

**HEARING 'SILENT VOICES':
EXAMINING MOTHER-DAUGHTER SEXUAL ABUSE**

By

Tracey Peter

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociology
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Abstract

As a society, tremendous strides have been made in addressing violence against women and children. Yet, when most acknowledgements of abuse are made, they tend to be within a specific or isolated context – one that recognizes men as abusers and women as victims. There is little recognition that women – especially mothers – have the capacity to sexually abuse children. Although there is some research that examines female-perpetrated sexual abuse, existing approaches tend to rest upon conceptions of the female offender as mad, bad, or victim. However, such constructions ignore the complexity of the issue and leave victims with no language to speak about their experiences.

The aim of this work is to develop a more reflexive theoretical approach in order to move beyond rigid explanations. Such a perspective will be informed by survivors' narratives, specifically, multiple un-structured interviews with eight women who were sexually abused by their mother or female caregiver. Working within a poststructuralist framework (which locates maternal sexual abuse within a discourse analysis), survivor accounts are critically analysed in order to explore how social constructions based on femininity, heterosexuality, and motherhood influence survivors' perceptions of their mother or female caregiver.

Findings suggest the impact of mother-daughter sexual abuse on survivors is particularly profound – especially in terms of the nature of the abuse as well as the complex ways survivors have coped with, resisted, and survived the sexual violence. Further, while survivors certainly draw on (and actively use) mad, bad, and victim explanations when attempting to make sense of the violence, they also recognize that

their mothers hold agency and had the capacity to make different choices. Finally, maternal sexual abuse tends to have an enormous impact on survivors' identities (specifically, gender, sexuality, and mother identities), which I argue are influenced by dominant discursive understandings of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality.

Acknowledgements

I first want to say a few words to anyone who reads this work. Despite the darkness of the topic, I hope this research acts as a reminder that we all have a responsibility to ourselves, to *any* children, and to each other. As a way to honour the women interviewed in this study, I ask that you don't just read the pages, close the book, and walk away saying 'that's sad.' Although I understand that we often ignore what we cannot endure, please remember that the massive weight of violence disturbs society. So instead of living in anger and hate, let's collectively try something new. Take pride, stay real, celebrate life, and choose peace – after all, you never know who you are inspiring (or helping to heal).

I want to thank all the women who entrusted their stories to my care. I read somewhere that in the process of interviewing, neither the participant nor the researcher stays the same. I find this to be quite true. I only hope my words do justice in honouring your lives and your suffering. Thank-you for surviving and speaking.

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Last but not least, this work is dedicated to Mary-Jo Bolton. Years ago, in the first card you ever gave me, you wrote the last lines from the poem *Perpetual Migration* (by Gort). 'Navigating by Chart, and Chance, and Passion, I will know the shape of the mountains of freedom. I will know.' Because of you, I now know such freedom. Thanks for teaching me that there are many ways to love and give life. Steady on!

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INTRODUCTION

A Problem with No Name

Because the world needs to know.
There are sisters silent with this and there should be no more silence.
It is real.
It is there.
It happens.
We are victims – we did not ask for this.
We are sisters – all of us.

Bobbie Rosencrans – *The Last Secret*, 1997, p. 11

Fifty years ago, child sexual abuse was considered to be an extremely infrequent phenomenon. When Samuel Kirson Weinburg estimated in 1955 that the rate of such violence was about one in a million, there was little resistance to his claims. Child sexual abuse victims were thereby relegated to live in silence, a silence which continued until the 1970s and 80s when research on rape¹ and child sexual abuse² – including survivor accounts³ – began to emerge. Attention to this issue was largely due to the success of the women's movement in transforming male violence against women and children from a private trouble into a public issue. Groundbreaking studies (Rush, 1980; Butler, 1978) identified child sexual abuse as being more widespread and damaging than was previously recognized. These findings challenged traditional incest taboo paradigms, whereby child sexual abuse was thought to be a rare phenomenon reserved only for pedophiles and sexual sadists. It seemed, finally, that the silence surrounding violence against women and children had been broken.

¹ See, for example: Russell, 1982; Clark, 1977; Brownmiller, 1975; Medea and, Thompson, 1974.

² See, for example: Ward, 1984; Herman, 1981.

³ See, for example: McNaron and Morgan, 1982; Brady, 1979; Armstrong, 1978.

Within this newly emerging field of feminist scholarship, feminists primarily concentrated on child abuse and spousal assault within the context of male offenders and female victims. As such, under the rubric of ‘violence against women,’ not all gendered harms were criminalized. Eventually, however, male survivors of child sexual abuse began to come forward,⁴ as well as male victims of intimate spousal abuse from their female partners.⁵ Despite the shift from the rigid binary of ‘male-only offender’ and ‘female-only victim,’ sexual abuse by a female perpetrator on a female child victim was – and still remains – largely neglected in the literature.

One reason for the scarcity of research in this area has been feminism’s reluctance to speak about women’s – and especially mother’s – capacity to sexually abuse children (Young, 1993). In fairness to feminist discourse, there are good reasons why feminists have been reluctant to bring female-perpetrated violence into the public domain. For one, feminists have spent decades fighting the oppressive effects of patriarchy for women. Specifically, with the advent of the second wave feminist movement, sexual violence was understood to be the direct outcome of misogynistic sexism. This assertion is best illustrated by Susan Brownmiller, who argues that “rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear” (1975: 5; emphasis in original) and by Catharine MacKinnon, who inimitably writes: “Man fucks woman. Subject verb object” (1982: 541). As an object, then, woman cannot hold power or gain control. She is always powerless and strictly controllable; hence, she is completely incapable

⁴ See, for example: Anderson and Struckman-Johnson, 1998; Crowder, 1995; Miletski, 1995; Lawson, 1993; Hunter, 1990; Bolton, Morris, and MacEachron, 1989; Krug, 1989; Dimock, 1988; Lew, 1988; Condy et al., 1987; Reinhart, 1987; Sarrel and Masters, 1982; Ellerstein and Canavan, 1980; Nasjleti, 1980.

⁵ See, for example: Fiebert and Gonzalez, 1997; Brinkerhoff and Lupri, 1988; McLeod, 1984.

of perpetrating sexual violence (Anderson, 1998). Regrettably, however, such a feminist approach is actually disempowering to females (Welldon, 1988). Even if sexually abusive women are victims of patriarchy, to treat women as “always ready victims” (Graycar and Morgan, 2002) creates a false consciousness by implying that women have no control over their lives. This reductionist approach therefore ignores the culpability of a mother and her ability to sexually abuse children.

Another reason why feminists have been reluctant to bring female-perpetrated violence into the public domain pertains to the concern that exploration of female-perpetrated sexual abuse will detract from the major problem of sexual violence by males. Many feminists fear that calling attention to this issue will provide further ammunition to those who argue that women are “men’s equals” in violence (see, for example, Pearson, 1997; Straus, 1993; Vanderbilt, 1992). For instance, Janice Ristock (2002) notes that in North America and Europe, there is a strong backlash against feminism.⁶ This movement is generally supported by conservative politics and is decidedly ‘pro-family’ in its rhetoric (i.e. it views patriarchal and heterosexual models as essential to the preservation of social norms and values). Anti-feminists have accused feminist analysts of inflating the rates of violence against women to promote a false view of women as victims. For example, in a *Lear’s* magazine article, Heidi Vanderbilt (1992) maintains that given their role as primary caregivers, women are just as likely to be sexually abusive towards their children as men. As such, a key defence tactic employed by this conservative movement has been to convey the message that ‘women are *just* as violent as men.’ Anti-feminist authors, therefore,

⁶ See also: Morrissey, 2003; Berns, 2001; Marleau, 1999; Renzetti, 1999; Kelly, 1996, 1991; Ashe and Cahn, 1994; Scott, 1994; White and Kowalski, 1994.

argue that violence is symmetrical, needs to be 'de-gendered,' and should be seen as a 'human problem.'⁷ Feminist concerns over this anti-feminist backlash make substantive sense and certainly have not been unfounded. However, as Liz Kelly (1996) argues, the very reluctance of feminists to address the issue of women's violence has actually worked against the women's movement because it gave anti-feminists an uncontested space to promote their propaganda (which included myths and moral panics such as lesbians 'abuse children' and are 'serial killers').

Despite these reasons, the feminist tendency to avoid the issue of female-perpetrated sexual abuse has the potential to invalidate survivors' experiences (White and Kowalski, 1994). As one survivor writes:

I searched for articles in feminist publications on sexual abuse. Virtually everything I found was based on the assumption that men were the perpetrators. There was no substantial discussion about the sexual violence of women toward children. By the consistent exclusion of this issue, I felt as though my experience was not important enough to even be acknowledged by feminist women, and some men, who wrote so powerfully and eloquently about the need to stop male violence against women and children. (Crockett, 2001: 205)

While there is no disputing that the vast majority of sexual violence is committed by men, this should not devalue the importance of research centering on women's capacity to sexually abuse children. In this regard, Kelly (1996) contends that because of feminism's silence around women's violence, as feminists we are failing women and children who have suffered from such abuse. Kelly therefore asks feminists not merely to consider what we stand to lose by addressing women's violence, but also what we potentially stand to gain. To this end, exposing the small percentage of

⁷ Anti-feminists frequently cite Claire Renzetti's (1992) earlier work where she claimed that lesbian violence occurred at the same rate as heterosexual violence. However, Renzetti's research was not a prevalence study drawn from a random sample; therefore, her work cannot be interpreted as such.

female offenders does not dismiss the fact that the vast majority of sexual abusers are male. Ignoring women's capacity for sexual violence only succeeds in ostracizing survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. As Michelle Elliott has remarked: "In 1968, a little girl told me about her stepfather. I thought she was one in a million. Let's not make the same mistake now" (1993a: 13a).

How Prevalent is Female-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse?

When female-perpetrated sexual abuse is recognized, it is often viewed by feminists and non-feminists alike as an extremely rare occurrence (much like male-perpetrated sexual abuse decades earlier). An illustration of this perceived rarity is found in a recent book, *A House Divided: Suspicions of Mother-Daughter Incest*, by Paul Abramson and Steven Pinkerton (2001). The book represents the experiences of Helen Cross, a well-educated mother accused of sexually molesting her five-year-old daughter. The charges were eventually dropped and Cross' daughter was returned to her care. What makes this story remarkable is that the primary author, who is a renowned sex psychologist with over thirty years' experience in the discipline, argued that mother-daughter sexual abuse was virtually non-existent and the "red herring" of all violence (Abramson and Pinkerton, 2001: 193). In fact, when attempting to calculate base prevalence statistics in order to determine false reporting rates, Abramson and Pinkerton (2001: 219) – similar to Weinberg some decades earlier – estimate that the frequency of mother-daughter sexual abuse is one in a million, which they argue "seems a reasonable but probably high estimate."

The unfortunate reality, however, is that some mothers do sexually abuse their children. Although female-perpetrated sexual abuse is a relatively rare phenomenon

compared to male violence, researchers estimate a prevalence range anywhere between 1 and 20 percent,⁸ depending on whether the data were collected from official sources or self-report surveys.

In terms of official statistics, the Canadian Commission on Sexual Offences against Children and Youth (1984: 215) found that 1.2 percent of suspected sex offenders were female. A decade later, data collected from the Winnipeg Family Violence Court between 1992 and 1997 (n=1,349) revealed that 3 percent of child sex offenders were female (Ursel and Gorkoff, 2001: 82). These data tend to be consistent with equivalent sources from the United States. For example, data collected in New Hampshire and Vermont found that 2 percent of convicted child molesters were female (Rowan, Rowan, and Langelier, 1990: 82).

In contrast to official statistics, self-report studies tend to exhibit higher prevalence rates.⁹ For example, David Finkelhor and Diana Russell's (1984) renowned study on child sexual abuse indicates that 6 percent of girls were victimized by females. Further, in 1992 a hotline – called Childline – was established in the United Kingdom for one year in order for callers to talk about their sexual abuse experiences. There were a total of 8,663 telephone calls during this period. Based on

⁸ See, for example, Finkelhor and Russell, 1984.

⁹ Official data sources, such as Uniform Crime Reports and other forms of criminal justice data collection, are generally much lower than self-report studies for several reasons. First, according to a general 'crime funnel' (Schmallegger, MacAlister, and McKenna, 2004), crime rates tend to shrink as one moves from the actual crime, to reporting, to prosecuting, and to conviction. Second, lower percentages can also be viewed as a reflection of the legal system's inability to prosecute female offenders due to numerous social barriers, which will be discussed in a proceeding chapter. Finally, these social barriers also resonate among survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse, which may prohibit them from coming forward to officially report the incident – even if they disclose the abuse in a confidential and anonymous self-report survey.

records kept from calls, 9 percent (n=780) of the disclosures involved a sexually abusive female (Harrison, 1993).¹⁰

Although prevalence studies (both official and self-report data) are useful in that they give us some estimate of the problem, they are limited for several reasons. First, due to the strong stigma attached to child sexual abuse by a female (especially a mother), cases are likely to be underreported – more so than for child sexual abuse by a male (Jennings, 1993).¹¹

Second, interpretation of prevalence data should be regarded with caution because closer investigation often reveals that women are being charged as co-offenders if they were thought to have known about the abuse, but did not report it (Kelly, 1991). Although the quality of parenting is called into question by mothers who fail to report, such women are not – nor should they be classified as – co-offenders.

Third, the problem with relying solely on statistical information, especially in the case of family violence, is that not everything can be quantified into constructs, indexes, and scales because “statistics do not have faces” (Danica, 1996: 136). For this reason, accessing the standpoints of offenders or survivors is essential if a better understanding of mother-daughter sexual abuse is to be achieved.

Fourth, it is simply not enough to ask the ‘gender question,’ for example, to include mothers and other females in a list of potential perpetrators. More often than

¹⁰ The breakdown of the relationship to the victim was as follows: 34 percent from a mother; 22 percent from a female relative/acquaintance; 11 percent from a sister; 11 percent from an aunt; 11 percent from a stepmother; and 11 percent from both parents (Harrison, 1993: 90).

¹¹ For example, statistics generated from Childline in Britain revealed that 90 percent of the callers who disclosed sexual abuse by a female commented that they had never previously told anyone about the violence (Elliott, 1993b: 8). For more in-depth discussions on the underreporting of female-perpetrated sexual abuse see: Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington and Beardsall, 1998; Allen, 1991.

not, what remains embedded in the wording of these questionnaires is the assumption that *all* respondents are heterosexual and *all* violence is perpetrated by men. Surveys, then, may in fact contribute to the underreporting of mother-daughter sexual violence because of the subtle yet powerful messages implicit in their text (Peter and Bolton, 2004: 7).

Finally, it is important to ask what exactly our motives for wanting to establish prevalence rates are. Is it to confirm the 'tip of the iceberg' view surrounding female offenders? Or is it to support the argument that any number is sufficient to be taken seriously? Kelly (1996: 43) warns that caution should be taken, especially where 'iceberg' arguments are seen as the primary motive because it succeeds in propagating moral panics, which inevitably become appropriated into truth claims. Thus, simply attempting to establish prevalence rates is insufficient to the study of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. To this end, theorizing around such violence needs to evolve beyond standardized data collection (Simari and Baskin, 1980).

Naming the Violence: A Statement of the Problem

While there have been a wealth of studies that examine the impact of male violence on women and children, there is little research that explores survivor accounts of child sexual abuse when the offender is a mother or a mother-figure. When it is recognized that mothers do sexually abuse children, the focus is usually on clinical research and practice, and there is little or no attempt to theorize how survivors make sense of their mother's violence. For example, much of the clinical research on mother-daughter sexual abuse focuses on conceptions of the female offender as

‘victim,’ ‘mad,’ and/or ‘bad’ (Comack and Brickey, 2003). Thus, through psych-based research,¹² when it becomes known that a mother has abused her child, she is often regarded as anti-female or ‘bad’ (if she acted independently) or she is not seen as responsible (if she was a ‘victim’ of male violence or suffered from a mental illness – and is therefore ‘mad’). But how do daughters who have been abused by their mothers interpret such violence? The problem with constructing mothers as victim, mad, and/or bad is that it ignores the complexity of the issue and leaves victims with little discursive language to speak about their experiences beyond these labels, which ultimately has a tremendous impact on survivors’ ability to make sense of their mother’s hurtful behaviour.

In contrast, the present study employs a feminist poststructuralist framework in order to explore the heterogeneity of mother-daughter sexual abuse. Poststructuralism is useful because it challenges the universal representations of dominant discourses. As such, three mainstream dominant discourses – motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality – will be critically analyzed in order to examine how mother-daughter sexual abuse is understood (i.e. becomes constituted) through these mainstream social constructions. Specifically, by critically analyzing these dominant discourses, more comprehensive explanations of mother-daughter sexual abuse can be explored, especially in terms of how mothers and female violence are discussed.

The main objective of this dissertation is to explore the impact of mother-daughter sexual abuse on survivors – especially in terms of how dominant discourses

¹² In referring to psych-based literature, I am not referencing psychoanalytic research. Rather, as will be discussed in proceeding chapters, I am referring to the positivistic research of mainstream psychology, which is otherwise known as the ‘psy’ or ‘psych-based’ discourse (see, for example: Morgan, 2005; Comack and Brickey, 2003).

of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality inform the identities of survivors. To realize this objective, this study utilizes a qualitative methodology involving a series of in-depth interviews (up to four) with eight female survivors who have been sexually abused by their mother or mother-figure. These interviews not only enable survivors to have a voice (which until now has been mostly silenced), but their first-hand accounts can also foster our understanding of what happens when experiences of being mothered do not match societal expectations of motherhood and mothering. In sum, three research questions guide this work:

1. What is the impact of maternal sexual abuse on female survivors?
2. How do survivors constitute a mother who is sexually abusive? Do prevailing constructs of 'mad,' 'bad,' or 'victim' resonate for survivors?
3. How do discursive constructions (such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality) inform the identities of survivors?

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, sexual abuse refers to any sexual assault or sexual exploitation of a child or adolescent by an adult that results in emotional, physical, and/or sexual trauma (Struve, 1990: 8). Such a definition acknowledges violence perpetrated by a mother or a mother-figure on her daughter. Examples of potential child sexual abuse include vaginal and/or anal penetration, oral sex, genital stimulation (such as fondling), voyeurism, exhibitionism, pornography, and prostitution.

It was decided to use the term sexual abuse, rather than incest (unless the word incest was articulated by one of the study participants), even though the two

terms are often used interchangeably. Traditionally, incest refers to a sexual encounter between family members who are biologically related. Historically, this sexual relationship has been forbidden and seen as taboo (Bagley and King, 1990: 39). Yet, despite its taboo status, incest per se is not necessarily regarded as a Criminal Code offence. Specifically, Section 155. (1) of the Canadian Criminal Code defines incest as, "Every one commits 'incest' who, knowing that another person is by blood relationship his or her parent, child, brother, sister, grandparent or grandchild, as the case may be, has *sexual intercourse* with that person" (emphasis added). Explicit in the definition is that heterosexual intercourse must take place in order for incest to be criminally outlawed. Thus, under the Criminal Code an incestuous relationship between a mother and her daughter would not be an offence. Also problematic in the legal definition of incest is that there is no distinction between victim and offender. In fact, if consent is legally proven, both parties would be criminally liable and could be imprisoned for up to fourteen years. For these reasons, I have opted to use the term sexual abuse, because it is clearly viewed as a Criminal Code offence that need not entail heterosexual intercourse and the victim and offender are more clearly identified.

In addition, throughout this study I have elected to refer to women who have been sexually abused by their mothers as 'survivors.' My decision to preference the word 'survivor' over 'victim' was based on my interviews with project participants. Specifically, when I asked the women interviewed what they preferred to identify as, the majority adamantly replied that they were survivors. Despite their preference to use the word survivor, not all of the women I spoke to felt completely comfortable with being seen exclusively as survivors. For example, one woman felt uneasy with

being labelled only as a survivor because she feared that it implies that she is totally over her past victimization. As such, the categories of victim and survivor are not static, but rather shift and change constantly. As a result, even though I use the word survivor, I do appreciate that 'victim' and 'survivor' are not mutually exclusive categories and that recovery is often a non-linear process (Monture-Angus, 1995).

Finally, in the present study, motherhood is understood to be historically variable (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991). Emphasis, therefore, is not on the biological determinisms of becoming a mother, but rather on the social definitions and the dominant discursive recognition of motherhood. Intertwined within the social constructions of motherhood are the discursive terrains of femininity and heterosexually – all of which are interrelated and inform how women mother. Motherhood, then, is inextricably linked to the experiences of mothering, which can be defined as the daily management of children's lives (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991). Mothering occurs within a specific social context of dominant motherhood discourses. This is not to suggest that all women's experiences of mothering are the same. For this reason, the role of agency is also central to mothering experiences.

Overview of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into two parts. Part One sets the stage by examining mother-daughter sexual abuse, which has largely been rendered unspeakable in the child sexual abuse literature. In Chapter One some of the common cultural constructions around women and violence are explored, especially in terms of how various myths and misconceptions have constituted the female offender. Most of the work on the female offender is positivist and psych-based, whereby mothers are

typically classified according to 'victim,' 'mad,' or 'bad' labels (Comack and Brickey, 2003). One problem with the research on the female offender is that it fails to conceptualize how the female survivor makes sense of her mother's sexual violence. In terms of the limited work on the female survivor, the literature tends to be clinical (i.e. positivist) or based on autobiographical accounts of women who have experienced maternal sexual abuse. Despite the utility of these contributions, I argue that the literature on mother-daughter sexual abuse either relies on universal descriptions (of the female offender) or is largely un-theorized (when considering the female survivor).

Chapter Two introduces poststructuralism, which is the theoretical perspective utilized in the dissertation. I argue that a poststructuralist framework is useful to feminist theorizing on mother-daughter sexual abuse because it allows us to explore how dominant discourses – such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality – become constituted and reconstituted through culture, language, experts, and even survivors themselves. As such, dominant discourses influence the complex ways survivors make sense of their mother's sexual violence, especially in terms of their identity formation.¹³

Chapter Three outlines the methodological framework for the present study, which is based on multiple qualitative interviews with eight adult survivors of sexual

¹³ Although much of the scholarly work on poststructuralism uses the term 'subjectivity' (see, for example, Ristock, 2002; Weedon, 1997), I have opted to use 'identity.' Following the work of Judith Butler (1996), performative subjectivities are accessible through an analysis of identity, which represents a variety of prospective and actual subject positions. Drawing on Butler's work, Belinda Morrissey (2003) contends that the difference between subjectivity and identity is that the latter includes all the subject positions of the former. Because identity is partially visible through the narrative and performativity of numerous subjectivities, Morrissey argues that studying identities enables analysts to assess the constraining impact of dominant discourses (See also, Weedon, 1997: 102). As such, Morrissey (2003: 166) concludes that "subjectivity and identity are, thus, utterly intertwined and any separation between them must remain purely theoretical."

abuse from their mother or mother-figure. Consistent with a postmodern/poststructuralist framework, I argue that survivors' stories are affected by dominant discourses, which influence how they make sense of maternal sexual abuse. Through a discourse analysis, the present study seeks to blur the line between data and theory by incorporating women's standpoints within a feminist poststructuralist perspective.

Part Two of the dissertation focuses on the research findings. Chapter Four examines the impact mother-daughter sexual abuse has had on the lives of survivors. While the first part of the chapter reveals the nature of the sexual abuse that survivors have endured, the rest of the chapter draws on the work of Liz Kelly (1988) by exploring the coping, resisting, and surviving strategies enacted by survivors.

In Chapter Five the focus shifts to an examination of the multiple ways survivors attempt to make sense of their mother's sexual abuse, especially in relation to discourses that construct mothers who sexually abuse as bad, mad, or victim. One strategy employed by most survivors is to label their abusers as 'bad mothers,' which was difficult because many women reported that their mothers were often highly regarded in the community. Because this good/bad mother dichotomy leaves survivors with few discursive tools to adequately make sense of their mother's violence, many of the women drew on other tactics when trying to make sense of the sexual violence. To this end, one approach was to construct their mother as 'mad,' while the other was to illuminate their mother's victim-filled past. Despite survivors' tendency to draw on these 'bad,' 'mad,' and 'victim' constructs, most women also recognized the fluidity of power within their mothers' lives – meaning that they all believed that their mothers had agency and could have made different choices.

In light of the polymorphic strategies used by survivors to make sense of their mother's violence, Chapter Six examines the impact of maternal sexual abuse on survivors' identity formation. By adopting a feminist poststructuralist perspective, I demonstrate how survivors' identities (specifically gender, sexuality, and mother identities) are influenced by mainstream motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality discourses, which are contrary to their childhood experiences. For many survivors, these powerful dominant discourses affect not only how they view themselves, but also how they have come to identify other family members.

The concluding chapter provides a brief summary of the dissertation and considers the implications that emerge from this study. I argue that solutions to mother-daughter sexual abuse need to be framed within a larger discursive context in order to challenge some of the mainstream assumptions about mothers and sexual violence. As a society, we need to stop denying the possibility of mother-daughter sexual abuse by recognizing the fluidity of violence as well as the historical specificity of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. As feminists, this must be reflected in our theorizing. Only then will the silent voices of survivors be heard.¹⁴

¹⁴ In this work, silencing refers to not being heard. The usage of this term is meant to imply that survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse feel that they are absent from the ways in which violence is understood (and therefore spoken about). Although some of the women interviewed spoke about being overtly silenced (i.e. being told that they were not believed), my use of 'silence' is not necessarily meant to imply that there is an active rejection of mother-daughter sexual abuse.

PART I: UNSPEAKABLE ACTS

CHAPTER ONE

Bringing Maternal Sexual Abuse into the Spotlight

When stories are not told, we risk losing our way... Time shatters and, though we strain to follow the pieces like pebbles through the forest, we are led farther and farther astray... We forget the consolation of the common thread... We lose our memory. This can make a person ill. This can make a world ill... Until we listen to the story, we have not paid the Piper. And he will continue to take our children away.

Ann-Marie MacDonald – *The Way the Crow Flies*, 2003, p. 518-19

Almost thirty years ago, Adrienne Rich (1976: 11) wrote in her book, *Of Woman Born*, that “all human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spend unfolding inside a woman’s body.” Thus, the one thing all humans have in common is being born and, to that end, mothered. Deeply embedded in motherhood is the belief that it is natural for women to love, and not harm, their children. Linked to these cultural conceptions of motherhood are certain notions of femininity, which are social constructions of how women – especially mothers – ought to act. One popular misconception is that children are *essentially* safe with women – especially mothers – because if they are not, then who can be trusted with children (Longdon, 1993)? Thus, unlike mainstream constructions of masculinity (where aggression is often normalized), there is less acceptance that some women have the capacity to sexually abuse children.

Yet, despite being recognized as the “ultimate taboo” (Borden and La Terz, 1993; Elliott, 1993a), the unfortunate reality is that mothers *do* have the capacity to sexually abuse children and that some women *are*, in fact, sexually violent. But how

do survivors make sense of the sexual abuse when their experiences of being mothered do not fit our expectations of how children *ought* to be treated by mothers? For many survivors, the impact of maternal sexual abuse is further intensified due, in large part, to the various myths and misconceptions that prevail about the mother-daughter relationship.¹

The purpose of this chapter is to consider some of these common myths and misconceptions as they relate to the literature on women's capacity for violence. In the first section, some of these myths and misconceptions are examined, particularly in terms of how they operate to minimize women's violence or mask the problem of mother-daughter sexual abuse. A primary aim of this discussion is to showcase how misconceptions of women and mothers are socially instituted and reinforced – especially by criminal justice officials and the psychiatric profession, and through research that has been conducted on the female offender.

Since most of the research on women's capacity to sexually abuse children has addressed perpetrators, the female offender is the focus of the second section. Most of this work has been framed within a positivist framework,² and most has been psych-based in its orientation. I argue that this research – like the work on women's violence more generally (Comack and Brickey, 2003) – typically classifies the female offender as 'mad,' 'bad,' and/or 'victim.' In other words, the sexually abusive mother

¹ The exclusion of sons from the analysis is not to suggest that mother-son sexual violence is not an important issue. Rather, I have decided to focus on mother-daughter sexual abuse because such violence draws on a number of significant discursive themes that I wish to address – namely the social constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. While the impact of mother-son sexual abuse is no doubt profound, in terms of discursive violations (especially of heterosexuality) few actions deviate from dominant social expectations as does a mother who sexually abuses her daughter.

² Positivism is a term introduced by Auguste Comte in the early nineteenth century. Today a positivist framework generally refers to the belief that social phenomena can be studied scientifically (Vogt, 1993).

is variously understood as mentally ill, the epitome of the 'bad mother,' and/or a victim of abuse herself.

Most of the research on female offenders fails to conceptualize or theorize mother-daughter sexual abuse from the perspective of the female survivor. There is, however, a small body of work that does consider survivors' experiences with maternal sexual abuse. While most of this literature is either positivist (i.e. clinical or based on survey research) or based on the autobiographical accounts of survivors, it does begin to map out several important themes related to survivors' experiences. These themes, including identity, multiple perpetrators, feeling unlovable, betrayal, confusion, sexuality, sexual preference, and discussions around disclosures, will be elaborated in section three.

The prominence of the various myths and misconceptions around mother-daughter sexual abuse generates questions about their effects on survivors who have experienced such violence. How do survivors make sense of their mother's violence? What has been the impact of these myths and misconceptions on survivors' identities? It is with these questions in mind that theoretical concerns with the current work on mother-daughter sexual abuse are explored in the final section of the chapter. More specifically, I argue that most of the existing literature on both the female offender and the female survivor offers a limited theoretical framework for studying mother-daughter sexual abuse. As such, theorizing needs to move beyond these rigid explanations in order to explore how popular social constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality operate to deny women's potential for sexual violence and silence survivors who have experienced such abuse.

Societal Myths and Misconceptions

Feminist writing on male violence against women has showcased the prevalence of certain myths and misconceptions that prevail in the wider society around the act of male rape (Comack, 2000; Morris, 1987). Myths such as “no means yes,” “the act of rape has little impact on the victim,” and “rapists are abnormal” constitute the ‘cultural construction of rape’ – “a set of beliefs about the nature of the act itself and stereotypical images of ‘true’ rape victims that have become part of the public discourse” (Comack, 2000: 139). Such myths not only operate to minimize male violence against women, they are often internalized by victims, who come to see themselves as somehow responsible for their own victimization. Similar to the cultural construction of male rape, there are a series of myths and misconceptions regarding female-perpetrated sexual abuse of children. These myths and misconceptions include: ‘all mothers are nurturers’; ‘women are essentially docile’; ‘women are asexual’; ‘female-perpetrated sexual abuse is harmless’; and ‘female offenders only sexually abuse boys.’ Their prevalence in the wider society is very much fostered by the psychiatric profession, criminal justice officials, and child sexual abuse researchers.

‘All Mothers are Nurturers’

In the most fundamental way, maternal sexual abuse challenges societal perceptions about how mothers should relate to children – in large part because the idealization of motherhood is so conspicuous. Implicit in the social reading of mothers is the condition of female self-sacrifice (Diduck, 1993). Thus, mothers are not child

molesters because societal notions of motherhood associate women as protecting and nurturing – especially towards their children (Mitchell and Morse, 1998; Briggs, 1995; Banning, 1989). As Lee FitzRoy (1997: 45) writes: “The construction of mother as ‘nurturer,’ ‘safe person,’ and primary caregiver suggests that a mother cannot enact sexual violence against her child.”

Based on her key-informant interviews with police officers and psychiatrists, Myriam Denov (2004; 2001) argues that the cultural conception of mothers as nurturers is reinforced in professional discourses such as law enforcement. For example, one male police officer in Denov’s (2004: 95) study commented: “We see women as mothers, as caretakers. We put women on a pedestal, and with good reason. The woman is the mother of the family.” In part due to these assumptions, Denov maintains that criminal justice officials contribute to the lack of serious acknowledgement of maternal sexual abuse. Such a contention is supported by Ruth Mathews and her colleagues (1989), who argue that women tend to be treated quite differently by police officers compared to males who commit violence against children. To illustrate their argument, they provide a mother’s comments on her treatment with police when it was reported to them that she sexually abused her daughter.

They were wonderful to me. I knew the police officer, and they did not seem to look down on me; they seemed to feel really bad for me and for Arlene. They came to talk to me after they had talked to Arlene in school. I was just shaking, I was scared to death. The police officer sat there and held my hand. I don’t really remember what they said, but they were great to me. It seemed like they just wanted me to get better. (Mathews, Matthews, and Speltz, 1989: 49)

It is hard to imagine similar treatment by a police officer towards a male sex offender. It seems, then, that when the sexual aggressor is the mother, there is a disconnect between the act and cultural conceptions of how a mother ought to behave.

'Women as Essentially Docile'

Women are generally not perceived to be violent and thus are conceived to be physically and psychologically incapable of becoming the victimizer. Women are considered essentially docile, powerless, and obedient – compared to males who are believed to be aggressive, powerful, and insubordinate. Myriam Denov (2004; 2001) maintains that the cultural conception of women as docile is based on traditional sexual scripts, which outline how women ought to behave. Thus, to be 'feminine' means that women are, by definition, passive, non-aggressive, and non-sexual (Denov, 2003b: 48). Denov contends that traditional sexual scripts can be formally and informally detected in society through a variety of professional and non-professional discourses.

As an illustration, Denov (2004; 2001) highlights a section in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) of the psychiatric profession, which describes the sophisticated measures paedophiles have been known to take in order to gain access to children. These include "attempting to win over the trust of a mother" or "marrying a woman who has an attractive child." The explicit gendered language used in the DSM-IV singles out women, especially mothers, as the caregivers of children and makes no mention of their paedophilic potential. Denov (2001: 313) writes: "If the DSM-IV reflects the official psychiatric discourse on clinical diagnosis, females are

rendered invisible as potential perpetrators. In this way, the manual at once sustains and reinforces traditional sexual scripts of female sexual passivity and harmlessness.”

Similar to the cultural conception that mothers are nurturers, Denov found that police officers aid in upholding traditional sexual scripts that women are essentially docile. Below are comments made by two male police officers interviewed by Denov:

A woman doesn't have the capacity to sexually assault ... it's not in their (*sic*) nature. (Denov, 2001: 315)

Maybe she's a butch. Maybe she's more inclined to be a man than a woman. Maybe that's what makes her offend. (Denov, 2004: 86)

According to Denov (2001), then, the reason female-perpetrated sexual abuse is so hard to accept is due to firmly imbedded traditional sexual scripts. It seems that either through conscious or unconscious means, professional organizations such as the police and psychiatry participate in aligning female-perpetrated sexual abuse with more socially accepted constructions of femininity, which ultimately leads to the renunciation of the problem.

'Women are Asexual'

Related to cultural conceptions that women are essentially docile is the societal myth that women are asexual. Any sexual desire afforded to women is usually aligned with a need for an emotional bond and physical closeness rather than with a capacity for violence (Sax and Deckwitz, 1992). Because women are regarded as having small sexual appetites, they are not seen as having the sufficient desire required to engage in inappropriate sexual proclivities (Chalker, 1994).

In addition, the cultural conception that women are asexual is reinforced by professional agencies. Denov (2001: 315), for instance, cites a male psychiatrist, who commented that: "Women are not erotically attracted to children. That's my feeling and that's certainly the feeling here [at this institution]. That is how we view it." The cultural myth that women are asexual, however, is not restricted to professional discourses. In this regard, the sexuality of women is also covertly controlled through female peer groups (Lees, 1997; 1993). Conformity to 'appropriate' female sexuality is thus reinforced through language and the use of stigmatic labels such as 'slut' and 'whore,' which ultimately work to marginalize women from other women.

'Female-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse is Harmless'

Although there is a widespread belief that women are incapable of sexually hurting children, when it is acknowledged, such violence is often regarded as inconsequential. Sexual abuse by women, and in particular from mothers, is believed to be subtle, gentle, and pain-free – ergo, it is harmless to children.³ Craig Allen (1990) outlines three common practices used to diminish any potential harm by a female offender. First, she is often pardoned from consciously intending to commit the sexual offence. Second, her sexual offending is not seen as an imminent threat or danger to the community. Third, the conditions surrounding the sexual act often become reconfigured so that the victim (especially when it is an adolescent male) is seen as the one who was the instigator of the sexual encounter. In this regard, child sexual abuse investigators are then able to portray the adult female as the 'true' victim.

³ See, for example: Miletski, 1995; Lawson, 1993; Wolfers, 1993; Johnson and Shrier, 1987; Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Marvasti, 1986; Russell, 1986.

The common misconception that female-perpetrated sexual abuse is relatively harmless to children compared to male-perpetrated violence was explored by Jacquie Hetherton and Lynn Beardsall (1998) who provided child protection investigators (namely, police and social workers) with four hypothetical cases of male- and female-initiated sexual violence. Participants were asked how serious they would consider allegations of abuse according to the sex of the perpetrator. Hetherton and Beardsall found that even though respondents thought that cases involving female-perpetrated sexual abuse were in need of intervention, most recommended against social service interference (i.e. removal of the child from the home) and criminal prosecution. This was not the case for male offenders. Their findings led Hetherton and Beardsall to conclude that victims of female-perpetrated violence are less likely to receive protection from either the police or social service agencies compared to victims of male-perpetrated abuse. As a result, these professionals may be inadvertently perpetuating the myth that female-perpetrated child sexual abuse is less harmful than violence carried out by males (see also, Broussard, Wagner, and Kazelskis, 1991).

Linked to the harmlessness of female-perpetrated sexual abuse is the misconception that children cannot be seriously damaged in the absence of a penis. For example, James Mathis (1972: 53) minimized the potential harm caused from female-perpetrated sexual abuse by writing, "[W]hat harm can be done without a penis?" Thus, without a penis some find it difficult to comprehend precisely how women can sexually abuse children. Given the phallocentrism of language, it seems that women cannot 'have sex' independent of men. The perception is that, because women lack a penis, they are limited in their choice of sexual options and therefore

are restricted in their ability to harm. For instance, Donald West (1987) argued that men are more likely to sexually abuse children because their penis allows them to be more creative (cited in Allen, 1990: 110). Nevertheless, testimonial evidence from survivors invalidates these myths and misconceptions (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington and Beardsall, 1998; Rudin, Zalewski, and Bodmer-Turner, 1995; Y. Dolan, 1991; Wolfers, 1990). Women have been known to violate children (boys and girls) in a wide array of sexual acts, including: reciprocated fondling of genitals; cunnilingus/fellatio; vaginal or anal penetration with or without objects; ritualistic/sadistic activities (Scott, 2001); and enema abuse (Herman-Giddens and Berson, 1994; Quintano, 1992). Even though numerous studies have not found female-perpetrated sexual abuse to be more violent compared to male offenders, according to survivor accounts, it does tend to be more humiliating (Rosencrans, 1997; Elliott, 1993a).

'Female Offenders Only Sexually Abuse Boys'

According to Adrienne Rich (1980), compulsory heterosexuality, which is also commonly referred to as heterosexism, is the social norm. Gerre Goodman and his colleagues (1983) define heterosexism as the "suppression and denial of homosexuality with the assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and, second, a belief in the inherent superiority of the dominant-male/passive-female role pattern" (cited in hooks, 1984: 151). Due, in part, to assumed heterosexism in society, there are social misconceptions of what sexual violence looks like. As such, same-sex sexual violence does not provide a visual image for most people. Lori Girshick

(2002a; 2002b), for example, examined female-perpetrated sexual abuse among adults by interviewing seventy lesbian and bi-sexual women throughout the United States and concluded that it is difficult to comprehend woman-to-woman sexual abuse precisely because of assumed heterosexism or compulsory heterosexuality. She writes, "To say 'my rapist was a woman' brings no image to mind for most people" (Girshick, 2002a: 1502). There are social constructions of what rape and sexual violence look like. To include women as offenders does not provide a visual image for most people. It creates a mental hurdle that many are not willing to face. In this respect, not only is violent male behaviour exclusively universalized, but lesbian or 'woman-only' relationships become the epitome of non-violence and essentialized in their own right. Popular social constructions of femininity and heterosexism do not predict that women will rape; therefore, when they do, that betrayal is seen as far more profound. Obviously, this has an incredible impact for survivors of female abuse (of any kind) who are further silenced by the denial of women's capacity for violence.

In addition, the myth that female-perpetrated sexual abuse only occurs with male survivors is supported in much of the earlier literature, because most studies only concentrated on the boy-child as the solitary victim.⁴ Further, the self-help literature that addresses sexuality among sexual abuse survivors seldom acknowledges mother-daughter or female-initiated sexual abuse (see, for example: Westerlund, 1992; Maltz and Holman, 1987). Thus, what this literature either

⁴ See, for example: Quintano, 1992; Wilkins, 1990; Sheldon and Sheldon, 1989; Marvasti, 1986; Shengold, 1980; Sagarin, 1977.

explicitly or implicitly states is that same-sex violence does not exist or is so rare that it is not worth mentioning.

Constituting the Female Offender

Most of the literature on female-perpetrated sexual abuse has responded to these myths and misconceptions by defining them as barriers to acknowledging women's violence (Denov, 2004, 2003a; Jennings, 2000; Hetherton, 1999; Allen, 1990). While such claims are certainly valid, the majority of scholars only tend to draw on these cultural constructions within a certain isolated context – one that is positivistic and psych-based. Thus, when female-perpetrated sexual abuse is acknowledged in the literature, the various myths and misconceptions outlined in the previous section are used either to reinforce many cultural conceptions about women and abuse or to illustrate why such violence has been largely neglected, which is then taken as evidence that the existence of female crime is grossly underreported (see, for example: Hetherton, 1999; Hetherton and Beardsall, 1998; Allen, 1990; Plummer, 1981; Groth, 1979; Justice and Justice, 1979).⁵

For example, as mentioned, one cultural misconception is that all mothers are inherently nurturing and, therefore, are regarded as the most suited primary caregivers of children. Childcare responsibilities such as bathing, breast-feeding, putting children to bed, changing diapers, and many other intimate tasks give mothers more

⁵ Although, overall, the literature on female-perpetrated sexual abuse is limited, the vast majority of the research has been conducted on the female offender. Thus, even though the focus of the present study is on survivors' experiences with maternal sexual abuse (and thus not the offender), it is necessary to review the literature on the female offender for several reasons. First, maternal sexual violence is not a solitary act; rather, mother-daughter sexual abuse occurs within a relational nature of the act. Second, survivors too are privy to the various myths and misconceptions about the mother-daughter relationship, which may influence how they make sense of their perpetrator's violence.

physical contact with children compared to most fathers. Given their special status as mothers, it is completely reasonable for women to have physically intimate relationships with their children. However, this can also create clandestine offenders. Thus, some analysts contend that the role of mother as caregiver gives women ample opportunity to mask their sexually abusive behaviour, which makes the abuse harder to detect (Kasl, 1990; James and Nasjleti, 1983; Plummer, 1981; Justice and Justice, 1979; Groth, 1979; Goodwin and Divasto, 1979). Kathryn Jennings (1993: 222-223) suggests: "Many of these [offences] are done in private, thus providing the mother (or any other caretaker) with a space that allows her to commit sexual acts under the guise of childcare."⁶

The bulk of the literature, however, tends to draw on the cultural constructions of mothers by locating women within 'victim,' 'mad,' and/or 'bad' constructs as a way to explain their sexually abusive behaviour. In this regard, Elizabeth Comack and Salena Brickey (2003) argue that criminological discourse on the Violent Woman tends to focus on sex-based constructions that label women in conflict with the law as either 'mad' or 'bad.' Feminist discourse, in contrast, locates women's violence in terms of their victim status under patriarchy. Although Comack and Brickey's research is directed towards women who have been charged with a wide array of violent offences (such as robbery and assault), I contend that their categorization of the Violent Woman around 'victim,' 'mad,' and 'bad' constructs resonates with how the sexually abusive mother has become constituted in the literature.

⁶ However, as David Finkelhor and Diana Russell (1984) observe, it is doubtful that women can easily hide the types of activities which generally make up the bulk of sexually abusive acts (such as fondling genitals, oral sex, etc.) under the guise of bathing, dressing, and bed sharing (see also: Hastings, 2000).

Offenders as 'Victims'

In some form, most of the literature on the female perpetrator connects the sexual offence to her current or past victimization, which causes intense feelings of powerlessness within the mother. For instance, Matthews (1993)⁷ developed a typology for female sex offenders where two of the three groupings explicitly relate to women's prior experiences with abuse.⁸ The first victim-based category was the 'predisposed' or the 'intergenerational' offender. Here the offender's previous victimization experiences are seen as a mitigating factor in the abuse because she typically comes from a horrendous background (such as ritual abuse).

The horrific victimization background of female offenders has also been supported in numerous studies on sexual violence.⁹ For instance, Julia Hislop (1999) found that 74 percent of female offenders reported being sexually victimized before the age of fifteen. The abuse also tended to be quite severe: 81 percent experienced vaginal intercourse; 66 percent oral sex; 31 percent anal intercourse; and 19 percent group sex. Similarly, Jennings' (2000) study found that almost three-quarters of female sex offenders in her sample of thirty women were previous victims of child sexual abuse. This is in contrast to an earlier study she conducted in 1990, which found that 43 percent of male sex offenders reported being sexually abused as children.

⁷ See also: Mathews, 1993; Mathews, Matthews, and Speltz, 1990, 1989; McCarty, 1986.

⁸ The third type was the 'teacher/lover' grouping. Women who fall into this type are usually teachers or coaches; as such, they tend not to be the mothers of the victims.

⁹ See, for example: Syed and Williams, 1996; Atkinson, 1995; Briggs, 1995; Wolfe, 1993; Higgs, Canavan, and Meyer, 1992; Cooper et al., 1990; Travin, Cullen, and Protter, 1990; Johnson, 1989; Scavo, 1989; Fehrenbach and Monastersky, 1988; Knopp and Lackey, 1987; O'Connor, 1987; McCarty, 1986.

The second type of female perpetrator, according to Matthews (1993), is the 'male-coerced' offender. Matthews maintains that women within this grouping are regarded as being the least responsible for her actions – in large part because they are often physically terrorized by their male partners and are forced to participate in the sexual abuse of their children. Women in this mother-father-child triad, Matthews argues, also tend to be very dependent on their male partner; have low self-esteem; do not feel lovable; feel powerless; often are unable to comprehend that the sexual abuse is wrong; and will do anything to stay in the relationship with their male partner.

The male-coerced female offender has been supported by a large number of scholars. Sharon Barnett and her colleagues (1990), for example, found in their groupwork sample of ten women that all were coerced by their male partners to engage in the sexual abuse of children (See also: Saradjian, 1996; Wolfers, 1993; Mayer, 1992; Westerlund, 1992; Rowan, Rowan, Langelier, 1990). Similarly, Patricia Davin (1999) interviewed seventy-six female sex offenders (95 percent were mothers) who were incarcerated in seven American states for sexual abuse crimes against children. Her research utilizes sex-role theory¹⁰ as a means to examine differences between male and female offenders. Specifically, Davin argues that women's participation in child sexual abuse is consistent with traditional female roles – with the ultimate feminine duty being an assistant to men. This is why, Davin concludes, female perpetrators most often co-offend with men; female offenders tend to be extremely dependent on their male partners and, unfortunately, their need for acceptance exceeds their children's need for safety and protection. Davin maintains

¹⁰ See, for example: Davin, 1999; Covington, 1985; Baldwin, 1983; Hoffman-Bustamante, 1973.

that female sex offenders seem to be willing to go to remarkable extremes in terms of their sexual behaviour in order to maintain their relationship with their male partner.

Offenders as 'Mad'

Women's mental health histories have also received a lot of attention in the psych-based literature, where analysts have categorized female sex offenders as psychotic, retarded, or mentally disturbed in some significant manner, thereby excusing their sexual perpetration as a consequence of their diminished capacity.¹¹ For instance, Hislop's (1999) research on forty-three female sex offenders found that 49 percent (n=21) had a history of receiving psychiatric medication and 51 percent (n=22) reported being institutionalized in a mental health facility at some point in their lives. These results are similar to Jennings' (2000) study of female sex offenders in Canada and the United States, where she found that 47 percent had been prescribed medication for a mental illness at some point in their lives. She also reported that 57 percent disclosed past suicide attempts.¹²

In this regard, female offenders have traditionally been described as incompetent, disturbed, immature, socially isolated, and lonely (Westerlund, 1992). Such labels are not generally attached to male offenders (Denov, 2004). The difference between men's and women's psychosis around child sexual abuse is

¹¹ See, for example: Harper, 1993; O'Connor, 1987; Chasnoff et al., 1986; McCarty, 1986; Forward and Buck, 1979; Justice and Justice, 1979; Sarles, 1975; Lukianowicz, 1972; Mathis, 1972; Lidz and Lidz, 1969; Wahl, 1960.

¹² Some of this literature also draws on cultural conceptions of heterosexism. For example, Jean Goodwin and Peter DiVasto (1979) review five case studies of maternal sexual abuse with daughters and conclude that, as the "pathogenic" behaviour of female homosexuality increasingly becomes tolerated in society, the incidence of mother-daughter sexual abuse will intensify.

illustrated in Denov's interviews with psychiatrists. Two such comparisons are listed below.

Most of the female sexual offenders that I've seen have been mentally ill in a fairly obvious way. They wouldn't do what they did if they weren't acutely psychotic. Most are psychotic. (Male psychiatrist, Denov, 2004: 123)

Psychotic illnesses? No... I haven't seen any psychosis in male sex offenders. (Male psychiatrist, Denov, 2004: 123)

Despite this connection between maternal sexual abuse and mental illness, not all analysts have found female offenders to suffer from some sort of psychosis (see, for example: Krug, 1989; Mathews, Matthews, and Speltz, 1989; Condy et al., 1987). It is important to note, however, that Condy and his colleagues (1987) as well as Krug's (1989) work focuses exclusively on male survivors while Mathews, Matthews, and Speltz's (1989) research draws on the cultural conceptions of women as victims of previous male violence.

Offenders as 'Bad'

As Comack and Brickey (2003) point out, the Bad Woman is not new to criminological discourse. In fact, the Bad Woman construction dates back to Cesare Lombroso and William Ferrero (1895), who described criminal women as unnatural and as betrayers of womanhood. In recent years, similar contentions have been put forth by Patricia Pearson (1997). In particular, Pearson is critical of the way criminological literature has excused women's violent behaviour through 'mad' labels such as mental illness and substance abuse. Similarly, Pearson challenges the way feminism has portrayed violent women as mere victims of patriarchy, which she

labels as the “abuse excuse.” Instead, women in conflict with the law are ultimately ‘bad.’

As a way to illustrate her point, Pearson draws on the story of Karla Homolka, the twenty-one year old who was implicated in one of Canada’s most horrendous cases of child sexual homicide in the early 1990s. Before the full extent of her culpability was understood, Homolka was first depicted as a victim of her newly-wed husband, Paul Bernardo – who was cast as the true master-mind behind the deaths of Tammy Homolka (her sister), Leslie Mahaffy, and Kristen French. Pearson also notes how psychiatrists were called upon to characterize Homolka as a battered woman. By highlighting the battered-woman syndrome, Homolka’s actions were successfully excused by virtue of her status as a ‘mad offender.’ By drawing on ‘victim’ and ‘mad’ constructs, Homolka’s lawyers were able to negotiate a plea-bargain, in which Homolka was sentenced to twelve years of imprisonment. Later in the police’s investigation, however, a series of videotapes were recovered, which revealed that Homolka was an active participant in all of the sexual killings. With both the ‘mad’ and ‘victim’ constructs called into question, Pearson imposes a new label for Homolka – that of the Bad Woman who epitomizes anti-feminine behaviour.

In her book, *When She Was Bad* (1997: 64-91), Pearson notes that mothers are not immune to the Bad Women label. Depictions of ‘bad mothers’ have, in fact, become increasingly popular in recent years with the rise to prominence of neo-liberal and neo-conservative forms of governance in Western societies (Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998; Eyer, 1996). For instance, in addition to an abusive mother, ‘bad mothers’ now include: the poisoning fetus crack

mother (Sterk, 1999; Pollit, 1998; Ashe and Cahn, 1994; Faludi, 1991); the welfare mother (McCormack, 2004; Seccombe, Delores, and Walters, 1998); the lesbian mother (Allison, 1998); the teenage mother (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991); the Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy mother (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998; Pearson, 1997); the incarcerated mother (Coll, Surrey, Weingarten, 1998); the murdering mother (Newitz, 1998); and the self-absorbed career mother (Riley, 1983). Thus, due in part to the many myths and misconceptions around mothers in general, when women do act in sexually abusive ways, they can also simply be portrayed as 'bad mothers' (on which there is ample literature to draw).

In the literature on female sexual offenders, additional forms of violence inflicted onto children are often used to further advance notions of the 'bad mother' (see, for example: Davin, 1999; Faller, 1995). In her study of seventy-two female sex offenders, Kathleen Faller (1995; 1987) found that only 15 percent of the women had no prior history of child maltreatment. Specifically, Faller (1995) reported that the most common form of maltreatment (in addition to the sexual assault) was neglect (33 percent), followed by a combination of physical and emotional abuse (18 percent). What these findings suggest is that mothers who abuse are bad in multiple ways, which can then be used to prove that such women are non-nurturing and anti-female. The sexually abusive mother must be 'bad,' because her behaviour ruptures the societal constructions of women.

Similar to the argument put forth in Comack and Brickey's (2003) work on the Violent Woman, then, the literature on female-perpetrated sexual abuse tends to constitute the offending mother as either 'victim,' 'mad,' and/or 'bad.' Yet, by

locating sexually abusive mothers within one (or more) of these constructs, the many myths and misconceptions about women and violence tend to be reinforced (i.e. either that docile women are usually victims or, alternately, that mental illness explains their sexual abuse, since mothers are asexual). If various myths and misconceptions are not easily reinforced, the Violent Woman is then used as evidence in order to demonstrate that mother-daughter sexual abuse is likely underreported/under-prosecuted (i.e. like Homolka, the bad mother can 'hide' behind mad and victim explanations in order to excuse or minimize her culpability). Most importantly, however, what this literature on female abusers fails to examine is the female survivor.

Bringing in the Female Survivor

Although studies that focus on the female offender offer useful data, especially in terms of establishing preliminary compositions of women who commit child sexual abuse, much of the research ignores the female survivor. Literature on survivors may confirm or dispute many of the myths and misconceptions around mothers and violence – or it may do something else entirely. In addition, by focusing on survivor accounts, the impact these cultural constructions have can be more easily explored. As such, it is important to review the limited work that has been done on the survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse. In general, the literature that focuses on the female survivor can be divided into two groups. The first group is works authored by scholars in various psych-based professions (including social work), and the second group is autobiographical accounts from survivors of maternal sexual abuse. Both groups will be discussed in turn.

Research on Survivors

In terms of psych-based research, the most influential work on survivors has been by Bobbie Rosencrans (1997), who wrote *The Last Secret: Daughters Sexually Abused by Mothers*. Rosencrans is also a survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse. In fact, a decade earlier, in 1987, she wrote *When You're Ready* under the pseudonym Kathy Evert. Despite her personal experiences with maternal sexual abuse, Rosencrans' more recent book is based on a survey she administered to 93 survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse as part of her requirements for a graduate degree in social work. Of the ninety-three women who completed the survey, 93 percent were sexually abused by their biological mothers. The survey was quite large, with over five hundred items, and focused on the following five areas: the survivor and the survivor's family background; survivors' experiences with maternal sexual abuse; the impact of the sexual abuse on daughters' development; major effects of mother-daughter sexual abuse; and experiences with therapy (Rosencrans, 1997: 45).

Rosencrans devotes an entire section of her book to the nature of the maternal sexual abuse, in which she writes:

One of the strongest messages that was delivered through the survey responses was how important these daughters felt it was to say what they lived through – to name for themselves, for us as researchers and clinicians, and for the public what they experienced as abuse.
(Rosencrans, 1997: 87)

To this end, Rosencrans (1997: 88-95) found that most survivors (69 percent) experienced genital fondling by their mothers. Nearly half (46 percent) recalled their mothers inserting their fingers inside their vaginas. In terms of being penetrated with objects, 51 percent reported that their mothers inserted foreign objects into their

rectums, while 38 percent revealed that objects were inserted into their vaginas. One-quarter (25 percent) received oral stimulation on their genitals from their mothers. Rosencrans also found that that 48 percent of survivors were forced to watch their mothers expose themselves, and 45 percent had to witness their mothers go to the bathroom. Some 16 percent were forced to watch their mothers masturbate, while 15 percent reported having to witness their mothers having sex. Finally, 42 percent of daughters revealed that they were made to sleep with their mothers, and 21 percent were forced to bathe with their mothers.

Participants in Rosencrans' study also disclosed that they were victims of both male- and female-perpetrated sexual violence. Seventy percent of mother-daughter sexual abuse survivors reported being sexually violated by someone other than their mother. Of this group, 30 percent were sexually victimized by their father or step-father (Rosencrans, 1997: 96-97).

Rosencrans argues that maternal sexual abuse is often based on a clandestine relationship and, as a consequence, she writes: "These mothers are not acknowledged by society, and therefore, are free to abuse with almost total impunity. Like spiders in an abandoned shed, they can catch their child victims in immobilizing webs and operate without concern about public monitoring" (Rosencrans, 1997: 36). Due to this immense social denial, Rosencrans (1997: 38) found that three-quarters of survivors reported mother-daughter violence was more isolating than male-perpetrated abuse. The unfortunate outcome of this societal silencing, Rosencrans (1997: 38-41) argues, is that over 95 percent of survivors did not tell anyone about their mother's abuse during childhood. Moreover, none of the women surveyed reported speaking with

their current spouse/partner about the abuse, which surprised Rosencrans, considering that 44 percent of the participants were in long-term relationships.

In another section, Rosencrans discusses the various losses survivors experience. She reports that many survivors revealed feeling un-loved, which they found especially difficult because it is often assumed that mothers are the primary socializers and role models for daughters. Rosencrans (1997: 30) writes:

Sexual abuse of a female child by her mother deeply violates the child and can make the child into an 'in-home orphan' or the proverbial 'motherless child.' They may become 'emotionally stray children' in the sense that unattached animals are 'strays.' The problem for these girls is that they were still living in their mother's houses while the rest of the world neither saw nor understood their fundamental aloneness.

It seems, then, that the sense of betrayal is greater when the one who is the abuser is also the primary caregiver and the one everyone assumes is nurturing and benevolent. As such, Rosencrans suggests that research on mother-daughter sexual abuse needs to consider what the impact is for daughters who do not have nurturing mothers. One outcome, Rosencrans argues, is that daughters tend to hold onto a desire that their mothers will validate their 'loveableness.'

This child within us as adults seems to believe that, more than any other person, Mother can convince the world that we are worthwhile human beings... To relieve a mother of that power to be 'My Mom' in a world of people who have moms, to stop trying to win her love, or to say her love doesn't matter, would be like using a trapeze without a net. (Rosencrans, 1997: 33)

Often, this desire for their mother's love forbids survivors from seeing themselves as victims. Instead they internalize a view of themselves as someone so strange that even their mother was incapable of loving them. According to Rosencrans (1997: 33), this self-blame is easier to accept.

If abused children reveal the sexual abuse by their mothers too freely, they risk not being seen as victims but as so strange that even their mothers didn't love them. They risk making others uncomfortable by challenging the stereotypes and the social mantra that 'mothers love their children.'

Although Rosencrans did not have a specific question among her research instruments that addressed gender identity, she did find that some women reported being afraid that they would become like their abuser. As a result, one participant wanted to reject her gender outright by saying: "I don't want to grow into a woman. I resent womanly functions and I never, NEVER want my body to look like my mother's" (Rosencrans, 1997: 135). This fear, Rosencrans argues, stems from a shared femininity identification, which for daughters means identifying with their abuser.

Similarly, Rosencrans reports that many survivors are afraid that they will forever be emotionally controlled by their mothers. Even in adulthood, survivors fear that they will never be able to escape their mothers. The overwhelming sense of being controlled by their mothers can result in a sense of identity fusion between the mother and daughter. As one survivor comments: "I was not a separate person. In her mind we were fused" (Rosencrans, 1997: 31). Thus, daughters fear that real independence from their mothers will never happen. As a result, this identity fusion seems to be the exact opposite of being in-house orphans, which only serves to further complicate survivors' experiences with maternal sexual abuse.

In addition to identity fusion and feeling like in-house orphans, Rosencrans maintains that survivors also report feeling like a surrogate partner, which was

confusing because it provided them with a special or privileged status.¹³ What often happens with this special status, however, is that an inversion of the mother/daughter relationship occurs whereby the child is now expected to meet all her mother's needs and demands. For instance, Rosencrans (1997: 67) found that 83 percent of daughters reported having problems distinguishing who was the 'mother' and who was the 'daughter' in their relationship.

Rosencrans also found that female survivors often express a tremendous confusion over their sexuality. For instance, 82 percent of respondents reported having sexual problems in adulthood (Rosencrans, 1997: 128). As a result, many survivors found it easier to be non-sexual. Yet, the problem with becoming non-sexual is that survivors felt further isolated which, along with their past secrets of maternal sexual abuse, adds another layer of confusion.

Related to sexuality is sexual preference, which is another area that causes great distress and confusion among survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse – in large part because they are unsure if the experience 'makes' them a lesbian. Rosencrans (1997: 130) found that 72 percent of the daughters felt confused about their sexual orientation, which they perceived as being related to their mother's sexual abuse. As one survivor comments: "[M]y mother felt like my first lover and I wonder how this impacts on [my] sexuality" (Rosencrans, 1997: 131). In addition, not only were daughters confused about their own sexuality, nearly half (48 percent) were also uncertain of their mother's sexual orientation.

While there was a high percentage of self-identified lesbians (36 percent) in her

¹³ For a more detailed discussion on covert forms of child sexual abuse, especially in terms of how it relates to surrogate partners, see Kenneth Adams (1991) work, *Silently Seduced: When Parents Make Their Children Partners*.

study, Rosencrans does not argue that there is any significant association between mother-daughter sexual abuse and homosexuality.¹⁴ Instead, she argues that “it is more accurate to say that sexual abuse by one’s mother may force a more conscious formulation of adult sexuality than might have otherwise occurred, but that it does not ‘cause’ lesbianism” (Rosencrans, 1997: 132). The potential over-representation of lesbians may also be due to the fact that gay or bi-sexual women are more comfortable speaking about same-sex matters, compared to heterosexual women who may have no direct experiences with homophobia/heterosexism. In contrast, however, Rosencrans also speculates that survivors who find themselves attracted to other women may in fact reject such feelings out of fear of being like their mothers. Experiencing such internal homophobia, one survivor writes: “I had a hard time thinking it was okay for me to be a lesbian. I thought I should not be attracted to women” (Rosencrans, 1997: 133).

Although exploring survivors’ experiences with therapy was one of the five themes of Rosencrans’ survey, she did not report on any of the findings. However, several other authors have written about female survivors of maternal sexual abuse within a therapeutic relationship. For instance, Beverly Ogilvie and Judith Daniluk (1995) wrote an article for the *Journal of Counseling and Relationships*, which outlined some common themes that survivors experience (based on their extensive file review as well as personal communication with three women who were receiving therapy). Like survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse, Ogilvie and Daniluk found that during adolescence, female survivors were prone to severe bouts of depression,

¹⁴ This finding is also supported by Cianne Longdon (1993) who, based on her clinical experience, has not found any relationship between female-perpetrated sexual abuse and homosexuality.

suicidal ideation, self-mutilation, substance abuse, and sexual acting out. As adults, women who suffered from mother-daughter sexual abuse reported having difficulty trusting people, which impaired their ability to form healthy relationships – especially sexual ones. Ogilvie and Daniluk report that other noteworthy counselling concerns involving mother-daughter sexual abuse survivors include feelings of shame and stigmatization, self-blame, and betrayal.

One significant theme outlined by Ogilvie and Daniluk was a sense of impaired identity development for survivors. Specifically, Ogilvie and Daniluk found that all three survivors experienced a strong desire to deny any notion of traditional femininity. For instance, one survivor commented:

I still struggle with being as far away from my mother as possible identity-wise. I wanted to be as different as I could from my mother. I used to dress in men's clothes just so that I could be as different as I could from her. (Ogilvie and Daniluk, 1995: 600)

According to Ogilvie and Daniluk, survivors report being disbelieved by other family members and friends when they have courageously disclosed what was happening at home. As articulated by one woman, "I told one of my friend's mothers about my mother abusing me and she told me what a terrible kid I was for making up lies about my mother" (Ogilvie and Daniluk, 1995: 600). Regrettably, this disbelief causes survivors to feel crazy, alienated, incredibly alone, and re-victimized.

Tree Borden and Jean La Terz (1993) also write about mother-daughter sexual abuse based on their (as well as twelve other counsellors') clinical experience with survivors. One important finding Borden and La Terz report is the high incidence of

ritual abuse¹⁵ among survivors who have been sexually abused by their mothers. Specifically, of the thirty-four female survivors of maternal sexual violence, fourteen (or 41 percent) revealed that they experienced ritual abuse. In addition, like Ogilvie and Daniluk's (1995) work, Borden and La Terz found that survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse report feeling extremely betrayed by their mothers, which leads to an increase in self-destructive behaviours such as alcohol and substance abuse, cutting, slashing, and eating disorders.

Similar to Borden and La Terz, Suzanne Sgroi and Norah Sargent (1993) write about impact and treatment issues pertaining to survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Based on their clinical experience, they found that disclosures around female-perpetrated sexual abuse tend to occur much later in the therapeutic process. As a result, survivors usually begin therapy for other reasons, such as male-perpetrated sexual violence. Similar to Rosencrans' study, Sgroi and Sargent report that most incidents of female-perpetrated sexual abuse occur within a multi-trauma milieu. Yet, most survivors maintain that the impact of being victimized by a female is far more damaging and shaming than male-perpetrated violence. Part of the particular impact of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, Sgroi and Sargent argue, is due to the fact that survivors feel that it is more difficult to avoid other women – given that they all share the same sex. They write:

They could not 'simply' avoid people of the other gender as some victims of child sexual abuse by males have done. Being the same gender as their abuser seemed to impart a contradictory message: To be a woman is to be at once the vulnerable victim and the powerful abuser. These women

¹⁵ Although Borden and La Terz (1993) make the observation that incidences of ritual abuse are higher for survivors who have also experienced maternal sexual abuse, it is not clear what they mean by ritual abuse because they never defined this term.

often reported that they saw themselves and all other women as potential victims and abusers. (Sgroi and Sargent, 1993: 24)

As such, many women revealed that they purposely avoided forming interpersonal relationships with other women. Finally, Sgroi and Sargent also point out that all their female clients who had been sexually abused by their mothers were afraid that they would become like them. They were also afraid that they would become as dependent on male partners as their mothers had been.

Cianne Longdon (1993) offers a unique viewpoint on the therapeutic process because, although she is currently a counsellor, she is also a survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse. Longdon writes about how many of the common myths and misconceptions about women and violence cause survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse to feel alienated and alone. For Longdon, this sense of feeling isolated was further intensified when she first disclosed her mother's sexual abuse in therapy – mostly because her counsellor tried to convince her that it must have been a man, instead of her mother, who sexually abused her.¹⁶ Longdon (1993: 56) cautions her readers about the potential fallout of assuming that all violence is perpetrated by men: “Attempts to implicate men in all cases are misguided and potentially very dangerous. At best, they divert attention away from the women abusers, at worst they deny survivors the reality of their abuse.”

¹⁶ In her book based on in-depth interviews with over fifty female child molesters, Jacqui Saradjian cites a particularly disturbing case study that highlights the medical system's inability to respond to – much less believe – a mother's capacity for sexual violence against her own child. Saradjian (1996: 8) writes: “When Linda tried to talk about being sexually abused by her mother in a psychiatric hospital, she was told she was suffering from delusions and was medicated. Over the next 20 years Linda made three attempts at therapy. When she said her mother had sexually abused her, her first therapist referred her back to psychiatry; her second told her it was ‘really her father but it was safer for her to believe that it was her mother’ and her third told her she had false memories implanted by previous therapists.”

Finally, Kate Hunter (1993) writes about her experience as a therapist counselling a survivor of maternal sexual abuse. In particular, Hunter recounts her client's experiences with disclosing her mother's sexual abuse to others. For example, when her client first disclosed to another therapist that her mother had sexually abused her, the counsellor made her a cup of tea and changed the subject. Not being believed, argues Hunter, is another barrier for survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. It led her client to believe that if she had been sexually violated by a man, the impact would have been less shaming. Hunter's client also reported feeling very confused as a child because, although she despised her mother, she was constantly being told by others that she should love her mother – she was, after all, the only mother she had. All this confusion resulted in Hunter's client trying to make sense of her mother's abuse by attempting to force herself to believe that women (like her mother) were really men who merely dressed up to look like women. This logic shows the power of societal myths and misconceptions regarding maternal sexual abuse, because even the daughter does not want to believe that her mother is capable of sexual violence.

Survivor Accounts

In addition to academic research, there have been some autobiographical accounts from survivors published, including several books written by women who disclose some of their experiences with mother-daughter sexual abuse. These works include Linda Crockett's (2001) book entitled, *The Deepest Wound: How A Journey to El Salvador Led to Healing from Mother-Daughter Incest*, Rosencrans' earlier book

(under the name of Kathy Evert), and a non-fictional account by Kathryn Harrison (1991) called *Thicker Than Water*. There have also been anecdotal accounts by survivors published in various books and magazines. For instance, Michelle Elliott's (1993a) edited book, based on presentations made at the first national conference on female-perpetrated sexual abuse in the United Kingdom, contained numerous male and female survivor accounts.

Although there have not been many survivor accounts of mother-daughter sexual abuse, there does tend to be some consistent themes, which support some of the findings from scholarly research. For instance, survivors' stories support Rosencrans' findings that most women reporting maternal sexual abuse also had multiple perpetrators. Yet, despite having multiple abusers, one survivor in Elliott's book commented that the trauma inflicted by her mother was the most damaging and shameful form of victimization. This survivor went on to write:

It's odd that the abuse by my father was not as awful as the abuse by my mother. There's something about a mother. When you're small, she should be the first person you go to if you're hurt, the first person to cuddle you. She should clothe you, feed you, and give you physical love and care, as well as emotional support. So when she's the one who abuses you, it leads to an even greater sense of despair than when your father abuses you. (Elliott, 1993a: 125)

Being unmothered can cause intense feelings of anger within survivors, but also remarkable feelings of loss, guilt, and shame. As a result, many survivors report feeling an overwhelming need to feel love or find a bonding mother-love relationship.

In a related manner, survivors also expressed a desire to feel a safe and loving touch from their mothers, rather than one fuelled by hurt. This theme is articulated in Crockett's account of mother-daughter sexual abuse:

[M]y needs for a safe touch were surfacing, I did not know that other women hurt by their mothers also struggled with this huge issue of safe touch. I thought I was the only person on the earth who was so needy, dirty and disgusting. I craved what I could never have: the safety of a nurturing mother's touch. And it was somehow wrong to need this. (Crockett, 2001: 126)

Even if daughters feel tremendous anger towards their offender, then, they often comment on an intense wish to be loved by their mother (Evert, 1987).

Survivors often feel confused as children because they hated the abuse experience, but were constantly receiving messages from almost every social institution that they should love and honour their mothers. Related to their confusion is how women have been socially constructed to be the primary caregivers of children. Harrison writes about this confusion:

I am like a freed animal who returns to the familiarity of its cage... I am the animal who understands only this cage... I am a child who ... is at first practical. I know that if my mother strikes me or pushes the handle of her hairbrush inside me, she also feeds me, hugs me, and puts me to bed. (Harrison, 1991: 64)

The perpetual confusion caused by maternal sexual abuse is also illustrated in a passage written in *Time* magazine by Barbara Dolan, who was sexually abused by her mother.

I didn't know the difference between consensual sex and rape. I didn't know that when my husband wanted sex, I could say no. I didn't know that when a psychiatrist sticks his finger in your vagina, it isn't therapy. How could I not know these things? You ask. I didn't know because I was keeping the secret about my mother's violation from myself. To be able to see anybody as abusive, I had to acknowledge that the woman who gave me life also devalued it, demanded it and nearly destroyed it. (Dolan, 1991: 47)

For the survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse, this heightened sense of secrecy is encouraged by a social denial that women are capable of such violence. However,

when survivors attempt such disclosures, reactions tend to be extreme in that they are either not believed or become flooded with someone else's anger that a mother could 'let them down.'

As illustrated in much of the clinical research on mother-daughter sexual abuse, for many survivors, the process of disclosing is often received with disbelief. Yet, according to some personal survivor accounts, some reactions can be full of anger and rage.¹⁷ Ironically, the strongest reactions seem to come from other females. In her autobiographical account of maternal sexual abuse, Linda Crockett writes about disclosing some of the violence to a woman in El Salvador (where she was volunteering).

'It is true that God calls us to forgive,' she said. 'But what your mother did was a great evil, and it is beyond forgiveness.' I discovered that the gentle Salvadoran woman who insisted on forgiving the army that destroyed her community and tortured her husband was adamant on this point. A mother-child relationship was sacred. For the abuse of her daughter, a mother could never be forgiven. (2001: 155)

These intense reactions, however, often leave survivors feeling even more ostracized from women. It can also cause many women to feel like they are betraying their own sex by revealing that other women are capable of such appalling acts (Longdon, 1993).

¹⁷ Although not a case of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, probably the most profound story that angers feminists and non-feminists alike is the Lisa Steinberg case from the late 1980s (Newitz, 1998; Ashe and Cahn, 1994; Jones, 1994). Lisa was murdered by her adoptive father – Joel Steinberg – after years of neglect and abuse. A massive debate took place around Hedda Nussbaum's – Lisa's adoptive mother – culpability. Many adamantly proclaimed that Nussbaum was just as responsible, if not more, for the death because she failed to protect her child from the violence and then did not seek help until it was too late. This case clearly reflects the societal moral outrage that occurs when mothers fail to protect their children, which stems from a fundamental expectation that mothers will do all that is in their power to protect their children and that they certainly would not sacrifice them for their own betterment.

Unfortunately, both reactions – disbelief or intense outrage – stem from similar sources: the privileging of the mother-child relationship, which fosters a societal inability to accept women as potential abusers. It seems that the popular cultural conceptions of motherhood operate to silence survivors' experience because it is completely outside of dominant constructions. One survivor states, "A consequence of this attitude in society is that, for people like myself who have survived being sexually abused by a woman, we suffer intolerable alienation and little recognition or support from the public or professionals alike" (Longdon, 1993: 48).

Changing Direction: Theoretical Concerns

Although the largely positivist or psych-based descriptions presented in the literature may have some validity, they are not without concern. This is especially the case with the various typologies used for female sex offenders. The main problem with such classifications is that the experiences of women become compartmentalized in order to fit a particular type. The totalizing nature of the largely psych-based research is best illustrated in Patricia Davin's (1999) work. As mentioned, Davin relies on sex-role female socialization theory to explain why some women develop a propensity to abuse children, which she argues is directly related to women being coerced by their male partners. What is interesting is that only 61 percent of her sample were co-offenders. What about the remaining 39 percent? Not surprisingly, Davin reports that independent offenders were more psychologically disturbed than co-offenders, and they also suffered more severe sexual abuse as children. Thus, there is an attempt to establish a universal typology of female violence (feminine sex-roles); however,

women who do not fit into the 'feminine sex-role box' tend to get pathologized or are painted as victims of male-perpetrated violence. From these groupings, certain truth claims are constructed – such as women only abuse when coerced by a male. Yet, as Cianne Longdon (1993) points out, the problem with this male-coercion thesis is that it diverts attention away from 'women as abusers.'

A more significant problem with theorizing based on rigid typologies is that it often categorizes women as being 'victim,' 'mad,' or 'bad' (Comack and Brickey, 2003), which does little to challenge many of the cultural conceptions around mothers and violence. As illustrated, several analysts have reported that most sexually violent mothers have been abused themselves – either as children or as adults. The problem, however, with focusing on a victim construct is that the word 'victim' represents a woman's master identity from which all subsequent behaviour is either excused or justified. From this perspective, it is not that these women do not love their children; they have just suffered intolerable amounts of degradation and abuse themselves. Such portrayals depict these mothers as so profoundly victimized that it is impossible to comprehend how they could ever possibly commit an intentional act. Thus, women are depicted as "always ready victims" (Graycar and Morgan, 2002: 322). However, a woman's victim identity is not a monolithic or stable trait. Rather identity, much like agency, is always in the process of becoming. Even a woman's victim persona is relational to the various subject positions she obtains throughout her participation in copious social locations. Dorothy Chunn and Dany Lacombe (2000: 17) comment:

We do act differently in different contexts depending on the power relations involved, the possibilities to manoeuvre, the expectations we or others have of the situation, and so on. Our ability to act and express ourselves – our agency – does not come naturally. On the contrary, it is

shaped by historically specific forces that constrain and enable our interpretations of any situation.

How a woman relates to her partner is different from how she interacts with her children, which is different from how she associates with her colleagues at work, and so on. The crux of the victimology thesis is that women's victim status becomes a fixed entity, which thereby denies the fluidity of her experiences (Daly, 1994). In the case of the sexually abusive mother, this means that she is never responsible, never culpable, never rational, and always the object who is more pitied than blamed. Similarly, in the case of the daughter who has been sexually violated by her mother, her ability to resist (in whatever way) is also denied, which thereby limits her ability to move beyond the pales of the perpetual cult of victimhood.

If women who sexually abuse are not 'victims,' then they are often construed to be 'mad.' For example, many psych-based scholars have reported that a high percentage of women had mental illness problems, chemical dependencies, or difficulties with parenting (Faller, 1995, 1987; Barnett, Corder, and Jehu, 1990). The realization that women who sexually abuse their children have problems with parenting seems rhetorical at best! In terms of mental illness, however, Saradjian (1996) points out that it may be just the most disturbed women that are brought to the attention of authorities. Moreover, none of the participants in Rosencrans' (1997) survey reported that in their opinion, their sexually abusive mothers were mentally ill. From the standpoint of survivors, then, explanations that construct sexually abusive mothers as 'mad' seem insufficient and inadequate.

If not all women who abuse children are mentally ill, why, then, are these psych-based explanations so readily accepted? Part of the problem with pathologizing

female sexual abusers or labelling them as 'mad' is that it helps to perpetuate a societal myth that any woman who sexually abuses her children must be crazy. This is especially true because psy-professions have a tendency to pathologize women anyway (Currie, 2004; Chan, 2001). However, Kelly (1991) argues that the problem with pathologizing female sex offenders' behaviour is that it makes women less responsible for their actions, thereby denying women's agency and their ability to be free-thinking subjects.

Finally, in addition to 'victim' and 'mad' identities, female offenders are often referred to as 'bad mothers.' Bad mothers are portrayed as completely ill-suited to look after their children. Examples of maternal sexual abusers being portrayed as 'bad mothers' are best illustrated through survivor accounts – especially when they write about some of their experiences with disclosing the sexual abuse to others. As mentioned earlier, some women reported (in the instances where they were believed) that their disclosures of maternal sexual abuse were often followed by an intense reaction whereby other people became fraught with anger and moral outrage. Moreover, evidence of additional forms of abuse (such as physical and emotional) inflicted onto children is used in order to 'prove' that sexually abusive mothers are 'bad seeds' and really the epitome of anti-feminine behaviour. They do not love their children because they are not 'human' and certainly 'not women.'¹⁸

¹⁸ The biographical story of *Sybil* (Schreiber, 1973) provides a useful illustration of how bad/mad constructs become transformed into inevitable outcomes among adult survivors of childhood violence. For instance, after extensive psychiatric treatment for multiple personality disorder resulting from severe sexual abuse with multiple offenders (one of which was her mother), Sybil was deemed 'mad' primarily because her mother was 'bad' (for her own abusive behaviour as well as for failure to protect).

In any of these three victim/mad/bad scenarios, women who sexually abuse children are considered anomalies. An explanation for this outcasting is provided by Jacqui Saradjian (1996: 2), who writes:

Society's construction of womanhood means that for women to be associated with sexual abuse against children is so contrary to the role set out for them that we try to deny that it occurs or when it does try and find some way to explain it away.

The problem with constructing women as victim, mad, or bad is that a mother's sexually abusive behaviour often gets downgraded within these simplistic explanations. Yet, by marginalizing a woman's capacity to commit sexual abuse and locating her behaviour within victim, mad, or bad constructs, her potential to be both good and bad is ignored precisely *because* her agency is also ignored.

Further, oversimplified binaries such as bad *or* good are problematic because women can be bad *and* good, mad *and* sane, and victimizer *and* victimized. Women can be, in fact, one or all of these constructs. Instead of drawing on simplified binaries, there needs to be room within feminist theorizing to move beyond this 'either/or' thinking in such a way that recognizes the possibility for 'both/and.'

In addition to concerns about the oversimplification of bad, mad, and victim constructs, theorizing that concentrates on categories and typologies of abusers is underdeveloped because women who have been sexually abused by their mothers have not been included in the majority of the research. Specifically, what has been ignored is how survivors interpret or make sense of their mother's sexual abuse which, according to the limited survivor accounts currently available, is often fraught with an overwhelming sense of confusion – especially around identity issues.

In the present context, it seems that it is much easier for children to believe that there is something inherently wrong with them, rather than to face the fact that they were not mothered in the way that society expects all children to be treated. This disconnect between experience and expectation, I argue, is largely fostered by the many myths and misconceptions that have been culturally created around women (especially mothers) and sexual abuse. Consequently, much of the work on maternal sexual violence is incomplete, which means that survivors' voices have often been rendered silent.

The minimal amount of work on survivors has assisted in challenging many of the myths and misconceptions on mothers and violence. Certainly, Bobbie Rosencrans' (1997) study of over ninety survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse has helped to dispel many of these myths. Rosencrans' book is useful because it provides us with an overview of the female survivor; yet, her work does not offer any kind of a theoretical analysis. Similarly, Michelle Elliott's (1993a) edited book on female-perpetrated sexual abuse is helpful for two reasons. First, even though the bulk of the scholarly contributions were based on the female offender, several chapters were devoted to research (mostly clinical) on the survivor. Second, about one-third of the book was delegated to male and female survivors' personal accounts of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Like Rosencrans' (1997) work, however, Elliott's book makes little attempt to theorize survivors' experiences.

There is one notable exception, which is a book section done by Lee FitzRoy in 1997. FitzRoy analyzes the experiences of five women who were sexually abused by their biological or adoptive mothers. FitzRoy draws on survivors' experiences to

challenge mainstream sexual abuse discourses. Using a feminist psychoanalytic framework,¹⁹ FitzRoy focuses on the impact that maternal sexual abuse has on the bodies of survivors. She also examines the gendered categories of Man and Woman. To this end, FitzRoy maintains that issues of the body as well as identification within gendered discourses are quite different for female survivors of maternal sexual abuse compared to women who have been sexually violated by men. For instance, FitzRoy comments that many survivors felt that they had little sense of their own identity. Many survivors had difficulties identifying where their bodies began and their mother's ended. The basic argument of FitzRoy's work is that these blurred boundaries require more theoretical attention in order to address some of the more complex questions in cases of sexual abuse where the offender and victim have a shared biological and gendered identity.

¹⁹ In terms of her feminist psychoanalytic approach, FitzRoy (1997: 42) attempts to answer the following question: Does feminist psychoanalysis have something to offer feminist discourses on sexual violence when exploring the blurred boundaries between a sexually abusive mother and her daughter? Based on her interviews, FitzRoy found that the sexualized nature of their mother's violence was always being juxtaposed with an awareness by survivors that they had been born from their perpetrators. This leads FitzRoy (1997: 52) to conclude that feminist psychoanalysis may offer useful insights to feminist theorizing around issues of mother-daughter sexual abuse. Moreover, within a feminist psychoanalytic framework, FitzRoy suggests that future research should focus on the blurred boundaries between mother and daughter in two key ways. First, FitzRoy contends that the offending mother may abuse her daughter because she views her female child as a physical extension of her own body. Second, FitzRoy maintains that some sexually abusive mothers may learn to internalize social misogyny in such a way that it becomes inscribed within their bodies and psyches. Consequently, these mothers learn to despise their own bodies and, because they view their daughter's body as an extension of their own, may turn their own self-hatred onto the body of their daughters. As FitzRoy (1997: 52) writes: "In this way, we could view the sexual assault of a young girl-child by her mother as a possible form of self-mutilation by the perpetrator herself." While I do not disagree with FitzRoy's assertion that feminist psychoanalytic theory offers a lot of analytic power, I have opted to adopt FitzRoy's reading of poststructuralist theory – via a discourse analysis that questions the conceptual boundaries of established 'truths' – for several reasons. First, in my opinion, FitzRoy's suggestions for future research within a feminist psychoanalytic framework would be more fruitful if it were based on interviews with sexually abusive mothers – especially since it is doubtful that daughters would be able to speak about the psyche of their mothers. Second, while I recognize that several feminist psychoanalytic scholars are sociologists (for example, Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin), my main focus is on the social processes that have influenced the ways in which daughters have come to understand their experiences with maternal sexual abuse. As such, including a feminist psychoanalytic perspective is simply beyond the scope of the current research.

FitzRoy draws on the work of Judith Butler (1993) and Carol Smart (1992), since both authors have challenged meta-narratives as well as essentialist categories of “an aggressive homogeneous masculinity and a passive homogenous femininity” (FitzRoy, 1997: 44). FitzRoy (1997: 53) argues that feminist discourse needs to extend beyond rigid conceptual understandings on issues such as gender and the body in order to explore the impact of maternal sexual abuse. Much like FitzRoy’s work, I suggest that there needs to be a change of direction when it comes to theorizing mother-daughter sexual abuse. Specifically, a theoretical approach is needed that moves beyond a positivist framework in order to explore the fractured identities and complex experiences of daughters (which indirectly would also include mothers). One such perspective, I suggest, is feminist poststructuralism. A poststructuralist approach has the potential to recognize the polymorphic experiences of women, without employing a rigid or restricting context.

Concluding Remarks

Much like the earlier cultural conceptions of male-perpetrated rape, understandings of mother-daughter sexual abuse have been influenced by various myths and misconceptions such as ‘mothers are nurturers,’ ‘women are essentially docile,’ ‘women are asexual,’ ‘female-perpetrated sexual abuse is harmless,’ and ‘female offenders only abuse boys.’ Most of the literature on the female offender upholds many of these myths and misconceptions. In this regard, most of the psych-based research on the female offender attempts to explain maternal sexual abuse through

'victim,' 'mad,' and 'bad' constructs, which is problematic because female offenders do not fit within dominant social constructions of how mothers are understood.

Further, what remains neglected are the ways these discursively constituted constructs influence survivors' experiences with maternal sexual abuse. To this end, even though there has been some clinical research as well as autobiographical accounts by survivors, most of these works make no attempt to theorize daughters' experiences. In fact, with the exception of FitzRoy's (1997) work, the impact of mother-daughter sexual abuse has been un-theorized. The goal of the present study, then, is to explore within a feminist poststructuralist framework how the social constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality inform the ways in which survivors make sense of their mother's violence (i.e. how their experiences are constituted or put into a discourse) and how the maternal sexual abuse has had an impact on the identities of survivors. To achieve this goal, it is important to shift direction and fashion a theoretical framework that can address the complexity of mother-daughter sexual abuse. Mapping out such a theoretical framework is the task of the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

The Discursive Silencing of Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse

The mother is the root which, sunk in the depths of the cosmos, can draw up its juices; she is the fountain whence springs for the living water, water that is also a nourishing milk.

Simone de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 164

No one who traces the history of motherhood, of the home, of child-rearing practices will ever assume the eternal permanence of our own way of institutionalizing them.

Jessie Bernard, 1974, Forward

Feminists who draw on a poststructuralist perspective argue that its attention to language and discourse offer helpful ways to examine experience without relying on fixed understandings of identity (see: Weedon, 1997; Nicholson, 1994; Alcoff, 1988; Phelan, 1988; Scott, 1988). A poststructuralist approach is also useful to feminism because it critically questions the status of universal knowledge and challenges modernist (or positivist) assumptions (for example, that women have essential natures). In these terms, feminist poststructuralism offers a way to critically examine how social patterns become constituted, reproduced, and contested – all of which are “important tools in the struggle for change” (Weedon, 1997: 180).

Within the context of the present study, poststructuralism is especially useful because it offers a reflexive approach whereby dominant discourses – such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality – can be critically analyzed in order to examine how survivors make sense of their experiences and how their identities are influenced by various discursive constructions. Similar to the work on lesbian violence by Janice Ristock (2002), I argue that an examination of dominant

discourses can offer insights into how motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality build a normative framework that, consequently, casts the maternal sexual abuser in a certain light, sets up social barriers to the recognition of mother-daughter sexual violence, and ultimately silences survivors by denying their experiences. A feminist poststructuralist perspective allows space for subjugated voices while placing mother-daughter sexual violence within a particular situational context. Thus, investigating the discursive fields of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality enables an exploration of the ways in which mothers become constituted through culture, language, and the role of experts.

A Poststructuralist Approach

In general, there is no fixed discipline for poststructuralism. Instead, it is broadly defined as an interdisciplinary approach that calls into question the positivist epistemologies of modern science, the Enlightenment's idea of progress and rationality, and notions of total or complete knowledge based on generalizations and absolute truth. The theoretical position of poststructuralism is derived from Louis Althusser's (1971) analysis of Marxism, Roland Barthes' (1973) cultural criticism, Michel Foucault's (1981; 1980; 1979; 1973) writings on knowledge, power, and discourse, Jacques Derrida's (1976) notion of deconstruction, Ferdinand de Saussure's (1983) emphasis on linguistics, and Jacques Lacan's (1966) work on psychoanalysis. Rather than focusing on personality and individual behaviour (as demonstrated by many of the psych-based analyses reviewed in the previous chapter),

poststructuralism concentrates on language, power/knowledge, discourse, and socially-constructed meaning.

Language

Knowledge is embedded in language, which does not reflect 'reality.' Instead, language reproduces a world that is constantly in transition and is never definitive (Rosenau, 1990). Language, then, organizes experience. Yet, language is not an expression of unique individuality. Rather, there is a social element in the construction of an individual's subjectivity, which is neither fixed nor stable (Weedon, 1997). Beginning from Saussure's theory of *logocentrism*, which assumes signs have predetermined meaning, Derrida moves beyond such a perspective by supporting the concept of *différance*, where signs are produced through dualisms. For Derrida, embedded in each sign is a *signifier* (a sound, text, or image) and a *signified* (its meaning); thus, language is relational. For instance, there is nothing inherent to the signifier 'whore,' but rather it is the difference of language within other signifiers of femininity such as 'virgin' and 'mother' to which meaning is attached (Weedon, 1997: 23).

Language, then, is a powerful tool of oppression because it classifies and orders experiences; it also signifies what is possible (male sexual abuse) and, conversely, what is not (female sexual abuse) (Girshick, 2002b: 100). It is clear that for female-perpetrated violence, there is little appropriate language. Specifically,

between hegemonic femininity¹ and compulsory heterosexuality there is little language to speak about sexually violent women – much as it once was thought impossible for a husband to rape his wife. Because the penis is the reference point for rape, women who have been sexually abused by a female have few linguistic tools to verbalize and name the experience.²

Janice Ristock (2002, 1994) has written extensively on the effects of heterosexist language for lesbians suffering from intimate violence. She argues that heterosexism assumes that the perpetrator is male; therefore, language reflects this supposition (Ristock, 2002). In addition, Lori Girshick (2002a: 1508) argues: “Although many male rapists certainly deny that they have raped, there is at least a legal context for the behavior and a language with which to discuss the acts. Female perpetrators’ denial is supported by our society.”

Thus, without language there is no way to make sense of the world – much less individual experiences. In the case of mother-daughter sexual abuse, there is no culturally supplied vehicle for the girl-child (or the adult survivor) to express her mother’s violence. Consequently, there is no social context for her to ‘shelve’ her experience since humans do not exist outside of language. The only way to study its effects is through analyzing discourses, which inform individuals’ modes of understanding. This is best achieved by reversing the dominant order within a binary

¹ Drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s (1946 [1994]) concept of ideological hegemony, I define hegemonic femininity as the process whereby dominant discourses on women retain ideological control of public opinion, which then become accepted as ‘common sense.’

² When women are afforded space to verbalize their experiences, it is often in a highly sexualized manner where the abuse becomes eroticized. Carol Smart (1989: 39) refers to this eroticized re-enactment as a “pornographic vignette.”

relationship; for example, giving priority to homosexuality instead of heterosexuality, or femininity rather than masculinity.

The Fluidity of Power and Resistance

Also central to a poststructuralist framework is Michel Foucault's (1979) work on power and resistance. Specifically, Foucault maintains that a conventional model of power (which he labels juridico-discursive) denies the polymorphic existence of domination.³ In response to the exclusive negativity of juridico-discursive power, Foucault contends that power is exercised through a web-like formation in which everyone is caught (Sawicki, 1991). Power does not flow one-way from the sovereign or the top. Rather, power can be found in all the capillaries of society. Power follows no pre-ordained pattern and is not singular in its makeup. It exists everywhere – in every fabric of society. Power interacts with knowledge and, as Foucault (1980) argued, the two are inseparable. Neither the 'powerful' nor 'powerless' are outside the constitutive effects of knowledge.

Foucault (1979: 95) also argued that "where there is power, there is resistance." Resistance is like power in that it has no life outside the relationship in which it is occurring (Faith, 1994). Put another way, if there was no resistance, there would be no need for power. Thus, resistance does not work against power; rather, it is in relation to power (Bell, 1993: 32). Power and resistance are like two sides of a

³ For Foucault, there are four important elements of juridico-discursive power. First, power only manifests itself in negative ways and acts in strict reference to prohibitions, taboos, or 'thou shalt nots.' Obedience is thus sustained through the threat of punishment. Second, power operates in a binary system that sets up dualisms such as the oppressor and the oppressed. Third, power stems from a central source, such as a sovereign, monarch, or the state. In this respect, some people have power while others do not. The final element of juridico-discursive power is that it is possible to overcome its grip and obtain freedom (Foucault, 1979).

single coin; as a result, only the specifics of power and resistance can be examined, and thus not its generalities (Flaskas and Humphreys, 1993). Finally, resistance manifests itself in multiple ways, because it is not a homogeneous, fixed phenomenon (Hoy, 1986).

By locating resistance within a power relationship, feminist theorizing is able to provide space for the role of human agency for offenders (to be violent) and victims (to resist on some level) without denying any social forces that shape and contain the application of that agency (Lamb, 1995). Instead of pigeon-holing female sex abusers into monolithic victim or victimizer constructs, poststructuralist feminist theory contends that power is relational. In this respect, power is not fixed or static; rather, it is constantly changing and in a state of flux. Such a theorization of power enables the examination of situations where women may feel powerless in one instance but powerful in another. The interrelatedness of power and powerlessness also allows feminist theory to conceptualize how women can be in a privileged and an oppressed situation at the same time. One could argue that nowhere is this realization more pronounced than it is for motherhood.

Even though Foucault's work has been criticized for failing to consider the gendered nature of power/knowledge (Sumner, 1990; Fraser, 1989; Smart, 1989; Eisenstein, 1988; Sawicki, 1988; Butler, 1987), within his understanding of disciplinary power it is possible to conceptualize how mothers can be powerless victims (from their partner or through previous victimization) and powerful agents (and sexually abuse their child). Julia Hanigberg and Sara Ruddick (1999: xi) write:

Mothers who harm, however powerless they may be in their lives, are powerful in respect to their young children who are often utterly

dependent upon their effective goodwill. Deliberately, helplessly, or inadvertently mothers may use their power in ways that hurt.

Situating women solely as passive victims denies their ability to be active agents who are capable of making decisions – good and bad. To this end, feminist theory cannot paint all women with the same brush. Even within patriarchal institutions like the family, women do have agency and have access to power. The options or choices of some women may be severely limited; yet, even in these situations women do have some capacity to choose. If there is one essential quality that can be found in humans (including mothers), it is the ability to choose, even if sometimes decisions are made in darkness.

Power, then, is not a possession that is permanently held by an individual (like a mother) who unilaterally exhibits control against a weaker person (or child). Instead, power is more fluid. As Ngaire Naffine (1997: 70) reports, power “moves around within relationships and its effects are felt not by people being bent to the will of others, but through the actual constitution of our thoughts and behaviour.” Thus, one problem with fixed definitions of power is that they ignore a mother’s capacity to act in sexually abusive ways. As such, within a rigid model of power, the ‘bottom’ can never become the ‘top.’

The Social Construction of Discourse

The study of discourse also stems from Foucault’s (1981) work. For Foucault, examining discourse is a useful way to illustrate conversations in and between texts in order to construct possibilities for knowledge. Foucault argued that as humans, we are in a constant state of incarceration – imprisoned by the practices of modern systems

and institutions, which he calls 'discourses.' Foucault promoted the study of discourses (instead of focusing strictly on structural inequalities) in order to analyze how 'regimes of truth' are socially constructed or produced within a series of discursive arenas.

Drawing on Foucault's work, Janice Ristock (2002: 138) maintains that critically analyzing discourses is useful because individuals are "regulated by language and how normative assumptions are asserted through categories that include the experiences of some women and exclude the experiences of others; naturalize certain forms of violence and repress knowledge of others." Discourse analysis, then, is employed to describe how 'subjects' (i.e. who we think we are and how we act) are created through an interplay of power and knowledge (Lamb, 1999b).

Working within a poststructuralist approach, feminist analysts can explore how the social constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality form dominant discourses, which create truth claims and normalize the way *all* women should behave towards their children. Thus, dominant discourses such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality provide a working language to which all women should perform. Even though mothers are bound to certain hegemonic discourses, it is, nevertheless, possible to transcend these dominant social practices by resisting such power through counter-discourses, which operate to challenge what is believed to be 'real' or 'natural' (Weedon, 1997; Hekman, 1995). This allows space for agency, because, by living out alternatives, individuals jeopardize the 'naturalness' of everyday knowledge and custom (Weedon, 1997: 108). As such, possibilities are opened up for women to act in ways that dominant discourses otherwise foreclose.

Mother-daughter sexual abuse would be one such act. Thus, by using survivor accounts to analyze experiences of being mothered, the rigid binaries of mothers can be further explored (for example, as either active powerful agents or passive victims caught in the wrath of male violence).

Normalization through Discourse

In Foucault's (1979: 184) postmodern analysis of disciplinary power, the social regulation of human behaviour through dominant discourses is labelled as "normalized judgement." Normalized judgement refers to a desire to produce conformity rather than seeking retribution. The main objective of normalized judgement is to create a homogenous group whereby everyone is encouraged toward the same behaviour. There is, however, an individualizing effect because each person is measured against the dominant discursive norm. This is achieved by measuring an individual against an essential criterion (or ideal type) of appropriate behaviour and then assessing how much of a gap exists between this individual and the desired norm (Garland 1990). As will be argued in this work, the outcome of such rigid criteria and restrictive boundaries is the effective regulation of women's sexual behaviour (or misbehaviour), particularly within the breadth of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality discourses.

The significance of Foucault's theoretical position on normative discourses is the way in which rules are followed through the threat of stigma on those who disregard or violate them. For instance, in order to secure normative ideals of motherhood, there needs to be women who 'fall' outside these discursive expectations

(Smart, 1996). This is achieved, in part, through the use of experts – from the psych-based disciplines as well as feminists – who operate (consciously or unconsciously) to shape a desired knowledge of women. In their role as experts, then, ‘psy’ professions and feminists play an important role in reproducing dominant motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality discourses. For example, through the use of expert discourse, certain behaviours are labelled. Specifically, behaviour that falls outside the discursive confines of the ‘good mother’ are completely beyond popular social constructions of mothers.

Normalizing Motherhood

Few discursive constructions are as powerful as the social terrain of motherhood. Central to motherhood discourses is the ‘ideal mother’ – the perfect woman who provides safety and unconditional love for her child and who successfully raises a model citizen. These discursive ideals are the ultimate measure of all females. In addition, motherhood is the keystone to establishing normalized patterns of femininity and heterosexuality. That is, to be a good female and proper woman, one must marry and have children.⁴ Dorothy Roberts (1999: 34) writes:

Of course, women experience tremendous pressure, both systemic and ideological, to become mothers. Motherhood is virtually compulsory for women: No woman achieves her full position in society until she becomes a mother. Women should not be compelled to be mothers, but those who are mothers take on an obligation to care for their children.

Yet, the ideal mother (as she has been constituted today) is a historically and culturally specific construct. By embarking on a historical analysis of motherhood,

⁴ Ironically, even though there is a glorification around becoming – and succeeding as – a *mother*, in reality, there is very little actual value placed upon *mothering* (Wolfers, 1993).

the changing role of Mother can be uncovered. This allows us to question the otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions around mothering practices (Smart, 1996).⁵

For example, during classical Greek and Roman periods, neither mothers nor fathers were known to be affectionate towards their children – especially female babies who were often viewed as a liability rather than an economic asset (Thurer, 1994). In line with the logic of the time, love and nurturing were not regarded as necessary or prudent parenting functions. Rather, parental ambivalence was normative – particularly for mothers who received little recognition or status for their childrearing abilities. Further, with the advent of Christianity during the Middle Ages (from the fall of the Roman Empire in 500 to the fifteenth century), motherhood became constituted as a manifestation of carnal pleasure – due to the Church's position that sex for pleasure was a venial sin and really the antithesis of salvation (Thurer, 1994: 104; see also, Parsons and Wheeler, 1996). Ironically, the Middle Ages also bore witness to the ultimate paragon of motherhood – the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus (Margolis, 1984). Despite the idealism of Mary, by the eighteenth century, due to the strict Old Testament influence of the Puritan movement within the Church of England, women were believed to be completely unreasonable and too emotional to mother. Consequently, fathers were called upon to provide religious instruction and discipline to their children (Ferguson, 1983).

⁵ Historically, fathering has also been socially constructed to align with cultural, political, and economic demands; however, it has neither been idealized nor demoralized to the same extent as mothering. This is best reflected in everyday language with ubiquitous phrases like 'mama's boy' (the epitome of anti-masculine behaviour) and 'daddy's girl' (an envious social position for females). Further, society is far more lenient on fathers as opposed to mothers; as noted by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004: 8), "a dad who knows the name of his kids' paediatrician and reads them stories at night is still regarded as a saint; a mother who doesn't is a sinner." Finally, given that a large number of fathers do not live with their children, men are less likely to be motivated through guilt – unlike mothers who are studied and blamed in epidemic proportions (Eyer, 1996).

As several scholars⁶ have pointed out, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries most Western nations underwent a process of industrialization, which meant that manufacturing began to shift from the household to the capitalist economy. This economic upheaval created a split between the public control of production and the private organization of reproduction (Glenn, 1993). Consequently, mothers were delegated to a domestic role within the home. Since most women now participated almost exclusively in unpaid labour, a new rationale was needed in order to justify the changing division of labour. The solution ostensibly resulted in the formation of a new ideology – the exaltation of motherhood (Eyer, 1996: 37). Directly related to the new romanticized persona of Mother came the belief that only mothers were capable of turning malleable infants into fruitful citizens and moral beings.⁷ Ironically, mothers, who centuries earlier were regarded as consorts of evil, were now deemed to be “angels of the house” (Bernard, 1974: 12), and were seen as possessing loving and gentle characters.

The increased idealization of motherhood in Western societies was also influenced, in part, by the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau and his insights on childrearing, which were first published in his popular book, *Émile* (1762). According to Rousseau, the continued existence of ‘mankind’ depended on the mother’s ability to strengthen the family through her natural propensity towards emotion and relationships with others (Kaplan, 1992). In contrast to earlier eras, women were now

⁶ See, for example: Arnup, 1994; Larson, Goltz, and Hobart, 1994; Glenn, 1993; M. Kaplan, 1993; Margolis, 1984; de Mause, 1975; Bernard, 1974.

⁷ Good mothering, then, was also tied to good government and nation-building (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998; Pateman, 1992; Peikoff and Brickey, 1991). For instance, the state now called upon mothers to have large families in order to fulfill their patriotic duty (Razack, 1990).

considered innately suited for childcare because of their inherent qualities of self-sacrifice and moral purity (Glenn, 1993; Boydston, 1990; Cowan, 1983; Cott, 1977).

What is interesting, however, is that despite all of the emphasis on maternal instinct and a woman's essential nature, from the nineteenth century onwards, mothering was also scientifically instructed by 'experts' (Ursel, 1992; Lewis, 1990). This professionalization of motherhood, produced mostly by psychological and medical experts, embodied a certain discursive construction of motherhood which, in turn, aided in constituting how a 'good mother' should conduct herself.⁸

A common thread in the newly constituted good mother was the portrayal, depiction, and assumption that motherhood was the ultimate accomplishment of femininity and womanhood.⁹ Central to this portrayal of maternal gratification is the absolute necessity for mother love. For instance, according to Erich Fromm (1956: 33), a "[m]other's love is bliss... Mother is the home we come from, she is nature, soil, the ocean... Motherly love is unconditional affirmation." Thus, mother love now became a repository for the collective desire towards perfect mothering – a wish previously strengthened by the Virgin Mary (Schutze, 1987; Maroney, 1985).

Related to the normative power of a mother's love is the assumption of a maternal bond, which originally began with John Bowlby's (1960a, and 1960b, 1958,

⁸ The most notable modern expert was Benjamin Spock, a Freudian Paediatrician, who published *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* in 1946. With the exception of the Bible, this book sold more copies than any other – enough for every childrearing American household to have a copy (Eyer, 1996; Braveman, 1989).

⁹ Despite an abundance of literature that perpetuated the essential goodness in mothers, there were also childrearing manuals that depicted mothers as dangerous. For instance, in 1948 Frieda Fromm-Reichmann argued that domineering, narcissistic, and rejecting mothers were the cause of schizophrenia in their children (Dolnick, 1998: 94). Thus, occurring alongside constructions of the 'good mother' was 'mother-blaming' – especially as the psy professions became more convinced that children's idiosyncrasies were the consequence of bad mothering. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the tendency of psych-based professions to label women as bad mothers is nothing new.

1944) work on attachment theory and then re-gained popularity in the 1970s. Specifically, in the 1970s, two American Paediatricians, Marshall Klaus and John Kennell (1976; 1970), concluded that immediately after birth, babies start a 'maternal sensitive period.' Even though this maternal sensitive period lasts only a short time, it is essential to the child's development. Based largely on these findings, hospitals began to implement compulsory mother-child bonding immediately after birth. The empirical validity of maternal bonding research was soon discredited.¹⁰ For example, the work was criticized for overlooking the social context in which the bonding union takes place (Schutze, 1987). Despite scientific falsifications, the idea of the mother-child bond survived – probably because it was so straightforward and complemented other discursive assumptions of motherhood (such as a mother's natural ability to love her children).

The purpose of providing a brief historical review of mothering practices is to demonstrate that motherhood is socially constructed. Thus, despite the current normalized assumptions of motherhood, the ideal Mother, as she is known today, is a recent phenomenon – especially in regards to a mother's innate loving abilities and her essential maternal instinct (Nice, 1992; Badinter, 1982). It is important to note that the ideal Mother is also very much a Western construction. This point is best illustrated by Marlee Kline (1993), a Canadian legal scholar who uses intersectionality to highlight the ways in which dominant ideologies of motherhood in Western culture advance hegemonic presuppositions of 'Indianness,' which ultimately succeeds in marginalizing Aboriginal mothering practices.

¹⁰ See: Romito, Saurel-Cubizolles, and Crisma, 2001; Eyer, 1996, 1993; Ross, 1995; Schutze, 1987; Sluckin, Herbet, and Sluckin, 1983; Chodorow, 1978; Oakley, 1974a.

Using child welfare cases as her reference point, Kline demonstrates how oppressive Western discourses create a conceptual framework whereby Aboriginal women are often blamed for any difficulties they have in their child-raising experiences. These 'bad mother' constructions occur because Aboriginal women are being measured up to dominant Western discourses of motherhood. The consequence, Kline argues, is that motherhood, according to Aboriginal ideologies and practices, is devalued and 'othered' by mainstream systems (such as the child welfare system). Western motherhood ideologies, for instance, emphasize an individualization of mothering practices, which is counterintuitive to Aboriginal culture and custom whereby child-raising is understood to be a collective responsibility (Kline, 1993). Omitted, however, are the long-term effects of colonialism and racial oppression on Aboriginal Peoples, which often act as a barrier for Aboriginal women when attempting to fulfill Western expectations constituted within these mainstream motherhood discourses. Thus, racism is central to Aboriginal women's mothering experiences in large part because of the naturalized and discursive formation of Western motherhood discourses. Instead, when an Aboriginal ideology of motherhood is counter-posed with dominant Western discourses, it becomes apparent that there are other constructions of how women mother (or ought to mother), which should reinforce the argument that motherhood – and especially Western motherhood – is a social construction.¹¹

¹¹ An in-depth review of Aboriginal motherhood discourses is beyond the scope of the current project. For more discussion on the hegemonic impact of Western motherhood ideologies on Aboriginal women as well as Aboriginal motherhood discourses, see Hammersmith, 2002, Kline, 1993 or Monture, 1989.

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that dominant discourses on Western motherhood have only been influenced by male experts from psych-based and medical disciplines. Feminists too have participated in the discursive construction of Mother. Historically, feminists have both challenged and reinforced popular contentions of the intrinsic good mother (Diduck, 1998).¹² For example, the first-wave feminist movement, beginning around 1875 in Canada, saw middle-class women join together in droves to promote maternalism, which was an attempt to enhance the status of women via good mother rhetoric (Valverde, 1991; Morrison, 1976). Canada's leading maternal feminist was Nellie McClung, who advanced the caring instincts of motherhood by claiming that "women are naturally the guardians of the race... It is woman's place to lift high the standard of morality" (McClung, 1972: 34, 66; cited in Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail, 1988: 31).

With the resurgence of the feminist movement in the late 1960s, women challenged the traditional nuclear family and proclaimed it oppressive to women. Feminists of this era also began to re-examine motherhood and question whether it was the ultimate destiny for all women (Snitow, 1992). Feminists, in one way or another, rallied against the propaganda of the postwar years and the patriarchal endorsements being perpetuated by male medical and psych-based experts (Eisenstein, 1983). For instance, in the early 1960s, Betty Friedan (1963) interviewed housewives and concluded in her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, that the crisis of motherhood stemmed from problems in patriarchal constructions of femininity. Specifically, she argued against previous psych-based interpretations of motherhood

¹² In the following text, I provide a brief review of the feminist history of motherhood. For a more complete review see: Eyer, 1996; Thurer, 1994; Dixon, 1991; Braverman, 1989; Margolis, 1984.

by asserting that the role of mother was socially constructed.¹³ Friedan's book was widely read and, as a result, hordes of married women formed consciousness-raising groups as a means to fight against the oppressive conditions of their housewife status. Despite the success of Friedan's work, however, the very essence of women as mothers was never called into question (Eyer, 1996). As such, all women were assumed to be white, heterosexual, middle-class, and not working for pay.

The marketing of motherhood as a natural occurrence was questioned by radical feminist groups who militantly called upon women to boycott marriage and motherhood on the grounds that "[p]regnancy is barbaric" (Firestone, 1970: 198; see also: Peck, 1971; Atkinson, 1974; Allen, 1983). To mother was to perpetuate patriarchy; thus, radical feminists took audacious stances against motherhood (i.e. by challenging women not to mother). However, the anti-motherhood position was dismissed by many feminist scholars for being too one-dimensional (Ferguson, 1989) and for ignoring the social construction of motherhood (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998).¹⁴

During the 1970s and 1980s feminist analysts also began to probe both the social (Ferguson, 1989; 1983)¹⁵ and the subjective meanings of motherhood

¹³ Seven years later, Kate Millet (1970) drew on many of Friedan's findings as well as the anthropological work of Margaret Mead, who revealed that in some cultures passivity was thought to be a masculine trait while aggressiveness and an aversion to childrearing was considered feminine.

¹⁴ As a result, some feminist analysts opted to say 'yes' to motherhood, but 'no' to patriarchy by advocating for matriarchy (Love and Shanklin, 1983; Irigaray, 1981). In addition, some feminists promoted equal parenting between mothers and fathers (Ehrensaft, 1990; 1983).

¹⁵ Socialist-feminist authors, like Ann Ferguson (1989, 1983; see also Zelizar, 1985; Barrett, 1980; Fox, 1980; Young, 1980), support a multi-systems approach that conceptualizes the reproduction of patriarchy and capitalism. For example, Ferguson argues that both patriarchy and capitalism operates to oppress women within motherhood.

(Benjamin, 1988; Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976).¹⁶ One popular feminist who challenged many of the patriarchal positions put forth by male childrearing experts was Adrienne Rich (1976), who contended that motherhood has two distinct, but superimposed meanings. The first is the *potential relationship* a woman has with her reproductive powers; the second is the *institution* that aims to keep all women under male control (Rich, 1976: 13). Thus, despite the hegemonic effect of the institution of motherhood, Rich (1976: 279-280) argues that women benefit from the *experience* of motherhood: "the tenderness, the passion, the trust in our instincts, the evocation of a courage we did not know we owned." To this end, once disengaged from androcentrism, the experience of motherhood could be transformed into a positive experience for both mother and child (and especially daughters). Rich's theory, however, is teleological because, on one hand, she argues that gender roles stem from social determinism (rather than biology); yet, she asserts, via biological essentialism, that mothers are naturally suited to mother because of their inherent nurturing qualities.

¹⁶ While radical feminists attempted to accentuate patriarchal interpretations of motherhood, early neo-Freudian feminist theorists sought to move away from historical, cultural, and social relations to uncover the unconscious effects of gender socialization among sons and daughters. Three books – Jessica Benjamin's (1988) *The Bonds of Love*, Dorothy Dinnerstein's (1976) *Mermaid and the Minotaur*, and Nancy Chodorow's (1978; see also: 2000, 1999, 1994, 1989) *The Reproduction of Mothering* – popularized the feminist psychoanalysis advancement. In general, psychoanalytic feminists move beyond Freud's work on the Oedipal stage of a child's development by supporting object-relations theory (Fairbairn, 1952; Balint, 1949) – which is based on the principles of intersubjectivity. Psychoanalytic feminists argued that gender role differentiation would persist so long as women continued to monopolize childrearing duties and parenting remained asymmetric. Although in support of symmetrical parenting (albeit to varying degrees), psychoanalytic feminists offer no recommendations of *how* to alter the psychic make-up of 'non-nurturing' men (Maroney, 1985). In addition, based on interviews with twenty-five couples, Susan Walzer (1998; 1996) found that despite egalitarian intentions, a traditionalization of gender roles existed, which she concluded was due to powerful social constructions manufactured mostly from the advice of childcare experts. For more thorough critiques of psychoanalytic feminism see: Dixon, 1991; Ehrensaft, 1990; Ferguson, 1989; Young, 1989; Gottleibe, 1984; Bart, 1983; Plaza, 1982; Lorber, Coser, and Rossi, 1981.

Despite the divergent range of motherhood perspectives, in one way or another, the feminist scholars mentioned have reproduced many of the mainstream assumptions of motherhood. One problem with the above examples of feminist perspectives on motherhood lies in their meta-theoretical approach, which ignores a mother's own ability to use (and abuse) patriarchal forms of power (Eisenstein, 1983). Most often, the ideal Mother within feminist perspectives unquestionably portrayed mothers as nurturers, primary caregivers, and safe people. Consequently, there is little space to recognize a mother's capacity for sexual abuse. Further, restricting feminist analyses within the parameters of biology creates an impasse with no logical answer – “why do *more* women not abuse their children considering the oppressive nature of motherhood in society?” (Ong, 1985: 411; emphasis in original) By accepting motherhood (as well as power, sexuality, identity, and femininity) as an essential construct, these feminist scholars simply “concede too much” (Smart, 1989: 5). To this end, writers like Lori Girshick (2002a; 2002b) argue that feminist theorizing needs to broaden beyond the structural inequalities of patriarchy in order to address women's violence.

Broadening our focus on motherhood enables feminist theory to acknowledge the importance of individual agency in that women can be active agents of power. By incorporating a poststructuralist perspective, for instance, feminist theorizing is able to explore the possibility of mothers being good/bad and powerful/powerless simultaneously. In this regard, challenging established truth claims (i.e. mothers do not sexually abuse their daughters) enables a new narrative – the voice of the daughter. This creates space for another reading of child sexual abuse, which until

recently has been socially coded as unspeakable. Through survivor accounts, then, we are able to critically analyze and challenge some of the hegemonic versions of motherhood.

Normalizing Femininity

A woman may deviate from the standards of respectable femininity in at least two ways. One is by not behaving as a lady should – for example, drinking or using drugs, dressing ‘seductively,’ having an extramarital affair ... A second, not unrelated way in which women can violate social standards of femininity is by being too much like a man. (Renzetti, 1999: 48)

From the above quote, it would follow that the sexually abusive mother is in direct violation on both accounts. As such, one strategy often employed in order to make sense of her behaviour is to construct her as essentially evil. The sexually abusive mother, then, is dangerous because her violence is a confirmation of her capacity to transgress ‘respectable’ femininity (Stanko, 2000).

Yet, feminist writers such as Judith Butler (1993; 1990) and Denise Riley (1988) question meta-narrative approaches, which dichotomize Man and Woman. These scholars argue that theorizing needs to avoid essentialism, be it social or biological, because the binaries of man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, or father/mother reflect universal, static, and ahistorical assumptions where women are located at the subordinate end of the dichotomy. Such dualisms deal strictly with difference and opposition. Chris Weedon (1997: 159) points out:

These are necessarily hierarchal oppositions, such as man/woman or culture/nature, which, in keeping with the structures of logocentrism, make one side of the opposition the key concept in relation to which the other is defined negatively. Deconstruction, by reversing these

oppositions, is able to show how discourses achieve their effects, rhetorically, and to displace their systems.

The problem with the rigid dichotomy within gender is that it depends on a Cartesian split whereby women are seen as less rational and, therefore, less responsible for their behaviour than men. In order for women to appear rational “the contradictory stories of others must be erased, devalued and suppressed” (Flax, 1993: 33). Thus, these binaries result in the construction of an aggressive homogeneous masculinity and a passive homogeneous femininity (FitzRoy, 1997). Only through the decentring of gender constructions can the regulative and normative formations of female identity be exposed.

Especially in the case of sexual violence, feminist theory needs to contest these presumed fundamental assumptions, because they prohibit the possibility of alternative accounts and experiences (Smart, 1995; Weir, 1994). In addition, as argued by feminist poststructuralists, rejecting problematic notions of an essential femininity does not require contemporary feminism to ignore the validity of identity politics or agency. Linda Alcoff (1988), for instance, acknowledges that gender is not a pre-discursive entity; rather, it is a construction that is logically formalized through a matrix of practices, customs, and discourses. Butler (1990: 138) calls this “gender parody” because it “does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate.” In addition, Butler draws on Foucault’s use of power/knowledge in her critique of the discursive formation of gender as an identity, because it gives us a way to acknowledge who is excluded from female identities and how the exclusion is sustained.

It is important, then, to explore women's fractured identities and their multiple – often contradictory – roles in society (Stanko, 2003).¹⁷ Examining the fractured identities of women also has challenged previous feminist notions of the authentic Woman because it implies a single identity (for instance, mother as offender and daughter as victim), which bestows one 'true' voice (Mahoney, 1996). Because the category Woman is internally fractured, the multiple identities of women, which are often contradictory – such as, victim/abuser, good mother/bad mother, homosexual/heterosexual, and loving mother/hurtful mother – can be explored. There is simply no fixed or stable female reality, because a woman's identity shifts synchronically and diachronically (Abbey and O'Reilly, 1998). Simultaneously, women are mothers, daughters, partners, friends, colleagues, etc. At any given time, these fractured identities will be both complementary and conflicting. For this reason, the normativity of femininity must be re-contextualized as having multiple constructions.

By focusing on identity as fluid, heterogeneous, changing, and fractured, Butler (1990) attempts to understand gender as a performance. For Butler, identity does not precede the performance of one's gender, which is constituted through the convergence of multiple discourses where we repeat, perform, and act out our sex. Related to performativity, then, is 'doing gender,' which moves beyond a structured analysis to encompass how women 'perform' various roles in society (see also: Daly, 1997; West and Zimmerman, 1987). In this regard, if gender is performative, why

¹⁷ The concept 'fractured identities' is more commonly aligned with a postmodern framework. Generally, however, there is little theoretical difference between poststructuralism and postmodernism, except that the latter also draws on the work of Jean Baudrillard (1994), David Lehman (1991), Ben Agger (1990), Jean-François Lyotard (1970).

should all women be expected to 'perform' to the ideal female? Or, why should it be surprising when some women become sexually aggressive with their children and thereby 'perform' alternative scripts, which arguably are more aligned with normative masculine behaviour? A male who sexually abuses his daughter can be made sense of through masculinity discourses, whereby he retains his agency and is still seen as *rational* despite his *irrational* act. "Violence is viewed as one of many possible behaviour patterns for men; it is not strikingly unusual even when extreme" (Morrissey, 2003: 17). Yet, when it is the mother who is the sexual violator, her very 'womanhood' comes into question (Scott, 2001; Crawford, 1997). The same does not hold for men who sexually abuse.

Within a performative framework, there is a greater understanding of how women conform to some traditional gender scripts, even while they violate others (i.e. by being sexually abusive). Sara Scott (2001) gives an analogy of a female biker who may combine heavy drinking and a hard-core lifestyle with obediently fulfilling the domestic role of a wife or girlfriend. Hegemonic (or dominant) discourses of femininity are not monolithic and the ideals inherent in them are not suitable to all women; as a result, women learn that they have a range of possibilities (Weedon, 1997). Thus, it is possible for women to both resist and reproduce femininity (Moore, 1994). As Scott (2001: 105) writes, "This makes possible the development of resistant identities including those of feminism, but it also allows for the existence of numerous subcultural variations in gender roles and expectations which may be less than revolutionary."

A performative framework also makes possible women's agency, because feminist poststructuralists do not treat agency (constituting) and construction (constituted) as antithetical; rather, agency is a product of discourse because there is no pre-discursive 'I' (Hekman, 1995: 202). This position is taken by Henrietta Moore (1994: 140), who maintains:

If we accept the idea that the concept of person is only intelligible with reference to a culturally specific set of categories, discourses and practices, then we have to acknowledge the different ways in which the categories woman and man, and the discourses which employ these categories, are involved in the production and reproduction of notions of personhood and agency.

Women hold many subject positions within a range of discourses, and some will contradict others (i.e. the passive asexual female versus the omnipotent mother). It is a woman's subjective experiences of identities that help to constitute her as an active agent in the world. Identity, then, is not only socially constructed, but also the result of "individual and collective choices within the parameters of regulated freedoms" (Faith, 1994: 41).

Normalizing Heterosexuality

By drawing on a Foucauldian perspective of normalization techniques, feminist theorizing can examine how sexuality is put into a discourse within specific power/knowledge networks. Foucault's (1981) work in the *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* explores the *effects* of sex rather than its *origins*. Because of the discursive terrain of sexuality, it cannot be specifically located within an individual's body; nor is it a natural phenomenon. Rather, "it is formed within and informed by the society in which one lives" (Bell, 1993: 15). Sexuality, then, is something that is

culturally constructed, sustained, and reproduced through a bio-political collection of discursive manoeuvres, namely the *deployment of alliance* and the *deployment of sexuality* (Foucault, 1981).

Foucault argues that the Victorian era saw a discursive upsurge around sex and the apparatus of sexuality as something that needed to be strictly regulated in order to produce and reproduce docile bodies. Sexuality was no longer seen as the property of an individual body (the deployment of alliance). Instead, it became the quintessential representation of self. As a result, sexuality turned into the object and product of social discourse, which influenced the way people talked about sex (Bell, 1991). The deployment of sexuality operated through normalizing techniques, which discursively created what sexuality should look like. In this process, compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) continued to be socially regulated.

Even today, heteronormative categories still resonate. Implicit in heterosexual assumptions are normalcy and naturalness, which thereby construct all other sexualities as abnormal and unnatural. Homosexuality is regarded as a social hangover from past traumas rather than a positive choice (O'Dell, 1991). It is a deviant act that represents sinful behaviour. Heterosexuality, then, becomes regulated and is regarded as the normalized form of adult sexuality. Further, in the case of a mother's sexuality, she is thought to be asexual. Consequently, knowledge about sexuality within this discursive arena works to create truth claims about sex. When women are discursively 'permitted' to be sexual, it is within the regulated confines of an adult heterosexual encounter. Although maternal sexual abuse towards a son is certainly not acceptable behaviour (nor is it normalized in the sense that it is socially

permitted), it is nevertheless within the sexual boundaries of heterosexuality. Mother-daughter sexual abuse, however, is explicit homosexual behaviour, which therefore is an additional boundary violation of normalized sexuality.

A Poststructuralist Synthesis: Bringing in the Voice of the Survivor

Some critics have argued that poststructuralism ignores the importance of structural inequalities, such as patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism, and racism (see, for example: Chunn and Lacombe, 2000; Boyd, 1999, 1994; Naffine, 1997; Currie, 1992). Naffine (1997: 89) writes:

There are powerful institutional reasons why many continue to think that 'man' is quite naturally the dominant and more important term, even when deconstruction reveals the dependence of that term on 'woman'... Deconstruction may do some of the job of effecting change, but alone it is insufficient to undo the institutional systems that have been built upon, and that help to sustain, the economic and political power of men over women.

The contention that poststructuralism dismisses the importance of hegemonic social structures, I believe, rests on a misreading of the poststructuralist insight. Privileging discourses, agency, and the fluidity of power is not meant to negate the effect of structures such as patriarchy, because women have different experiences from men. For example, Chris Weedon (1997: 167), a poststructuralist feminist scholar, argues that under patriarchy women have "differential access to the discursive field which constitutes gender, gendered experience and gender relations of power in society."

By drawing on a poststructuralist perspective, feminist theorizing can examine how dominant discourses become constituted and reconstituted. This allows space in our theorizing to accept that social constructions of motherhood, femininity, and

heterosexuality are simultaneously developed and resisted, which thereby permits analysis of alternative practices like mother-daughter sexual abuse. To this end, I am not rejecting structural explanations for women's violence, per se; rather, my aim is to dig deeper in order to explore how survivors draw on dominant discourses when they are attempting to make sense of their mothers' sexual violence.

Such a theoretical endeavour is not new to feminist theorizing of women's violence (see, for example: Ristock, 2002; Eaton, 1994; Kelly, 1991). Thus, my approach is compatible with that of several feminists studying women's capacity for and practice of violence who stress the need to look at gender within a social and cultural context (discourse). Specifically, it is useful to explore how gender is situationally structured (within the intersectionality of race, class, sexuality, etc.)¹⁸ in order to appreciate the structured action and overlapping effects of gender, agency, and social structure (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 1995). Research on women's capacity for sexual violence needs to investigate, in a more inclusive way, the interconnection between a woman's agency and the consequence of phallocentric interpretations of Woman, Mother, and Heterosexual (which are constituted through dominant discourses such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality).

The goal of this work, then, is not to come up with answers that will explain the occurrence of mother-daughter sexual abuse – such a grand objective is too totalizing and, therefore, is unrealistic. This is not to dispute the lesser power of women in the public realm or to deny that women are often caught in the wrath of

¹⁸ Intersectionality theory considers women-as-subjects within a multiple milieu of race, class, sexuality, age, etc. (see, for example: Johnson, 2002; Jiwani, 2001; Grillo, 1995; Mann, 1994; Crenshaw, 1993). Thus, shifting attention away from a unified centre allows feminist theorizing to embrace various intersections and differences.

androcentric misogyny. Rather, the aim of this research is to address the impact of mother-daughter sexual abuse in relation to how survivors make sense of the violence through discursive lenses such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. Put another way, attention must be given to how dominant discourses influence the ways in which survivors come to make sense of their experiences with maternal sexual abuse. Such theorizing, I contend, can be achieved by exploring how survivors' experiences become constituted and reconstituted through mainstream social constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality, which inevitably cause a disconnect between survivors' actual experiences of being mothered with society's expectations of how all daughters ought to be treated by mothers.

It is important to remember that survivors are also exposed to these social discourses. This often means that the child who is sexually abused by her mother feels a profound sense of guilt and shame, not only due to the immense confusion precipitated from the acts themselves, but also via motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality discourses, which contradict her actual experience. To examine identity and discourse is, therefore, valuable in exploring how survivors come to develop identities apart from their abusers. Thus, within a poststructuralist perspective our theorizing is able to move beyond a simplistic 'cycle of abuse' argument, which fails to answer why very few women go on to become sexually abusive, even though they are far more likely to be victims of violence (Scott, 2001).

Rather, a more complex approach is needed in order to address how children make sense of being sexually abused within multiple situations and how this affects the construction of their identities. Scott (2001: 105) writes:

All children draw on the (gendered) discourses concerning sexuality and the family that are available to them, and out of a mixture of private experiences and public discourses begin to construct the narratives of self which guide, inform and justify their course of life.

Survivors of maternal sexual abuse are often caught within a multitude of identities – daughter, sister, lover, object, child, victim, caretaker, etc. Each one affects the other. This causes confusion between identities; thus, the survivor is constantly trapped within a performance of uncertainty. Further, because violence narratives are based on male offenders, a daughter's ability to make sense of her mother's sexual abuse is limited by the lack of social recognition for such violence. Given the poststructuralist contention that language influences lived experience, the complexity of a daughter's fractured identities ought to be addressed – especially because the words (i.e. discursive language) to describe her experiences with maternal violence are so limited.

Concluding Remarks

The discursive terrain of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality are constituted and reconstituted, in part, by expert disciplines such as psychology, medicine, and feminism.¹⁹ Even though, on some level, feminist analysts have transcended the boundaries by moving away from Mother as an object to Mother as subject, such recognition seems to disappear when a mother is sexually abusive. Its disappearance shows the limits of our contentions. Within the realm of maternal sexual abuse,

¹⁹ It may seem inappropriate to include feminism alongside medical and psych-based experts. Following the work of Laureen Snider (2003), it is important to recognize that feminists are carriers of knowledge which, like all knowledge, is produced and constituted. As such, feminism ought to be regarded as an expert discourse. Moreover, like all expert discourses, feminism represents the Fallible Expert (Snider, 2003: 371).

feminist theorizing has been unable to address the autonomous and multi-faceted subjective positions of mothers.

A poststructuralist perspective delineates the historical process of how mothers have become constituted by illustrating the many claims about mothers. Following a poststructuralist framework, my premise is that mothers and daughters can only function within the linguistic constraints of a particular moment because motherhood (much like femininity and heterosexuality) is socially constructed and culturally determined by discourse. Put another way, motherhood is not a natural condition for women; rather, the category Mother has been socially produced through a variety of discourses, which are connected to the institutional practices and ideologies of that era.

For this reason, a poststructuralist approach challenges essentialist views of mothers because poststructuralism recognizes individual agency within a multiplicity of constraining and enabling discourses. By accepting the possibility of Mother as an active agent within a discursively produced social order, a platform is created that acknowledges some women's ability to exercise power over men, other women, and their children. As such, within a poststructuralist perspective, there is a recognition of the discursive constitution of mothers, but also their ability, as recipients and reproducers of dominant discourses, to make certain choices – and therefore act in sexually abusive ways.

Using a feminist poststructuralist perspective, my central argument will be that society's reluctance to acknowledge mother-daughter sexual abuse is due to the hegemonic (dominant) discourses of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. An

investigation of how Mother becomes constituted through discourse is best achieved through a critical analysis of these popular social constructions. Thus, a poststructuralist approach is useful because it allows feminist theorizing of mother-daughter sexual abuse to move beyond rigid categories and binary logic, which only succeed in supporting a falsely universal and static identity of Mother.

In sum, feminist theorizing needs to address these mainstream social constructions in order to attend to the multifaceted conceptualizations of survivors' identities because, as a consequence of hegemonic discourses, the daughter's identity also becomes confined. In the case of the daughter who is sexually abused by her mother, the constricted space within the dominant discourses of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality not only marginalizes her experiences, but in many ways silences them as well because her experiences do not fit within these mainstream discursive terrains. Thus, a women-centred framework, informed by a discourse analysis, will enable feminist theorizing to conceptualize survivors' experiences within a broader social (i.e. discursive) context. Only then will we begin to speak about the unspeakable.

CHAPTER THREE

Employing Feminist Research

In learning to speak our experience and situation, we insist upon the right to begin where we are, to stand as subjects of our sentences, and to hear one another as the authoritative speakers of our experience.

Dorothy Smith, 1975, p. 95

At first blush, child sex abuse victims appear powerless. They lack the words to construct an alternate identity for themselves. Their identity is tied to the abuse because society tells them it is and, on their own, they have difficulty defining it in any other way. But child sex abuse survivors can be both active and reactive in their ability to control the definitions and conditions contributing to their self-identities.

Carol Rambo Ronai, 1995, p. 418

Central to poststructural/postmodern arguments is that all knowledge is partial and embedded in social relations; as a result, no one “can speak for women because no such person exists except within a specific set of already gendered relations” (Razack, 1993: 42). Within this framework, women’s voices must determine the meaning of practices in which women engage (Fineman and Thomadsen, 1991). Such an approach typically favours qualitative methodologies as the best way to listen to women’s voices and to investigate various patterns that emerge from personal testimonies. For this reason, I conducted multiple in-depth interviews with eight adult survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse. This methodological approach provides the women with the necessary time required for their stories to be told, and thereby enables survivors to be more than mere data providers.

This research is intended as a theory-building, exploratory study of the experiences of daughters who have been sexually abused by their mother. As outlined in earlier chapters, the main goal of this research is to develop a theoretical

framework that critically examines the assumptions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality by analyzing how these social constructions are 'put into a discourse.' By exploring daughters' perceptions of maternal sexual abuse through poststructuralism – with specific attention to discourse, agency, and the fluidity of power – this theoretical model will integrate the experiences of survivors with societal perceptions of motherhood, both of which are reinforced via discourse. As mentioned at the outset of this dissertation, the central research questions that guide this work are:

1. What is the impact of maternal sexual abuse on female survivors?
2. How do survivors constitute a mother who is sexually abusive? Do prevailing constructs of 'mad,' 'bad,' or 'victim' resonate for survivors?
3. How do discursive constructions (such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality) inform the identities of survivors?

Epistemology and the Reflexive Practice of Oral Narratives

Because there are many feminisms, and thus multiple views of feminism, there is no single feminist epistemology.¹ There is, however, a popular debate within feminism between standpoint and postmodern epistemologies. In general, standpoint epistemology employs feminist praxis by emphasizing a politically-engaged and theoretically-cultivated worldview in terms of how women come to understand their everyday life as a marginalized group (Hartsock, 1983). In particular, by having women speak for themselves, a feminist standpoint approach places women at the

¹ Despite the many differences, there is a unity among feminist researchers as they all share a commitment to researching women in society. For a more comprehensive discussion, see: Stanley, 1999; DeVault, 1993; Stanley and Wise, 1990, 1979; Gelsthorpe and Morris, 1990.

centre of their lives, which moves them from “the known” to “the knower” (Naffine, 1997).

It has been argued, however, that simply focusing on women’s standpoints fails to consider other ways of knowing – women are not a homogeneous group and it has been argued that divisions between women along race, class, sexuality, etc. extend beyond commonalities of gender (Collins, 1992; Garcia, 1989; Harding, 1986). Given that the identities of all individuals are fractured, women are not fixed entities, but rather are fluid subjects who are always in the process of changing and becoming. According to its critics, then, the essentialist undertones of standpoint feminism raise problems of ‘validity’ because women’s experiences are always incomplete (Ramazanoglu, 1989).

A different line of inquiry is undertaken by postmodern feminism. In contrast to standpoint epistemologies (which examine the social conditions of women’s experiences as a *constituting* subject), postmodern feminism investigates the multiple ways discursive practices affect women’s lives by virtue of being a *constituted* subject (Ristock and Pennell, 1996). Based on the assumption that there is a nebulous distinction between narrative and reality, postmodern feminism contends that text or stories only provide a partial picture of women’s understanding of their social world. By employing a discourse analysis, postmodern feminist researchers explore how language and ideology operate to produce meaning and ultimately sustain oppressive practices.

Many scholars, however, are critical of a postmodern epistemological approach – mostly because they contend that its mainly textual focus renders the lived

realities of women as immaterial (Wolf, 1996; see also Clifford, 1990). One of the most thoughtful critiques of a postmodern epistemological framework is by Dorothy Smith (1999), who argues that substituting 'discourse' for the 'knower' limits the importance of empirical investigation and restricts the possibility of discovery. Smith does not agree with the postmodern contention that subjects are solely the effect of discourses. By drawing on the work of George Herbert Mead and his ideas of the mind and self as a social discourse, Smith develops a theory of relations between standpoint *and* discourse. Her epistemological approach advances discourse analysis by making it stronger and more comprehensive by considering how subjects navigate through discourse, which consequently moves social constructions beyond texts. Through her resolve to situate theory within the 'everyday' world (because that is where it is produced and questioned) as well as her insistence on using empirical inquiry, Smith provides a convincing alternative to the postmodern privilege of the researcher by merging data *with* theory.

Following Smith's epistemological contentions, the present study will attempt to combine experiences of female-perpetrated sexual abuse within a postmodern discourse analysis in an attempt to reconstruct a more synchronous account of women's lives. This epistemological approach is similar to the model proposed by Elizabeth Comack (1999), who combines women's standpoints (which are both experiential and discursive) with a feminist standpoint (which pieces together women's accounts in a theoretical and reflexive manner).² Women's stories are placed at the centre of the analysis, but their narratives are critically analyzed in an

² A similar approach has been offered by Nancy Naples (2003) who contends that standpoint epistemology can be improved through the synthesis of postmodern perspectives on power, subjectivity, and language.

attempt to deconstruct their experiences within an interplay of competing discourses. The role of the researcher, then, is to occupy a specialist job in order to join together the local (personal) and wider (discursive) relations of knowing.

Survivor Discourse and/or Feminist Experts

Related to this epistemological debate is the question of privileging either a survivor or a feminist discourse. According to Nancy Naples (2003), a survivor discourse is often pitted against a feminist discourse in terms of how knowledge is produced. Due to the latter's emphasis on systematic forms of knowing, there has been a lot of debate within the theoretical divide between the personal and the political domains of experience (Haaken and Schalps, 1991). For this reason, the survivor and/or feminist debate will be discussed: namely, the importance of giving voice versus situating survivor accounts solely within the polymorphic terrain of dominant discourses.

The Importance of Giving Voice

On one side of the debate, there has been a longstanding tradition within feminism that values the experience of women as a direct link between the personal and political in the reconstruction of 'her-story' (Hoffman, 1996; Armstrong 1994; Barringer 1992; Gluck and Patai, 1991). Oral narratives or histories were seen as a way to explore women's *own* personal accounts rather than restrictive masculine interpretations of *their* stories.

Oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds. The spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom and flexibility for researchers and narrators alike. For the narrator, the

interview provides the opportunity to tell her own story on her own terms.
(Anderson and Jack, 1991: 11)

As suggested in Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack's work, oral histories complement many principles of feminist inquiry, especially those which emphasize women as the best experts over their lives (Anderson et al., 1990).

As such, deeply imbedded in most feminist research is the question of voice – how a woman is to be heard as an arbiter of her own truth and with what authority (Lamb, 1999a; Olesen, 1994). Giving preference to a woman's voice (as opposed to her silencing or to the views of others, who are 'experts') is a way to validate her experience and to make it authentic. Nevertheless, feminist research has been criticized for annihilating the speech of the other by denying her voice, as bell hooks (1990: 151-152) powerfully asserts:

[N]o need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.

To this end, not only is it important to give voice, but it is vital that preference be given to hearing diverse voices (such as women of colour or survivors of maternal sexual abuse), which succeeds in curbing the "historical objectification and stereotyping of women as a group" (Lamb, 1999b: 130; see also, Eichler, 1988).

For survivors of maternal child sexual abuse, analyses which centre on narratives are important because, as many writers contend, unless an individual has personally experienced sexual violence, s/he will never truly understand the extent of its pain. Kathy Evert (1987: 21), a survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse writes:

You say you talk with each other and you can't figure it out. Just can't get a handle on it, huh? Well, let me explain it to you. You weren't there. And now, years later, there may be no way for you to understand the deadening isolation of abuse. You think you know, but you don't. Unless you were beaten, or told from the earliest time you could understand that you weren't wanted, or you can remember how it felt to have an adult probe and enter you sexually before you weighed fifty pounds, you don't know. Not really.

The metaphor and practice of giving voice, then, is especially valuable in the area of victimization studies for three reasons. First, narratives have the ability to uncover patterns that are otherwise silenced by dominant discourses. Providing a woman with the subjugated space to tell her story is thus constitutive of the very thing her voice is to stand for. Any endeavour which explores a survivor's life outside of the narratives that embody her only succeeds in misrepresenting her reality (White, 1987). Second, hearing silent voices is a way for the public to collect 'forensic evidence' on unlikely behaviour or events. As Sara Scott (2001: 192) writes: "Without the accounts of Holocaust survivors, the bricks, 'showers' and gas pipes of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen would make no sense." Third, giving voice is unequivocally political, especially in its transformative promise. Quite simply, by allocating space for the silenced to speak, giving preference to women's narratives contributes to transforming social life in empowering ways (Rollins, 1995).

Survivors within Social Discourses

Not all feminist analysts, however, are in support of the unlimited use of 'voice' as a means to investigate social problems (Haaken, 1999, 1998; Faith, 1994; Fine, 1992). In fact, many feminists contend that simply interpreting women's narratives at face value fails to consider how such experiences came to be, mostly because oppressive

systems are merely being replicated without being questioned or critically analyzed. For instance, because there is no difference between essence and appearance, Janice Haaken (1999) regards the preference of ubiquitous voice as a form of naïve realism. No consideration is given to how understanding and knowledge are altered through the telling and re-telling of stories.

Further, Sharon Lamb (1999b) maintains that work on survivor discourse must accentuate the ways in which social actors, including women who have survived sexual trauma, are shaped by cultural regulations and discourses. In this view, “stories are always told within particular historical, institutional, and interactional contexts that shape their telling, its meaning and effects... [S]tories are constrained by both rules of performance and norms of content” (Ewick and Silber, 1995: 206). Put simply, such an approach minimizes survivors’ accounts because it cannot incorporate the multiple layers of meaning in which their experiences are founded.

Using the issue of recovered memory from child sexual abuse, Haaken (1999; 1998) explores earlier contentions that women are not credible observers and chroniclers of their social terrain. Especially due to the current chilly climate and growing controversy over memory and meaning, Haaken suggests that feminists must expand their questions away from simple determinations of true or false memory. By moving beyond these restrictive poles of true and false stories, feminist analysts are able to examine how the fragility of memory, articulated through women’s accounts, is layered within gendered and contradictory meanings across an open social, clinical, and historical landscape. True and false judgements lack the ability to process the enormous “range of meanings and partial truths that lie between those polarized,

absolute categories” (Haaken, 1998: 4). What is needed, then, is another method that can effectively attend to the multiple social meanings of survivor accounts, but also one that can adequately address *how* and *why* survivors have come to understand their experiences. For this reason, Haaken gives preference to the verb ‘remembering’ (over the noun memory) in order to remind feminist scholars that memory is a social construction and a transformative process.

Haaken (1999) uses the stories of survivorship in Ellen Bass and Laura Davis’s (1988) self-help book, *The Courage to Heal*, to illustrate the consequence of focusing on factual truth. For Haaken (1999), the women’s stories within this book do not provide space for remembering the colossal range of personal damage caused through the “quieter assaults of everyday life.” Despite the book’s progressive insights, its emphasis on literal truth also forbids alternate experiences of sexual trauma – such as mother-daughter violence. Although not likely the authors’ intention, the book overlooks survivors of maternal sexual abuse, because there is no space for their experiences within these limited narratives.

Survivor speech also has the tendency to essentialize identity and ignore the potential of experience. Instead of focusing exclusively on voice and a narrative framework, some feminist writers suggest employing a discourse analysis, because it signifies possible formations for speech acts (Weedon, 1997). Put another way, discourse analysis establishes not what is true or false, but rather, what can have any truth-value through the construction of what is ‘statable’ (Alcoff and Gray, 1993). This means that when survivors (or anyone for that matter) speak, there are only certain narratives that are permitted (Lamb, 1999b).

One problem with personal narrative is that individual insight does not always provide a means to break down dominant discourses. According to Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray (1993), in some cases, personal narrative may actually operate to reproduce dominant discourses. As such, they give the following caveat about survivor speech:

Given the structured nature of discourses, survivor speech has great transgressive potential to disrupt the maintenance and reproduction of dominant discourses as well as to curtail their sphere of influence. Dominant discourses can also, however, subsume survivor speech in such a way to disempower it and diminish its disruptive potential. These discourses should not be conceptualized as static, unchanging, or monolithic entities but as fluid, as flexible, and as capable of transforming to accommodate survivors' speech while not significantly changing the underlying systems of dominance. (Alcoff and Gray, 1993: 270)

Like everyone, survivors of maternal sexual abuse are confined within discourse, which influences and constrains what they say and how they say it.

Balancing Act

As mentioned, in line with feminist analysts such as Dorothy Smith (1999) and Elizabeth Comack (1999), the aim of this research is to apply a sociological framework to the narratives of survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse that will situate 'voice' within a larger discursive context. It is necessary, however, to first define the usage of narrative and discourse. Narratives are significant because they provide insightful ways of understanding society. Without narrative, there would be no way to constitute personal experience or acknowledge subjectivities. But narratives are also determined by a broad historical and cultural landscape, which has an impact on interpretation (Morrissey, 2003). According to Haaken (1999), another

limitation of narrative is its ability to mesmerize the audience due to the subjective convictions by the teller. This causes the 'hearer' to forget that narratives exist within discourse, which is constituted and reconstituted through institutions and ideological constructions.

Further, narratives can be located within specific discourses, but they also exist transdiscursively (Benhabib, 1992). Survivor narrative addressing the discursive terrain of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality, for example, can be divided into different types or 'genres.' Genres represent the multiple modes accessible within a particular discourse, while facilitating certain narratives (Morrissey, 2003). Narratives, then, are restricted by whatever genre is available at the time within that discourse. For instance, while male violence has begun to be normalized in recent times, the barriers mentioned in the previous chapter impede in the recognition of female violence which, in turn, limit the ways in which these survivors can speak about their experiences. Mother-daughter sexual abuse provides feminism with a unique opportunity to explore the effects of discourse on survivor narrative. Women may be aware of trauma talk within the milieu of male violence, but there are restricted modes (or genres) accessible to survivors of maternal sexual abuse – at least within dominant discourse. Thus, critically analyzing survivor speech via interviewing provides a useful tool that can track the various connections between individuals and complex social relations.

Before I go further, I must make clear the position taken throughout this research. First, it is not my intention to downplay survivors' experience or to minimize the transformative power of resistance that is best brought out through

voice. Second, I have no interest in portraying myself as a leading authority or expert on the experiences of women who have been sexually abused by their mothers. Such a goal only succeeds in reproducing yet another power dynamic over the lives of survivors by having me tell them how they should make sense of their victimization. Third, I reject the claim that narratives are always hegemonic. One certainly does not have to travel far back into history to reveal how the catalyst effect of stories has significantly altered political, cultural, and social terrains. The tremendous strides made within violence against women movements as well as gay and lesbian rights debates speak volumes (pun intended) to the transformative potential of voice. Rather, my contention is that narrative is affected by dominant discourse. Survivors, like everyone, embody speech acts through discursive positions that constitute narrative but are not determined by such narrations (Morrissey, 2003). Put another way, "life-stories are always made, not found" (Scott, 2001: 192). For this reason, even as I employ a discourse analysis in my research, I believe that women's stories are a necessary component for the reconstruction of dominant discourse. The trick, in my opinion, is to balance survivor discourse and feminist discourse as a way to acknowledge the partiality within *both* camps, where neither have final authority in determining the ways of knowing because no such universal truth exists.³

³ A similar position is taken by Kathy Daly and Lisa Maher (1998) who were concerned with the postmodern impasse within feminist scholarship. As a result, they encourage feminists to consider both 'real women' and 'women of discourse' in research. They argue that feminist research should not abandon the narratives of women as a means of examining women as active agents in constructing their social worlds (see also: Carlen, 1998; Carrington, 1998; Daly, 1997).

Participant Selection

Consistent with qualitative methodologies, non-probability sampling was employed in this study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Because the goal of this research is to capture narratives from a specific group of people – survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse – purposive sampling was used.⁴ Based on previous research, it was anticipated that reaching survivors would be challenging; as a result, snowball sampling, through service-care providers, was used as the primary form of ‘gaining entry’ for project participation.⁵ Specifically, I visited twenty-two social service agencies and provided organizations with a cover letter (Appendix A) explaining the nature of the research and asked workers to distribute an information sheet (Appendix B) to any potential participants within their facility. As an alternative strategy, poster advertisements were distributed throughout social service agencies in Winnipeg (Appendix C).⁶

⁴ Purposive sampling is used when a particular group is the desired population to be studied, but the researcher has no way to obtain a sampling frame for that population.

⁵ Because networking through service-care providers was the primary data source, it is possible that the profound impact of mother-daughter sexual abuse may be more pronounced – given that the women were seeking counselling. However, only two women were attending one-on-one counselling sessions (weekly or bi-weekly). One woman had never received counselling and was informed of the research through a community drop-in centre. The remaining participants were attending community centres, but not necessarily seeking intensive therapy for the sexual abuse.

⁶ Information on the poster referred potential participants to a phone number or an e-mail address which they could contact for project information. Confidentiality was assured and clearly displayed on the poster. The advantage of poster advertisements is that a wide audience is easily obtained; however, a disadvantage is that the researcher has little control over who responds (for representation or suitability) (Lee, 1993).

Professional Informants

Given the sensitivity of the research, it was necessary to gain entry through service-care providers.⁷ As a way to promote the research, a community health crisis counsellor and I conducted workshops at various centres (Peter and Bolton, 2004). My motive for this was twofold. First, giving presentations enabled me to establish many valuable contacts, especially among feminist therapists. When it came time to enroll project participants, I was a familiar face at several agencies and most therapists had already heard of my work. This obviously was a great help in the recruitment process. Second, through my networking I was consistently being encouraged to continue with my research and was told how important this work was. I found that providing education workshops to service-care providers was a proactive way to begin naming the unnameable. It was a way to disseminate knowledge on female-perpetrated sexual abuse to a group of people who are quite likely to come into contact with survivors. It was also an important component of feminist conscious-raising, which is consistent with the title of Ristock and Pennell's (1996) book, *Community Research as Empowerment*.⁸

Ethical Considerations

The consideration of ethics is an on-going and vital dimension that one should be mindful of throughout any research process. These considerations begin with an Ethics Protocol package, which was prepared for the Psychology/Sociology Research

⁷ Without violating any confidentiality, therapists were asked to speak with their clients about the research as well as the potential benefits and consequences of participating in the study.

⁸ Similar to the principles of community research as empowerment is what Rebecca Dobash and Russell Dobash (1988) refer to as "action research."

Ethics Board (REB) before the data collection phase. It is not enough, however, to end there, especially considering the sensitive nature of this topic. For this reason, I was mindful of the implications for the participant as well as my role as researcher in making the interview process as safe and as healthy an experience as possible.

An Appreciation of Sensitive Research

Given that discussions on sexual abuse are extremely personal, there is an inherent safety risk that must be addressed (Lee, 1993; Lee and Renzetti, 1990; Brannen, 1988). For women who have only recently begun to deal with their mother's sexual abuse, the interview process has the potential to uncover emotions that previously may have been bottled up and safely stored away. Even survivors who have spent years working through the abuse trauma may re-experience intense feelings or discover other areas that they have not dealt with.

Regardless of where survivors were in their healing process, all were being asked to communicate, with a complete stranger, their most private and painful childhood memories. For this reason, gaining trust and establishing a good rapport was absolutely essential throughout every stage of the interviewing process. Trust and rapport must be created in earnest, especially given that one objective of qualitative methods is to foster understanding and empathy (Fontana and Frey, 1994). Since trust is an extremely fragile honour, the researcher must never forget that even the slightest act of imprudence can destroy this delicate connection. Rapport is best established when the interviewer metaphorically puts herself in the seat of the interviewee in an attempt to see things from the perspective of the participant and not an academic in

search of good data. The role of the researcher, then, must be one that involves active listening (Holsteint and Gubrium, 1995: 31).

Both trust and rapport may be influenced by the degree of social power granted to the researcher (being a white academic/professional), which may be denied to the participant (four of the women were Aboriginal and most were in non-professional occupations or not currently employed). Even though these biases cannot be eliminated, the researcher must be sensitive to these social and cultural differences. This is best achieved by remembering that the participant is a person with emotions and integrity (Castor-Lewis, 1988).

It is also important that the interview process not recreate aspects of the sexual abuse experience for survivors. For survivors of childhood sexual abuse, anxiety around interviews may be due, in part, to fears of being perceived as pitiful, crazy, or 'interesting' in a voyeuristic sense (Castor-Lewis, 1988). Survivors are all too familiar with being invalidated, misunderstood, and blamed; their anxieties are understandable and reasonable. For these reasons, my role as a feminist researcher was to communicate to survivors that their experiences were real and, most importantly, that they were not to blame.

Gathering information from survivors represents an 'intrusion' of highly protected inner space. As a researcher, it is vital that I am sensitive to this 'boundary invasion' (Castor-Lewis, 1988). Further, women with histories of childhood sexual abuse are often hypersensitive about saying 'no,' mostly because their wishes rarely have been respected in the past. Thus, it is imperative that survivors are reassured that the interview process is a place where they will be listened to, respected, and not

judged. This is best achieved through ongoing discussions about confidentiality, participant control, and researcher sensitivity and flexibility (Castor-Lewis, 1988).

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The importance of honouring confidentiality cannot be overstated, as it represents to participants that researchers can be trusted (Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman, 1993; Kelman, 1972). Especially given the small sample and single geographical location of this research, attention must be paid to the preservation of confidentiality. As expected, anonymity was a major issue for survivors. I attempted to offer reassurance through the following acts. First, at the beginning of each interview I had women go through (and sign) a consent form⁹ (Appendix D) outlining the confidentiality and anonymity procedures.¹⁰ Second, I was cognizant of the importance of privacy for survivors. For this reason, in all telephone calls to participants, I made sure to ask if 'this was a good time to talk,' and in the few instances when I left voice mail messages (with their permission) I only gave my name and telephone number and did not disclose my reason for calling. Third, at every possible opportunity, I articulated to participants my commitment to, and sincerity in, safeguarding their anonymity.

⁹ Also included in the consent form was a paragraph informing survivors that they could refuse to answer any questions, could terminate the interview at any time, and were under no obligation to participate. Interviewees were made aware that neither their decision to become involved in the project nor their choice to discontinue participation would affect any benefits or services now received as a client at any location where they may be receiving therapy or other treatment.

¹⁰ Even though all interviews were audio-taped, participants were informed that the cassettes would be destroyed upon completion of the research project. Until destroyed, participants were assured that the data are stored on a password protected computer and stored in a locked facility. As well, any identifying characteristics have been changed or omitted from my research findings and pseudonyms have been used instead of women's real names.

Participant Control

Given that the interview process has the potential to unintentionally repeat painful childhood experiences, it is important that the survivor has as much participant control as possible. Survivors are unfortunately all too familiar about meeting the needs of others, and consequently, may not believe that they are entitled to express discomfort. Similarly, survivors often have a tendency to feel the need to comply with all instructions, independent of their own needs (Castor-Lewis, 1988). For these reasons, several steps were taken to ensure participant control. First, and most fundamentally, when survivors appeared distressed, I asked them if they wanted to stop the interview or take a break. In quite a few instances, this resulted in taking a short break, and in one case, we stopped the interview mid-way and then spent the remainder of the time talking about non-intrusive matters. Second, I tried to engage in 'collaborative interviewing and interactive research' (Laslett and Rapoport, 1975).¹¹ The goal of a collaborative approach is to avoid interviewing in a traditional and standardized manner so that there is more exploration of the thematic issues chosen to be discussed. For example, instead of abstaining from providing survivors with any information about me or my beliefs/values, I elected to be as open and honest as possible. This approach is in line with principles of feminist research, which indicate that the best interviewing scenario is when there is a non-hierarchical relationship and where the researcher is willing to invest her own personal identity (Kelly, 1990, 1988; Finchi, 1984; Oakley, 1981).

¹¹ In addition to being useful for ethical and political reasons, collaborative interviewing is also seen as a way to ensure internal validity (Laslett and Rapoport, 1975).

Researcher Sensitivity and Flexibility

As a way to increase my own sensitivity to sexual trauma and decrease the possibility of researcher bias based on making incorrect assumptions, I read current literature on sexual abuse (Rosencrans, 1997; Blume, 1990; Bass and Davis, 1988) as well as consulted with several community service providers. Further, as a way to reduce the potential for harm, I decided to conduct all interviews at one of two community health facilities. The reason to conduct interviews at a community health/service centre was to provide participants with a relatively safe environment where immediate professional support would be available, if needed. As an added safety precaution, before and after each meeting, we worked through an informal check-in process in order to double-check that participants were not distressed and felt comfortable continuing with the interview. Further, phone numbers for a twenty-four hour crisis line were given to participants.

It is also important to remember that the interview phase is typically a stressful experience for both the participant and the researcher. For this reason, I needed to anticipate my own conceptual baggage and make sure that I was adequately taking care of myself throughout the interviewing process. This was mainly achieved through journal writing (done after most interviews) and conversations with support people in my life (without compromising participants' anonymity and confidentiality) about some of my feelings that were stirred up from the interviews. After particularly hard sessions of empathic listening to horrifying histories, a long run was the only way to curb the whirlwind of emotions within me.

Research as a Means to Empowerment

One aspect of the research that I did not anticipate was the overwhelming interest in the topic of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. There was a real sense that this was an area that was in great need of research and understanding. Nowhere was this more pronounced than from the survivors themselves – who not only regarded this research as groundbreaking work, but also saw the interview process as a part of their healing. Some women expressed that the interview process helped alleviate their feelings of ‘being the only one.’ Others commented that our meetings allowed them a safe space to explore their experiences and feelings.

It soon became apparent that even though I was able to speak with multiple survivors of maternal sexual abuse, the survivors themselves could not. After several had expressed to me their wishes to connect with other survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse as a way to minimize feeling isolated from mainstream healing movements, it became readily apparent that this research could further propel the principles of community research as empowerment (Ristock and Pennell, 1996). As such, arrangements are being made to offer women the opportunity to participate in a survivor group session that will focus on peer counselling as well as advocacy work. One goal is to solicit funds in order to design a pamphlet on female-perpetrated sexual abuse to distribute out in the community. This idea stemmed from the multiple conversations I had with survivors who said: “Just a pamphlet. Just something for me to know that I am not alone with this. Just something to tell me that this really exists. Just something to show me that people are taking female-perpetrated sexual abuse seriously.”

Research Instruments

Research instruments for the multiple interviews were based on various themes pertaining to how survivors made sense of their experiences with maternal sexual abuse. All questions were open-ended and subjectively-based with limited structure independent of the meeting's pre-determined topic.¹² When possible, arrangements were made for participants to receive the topical questions ahead of time. Women also received a written information sheet outlining the details of the research (see Appendix B). The reasoning behind providing women with an information sheet and interview themes was to offer potential respondents a way to decide prior to the first meeting if participating would be beneficial or, conversely, too difficult for them. Although women were always given the option of opting out of the interview at any time, providing information at the onset, hopefully, allowed them to make a decision that was best (and safest).

The Interview Process

Raymond Lee (1993) argues that interactive (or collaborative) interviews are best achieved through multiple interviews.¹³ The decision to conduct multiple interviews was also based on a well-standing contention that it is unreasonable to assume that a woman will be able to articulate her painful abuse experiences in a one-time, one-to-two hour interview with a person she has just met. Interviewing women several times

¹² This unstructured interviewing style is thought to provide greater breadth, especially given the highly sensitive nature of the topic (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Denzin, 1989; Lofland and Lofland, 1984; Lofland, 1971). This is especially true given that the typical qualitative research position is based on careful listening followed by appropriate probes as a way to clarify or elaborate on what is being discussed.

¹³ See also: Oakley, 1981; Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Laslett and Rapoport, 1975.

allows for ‘thick description’ and rich accounts, which arguably fosters strong interviewer-interviewee bonds.¹⁴ Multiple meetings provide an environment where the researcher can attempt to establish herself as a trustworthy individual who can empathize with survivors’ experiences so that they can truly feel like they are being heard and believed. Based on my observations, it certainly seemed that participants felt more comfortable speaking with me in the second, third, and fourth interviews, which was supported by several women who expressed feeling more at ease – especially after the initial meeting, as they came to ‘know me better.’

Further, multiple meetings are beneficial to interviewers because they are able to seek clarification or ask participants if they have anything else to add from the previous meeting (Reinharz, 1992). By virtue of the multiple meeting arrangements, participants can be more involved throughout the interview process. Finally, transcription review – or “member checks” – provided an additional test of internal validity (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Having more than one interview provides participants with an opportunity to read interview transcripts or notes taken from previous meetings in order to offer corrective feedback. Most women had some comments about the transcripts. A few women wanted certain statements about other people’s experiences (i.e. siblings) omitted, because seeing it ‘in print’ made them feel uneasy and they did not feel comfortable speaking for someone else. Other women did not have specific changes, per se, but expressed that reading over the transcripts was “really hard.” One woman commented that the abuse from her mother “felt all the more real,” which was very frightening for her, but also positive as it

¹⁴ According to Norman Denzin (1989), thick description moves beyond surface accounts by providing more fruitful descriptions of feelings and meanings within a web of multiple relationships (see also: Van Maanen, 1988; Geertz, 1973).

validated to her that it “really happened.”

Some postmodern ethnographers suggest that interviews should be more polyphonic (Frey and Fontana, 1993). One way to accomplish such an endeavour is to allow participants to communicate through whichever narrative form they feel is the most non-threatening. For this reason, the women who participated in the present study were given the option of providing oral and textual narratives – be it through poems, written responses to questions, stories, or journal entries (Berg, 2001; Clandinin and Connelly, 1994). Although most women opted out of providing textual narratives, one woman brought in paintings, drawings, poems, and journal entries, which she courageously shared with me. A few other women brought in written responses to the topical themes for that day’s interview, which seemed to help as a reference guide for them.

Interview Guides

The first meeting was organized around a feminist oral history of survivors’ narratives, and sought to: validate women’s experiences; foster communication between researcher and participant; and develop a previously denied sense of continuity (Gluck, 1979). The purpose of an oral history is that it allows participants to tell *their* story on *their* terms. In particular, this enables survivors to articulate childhood events that were significant to them – from their standpoint or from their “topical autobiography” (Berg, 2001). The questions asked were meant to help *guide* the interview and were not designed to *dictate* it. Topics covered were structured into three main parts. The first was designed to obtain basic demographic information

about the women's lives growing up (year born, racial/ethnic background, education, work history, family structure then and now, mother's and father's occupation, etc.). The second part contained questions that focused on various aspects of the abuse (age of onset/how began, type of abuse involved, frequency, other abusers involved, how functioned as a child, relationships with others as a child, good and bad memories of mother and/or parents) and elements of harm (emotionally, physically, sexually, economically, spiritually, and mentally) that resulted from the sexual abuse either in the short- or long-term. The third part of the interview guide sought to uncover survivor experiences of disclosures and sources of support (was the abuse ever revealed to anyone, whether in therapy, how long, how made the decision to go, what were responses like after disclosed abuse, and coping strategies).

In addition to revisiting topics from the last interview, the second meeting was organized around survivor experiences and understandings of motherhood. Specific topics included: the prevalence of violence in their lives; whether it is natural for mothers to love their children; differences between male- and female-perpetrated sexual abuse; whether women perceived their mothers as all powerful figures or powerless victims (or both); beliefs around bad mothers; how others saw their mothers; if women believed their mothers had a mental illness; survivors' perceptions on the range of choices (or lack there-of) made by their mothers; and, finally, a discussion of societal barriers to acknowledging mother-daughter sexual abuse.

Topics for the third meeting included: impact of the abuse; identity; sexuality; and, if mothers, their own mothering experiences. Thematic areas that emerged from our discussions were: differences between male and female survivors of maternal

sexual abuse; feelings about self; a discussion around multiple abusers; impact of sexual abuse in terms of self-perception, perception from others, sexuality, sexual preference, and relationships with others; and whether the sexual abuse affected their own mothering experiences (or, alternatively, if being sexually abused by their mothers had an impact on their decision not to mother themselves).

The main theme of the final meeting was survivors' perceptions of social recognition regarding mother-daughter sexual abuse. Women were asked what they thought needed to be done in terms of social responses to maternal sexual abuse – including what would have made a difference in their life. In line with survivors being the best experts over their experiences, a lengthy discussion was based on what they wanted others to know about mother-daughter sexual abuse. Another purpose of the last meeting was to debrief the interview process and to answer any questions or concerns survivors may have. Finally, arrangements were made for participants to receive their final transcripts and how they could correspond with me, if needed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected over a seven week period between September and November 2004.¹⁵ Eight women in total participated in the study. The goal was to interview each woman four times (for an overall total of thirty-two interviews). Six of the eight women participated in all four interviews, one woman was interviewed three times,

¹⁵ Research funds totalling \$1,140 were granted through the J. G. Fletcher Award by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Manitoba; thus, participants received \$25 for each meeting attended. The benefit of being able to pay women is that hopefully, at a minimum, it would not cost them anything in terms of arranging childcare, transportation, etc.

and another woman only completed two interviews (for a total of 29 interviews).¹⁶ All interviews ranged in total from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours (total interview time was 31 hours and 15 minutes with an average of 65 minutes per interview). The in-person interviews were audio-taped, with consent from participants, and professionally transcribed by a typist for data analysis.

Women as a Group

Of the eight women who participated, six were sexually abused by their biological mother, one woman was sexually abused by her maternal grandmother (her biological mother died shortly after birth) and one other woman was sexually abused by her step-mother. Even though my focus is on mother-daughter sexual abuse, I decided to retain the interviews from the two women who were not abused by their biological mother for several reasons. First, the woman who was sexually abused by her maternal grandmother states that this was the only 'mother' she had ever known. Years later she found her biological mother's childhood diary (kept by her aunt) which revealed that she too was sexually abused by her mother (the participant's grandmother). In many ways, I believe, the participant was speaking for both herself and her mother. Second, both participants who were not sexually abused by their biological mother identified their abuser as 'their mother' after reading the study information sheet, which outlined the study's criteria of 'mother-daughter' sexual abuse. By excluding them from the sample, I would be speaking for them and

¹⁶ Although two women did not participate in all four interviews, we did cover all topical themes. One participant opted out of the third and fourth meetings because she wanted to cover all topics in two sessions. With the other participant, we had covered all thematic topics over the first three interviews.

ultimately minimizing their experiences and perceptions – something I am not prepared to do.¹⁷

The women interviewed ranged in age from twenty-two to fifty-three years old (average age was thirty-eight). Half were Caucasian, three were Aboriginal or Métis, and one identified as Métis and Hispanic.¹⁸ In terms of geographical locale growing up, three of the participants lived in Ontario (one from northern Ontario and two from southern Ontario). The remaining women were born and raised in Manitoba (four in Northern Manitoba on Aboriginal reserves and one in Winnipeg). Only one respondent reported moving frequently as a child.

Most of the women interviewed reported growing up in working-class households. Three women classified their childhood family as middle-class, and none described living in particularly wealthy families. Five women described growing up in dual income households – although most parents worked in blue- or pink-collar occupations for marginal wages and several mothers worked only part-time. Some participants, however, reported that their parent(s) worked in professional occupations, such as teacher, school principal, and nurse. Two women mentioned that

¹⁷ A similar decision was made by Bobbie Rosencrans (1997) in her interviews with survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse.

¹⁸ At the onset of this research, I was not aware that such a large portion of the sample would be Aboriginal until I completed the first interviews with survivors. In the proceeding interviews, I did try to bring issues of race into the interviews (through probes, etc.) in an attempt to capture the potential diversities of the sample. Such a task, however, was difficult because most of my preparatory work centred on discursive understandings of motherhood, femininity, heterosexuality, and violence. As a result, very little of my reading examined the unique experiences of sexual abuse on Aboriginal women. Moreover, being a non-Aboriginal individual, I was reluctant to speak on matters that I really knew little about, which meant that even though I probed for issues on race, I did so timidly. Of course, my fear of over-exerting my white privilege, coupled with the fact that I did not feel academically prepared, has meant that I have very little 'data' on potentially important intersections of race. Certainly, future research on mother-daughter sexual abuse should explore issues of race in more detail, especially given that First Nations understandings and practices around motherhood often diverge quite substantially from mainstream motherhood discourses (see, for example, Hammersmith, 2002, Lake, 1999).

their mothers did not work for pay outside of the home, while one participant reported that there was no fixed income in her household growing up.

In terms of family background, all women reported having at least one sibling: four participants have two other siblings; three have between five and nine siblings; and one has over ten brothers and sisters. On average, each participant comes from a family of five children. One interesting finding was that the women interviewed were among the youngest siblings, or at least the youngest female. This was the case for half the women interviewed – three of whom came from large families (i.e. with five or more siblings). In one case, the respondent was the oldest female in a large family, which meant that at an extremely young age she became the caregiver to her brothers and sisters.

Today, as adults, participants come from a diverse range of educational and employment histories. For instance, half either held a post-secondary degree (undergraduate or graduate) or had completed some college or university courses. Three women had not completed high school – although one participant was currently finishing her General Education Degree (GED). One respondent had less than a grade seven education. Although not currently working for pay, three women had been previously employed, and two reported having no current or past employment history. Two women were currently employed (one held a full- and part-time job while the other was working part-time while on partial disability). One participant reported being unable to work and, as a result, was receiving disability payments.

Most of the women (six of the eight) are currently mothers. Two women have one child. Three women have four children, while one woman has six children. Even

though six of the women interviewed are mothers, only one currently has custody of all her children. In addition, only one participant reported being in a partnered relationship, although five of the eight women stated that they had previously been in married or common-law relationships. Moreover, in terms of sexual orientation, only one woman self-identified as a lesbian. Another woman reported that the closest 'category' to describe her sexual orientation was bi-sexual – although she prefers to reject all labels affiliated with sexual orientation.

Finally, almost all (seven of the eight) of the women interviewed were currently accessing some type of therapy/healing program (which is to be expected given that a primary recruitment source for the interviews was through community health agencies). For one Aboriginal woman, the process of healing is taking place through Aboriginal community programs, which involves time with elders as well as participation in sweats. Two other Aboriginal women were involved with community organizations that help women get out of the sex trade industry. Four women were attending one-to-one counselling through a non-profit organization.

Data Analysis via Discourse

In order to facilitate 'thick description' within a poststructuralist framework, both categorizing and contextualizing strategies were employed for the purposes of data analysis (Maxwell, 1996). Categorization schema involve verbatim coding within thematic groupings. In contrast, contextualizing strategies build on individual narratives and ethnographic microanalysis in an attempt to locate the data within a wider discursive terrain in terms of emerging commonalities. Thus, in the following

analysis I rely on both survivor narrative (to identify common themes) and a discourse analysis (to critically analyze various discursive assumptions within the language used to talk about mother-daughter sexual abuse in an attempt to understand how meaning becomes constituted and re-constituted). By relating my work to findings from previous research, I sought alternative explanations for the discursive effects of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality.

As a way to systematically analyze the data, interview statements were coded according to pre-identified themes. Themes like 'coping strategies,' 'overcoming the abuse,' and 'mothers as mad, bad, or victim' were pre-determined topics stemming from existing theory. Themes such as 'normalization of violence,' 'multiple betrayals,' 'overshadowed identities,' and 'fear of mothering' were emergent themes based on a preliminary analysis of the data. In order to take into account the less conscious positions of survivors, my analysis of the interviews focused not only on what was said but also on how and when certain viewpoints were articulated. This was achieved through a discourse analysis of both dominant and marginal discourses so that I could ask more complicated questions of my data in order to seek out affirmative or contradictory social constructions. According to Jeanne Marecek (1999) dominant discourses represent taken-for-granted notions of truth easily identified through socially agreed-upon language and meaning. In contrast, marginal discourses are counter-hegemonic because they challenge mainstream understandings, which previously have not been questioned. Such thoughts are often given reluctantly and are usually followed by a series of disclaimers or covered up by reverting to dominant discourse – for example, calling mothers 'bad,' and then

following up such comments by reaffirming that it was their mother's previous victimization that caused the sexual abuse.

Concluding Remarks

Since there is no single feminism, employing feminist research often utilizes multiple epistemologies, which is the case with the present study. Following the work of Elizabeth Comack (1999) and Dorothy Smith (1999), the epistemological approach undertaken here represents a synthesis between women's standpoints and discourse analyses (via a critical analysis of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality).

Within this perspective, women's narratives are placed at the centre of the analysis, but their words are also critically analyzed as a way to analyze how survivors have come to make sense of mother-daughter sexual abuse through dominant discourses such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. In order to achieve this goal, I have sought to merge the data (i.e., women's standpoints) with the theory (i.e., feminist poststructuralism).

In addition, this chapter has outlined both sides of the debate regarding whose voice should be privileged – that of the survivor or that of the feminist expert. As a way to integrate both sides, I have opted for a balancing act where survivors' voices are *heard*, but are also *situated* within a larger social context – namely, in reference to the dominant discourses of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. The main role of the researcher, then, becomes that of quilt maker (Comack, 1999; 1996). Here the researcher attempts to reflexively join women's narratives with dominant

discursive constructions – especially in terms of how mainstream discourses have come to influence the multiple ways survivors make sense of their lived experiences.

To this end, my role as the researcher is that of a feminist who draws on women's standpoints in a theoretically informed manner. Yet, with great reservation, I write that I too am a survivor of maternal sexual abuse. As a result, both my feminist standpoint and my standpoint as a survivor have undoubtedly influenced this work. Despite my own personal experience with sexual abuse, I want to be clear that this dissertation is not about 'my story' – although it should be no surprise that there are parts of 'me' in it. This work is for the women interviewed and for all others who have suffered this terrible plight (in which I am included). Does my 'conceptual baggage' make me ill-suited to objectively conduct this research bias-free? Probably yes, but I make no apologies.

My reasons for disclosing are as follows. First, during the interview process I made no attempt to hide my experiences or my position on mother-daughter sexual abuse. I was asking women to share their most daunting secrets, the least I could do was to be honest in return.

Second, I know first hand what it feels like to be silenced. I have been told by Crown Attorneys that it would be impossible to prosecute my mother because no jury would ever believe that she actually did what I was disclosing – she was, after all, 'a mother' (not to mention a white one with financial privilege). I have been involuntarily committed to psychiatric wards where 'my story' was forced out of me through blackmail (i.e. continued confinement) only to have it read back to me through labels – such as post traumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorder, major

depressive disorder, Cluster B traits, limited symptom anxiety attacks, chronic suicidal ideation, and chronic anger who defends self through intellectualization – all of which are simplistic surface markers designed to encapsulate my experiences, heedless of *me*.

Finally, I do not want people to see me only as an academic ‘expert.’ Many of the women interviewed commented that the depth of their disclosures were because I was also a survivor. I was one of them. In qualitative research, the goal is to collect and analyze rich data through thick description, which I believe I have done. This accomplishment was not just because I am an empathic interviewer; nor, I believe, is it strictly because I am a survivor. I think it is both. I provided a package to these women as someone who has been in the trenches *and* as someone who has accumulated a lot of information on sexual abuse. Ultimately, my fear about keeping my ‘survivor status’ silent is that I would disrespect the women I interviewed. I am worried that if these women read my work, they would interpret the presentation of myself as the ‘researcher’ as a sign that I am too ashamed to stand beside them in this struggle. This could not be further from the truth. So, despite my own fears of coming out from under the protective cloak of academic research, such reservations are vetoed by my greater fear of being seen as a sell-out to the very women it gives me great honour to represent.

PART II: SPEAKING ABOUT THE UNSPEAKABLE:

RESEARCH FINDINGS

CHAPTER FOUR

Impact on Survivors

I feel robbed of part of my life, my whole life really, because even though I'm out of it, I'm still in it. I'm still living it... I'm taking steps towards coming out of it, but it's hard. Some days I go totally backwards for weeks and I just feel paralyzed.¹

Nicky

And a voice cannot carry the tongue.
And the lips cannot give it wings.
And alone, it must seek the ether.

Chris [Excerpts from writing kept as a child]

It is impossible to 'beat' childhood sexual abuse. Once violence has been inflicted onto a child, there is no 'cure.' In time, the body may heal and eventually many of the scars begin to fade away. But the memories leave a permanent stamp on the soul. Even if the survivor is successful in her dissociation and represses the violence, there is still some part of the mind that never forgets. While it is important to recognize the abuse that women *lived through*, it tells little about their struggles. It does not illustrate how they *live with* being a survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse. Thus, as a way to honour the lives of the women interviewed, I have chosen to follow the model of Liz Kelly (1988), who focuses on the impact of sexual abuse in terms of coping, resisting, and surviving. Adopting this approach enables a recognition of the women's strengths as they undergo the process of living with (coping), living through (resisting), and moving on (surviving) from maternal sexual abuse.

This chapter, then, examines the life history of daughters in terms of the impact that maternal sexual abuse has had on those who survived the pain and

¹ As a way to share authority, I decided to use a different font for the women's narratives. As such, women are given their own space and are uniquely visible on the written page (Comack, 1999).

shaming of such violence. But first, the nature of abuse is explored, which is necessary in order to acknowledge the multiple ways women find to cope, to resist, and to ultimately survive mother-daughter sexual abuse. As a word of caution, some of the stories of abuse are atrocious. Reading many of the narratives may elicit deep feelings of anger and hate. I know they did for me.² Yet, when I became completely overwhelmed by the level of suffering endured, I often reminded myself that as hard as it is to hear (or read) their stories, it cannot compare to the teller who was forced to live it.

On a more instrumental note, in keeping with anonymity and confidentiality agreements, all respondents' names and any identifying characteristics have been changed. Further, as will be discussed in a proceeding chapter, in speaking with survivors I learned that many rejected traditional notions of femininity when identifying themselves. Others offered a sophisticated analysis of how they re-arranged femininity discourses in order to align gender within their current reality.

² I include parts of an entry from my research journal here as an illustration of the profound effect speaking with these women had on me. "As I listen to women talk about the pain, torture, and awful abuse they have suffered at the hands of other women, a battle rages inside of me – one that I have never felt before. I sit here confused. I love women. I am a feminist. I have read into inertia the damnation of the essential woman. I know, first hand, that there is no homogeneity of women or a simple bifurcation of gender. And yet I sit here confused. Can I love women and hate women simultaneously? My theorizing says yes, but the rage inside me shouts 'no fucking way.' I take great pride in my commitment not to live in anger and hate – even in a world full of death, destruction, and degradation, the little voices in my head adamantly repeat 'there's pride in pacifism.' But as I sit and listen to survivors talk about how one mother sadistically liked to burn her child or how another would hold down the small body of her defenceless daughter so she could be raped, yah, I hate... The guilt dagger plunges deep into my heart - where should we direct our hate? There is no question that I hate what these mothers have done to their children. I hate that they have shattered innocence – an innocence they helped create. I hate the choices these mothers made. But try as I may, I can't hate women. I hate poverty. I hate sexism. I hate racism. I hate homophobia. I hate labels. I hate stereotypes. Above all, I hate violence. If I had to don my positivist hat, I would have to say that violence causes violence. It is tautological; yes I am well aware of the methodological violation, but right here and now in my emotionally raw state that is my solution to this seemingly complicated formula: violence causes violence. I know all the conceptual flaws. I know it is not a zero-sum game. But maybe it is a start, and if nothing else, hopefully it will be enough to help me sleep tonight!"

Due to the ambiguity of gender for many of the women I spoke with, I elected to give all participants gender- neutral names.

The Nature of the Abuse

As should be evident from this study, not only do mothers have the *capacity* for violence, but some actually *exercise* it by sexually abusing their children. In terms of the nature of the abuse, all the women described participating in some type of genital contact and/or fondling (either by the child on the mother or vice versa). Five women were forced to either perform or be the recipients of oral sex/cunnilingus. Half experienced vaginal and/or anal penetration with fingers or objects.

Age of Onset and Duration

On average, the age of onset of the maternal sexual abuse was six years old and ended at thirteen, giving a mean duration of seven years. This finding is consistent with Myriam Denov's study of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, where the average age of onset was five and ended at twelve. Age of onset in the present study is also similar to Kathleen Faller's (1987) research on female sex offenders. In her research, Faller reported that the sexual abuse began when children were six years old (in a sample where 85 percent were mothers to their victims).³ Faller compared age of onset between male and female sex offenders and found that women perpetrators tended to abuse children at a younger age than men did. Women's preference for younger victims led Faller to speculate that female offenders sought children who were more

³ Loretta McCarty (1986) also had an average onset age of six years in her study of twenty-six female sex offenders.

vulnerable and powerless, which was consistent with how these women saw themselves. Another reason was that in polyincestuous cases, victims tend to be younger in age. For instance, in cases of intra-familial violence, Faller found little difference in age of abuse onset among male and female sex offenders (6.4 for mothers and 6.9 for fathers).

Moreover, the duration of the abuse, especially the age when the abuse ended, is consistent with other studies of maternal sexual abuse, which tend to report that the sexual abuse usually ends when the child enters puberty (Rosencrans, 1997; Faller, 1987; McCarty, 1986). Yet, in the current study, one woman reported that the sexual abuse from her mother did not end until she left home when she was nineteen years old. According to an unpublished paper by L. V. Roberts (cited in Borden and La Terz, 1993), the continuation of mother-daughter sexual abuse into adulthood is not uncommon.⁴

Masking the Violence

As previously noted, some analysts contend that the role of mother as caregiver gives women ample opportunity to mask their sexually abusive behaviour (James and Nasjleti, 1983; Goodwin and Divasto, 1979). These writers argue that inappropriate sexual activity is easily hidden through activities such as sharing a bed, bathing, dressing, or embracing (Kasl, 1990; Plummer, 1981; Groth, 1979; Justice and Justice, 1979). In speaking with the women in this study, there seems to be some merit to

⁴ In Bobbie Rosencrans' (1997) study of mother-daughter sexual abuse, one woman reported that the violence continued until she was fifty-six years old. Another adult woman who replied to Rosencrans' survey stated that the maternal sexual abuse was ongoing.

these claims. For example, Jackie described to me how her mother would make her share a bed when her father was absent.

My mom would have me sleep with her in her bed and for a long time I thought this was normal... except my mom was always touching me and kissing me between the legs and it made me feel uncomfortable... She called it 'bedtime games,' but they weren't games. They were awful. It was dirty and I was scared.

For Robin and Lee, the sexual abuse was initiated in the bath through fondling and then progressed to other sexual acts.

The first time I can remember my mom was... giving me a bath. She started to touch me all over the place and I felt weird. Then after that, it was every time and I was scared to take a bath all the time... Then she started to come into my bedroom... Then it was oral sex... She used to tell me she was cleaning me because I was dirty... and I used to think maybe it was because I was playing outside, but then I would think 'Well how can dirt get down there?' (Robin)

She started to abuse me in the bath and then it just progressed. Then it came to her having to be in the same bed as me when my dad wasn't home... She used to insist on wiping me when I'd go to the bathroom... and there was fondling while she was doing it. (Lee)

Despite confirmation that the sexual abuse often occurred alongside acts of childcare, one caveat is in order. Given that most women reported being involved in either intercourse and/or oral sex, one would be hard-pressed to argue that such activities are easily masked under the day-to-day routine of 'normal' childcare. Even if some acts of abuse took place under the guise of appropriate parenting (such as sharing a bed and bathing), it is the *impact* on the survivor which needs to be addressed. In this respect, survivors must be given more credit in terms of recognizing good and bad touches as children. Dana best illustrates this point:

I didn't know at first that it was sexual abuse... But I remember how it used to make me feel.

Children can and do have the ability to differentiate between sexualized and non-

sexualized touch. To suggest that sexual abuse by mothers is often unrecognized through childcare duties assumes that children are completely alienated from their bodies.

The Presence of Male Co-Offenders

Some of the literature suggests that mother-daughter sexual abuse occurs in the presence of a male co-offender – who is usually the mother's partner (Davin, 1999; Mathews, 1993; Faller, 1987; O'Connor, 1987). In the current study, however, there were no father/step-father co-offenders. In three cases, sometimes the mother perpetrated in the presence of a co-perpetrator, but it was the adolescent brother(s) of the survivor. For one survivor, the mother would hold her daughter down while one or both of her brothers would rape her. The absence of a male partner is consistent with findings from Myriam Denov's (2004) study, where all fifteen of her participants reported being abused by a lone female.

Multiple Victims

Three women reported that at least one other sibling was also sexually abused by their mother, while another commented that her brother experienced physical, but not sexual, violence. In two cases, the participant was the only sibling abused. Interestingly, in both these families the other siblings were boys. Finally, two women were not sure if their brothers or sisters were sexually abused by their mother.

In a story told by Chris, her mother gave birth to her brother's child.

Therefore, Chris' new 'sister' was in fact her brother's daughter. According to Chris, the baby 'sister' was also sexually abused.

Since my sister was a baby, my mom would mouth her all over my sister's vagina. She would do it in front of me, and by the time I was sixteen, I would haul her off my sister.

The sexual abuse by Chris' mother had a deep impact on all three siblings, especially Chris' brother, who attempted suicide when he was in his early twenties by driving his motorcycle off the road. Although he did not complete suicide, the accident left him with permanent brain damage and he had to undergo reconstructive surgery to his face.

The Absent Father

Consistent with Bobbie Rosencrans' (1997) study, most women reported that their fathers (or step-fathers) were permanently absent or away for extended periods of time (either through divorce/separation or due to employment responsibilities). This finding is also consistent with research by Beverly Ogilvie and Judith Daniluk (1995) as well as Loretta McCarthy (1986), who report that mothers would often sexually abuse when their partners were absent.

Despite the similarity with previous studies, a noteworthy aspect of the women's accounts was the absence of anger towards the non-offending father. Contrary to reports of father-daughter sexual abuse, where the survivor often expresses a considerable amount of outrage towards the unprotecting mother (Hiebert-Murphy and Burnside, 2001; Candib, 1999; Johnson, 1992), none of the women in this study articulated such anger, which is not to suggest that they did not

express feeling 'let down' by their fathers. Recalling the brief history of motherhood presented in Chapter Two, it is not surprising that daughters are quick to blame non-offending mothers for failure to protect them from an abusive father. But what about non-offending fathers? It seems that fathers are not held to the same stringent standards as mothers, which is evident by Robin's comments on her father's reaction when she disclosed to him the sexual abuse from her mother.

He got me a lock for my room... and he said my mom was sick. That's what he told me. I still remember that. He told me to lock my door at night.

(Were you ever upset with your dad for not removing you?)

Yeah, I used to tell him, 'Let's go live somewhere else.' And he used to tell me that he couldn't because he was married and he still loved my mom. He said even though she does things, 'I still love her'... It used to make me feel bad when he would tell me that he loved her because I used to think, 'How can you love her?' 'You should love us more.' But now I think he tried. He did try to help, but at that time I didn't understand.

Fathers, it seems, only have a peripheral responsibility to protect their children in contrast to the mother who is seen (by both survivors and mainstream discourses) as the primary caregiver and protector of children.

Informative as they may be, these findings do not do justice to the horrific nature of some mothers' actions. These descriptions fail to depict the extreme 'abnormalness' experienced by the majority of the women interviewed, which is best illustrated in Sandy's narrative.

My childhood for me wasn't a normal childhood. I never went to school. I had to be up at 4:30 in the morning. No television. I couldn't eat until I was done cleaning the house... Most of the time that I had to clean up, I had nothing on... I had to stay home because I always had a lot of markings on me from the belt or the extension cord. I was always too sore to go to school anyway... I never got to play outside. I never got to be around other kids.

Further, in speaking with survivors, the extremes to which some mothers went were considerable. As will be described below, these ranged from the emotionally hurtful and neglectful mother to the out-and-out violent and sadistic mother.

The Emotionally Hurtful Mother

As most of the literature on child sexual violence indicates (Blume, 1990; Courtois, 1988; Bass and Davis, 1988), emotional and sexual abuse often go hand-in hand.⁵ However, given the sexual nature of the abuse suffered, its impact on survivors is often overlooked. Quite simply, the power of words is forgotten, especially on young vulnerable minds.

For Dana, hurtful words consisted of her mother informing her that she was almost entirely unlovable. As Dana remembered:

At fifteen, she told me that only my dog loved me.

Dana also recalled how her mother would attempt to make her feel guilty for her marital problems, because she was married to an alcoholic.

She would blame me and she'd say, 'If you weren't so sick, I could divorce your father.' She just could not admit that she was married to an alcoholic.

Chris' mother was equally hurtful with her words. For instance, Chris remembers being repeatedly told that no one would love her.

'No one will ever want you.' 'No one will ever love you.' 'You're only allowed to live because we allow you to live.'

⁵ Emotional abuse is also known as psychological abuse, which is defined as a sustained pattern of verbal maltreatment by an adult that results in some damage to a child's self-esteem (Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley, 1986; Garbarino, 1978).

These verbal assaults were nothing short of malicious and obviously damaging to Chris' self-esteem. Yet, her mother was emotionally hurtful in other ways, which is evident in the following story.

When I left for university, I left on a Wednesday afternoon and came back on a Friday night and my room was entirely gone. All my belongings, all my artwork, everything never to be found again. They did that with my brother as well. They erased us as quickly as possible.

Probably the most destructive example of emotional abuse from Chris' mother came when Chris had to go to the hospital for tonsillectomy surgery. Instead of consoling her already frightened daughter, Chris' mother informed her that she was going to the hospital to be killed.

When my tonsillectomy finally came along in the summer just before I turned nine years old, I was told by my mother that they were taking me to the hospital to kill me so when the doctors gave me the ether, I fought like hell. I was fighting for my life - literally! I kicked one anaesthetist smack in the stomach. I pounded, hit, bit the two other doctors, squirmed with all my body strength to break free of their hold on me and the mouthpiece of ether. But then they knocked me out and I swirled down into a sickeningly thick, black, heavy spinning world of darkness and swirling lights that I was sure was the death I would never awake from... When I did awake, there were about six or seven doctors and nurses standing around the bottom of my bed. They were whispering about me to each other and pointing, gesturing towards me. I thought they were talking about how they had failed to kill me and that they were embarrassed that as professional people they had failed to kill me. In that moment, I swore I would kill myself. I would kill myself by not eating. I would do to myself what they had not succeeded in doing. I would do it on my terms and in my own way. So I became anorexic.

Chris' story painfully illustrates the profound effect hurtful words can have on the lives of children. Like all the women's stories, Chris' account should serve as a reminder that even though the scars from emotional abuse are invisible, its wounds run deep.

By focusing on mothers' emotionally abusive behaviour, I am not implying that women have exclusive control over the mental well-being of their children. Rather, I am suggesting that mothers, like all caregivers, have an enormous influence on children, and hurtful words *do* have a profound impact on how children view themselves. The consequence of such emotional ignorance is reflected in Nicky's story and in her description of how, because of her mother, she grew up fearing God.

I grew up believing that God was this scary monster and that God was not someone who was going to help me because my mom used to make me put my hands on the Bible and swear that my brothers weren't abusing me. She would say that if I was lying, then God would get me. And I was lying, so I thought God would get me. So I chose not to believe in God. I chose to believe that there was some scary monster that could get me.

The Neglectful Mother

In the literature, neglect is often used simultaneously with emotional abuse, which, because of the absence of direct harm to the body, is then separated from physical and sexual abuse (Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley, 1986). Even though emotional abuse and neglect represent the hidden maltreatment of children, they are different in that neglect refers to the failure to provide for a child's basic needs. Neglect is also known as an 'act of omission,' which is usually contrasted with physical and sexual violence where the act is overtly deliberate (National Research Council, 1993). Yet, like emotional abuse, the impact of neglect resonates deep within survivors.

In the present study, several women spoke to me about neglect within their families. For instance, when Robin was eight years old she got lost in the bush overnight, which unfortunately also happened to coincide with her parent's drinking party.

I remember crying and I was hungry and I ended up coming out somewhere by a road. When I finally got home, my mom was still drinking. I am not sure if she even noticed that I was gone... It was summer and I remember having mosquito bites and I got stung by a bee. That's when I really wanted to go home after I got stung by a bee. I remember just sitting there and crying. And I thought, 'Will somebody come and find me?' ... I used to go out into the bushes with my brothers and grandpa a lot and he used to show us berries and stuff to eat... So I remember ripping off bark and sitting there eating it thinking, 'OK somebody is going to come and find me now.' But no.

In terms of maternal neglect, there was one reoccurring theme among survivors – the lack of information provided by mothers during puberty. Several women spoke about the enormous confusion and outright fear over what was happening to their bodies when they first got their menstrual period. Pat recalled her “introduction to womanhood.”

All she said to me when I first got my period was 'Oh, my baby's a woman now.' Well that explains a lot doesn't it! I thought I hurt myself when I started bleeding that first time... She didn't explain puberty... She didn't explain where babies come from like normal mothers do.

For Pat, getting her period was an extremely confusing time, which was only exacerbated by the lack of comfort and support from her mother.

In a similar account, not only did Nicky's mother fail to inform her about the hormonal and bodily changes she was naturally experiencing, she physically punished Nicky for it.

When I got my period, my mom beat the crap out of me. Yep, because I got blood on the bed. And I didn't even know. No one told me what a period was and I didn't really know what was going on.

Like Pat and Nicky, Jackie felt that her mother was equally negligent when she was going through puberty.

My mom never told me about periods. She never taught me about puberty. She never told me what was going to happen to my body... When I had my period I thought I rode my bicycle too much or I thought I rode the horse too much... or I thought that my mom had broken something inside from the night before... I stayed in the bathroom for over 2 hours and I locked myself in the bathroom and my dad heard me crying... He asked what I was doing and I told him that I thought I was dying... He says, 'Why?' 'What's the matter?' We had a phone and he was going to call the ambulance and he asked where I was hurt. And I told him. And he told me to open up the door... And I did and he asked me how long I had been bleeding... He took off his jacket and he said, 'Pull up your panties.' And I said, 'There's blood on there.' And he said that it was ok and he turned around and then he put his jacket around me and carried me to my bed and I was shaking so he turned the heat up in my bedroom... And he said, 'Did your mom ever talk to you about the birds and the bees?' And I didn't know what he meant. And I said to my dad, 'Mom never talks about birds and bees, she only likes her garden.' And then he said, 'Did your mom ever talk to you about your body changing when you get older?' You know, that your body changes when you get to a certain age but it's different for every female... but that it happens to every girl... He said he was angry and I started to cry and I thought he was angry at me and he said, 'Don't cry.' 'It's not your fault.' 'It's just something that every girl goes through.' 'You're not going to die.' 'It's called your period and you are going to have it every month.' And I said, 'Every month!' And he said, 'Yah, but these are the things that your mom should've told you.'

Jackie's story can be read in multiple ways. One possible reading would be to question why it is the mother's responsibility to inform daughters about menstrual cycles. However, the inclusion of Jackie's story is not meant to imply that it is neglect when a mother fails to talk to her daughter about changes in her body, which ostensibly implies that the father is not responsible for such inaction. Rather, this reading is meant to represent the powerful discursive expectations on mothers to teach daughters about puberty and their subsequent entry into 'womanhood.' When a mother fails to do so, it becomes socially translated as neglect. In Jackie's case, not only was her mother neglectful of her basic feminine needs, but her father

consequently became her hero. Linked to motherly duties, then, are additional responsibilities, especially when it comes to parenting daughters.

The above accounts of both emotional abuse and neglect help to show the polymorphic nature of a mother's harm from the perspective of the women interviewed. From the standpoint of survivors, the maltreatment from their mothers runs deep, and – much like the physical acts of harm inflicted onto their bodies – the impact has been immense.

The Violent Mother

Not only were most histories of abuse from mothers emotionally or psychologically damaging, for many of the women interviewed they were accompanied by frequent beatings and violent outbreaks. For Sandy, the physical violence suffered from her mother was both copious and cruel.

She was a very mean person... I'd have to sit in the washroom while she was having a bath and if I moved when she was having a bath, if I moved from how she put me and how she told me to watch her, I'd get a licking because she'd just reach over and grab the belt and hit me with it.

Like Sandy, Jackie experienced frequent beatings from her mother. Yet, despite the numerous acts of outrage and physical punishment inflicted on Jackie, her mother always managed to maintain enough control in order to avoid striking her daughter in areas that would leave noticeable marks or scars.

I would get beaten with a stick, a broom, a mop, a shoe. Anything that she could get her hands on. I remember there was always a stick right over the door, the front door, so that as soon as I came in, I would get a licking with the stick... and I would have marks all over my body - my back, my legs, my stomach, but not my face. She wouldn't put marks on my face.

Given the calculated manner in which Jackie's mother would beat her, it is hard to dispute the absence of control in her rage. Rather, as will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, Jackie's mother was acting with agency and exercising choice to abuse her daughter physically.

Recalling one incident of her mother's violent outbreaks, Robin told me about how she got dirt on her new dress, which resulted in a severe beating from her mother.

I went outside and I was playing and I ended up getting mud on my dress. My mom tied me up with an extension cord and started to hit me with a broom.

Sadly, Robin was also able to talk to me about the tragic death of her father when she was eleven years old. The incident occurred when her mother, in a violent rage, repeatedly stabbed and killed her father during a domestic dispute fuelled by alcohol.

She went to jail. So we went to live with my grandfather... My mom was in jail for three or four years and then she met somebody else and they had kids so she decided to take us back. But I could not stand to be around my mom because she took my dad.

The loss of her father was bittersweet for Robin. On one hand, she lost her "anchor" and the only parent who, Robin believes, truly loved her. Yet, with the imprisonment of her mother came an end to the sexual abuse, the drinking parties, the emotional anguish, and the physical violence. Robin was fifteen when her mother regained custody of her, which sadly precipitated her frequent running away and eventual full-time life on the streets.

The Sadistic Mother

As the above narratives show, most mothers inflicted multiple forms of abuse on their daughters. Unfortunately, neglect as well as physical and emotional abuse is common in families plagued with sexual abuse (Blume, 1990; Bass and Davis, 1988). Yet, of notable concern was the level of cruelty, which in many instances was purely sadistic. For Chris, the outright cruelty from her mother was a common occurrence, of which she and her brother were frequent recipients.

My mom did a lot of stuff like burning me, hot baths, cigarettes...

Sadly, this was only the mild side to her mother's sadistic violations of her body. In the following story by Chris, the full extent of the horrific torture inflicted by her mother is revealed. Although the incident is extremely vague for Chris, it tragically involved her mother (who seemed to have a preoccupation with torture by fire) inserting a burning stick into Chris' vagina as a small child. As she recalled to me:

I remember hurting badly deep down inside me but from somehow outside me. I was four or five years old and I did not know what a vagina was then. I did not know I had one. All I knew is that I hurt way deep inside me but from the outside of me like I had been burned way deep inside.

No doubt due to the torture, Chris remembers having frequent bladder and kidney infections. This resulted in many 'accidents,' which only succeeded in exacerbating the violence from her mother when Chris attempted to hide her spoiled underwear, only to have them discovered by her mother.

I had non-stop bladder and kidney infections. I couldn't hold my urine. I often was overcome by severe pain and a horrendous need to go to the washroom but so fast that all I could do was squat down and try helplessly not to go to the washroom. It was horribly embarrassing and shameful. As a kid I accidentally wet myself a lot. I knew it was bad so I hid my underwear under my mattress so no one would find them. My mom kept going in my room and

saying, 'Where is that odour coming from?' One day she lifted the mattress and found the underwear. She started hitting me on the head and rubbing my nose in the underwear, swearing and yelling, 'You dirty filthy little girl' and other things I didn't understand.

Another vivid illustration was given by Nicky in her poignant description of the terror inflicted by her mother onto her brother.

My brother wouldn't eat cereal one morning so she took a knife and put it in the table. A big butcher knife! She stuck it in the table and said, 'You're going to eat that and you're going to eat it everyday or you're going to get this.' And he would eat his cereal everyday and he'd puke. It made him sick. It was terrible.

Based on conversations with her grandfather, Robin spoke about the insidious abuse her mother inflicted when she was an infant and a toddler.

My grandpa told me he took me away when I was four or five months because my mom was trying to put me in bleach and I also used to have burns all over. My grandpa told me that she used to burn me with cigarettes when I was a little kid.

Like many of the other women I spoke to, Sandy also defined the maternal sexual abuse as sadistic because her mother would refer to her as a sex slave and would force Sandy to engage in sexual acts just to have her basic needs met.

Just to get money from her or to get something from her I had to do sexual favours to her... Just to have basic needs... She used to tell me that I was her sex slave.

An equally upsetting story was told to me by Jackie, who recalled how her mother used to confine her to the basement for extended periods of time without food, water, or access to toilet facilities.

Sometimes my mom would lock me in the basement and she would leave me there for hours. And there was no light. And there was no bathroom. If I made a mess she would give me a licking and she would make me clean up my mess. I would have to go on my hands and knees... She would say that I had to lick up my pee and she told me if I had a bowel movement, if I pooped on the floor, she would make me eat it.

The sadism of Jackie's mother also had a permanent physical impact on Jackie, an Aboriginal woman who grew up on a reserve. She became legally blind as a teenager when her mother tried to bury her alive after she was caught trying to run away from home.

It's partly my mom's fault why I'm blind today... I'm legally blind... I can't see from one eye... and my other eye is going away... It happened when I was thirteen... I was trying to run away and I ran into the bush but she caught me and she hit me so hard that she knocked me down and I passed out. And when I came to I was in the field and nobody was around and my mom had tied me and buried me in a hole with just my head barely sticking out... there was so much dirt in my eyes and I couldn't get the dirt off my face and it caused infections in my eyes and that's how I started to lose my sight. My eyes got infected... I had to have several surgeries... after my mom came back to get me because my dad came home unexpectedly from his work trip... But by that point I had been there for days.

There are many troubling issues that stem from Jackie's story. The first that comes to mind is: How could a mother – or anyone – be so cruel and cold-hearted? Judging by all of the above accounts, it is easy to conclude that some of these mothers' behaviour is purely evil. Certainly, it is not my intention to dispute this point. Yet, to stop at this conclusion also seems insufficient because it does not address survivors' perceptions of their mothers, especially given their understanding of traditional motherhood discourses. As will be discussed in a proceeding chapter, it is the disconnection between experience and expectation that has caused an intense anger among the women interviewed, which has resulted in most classifying their female caregivers as 'bad mothers.'

Multiple Abusers

The collective picture that materializes from the life history interviews with survivors is the massive amount of violence suffered, which is consistent with child sexual abuse research (Romito, Saurel-Cubizolles, and Crisma, 2001; Blume, 1990). In the present study, all but one woman reported being a victim of some other violence. Yet, also concerning was the sheer *amount* of abuse. Although none of the women interviewed were sexually abused by their fathers or step-fathers (except one woman who was sexually abused by her foster father), three experienced physical violence from them. Three women were sexually abused by at least one brother, and two were sexually victimized by at least one uncle growing up. Five women experienced sexual abuse by a male non-family member (neighbour, friend of the family, etc.). In terms of additional female-perpetrated violence, two women were sexually abused by an aunt.

Below, is a snapshot description of Nicky's life from child- to adulthood, which illustrates the unconscionable amounts of violence endured.

Most of my life I have been sexually abused. When I was about four years old, there was a man in our house, a boarder, and he started sexually abusing me for about two years. Then when I was about seven, my two brothers started sexually abusing me. My mother also started to sexually abuse me when I was seven... Then at about twelve, the abuse from my brothers got worse, much worse. And then my brother-in-law raped me when I was thirteen. And then my brother's friend raped me two months after that... I then went into a foster home and my foster father sexually abused me... I got married when I was eighteen to an abusive husband who physically, emotionally, and sexually abused me. I left him about five years later and then married almost the same man... He was exactly the same, just a different face.

Similar to Nicky's life, Lee's past was plagued with violence and degradation.

He [a neighbour] raped me for the first time when I was five... That went on until I was about ten and then he moved away, came back, knocked me up when I was twelve... So I have a little boy that I gave up for adoption... Then a little over a year and a half ago, I was raped by two guys.

Like Nicky and Lee, most women experienced physical and/or sexual violence well into adulthood, especially at the hands of intimate (male) partners. This speaks to the ongoing nature of violence in their lives. Sadly, this was also the case for Sandy, who spoke about the frequent assaults from her common-law partner.

I was in and out of the hospital for about six months because he really damaged my insides... He used different objects inside me.

When violence is everywhere it becomes normalized and, in many ways, violence begets violence. Even though none of the women reported to me that they have inflicted violence onto others,⁶ after being repeatedly victimized, many began to internalize the violence as being a reflection of their inherent 'badness.' This was the case for Nicky and Robin:

I saw it [violence] as dirt.

(As dirt?)

Yeah, it was dirt and I was letting it happen so I was dirty too.

(Nicky)

...

I used to cry a lot as a kid because I would wonder what was wrong with me because I used to think that everything was my fault.

(Robin)

⁶ I recognize that it may seem 'incredible' that none of the women reported being violent, especially given the social conditions in which many women are currently living. While I am inclined to believe their denial of violence, it is also important to remember that conversations around victim discourses are often more forthcoming than admissions of acts of violence (see, for example, Comack and Brickey, 2003), especially when the research instruments are centred around women's experiences as victims of violence.

As mentioned, half of the women interviewed were Aboriginal or Métis – three of whom grew up on an Aboriginal reserve. The wide-spread use of violence on reserves has been well documented (MacGillivray and Comaskey, 1999; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Hamilton and Sinclair, 1991) and was also supported in many of the narratives by the Aboriginal women interviewed. Specifically, all four Aboriginal women experienced multiple forms of violence throughout their childhood and their adult lives. Given their experiences, most of the Aboriginal women commented on their deep hatred towards any type of violence. Yet, for many, violence has simply become a regular part of their everyday life which, unfortunately, was (and still is) plagued by impoverished living conditions.

For me, it was always there. I accepted it... It was just something that was a part of my life. (Pat)

I can't stand it [violence], but if it is going on around me, it doesn't really bother me because it is so normal for me to see it. (Robin)

Judging by these survivor narratives, it is little wonder that child sexual abuse has had an enormous impact on their lives. As mentioned, I have opted to use the work of Liz Kelly (1988) as a guide in order to focus more specifically on the impact of child sexual abuse through coping, resisting, and surviving violence. Following the work of Elizabeth Comack (1996), I elect to highlight coping, resisting, and surviving as verbs in order to demonstrate that all three are ongoing and active.

A similar position was taken by Janice Ristock (2002) who, when interviewing lesbian survivors of domestic violence, opted to concentrate on 'responses to violence' instead of the short- and long-term effects of abuse. Drawing on Kelly's (1988) work, Ristock suggests that concentrating on the *effects* of violence simply reflect its psychological consequences, which fails to consider the

polymorphic *impact* of abuse. Ristock uses Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as an example to illustrate how the psychologically-based disciplines label women who experience flashbacks and hyper-vigilance. She argues that the label PTSD ignores the subjective experiences of survivors and does not consider the complexity of its 'effects' on the daily lives of women. Quite simply, it tells us little about the multiple (and often innovative) ways women engage in coping, resisting, and surviving.

Focusing on effects also locates the sexual trauma outside the individual. As Sharon Lamb writes: "[I]f we accept these assumptions, we are then very close to seeing women who have been victimized as 'damaged goods,' thereby reinforcing female passivity" (cited in Ristock, 2002: 80). Conversely, by looking at the impact of violence within a larger social context, the focus shifts to how victimized women define their personal struggles of attempting to live with being survivors of sexual abuse (in addition to other identities). Implicit in such a contextual approach is the social surroundings of individuals. To this end, instead of merely being a mental health issue, sexual abuse can be regarded as a complex social problem that continues to have a diverse impact on individuals (Ristock, 2002).

Coping Strategies

When an injury has been inflicted upon the body, we all react in different ways. Some may shout out in pain. Others may quickly try to minimize the hurt due to social unease and awkwardness. Out of necessity, we find a way to cope. For the women interviewed, the need to cope was profound. For many, it was a matter of life and death. It is, after all, what makes them survivors.

In speaking with survivors of maternal abuse, I was struck by their sheer resiliency. Consistent with research on sexual violence (Rosencrans, 1997; Blume, 1990; Kelly, 1988), the women in this study reacted to, and coped with, the sexual abuse in multiple ways. Some of the coping strategies for survivors included finding an escape through school, siblings, friends, and humour. Other strategies were more self-destructive and included the resort to self-injury (like slashing) and drug and/or alcohol abuse.

Resilient Survivors

For many women, school was their main source of refuge from the sexual abuse. Even though Robin and Jackie, two Aboriginal women, looked forward to school, both had irregular attendance due to all the abuse in their lives.

School was good. I was good in school. I had a lot of illnesses that were unexplained so I missed a lot. (Robin)

I read a lot. I felt safe in school. But I missed a lot of school. (Jackie)

School, for Pat, was a strategic way to cope with her tumultuous life at home.

That was my escape - books and going to school... [B]ooks was like living in a fantasy world.

Similar to Pat's account, school for Chris became a place where she could regain her confidence and self-esteem, which were being destroyed at home.

As a teenager in high school, I buried myself in academics, books, and certain sports. I was a heady or academic kid. It was where I found my refuge. It was how I got through living at home, living with the lies, the secrets. It was a place where I could stay late unquestioned by my parents and un-assaulted by my mother.

Chris spoke of an additional coping strategy: the closeness with her brother, who was also being sexually abused by their mother. Chris and her brother also had the ability to find humour even amongst so much pain.

My brother and I used to joke about being the living memories that our parents didn't want to remember.

Coping, for Nicky, also included humour, which she skillfully used to hide from awkward situations.

I use humour to get through a lot of things. If something is too much for me, I'll try to say something funny and that'll get me through that. I know I am hiding, but it's the only way I could do it at the time.

Even though Nicky never disclosed the abuse to any of her friends, having playmates provided her with another coping refuge.

I had lots of friends... I used to go over to their houses all the time and have supper because I wouldn't eat anything in the house that has been opened because I didn't trust my mom. I thought she might poison me or something.

By drawing on the safety of her friends' families, Nicky was able to have some of her basic needs met.

Today, for most of the women, coping with their mother's sexual abuse remains a constant struggle. Yet, many survivors continue to make a series of positive choices. For example, Lee expressed many healthy coping strategies that she is beginning to incorporate into her day-to-day life.

I write. I draw. I listen to music. I grab all my cats and I sit them on the floor next to me and I sit in front of the TV for a few hours.

Finally, coping for Sandy is much healthier now that she has re-established her roots in her Aboriginal culture.

I've been getting into my culture. I go to a lot of sweats and that's really helping me. One elder, he knows my past history and he held a sweat ceremony just for me.

The importance of healing by reconnecting with Aboriginal culture has been documented by Renya Ramirez (2004), a Native American scholar (see also Loupe, 2004), who argues that the tandem impact of violence against women and colonialism needs to be recognized. By promoting resistance and survival, Ramirez (2004: 106) argues that "healing is inextricably linked to learning about indigenous women's history and experience and to inserting a gendered analysis into images that were drawn through a white, masculinist lens." In addition, Aboriginal spirituality is important because there is an emphasis on relatedness (to Aboriginal Peoples and culture) rather than separation (which promotes isolation and does not facilitate healing) (Forbes, 2001).

Destructive Coping Strategies

Unfortunately, most women did not report that they resorted exclusively to healthy coping strategies, which is common for most survivors of child sexual abuse (Rosencrans, 1997; Bagley and King, 1990; Blume, 1990). For instance, despite the many positive self-care strategies employed when Nicky was a child, as she grew older her coping tactics turned inwards. As a way to dissociate from her pain, Nicky began to self-slash.

I used to cut myself. It almost dissociated me because it takes your pain away. When you cut yourself that's where all your energy is going into the cutting, instead of thinking about what's going on... You're not thinking about the memories.

Regrettably, many women believed that the streets were safer than their home; as a result, they began to run away as teenagers.⁷ This was the case for Jackie, Lee, and Robin, whose respective narratives are presented below.

[W]hen I was fifteen I ran away from home and I've been on my own ever since. (Jackie)

I left home when I was sixteen. (Lee)

I used to take off lots from my mom's and then I ended up putting myself in a group home. (Robin)

While running away from home presents many hurdles and obstacles for *all* young people, it is also racialized and class-based. For example, when Jackie, Robin, and Sandy (all Aboriginal women) ran away, their access to resources was limited – especially for Jackie and Sandy who not only left their family, but their reserve (and therefore most of their extended family) as well. In contrast, when Lee left home at sixteen, she was able to travel across two provinces and stay with relatives.

As such, upon running away all three Aboriginal women found that neither home nor the streets were safe, which is evident in Sandy's vivid story of when she ran away at age twelve.

I ran away from everything and I hitchhiked to Winnipeg. I had no family here and I didn't know anybody so I was out on the streets trying to find a place to go and a place to sleep... I wasn't working the streets, I was just roaming around and then I slowly started to meet people... But I trusted too many people and it came to an end when I put myself in CFS because I was gang-raped... But it wasn't a very good place... It was not like a foster home, it was like a girls' lock-up facility.

Sandy believes that she was being punished because she associated with gang members, who she regarded as “family” and a source of “food, money, and

⁷ Running away from home has also been a popular coping strategy for survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse (see, for example: Comack, 1996; Webber, 1991).

attention.” Judging by Sandy’s story, being affiliated with a gang is more damaging than being gang-raped. Sandy remained in a group-home facility for three years until she slowly started to go back to the street. When a second gang-rape occurred, she did nothing about it. When she found out that she was pregnant due to the gang-rape, she had no one to turn to and she feared no one would have believed her.

Another common coping strategy for many survivors of sexual trauma is substance abuse and alcoholism (Blume, 1990). It was no surprise, then, that some of the women interviewed turned to drugs and/or alcohol as a way to cope with their mother’s sexual abuse. This was the case for Robin who, after running away as a teenager, started using drugs in order to ‘forget’ her past as well as her then-current reality of life on the streets. Like Robin, Nicky turned to drugs as a coping strategy.

I got into drugs. Yeah, got into drugs. That was my escape... I took drugs and drank to get rid of the voices in my head. The pictures, you know? That’s why I did it. To drown them out.

Drugs and alcohol, for Robin and Nicky, have been negative coping strategies that have come with great consequences. For example, eventually both had to give up custody of their children, which will be discussed in a proceeding chapter.

Seeking Expert Help as Adults

Reaching out for help is another coping strategy employed by most of the women interviewed. Although most of the women were in, or had received, counselling of some kind, not all had positive experiences when they disclosed the maternal sexual abuse. This was the case for Robin and Chris.

I told her [the therapist] about my mom and she said nothing... so I said nothing... I only talked about men. (Robin)

I tried to tell a female therapist and when I was talking about my sister [and mother having oral sex] she said, 'Oh, all mothers do that. They blow on their tummy.' (Chris)

In another meeting, Chris spoke about her numerous bad experiences with therapists who were ill-equipped to deal with mother-daughter sexual abuse.

It's been a hell of a journey since the first day I opened my mouth about anything. Whoever said it was better or easier if you broke the silence! It's a real mixed bag. Mostly opening my mouth over the last twenty years has not been a great experience. It's actually, most of the way, been really horrific.

These experiences seem to be similar to findings from analysts studying the effects of lesbian domestic violence (Girshick, 2002b, Ristock, 2002; Renzetti, 1998; Taylor and Chandler, 1995), who report that many women do not seek community resources (such as individual counselling or group therapy). They believe these services are either not 'for them' or the facilities do not have adequate training and written material to deal with same-sex abuse. Similar opinions were voiced by survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse. Below are narratives from Chris and Nicky about how they felt excluded from mainstream counselling services and popular healing literature on sexual abuse.

I have tried incest groups, but they are all dealing with the guy, 'Let's punch out the guy,' 'Let's confront the man, the man, the man.' Where was the place for me? And when I would try to talk about it, everyone would look down and fumble! And the books didn't work. *Courage to Heal* and all of the others... Self-help books - I can't use them I found them totally useless. I mean, until mother-daughter incest is socially recognized, until I meet people like me, until I hear it and I see it in writing, and see that attention is paid to it... Until then, there will be no place for me to put this. (Chris)

When I first started to deal with the memories that is how I became not so alone was by the information. But I have never in all my reading have I ever come across stuff about mother-daughter sexual abuse... So I hid that part... It's like it is a big dark secret and I held that secret for thirty something years! And when I came out, I

just couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that I actually said the words out loud, because when you say the words out loud, that's when they hit you that it really happened. (Nicky)

Despite these negative encounters, most women felt that their current experiences with therapists were positive and were thankful to receive counselling in what many referred to as "a safe place."

It has not been until recently, very recently with [current therapist] that I really had any good place to put this stuff and it has been a long time! (Chris)

There needs to be more counsellors like the ones at [Counselling Service]. They know how to deal with mother-daughter sexual abuse. (Sandy)

The fact that so many women currently seeking counselling or accessing some community-based service spoke highly of the experience should give us hope.

Resisting within Hopelessness

Sometimes, to the mind, body, and spirit of a small child, surrender is the most honourable form of resistance. This is best illustrated through Jackie's story.

I wanted it to stop, but I didn't know how to make it stop. I once told her that I was going to tell a teacher at school.

(What happened?)

She gave me a licking. Beat me really bad. So I just let it happen. I didn't fight it anymore.

In their own way, all the women found a way to resist the terror that was being inflicted upon them. In keeping with Foucault's (1979) concept of resistance, I am not suggesting that these women found a way to stop the violence. Such a rigid definition of resistance denies the complex existence of both the victimized and the victimizer. Rather, resistance within a feminist poststructuralist approach is understood as being

in a constant state of flux. Resistance, then, has the potential to reveal itself in multiple ways, which is summarized by Sara Scott (2001: 193) who researches ritual abuse:

I began this research with an understanding of power based on my years of work around issues of sexual violence. I knew that even in the most extreme situations, where power appears as its most absolute – as it does in the torture chamber and the death camp – power still calls forth resistance, and resistance will extract an answer from the oppressor, so that only death can end the dialogue.

Locating resistance within power provides space to acknowledge the multiple ways women attempt to overcome or resist – no matter how small or seemingly insignificant – the sexual abuse.

Narratives from several of the women illustrate why resistance cannot be measured along either/or lines (according to success or failure to stop the abuse). These women's stories not only reflect the enormous diversity and complexity of resistance, but they also reveal the remarkable resiliency and tenacity of survivors' will to live and to endure – even within “the belly of the beast” (Scott, 2001: 193).

For Pat and Dana, their way to resist their mother's sexual abuse was to physically hide.

I tried sleeping in the closet so no one would find me and crawl into my bed. (Pat)

She used to harm me, like touch me, or she would beat me and I would get scared so I would hide under the bed. (Dana)

Although physically hiding was not a strategy Nicky used to resist her mother's abuse, she did resort to dissociation, which was her way to hide the abuse from herself.

When my mom abused me, I'd go to the curtains. I'd always go to the curtains in her room... I'd just dissociate from myself.

Physically protecting herself did not seem like a reasonable option for Jackie. Instead, resistance meant potentially saving her friends from being sexually abused by her mother.

My mom wanted me to have sleepovers and to invite my girlfriends but I would lie to my friends and tell them that I was not allowed to have any because I thought that maybe my mom would try to do that to them. I was afraid that my mom would have me sleep with her and my friends.

For Robin, resistance meant running away. When she was young, Robin would go to her grandparents, who lived nearby.

I used to always take off to my grandmother's when my mom was drinking because when she was drinking that is when she would do things to me.

Sadly, however, when Robin grew older she began to run away to the city, which eventually led to a life on the streets fuelled by drugs, alcohol, and the sex trade.

When Chris was a young girl, she attempted to resist the abuse by breaking the law in order to draw attention to her home life.

[W]hen I found out that another kid in grade three had a social worker come in to help her family, I wanted that for me too. Since the social worker had come in because my friend was caught shoplifting candy from the local plaza, I tried to steal to get caught so I could have a social worker find out about my family too. It backfired because the drugstore people knew my mother and, when they caught me, they phoned my mother. All I got was beaten up some more.

As Chris grew into her teenage years, resisting became even more strategic, and she would spend endless hours mentally and physically planning her 'escape.'

I had begun yelling in my mind: 'You can have my body, but you can't have my soul!' I don't know where I got that phrase from, but it was mine. I said it to myself all the way through high school, until I could make it to university and my escape away from all of them. When I could be free and self-determining. I waited, counted,

hungered, saved every penny I could from grade ten. I worked non-stop at babysitting, picking fruit, working in the local restaurant for university, for my escape, my future, my life-raft.

Regrettably, however, the ultimate form of resistance in the minds of many children living with abuse is suicide – as was the case for both Jackie and Chris.

I remember that I tried to kill myself when I was nine years old. I took a whole bottle of my mom's pills... I don't know what they were, but they were white... I was sick and I woke up in the hospital because I guess I stopped breathing and my sisters and brothers couldn't wake me. (Jackie)

[I] was very, very suicidal... I tried to jump off the third floor balcony of our apartment building. I tried to hang myself in the closet with a sock. I tried to get hit by a car... I tried to die by anorexia - not because I saw myself as being too fat, but because it was the only way I knew how to kill myself... I grew up watching my brother try to kill himself... I mean, he put a knife into his thigh... So here's the two of us living in this cesspool, not knowing what to do with any of it. (Chris)

It is evident in all of the survivor accounts that resistance is more than life or death. Instead, resisting can involve dissociation in order to escape the mental and physical pain of the sexual encounter. It can include children vigilantly monitoring the offending parent. For Robin, resisting was strategic as she would go to her grandmother's at the first sign of 'abuse cues' – like her mother's drinking. Resisting can involve lying to protect others from potential sexual abuse. For Chris, resisting meant trying to get the attention of authorities through shoplifting – all the time hoping that someone would recognize her pain without having to say the words, 'My mom is sexually abusing me.' Yet, Chris reported another form of resistance – her self-determination to rise beyond her mother's grip. The solution, for Chris, was to pour all her energy into getting educated, getting out, and finding freedom from her family and her mother's abuse. Thus, what the above narratives show is that *all*

resistance offers formidable ways to say 'no' – whether it is through speech or silence – and, as a result, it should be recognized as such.

Multiple Betrayals: Disclosing the Abuse

Another strategy for resistance is telling someone about the abuse. In light of the discursive barriers to acknowledging maternal sexual violence, it should be no surprise that for many of the women interviewed, resistance in the form of disclosing that it was their mother who was the abuser was often met with disbelief. As a result, most women grew up thinking that no one would believe them – even if they found the courage to speak.

Most research on mother-daughter sexual abuse acknowledges the tremendous fear survivors have of not being believed (Rosencrans, 1997; Saradjian, 1996; Ogilvie and Daniluk, 1995; Longdon, 1993). Consistent with this literature, the majority of women interviewed for this study were adamant that no one would ever believe them. Even though most disclosed their male-perpetrated sexual victimization, several women reported that they rarely, if ever, told family, friends, and even therapists about the maternal abuse. Unfortunately, for Pat and Sandy, when they did tell, their fears were founded.

I tried [to talk to a teacher at six years old] but they went running to my mom and asked her about my accusations and of course she denied it... I guess they thought I was lying... They really didn't believe what I was trying to tell them that my mother was doing... I learned not to say anything to anybody, just to keep it inside me... This is only the second time I'm talking about this in my lifetime.
(Pat)

When I began telling people, they didn't believe me. They'd say 'Are you sure you're not making this up because you probably are just making it up.' (Sandy)

Much like Pat and Sandy's account, Lee was also someone who rarely spoke about her mother's sexual abuse. She comments:

I never told anyone. Even my current partner does not know. She knows about everything else, but that's the one thing... I've always wondered why I never said anything... [S]ome of me thinks that maybe it's because I am afraid to admit that a woman would do something like that... because society looks on it as men do it and women don't.

Lee's silence was due, at least in part, to compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), which discursively produces a social disbelief over the potential for woman-on-woman sexual abuse.

Like many of the women I spoke to, Robin refrained from telling others about her mother's sexual abuse because, based on her past experience, she was convinced no one would believe her.

One woman laughed at me when I told her that my mom used to molest me when I was a kid... She said, 'As if your mom would do that'... After that, I wouldn't tell anybody anything... Until recently I have started to tell people again.

(How has it been now?)

It's still, a lot of people don't believe it, because it is not something that is really openly talked about. Like other than the fathers and stuff that's been going on for a long time.

(How does that make you feel?)

It makes me mad because they don't understand. Like when I saw the paper talking about the study that you are doing, I was like, 'Oh yes, finally people are going to know how bad it really is and how it impacts people.' I thought, 'Right on, it's actually going to be out there now.'

In the following story, Chris comments on the determination of others to uphold the assumption that violence is strictly a male behaviour, which means that all other accounts are disbelieved.

I was at a lesbian bar one night and this was when incest was a hot topic and it was all "damn the man" and I just said, 'Well, it was my mother.' And these butch dykes came flying at me saying, 'You lying fucking bitch! Women don't do that.' They were ready to punch the shit out of me and I was shocked. I was utterly shocked. I thought these women are supposed to be so informed. I just slumped down right into my chair so that they would back away. I just sat at the table and after about five minutes I felt a woman's head come to my shoulder and then sit down beside me and she whispered in my ear, 'It was my mom too. You have a lot of courage and guts.' And I just said, 'I am just being honest.' And then another one came and then eventually another one. And in the end, I think there were six of us.

Chris' story speaks to her resiliency and her inner strength to resist dominant assumptions of a mother's inability to be sexually abusive, but it also reflects the impact of mainstream discourse. In an environment that Chris thought was socially progressive and less rigid than heterosexual communities,⁸ there were no apologies given from the women who launched the verbal attack. For Chris, the rejection of her experiences caused a deep wound and a profound sense of betrayal from other women – yet again.

Nicky also spoke about how compulsory heterosexuality was a definite barrier to disclosing maternal sexual abuse. For Nicky, part of her reluctance was a fear that others would assume she was a lesbian, which would somehow imply that she was responsible for her mother's sexual abuse.

⁸ Denial of this issue within the lesbian community partially stems from a fear that any acknowledgement of intra-gender violence will aid in the advancement of further homophobic responses (see, Ristock, 2002; Renzetti, 1998; Lobel, 1986).

I think I kept it in for so long and why I didn't tell anyone about it is because I thought people were going to think I was gay... I don't think people think that it's so bad if it is a man who sexually abuses you, but if it is a woman, then they say, 'What is that all about?' 'Did you have something to do with it?'

Nicky's fear of being perceived as a homosexual, I believe, speaks to the dominance of heterosexism in our society. For instance, I am not aware of female survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse 'worrying' about their perceived heterosexuality. If there is no connection between heterosexuality and childhood trauma among female survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse, why is it assumed that there may be a connection between mother-daughter sexual abuse and homosexuality?

In addition to her fear of being perceived as a lesbian (and therefore she was afraid that people assumed that she welcomed the abuse), Nicky elected to remain silent because she was convinced that no one would believe her.

I think in society who would think your own mother would do that to you? Who would believe you? And when I first disclosed my abuse, I told everybody... I wanted everyone to know that I was an abuse survivor... But I never told them about my mom, just all the others... It was not until four years ago that I told about my mother.

(Why didn't you say anything about your mother earlier?)

[I] was ashamed. It was like it was my sin. It was like I thought that everything that happened to me was because of who I was.

(And who did you think you were?)

A bad person because I did things. Like I touched my mother and I let her touch me... It was the most shameful thing because it was my own mother. Yeah, and everywhere you get these things that tell you that it can't be true. So every time I get a memory, my mind would say that cannot be true.

Ironically, Child and Family Services (CFS) had a regular presence in Nicky's home, and yet she never disclosed the abuse because they were convinced that her

father was the one perpetrating the sexual abuse. No one thought to ask Nicky about her mother. It was assumed that the marks on her body were her father's imprints. Physically, Nicky's father did sometimes strike her, but she refused to disclose his violence to CFS workers because she did not want her father removed from the home. For Nicky, then, resisting meant remaining silent because she was too afraid to be left alone with her mother, who violated her much more than her father did. Thus, in the mind's eye of a small child, it came down to choosing the lesser of two evils.

Unfortunately, Nicky's experience with CFS was not unique. In speaking with the women, it was deeply concerning how many survivors came into contact with doctors, nurses, teachers, CFS, the police, and the courts for matters related to probable sexual abuse.⁹ For example, when Chris was pre-pubescent, she went to the doctor with her mother. Upon examining her vaginal area (for reasons unknown) he simply informed Chris' mother that her hymen had been broken. Implicit in his actions were that: one, no sexual abuse had even taken place; and two, that Chris' mother could not possibly be involved in breaking her daughter's hymen – due perhaps to the absence of a penis. Unfortunately, the doctor was wrong on both accounts.

Like Chris, Robin spoke about the failure of external agencies – specifically, the police and the courts – to recognize her mother's violence. As mentioned earlier, when Robin was eleven her mother killed her father after a night of drinking and fighting. This in of itself would be traumatizing to any young child, but what added to

⁹ While it is well-documented that Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child welfare system (see, for example, Kulusic, 2005; Monture-Angus, 1995; Timpson, 1995), in the present study, investigations by CFS workers did not appear to be racialized. Ironically, it was Nicky (a Caucasian) who was finally removed from her home as a teenager due to her father's abuse, while CFS workers ruled that there was no abuse or neglect taking place in the Aboriginal homes of Robin or Sandy.

Robin's confusion was that no one talked to her about other acts of violence from her mother. Then, after four years incarceration on manslaughter charges, Robin's mother was given custody of her children. Implicit in the actions by these external agencies were: first, it is one thing for a wife to kill her husband in a fit of rage, but it is another to assume that such anger could be turned onto her children; and second, Robin would have no ill-feelings toward her mother who took the life of her father, who Robin described as her 'saviour.'

The stories of inaction by Chris' physician and the various authorities in Robin's case offer a vivid illustration of the outcome of mainstream assumptions, produced through discursive constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. This enforces a tautological form of logic. Social constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality act as barriers to recognizing a mother's potential to sexually abuse her child, which silences survivors and leaves them with little social voice from which to speak. However, some children find a way to resist and either speak or position themselves among presumably safe authorities. Yet, they are not heard precisely because of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality discourses which operate to silence their experiences! If such circular reasoning is confusing to follow, try imagining how difficult it would be within the mind of a seven year old, which is the age at which many of the women interviewed would have had to grapple with this tautological confusion.

Surviving the Abuse

One of the many indignities of child sexual abuse is that survivors often hang on to the hope that adulthood will bring escape and independence from pain. But, as Judith Herman (1992: 110) writes:

[T]he personality formed in an environment of coercive control is not well adapted to adult life. The survivor is left with fundamental problems in basic trust, autonomy, and initiative... burdened by major impairments in self-care, in cognition and memory, in identity, and in the capacity to form stable relationships. She is still a prisoner of her childhood; attempting to create a new life, she reencounters the trauma.

The impact of sexual trauma lingers within survivors – much like a soldier who will never forget the battles of war, heedless of any will within him or her.

In many ways, the women interviewed were no different than survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse – they have tremendous difficulties with self-esteem, trusting others, and forming relationships (Mayer, 1992; Blume, 1990; Courtois, 1988).¹⁰ However, most women spoke of an additional impact of maternal sexual abuse – that of betrayal, stigmatization, and impaired identity development, all of which, when filtered through a child's logic, gets translated to mean that there must be something essentially wrong with her.

Shattered Trust

Whether the offender is male or female, most survivors of sexual trauma report experiencing difficulties with trust (Rosencrans, 1997; Mayer, 1992; Blume, 1990).

¹⁰ One word of caution, it is difficult to isolate the impact of maternal sexual violence because almost all of the women interviewed also experienced male-perpetrated sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse – either as children or as adults. However, one would suspect that isolating the impact of child sexual abuse would be difficult for any scholar researching in this area. For example, many women who have experienced father-daughter sexual abuse also report having multiple violent perpetrators either in childhood or adulthood (see, for example, Blume, 1990).

Consistent with other research, all the women interviewed expressed a deep distrust in others. With specific reference to maternal sexual abuse, most women reported having a poignant distrust of other women. For Jackie, this meant having few female friends, but it also led her to distrust female physicians.

It has kept me from having female friends. I still don't have that many female friends. It is hard for me to trust people - especially females. Even doctors, I would prefer a male doctor.

Like Jackie, Robin and Nicky expressed an intense distrust of female doctors and dentists; as a result, each specifically requests to see a male health practitioner.

When I was younger, I couldn't go to the dentist because we had a female dentist and I used to think that she'd put me to sleep and be touching me. (Robin)

I went to a female physician once for a pap test and I couldn't do it. I couldn't stop crying and I was shaking. (Nicky)

Given the horrific violence suffered from multiple men in her life, Nicky realizes that her greater distrust in women is not 'rational.' This 'irrationality,' I believe, speaks to the power of dominant social constructions of motherhood, whereby a mother's abusive behaviour towards a child shatters a trust that is not easily restored and which, therefore, get transferred to all women.

I don't trust men either, but I can deal with them easier. I don't know why that is, because lots of men abused me.

Yet, for Nicky, surviving maternal sexual abuse has been more difficult compared to her experiences with male-perpetrated violence.

It's worse than my brothers doing it to me. They're family too, but they're my brothers. They're not my mother, you know?

It is the special status attached to 'mother' that causes Nicky to define the sexual abuse as more damaging, which is no doubt related to the powerful mainstream discourses on motherhood. A similar distinction was made by Pat.

It was worse from my mom because my mom was the one I trusted. She was my mother and I was supposed to trust her... But she didn't give me the kind of love that she should have. She gave me something else.

Chris also spoke about how surviving maternal sexual abuse has been more pronounced compared to men.

Having experienced both male- and female-perpetrated sexual abuse, I would say it is different. The male is very out-front. Ostentatiously the power trip is really obvious... It is there in the smell, like men who are aggressive smell like burning metal... They know they are violating power. They know they are using their power - whether it is muscle strength, age, dominance, societal, whatever. For women, like my mother, it is more passive aggressive. It is more manipulative because it is put under the banner of love and nurture, which it isn't... My mother's love always had strings attached... It is more warped because I don't think my mother even let herself make sense about what she was doing... So yah, both are an abuse of power, but with male abusers the power is more blatant than the female. The female can too, but the female does it by trying to con you through their 'nurturing' side.

In Chris' opinion, her marginally greater trust in men is connected to the way in which social constructions of masculinity tend to permit overt aggression in males – especially in relation to their power over others. By way of contrast, Chris' distrust of women stems from her belief that females often hide behind discursive strategies – such as inherent nurturing. For Chris, the passive-aggressive form of manipulation ostensibly causes women to covertly exhibit their power, which is why she trusts females less.

The Isolating Impact of Betrayal

Many women described feeling betrayed by their mother's abuse. This was the case for Robin.

The betrayal is more. I think it would have been easier to be abused by my father than my mother because it is more seen in everyone's eyes that a father would do something like that and not the mother.

Based on her interviews with survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, Myriam Denov (2004) found the impact of betrayal equally intense. She cites one woman's feeling of betrayal:

There is a deeper sense of betrayal. It's like there's no safe place. How can a woman face a world that belittles and condemns us because we're women, face that world and struggle within it and still turn her hand against her own sex? That's a bitter betrayal. (Denov, 2004: 149).

It seems that the greater sense of betrayal stems, at least in part, from a belief that a shared gender ought to result in more empathic care (Ogilvie and Daniluk, 1995). In this regard, there does seem to be an assumption of an implicit unity of women, especially within the family. Given this assumption, and the powerful effects of motherhood and femininity discourses, it makes sense that survivors would perceive a greater betrayal from sexually abusive mothers.

Even though feelings of betrayal exist on some level for almost all survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Herman, 1992; Mayer, 1992; Blume, 1990; Courtois, 1988), the added shame and stigma – brought about by motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality discourses – seems to have a profound impact on women who have been sexually abused by their mothers.

Regrettably, the combination of shame, stigma, distrust, and betrayal often causes maternal sexual abuse survivors to retreat into a deep isolation. This was the case for Sandy.

It's very hard for me to be around a lot of people... I'm very isolated right now.

For Nicky, shame and isolation was the result of feeling like she was somehow culpable in the sexual abuse.

I wear it. It's like I am wearing my shame... And I feel guilt because I did things. I didn't do them intentionally. She made me do things, but I still feel guilty because I didn't scream or yell or freak out. I just went along with it.

Like Nicky, Robin often finds herself isolated from others or, if she is with a group of people, retreating from conversations – especially when the topic is mothering.

Even now I still feel ashamed because your mother is not supposed to do things like that to you... From a mother it seems so wrong... and I don't think people really believe that a mother can do something like that to their daughter or to their own child because a mother is supposed to be caring. She is supposed to be the caregiver and the loving person.

For Robin, the consequence of carrying so much shame is that it causes her to always feel dirty and to regret not being a perfect child.

I always feel dirty. Even still today. I still think that if I would have been good, my mom would not have did anything to me... If I didn't misbehave. If I did well in school, she wouldn't have done those things to me.

(So if you were the perfect kid?)

Yeah!

(Which no kid ever is)

Yeah, but I just thought that if I would've stayed a good kid, then she wouldn't have did anything to me.

Nicky also spoke about how her shame has caused her to constantly feel dirty. According to Nicky, 'her dirt' is not just obvious to herself, but rather it is can be readily seen by others. Feeling dirty gives Nicky one more reason to distance herself from others because isolation insulates others from seeing what she sees.

Troubles Forming Relationships and Problems with Intimacy

With betrayal, isolation, stigma, and shame comes a perpetual difficulty forming safe relationships. Specifically, most women spoke of problems with intimacy. For Nicky, problems with sexual intimacy were difficult with people she knows.

I can't have sex... it's weird and it sounds slutty, but I can have sex with someone I don't know. I can do that, but as soon as I know them then I can't have sex with them. The closer I get, the further away I go... because with people, the problem has always been inside the home.

Nicky also spoke about how hard it is to kiss her children, because it causes her to remember how her mother used to kiss her.

I can't kiss because my mom used to kiss me, and that grosses me right out. It just makes me feel sick... I've never been able to kiss. It's always been a rule for me. You can have sex with me, but you can't kiss me... I can kiss my kids, but not on the lips, just on the cheek.

Pat also commented on her difficulties with meeting people and keeping relationships.

I have no friends. No really good friends... because I know that nobody will get close to me... I have this boyfriend... we used to live together... and now he's trying to get back with me, but I'm scared to have a relationship with anybody... when they get too close, I just push them away... It is just the scariness... having somebody tell me,

'Okay, do this and do that.' Well you're not my mom and I don't want you to be my mother either.

Regrettably, Pat's fear of relationships isolates her, which only succeeds in exacerbating her feelings of loneliness.

The Role of Poverty and Race in Surviving Abuse

Surviving mother-daughter sexual abuse is real, intense, and long-lasting, which is not surprising given the discourses surrounding motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality that serve to produce perceptions of mothers as being inherently trustworthy and always reliable caregivers. In speaking with survivors, it became apparent that impact is not singular. Rather, it is multiple and polymorphic. So are its losses, which tend to be a precipitating factor in the dismal financial situation many survivors are currently in.

This is the case for Nicky, who is currently in the process of trying to rebuild her life.

I spent about a year on crack and I lost everything. I lost my home. I lost my car. Then I gave up my kids... I truly believe that my kids are not with me because I was sexually abused, because I don't think, or maybe I don't want to believe, that I would have got into the things I did without the abuse. I would have been a different person altogether.

Despite the remarkable losses in Nicky's life, she hopes for a better future. Yet, poverty was the one common hurdle most women were having difficulties getting over. The financial losses for several women have been huge. For Nicky, her often severe fear of people causes huge disruptions in her ability to secure long-term

employment. As a result, Nicky moves from one 'McJob'¹¹ to the next, only ever being able to work part-time.

The effects of poverty have also had an enormous impact on Sandy's ability to heal from all the past abuse. In fact, for Sandy, surviving is not limited to abuse.

For me, it's basically poverty. That's what it is for me. That is where I am right now, in poverty because thirty-seven dollars every two weeks ain't getting me nothing. So it's a major thing for me. Ever since I ran away from home, it's just been poverty.

The impact of being a trauma survivor is also racialized. For Sandy and Jackie in particular, the systemic conditions of poverty combined with having to cope with being Aboriginal in a predominantly racist society does not make healing from abuse easy.

I was not the only Native out on the streets. Lot of Natives are living in poverty (Sandy)

I hate my culture. Things would be so much easier if I was white. (Jackie)

The link between racism and classism has been made by several scholars who have explored experiences of violence among Aboriginal women (see, for example, MacGillivray and Comaskey, 1999; Comack, 1996). Consistent with this previous work, it seems that for many of the Aboriginal women interviewed, the influence of racism manifests in multiple ways. For example, the colossal impact of systemic racism in the criminal justice system (see, for example, Fraser, 2002) has resulted in the criminalization of two Aboriginal women who, due to their drug and/or alcohol addictions, turned to the sex trade industry. In addition, the racialized nature of child

¹¹ 'McJob' is a term that has been popularized by George Ritzer (1996). Briefly, McJob refers to a low paying job where employees are trained to follow rigid rules and scripts, which succeeds in eliminating all authentic interaction between server and customer.

and family services (see, for example, Kline, 1993) has had an influence on three of the four Aboriginal women interviewed, which will be discussed further in a proceeding chapter. Finally, one outcome of impoverished living conditions (especially on a reserve) is that Aboriginal Peoples do not have equal access to social services (Bucharski, Brockman, and Lambert, 1999; Satzewich and Wotherspoon, 1993: 164-165), which are essential resources for women attempting to 'survive' sexual violence.

Concluding Remarks

To many, the rhetoric of violence is nothing new. We know it exists. We know the damage. And we know that the impact is often a wound that even time cannot heal. Such is the case for mother-daughter sexual abuse. This chapter has served as an extensive introduction to the women interviewed – who they are and what they have lived through in terms of coping, resisting, and surviving child sexual abuse. For most women, the fact that their mother was one of their sexual aggressors has further exacerbated their struggles.

My objective, however, has not been to make the case that mother-daughter sexual abuse is the worst form of violence or the "ultimate taboo" (Borden and La Terz, 1993; Elliott, 1993a). Rather, my aim is to highlight the ways in which popular stereotypes of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality have an impact on survivors' experiences of maternal sexual abuse – especially when it came to coping with, resisting, and ultimately surviving the sexual abuse, which unfortunately was often fraught with disbelief.

Thus far, I have focused on survivors' descriptions of how maternal sexual abuse has had an impact on their lives. I next turn to the multiple ways survivors regard their mothers which, consistent with a feminist poststructuralist analysis, are fluid, multiple, and put into discourse. By first exploring 'the good,' 'the bad,' and 'the ugly' of mothers from the viewpoint of daughters, I examine whether or not survivors saw their mothers as powerful figures or as powerless victims, with the latter being more in line with dominant social constructions of women.

CHAPTER FIVE

Making Sense of the Sexual Abuse: Mothers as Mad, Bad, or Victims?

Other than seeing mothers on TV and stuff, I didn't know what a real mother was.

Robin

She could have done a better job of mothering me. She failed me as a mother. I feel bad to say it, but it's the truth.

Nicky

When a terrible tragedy has been inflicted, survivors struggle to make sense of the occurrence. The need to understand 'why' is contagious. We are, after all, a culture of answers. One question that undoubtedly comes out of the previous chapter is, 'Why is it so difficult to hear these women's stories?' At least this is the question I repeatedly asked myself throughout the interview process. On one hand, I recognize that on some level it is almost unbearable to hear about any form of degradation, regardless of the perpetrator's sex. Yet, on the other, when the abuser is the mother, there are few discursive resources available for us to make sense of her abhorrent acts of cruelty.

As discussed in a previous chapter, one strategy has been to label these women as 'bad mothers' and align them with monstrous females like Karla Homolka or Valmae Beck.¹ The appeal of this label is that it effectively locates women outside of popular constructions of mothers and women because the sexually abusive mother (by virtue of her 'badness') becomes the epitome of *anti-female* behaviour. The problem with this hard stance is that survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse are

¹ Valmae Fay Beck is an Australian who was given a life sentence in 1988 for her participation in the sexual assault and murder (with her husband Barrie Watts) of twelve year old Sian Kingi.

left with few discursive tools to make sense of the violence – in part because if they were born to a *monster*, then what does that make them? When attempting to make sense of the abuse, survivors have two other available tactics to draw upon. One is to construct their mothers as ‘mad,’ while the other is to make sense of the violence by illuminating their mother’s horrific, victim-filled past. Yet, to focus exclusively on mad or victim explanations often succeeds in diminishing a mother’s capacity to act in violent ways.

Thus, to *excuse* a mother’s sexually abusive behaviour through mad, victim, and even bad constructs runs the risk of not holding women responsible for their own acts of malice. In speaking with survivors, I found that simple bifurcations such as good/bad, sane/insane, and powerful/powerless are insufficient when examining how survivors come to make sense of maternal sexual abuse. For example, some of the women reported that their mothers were highly respected in the community. This public presentation of the ‘good mother’ made it difficult for survivors to make sense of how their mothers acted in the privacy of their home.

In addition, although most survivors did acknowledge that their mothers were victims or had suffered from either alcoholism or a mental illness, they also recognized the fluidity of power within their mothers’ lives. To this end, all of the women interviewed believed that their mothers had agency and could have made different choices. Thus, by adopting a feminist poststructuralist perspective, the many dynamic and complex ways survivors attempt to make sense of mother-daughter sexual abuse can be explored – especially in terms of how they draw upon and interpret mad, bad, and victim constructs.

The Good

Many survivors of child sexual abuse have commented on the immaculate presentation of their family's external façade (see, for example: Brady, 1979). The presentation of the 'happy family' adds an additional barrier for survivors when it comes to making sense of the abuse, because they become convinced that even if they muster up the courage to speak, no one would believe them anyway. With mother-daughter sexual abuse, these feelings seem to be further exacerbated, especially given the high level of involvement many mothers have in their children's lives. This is evident in Linda Crockett's (2001: 235) account:

No one outside the family would have guessed that the woman who baked cookies for the PTA bake sales and helped cub scouts with their craft projects bottled her young son's bowel movements... and had sadistically abused at least one of her children.

Survivors' belief that their mothers were perceived in the community as the 'good mother' is consistent with Bobbie Rosencrans' (1997) survey of daughters who were sexually abused by their mothers. Specifically, Rosencrans asked survivors if their mothers 'appeared normal to people outside of the home.' Of the ninety-three women interviewed, eight-four (or 90 percent) responded 'yes.' In speaking with women for the present study, it was apparent that the appearance of the 'good mom' was also a common factor in survivors' feelings of not being believed, which further ostracized them from sources of help and potential support.

The 'Front-Stage' of Family Life: How Others Saw 'Mom'

Many women interviewed reported that to the outside world, their mothers presented a carefully constructed "front-stage" (Goffman, 1959) of family life. Their families

were often well respected in the community. This was especially the case for Sandy, Jackie, and Pat who grew up on small Aboriginal reserves with strong ties to the community. All three women spoke about how they were convinced no one would believe that their mothers were sexually abusive. As Sandy commented:

The only time she was nice to me was when she took me for my doctor's appointments. That's the only time because we were out in the community.

Like Sandy, Jackie spoke about being convinced that others would not believe the abuse because her mother was so well respected.

People would always see the marks but my mom would always say, 'Oh, she's just getting herself hurt from falling off trees' because I had a lot of brothers... My mom was a teacher so she was really respected in the community... So who would believe me?

No doubt, for Jackie, socio-economic status also played a role in how her mother was perceived in the community, especially given that her mother was a teacher.

A similar account was shared by Pat who remembered how confusing it was to see her mother so active and helpful on the reserve and yet be so hurtful in the home.

She was always doing things for people. She sewed and made blankets and she cooked and she used to cater weddings. Everyone would - as soon as somebody got engaged - come running to my mom right away and she'd do all the cooking... So I don't think anybody would have believed me if I tried to say anything.

For Pat, the presentation of her mother as the 'good mom' impaired her ability to make sense of the abuse. In the community, Pat's mother was seen as a 'mother-figure' who others came to for help organizing significant events in their lives. Yet, as Pat described to me, at home she provided little or no childcare. Given the near spotless front-stage set up by Pat's mother, it is little wonder why Pat was adamant

that no one would have believed her about the maternal sexual abuse, even if she had found her voice to speak.

Unfortunately, the positive image of mothers outside of the home often succeeded in masking the sexual abuse. Sandy, for example, remembered a time when Child and Family Services (CFS) was notified about possible sexual abuse in her home; however, because her mother was so well respected in the community, she was not questioned about her potential involvement. As Sandy recalled:

Allegations were being made, but she was a goodie-two-shoes, you know, she never did anything wrong... They investigated and she told them, 'There's nothing wrong.' 'She's a little bit sick and she's in bed so you can't talk to her.' 'She's just down a bit because she's not feeling good.' Yah, she was so happy-go-lucky.

The mistakes and oversights made by CFS are obvious. Sandy's mother was taken at her word when she told CFS workers that everything was a simple misunderstanding. No one at CFS considered that in speaking with Sandy's mother, they were in fact consulting with the abuser. Finally, no one thought to speak to Sandy, who was the alleged victim of violence.

Many of the women interviewed also expressed experiencing a lot of confusion in their mother's presentation of the 'good mom,' which is clearly reflected in Robin's narrative.

I never saw my mom how others saw my mom. Even my cousins always told me, 'Your house is always so clean' and everything... And people would say 'Your mom used to take us swimming'... and I would be like 'Where the Hell was I?' I used to think that I was dreaming and I actually would pinch myself a lot... like when other kids would be talking about my mom, I would go pinch, pinch! So I used to think that I was always dreaming all the time or that maybe I was not paying enough attention, you know, like maybe she was being nice.

For Robin, the only way she knew how to make sense of the difference between people's perception of her mother versus her behaviour at home was to try and convince herself that she was not dreaming. Physically pinching herself thus became the only way she knew how to confirm that she was not imagining things.

As the above accounts have illustrated, most of the women reported that their mother's behaviour was quite different in public compared to their private home lives. In Nicky's opinion, however, there was no difference in how her mother was perceived in public to how she behaved at home.

People saw my mother in a negative way because they saw her drunk. They saw her flirting with men. They saw her going to parties without my dad. So people saw her for what she was.

Like Nicky, Lee's account of other people's perceptions of her mother was largely negative. For example, Lee lived in a remote northern community and remembers being teased endlessly at school about her mother's numerous "one-night-stands" and "motel parties."

Although not the case for all women interviewed, it seems that for many, an additional barrier for them to be able to make sense of the abuse stemmed from their mother's positive image in the community. As demonstrated in previous chapters, what made matters worse for many survivors of maternal sexual abuse were the already strong social discourses of femininity and motherhood, which also operate as barriers to them being believed. However, despite their mother's near immaculate front-stage performances, according to the women interviewed, lurking behind the scenes were 'bad mothers.'

The Bad

Within the discursive terrain of motherhood, mothers are often categorized into a good and bad binary. As such, images of the bad mother are produced through assumptions of the good mother. Put another way, the good mother cannot exist without the bad mother. In the present study, all the women believed that their female caregivers were bad mothers, and this provided one explanation for how survivors made sense of their mother's sexual abuse. In fact, most did not hesitate in their response when asked whether or not they would label their mother as a 'bad mother.'

This is understandable – especially when recalling some of the atrocities committed by their mothers that were illustrated in the previous chapter. Quite simply, the thought of a knife-wielding mother or a mother who causes blindness by burying her daughter is unfathomable. So is a mother who penetrates her daughter's vagina with a burning stick. These survivor narratives no doubt represent the worst-case scenarios of parental torture and neglect. Short of killing their children through such torture, it is hard to comprehend anything more severe. Yet, what makes these stories so hard to digest is that they also exceed the discursive confines of mainstream motherhood and femininity discourses. Even when women's violence and the extent of female rage is acknowledged, very few are willing to concede to the possibility that some mothers have the potential to sexually torture their children.

Robin's story of her mother killing her father offers a good illustration of this point. Although not as prevalent as male violence against women, a female who kills her male partner is not unheard of. When a woman kills her partner, there is now a new discourse in which to explain the action. With the advent of the Battered Woman

Syndrome, a woman's behaviour is now made understandable and excused through law. But only as long as she can convince the court that she is some combination of mad or victim – 'mad' in the sense that she suffers from a psychological malady and 'victim' if she is (or has been) in an abusive relationship.²

In Robin's case, only a partial account of her father's homicide is given. But when I asked Robin if domestic violence was a factor, she replied that it was not. From speaking with Robin, I got the sense that the courts portrayed her mother as inherently bad – as a chronic alcoholic and a dangerous offender – which are discursive strategies that serve to explain her departure from normative femininity.³ Yet, despite being portrayed as a 'murdering wife,' no one thought to question her potential as a child sex offender. Robin's mother's 'badness' therefore exists within a predefined (and socially constituted) discursive terrain, one that rarely includes child sexual abuse – especially by the child's mother. Thus, even though there is a lot that is not known about child sexual abuse, it seems that it is known to be discursively gendered.

The consequence, however, is that survivors of maternal sexual abuse are silenced because, according to Belinda Morrissey, most people prefer to "ignore rather than accept that women are as *capable* as men of condemnable and abhorrent acts" (2003: 174, emphasis added). One word of caution is in order. As mentioned at the onset of this work, to suggest that women are as *capable* as men of committing

² See, for example, Elizabeth Comack's (1993) monograph on the legal recognition of the Battered Women's Syndrome. Specifically, she argues that in order for the Battered Woman Syndrome to be successful in law, women must be individualized, medicalized, and portrayed as a victim (Comack, 1993: 46-47).

³ Given the relatively short four-year sentence Robin's mother received for manslaughter (instead of a second-degree murder charge), it seems that linked to the 'bad' woman is the discursive label of the 'mad' woman.

sexual violence is not to imply that women abuse in *equal* proportions. Being capable of violence and committing sexual abuse in equal proportions are fundamentally different claims. While I believe that it is important to address women's capacity to perpetrate sexual abuse, it should not be used as a tool to minimize the social problem of male violence.

To this end, feminist hesitation to address female-perpetrated violence is somewhat warranted because, "several female abusers become equivalent to a hundred men" (Kelly, 1991: 17). However, it is possible to concede that some women sexually abuse children without jeopardizing the larger movement to end male violence against women. For this reason, Liz Kelly (1996: 36) argues that as feminists, we ought not to be concerned with whether women are capable of violence, but rather *how* feminist praxis can be used to address and respond to it.

I would extend this position by arguing that a necessary component of feminism should be in our ability to *theorize* (i.e. make sense of) women's violence. For instance, many feminists have argued that the term 'woman' is not unitary (Butler, 1990; Riley, 1988). This critique has usually been directed towards white, middle-class, heterosexual women, but it could be extended to include the issue of mother-daughter sexual abuse as well. By acknowledging women's potential to act in abusive ways, it is possible to explore the limitations of constructing sexually abusive mothers as inherently bad or evil. It may be that mother-daughter sexual abuse presents us with one of the worst-case scenarios of women's capacity for violence, but to deny that mothers are incapable of such abhorrent acts or to dismiss a mother

as simply 'bad' (and therefore anti-female) only succeeds in sustaining hegemonic perceptions of women.

In contrast, even though a man's abusive behaviour is also often excused by labels such as 'bad,' 'evil,' and 'monster,' male violence is still normalized to some extent within masculinity discourses. For instance, when it becomes known that a father or step-father has sexually abused his child, although a social outrage may be expressed towards the act as a society, we often are not entirely surprised by the act itself. Yet, when a mother or female caregiver commits acts of violence towards her daughter, we are left with no discursive place to put this behaviour because maternal sexual abuse completely defies our logic around femininity, motherhood, and heterosexuality. To this end, a man is construed as 'bad' because he violated a *criminal act*; however, a woman is labelled 'bad' because she violated the discursive constructions of her *gender*.

For this reason, Chris has actually given up on trying to make sense of her mother's sexual abuse because, in her opinion, she cannot begin to understand something that society does not acknowledge.

(How do you make sense of the abuse?)

I don't. I don't know where to put it. I don't have a box to put this shit in. There is a lack of data. There is a lack of studies. And there is a lack of appropriate responses. Like people are so seeped in male-female violence that they can't see any others. They can't get their heads around it... It's like, when I was a teenager, they put the first person on the moon and all of the seniors thought it was a hoax! They just could not believe it! So it's almost like that for me. I've come from where I have come from and I almost can't see that there would be a shelf to put this... Intellectually, I can make sense of it but even that gets really muddled. It's like a secret within a secret... I mean, it's like this is the last bastion of secrecy within incest!

A Feminist Denial of Women's Badness?

Why have feminists so rarely focused on women's capacity for sexual violence? As noted, feminist reservation has been in part due to a fear of overstating women's violence to the point that it is assumed to occur in equal proportions with men's violence. But how do survivors make sense of this reluctance? In an attempt to answer this question, I draw on Chris' standpoint on feminist discourse regarding mother-daughter sexual abuse. In our many discussions on the topic of feminism, Chris repeatedly expressed feeling angry towards feminists and, in particular, their response to 'mother-blaming' by the 'psy' professions. This is, in part, what Chris had to say:

With early feminism, there was a real backlash against psychiatrists blaming the mother for all the misfortunes of their children or family, which was a convenient male-designated stereotype of the inadequate mother. The pendulum swung wide, and, while some new ground was gained for women, other issues and possibilities of harm were lost, became taboo to even talk about or say. An even heavier silence descended on women survivors of mother-daughter incest.

There are two things that I see. One is because I'm emerging from the generation that was really held to the wall by psychiatrists because if a kid grew up with problems, it was the mother's fault. And so then came feminism, and early feminism took the word 'mother' and turned it into a positive word. They took what was a negative aspect of mother-blaming and they turned it into a power aspect. They merged the new identity of women - women as nurturers in the world. War would not happen because women would fight for their sons, but they didn't say that they were raping their sons and daughters, you know?

Even though Chris is not hopeful for much substantive change among the 'psy' professions, she is far more confident in the potential advances within feminism when it comes to recognizing and addressing mother-daughter sexual abuse.

Like, I'm so mad at professionals right now because it is like, 'Damn you guys, why don't you listen?' And feminism! I've had trouble with the concept of feminism because it always comes back to, 'Women are nurturers' and, 'We are the ones that can make a difference in the world.' ... It is a fractured feminism and many could not handle it or women said, 'Don't go there or you will go crazy!' They didn't know how to react to it so they minimized it and they diminished it. It was not in their repertoire... I feel that feminism betrayed me. But on the other hand, there are many empowering aspects of feminism. So I guess, I just wish that they'd get some of the assumptions out of the way... I think feminism today is much more capable of bringing mother-daughter sexual abuse forward than the feminism before. I think feminism now is more 'in the world' and is not so closely tied to nurturing. I think there is now more of an acknowledgement that women can be abusive.

Consistent with Chris' advice, then, as feminists we should take the lead – much like we have with challenging other forms of degradation – in bringing to light all forms of violence, even if the abuser is a woman. By doing so we can still acknowledge that over 90 percent of sexual violence is perpetrated by males. But, in addition, our theorizing can challenge universalism, and the tendency of dominant discourses to marginalize (or make sense of) women's violence through constructs like inherently 'bad' or 'evil.'

How Survivors Make Sense of Their 'Bad' Mothers

As mentioned, all of the women interviewed had little reservation in labelling their mothers as 'bad.' Given these adamant assertions, it should be little surprise that survivors tended to hold a great deal of anger towards their mothers. For Robin, it was her mother's frequent violent outbreaks, the homicidal death of her father by her mother, and the years of sexual abuse that caused Robin to form her opinion of maternal badness.

Yet, for many others, it was also their mother's failure to protect them from other harm that caused a lot of anger among survivors.⁴ For example, Lee was angry that her mother seemed to be completely unaware of the horrific abuse she suffered from their neighbour.

He raped me for the first time when I was five. So I mean how do you not notice that your child is bleeding and bruised and torn, you know?

An intense outrage was also expressed by Nicky in her graphic and troubling depiction of how her mother took no protective measures when it was discovered that she had been brutally raped by a boarder at age five.

[H]e actually had sex with me in my rectum and I felt so dirty. What happened after was that my parents came home and he shoved me in the bathroom and like there was shit everywhere and my mom wanted to know what I was doing in the bathroom for so long and I was trying to clean it up! And I was bleeding... And she got the door unlocked and she came in and it was a mess in there and she freaked. She freaked and she made me clean it all up and was saying, 'What the Hell is wrong with you?' She didn't ask why I was bleeding or what had happened to me. Nothing. She just freaked out on me that I had made such a mess. She then told my brothers and they teased me for years. It was horrible. It was just horrible.

By highlighting these survivor accounts, I am not making the claim that Lee and Nicky's mothers are more deserving of a 'bad mother' label because, in addition to being sexually abusive themselves, they failed to protect their daughters from other perpetrators. Rather, my intention is to illustrate the multiple reasons why survivors regard their mothers as bad parents.

Yet, in speaking with survivors, it was not enough that they labelled their mothers as bad and then proceeded to painfully tell me why. In fact, for some of the

⁴ Survivors expressing anger towards mothers for failing to protect them against other abusers is consistent with previous studies of male-perpetrated sexual abuse (see, for example: Hiebert-Murphy and Burnside, 2001; Candib, 1999; Johnson, 1992).

women, naming their mothers as bad was quickly followed by a verbal retreat. Thus, what was interesting was that no matter how angry some survivors became, and no matter how adamant they were in their assertions of 'maternal badness,' quite often our conversations ended with survivors rationalizing their mother's abuse, using language that is more consistent with 'mad' and 'victim' constructs.

This was the case for Pat. Below is a brief dialogue from our conversation about whether she believed her mother was 'bad.'

(Would you label your mother as a bad mother?)

Yeah, absolutely. She did a lot of shit. It's her fault I am where I'm at today.

In a later conversation, however, Pat revisited our earlier discussion.

You know, I used to think she was a horrible mother, but now that I am older and she is older, I understand that she had lots of problems. You know, I always thought she should be put in [a mental institution].

(How come?)

Because she was warped. I mean, really crazy.

Similar to Pat, I asked Nicky if she thought her mother was a 'bad mother,' to which she responded:

Yeah, she really failed me as a mother. She made bad choices. And she wasn't powerless. She had power. She could've made better choices.

(Yeah, it really sounds like it)

Yeah, I feel bad to say it. But it is the truth... My mother was a bad image.

Yet, later in the interview, Nicky began to retract her statements.

It is hard to say that she is a bad mother... I am pretty sure she was sexually abused by her uncle when she was a kid... And maybe I'm

using that for an excuse because I want to think that she was a victim. I don't know. I just know it doesn't leave me with figuring out the reasons why she did things to me, you know?

Once again, the power of dominant discursive constructions of motherhood is illustrated. It should come as no surprise that even survivors may be uncomfortable with 'bad mother' claims. In this regard, my intention is not to dismiss survivors' anger, which by all accounts seems completely appropriate and understandable. Rather, my interest is in how survivors draw on 'mad' and 'victim' constructions because, in many ways, they align their mothers *within* mainstream femininity and motherhood discourses. To simply define mothers as 'bad' does not help survivors make sense of the sexual abuse – in large part because they would have to define their mothers as monsters who are the epitome of anti-feminine behaviour. To this end, it is far easier for survivors to make sense of their mother's bad actions through 'mad' or 'victim' rationalizations. While such labels may place their mothers at the *margins* of femininity and motherhood discourses, at minimum they are still located *within* these discourses, so therefore survivors at least have some way to make sense of the violence.

The Ugly

Often, mental illness is regarded as a terribly ugly sickness. The same holds for alcohol and substance abuse. Why? Because left untreated or unaddressed, it has a great potential to destroy lives. However, despite the commonality of ugliness, there are very few similarities between the two – barring one: in the case of women falling outside or at the margins of mainstream femininity and motherhood discourses (as are

mothers who sexually abuse their children), both mental illness and drug/alcohol abuse are regularly cited as explanations for women's diminished capacity and lack of agency (Hislop, 2001, 1999; Jennings, 2000).

Kathleen Coulborn Faller (1995; 1987), for example, has written several articles on women who have sexually abused children. Based on her ongoing clinical sample of seventy-two female offenders (most of whom were mothers to the abused children), Faller (1987) reports that almost half (48 percent) of the abusers suffered from some sort of mental illness, while some 55 percent had problems with substance addiction.⁵

The problem, however, with emphasizing a mother's alleged history with mental illness is that often her perceived diminished capacity is used to *excuse* her sexually abusive behaviour. Further, not all mothers who have sexually abused their children are mentally ill (Rosencrans, 1997). To this end, it is not my intention to question the validity of any mental illness claims. Rather, what I find interesting is *why* males have *not* been pathologized to the same extent. This argument was made by Myriam Denov (2004; 2001) who demonstrated, based on her interviews, that psychiatrists believe that the majority of female –but not male – sex offenders are 'mad.'

Thus, part of the problem with labelling mothers as 'mad' is that it helps to reinforce dominant motherhood and femininity discourses which contend that *all* mothers naturally love and, conversely, would not harm their children. Therefore, *any* mother who deviates from this assumption must be made sense of by means of

⁵ The numbers for both mental illness and substance abuse dropped in Faller's 1995 study to 32 percent and 51 percent, respectively. Faller suspects that the substantial drop, at least for mental illness, was in part due to the increase of childcare workers being charged with child sexual abuse in daycares.

rationalizations such as mental illness or the complete loss of control that is caused through extreme alcoholism or substance abuse.

The Mentally Ill Mother

As demonstrated, a large portion of the mostly psych-based literature focuses on – at least in part – the mental illnesses of female offenders (see, for example: Hislop, 2001; Harper, 1993; Chasnoff et al., 1986; Mathis, 1972). Yet, to the knowledge of survivors, none of their mothers had ever been officially diagnosed with a mental illness. This finding is similar to Rosencrans' (1997) survey of maternal sexual abuse survivors, whereby none of the daughters reported that their mothers had ever been treated for a mental illness. However, unlike Rosencrans' research, most women in the present study adamantly believed that their mothers suffered from some sort of mental health problem.

For Nicky, it was her mother's erratic behaviour and violent mood swings which led her to classify her mother as 'mad.'

She was out of her mind. She did weird things like walking around the house with a butcher knife saying that she is going to kill us while we were sleeping.

Like Nicky, Pat believed her mother suffered from some mental illness. However, unlike Nicky, Pat could not pin down exactly what was wrong with her mother. But, for Pat, this did not matter because she simply saw her as 'crazy.'

I'd say she had a mental illness problem. She was warped... She didn't smoke cigarettes. She didn't drink alcohol... She was just crazy.

A noteworthy aspect of the interviews was the high number of survivors who believed that their mothers must have mental illnesses *because* they were sexually abusive. Below are narratives from Jackie and Chris which reflect this opinion.

(Would you say your mother suffered from some sort of mental illness?)

Yeah, I think so because no mother in her right mind would even think of doing that. (Jackie)

...

Women perpetrators, I think, are sick. They are mentally sick. I can see that more easily than for male perpetrators. Male perpetrators have social permission to do it so it seems to be ok if the guy does it. (Chris)

Despite Chris' assertion that her mother must have been 'mad,' she still held her accountable for her violent outbreaks.

I know my mother was sick. I mean, she was a real sadistic, manipulative, cold person. She knew what she was doing and she knew it was wrong and she took tremendous pleasure in the discomfort. So that to me is someone with a personality disorder or something. I see that as mentally ill. And that's not to excuse her, because she knew what she was doing.

For Chris, even though she classified her mother as 'mad,' her mother's agency could not be *excused* due to mental illness. Thus, in terms of the 'mad mom,' it may be that survivors too are aware of the discursive constructions of femininity and motherhood, which implicitly state: any woman who sexually abuses her daughter *must* be insane.

The Alcoholic Mother

Much of the psych-based literature reports that alcohol and substance abuse is a precipitating factor in maternal sexual violence (Davin, 1999; Barnett, Corder, and Jehu, 1990; Mathews, Matthews, and Speltz, 1989; O'Connor, 1987). Such findings,

however, were only partially substantiated in the present study. Overall, only two (25 percent) women reported that their mother had an alcohol problem. None mentioned narcotic or substance addictions by their mothers. Reports of alcohol abuse were similar to Bobbie Rosencrans' (1997) study of maternal sexual abuse survivors, wherein 32 percent believed that their mothers were alcoholics. However, 19 percent of the women in Rosencrans' study also reported that their mothers suffered from a drug addiction, which was not verified in the present research.⁶

Below are the responses from Nicky and Robin, the two women who maintained that their mothers were alcoholics.

It was frequent [the sexual abuse], like every couple of days and especially if she was drunk. (Nicky)

It was always when my mom was drinking. It wasn't when she was sober. (Robin)

For Nicky and Robin, their mother's drunkenness instigated the sexual abuse. As will be explored later in the chapter, however, Nicky and Robin also acknowledged that despite chronic battles with alcohol, their mothers had agency and a capacity to make certain choices. The fact that they made poor choices, in their opinion, should not excuse their mother's sexually abusive actions.

In terms of the 'ugly mom,' it seems that mental illness and, to a lesser extent, alcoholism help some survivors to rationalize and make sense of their mother's violence. To this end, a mother's hurtful conduct becomes somewhat pardoned due to her diminished capacity. The fact that many survivors draw on 'mad' constructs shows the extent to which they too are informed by dominant discourses. Given that

⁶ The fact that Rosencrans' (1997) survey on mother-daughter sexual abuse consisted of ninety-three respondents versus the eight interviewed for the present study could also account for this discrepancy.

survivors are familiar with discursive contentions of a mother's unwavering love towards her child, it should be of little surprise that many made sense of their mother's abuse through perceived mental illness and/or alcoholism.

Yet, to end here would provide an incomplete account of how some survivors made sense of their mother's sexual abuse. As was evident in Chris' account, even though she adamantly maintained that her mother was mentally ill, she also believed that her mother was fully accountable for her sexually abusive behaviour. Thus, labelling her mother as 'mad' was Chris' way to make sense of the abuse, which is not the same as *excusing* the violence – or her mother's culpability in it.

It may be, then, that labelling mothers as 'mad' is a useful coping strategy for survivors when they are trying to understand why the abuse occurred – especially considering how mainstream social constructions of mothers have limited survivors' options for making sense of the sexual abuse. For this reason, as feminists, we must be careful that in our analysis of mother-daughter sexual abuse, we do not interpret a survivor's rationalization that her mother was 'mad' as a suggestion that her mother was therefore not responsible for the abuse. This may be the interpretation within some of the psych-based studies on female-perpetrated sexual abuse, but it is not how survivors' perceive their mother's violence. To this end, the usefulness of determining whether survivors believed that their mothers had problems with mental illness and/or substance abuse lies in the limited discursive terrain from which they can draw to reasonably make sense of the sexual abuse.

Mothers as Victims?

When mothers sexually abuse daughters, there is little space where survivors can discursively locate the violence – especially within dominant constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. This limits survivors in terms of how they can make sense of their mother's violence. For this reason, when such violence occurs, common responses have been to rationalize the sexual abuse as being either 'bad' or 'mad.' Unfortunately, however, these responses by survivors also succeed in upholding the popular constructions of mainstream discourses. This shows the social power of our failure to acknowledge sexual abuse by mothers, because it completely defies our logic around femininity, motherhood, and, arguably, heterosexuality. To this end, if the sexually abusive mother is fit into a pre-existing victim model based on previous violence from males, daughters are then able to make some sense of the abuse.

Most of the literature on the female offender emphasizes the previous victimization of perpetrators. For instance, Kathleen Coulborn Faller's (1995; 1987) study on female sex offenders found that nearly half of the women disclosed being sexually abused at some point in their childhoods. Further, only 15 percent reported *not* having any prior victimization history. One outcome of Faller's study is that it helps to reinforce dominant femininity and motherhood discourses. Thus, like the 'mad mother,' a 'victimized mother' who sexually abuses her daughter may be marginalized within mainstream motherhood and femininity discourses, but at least her behaviour can be *located* within such social constructions.

In the present study, most of the women interviewed did not view their mother's victimhood as a fixed or stable trait. Specifically, many would not define their mothers exclusively as victims, nor did they regard them as having a total propensity for power. Rather, many viewed their mother's lives as extremely variable in that they swung from powerful abuser to powerless victim.

That being said, this was not Jackie's position. Instead, Jackie was steadfast in her belief that her mother was never a victim. In Jackie's opinion, her mother held all the power over her and in her family.

(Did you ever see her as a victim?)

No, are you kidding!

When Jackie's response is put into context and the horrific abuse she suffered from her mother is recalled (she is, after all, legally blind due to an insidious assault by her mother), Jackie's reaction is certainly understandable.

While Jackie was adamant in her assertions that her mother was not a victim, most survivors were not so certain – especially as the interviews progressed. For instance, when I first asked Nicky, Pat, and Robin whether they saw their mothers as victims, they all quickly replied 'no.'

She wasn't powerless. She had power and she failed me. (Nicky)

No. I saw my dad as more powerless than my mother. (Pat)

She had all the power. We had to obey everything she said.
(Robin)

Thus, in my initial conversations with Nicky, Pat, and Robin, all saw their mothers as powerful figures who exploited dependent children. As our conversations progressed, however, the firm position taken by these women started to shift and they became

more empathetic towards their mother's previous victimization. For example, Nicky saw her mother as a powerless victim when she was intoxicated. She also acknowledged her mother's past sexual victimization as a child.

When she was really drunk, I saw her as powerless, because she would be so drunk that you just had no respect for her.

I guess after she died, I saw her as more of a victim, because I started to try to understand her and why she did what she did to me. And then I realized she was a victim herself.

Like Nicky, Pat started to shift from her initial opinion by recognizing the damaging impact her mother's past sexual abuse must have had on her.

I think my mom was abused too when she was growing up. I think that is why, because she was so used to it, you know, she didn't see anything wrong with doing it.

A similar positional swing occurred with Robin, who commented on her mother's experiences with sexual abuse as a child from her uncle.

About a year ago I started to talk to my aunties and they were telling me how my mom was as a kid. So that kind of made me see my mom differently. Because I always hated her... But then I started to look at it and there was nobody around that my mom could talk to.

The shift in responses from Nicky, Pat, and Robin aligns their mother's behaviour with the most common rationalization as to why some mothers sexually abuse their children: their past victimization (Jennings, 2000; Hislop, 1999; Turner and Turner, 1994). Contrary to much of this literature, however, none of the women interviewed saw their mothers exclusively as victims. Thus, portraying their mothers as "always ready victims" (Graycar and Morgan, 2002: 322) provides an incomplete picture of maternal sexual abuse.

In terms of how survivors make sense of their mother's previous victimization, exclusive victim explanations are insufficient for at least two reasons. First, focusing only on a mother's victim status cannot explain why some women who have been sexually abused (like those I interviewed) did not report becoming violent themselves. Lee provides a useful explanation.

I was abused a lot and I'm not doing it... It's people's ideals of women as victims... You know they just don't want to bring it up. You know women just don't do that because they are women.

(Why do you think people see it that way?)

Because there's nothing else to hold onto. I really don't think there is much else to hold onto. The world isn't perfect and people don't want to face that and if we have to let go of that one about the mother, we may think that's all that's left of humanity.

As has been discussed, it is mainstream ideals of women/mothers that cause a quick acceptance of the women-as-victim rationalization.

Second, victim-based explanations cannot address why mothers were not perceived by daughters as 'all-victim all of the time.' From the perspective of daughters, the status of victim or offender is neither fixed nor static. Similar to Kelly's (1988) work on sexual violence, which draws on a continuum of victimization, many of the women interviewed saw their mother's position of victim and abuser as representing two ends of a spectrum. In these terms, power is more like a pendulum that swings back and forth, and is free to oscillate between the two extremes. Mothers, then, can be both powerful abusers and powerless victims which, following a poststructuralist perspective, can occur simultaneously precisely because they are relational, fluid, and flexible. As Chris put it, mothers can be 'powerful victims.'

I don't see my mother as a powerful figure. I see her as a manipulative, disgusting wimp and I hate her for being weak. She stuck me in front of her when my dad went to hit. I was the punching bag. I was the person on whom things got deflected... I mean she was a victim too, but a powerless victim? No. She had the capability of making informed choices. She chose not to. And other women I've known of her age group, even at that time, made informed choices to get the fuck out and stand up for their kids. They didn't leave their kids to be the fodder so they would not get chewed up. I think my mother was a powerful victim! While she was being victimized, she victimized us.

The anger in Chris' narrative is obvious, but what interested me in our conversation was her discontent over her mother being 'weak.' In speaking with Chris, it became clear that she resented the choices her mother made. Chris recognized that her mother's social status (or lack thereof) of being a married woman in the 1950s and 60s did not leave her with a lot of reasonable options to live a life free of heteropatriarchy. However, despite the limitations of her mother's social position, Chris did not believe her mother was completely powerless. To this end, power is fluid, ever-changing, and polymorphic. Even though Chris' mother carried out the expected discursive performance of femininity and motherhood, she also took the demands of heteropatriarchy to excessive levels. Arguably, she performed socially normalized acts of masculinity⁷ (which will be discussed in the following chapter). It is this role reversal which needs to be recognized and explored in more detail within a feminist poststructuralist approach, and particularly in relation to Judith Butler's (1993; 1990) work on performativity.

⁷ As mentioned in a preceeding chapter, this is not to suggest that child sexual abuse is normalized (and therefore socially accepted) within mainstream masculinity discourses. Rather, it is my contention that male violence has become more normalized within masculinity discourses (see, for example: Canaan, 1998; Collier, 1998; Martin and Hummer, 1998; Newburn and Stanko, 1994; Messerschmidt, 1993) especially in comparison to female-perpetrated sexual abuse and the discursive terrain of motherhood and femininity.

By drawing on the work of Butler, the cultural (as opposed to natural) specificity of gender can be explored, which helps reveal the implicit binary locations of power (masculine) and powerless (feminine) that the respective sex is to perform. Femininity, then, is a discursive construction and an endless performance which always entails a parodic imitation. Butler writes:

[A]cts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler, 1990: 173, emphasis in original)

To this end, there is no authentic true or false performance of gender. Given that there is no inner essence, gender performances help sustain and reinforce the discursive constructions of idealized femininity. Butler (1990: 174) writes: “[A]cts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires, create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained by the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.”

Yet, for a sexually abusive mother, her discursive performance of femininity is deeply flawed because she is incorrectly applying dominant social constructions of ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ – even if she is complying on other levels. In the case of mother-daughter sexual abuse, the performativity of gender reflects the destabilization of the naturalized assumption of femininity, motherhood, and heterosexuality. However, because those who falsely or incorrectly ‘perform’ their gender are regularly punished, mothers who sexually abuse their children can only be made sense of by locating their actions within socially constituted (and therefore known) labels, such as previous victimization.

The advantage, therefore, of critically analyzing women's violence beyond hegemonic definitions of femininity and motherhood is that feminist theorizing is able to abandon, and move beyond, monolithic categories of victim and offender whereby mothers are afforded a single and stable identity. Further, it is not enough for feminist theorizing on maternal sexual abuse to simply address the complexity of gender when understandings of power remain fixed. To this end, gender must be autonomous from sex in order to acknowledge that power is not exclusive to the category of man, nor is powerlessness to the category of woman. It is also not enough to highlight the fluidity of power along a victim/abuser continuum where gender remains a fixed construct. These meta-narratives only succeed in setting up discursive ideal types and rigid performative scripts.

More importantly, essentializing the adjective 'feminine' puts women in conceptual straitjackets and creates a unitary truth that works to reinforce phallogentric notions, which is precisely what feminist theory is trying to get women out of. It also limits the potential of females to be active participants in power, because women are still subordinated within mainstream constructions of femininity, motherhood, and heterosexuality. Through a critical analysis, the fluidity of both gender *and* power can be highlighted, because binary concepts such as powerful/powerless and masculine/feminine are relational, constantly changing, and always located *within* discourse. By exploring the numerous permutations and combinations constructed *through* gender and power, it is possible to move beyond the rigid categories of 'strong man' and 'weak woman.' As a result, the otherwise unthought-of actions like mother-daughter sexual abuse can be better acknowledged.

Exercising Choice and Possessing Agency

In addition to demonstrating the complexity of women's sexual power in relation to how survivors make sense of their mother's sexual abuse, a feminist poststructuralist perspective is useful in accounting for women's agency and their capacity for exercising choice. Despite the tendency of mainstream discourse to pardon a mother's sexually abusive behaviour through bad, mad (or what I have labelled as 'ugly'), and victim constructs, such explanations have generally been rejected by the women interviewed – at least in part. A partial acceptance of these constructs is understandable and makes sense to some degree. No doubt many of these mothers suffer from mental illness and some were alcoholics. Clearly, most ought to be classified as bad mothers and almost all have lived through their fair share of victimization. Moreover, partial recognition, especially of mad and victim constructs, shows the deep penetration of mainstream discourse because even survivors believe, on some level, that for a mother to sexually abuse her daughter, she must be insane or have suffered intolerable amounts of violence and degradation.

In speaking with these women, however, it became clear that mad, bad, and victim explanations were incomplete because they fail to acknowledge their mother's agency. They also fail to recognize that despite a partial acceptance of these paradigms, most daughters saw their mothers as accountable for the sexual abuse and expressed an intense anger towards their mother's failure to make better choices.

Below is Robin's response when I asked if she thought her mother could have made different choices in terms of how she mothered:

She could have made a lot of better choices... I seriously think that my mom should have gave me up as a kid when she didn't want me... There were people who were willing to take me when I was a

kid, and I think I would have been a happier person raised in those families than being with my mom.

Given that Robin currently has four children who are in the care of others, she knows first hand what it is like to make tough choices. For Robin, giving up custody of her children was a choice she made when her drug addiction brought her to the street and to the sex trade industry. Given the tough choices in her life, Robin holds a lot of anger towards her mother for, in her opinion, taking the easy way out.

Pat shared similar feelings about the decisions her mother made and, like Robin, obstinately disagreed that her mother was without agency and lacked the capacity to make certain choices.

I think she could have made lots of big choices and lots of different choices... I never saw any of my friends' mothers treat them the way she used to treat me.

For Pat, watching the way other mothers treated their daughters served as a constant reminder of how children are supposed to be treated by caregivers. It also helped to reinforce Pat's opinion that her mother was choosing to behave in hurtful ways.

Like Pat, witnessing how other mothers acted served for Chris as a form of self-confirmation that her mother was an active agent who made very poor choices when it came to parenting her children. As mentioned earlier, despite being raised in the 1950s and 60s (before the civil rights and second-wave feminist movements), Chris still remembers seeing some women make tough choices to protect themselves and their children. For this reason, Chris is able to separate her mother's agency into two parts, as she comments below.

I think she could have made different choices... But in terms of the social set-up. In terms of being married and being dependent on a man, no I don't think she could have done things differently.

On one hand, then, Chris recognizes that to some extent her mother was stuck in an era where women's rights were not paramount. Yet, despite the fact that her mother's social location may have made her *stuck*, she was not *frozen* and, therefore, could have made different choices, even within her limited options. Thus, even if survivors partially accept these mad, bad, and victim constructs for their mothers, when it comes to exercising choice, their mother's agency seems to trump these discursive exemptions of responsibility.

To this end, theorizing around mother-daughter sexual abuse cannot be limited strictly to mad, bad, and victim constructs because they deny the individual agency of mothers. Yet, privileging the all-encompassing locus of agency also seems to provide an incomplete account of how survivors make sense of their mother's sexual abuse; it ignores the impact of dominant discourses on the lives of mothers and daughters. For this reason, as feminists we need to move beyond this either/or binary – i.e. mothers *either* have total agency over their actions *or* are relieved of any responsibility through constructs like mad, bad, and victim. Thus, following a feminist poststructuralist perspective, we are able to appreciate the complex and multiple ways survivors *simultaneously* make sense of the sexual abuse.

Concluding Remarks

Despite signs from almost every social institution that mothers only love, nurture, and care for their children, the women interviewed know that this is far from the case. Sadly, however, the disconnect between their *experiences* with maternal sexual abuse and social *expectations* of mothering (as informed through femininity, motherhood,

and heterosexuality discourses) often leave survivors feeling ostracized and alone – or as Chris rightfully labelled it, “We are silent survivors.” She went on to comment:

I’ve read whatever literature there is and there’s no reflection of me there. I really don’t know anyone like me and it’s really lonely. I’m alone and it really hurts... I’ve lived most of my life thinking that no one would ever do a study, you know? It’s been such a privilege to have you do this study. I mean, no one, no one has ever asked me about my story. Do you know how revolutionary that is? Everyone else, they gloss over. Or they ignore it. Or they dismiss it. Or they minimize it. It’s like there is this dead, dull, empty box and you can’t put it anywhere and you can’t articulate it, you can’t... It all makes me feel like I am the odd one out. Like I don’t fit or that I am the misfit. In fact, it is worse than being the odd one out because in every aspect of society, in every corner that you look, in religious text, in school instruction, in everyday speech, it is all about the mother and nurturing... For me it is the bonding of violence... I hate to use the word bonding because I was only bonded to my mother through violence. You are too young to take care of yourself and she is threatening you with death, abandonment, killings, etc. But you have to rely on her because you are socially dependent on your mother. So you are bonded by violence.

To this extent, dominant discourses on motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality do not represent survivors’ experiences of being mothered.

Like Chris, many of the women interviewed expressed how the contradiction between experience and discourse added another layer to their shame because there was no place for them to make sense of their mother’s sexual abuse. Nicky, for example, commented:

I don’t think people want to realize that mothers are capable of doing these things... I think it’d be easier to see that it was the father doing it. Because a woman on a woman or a young girl, it seems so much sicker than a man on a girl. You know? And I think that is why society wants to deny it... I think society assumes that there’s something inside of us because we are women and that as soon as we have a baby, we instantly love it and we know exactly what to do and we know how to raise it... It’s assumed that people have social supports and we assume that every woman comes from a healthy family. That every woman has come from a healthy role model, probably the mother, so they will know exactly how to

mother... But when sexual abuse comes in from the mother, then there's nothing... Just because you are a woman does not mean you can mother... And just because you have the potential to mother, does not mean that you will be a good mother.

Given the intense social denial of a mother's capacity to act in sexually abusive ways, it is easy to appreciate why labels such as mad, bad, and victim have been discursively produced as a means to locate and make sense of a mother's violence. As a society we adamantly want to believe that children are *essentially* safe with mothers, because if they are not, then who can be trusted with children? This, in part, explains the construction of the 'bad mother' label, because sexually abusive mothers are seen as the epitome of 'anti-female' behaviour (who can therefore be successfully placed outside of dominant femininity and motherhood discourses).

Much like survivors, our theorizing around mother-daughter sexual abuse needs to acknowledge the sheer *badness* of a mother's sexually abusive acts, but in a way that recognizes the social location within which her behaviour is made sense of. In these terms, mad, bad, and victim constructs can be understood as discursive tools used by survivors (and the larger society) to make sense of a mother's capacity for sexual violence.

Following the work of Judith Butler (1990), social constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality shape the performativity of mothers. The sexually abusive mother, however, challenges these discursively constituted scripts. As a result, labels such as 'bad mothers' are needed, in part, so that a mother's sexual abuse can be understood. It also serves as a means to locate violent mothers *outside* of dominant discourse where sexually abusive mothers become the epitome of anti-femininity. Yet, for survivors, the displacement of their mothers outside of dominant

discourses offers an incomplete account in terms of how they make sense of the violence. In fact, for many of the women interviewed, it was easier to acknowledge and thus label their mothers as 'mad' or as 'victims,' because these are socially constituted explanations for their mother's sexual abuse. To this end, although survivors certainly define their female caregivers as 'bad mothers,' it is far easier for them to make sense of their mother's violence when the behaviour can be located at the *margins*, rather than *outside* motherhood and femininity discourses.

CHAPTER SIX

Overshadowed Identities

It's like millions of pieces from a shattered mirror and you don't know which reflection is real because when there is a mirror that is shattered, it reflects everything at every angle and you can't put the pieces together.

Chris

In our culture, great emphasis is placed on an individual's identity. All of our activities, manners, and conduct operate to reflect a seemingly unitary sense of self, which has an impact on our performance within the world. Identities first begin to develop in childhood, when social surroundings start to influence the ways in which we see both ourselves and the world around us. Even though a child's identity is formed through an array of social messages, at such an early age parents tend to exhibit a lot of influence. When a girl-child grows up in a positive and respectful environment, she usually has more freedom to develop a sense of self. In contrast, for a child who is constantly receiving messages that what she feels does not count and what she wants does not matter, it is almost inevitable that any positive identity development will be marred. This can cause a young girl to see herself as unlovable (Courtois, 1988). Sadly, abused children often do not believe they deserve to be loved because of some inherent defect within them. In part a coping strategy, the girl-child learns to discount and invalidate who she is.

Occurring alongside the development of a child's identity are social forces that include discursive constructions of the outside world. Because all humans are social creatures, everyone is influenced by, and produced and reproduced within, discourse. For sexually abused daughters, I argue that it is the mainstream discourses

of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality that operate to further silence experiences of maternal violence. Moreover, in keeping with a feminist poststructuralist perspective, this research supports the idea of fractured identities, which means that daughters present themselves in multiple ways. Identity is neither fixed nor static. It is always changing, fluid, coming into being, and put into discourse. For some survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse, not only were their identities extremely fractured, but they were downright chaotic. Such chaos is best reflected in Chris' narrative.

Here I am. I am my mother's lover. I am her protector from my dad. I am her parent. And yet, I am being tortured by her. I am fifteen and all this shit has gone down, with my brother and everything, and my mother is saying, 'When I get to that place, I want you to give me pills and kill me.' And she pushes me and she pushes me and she makes me promise over and over again. So I am going to be my mother's lover, her protector, her parent, her *executioner*, and her victim. Like fuck! You know?

In this chapter, I explore the impact of survivors' experiences with maternal sexual abuse on their identity formation. Although identities are infinitely plural, the focus here will be on the formation of survivors' gender, sexual, and maternal identities. During the interviewing process, gender identity was defined as 'who you see yourself as in terms of feminine and masculine, especially in relation to your experiences of mother-daughter sexual abuse.' Included in our discussions were perceptions of blurred gender identities among the parents of survivors, because many women spoke of their fathers being 'feminine' and their mothers as 'masculine.' In terms of sexual identity, I was interested in exploring survivors' perceptions of their bodies. As such, most conversations on sexuality concentrated on self-concept and

bodies, although some women also spoke about their difficulties expressing themselves sexually as well as confusion over sexual identities.

Finally, in order to further examine the impact of mother-daughter sexual abuse, I wanted to explore Bobbie Rosencrans' (1997) concept of 'mother fusion.' Specifically, based on findings from her survey of maternal sexual abuse, Rosencrans reported that daughters growing up had little sense of self independence from their mothers. Similarly, based on interviews with five survivors of maternal sexual abuse, Lee FitzRoy (1997) contends that daughters grow up feeling extremely confused in terms of where their bodies began and where their mother's body ended. Even though the experiences of some women in the present study support Rosencrans' gender fusion and FitzRoy's concept of body continuance, what interested me was how this related to survivors' current struggles over their perceptions of mothering their own children. Thus, included within a mother identity are the mothering experiences of survivors. In speaking with survivors, however, I found that some women made conscious decisions not to have children or, if they did become mothers, not to parent.

Gender Identity

Like most aspects of self, gender identity is created through discourse and, as Judith Butler (1993; 1990) argues, the performativity of gender. From the Victorian era onwards, mainstream motherhood discourses have constructed the mother-daughter relationship as the primary bond within which the girl-child's gender identity is formed. Mothers are emblematic of the hegemonic principles of femininity, motherhood, and heterosexuality are intact. To be a daughter is to learn how to

become a 'proper woman' within femininity discourses. Closely connected to discursive trajectories of femininity are the social teachings of motherhood and heterosexuality – to be a proper female is to mother and to be a proper mother is to be heterosexual. In speaking with survivors, however, mother-daughter sexual abuse seems to *impair* rather than *promote* these discursive ideal types. Given that children experiencing maternal sexual abuse are developing identities during tumultuous times, it is not surprising that the women spoke, to varying degrees, about being confused over their gender identity as well as their awkwardness in performing gender.

Beyond the Bifurcation of Sex: Rejecting Femininity

In my conversations with survivors, I learned that most rejected some aspect of traditional femininity, in large part because such identities mimicked their mothers.

For Jackie, it was the entire female sex that she wished to reject.

I didn't want to be a female at all because my mother was a female. I wanted to be a male. I always thought if I ever won the lottery, I would get a sex change.

Yet, for most survivors it was gender (and femininity discourses) which they wished to opt out of. This was the case for Chris and Robin.

I grew up never wanting to be a woman... I hung out with boys. I was president of the boy's club! But I never wanted to be a woman. Not that I wanted to be a man. I just did not want to be a woman. I did not want to be like my mother. (Chris)

I didn't want to be a girl because I always thought I'd turn out like my mother. (Robin)

Related to many survivors' rejection of femininity was the confusing time of puberty. Even though puberty is a difficult time for most girls, for survivors of

mother-daughter sexual abuse physical changes to their body were particularly daunting because it acted as a physical signifier that they were becoming like their mothers. For Jackie and Dana, this was an absolutely frightening thought.

It was scary because I thought my body was becoming my moms... and I started to believe everything my mom was telling me. (Jackie)

When I got my period it was terrible because I thought I was becoming my mother! (Dana)

For many women, rejecting femininity was their way of rejecting the sexual abuse. One strategy used by several survivors was to avoid identifying as feminine, which included dress and play-time behaviour. This was the case for Sandy, Robin, and Jackie.

I never wear dresses or skirts or anything like that because it is too woman-like. (Sandy)

My mom always wanted me to wear these dresses and have my hair up all the time and I used to get my dad to buy me jeans and my mom used to get mad at me when I wouldn't wear dresses. (Robin)

I was a tomboy and I hated dresses. I wouldn't wear dresses. Didn't want to be like a woman... I didn't like playing with dolls because they were all female dolls... I would break them apart and I would throw them away. (Jackie)

Being more 'masculine' was a way for Sandy, Robin, and Jackie to form an oppositional identity to that of their abuser. For Dana, however, her feelings of discomfort around identifying as feminine stemmed from her mother's insistence to dress and treat her like a boy and *not* a girl. Dana recounts:

My mother would dress me like a boy. She didn't want a girl... It has always made me feel like I should be a boy and I have always felt more masculine because of that.

Dana's gendered preference towards masculine traits was also based on her desire to be closer to her father as opposed to her mother. For her, one way to achieve this was by altering her gender identity.

I wanted to be more masculine because I always felt closer to my dad and if my mother was ten feet away from me, she was too close and she was a female so I didn't want to look like that.

Finding Comfort Among Males

In households with sexual abuse, gendered discourses are often in a state of disarray (FitzRoy, 1997). For this reason, it is necessary to unpack mainstream assumptions of gender in order to appreciate the experiences of daughters who have not been mothered in the way popular discourses assume all children are parented. Yet, this is not to suggest that daughters felt un-parented. In fact, many believed they were – it was just by their fathers or some other male figure.

To this end, several women spoke about feeling closer to males compared to females. For Robin, love and comfort were received from her father, who tragically was killed by her mother. The caring provided by her father, as well as the abuse from her mother, made it easy for Robin to choose which parent to favour, which has had a lasting impact on which sex she prefers to associate with.

Even as a teenager, I could not hang around girls. I was always a tomboy hanging around with boys. Even to this day, I would rather hang out with guys than I would girls.

Given survivors' preference to associate with males, one wonders if there is any connection with this finding and heterosexuality. Specifically, if survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse find comfort among males, it would be reasonable that many seek out heterosexual relationships because they regard it as safe. The fact that one

woman was currently in a lesbian relationship, while two other women had had previous sexual relationships with other women (although one of these women identified to me as being 'straight'), does cast some doubt on this speculation. Moreover, in Rosencrans' (1997) study, 36 percent of the daughter survivors of maternal abuse identified as lesbian. Indeed, this is an area worthy of further exploration.

For Nicky, a sense of love and security was found with her eldest brother. Even though he had already moved out of the family home, Nicky's brother would frequently visit and take her out for ice-cream or other treats. Growing up, Nicky also recalled having male friends and feeling more comfortable around boys compared to girls.

Like Nicky, Chris felt more comfortable around males, but she also expressed a lot of resentment towards what she labelled a "social ignorance" when it comes to the "nurturing" potential of men. For Chris, any love, comfort, and support she received as a child came from her brother or from male friends.

I did embody, I did embrace a concept of male nurturing that most women don't have because my brother was the one who protected me. I had good male friends. Growing up, I've had more caring come from males than from any woman in my life. And there is a confusion as well because not all men are nurturers - that's certainly not the point! But I think what the point is that by getting locked into these 'females are nurturers and males aren't,' we get cheated out of the positive relationships we have with males because they are not supposed to be that way. So there's no recognition of that. They don't get any credit when the expectation is that it will come from the mom, but when that does not happen, then you are seen as 'what's wrong with you?'

The problem, according to Chris, is that the fixed nature of gender discourses restricts the potential of males, because masculinity deploys standard scenarios that reinforce

the inability of men to nurture, while socially atypical behaviours (like finding comfort in men) often get ignored or marginalized. Worse still, uncharacteristic scenarios (like a sexually abusive mother) can be read incorrectly by survivors, which is what happened with Chris who, even today, struggles with accepting that there was nothing inherently wrong with her because her mother did not love her appropriately. Further, because gendered stereotypes are informed by wider social discourses, many survivors are left feeling ostracized given that their experiences did not fit within socially constructed expectations. As a result, some women found more comfort among men, in large part *because* they were being sexually victimized by the very gender that mainstream discourses contend is the one that loves, nurtures, and protects.

On Being Loved

Nancy Friday (1977) wrote in her book, *My Mother/Myself*, that a good mother was someone who gives her child an identity and then lets her go. Although Friday gives an overly simplistic account of a mother-daughter bond, the evidence provided thus far does suggest that for most of the women interviewed, their understanding of gendered identities produced through discourse often do not match with their experiences. As the earlier review on motherhood has demonstrated, mothers are almost exclusively expected to assist in the healthy formation of their daughters' identities, and then they are to instinctually know when to 'let go.' However, working within a feminist poststructuralist perspective, daughters' perceptions of love can be further explored. Specifically, through a critical analysis, survivors' understanding of

motherhood discourses (and how it has affected their appreciation of love, nurturing, and belonging from their mothers) can be examined.

A Quest for Love, Nurturing, and Belonging

Despite many attempts, most survivors could not give up on their quest for love and nurturing from their mothers. Below, I have included women's stories to demonstrate the extent to which survivors went to win their mother's love. Many accounts are utterly heart-wrenching, which I believe speaks to the depths of daughters' desire to 'fit in' and have their experiences included within mainstream discourses.

The first story is from Chris, who painfully recalled how hurtful it was to grow up feeling the absence of parental love and, specifically, how her quest for her mother's affection often resulted in disappointment and self-blame.

I have gone all my life without any kind of love other than from my brother... but I can remember being a young kid and a teenager and trying so hard to win both parents' love. I remember being devastated when my parents went off to Toronto when I was eleven and my mother told me that I had to take care of the entire house while she was away. She wanted everything spic and span. And I did the entire house. All I had to do was make my own bed. It was the last thing I hadn't finished and my mom came home just as I was making my bed and she just screamed - up one side and down the other. And she whacks me across the head. I just burst into tears. I was absolutely devastated and heartbroken because I had cleaned the entire place. All the kitchen cupboards. Everything. My brother got mad at my mom and I guess she got contrite and she came into my room holding the newest thing from Toronto - bright red rubber boots - and said, 'Well, I got these for you.' That was her apology. But I was so heartbroken that I could never wear the boots. I didn't feel like I deserved them.

Even though her attempt to earn her mother's love was unsuccessful, at a young age Chris made the connection that she could receive affection through the sexual abuse which, back then, seemed like a worthwhile transaction.

I needed to be mothered/loved, so I paid with my body to have it. There was no other form of love in my family.

Similar to Chris, the following narrative from Nicky reflects her devastation when yet another attempt to win her mother's love failed.

One time I bought her this nice necklace and she was allergic to costume jewellery and she could only wear it for a little while. But I was just little and I didn't have much money and she took it and looked at it and she walked over to the garbage and opened it and dropped it in. And do you know what that did to me? It just crushed me. I was trying to show her something, that I wanted something, that I wanted her love. And that was the last time I ever tried to get her to love me.

As Nicky recalled, that incident was the last straw, but unfortunately with it came the belief that the problem was inherent in her: she simply was unlovable.

I was told from day one that I was a mistake... I internalized that and said it was me. I was unlovable.

Like most people, Nicky grew up within mainstream constructions of motherhood, so she was aware of the existence of maternal love. Yet, based on the reality of her home life, there was no way she could comprehend 'a mother's love,' let alone internalize it within her own identity. As Nicky told me:

I didn't think love existed. There was no such thing as love... And when I saw other people with their mothers, I just could not understand it. I could not understand love.

Love, for Nicky, was always connected to the sexual abuse. In fact, it was the only time the word was ever used.

She would say to me, 'I do this because I love you.' 'If I didn't love you, you wouldn't be worth it.'

The inconsistent message of love was also experienced by Dana, who commented on how she grew up confused over discursive definitions of motherly love versus the type of 'love' that was occurring in her home.

She would say, 'I want to kiss you.' 'I love you.' But her way of loving me was by touching and by buying me things and giving me money.

Despite the absence of 'motherly love,' most women expressed being well aware of its existence. As Robin recalled, such knowledge caused her to frequently wish that she was a part of some other family:

I would go skating and I would see mothers and daughters holding hands skating and stuff. And mothers teaching their daughters how to skate. And I used to get so mad because everything I did I had to do on my own. My mom was never there. And I'd think, 'Why are you my mom?' 'Why doesn't she love me?' 'I want to be born to somebody else.'

As another example of the resiliency of children, Robin went on to explain how she used illness as a tool to elicit her mother's love and attention.

I used to get sick a lot when I was younger. I used to get really bad ear infections and throat infections and my mom was always so caring. She would take me to the hospital and make sure that I took my medication and she would give me baths but she would not touch me in the bath when I was sick. And she would give me soup and toast and she was so caring, but if there was not something wrong with me, then she would not even bother with me.

(So did you ever want to be sick just to get some attention?)

Yeah, I used to tell my mom that my stomach was sore.

(Just to get attention?)

Yeah!

(Did it work?)

For a while, but then she would take me to the doctor and there would be nothing wrong.

Even if her strategy of faking an illness was only successful for a short period, for Robin it was better than nothing.

Like Robin, Chris expressed feeling a lack of love as a child. As a result, when people would demonstrate even a seemingly small act of caring, such kindness would completely overwhelm her. This is evident in the following touching story by Chris.

I was living in residence for the first two years of university. I remember in my first year everyone from the residence got together for my birthday and pitched in on a cake. Everyone hid in my one friend's room with the cake all covered in candles. I was shocked because no one had ever done that for me. At fifteen I swore to myself that I would never cry again, but seeing everyone there - they bought me gifts, a cake and they were surprising me - well, I burst into tears. I was sobbing and they thought I was unhappy, and I said, 'No, I'm crying because I'm happy!'

As mentioned, many survivors expressed growing up with a discursively 'abnormal' understanding of love – at least according to dominant constructions of motherhood. For Jackie, this caused a roller coaster of emotions, because she simultaneously loved (or at least wanted to) and hated her mother:

I hated her, but I also really wanted to love her. I really wanted her to love me the way a mother is supposed to love her child.

Tragically, for Pat, growing up without feeling loved has now meant that she no longer believes in her self-worth. For example, in one of our conversations, Pat spoke about her ambivalence towards life, shown by multiple suicide attempts. Saddened by her indifference, I told her that I thought her life was worth living, to which she answered:

Oh I have heard that so many times. I don't believe it anymore. So many times I've heard that somebody loves me. Yeah right! I don't believe it.

In speaking with daughters, it is clear that they wanted what every child needs – love, security, and nurturing. Survivors, it seems, were well aware that the love they

received from their mothers was not 'normal.' Although survivors did not speak about this directly, what is interesting is the desire for normalcy, which arguably is a trait held by many. It is also clear that survivors are well aware that mainstream discourses have allocated these tasks to mothers. Thus, because they defined their experiences as 'abnormal,' many of the women interviewed grew up believing that the reason their mothers did not love them in a conventional manner was because of an inherent flaw within them.

Not only did their mothers fail in providing appropriate love and care, so did most other adults in their lives. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, almost all survivors have endured a lifetime of violence and degradation. Many were also continually let down by various social and legal institutions. To put the blame solely on mothers is to let these other adults and institutions off the hook. Instead, there needs to be more social, and less individual, responsibility for the love and nurturing of children. This is not to excuse the individual responsibility of mothers. Especially when it comes to sexual abuse, no one is excused of such actions. But to place sole responsibility of childcare on one person (the mother), sets up a system destined to fail. The stories from the women interviewed certainly help to illustrate this point.

A Mother's Love: A Critical Analysis of Nature?

As discussed previously, many 'psy' and feminist experts have argued that mothers are naturally suited for childcare. Upon investigation, however, such assertions are challenged for several reasons. First, the lack of appropriate childcare from the mothers of the women interviewed calls into question the naturalness of healthy

affection. Second, a brief history of motherhood has demonstrated that childrearing practices have not been static. Rather, a mother's responsibility for childcare has been informed by mainstream discourses and the social location of women. Yet, from the Victorian era forward, the assumption that a mother's love is a natural and inherent trait (or pre-discursive) has dominated popular culture.

Of particular interest during the interviews was the variety of viewpoints on whether or not a mother's love is an inherent trait. Given that these women were sexually abused by their mothers, as well as earlier assertions that most survivors grew up feeling unloved as children, I anticipated that such a presumptuous conclusion would be regarded as an additional denial of their experiences. While most survivors rejected the idea of an inherent love within mothers towards children, I was nevertheless surprised by some responses. Below are the replies from Nicky and Dana when I asked if they thought it was natural for mothers to love their children.

I think it's natural. I don't understand how it cannot be natural. Like how can you not love your child? You gave birth to it. How can you not naturally love what came out of you that you created? (Nicky)

A mother is supposed to be looking after you and nurturing you. It's just natural. (Dana)

Yet, in later conversations, when talking about *their* mothers Nicky and Dana both disagreed in the naturalness of maternal love.

Well, I wasn't naturally loved, so my experience of being mothered was bad. My mother was a bad image, not a loving image. (Nicky)

I wasn't loved and now I have a hard time with sadness because I've blocked out a lot of emotions. (Dana)

Once again, the strength of motherhood discourses is apparent. Even though their own experiences suggest otherwise, Nicky and Dana maintain that it is natural for mothers to love their children. The fact that they were not recipients of this natural love, as was discussed in the previous chapter, caused survivors to partially locate their mother's violence outside of motherhood discourses in order to make sense of the sexual abuse.¹

Due in large part to their own experiences of being mothered, most survivors did not support the social myth that mothers have a natural affinity to love their children. For instance, Pat was well aware of stereotypes such as the necessity of the mother-daughter bond and maternal love (produced through motherhood discourses), but commented that neither existed in her childhood. In her opinion, it was the exact opposite.

I never felt loved growing up... I never felt bonded to my mother... Everyone thinks that the safest place for the kid is with the mother but it's not because the mother is the one that's doing the abuse, and that's not nurturing when she's touching you and giving you these creepy feelings.

Robin and Lee shared similar responses about the inherent assumption of a mother's love. Robin's opinion stemmed from her childhood experiences, but also from her current difficulties parenting her own children.

I don't think it is natural... I think it is learned... And it has a lot to do with how you were as a kid and stuff... But everyone expects you to know your child and stuff and it's so hard because you don't, you don't know what to expect.

¹ I first thought that current parent status may be a contributing factor for such judgments; however, while Nicky is a mother, Dana is not.

Even though Lee did not base her judgment of a mother's ability to naturally love her children on her own experiences of being mothered, she nevertheless gave a similar response.

Ideally yes, but logically no. I mean, there are mothers that hurt their children. They kill them. They don't want anything to do with them... Mothers are always portrayed as caregivers... All women are supposed to have this nurturing, loving thing about them and not all of them do... It's just a stereotyped role.

The above accounts show the enabling and constraining effect of motherhood discourses, which are multiple and subjectively translate the way survivors view the world. It is possible, then, for survivors to combine two separate, often conflicting viewpoints – such as all mothers love their children and not feeling loved by their mothers. One narrative no doubt reflects the socially-informed position of cultural discourses (which upholds motherhood discourses), while the other echoes a survivor's childhood reality (which calls into question motherhood discourses).

Finally, like the others, Chris disagreed with the motherhood myth that promotes the naturalness of a mother's love. In contrast, Chris did believe that all humans are born with some innate ability to bond with their offspring. The difference, Chris maintains, is in socialization. For Chris, this was not limited exclusively to women; males too had some intrinsic ability to love and nurture children. As Chris describes:

I think every person has the propensity for violence and everything that exists has the propensity to nurture. Whether they do or don't I think is a combination of socialization, their environment, and personal choice. And then maybe other factors like mental illness and substance abuse.

In a later interview, Chris went on to comment:

I think there is a 20 percent instinctual urge in every human being to protect and nurture their offspring. And I don't distinguish between male and female. But we all get socialized in a different way and then people's experiences growing up contaminate us... So can we expect women as a rule to nurture their children? No.

(Why do you think society does then?)

Because it is easier to accept! Everyone likes pigeonholes! I think it's the one thing we can recognize as women that is not male patriarchy and I don't think it is entirely true. I think in an ideal world.

To align Chris' analysis within a feminist poststructuralist framework, I would suggest substituting *socialization* for *discursive practices*. In so doing, human behaviour can be recognized as something that is not pre-discursive, but rather acts of nurturing and/or violence are informed by social constructions of how women and men, mothers and fathers, ought to act. Finally, what is interesting in Chris' account (which was explored in the previous chapter) is her understanding of how experiences with alcoholism or mental illness operate to contaminate the inherent good within people, and also how mothers have the ability to make choices when it comes to both nurturing and violence.

Identities in Chaos: Blurred Boundaries

Throughout the interviews, I sought to understand the family dynamics of each survivor's childhood home. In many cases, I was intrigued by the contrast between survivors' images of their parents and traditional gendered discourses. For instance, in the following description of her parents, Chris did not see her mother or father adhering to mainstream discourses of femininity and masculinity for their respective sex.

In my case, I saw neither femininity in my mother nor masculinity in my father. Neither fit the stereotypical feminine or masculine... My mother was not typically feminine. She did not wear makeup or rarely, mostly only when I was younger or on special occasions. She didn't dress particularly feminine. In fact, I didn't learn from her all the feminine things women are supposed to learn in this society about makeup, clothing, being attractive etc. to the male sex... My father was definitely not a man's man. He was what other men would probably see as a wimp... He wasn't interested in all the things a man stereotypically would be like sports, fishing, hunting, etc. Even sex!

Chris, who grew up in a middle-class household where both parents were employed in a professional capacity, was quite aware that her parents did not perform dominant gendered discourses. The above description demonstrates that Chris grew up being fully aware of gendered expectations according to masculinity and femininity – especially in terms of how each parent should have behaved.

Two descriptions of Nicky's parents illustrate how the discursive terrain of gender often becomes reversed in families with maternal sexual abuse.

My mom controlled everything. She was the controller. She would not let my dad drink, but she was allowed to drink.

My dad tried to compensate for things that my mom did to us and he kept saying that he was going to leave when the kids got old enough... I felt like he was martyring himself.

From Nicky's account, her father is described as the subordinate spouse who feels stuck in an unhealthy relationship, and who attempts to make up for his abusive partner. If such a portrayal was being made of Nicky's mother, it would align within mainstream femininity and motherhood discourses.

As the above accounts demonstrate, mothers were often described in masculine terms, such as the "head of the household" or the one "who controlled

everything.”² It seems, then, that the portrayal of parents was often in opposition to gendered discourses. However, if ‘father’ was substituted for ‘mother’ – or the ‘sex’ was reversed – survivor accounts would be consistent with the normalized behaviours of men and women.

A further example is provided by Pat, who told me how she worked to reject conventional feminine identities (which she perceived as being connected to her mother’s sexual abuse). A noteworthy aspect of my interview with Pat was her usage of femininity and masculinity constructions. On one hand, Pat’s feelings seem to be consistent with other survivors. However, Pat’s ambitions to be “more like a man” were also related to her differentiation between *sex* and *gender*. This is best illustrated in the following dialogue.

I don’t feel womanly.

(How so?)

I don’t know. I think it is because of the touching and stuff from my mother. I think it had lots to do with it because she was always trying to put me in dresses and sit me in the corner and say, ‘You be my nice little lady’... So as soon as I grew up I was trying to be a boy... I just had a woman’s body but I did a man’s job and everything... It felt safer. I was strong... I just didn’t want to be a girl. I wished that I was a boy. That I grew up as a boy. But I don’t think it would’ve mattered to my mother anyway because she abused my brother too.

(It’s really confusing then)

Yeah, but I felt safer pretending to be a boy than I did a girl... I felt boys were stronger because girls were the ones that were getting abused and being taken advantage of and I didn’t want that to

² In future research, it would be interesting to pursue whether or not there are any differences in terms of race and the portrayal of mothers according to dominant masculinity discourses (i.e. head of the household). Specifically, given that many Aboriginal cultures are based on matrilineal systems (that is, ancestry is traced through the woman), there is a contradiction with mainstream/Caucasian patrilineal systems (Silman, 1987). Unfortunately, despite the fact that half of the sample are Aboriginal or Métis, there is insufficient ‘data’ to proceed with such an analysis.

happen anymore to me and I was trying to fight back and get my identity back.

For Pat, rejecting femininity was one way to cope with, and resist, the sexual abuse from her mother. It was her way to distance herself – and her identity – from her abuser. Yet, Pat's statements also illustrate how she grew up being well aware of the discursive terrain set out for females and males. Specifically, power was a masculine trait and powerlessness was located within femininity. At first glance, there are two flaws in Pat's logic. First, her mother was the sexual abuser, plus Pat often commented that her mother "ruled the household," which is an example of 'bottom' becoming the 'top.' Second, Pat's brother was also sexually abused by her mother, which is an example of 'top' becoming 'bottom.' Upon deeper investigation, when *sex* is substituted for *gender*, Pat's rationale aligns with discursive constructions of femininity and masculinity. For instance, in speaking with Pat about her brother, she described him as being soft spoken, passive, and more of a homebody – traits historically attributed to females. Pat's descriptions of her mother and father also uncover a reversal in gender roles.

My dad would make supper for us and everything... My mom was the boss... And he would take it. He'd take all the abuse she gave him and he wouldn't do anything to her.

By exploring Pat's understanding of *gender*, rather than its rigid bifurcation with *sex*, her logic of rejecting femininity makes more sense. Despite the fact that her mother was the abuser and her brother was abused, Pat reverses femininity and masculinity discourses so that it now fits her childhood environment. For this reason, dual classifications of sex (i.e. man or woman) provide an inadequate account of mother-daughter sexual abuse and its impact on survivors. Instead, a feminist

poststructuralist examination, through a critical analysis of gendered discourses, creates space for a multifaceted and complex understanding of how survivors rationalize, and ultimately make sense of, maternal sexual abuse. As discussed in previous chapters, the masculinization of women is not a new strategy. If 'bad mothers' can be placed outside (or at the fringes of) femininity discourse, then their actions cannot threaten the social constructions designated for women. What is interesting, however, is how survivors' gender identities are affected by their chaotic upbringings, which are full of blurred gender boundaries.

An Identity beyond 'Mother's Daughter'

Given their chaotic experiences with gendered discourses in relation to mother-daughter sexual abuse, many women expressed feeling that there was nowhere to hide from their past. Specifically, some survivors were afraid that there was no escaping an identity beyond being their mother's daughter. Several women mentioned that they often saw their mother's body when they looked in the mirror. This speaks to the impact of maternal sexual abuse, because, now as adults, survivors see their bodies as an extension of their mother's – who was also their abuser.

This finding supports research on mother-daughter sexual abuse by Lee FitzRoy (1997) and Bobbie Rosencrans (1997). FitzRoy (1997: 46) writes:

They experience themselves not only as a possession of their mother but in a more complex way as a biological and psychological extension of her body. This is a very different reality for survivors of mother/daughter rape from the current feminist understandings of father/daughter rape.

Herein is an important difference between mother-daughter versus father-daughter sexual abuse: when a girl-child has been violated by the latter she does not share a

physiological, psychological, or social (discursive) union with her abuser. Thus, if feminist theorizing is to effectively address difficulties attached to identities, the impact of identity fusion on female survivors of maternal sexual abuse should be further explored.³

Nicky made the following comments about the intense connection between the sexual abuse, her mother, and how it impaired any sense of ownership over her identity as well as her body.

I didn't know my own body. I connected my body with my mother's body in a way. Like, because she was doing that to me, I became a part of her body. My body was an extension of hers.

Chris also expressed feeling little sense of herself independent of her mother and her sexual abuse.

I didn't see my body as mine... I had to numb my body with my mom.

In a later interview, Chris went on to comment on the effects of identity fusion, which she believed occurred because there was no place to hide from the sexual abuse when the perpetrator shares the same sex.

[H]aving a mother sexually molest and rape you and force you to watch her doing it to your younger sister blurs all the sexual lines and line of reaction and response. It's a perpetual confusion between the two, both imprinted at an early age. If you want to run and hide out in another sex than that of the perpetrator, you can't.

Nicky and Chris' accounts are similar to Linda Crocket's (2001) autobiographical story, wherein she writes about feeling a sense of identity and body

³ As mentioned in an earlier chapter, feminist psychoanalytic theory may be able to offer a fruitful analysis of identity fusion amongst female survivors of maternal sexual abuse (see, for example, FitzRoy, 1997).

fusion with her mother due to the sexual abuse. The following passage is from a journal Crocket (2001: 283) kept while she was processing her mother's sexual abuse:

I have never had the sense that I truly live in a body. I float outside of it much of the time. I refuse to be trapped in anything female. My mother was female, and I will not be like her... My mother's shadow falls on all the flowers, and I am afraid to touch them. And my body is nothing more than a bridge to pain.

Without a body, survivors find it difficult to form identities independent from their mother's. Moreover, without a body, survivors are confused over where their mother's identity ended and theirs began. FitzRoy (1997) refers to this as "blurred boundaries."

Two narratives from the present study help to illustrate FitzRoy's point. The first is from Nicky, who spoke about how her identity was produced through her mother and, consequently, how it is now extremely difficult for her to develop a sense of self independent of abuse.

My identity was made through my mother.

(So was there any real sense of you?)

No. I never knew who I was, and now I am scared to look because what if I don't see anything. You know? Do I have any identity besides abuse? That's what I am trying to discover now. It is almost like I am building who I am. It's almost like I was nothing and now I'm learning how to become a person.

The second illustration of blurred identity boundaries comes from Jackie, who also believed that her identity was shaped through her mother and her sexual abuse.

My identity was formed through my mom... She always told me that my body was hers and that she could do whatever she wanted to my body because I came from her.

(How did that make you feel?)

Regret.

(Regret? How so?)

Because I wished I'd never been born.

Sadly for Jackie, the only way she could cope with having no sense of her own identity was to wish that she had never been born. Jackie's response, I believe, shows the depth of motherhood discourses, because it is easier for her to believe that if *she* had been different (ergo, not born), then the sexual abuse would not have happened. Ceasing to physically exist was the only way Jackie believed she could be free of what she ultimately saw as her two primary identities – that of her mother's daughter and victim.

Finally, related to blurred boundaries are the number of women who spoke about how they felt forced to take on an adult identity in order to provide childcare for siblings and/or act as surrogate partners for their mothers. An example of this boundary confusion comes from Jackie, who was the eldest daughter in a family where her mother clearly was not interested in parenting. What added to Jackie's difficulties was that her father often travelled for long periods due to work. Thus, from a very early age, Jackie was responsible for all household duties, including providing childcare to over ten other siblings.

When I was seven my mom would make me baby-sit. I knew how to change diapers. I knew how to make bottles. I knew how to go grocery shopping. I knew how to use coupons. I knew how to budget.

In addition to Jackie's demanding schedule as 'housewife' and 'interim mother,' she was expected to attend to her mother's needs. For example, Jackie's mother expected her to act as a partner/lover when her father was away. During these sexual encounters, Jackie told me how she used to praise her mother. For Jackie, this was her

strategic way to avoid physical beatings. The blurred boundary of having to fill in as a surrogate partner was also experienced by Pat.

My mom used to make me sleep with her and she used to say she was lonely because my dad wasn't there.

Often in families where the mother is being sexually abusive, traditional boundaries are non-existent. This caused a tremendous amount of confusion for survivors of such violence. Now as adults, daughters have to work to heal and ultimately regain their own identities. They also have to try and make sense of the disparity between conventional discursive constructions of gender and motherhood against their own childhood experiences. For many of the women interviewed, this was an extremely daunting task.

Eliminating Gender: Being Androgynous

Due to the overwhelming task of attempting to understand the discursive terrains of femininity and masculinity, some women expressed a desire to eliminate gender completely. Like many of the survivors interviewed, Chris grew up resisting the many discursive constructions of femininity. Chris spoke at great length about her struggles with her gendered identity, which has been a longstanding source of confusion.

I had girlfriends and they would invite me over for a sleep-over and I would feel so damn awkward because here I am and they're going 'ooh, aah' over some movie star and they would put on make-up and I didn't want make-up on because it smelled like the make-up from my mother... I could not stand the smell of it. It almost made me throw up. And I didn't want to be all dolled up because I didn't want to feel like anymore of a sex object. And I wanted to downplay my body as much as possible.

Growing up, Chris felt ostracized from her female peers who, in her opinion, were buying into the norms of femininity. Even if Chris had wanted to indulge in these acts

of femaleness, the maternal sexual abuse prohibited her, because it reminded Chris of her mother and, therefore, of her violence. Despite her conscious decision to reject being feminine, Chris knew that she also had no desire to identify as male – even if she felt more comfortable around boys and associated primarily with male friends and her brother. To this end, Chris wanted to be neither male nor female, but rather androgynous.

I'm not interested in being a male, but I am also not interested in being a female... All I want to be is androgynous. I don't want to have to be any sex. I don't want to have to be any gender. I don't want to have to be anything specific. Maybe in some ways that is a denial of my body, but I just don't want to be anything.

According to Chris, her yearning to be void of gender can be traced to her early teenage years. Even though, at such a young age, Chris had not yet developed the skills to verbalize her confusion, she was able to sketch her androgynic feelings.

I was very androgynous. I would do drawings in my diary, even when I was a teenager, and one part of the head would be female and the other part male. One half would be plain and the other half would be the head of Medusa! For me the snake-like figures was all about bad sex. I just could not describe it. And there was usually female figures coming out of what looked like the vaginal area, and then it would swirl into a woman.

Based on Chris' vivid descriptions of her drawings, it is clear that the sexual abuse from her mother had a profound impact on her, but it also affected her sense of motherhood and femininity.

At another interview, Chris brought in some of her drawings to share with me. Most of Chris' sketches centred on androgynous figures. Of particular interest was the Medusa-like depictions on the female side, which included female sex organs. According to Chris, this was her way to non-verbally illustrate, even back then, the sexual abuse from her mother.

At sixteen I didn't know what else to do so I drew, but it was like legs with the vagina open and this snake-like figure would be going into it... We always talk about the mother and the mother's loving hands, but I drew snake hands, you know, like snake bites.

(Like poison?)

Yeah, the metaphors are quite profound. I mean look at the snake dangling out and then the breasts. I mean, what strikes me is at this time, I just hated breasts. I hated them, probably because they were being shoved in my mouth... But here [the picture] it is all bloody breasts and a heart that is a vagina!

The sexual undertones reflect the intense impact the sexual abuse was having on Chris, which could only be expressed in her artwork.

By following a feminist poststructuralist approach, feminist theorizing is better able to examine the linguistic and discursive barriers confining Chris' verbal ability to disclose her mother's sexual violence. As feminists, we are also able to explore the multiple modes of resistance – especially since, for survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse, there are few discursive tools available to articulate their pain. Finally, by critically analyzing dominant discourses, focus can be placed on the social specificity of language and the signified meanings confined within normalized constructions of femininity and masculinity.

Sexual Identity

Sexual abuse inhibits healthy sexuality. For women who have experienced sexual violence (male- or female-perpetrated), even the thought of sex can cause great emotional distress because many confuse their sexuality with the sexual abuse (Blume, 1990). Specifically, some survivors are unable to conceive of any sexual activity that is pleasing, positive, and healthy (Maltz and Holman, 1987). Instead,

sexual activity gets connected to physical and emotional suffering. Given this turmoil, it is little wonder why many women have little interest exploring their sexuality or, if they do, are utterly confused by it.

Survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse report that these feelings are intensified because of the same-sex nature of the violence. This is especially valid given the cultural uneasiness and secrecy even around heterosexuality. For instance, even though heterosexual activity is socially mandated through mainstream discourses, most teenage girls grow up with little knowledge of healthy sexuality. Further, the outlaw status of homosexuality – coupled with the lack of comprehensive education as well as generations of homophobia – has skewed the information young teenagers receive. For these reasons, when a girl-child has experienced same-sex violence, she too is aware of the stigma and abnormality attached to homosexual behaviour, because dominant discourses exclusively promote heterosexism. However, given that her sexual identity is not yet developed, the daughter who is being sexually abused by her mother experiences tremendous confusion.

Even though activism from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities has challenged mainstream notions of heterosexism, due to social constructions of femininity and motherhood, mother-daughter sexual abuse remains discursively marginalized.⁴ In this regard, the possibility of a mother sexually abusing her daughter is located outside both mainstream *and* counter-discourses. This leaves survivors feeling completely alone, especially when it comes to dealing with confusion over sexuality, sexual orientation, and ‘battling the body.’

⁴ It is important to remember that heterosexuality, motherhood, and femininity are not mutually exclusive, but rather that there is tremendous overlap between the three discursive constructions.

Confusion over Sexual Orientation

Much of the literature on female-perpetrated sexual abuse has addressed survivors' confusion over sexual orientation (see, for example: Rosencrans, 1997; Borden and La Terz, 1993; Harrison, 1993; Hunter, 1993; Longdon, 1993). For this reason, I expected that some of the women interviewed would express difficulties with understanding (or coming to terms with) their sexual orientation. This was especially the case when it came to sexual relationships with other women. Both Lee and Chris comment on their difficulties of separating sexual relationships with women from their mother's sexual abuse.

Well it kind of blows experimenting right out the door doesn't it!
(Lee)

Female to female is not the norm so if I go out and be with women,
then I am going back there. (Chris)

Pat also expressed feeling confused over her sexuality, especially when she began to explore having a same-sex relationship. When I asked Pat about her sexual orientation, she mentioned that she was "straight," but had had a prior relationship with a woman. The relationship ended, however, because she was unable to separate her adult sexual encounter from the maternal sexual abuse.

I tried to go with another girl but I started having these kind-of
flashbacks of what my mother used to do... so I didn't like it. I felt
uncomfortable.

Much like women who have been sexually abused by men, being sexual with an individual who shares the same sex of her abuser caused Pat too much inner turmoil. Unlike the survivor who has been sexually abused by a male, however, Pat also has to come to terms with heterosexism, which is a discursive strategy designed to deny both her past and present experiences with same-sex experiences.

Similar feelings of confusion and discomfort were experienced by Chris, who had difficulties separating her same-sex relationship from her mother's sexual abuse.

When I began to explore my sexuality in the lesbian community, the first woman I went all the way with looked just like my mother. And I cried and she did not understand why. All I was saying was, 'It's real, it's real, it's real'... I think on some level I needed to go out and be with a woman that looked like my mother to verify that it was real.

Sadly, in a society that discursively denies a mother's capacity to sexually abuse her daughter, Chris felt that she needed to have sex with a woman in order to prove to herself that her mother's sexual violence was real.

In Chris' case, when she came out and identified as a lesbian, she really believed that she was immersing herself in a positive and safe environment – after all, who could be more sensitive to same-sex issues than lesbians? Although she realizes now that her expectations of lesbianism were far too high, she was still greatly affected by the insensitivity of some members of her new community, especially in regards to all the verbal jostling about the fact that Chris' first girlfriend was an older woman.

They were merciless in their ribbing – 'baby dyke, baby dyke' – until at one point I finally blew up and said, 'stop it.' 'You don't know how much of a baby I was.' 'I'm not a baby dyke!'

Even though the teasing was done innocently, it does illustrate the power of language to support discursive assumptions of exclusive inter-sexual violence – even within counterdiscourse. This is even more heightened when recalling Chris' later experience at a lesbian bar when she disclosed her mother's sexual abuse and was quickly dismissed by many of the women there.

The purpose of highlighting these two examples is not to add 'shock value' by suggesting that even lesbians are not immune to overlooking mother-daughter sexual abuse. Rather, I believe these illustrations help demonstrate the deep level of heterosexism as well as the normative assumptions of femininity that exist around issues of violence, as Janice Ristock (2002; 2001; 1994) and others (Poorman, Seelau, Seelau, 2003; Poorman, 2001; Renzetti, 1998; Eaton, 1994) have shown with lesbian domestic violence and as Lori Girshick (2002a; 2002b) has revealed with lesbian rape.

Chris no longer identifies as a lesbian. In fact, she no longer knows how to sexually identity herself.

I don't know how to identify myself.

(Do you feel that you need to identify as something?)

Well yeah, because people often say that they get confused because they can't read me. Women say that I am sending out signals. And men get confused because they are trying to send out signals and I am not responding back. So my sexuality is a really weird thing.

In a later interview, Chris went on to comment:

I need clarity within myself, but as clear as I can get is to say, I am not a lesbian, but am I bisexual, heterosexual? I am not sure, but I think bisexual is a product of my mother's incest with me. Sex and turn on are almost like indelible ink etched on my mind like emotions and physical reactions from a young and vulnerable age.

In an attempt to clarify her confusions, Chris recently decided to have a sexual relationship with a long-time male companion.

I realized after he went home that I really needed to be with a man to work things out and to get rid of the yucky taste of my mother. To really get rid of it. Immediately a voice in my mind yelled, 'I want to be heterosexual!' That's the first time I've heard myself yell that in

my mind. It was like, 'No, I'm not my mother's lover and I don't want to be any woman's lover. I am normal. I can be with a man.'

It is clear that the sexual abuse from her mother still has a tremendous impact on how she wishes to identify sexually. Chris believes that having a heterosexual relationship with a man will aid in separating adult sex from child sexual abuse. Chris' story also illustrates the effects of heterosexism on survivors, because she equates inter-sexual relations with normalcy.

Yet, immediately after Chris' description of her sexual encounter with a man, she went on to comment:

But then I watch out on the street or watch television and I'll notice a woman. I will find her attractive, get excited, and do mixture of pant and truncate the feelings and then go into an androgynous asexual mode and act on nothing.

For Chris, who previously used to identify as a lesbian, sexual identity is fraught with confusion. Today, despite her efforts to identify as heterosexual, Chris admits to still being attracted to women. Given Chris' confusion with her sexual orientation, she wishes that society would de-emphasize sexuality because it forces people to identify as "gay, straight, or somewhere in between." From these rigid labels, the experiences of some become marginalized. Much like Lee's desire to live in a world free of hegemonic feminine and masculine gender labels, Chris had similar longings with sexuality.

I wished we lived in a world where everyone would celebrate and honour whoever you choose to be your lover regardless of sex, that I could choose the 'person' and not a sexual identity. I thought that was a world in which sexual identity wouldn't matter. Such a utopian world does not exist and I doubt ever will. There will always be someone to cast pronouncements, judgements, and dishonour. I guess I was looking for an easier world where my internal confusions wouldn't matter so much and wouldn't have a social cost attached to them.

In terms of sexual identification, pigeon-holing people into exhaustive categories is problematic at the best of times; however, for women like Chris, it simply intensifies her confusion and further ostracizes both her present and past experiences.

I want to conclude this section with one observation. When I asked survivors questions about sexual orientation, I noticed that some women would quickly change the subject, especially if I used the word 'lesbian.' Although it is impossible to know why this was the case, given the power of heterosexual discourse, I would tentatively suggest that some women wanted to quickly dismiss the idea that their sexual orientation (which, in these cases, were heterosexual) could be linked to the abuse from their mothers. Yet, none of these women had problems connecting other identity or impact issues back to the maternal violence. I am hesitant in my submission because it is really difficult to ascertain if such expedient dismissals were due to a general institutional heterosexism, where any confessions to homosexual feelings or desires are fraught with stigma and a perceived damnation, or if perhaps women were reluctant to talk about sexuality out of fear that this may imply that they somehow consented to the sexual abuse from their mothers (see, for example: Harrison, 1993). In either scenario, such disinclination does reveal the profound impact hegemonic heterosexual discourses have on women's sexual identity formation. The fact that these women have experienced same-sex violence in childhood no doubt only succeeds in exacerbating the impact, stigma, and shame – especially if they are currently identifying as heterosexual.

Battling the Body

Connected to sexuality is how survivors relate to their bodies – as children, through puberty, and as adults. For most women, the body has been, and continues to be, a constant battleground. Several survivors spoke about feeling alienated from their bodies, which many believed was related to dissociating from their bodies as children in order to cope with the sexual abuse. These accounts were similar to Linda Crockett's (2001: 227) experiences of coping and dissociating from her mother's sexual abuse.

She taught me to control my body and my emotions as methodically as any teacher instructing a student in multiplication tables. I learned to be silent and still. I learned to relax my muscles rather than allow them the tension connected to fear. I left my body when the pain became too much for me to absorb.

According to Sue Blume (1990), survivors of childhood sexual abuse often grapple with sexuality. This includes: not feeling at home in their bodies; failure to take care of their bodies; failure to recognize signals from their bodies (for example, if it is in pain); poor body image; and controlling body size in order to evade sexual interest. Thus, struggles over the body are common with many survivors of any childhood sexual trauma. Yet, with mother-daughter sexual abuse, when the daughter looks into the mirror she also sees her mother's body. This was explained to me by Nicky.

When I look at my body I am afraid of seeing what my mom saw and it's remembering what she did to me... If a male abuses you and you look in the mirror at your body, you don't see his body. But if it is a female that abuses you and you look in the mirror, you see your abuser... I see a lot of similarities with my mom... Her body is the same as mine, like her breast size, and it creeps me out. It's like ooh, am I becoming her?

In addition, for many of the women, any feelings of sexual pleasure or orgasm get overshadowed by memories of the abuse, which then preclude any healthy identification with their bodies. This was the case for Nicky.

When I was married, I think my husbands probably saw me naked once or twice. Like I would get changed under the covers... And after sex... I'd cry and cry and neither husband ever asked me what I was crying about.

Even simple acts of affection were difficult for Nicky, in part because she believed that physical touch would bring out the shame she desperately tried to hide deep inside herself.

I don't want someone's hand touching my body and feeling what I feel. Like, when someone touches me with their hand, then they feel what I feel. They feel the dirt and the shame.

To this end, Nicky's dream relationship is one where there would be no sexual contact.

I think if I could just meet someone that couldn't have sex. That would be the perfect relationship... then there would never be that tension and you would not break up over it.

Much like Nicky's preference not to identify with many dominant images of femininity (or masculinity), in terms of sexuality, she also chooses not to identify with mainstream notions of sexuality. Nicky's desire to be asexual, I believe, powerfully speaks to the impact of all the violence suffered in her life. What is difficult to decipher, however, is how much of Nicky's desire to be asexual is due to her mother's violence. Recall that Nicky has lived a life full of horrific violence (in childhood and adulthood) from multiple abusers. Although Nicky was clear in her narrative that her rejection of many mainstream aspects of femininity was related to

her mother's sexual abuse, unfortunately, we did not have a further discussion as to why she wishes to be in non-sexual relationships.

Like Nicky, Sandy spoke about having a poor body image, which was heightened when she was sexually intimate.

I have a really low self-esteem about my body. Like, when I do have sexual intercourse, I won't take off all my clothes. All I'll do is from the waist down and that is it and I have to be in the dark.

Mutual sexual affection was also a struggle for Chris. As mentioned, Chris had tremendous difficulties when she started to date women, but even simple acts of affection would cause her to become numb.

In the beginning, if a woman ever touched me, I would freeze. Just freeze. People would say, 'Why are you so stiff?' 'I am just giving you a hug.' I just could not take it. I could take a hug from a man, but not from a woman.

Once again, even though most of the women have been sexually traumatized by men and women, for some survivors, it has been easier to overcome sexual hurdles with men compared to women.

Many of the women also expressed battles with weight gain. For instance, Robin spoke about consciously gaining weight in order to protect herself from others. The problem with this strategy, according to Robin, is that she now has low self-esteem when it comes to her body.

I struggle a lot with my weight.

(What is it about your weight that you struggle with?)

I think it is because when I was younger I was really skinny and I think if I'm heavier nobody will touch me or do anything to me and a lot more people will be afraid of a heavier person than a skinny person.

It is not surprising that many survivors struggle with their weight. Like Robin, weight gain is often regarded as a coping strategy because 'fat' is equated with 'desexualization.' Much like survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse, gaining weight is seen as a way to insulate feelings of vulnerability (Blume, 1990). The problem with such a strategy, however, is that it contradicts current social discourses on femininity that operate to promote and value skinniness. To this end, even though weight gain helps survivors feel less vulnerable, they now have the added burden of worrying that their body is "ugly" – as it was put to me by Robin. Thus, in either direction (be it weight gain or weight loss), the battle within the body is ongoing.

Another issue on the body expressed by many survivors was in reference to self-care. This was the case for Sandy and Nicky.

I have a hard time taking a shower. I'll get in the shower, but I won't even have my clothes off yet. I wait until I close the curtain and then I take off my clothes. And after the shower I put my clothes on without even drying myself... And when I wash myself, I won't look at myself. I just close my eyes and I won't look at myself. (Sandy)

I can't take a bath for very long. I have to have lots of bubbles. I can't stay in the bath for very long, because it feels like she is in there. (Nicky)

Although Nicky talked about her current difficulties with self-care, she also remembered a time when her reactions were completely different. For instance, in the past, Nicky used to be obsessed with washing herself and would do so several times a day.

I went through a period where I shaved my legs four to five times a day. I scrubbed my body and had a bath every time I ate. I just felt dirty all of the time... And then I went to where I am now where it is hard for me to shave my legs. It's like because I have to pay attention to my body... It's really hard for me to do anything to my body... Like I'll look at cream and I'll know that my skin is really dry and itchy, but I can't do it. It's like caring for myself hurts.

(Why do you think that is?)

I think it is because I don't want to touch myself. I don't want to bring out those feelings of being touched and having smells... She made me touch her and now I can't touch myself.

Once again, it seems that mother-daughter sexual abuse prohibits survivors from taking care of their bodies in a healthy and healing manner. For Sandy, her way to cope with her mother's sexual abuse was to pretend that her body did not exist. This was a strategy that served her well as a child, but is one that has come with a great cost today. Like Sandy, Nicky often ignores caring for her body. But she also vacillates between denying her body and completely obsessive over-care. Interestingly, denying her body could also be regarded as a rejection of heteronormative femininity. Yet, when Nicky used to constantly shave her legs, it would appear that she was engaging in heteronormative femininity. The relationship between coping (either shaving or not shaving) and femininity is an area worthy of future research.

Finally, in relation to feelings of confusion over the body, several women described puberty as a particularly troubling time – in large part because they were starting to develop breasts. This was especially the case for Robin and Pat.

When I started to get breasts, I used to hide them. (Robin)

I didn't want breasts. I didn't want them to grow but I couldn't stop it. I used to bind my chest so that they wouldn't show. (Pat)

Although many young girls experience anxiety and awkwardness when they begin to develop breasts, what makes this physiological transition so difficult for survivors of maternal sexual violence is that their bodies are beginning to take the shape of their

mothers, which in turn serves as a permanent reminder of the abuse. As Chris comments:

I didn't want breasts because I didn't want to be a woman.

(What did breasts signify to you?)

Being a female so I fought it for as long as I could.

(And what was female to you?)

My mother.

From the above narratives, it is evident how sexual identity and gender identity intersect for survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse. Also apparent is how femininity, motherhood, and heterosexuality discourses are interwoven and influenced by one another. To be a woman is to adhere to the discursive terrain of femininity, which most survivors consciously chose to reject in order to avoid identifying with their mothers. Further, within dominant femininity discourses, to be a woman is to embrace motherhood. And finally, to be a woman is to be heterosexual. However, when mother-daughter sexual abuse enters the mix, survivors are left feeling ostracized from these discursive strategies, because their experiences do not fit with these social expectations. Consequently, not only are survivors left feeling completely alone in their attempts to discursively make sense of their past experiences, they also have tremendous difficulties when it comes to understanding many of their current confusions with sexual identity, precisely *because* mainstream discourses fail in recognizing their mother's sexual abuse.

Mother Identity

Given that six of the eight women interviewed were now mothers themselves,⁵ I wanted to explore the impact of maternal sexual abuse with survivors' current identities as mothers. For the two women who had never given birth to a child, I was interested in learning more about their decisions not to mother.

Research on child sexual violence has found that there is a positive relationship between sexual abuse and adolescent pregnancy (Mason, 1998; Boyer and Fine, 1992). This finding is supported in the current research as four of the six women who were mothers reported being teenagers when they first became pregnant (one other woman became pregnant at 20 years old, while the other was 26 years old when she had her first child). In addition, Aboriginal women are more likely than non-Aboriginal women to become pregnant during adolescence (Anderson, 2002). In the present study, all four Aboriginal women were mothers, and three of the four had their first child when they were adolescents. Aboriginal women are also more likely to be single mothers. Kim Anderson (2002), for example, cites statistics from the 1996 Census data in Canada which reveal that 27 percent of Aboriginal families are headed by single parents (mostly mothers), compared to 12 percent in the general population. Even though three of the four Aboriginal women gave up custody of their children, when they were the primary caregivers they were also single parents. Also, the one Aboriginal woman who has custody of her children is a single parent. Finally, Aboriginal women tend to have more children than non-Aboriginal women (Anderson, 2002). This statistic is also supported in this research as three Aboriginal

⁵ One woman, however, did not define herself as a mother because she gave her child up for adoption after being raped at twelve years old.

women reported having four or more children, while only one non-Aboriginal participant had four children.

Based on my conversations with survivors, one principal concern shared by almost all the women interviewed was how to break the perpetual cycle of violence they seemed to be embedded in. Being female for most women meant that they too could someday sexually abuse. For this reason, most expressed extreme fears of mothering, which in turn deeply influenced either their own mothering experiences or their decisions not to mother.

Mothering Experiences

Due to their mother's sexual abuse, most survivors expressed experiencing extreme anxiety when they found out they were pregnant. Why? Because they were afraid they would become like their own mothers.

I was so scared that I was going to end up doing something to my kids. (Robin)

I was scared. I didn't know if what my mom did to me if I was going to do that to [my daughter]. (Pat)

I am afraid I will become like her. (Sandy)

I was scared. I didn't want to be like my mother. (Nicky)

For Sandy, in particular, the impact of maternal sexual abuse greatly influenced her mothering experiences. What made her experiences all the more troubling was her fear and distrust of doctors and nurses. As a result, Sandy never participated in any pre-natal programs, nor did she attend regular check-ups with her doctor.

I never got any pre-natal care when I became pregnant. I couldn't trust any doctors so I never got any medical attention. Nothing at all through my pregnancy. That's how hard it was. And I couldn't handle the fact that it was getting hard because you know where my baby was going to come from. It was a really hard time for me to adjust to know that somebody's going to be sticking things up me there again... When I went into labour that time, they had to literally sedate me.

According to research by Dawn BucharSKI and colleagues (1999), distrust of medical professionals is quite common. They argue that even though motherhood is quite valued in Aboriginal culture, pregnancy is often viewed as a natural event. As such, many Aboriginal women do not attend pre-natal classes or seek medical care when they find out they are pregnant.

Given her extreme fear of medical professionals, and the fact that her first pregnancy was the result of a gang rape, Sandy considered having an abortion. Yet, because of the sacredness of children in Aboriginal culture, Sandy did not feel this was something she could do. Instead, Sandy decided that she was going to mother her baby.

When I found out I took it hard because he was a rape baby. I didn't want to go through with it but in my culture children are sacred so we don't believe in abortion, because then like you get punished for it by the Creator. So I thought hard about it and I didn't want to do it. But I just always told myself 'that's my baby.' I'm the one that's going to nurse it. I'm the one that's going to, you know, mother it. I always thought 'No matter what, this is always going to be my baby.'

As mentioned, however, Sandy's first child was apprehended. Losing custody of her children, coupled with the often overwhelming reality of healing from childhood sexual trauma, has caused Sandy to shield her feelings of love for her children (when she does get to see them).

Honestly to tell you the truth, I don't give back. I don't give love to anyone. Even my own kids. It's hard, because of what I went through all my life and I'm dealing with today. I keep my distance from my kids because it's very, it's very emotional. I'm very frustrated. I get very angry. And I don't want to bring it onto my kids. I know that I'm feeling like this so I don't want them to see me like this.

Even though Sandy has difficulties showing affection towards her children, in speaking with Sandy, it was apparent that she cared deeply for all of them. In fact, Sandy repeatedly told me that part of her decision not to regain custody of her children (right now, at least) stems from her desire not to have her children experience the same hardships as her.

In this regard, it is important to recognize the social context in which many Aboriginal women's lives are tragically located, which has a substantial impact on their mothering experiences. The hard reality is that for Aboriginal women like Sandy, surviving multiple forms of violence has placed her in situations (i.e. living on the streets as an adolescent) that have increased her risk of coming into contact with Child and Family Services. Unfortunately, however, agencies like Child and Family Services are not usually based on Aboriginal culture where teaching philosophies are holistic in nature – nor do they tend to promote Aboriginal traditions such as healing circles, pow wows, sweats, or including the wisdom of elders (Shestowsky, 1993).

Similar to Sandy, Nicky's experiences with mothering her children were quite chaotic.

It was really hard. When they were smaller it was really hard because I had a lot of memories when they were smaller. And I used to just think 'God, am I going to do this to my kids?' 'How am I going to take care of them?' And I used to think people were abusing them. I thought they were being sexually abused, and like I didn't trust anybody.

For Nicky, then, mothering vacillated between flashbacks and fear. Yet, according to Nicky, it was easier to parent her son compared to her daughter.

It was easier for me to be more comfortable with my son that it was with my daughters. It made me not be touchy-feely and it was hard when my kids were going to hug me and kiss me and stuff I was always kind of tense. And I have a hard time relating to my daughters about sex. You know, it's hard for me to talk to them about it.

Like Sandy, Nicky frequently communicated to me about how much she cared for her children and how she hoped for them to have a better life.

Even though Lee immediately gave up custody of her baby, she did speak about her fears of becoming like her mother. As a result, she recalls being hyper-vigilant around young children.

I remember one little girl that I used to baby-sit and she would ask if I wanted to come into the bath with her and like sit on the floor... There was no way. There was no way that there was going to be naked children around me.

Lee's fears were further intensified when a past therapist informed her that many victims of violence become abusers themselves (which Lee suspects was the counsellor's way to rationalize a female's propensity for violence).

She scared the living shit out of me... I got home and I cried for about a week and I'm like, 'Oh my God, am I'm going to turn into this kind of person?' 'Should I kill myself now?' It made me very suicidal... She really spooked me. Like I wouldn't even consider having kids until about a year ago.

In this regard, all of the women I spoke to seemed to have made different choices as none of the women reported becoming sexually abusive themselves towards their own children. This is not to suggest that the women who had children had an easy time of mothering. In fact, in speaking with survivors, it seems that the hardest choice many had to make was their decision not to mother their children.

Choosing Not to Mother

Throughout the interview process, I discovered that even though many women were mothers, most made conscious decisions not to parent. For Nicky,⁶ Pat, and Robin, giving up primary parenting responsibility was their decision. Alternatively, Sandy was fifteen years old when she had her first child. Due to her young age – not to mention the lack of a known address – Sandy's child was apprehended. Sandy currently has had five other children – all of which have been apprehended by CFS.

Although there were many reasons why survivors chose not to mother (or, for Sandy, losing custody),⁷ all agreed that part of their decision was due to their mother's sexual abuse. This was the case for Nicky, Pat, Robin, and Sandy (who had four, one, four, and six children, respectively).

I guess because I'd been through so much in my life that I didn't want my children to be, to go through that, because I felt so worthless. And I didn't want them to feel that way. I wanted them to feel loved and have confidence and for them to know that I'm proud of them. (Nicky)

I didn't trust myself to be a good parent... I never wanted children in my life... I was scared because of all the violence and everything and then I had my daughter and I wasn't really trying to be a mother... I had her and my mom was on my back about giving her grandchildren... It's like I had a kid just to please my mother. (Pat)

When I first started using drugs and stuff, I wrote my kids a letter. I wrote each of them a letter and explained everything. I'll give it to them when they're older. (Robin)

They put me in a psychiatric ward. I was in and out of there for a year... In front of my older kids, I slashed my wrists and I slashed my legs. I've hung myself in front of my kids and if it wasn't for my son finding me hanging, I would not be here today... So I wasn't

⁶ Although Nicky gave up custody of her children when they were young, she now lives with her adult daughter and has contact with her four other children, who live out of province.

⁷ Although Sandy has lost custody of her children, she does have visiting rights with her three oldest children. Sandy reported to me that she chooses not to see her three youngest children because she is not ready at this stage in her healing.

ready to be a parent, so I told the people in the hospital that I can't keep my kids... My kids are seeing too much... I said my kids need to be in a safe place. So that's where they've been. (Sandy)

It is impossible to conclude that Nicky, Pat, Robin, and Sandy gave up custody of their children solely due to their mother's sexual abuse. Yet, it certainly seemed to be a factor in all of their decisions. For these women, the best way to insure against becoming like their mothers was to give up on mothering.

For two women, the decision not to mother was a conscious choice. This was the case for Chris and Dana who decided early on not to have children, in large part because of the violence suffered in their lives. For Dana, her choice not to have children was also her way to resist her mother's wishes.

All the stuff with my mother has made me never to want kids... I once wanted twelve kids. But then my mother said to me, 'Get pregnant so that it can bring us closer together.' No way.

For Chris, her decision not to have children was something she has been adamant about for a long time. In Chris' opinion, the only way to ensure that the cycle of violence would be broken was not to have children.

I did not want kids. It was an early decision. I mean by the time I was fourteen, I knew that I didn't want to get married and I didn't want to have kids. And at a deep level, I just didn't want to put any child through what I had gone through... I did not want the pattern of abuse to continue and I thought that by not having children that I would break that pattern... I think in some warped way, I didn't want any more progeny from this family.

Whether the decision was not to become a mother in the first place or to give up custody of their children, maternal sexual abuse has profoundly effected survivors' mother identities. Given the enormous influence mother-daughter sexual abuse has had on survivors' gendered and sexual identities, it should come as little surprise that

a lifetime of feeling ostracized by dominant motherhood discourses would also negatively effect the mother identities of daughters.

Concluding Remarks

The girl-child who experiences sexual abuse from her mother learns at an early age that sometimes she must concede to a stronger force. At some level, this is a reality for all children. Various social forces operate to teach children that adults have control over much of their lives. In terms of gender differences among children, an assortment of social manoeuvres have been put into discourse for young girls – in large part so they come to view themselves below boys. For example, in the playground all children learn that to throw like a girl is to throw improperly and to throw like a boy is to throw correctly. While most girls grow up ‘throwing like a girl,’ some resist this discursive stereotype. However, through labels such as ‘tomboy,’ the girls who throw like boys become aware that they are defying dominant discourses of femininity. This is much the same for the young girl who has been sexually abused by a female caregiver. Rejecting femininity is her way of rejecting her mother’s sexual abuse. In her child’s mind, throwing like a boy also means freedom from abuse. Yet, such defiance comes with a personal cost – that of her gendered identity.

Sexually abusive families are also influenced by powerful social forces. As a result, relations within these families are in constant action, reaction, and interaction with discourse. For the women interviewed, the powerful discourses of femininity, motherhood, and heterosexuality do influence how they view themselves as well as

come to identify other family members. This is best illustrated in the chaotic formation of blurred gendered boundaries among survivors' parents and siblings.

It should come as no surprise that mother-daughter sexual abuse has a tremendous impact on survivors' sexuality. In speaking with daughters, some expressed feeling confused over their sexual orientation, especially when it came to same-sex relationships. For these women, it was extremely difficult to separate their lesbian relationship from their mother's sexual abuse. In addition, most women spoke about their constant battles with their bodies and how the maternal sexual abuse has impeded their ability to form a sexual identity.

Finally, through mainstream femininity and motherhood discourses, the girl-child also learns that, despite her mother's higher status of 'parent,' she is supposed to be an identity ally. One consequence of having a sexually abusive mother, then, is that the daughter often grows up without a sense of self, because her main discursive ally is hurting rather than helping. For Nicky, this has meant giving up her 'identity' entirely, because sometimes it is best not to have what can so easily be taken away.

Identity? I don't know. I don't even know myself very good. It's hard for me to know who I am... I don't really see myself as anything. I see myself as invisible most of the time... It's mostly that I exist.

In terms of identity loss (or blurring), the present analysis of mother-daughter sexual abuse moves beyond simply addressing its impact within the rigid bifurcation of sex (i.e., male versus female). Rather, by adopting a feminist poststructuralist framework, I have demonstrated how survivors' identities (both internally and externally on the body) have been influenced by the intersection of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality discourses – and, in particular, how these dominant discourses are contrary to their childhood experiences.

CONCLUSION

Breaking Barriers

So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilisation, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine, with human fatality; ... so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless.

Hauteville House, 1862

Preface from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*

As long as the child within is not allowed to become aware of what happened to him or her, a part of his or her emotional life will remain frozen ... all appeals to love, solidarity and compassion will be useless.

Alice Miller, 1983; cited in Adams, 1991, p. 1

While tremendous gains have been made in attending to men's violence, the issue of women's capacity to be abusive has only recently become a subject of academic attention (Ristock, 2002; Girshick, 2002b). Nevertheless, mother-daughter sexual abuse of children has seldom been a subject of investigation. It seems that societal norms are not conducive to accepting mothers as sexual abusers, in large part because it is often automatically assumed that mothers provide nurturing care towards their children, which is validated by popular constructions of the benevolent mother. But what happens when a child's (and later adult's) experience of being mothered does not fit with society's naturalized assumptions of motherhood?

This question cannot be fully explored so long as motherhood is seen as a universal construct – mostly because mothers become categorized through “ideal types” (Weber, 1958), which oversimplifies mothering experiences (and gender

itself). For instance, much of the earlier feminist work has analyzed violence as the result of patriarchy and male power. Consequently, there has been little room for alternative forms of sexual violence, especially mother-daughter sexual abuse. As a result, truth claims are easily constructed – such as those which directly support dominant motherhood discourses – whereby anyone dependent on a mother (like a child) is safe and free from sexual abuse. As a society, we cling onto this belief, because we are left with no safe place to turn if women do not inherently provide nurturing for their children.

As such, when acknowledgements of mother-daughter sexual abuse are made, it is usually only within a specific or isolated context – one that situates mothers outside the mainstream realm of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. Thus, when mother-daughter sexual abuse is recognized, it breaches our conceptions of motherhood (which also include the discursive terrains of femininity and heterosexuality).

My investigation of the literature revealed that the ways in which survivors make sense of mother-daughter sexual abuse is rarely the centre of inquiry. When research has focused on daughters, work is either based on psychological (i.e. positivistic and/or clinical) studies or draws solely on survivor accounts with little attempt at theorizing. Because survivors' documented experiences have been limited, this study has attempted to provide a qualitative approach that is informed by women's narratives (within discourse). The focus, therefore, is on a small number of women in order to encapsulate: how they attempt to make sense of the abuse; how they speak about their relationships; and how they come to understand the ways in

which dominant cultural notions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality have silenced their experiences.

Moreover, although there are numerous psych-based studies that address the female sex offender (most of whom are mothers), mother-daughter sexual abuse has either been situated within an isolated context (focusing on mental disorders or substance abuse) or understood as the result of a woman's involuntary participation (as a victim) in a role that is auxiliary to her abusive male partner (Davin, 1999; Faller, 1995). If, however, 'mad' and/or 'victim' labels are unsuccessful, female sexual abusers are portrayed as 'bad mothers,' and additional forms of violence – such as physical and emotional abuse – are used to justify the classification of these mothers as 'non-women.' As Belinda Morrissey (2003: 168) writes, "Nowhere, it seems, is the presentation of a woman who is both violent and agentic, responsible and human, possible in these discourses." As a result, most of the psych-based literature on female-perpetrated sexual violence focuses on the female offender in a way that attempts to pigeon-hole women into various types or constructs.

The concern with psych-based approaches, as well as some feminist literature, is that both dismiss the possibility that women are active agents who *do* have the ability to abuse power. The reality, however, is that women – including mothers – have the capacity for sexual violence and some exercise this power over children. Simply painting this behaviour with a 'mad,' 'bad,' or 'victim' brush ignores the complexity of the issue. It also silences survivors and leaves them with virtually no language to speak about (and therefore make sense of) their experiences.

My aim, therefore, has been to develop a more reflexive approach, one that locates maternal sexual abuse within the larger social terrain of hegemonic motherhood, which is also informed by femininity and heterosexuality discourses. In this regard, my interest has been on the female survivor: what has the impact been for her; how she makes sense of maternal sexual abuse; and how dominant discourses have influenced her multiple (and inherently fractured) identities.

Critically analyzing dominant discourses enables an investigation of how notions of mothering are socially constructed and ultimately discursively produced. The position taken throughout this dissertation, then, is that the category Mother is historically specific and discursively constituted. Survivors of maternal sexual abuse are aware of the socially constituted category of Mother which, therefore, has a tremendous impact on the way they attempt to cope with, resist, and survive their mother's violence.

For all the women interviewed, living as a maternal abuse survivor has been fraught with many difficulties and challenges or, as articulated by Chris, "Like a cage, the pain forms ribs that press against the soul." In an attempt to turn some of that internalized pain outward, one goal of this study has been to allow women the subjugated space for their stories to be told in a way that recognizes their multiple strategies of coping, resisting, and surviving mother-daughter sexual abuse. Specifically, by exploring the experience of being mothered from the perspective of the female survivor, a better understanding of how daughters make sense of their mother's sexually abusive behaviour can be developed. This understanding includes

the multiple ways that such violence has influenced their identity formation – especially in regards to gender, sexuality, and becoming mothers themselves.

As mentioned, a poststructuralist approach is also useful because it allows feminist theorizing to incorporate the reciprocal relationship between the influence of dominant discourses, the fluidity of power, and the role of agency. By recognizing the fluidity of power, feminist theorizing can distinguish a woman's capacity for violence from her prior victimization. In this regard, there is acceptance that women can be both powerful abusers and powerless victims simultaneously – or as Chris put it, mothers can be 'powerful victims.' This is important because, although most survivors recognized the horrendous victim-filled pasts of their mothers (and therefore, retracted somewhat on their earlier assertions that their mothers were completely 'bad'), they also adamantly believed that their mothers were responsible for their abusive actions and could have made different choices. Their choices may have been limited and the extent of their agency may have been complicated, but to deny their existence is to provide an incomplete reading of mothers who sexually abuse their children. Even if a mother feels as isolated and powerless as the child she is sexually abusing, she still has agency and choice and, therefore, she is still responsible for her actions. Similarly, recognizing that mothers are active agents, no matter how limited their choices may actually be, will hopefully allow survivors to, at minimum, name their experiences. But more optimistically, it will provide an environment where they can feel safe enough to speak and be heard.

In this study, I have also found that even though survivors draw on mad, bad, and/or victim labels, such constructs only provide surface explanations for how they

make sense of their mother's sexually abusive behaviour. In this regard, the women interviewed recognize the fluidity within their mother's lives – they can be mad, bad, and/or victims as well as active agents who are accountable for their actions. Thus, following a poststructuralist analysis, as feminists, we are able to move beyond an either/or binary when theorizing maternal sexual abuse. This is not to suggest, as I have argued in Chapter 5, that the accountability of mothers (i.e. their agency) should result in an increased culpability for their actions, which then serves as further justification towards harsher penal sentences. Following the approach of several poststructuralist scholars (see, for example, Smart, 1989), it is not my contention to suggest that, as feminists, we need to push for more draconian (or neo-conservative) forms of punishment for offenders of maternal sexual abuse. Especially in terms of assisting survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse, I am sceptical of how successful criminal justice interventions would be in helping them make sense of their mother's sexual violence. Having said this, I do maintain that there needs to be more education and training with agencies such as Child and Family Services (CFS). As revealed in many of the narratives from survivors, CFS did have a presence in their lives, but only for investigations involving male-perpetrated violence. In the few cases where CFS was called to investigate maternal sexual abuse, all cases were readily dismissed.

Where Do We Go from Here?

If law and order solutions are not desirable strategies, what needs to be done regarding mother-daughter sexual violence? Put another way, as feminists, where do we go from here? As I have argued, psych-based perspectives on maternal sexual

abuse have a tendency to individualize the problem. By drawing on a sociological framework (informed by poststructuralism), I have contended that it is more fruitful to explore how discursive constructions of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality have influenced violence perpetrated by mothers. As such, solutions to mother-daughter sexual abuse also need to be framed within a larger social context. Specifically, some of the popular assumptions about both mothers and sexual abuse – in a sense, how one is an oxymoron for the other – needs to be broken. Denying the *possibility* of a mother being sexually abusive must be challenged. One way to achieve this is by recognizing the fluidity of violence as well as the historical specificity of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality. Such recognition could be achieved by constructing new discursive spaces to constitute the actions of mothers, which no doubt would be difficult, especially considering the powerful discursive strategies firmly imbedded within motherhood and the effects of femininity and heterosexuality. I do believe, however, that a recognition of mother-daughter sexual abuse could be accomplished by challenging many of these mainstream assumptions.

On a larger socio-political level, there needs to be substantial shifts in the expectation of mothers. Despite many positive changes in the representation of women within the labour market, under the current neo-liberal climate, mothering continues to be the sole responsibility of women. Specifically, governments (especially in the United States, but also in Canada) continue to under fund childcare and education. The consequence, according to Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004: 308), is that mothers are left with one alternative: “It’s every mom for herself.” To this end, dominant discourses on motherhood must be redefined so that mothers

are not required to be the exclusive providers of childcare. This is best summarized by Shari Thurer, who writes about the role of mothering in general.

At the societal level, child rearing would not be dismissed as an individual mother's problem, but one in which nurturance and the well-being of *all* children are transcendent public priority. This society would accept changes in family structure as inevitable (and not necessarily bad) and would devise for them new forms of public and private support. I hope for a society that will tolerate and encourage a diversity of mothering styles and cohabitating groups. I hope for a society in which both women and men have the power of the world and the nurturant experience. (Thurer, 1994: 300-301)

Similarly, it is imperative that the anti child abuse movement also be located within a socio-political terrain. Individualizing blame onto the mothers who sexually abuse only succeeds in diverting our attention away from the larger issues many women face when trying to parent children. This comment is not meant to excuse the actions of a mother who harms her child(ren). Rather, my discontent with attaching blame solely at an individual level is that it only succeeds in providing a scapegoat for many larger social problems – such as our dismal child welfare system that leaves over a million children (15.6 percent of all children) to live in poverty or the lack of resources available to women (or men) when it comes to parenting children (Campaign 2000, 2004).

Real change, then, will not be possible until the rights of children are validated so that they are truly valued and seen as worthwhile social investments. Even though denial is far more comfortable than truth, the ugly face of family violence must not be hidden away. This only serves to silence the voices of survivors (male or female). As Linda Crockett (2001: 309) writes:

Survivors, for all their visibility in recent years, are not yet a potent social or political force. The nature of our wounds often keeps us from building

the trust that is needed to create and sustain long-term projects for cultural or political change.

Until survivors are able to speak openly about their experiences without feeling a sense of public shaming, surface solutions – such as intervention by external agencies or criminal justice responses – will continue to be ineffective. As Chris so rightfully argued: “Until children’s bodies and minds and souls are as important as property, it will continue.”

In addition, the role of feminism must be determined – particularly in terms of breaking the numerous barriers pertaining to mother-daughter sexual abuse. Six years ago, when many feminists began to address the issue of women’s violence, Claire Renzetti (1999: 52) stated that as feminists we “must *own* the problem of women’s use of violence.” Her statement is still important today. As feminists, despite fears of having our work used against us as a means to further advance anti-feminist propaganda, we cannot remain reluctant to address the issue of mother-daughter sexual abuse. As feminists, we must continue to challenge the hegemonic versions of mothers that are so readily accepted and so easily upheld by dominant motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality discourses.

One way to achieve this objective would be to work with community agencies who are at the frontlines of the anti child abuse movement. In this regard, it is critical that traditional belief systems are challenged, especially since survivors may be trying to speak about their mother’s abuse. As seen in the present study, almost all survivors made some attempt to reach out and tell someone about the violence. Yet, for too many women, their gallant efforts fell on deaf ears. We must work towards ending this pattern.

Previous feminist challenges of dominant discursive assumptions should give us hope. For instance, today when a woman refers to her 'partner,' as feminists, we challenge others (and ourselves) not to assume that she is talking about a man. Assumptions of heterosexism are therefore confronted. In a similar way, when a woman discloses that she is a survivor of sexual abuse, it should not be assumed that she is referring to a father, a step-father, or a male neighbour. This is not to suggest that all discussions about violence need to be on gender-neutral terms. As I stated at the onset of this work, I am vehemently opposed to any suggestion that male- and female-perpetrated violence is symmetrical. Instead, I am suggesting that there needs to be more attention to the use of language as well as taken-for-granted assumptions about violence.

While I recognize the importance of not making claims that male- and female-perpetrated sexual abuse is symmetrical, it is also necessary to acknowledge that survivor's experiences with maternal sexual violence cannot be understood in terms of a unified sameness. In this work, I have tried to link the similarities of survivors experiences by highlighting the ways in which the dominant discourses of motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality have had an impact on the complex ways women cope, with, resist, survive, identify, and ultimately make sense of their mothers violence. In doing so, I have largely portrayed the eight women as a unified core. I think such an endeavour was necessary in order to highlight the many similarities survivors share, especially considering the ostracizing impact that all women spoke of. This impact was due, in large part, to the fact that their experiences are generally not recognized in most social contexts. Yet, it would be inaccurate (as

well as problematic) to assume that women's experiences are not diverse and unique, especially along intersections of race, class, sexuality, etc. As such, an important next step for future research would be to explore the ways in which maternal sexual abuse both *diverges* and *converges* according to an intersectionality perspective. The merit of an intersectionality approach is that scholars would be able to critically analysis dominant discourses (such as motherhood, femininity, and heterosexuality), but could abstract gender from other dimensions of social identity (such as race, class, or sexuality). Specifically in the current project, such an analysis would have been helpful in drawing important insights pertaining to race, especially given that four of the eight women interviewed had Aboriginal roots. By exploring cultural difference, it would be fruitful for future research to investigate how the related histories of colonialism and racial oppression have affected Aboriginal women who are healing from and making sense of maternal sexual abuse.

What Survivors Want

Throughout the interviews, I wanted to respect the fact that survivors are the best experts over their lives. Following the work of Bobbie Rosencrans (1997), I have argued that survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse need to be spoken to and heard. Quite simply, this is because, "If we want to know what it was like to be a prisoner of war, we will not ask the prison keepers. We'll ask the POWs" (Rosencrans, 1997: 13). As such, I believe that it is important to conclude with survivors' words about what they believe needs to be done regarding mother-daughter sexual abuse.

First and foremost, survivors wanted others to know that much like male-perpetrated sexual abuse, some mothers are sexually violent towards their children.

As Lee comments:

Nobody knows about it... It's always about men. I think it needs to be brought to people's attention and say, 'Look this shit does happen.'

A similar contention was made by Sandy.

There needs to be more awareness. People have to realize that it's not only males that do it. It's females that do it too.

Like Lee and Sandy, Chris was steadfast in her assertion that mother-daughter sexual abuse needs to be recognized, which is evident in the following dialogue.

It exits... It hurts almost more.... It is real... So don't force me to keep it a secret... Listen. Hear. Know. Believe... It has a significant impact on gender, on your sexuality, confusion, feeling weird, odd, and dirty... [W]ith mother-daughter there is a permanent confusion. And it hurts more.

(How so?)

Because it is like silence in triplicate - silence from my family, silence from society, and silence from therapy... It's a mixture of denial and profound ignorance.

In part, then, it is the multiple modes of silencing that make the impact of mother-daughter sexual abuse so profound. In one way or another, the silencing attributed to maternal sexual abuse stems from the assumptions held about mothers. The problem with the hegemonic influences of dominant discourses, however, is that survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse are left with few linguistic resources to make sense of the violence – or as Chris remarked:

It is like a bloody volcano blowing, and that is why it is worse for me because I can't talk about it. There is no place to put it. I can't let it go. I can't let it blow. It's like I have had to bury this volcano deep down inside of me.

Chris went on to comment about the consequences of her silencing.

If it had been recognized, I probably would not have had to go through an entire life of Hell... I would have had self-esteem. I might have had children. I certainly would not have gone through my whole life feeling weird, ashamed, embarrassed, and anxious. I would have been able to have a present instead of being dragged down by the past - afraid of the past and afraid of the future. It's sad.

Another important strategy survivors felt needed to be adopted regarding female-perpetrated sexual abuse was more education and training – especially for frontline workers (such as therapists and investigators from Child and Family Services) and school teachers. For Robin, education is important because it is one way that common assumptions about mothers can be broken.

There needs to be more education out there that mothers do sexually abuse their daughters because it is not something that is out there now.

Like Robin, Dana comments about the denial of mother-daughter violence, especially in the child abuse literature.

You've got to teach kids about abuse... There are all kinds of books on touching and everything inappropriate, but nothing about the mother touching you.

Similar to Robin and Dana, Nicky suggested that more information should be directed to school-aged children.

I think they should teach it in school. I know they teach about sexual abuse, but I don't think they teach about mother-daughter sexual abuse and I think they should. There could be a little girl sitting there and that could change her whole life if she heard that it happens and it is not her fault. That could change her whole life, right there.

Related to education on mother-daughter sexual abuse is the need for more publicly disseminated information on women's violence. Many survivors commented

that the violence against women movement has become very visible in recent years.

Although they view this as a positive change, most felt their experiences with female-perpetrated sexual abuse were being neglected or overlooked. As a result, some women felt that there needed to be more public recognition of women's violence.

Two popular suggestions were the distribution of posters and pamphlets. Nicky comments on both.

There needs to be more pamphlets out there. There needs to be more posters - things that people can see with their own eyes and say, 'Okay, I'm not alone.' 'This happens.' Mother-daughter sexual abuse needs to be out there like male violence is. You see posters in a lot of places, but they don't have anything like that for mother-daughter.

In addition to inviting survivors to comment on what they wanted others to know about mother-daughter sexual abuse, I asked the women what would have made a difference in their lives - as children and today as adults. For Nicky, more probing from frontline workers would have made a difference, because she honestly believed that if the question of her mother's sexual abuse would have been asked, she would have disclosed her well-guarded secret.

If somebody would have talked to me when I was younger... Like they did, but they were dealing with the physical abuse from my dad... Nobody ever said, 'What else is happening in the home'? If somebody would have said to me, while they were assessing me, 'What else happened to you'? Maybe I would have been able to explain or express it or something. But nobody did.

Like Nicky, Robin also wished that there would have been someone that she could have disclosed her mother's abuse to.

If there was somebody that I could have turned to who actually would have listened to me and believed me and not say, 'You are making it up because that is your mom'... If there was someone who said, 'This does happen.' 'You're not the only person.' 'You don't

need to be ashamed of coming forward and speaking out against it.'

Sandy was also someone who did not have anyone to talk to when she was younger – even though Child and Family Service (CFS) workers came to her house to investigate allegations of sexual abuse. Sandy believes that if the CFS investigators had probed deeper or if they were not so rigid in their assumptions about the inability of mothers to be sexual abusers, she would not have had to suffer many more years of horrendous violence.

The authorities need to take it one step further and investigate females too. Not just males. They need to talk to the children. That is what happened to me because the authorities never went further than just coming into the home and saying, 'Oh, there's nothing wrong here.'

To this end, there are many steps that need to be taken regarding mother-daughter sexual abuse. Education obviously is a critical first step. Related to education are prevention programs. Both could provide a valuable resource for children and even adult survivors. Yet, these approaches are only surface solutions for achieving significant change. Many of the common assumptions about mothers and violence need to be challenged. To do this, women's stories of maternal sexual abuse need to be heard. Action must be then taken from their words, which means that mother-daughter sexual abuse must be acknowledged. There needs to be an acceptance that such violence exists and has a profound impact on women's ability to cope with, resist, and survive.

These may seem like simple solutions, but for many of the women interviewed, social acknowledgements of mother-daughter sexual abuse give them a place to put their experiences. According to a letter Chris wrote to me after our

interview sessions were over, it gives survivors permission to *start* to make sense of the violence.

If you ever were worried about giving women their voice, there is maybe something you didn't quite anticipate. In talking with you I have been letting go of all this horrible stuff. I have begun to have a place to let it go to. Before now, there has never been a place to 'put it.' That's why for all my life 'it just was' and I couldn't make any sense out of it. So you've helped to give a far more precious gift than the voice you have helped us to have. You have helped us to let go of carrying all this alone.

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APPENDIX A

Cover Letter



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Hearing 'Silent Voices': Examining Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse

Dear Service Care Provider:

I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba. For my dissertation, I am researching mother-daughter sexual abuse. The purpose of this project is to explore perceptions of female-perpetrated sexual abuse and experiences of being mothered (good and bad) from the perspective of females who have experienced such violence.

In order to address these research objectives, I am conducting in-person interviews with survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse. There will be a total of four interviews for each participant – each interview lasting one to two hours. Participants will be paid \$25 for each interview. This research has been approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba.

Reaching survivors is challenging – especially considering how powerful social taboos have silenced many women who have been sexually abused by their mother. For this reason, I am asking for your assistance, as a service-care provider, to reach women who have experienced mother-daughter sexual abuse and who may be willing to participate in my study. Enclosed you will find an information sheet, which includes detailed information on the project as well as my contact information.

Given the importance of the therapeutic relationship, I would ask that you discuss with your client her preparedness to participate in such a project in order for her to make a well-informed decision. While I am eager to speak with survivors, I would also ask that your client not be unduly influenced to participate in this project, and that you emphasize to her there will be no consequences in therapy or to the services she is receiving if she decides not to participate. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, confidentiality will be of utmost importance. All of my conversations with a woman (including whether or not she is even participating in the project) will be completely confidential.

While there is a wealth of literature that examines the impact of male violence on women and children, there is no Canadian research that explores survivors' accounts of child sexual abuse when the offender is their mother. Sociological research in this area has the potential to not only advance our understanding of this important issue, but develop policies for attending to it as well. However, probably the greatest benefit of such a project is that it is giving survivors the opportunity to have their stories told.

Please feel free to contact me directly if you have any comments or concerns regarding this research project. Thank-you for assisting me in this important research,

Yours truly,

Tracey Peter

APPENDIX B

Study Information Sheet



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

**Hearing 'Silent Voices':
Examining Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse**

STUDY INFORMATION SHEET

Project Summary:

Research on incest and other forms of child sexual abuse began to emerge in the 1970s and 80s. Attention to this issue was largely due to the success of the women's (feminist) movement in transforming male violence against women and children from a private trouble into a public issue. While great gains have been made in attending to the issue of men's violence, female-perpetrated sexual abuse of children has seldom been a subject of investigation. In recent years, however, growing recognition of women's capacity for violence has challenged traditional images of women as naturally passive and non-abusive. Nevertheless, it seems that, as a society, we are not ready to entirely accept that women – especially mothers – have the capacity to sexually abuse children. When this form of violence is recognized, it is usually accompanied by moral outrage, in large part because it breaches our notions of 'female behaviour' and 'mothering.' However, mother-perpetrated sexual abuse occurs. For this reason, we cannot dismiss the possibility that mothers have the ability to make certain choices as well as have the ability abuse power.

The purpose of this research project is to explore perceptions of female-perpetrated sexual abuse and experiences of being mothered (good and bad) from the

perspective of female survivors who have experienced such violence. The most important part of this work is hearing from survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse. Your experiences need to be validated and the central aim of this research is to listen and hear what you have to say.

Your Participation:

The study that you are being asked to participate in will fulfill the requirements of a PhD thesis in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba. Your involvement in this study involves participating in four in-person interviews to discuss your experiences of mother-daughter sexual abuse as well as your perceptions of motherhood. Each interview will be one-to-two hours in length and will be audio-taped (with your consent) so that the dialogue can be transcribed by a professional typist to ensure that there is an accurate record of what we are talking about in the interviews. You will be paid \$25 at the start of each interview (a total of \$100 for all four interviews).

Even though a professional transcription service will be used, no identifying characteristics will be given to the transcription agency. Instead, tapes will have numbers that will correspond with a master list available only to me (this file will be password protected and stored on a personal computer). In order to ensure confidentiality, you will be asked at the beginning of each interview (through a consent form) not to use names that would identify people, but rather to refer to them by relation (i.e., 'my mother,' 'my sister,' 'my friend,' 'my therapist,' etc.). If by accident, a name is identified during the

course of the interview, I will erase the name from the tape before it is sent to the professional transcription service.

A main reason for the multiple interviews is that it is unreasonable to assume that you will be able to talk about your painful abuse experiences in a one-time, one-to-two hour interview with a person you have just met. Multiple meetings will allow me to try to establish myself as a trustworthy individual who can empathize with your experiences.

Another goal of this research is to allow you to communicate to me in a way that is comfortable and non-threatening. We all communicate in multiple ways. If non-verbal forms of communication are easier ways to speak to me, you are encouraged (but not obligated) to submit poems, stories, journal entries, etc. It is important that you truly feel that you are being heard and believed.

You can refuse to answer any questions that cause you discomfort and can stop or end the interview at any time without any negative consequences. Being involved in this research project is completely up to you. You can decide to drop out of the study at any time, as you are under no obligation to participate. There should be no risk involved by participating in this study. However, given the sensitive nature of the topic, we will start and end each session with a 'checking-in' exercise (which simply consists of each of us saying how we have been feeling today). Also, in case needed after or in-between interviews, you are encouraged to call 24 hour Klinik crisis line at: 786-8686. It is

important to note that participation in this study, and your decision to become involved in this project, will not affect any benefits or services you now receive as a client at any location where you may be receiving therapy or other treatment.

Confidentiality:

Confidentiality will be assured to all study participants. However, confidentiality cannot be maintained in the event of disclosure of matters related to abuse or violence against vulnerable persons such as children and/or elderly people. I am obligated, by law, to report such occurrences. Any identifying characteristics will be changed or omitted from any writing from this research and a master list of names and codes will be destroyed when the research is completed. The audio-taped interviews and transcripts will also be destroyed upon completion of this research. All electronic information (transcribed interviews, contact information, etc.) will be saved on a password protected personal (non-networked) computer within a locked facility. Any printed material (interview notes, write-ups, etc.) will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic files will be deleted upon completion of the project. Similarly, audio-tapes will be erased and all paper files will be shredded.

Additional Ethical Considerations:

Talking about sexual abuse is a sensitive topic. In order to discuss such experiences in a safe environment, all interviews will take place at a community health facility. If you feel more comfortable at a centre that you go to for counselling or other healing-related

services, I will try to arrange for the interviews to be held there. Otherwise, interviews will be carried out at Klinik Community Health Centre (870 Portage Ave) in Winnipeg. I would also like to remind you that there is a twenty-four hour crisis line phone number (786-8686) that you can call if you ever feel the need to talk to a safe person.

Distribution of the Findings:

A summary report of the study findings will be made available to you if you wish and will be mailed out to you once the study has been completed. The findings of this study will be used in my PhD thesis and possibly for subsequent publication.

The principle investigator of this study is Tracey Peter, a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba. This study is being supervised by Dr. Elizabeth Comack also of the Department of Sociology, and has been approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board. Any concerns or complaints regarding a procedure used in this study can be reported to Tracey Peter at 474-8192 (e-mail:

); Dr. Elizabeth Comack at 474-9673 (e-mail:

); or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122 (e-mail:

) for referral to the Research Ethics Board.

Your input in this study would be most valuable and greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your time.

Tracey Peter
Principal Investigator

* There is no caller ID and Voice Mail is protected by a security password.

**All correspondence is strictly confidential.

APPENDIX C
Recruitment Poster

HAVE YOU PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED MOTHER-DAUGHTER SEXUAL ABUSE?

All participants providing an interview will be paid \$25 for each interview. There will be up to 4 interviews that will be 1-2 hours in length

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umpeter@cc.umanitoba.ca

This research has been approved by the Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba.

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APPENDIX D

Consent Form



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Department of Sociology
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
Telephone (204) 474-9620
Facsimilie (204) 261-1216

Consent Form

Interview #1

Hearing 'Silent Voices': Examining Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse

Researcher:

Tracey Peter, Ph. D. Student, Department of Sociology

Supervisor:

This study is being supervised by Dr. Elizabeth Comack, Department of Sociology, University of Manitoba.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purposes:

Research on incest and other forms of child sexual abuse began to emerge in the 1970s and 80s. Attention to this issue was largely due to the success of the women's (feminist) movement in transforming male violence against women and children from a private trouble into a public issue. While great gains have been made in attending to the issue of men's violence, female-perpetrated sexual abuse of children has seldom been a subject of investigation. In recent years, however, growing recognition of women's capacity for violence has challenged traditional images of women as naturally passive and non-abusive. Nevertheless, it seems that, as a society, we are not ready to entirely accept that women – especially mothers – have the capacity to sexually abuse children. When this form of violence is recognized, it is usually accompanied by moral outrage, in large part because it breaches our notions of 'female behaviour' and 'mothering.' Mother-perpetrated sexual abuse occurs. For this reason, we cannot dismiss the possibility that mothers are active agents who do have the ability to abuse power. The purpose of this research project is to explore perceptions of mother-perpetrated sexual abuse and experiences of being mothered (good and bad) from the perspective of female survivors who have experienced such violence.

Your Participation:

The study that you are being asked to participate in will fulfill the requirements of a doctoral thesis in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba. Your involvement in this study involves participating in four in-person interviews to discuss your experiences of female-perpetrated sexual abuse as well as your perceptions of motherhood.

You will be paid \$25 at the start of each interview. Each interview will be one-to-two hours in length and will, with your consent, be audiotaped so that the dialogue can be transcribed by a professional typist to ensure that there is an accurate record of what we are talking about today. You are also invited to submit any written work (e.g. journaling, poetry, etc.) that you feel is relevant to your experiences of mother-daughter sexual abuse.

You will have the opportunity to review each interview in which you participated once transcription has taken place. You are encouraged to comment on the contents of the transcripts and your participation is greatly appreciated.

You can refuse to answer any questions that cause you discomfort and can terminate the interview at any time. Being involved in this research project is completely up to you. You can decide to drop out of the study at any time, as you are under no obligation to participate. There should be no risk involved by participating in this study. However, given the sensitive nature of the topic, we will start and end each session with a 'checking-in' exercise. Also, in case needed after or in-between interviews, you are encouraged to call the 24 hour Klinik crisis line at: 786-8686. It is important to note that participation in this study, and your decision to become involved in this project, will not affect any benefits or services you now receive as a client at any location where you may be receiving therapy or other treatment.

Confidentiality:

Confidentiality will be assured to all study participants. However, confidentiality cannot be maintained in the event of disclosure of matters related to abuse or violence against vulnerable persons such as children and/or elderly people. I am obligated, by law, to report such occurrences. Any identifying characteristics will be changed or omitted from any writing derived from this research and a master list of names and codes will be destroyed when the research is completed. The audio-taped interviews and transcribed verbatim will also be destroyed upon completion of this research. All electronic information (transcribed interviews, contact information, etc.) will be saved on a password protected personal (non-networked) computer within a locked facility. Any printed material (interview notes, write-ups, etc.) will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Distribution of the Findings:

A summary report of the study findings will be made available to you if you wish and will be mailed out to you once the study has been completed. The findings of this study will be used in my PhD thesis and possibly for subsequent publication.

Consent

Please read the following statements and circle either YES or NO to each.

I understand I am participating in a research study conducted by a researcher at the University of Manitoba.	Yes	No
I understand this research is being conducted for the purposes of a Ph.D. thesis in the Department of Sociology.	Yes	No
I have read, received, and understood this document explaining the research.	Yes	No
I understand I will be asked questions regarding my experiences of childhood sexual abuse and my experiences of being mothered.	Yes	No
I understand the interview will take one hour to two hours to complete.	Yes	No
I consent to having the interview audiotaped.	Yes	No
I understand that a professional typist will be transcribing the interviews, but that no identifying information will be given to them.	Yes	No
I understand that I should try not to refer to people in the interview by name in order to ensure confidentiality.	Yes	No
I understand I am under no obligation to participate in this project, and can freely choose to end the interview at any time without any negative consequences.	Yes	No
I understand my responses to the interview questions will be stored in a computer file that will be password protected in a locked facility.	Yes	No
I understand this study is confidential, meaning only the researcher will have access to the computer file or any paper copies.	Yes	No
I understand that any documents or materials (including journalling and poetry) given will be stored in a locked facility and only viewed by the researcher.	Yes	No
I understand this research may be published in an academic or other scholarly journals or manuscripts.	Yes	No
I understand that my confidential participation also means my name will never appear on any publication of this research, nor will anyone other than the researcher be able to connect my name with the responses I give.	Yes	No
I have had an opportunity to ask any questions, state my comments, or raise any concerns that I might have.	Yes	No
I understand that I will be paid \$25 for this interview	Yes	No

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Questions or concerns regarding this process may be reported to the principle investigator, Tracey Peter, at 474-8192 (e-mail: _____), or the project advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Comack, at 474-9673 (e-mail: _____), or Dr. Stephen Brickey, the head of the Sociology Department at the University of Manitoba at 474-9260 (_____).

This research has been approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at (204) 474-7122 or e-mail _____ .ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

I agree to participate in this research study

Signature of Participant

Date (day/month/year)

Printed Name of Participant

If you would like to be mailed a copy of the research findings, please fill in your mailing address or your e-mail address in the space provided below

Address of Participant (Optional)

I have explained the research study and this form to the participant, and I am confident that she understands its contents and freely agrees to participate

Signature of Interviewer

Date (day/month/year)