a sense of stability. However, giving up this core belief meant living in ambiguity. “Believing in an evolving self is frightening, too unbearable, because the self goes forward each day into an unknown.” Indeed, changing her understanding of that core is viewed as a life-long process. She stated that “I’m becoming clearer and know this will happen throughout my whole lifetime. I’m never going to completely understand myself at any given moment.”

For another participant, adopting a multiple-selves perspective meant “You can evolve and change and shift and develop.” An evolving self for her included choices regarding the person she is or wants to become.
She stated, “I can’t go back to find a true self, but I can create a new identity and I can actively participate in creating new ‘possible selves.’ It’s a forward looking thing.” Markus and Nurius (1986) describe possible selves as deriving “from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future” (p. 954). From the narratives of the women in this study, the self continued to change over time. This theme is supported in the literature by postmodern writers who view the self as a process (Carlsen, 1988; Kegan, 1982; Mahoney, 1991).

**The Contextual Self**

The theme “contextual self” describes the participant’s understanding of the development of self through participation in social relations. This theme explicates the impact of culture on one’s identity as well as highlights the influences of personal relationships in the conceptualization of self. The participants articulated the tension between self and discourse. Being embedded in discourse, the participants found it difficult to understand what shapes the social and individual constructions of self.

For the women in this study, different selves emerged within specific contexts. “Context defines my experience,” stated one woman. I believe that there is no self other than the self that is constituted by others. My self is made up of all my internalized others … so I don’t spend time looking for an inner self, because I know the context defines me.” The contextual influence on self-definition was prevalent in her description when she asked: “So am I having the context shape who I am rather than have me shape the context?” She wondered, “Where is the self located? … How much does the environment overshadow who I am and want to become?” Another participant commented: “It’s the idea of the ‘looking glass self,’ because I often define my self in terms in how I perceive others see me.” Gergen (1973) wrote about the masks of social life and how individuals are molded by social circumstances; individuals have many potential selves and the capacity to define themselves depending on social conditions. Individual identities change according to which mask is worn.

One woman described the significance of relationships in her self-discovery process: “Relationships are crucial to my own personal growth and development.” Peck (1986) describes a sphere of influence as the reciprocal effect of relationships upon women’s self-definition (p. 279). She suggested that women may gain an increased clarity of self-definition over time depending on the extent and quality of women’s involvement with interpersonal relationships.

Relationship or connection in a long-term marriage was described by one participant as a “loss of self … of being invisible.” Eventual marital separation required a new perspective of self-in-relation: “I was forced to
develop a relationship with a new person—with myself.’’ For this coresearcher, connection with self corresponded with meaningful interactions with others. She stated, ‘‘It’s paradoxical where I can really appreciate that other person’s self and not have my expectations or agendas get in the way. It’s becoming a separate self.’’ Self-in-relation theorists (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Josselson, 1987; Miller, 1978; Peck, 1986) have described how women develop a sense of separateness while in relation at the same time. This fusion of separateness and connection that relates to women’s experience of identity formation contradicts developmental psychologists (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1994) who maintain that separateness and autonomy are integral to ‘‘normal’’ identity development. A constant source of struggle for the women in this study was the experience of being connected while maintaining a sense of separateness, which creates paradoxical and fragmented life circumstances.

I am aware that it is my time to nurture myself and care for myself and I know that this understanding has to do with moving away and separating more from others. At the same I realize that I share a common experience with other women, not only as an adolescent but now at this stage in my life. The struggle to separate is always there.

DISCUSSION

In this discussion we focus on issues regarding subjectivity and positionality, constructing intersubjective and subjective bridges between theories of the self and the lived experiences of the self, and finally connections between theory and practice. We will also address implications for health care practice.

Subjectivity and Positionality: A Unique Perspective

The concepts of researcher subjectivity and positionality took on different meanings in this research. We began with the belief that the self was not something that could be detached from knowledge or from the research process. In our study, subjectivity became a focal point, an intentional act that was expressed through self-reflection and group process. We participated in what Heshusius (1994) referred to as ‘‘participatory consciousness.’’ That is, instead of trying to manage or restrain our subjectivity as researchers, we merged and turned toward each other with openness and flexibility. We realized that we were not separate from our questions or research process, but were actively engaged as the research participants and the researchers. We believed that we came close to the
ideal of research as a collaborative process, where research is a coconstruction of meaning with input from the participants and the researchers to arrive at a negotiated interpretation of the content of the data. Our unique research process attended to the subjectivity of the knower and that which can be known while recognizing that we held shifting and plural realities.

Traditional power dynamics or hierarchical research relationships were minimized in this study. The power to define the questions, the methodology, and the research findings was not determined by any single individual; it was a reciprocal process that evolved through our interactions with each other. There was no exploitation of the participants or misrepresentation in the research findings since we held multiple positions as researchers, participants, and authors. We were able to break down many of the traditional power dynamics by positioning ourselves in multiple roles or stances and by negotiating the research process in a collaborative manner.

Positionality speaks to one’s position or standpoint (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1989) within a given research study. Because we held multiple personal standpoints as women, mothers, and academics with different values, identities, and experiences, our positions within the research overlapped and became very complex. In terms of our research positions, we were individual participants, participants in group interviews, coresearchers, and coauthors of the research. Not only were we embedded in the topic, we were also embedded in the research process. The topic of the study, “women’s lived experience of conceptualizing the self” was enacted in our research interactions. At different stages we experienced ourselves as evolving (Carlsen, 1988; Hermans, 1992; Kegan, 1982), multiple (Gergen, 1991; Schwartz, 1987), possible (Markus & Nurius, 1986), metaphorical (Hoskins & Leseho, 1996; Olds, 1992), and core (Kohut, 1977), depending upon the activities in which we were engaged. We allowed ourselves the ambiguity of not knowing where we would end up. We evolved both individually and collaboratively as the research progressed from the initial conceptual stages, to data gathering, through the analysis, and finally to the writing stage.

We grappled with the varying theoretical orientations that we each brought to the study and with our personal interpretations of the literature. We acknowledged our differences and negotiated our collective findings for the study to have integrity and to be an accurate reflection of our experiences. Although interpretation of our interviews followed standard qualitative content analyses, similar to thematic analyses found in phenomenological research (Kvale, 1996; Tesch, 1990; van Manen, 1984), the process differed significantly due to the fact that the researched individual was always present to confirm or negate an interpretation. The analysis, therefore, was a fluid process since the interpretations were continually being reinterpreted as we strove for personal clarity.
Constructing Bridges

Connecting subjective meanings with the objective body of self-theory research was the starting point for this study. However, as we progressed, we realized that numerous bridges needed to be built in order to more fully comprehend our lived experiences of this research inquiry. We became aware that we needed to make connections between (a) subjective and intersubjective experiences of selfhood and (b) the intersections between various self theories and the lived experiences of self.

Subjective and Intersubjective Bridging

The first connection focuses on the construction of intersubjective bridges between the phenomenal worlds of the research participants. During group discussions we struggled to understand each other’s unique processes of meaning-making. This process entailed more than just listening to each other’s interpretation of life events; such listening required the listeners to adopt a metaperspective of each participant’s meaning-making process. Thus, bridges between our intersubjective realities were constructed. As the participants described their particular situation we were challenged as researchers to understand the content discussed and the process of attributing meaning in relation to our theories of self.

Additional bridges needed to be built to connect each person’s subjective experience to a collective whole. For example, although each person made meaning of various self-concepts in unique ways, difficult challenges emerged when negotiation of meanings became necessary for a collective understanding. Honouring individual meanings while establishing universal codes was problematic at various times because of the fluid, evolving nature of the interpretations. Confounding such challenges was the desire and commitment of the participants to remain in relationship with each other. In more traditional research designs maintaining connections is usually not a factor to consider. It was through and between these connections, however, that deeper meanings and understandings were explicated for the participants.

Bridges Between Theory and Practice

An intersubjective bridge between theory (self-theory literature) and practice (our lived experience) was the second connection of meaning that was explored. This bridging process was similar to Kegan’s (1982) spiral of development, where the participants engaged in progressive stages of understanding in relation to lived experiences and interpretations of the literature. As we listened we tried to link each other’s stories to our lived
experiences and to our interpretations of the literature. This process was discursive in that an individual’s personal experience was shaped by how another participant made meaning of the literature. The layers of meaning became progressively deeper as we learned more about ourselves while listening to each other.

These bridges or sources of knowledge have been categorized for the purpose of this discussion. However, the distinctions between the subjective and collective ways of knowing were not always clear in our lived experiences of self. Instead, such sources of knowledge were sometimes experienced as contradictory, dialectical, and discursive. Given the complexity and often ambiguous nature of these sources of knowledge, it became difficult to determine how we came to adopt a particular position. As researchers immersed in studying self theory, we were certainly influenced by the literature, but to what extent? At times we used psychological discourse such as “multiple selves,” “authenticity,” and “self-in-relation” to describe our lived experiences. These descriptions then became the lens through which our experiences were interpreted. At other times we used cultural discourse reflecting a North American ideal of the self. Terms such as “tapestry of self,” “silver cord connecting selves,” “inner spiritual self,” and the “essence of self” were phrases that shaped and reflected our experiences. We also realized our cultural embeddedness within metaphors that were only available because of our ethnocentricity.

**Implications for Health Care Practitioners**

By health care practitioners we are referring to those professionals who intervene in people’s lives in helpful ways. This includes, nurses, counselors, social workers, and child and youth care practitioners, and, in particular, those professionals who work with women on issues of identity and personal growth. There are implications for practitioners depending upon how one perceives the nature of the self. Results from this study suggest that practitioners’ own conceptualizations of the self influence the kinds of questions asked and interventions used. For example, if practitioners believe in a core unified self, they could inadvertently guide the client to adopt a conceptual framework of a singular sense of self. On the other hand, if practitioners believe in the concept of multiple selves, they could work toward models of self that are diverse, multiple, and complex. Therefore, practitioners need to assess their own as well as their clients’ understanding of self by paying attention to language. For instance, do clients use language representing an understanding of self as unified and fixed? When a client states, “I don’t know who I am anymore,” or “I’m
not the person I used to be,’’ or ‘‘I’m afraid if I look inside I won’t find anything,’’ they appear to be referring to an understanding of self as core. This language reflects a position of the self that may constrain choices and imagined possibilities for reconstructing self.

Furthermore, practitioners need to be aware of the limitations of contemporary cultural models of the self. Considering the cultural prevalence of phrases such as ‘‘finding oneself,’’ ‘‘identity crisis,’’ and ‘‘transcending oneself,’’ practitioners could be restricting rich metaphors of the self. What would happen if the practitioner asked, ‘‘What if there isn’t a self to be found?’’ ‘‘What if there isn’t a self to transcend?’’ ‘‘What if an identity crisis is actually an identity transformation?’’ Questions such as these could help to deconstruct the cultural hegemonic practices of Western ideals of the self within the helping context.

We believe it is essential that practitioners clarify their own assumptions of self theories. Reflexive questions could include the following: What are my assumptions about how the self is structured? To what extent do I believe that discourse shapes the self? What do I believe about identity development? Is the self fixed, singular, evolving, and multiple? These questions have important implications for clinical practice.

Numerous theorists are grappling with these kinds of questions (Harré & Gillet, 1994; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). In referring to the debate between multiple and core self issues, Gonclaves (1995) states:

By transcending the selfhood duality, constructivists are finally establishing a secure bridge between what [are] referred to as two of the most conflicting cultural, epistemological, and psychological traditions—the American dream of self and the European nightmare of its deconstruction. (p. 218)

This is the challenge for health care practitioners as we move into the next century.

BIOGRAFICAL NOTES

Authorship of this paper is alphabetical; the authors’ contributions are equal and in-separable.

Marla Arvay, M. A., Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Counselling Department at the University of British Columbia. Her teaching and research interests include constructivist approaches to counselling, school counselling, adolescents’ sense of self, and studies in traumatic stress.

Elizabeth Banister, R. N., Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor at the School of Nursing at the University of Victoria. Her research interests include women’s health issues, women’s development, and qualitative research methodology.
Marie Hoskins, M. Ed, PhD. is an Assistant Professor in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. Her research interests include adolescent girl’s development, constructivist metatheory, and eating disorders.

Anita Snell, Nursing (Diploma), Ph.D., R. Psych. is currently working as program supervisor in the field of addictions. She is interested in dual disorders and self theory.

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