

**Constituting the Violence of Criminalized Women:
Not Bad, Mad or Victim will Suffice**

By

Salena Brickey

A Thesis
Submitted to the Department of Sociology
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Sociology
University of Manitoba
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Abstract

Criminalized women who engage in violence have been variously constituted in academic and popular discourses as ‘bad,’ ‘mad’ and/or ‘victims.’ Drawing on 17 in-depth interviews with criminalized women, the present study critically examines these competing explanations in terms of (i) the extent to which they are relevant to understanding women’s use of violence; and (ii) the extent to which women identify with ‘bad,’ ‘mad’ and ‘victim’ categories in making sense of their violent behaviours. The argument advanced throughout is that each of the dominant discourses, to varying degrees, fails to capture the complexity of women’s experiences. More so than the ‘bad’ and ‘mad’ discourses, the feminist ‘victim’ did resonate with the women’s accounts. Each of the women interviewed for the present study discussed being victimized in childhood and/or as an adult. As well, the women’s narratives illustrated the complex, plural ways in which women’s experiences of violence and abuse connect to their own use of violence. Nevertheless, this study highlights that a range of contextual factors, including but not limited to conditions of patriarchy, are key to explaining why women choose to respond to particular situations with violence. Regarding the extent to which criminalized women identify with ‘victim,’ ‘bad’ and ‘mad’ categories, the women interviewed for the present study deployed multiple and often contradictory categories in making sense of their experiences. Some of the women identified themselves unambiguously as victims, while others represented themselves as both victims and perpetrators of violence, and/or as both victims and angry women. Moreover, some women purposefully adopted the ‘bad’ label, but they did so only in particular contexts and at the same time as identifying with other, contrary labels. These findings suggest that none of the discourses alone – not

'victim,' 'bad' or 'mad' – will suffice. As such, moving discussions of women's violence forward involves recognizing that women perpetrate violence in diverse and complex contexts, and that women draw on multiple discursive constructions in articulating how they understand their violent behaviour.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Female prisoners are not peace activists or nuns who were kidnapped off of the street and stuck in jail. They are miscreants, intemperate, willful and rough. (Pearson, 1997a: 210)

Feminism may be satisfied with double standards and excuses, but in the real world, women are no angels. (Laframboise, 1996: 124)

The Violent Woman has been variously constituted in academic and popular discourse. In traditional criminological writings and the majority of current mainstream portrayals, women who use violence are depicted as either 'mad' or 'bad.' The 'mad' woman construction locates women's violence in psychological terms. Psychological professionals, especially those working within the context of the criminal justice system, play a key role in shaping how women's violence is named and understood. Drawing on the perspectives and terminology advanced in their discipline, these 'experts' routinely attribute women's violent behaviours to some manner of psychological dysfunction or personality disorder. In these terms, the Violent Woman is categorized as not just abnormal, but as 'mad' or insane. The second construction has a history that dates back to Lombroso and Ferrero's (1895) classic criminological text: *The Female Offender*. For early writers like Lombroso, the Violent Woman was inherently 'bad.' Her use of violence marked her as different than other women, and was explained in terms of her aberrant physiological nature. While discourses like Lombroso's are clearly outdated, their categorization of women who use violence as 'bad' persists in recent accounts. The selections above come from journalists Patricia Pearson and Donna Laframboise, and represent the types of claims being made about women's violence in mainstream

discourse. Much like traditional criminological accounts, these writers present women who use violence as 'bad,' evil and unlike women in general.

From a feminist perspective, these claims can be understood as part of a 'backlash'¹ or resistance to feminist research and theorizing, which, since the 1970s, have called attention to the pervasiveness of male violence against women and its roots in the patriarchal nature of society (Brownmiller, 1975; Comack, 1993a; Macleod, 1980; Ursel, 1991). Writers like Pearson charge feminists with focussing too much on women's experiences of victimization at the hands of men and not enough on women's culpability as perpetrators of violence. Indeed, when the Violent Woman does come into view within feminist work, the focus remains largely upon how the structural context of patriarchy accounts for her violent behaviour. Patriarchal relations and restrictive gender roles, feminists argue, have not only led to massive amounts of violence against women, but have resulted in some women turning on their abusers and using violence themselves. The Violent Woman constituted by feminist discourse thereby emerges as the 'victimized' woman. Her violence is not of her own making, but is a response to her experiences of violence and abuse under conditions of patriarchy.

At present, then, there are three competing constructions of the Violent Woman arising out of academic and popular discourse: 'mad,' 'bad' and 'victim.' Based on 17 in-

¹ Susan Faludi (1991: xviii-xix) describes a 'backlash' to the women's movement as a "powerful counter-assault on women's rights, ... an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women." These backlashes, Faludi notes, are "triggered by the perception – accurate or not – that women are making great strides." In this context, mainstream discourse around women's violence may be understood as a backlash to feminists' emphasis on and success in drawing attention to women's victimization.

depth interviews with criminalized² women, the present study explores the extent to which these three discourses resonate with women's accounts of their own violence. To date, there have been few research studies that focus exclusively on women's violence, and an even smaller number which are informed by criminalized women's perspectives and understandings. As a result of this lack of attention to the issue, there is a call in the literature for "detailed studies which examine in greater depth and in terms of their own experiences the contexts and lives of women convicted of violence" (Shaw, 1995: 125). In the present study, women's narratives on their lived experiences and their ways of making sense of those experiences are the starting point for theorizing about women's use of violence. How and where is violence situated in women's accounts of their lives? How do criminalized women constitute themselves? In the process, what discourses do they draw from (and resist)? Are the women victims? Bad? Mad? Prior to outlining the organization of the thesis chapters, I will explore why feminists have yet to adequately attend to the Violent Woman. Why have feminists been so reluctant to address women's violence? Following this, what are the consequences of this neglect?

Feminism and the Issue of Women's Violence

One of the expressed goals of feminist criminologists has been to make women visible within criminological thought. To this end, feminists have worked to both name and document male violence against women, with the purpose of "uncovering women's realities of victimization, giving victims voices, giving the behaviors names, and

² The concept criminalized is used by feminists and other critical analysts to reflect that decisions to charge and/or convict persons of crimes are made by the state and other penal agents (Daly, 1998; Laberge, 1991). All of the women who participated in the present study had been criminalized, meaning they had been charged with or convicted of a criminal offence.

uncovering their prevalence and toleration in patriarchal histories, laws and discourses” (Klein, 1997: 82). The significance of these efforts by feminists both within and outside of the academy cannot be understated. Information on the nature and extent of women’s victimization has transformed domestic violence from a private trouble to a public issue, and provided the impetus for the establishment and development of women’s shelters and rape crisis centres throughout North America (Smith, 1995). While the practical import of these efforts on women’s lived realities is widely lauded, feminists have also been critiqued for their narrow focus on women’s victimization and the seeming lack of interest in women’s criminality, particularly women’s violence. These critiques have been put forth by both feminists (Kelly, 1991; Burbank, 1994) and non-feminists (Fekete, 1994; Pearson, 1997a) alike.

There is no one explanation for why feminists have yet to systematically focus on women outside of their ‘victim’ status. A simple answer, one similar to that employed by mainstream criminologists to explain their general lack of concern with women’s crime, is that the small number of women charged with a violent offence does not necessitate them being studied in any detailed way.³ Margaret Shaw and Sheryl Dubois (1995:2) argue otherwise, stating that to “deny or avoid consideration of women’s use of violence does them a great disservice.” In other words, even though women are less likely to be charged than men, there are some women who use violence and these women deserve to be considered. Related to this is the notion that violence is something that males do: men are the abusers and women are the victims. This generalization is also problematic. For one, as Sally Simpson (1992: 129) explains, the “simplistic notion that males are violent

³ In 2000, for example, women accounted for only 15 percent of all adults charged with a violent offence (Statistics Canada, 2002a).

and women are not contains a grain of truth, but it misses the complexity and texture of women's lives." Also, this simplistic binary of abuser (male) and victim (female) ignores the context of lesbian relationships and other forms of woman-to-woman abuse (Ristock, 2002). Thus, simply asserting that men are more violent than women or that women are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence does not justify the lack of feminist attention to women's violence.

Perhaps a more substantive explanation is that feminists are apprehensive about bringing negative attention to women who are violent (Kelly, 1996; Renzetti, 1999a). There are two facets to this argument. First, if feminists begin to focus on women's violence, it is possible that the struggles to make male violence against women public and to increase resources for female victims will be compromised. As Janice Ristock (2002: ix) makes clear, "Secrets are sometimes kept for strategic reasons within liberatory movements such as feminism that are trying to eradicate the globally pervasive phenomenon of male violence against women." What this passage highlights is that there is a potential political danger in producing knowledge about women's violence, as it may be used to downplay the significance of male violence against women and to discount women's stories of victimization. Second, some feminists caution that feminist accounts of women's violence may be misused to reinforce negative stereotypes about women's nature (Dell, 1999). That is, there is a chance that information about women's violence may be misrepresented to depict women as 'bad' and/or 'mad.' Within lesbian communities, for example, there is intense debate about acknowledging the issue of violence in lesbian relationships, as doing so might contribute to negative stereotypes about lesbian women (Ristock, 1997). Apprehension around the possible negative effects

of producing knowledge about women's violence, such as decreasing concern for male violence and bringing negative attention to women, is warranted. What is also worth noting, however, is that there are grave consequences for not producing such knowledge.

Liz Kelly (1991: 13) advises that "avoiding the issue of women's use of violence represents as much of a threat as we [feminists] previously felt talking about it did." The main threat or consequence is that other accounts and explanations of women's violence have been able to predominate, and feminists have been unable or ill-equipped to offer a response. The media, for example, focus on the most serious cases of women's violence and present an exaggerated and distorted picture of what the violence looks like. Ellen Rosenblatt and Cyril Greenland (1974: 174) highlight that:

Popularized "true" accounts of female criminals and crimes ... have generally proved to be commercially successful. Unfortunately, their focus on the most heinous and terrifying of these has had the effect of mythologizing female crime, particularly those involving violence. An exotic flavour frequently pervades these stories without providing much understanding for the majority of crimes committed by women.⁴

Similarly, Karlene Faith (1993a: 187), in a discussion of the image of female offenders in the media, comments that filmmakers "grossly exaggerate the level of violence that women commit and, in the process, reinforce myths of increasing violence by women – women who are categorically portrayed as the antithesis of the feminine woman" (see also King & McCaughey, 2001). What is problematic is that these media depictions are not representative of the majority of women's violence, and they portray the Violent Woman as unlike women in general, as 'Other.'

One of the most favoured sources of knowledge on women's violence is the

⁴ As examples, think of Glenn Close's infamous character in the 1987 film, *Fatal Attraction*, and Juliet Lewis' portrayal of Mallory in the 1994 hit, *Natural Born Killers*.

journalist introduced above – Patricia Pearson. In 1997, Pearson published a book entitled *When She was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence*. She has also produced numerous magazine articles with the intent of exposing what she sees as the loathsome nature and hidden extent of women’s use of violence. Pearson (1997a: 24) claims that

Feminist criminologists have tried to bring them [violent women] back into the fold by recasting them as victims, arguing their violence away. But the truth is, although few of us will ever encounter women who are blatantly evil, strategies of aggression and violence are culled from a shared cultural repertoire ... The violent woman differs from other women in character and propensity but not in modus operandi. Instead of insisting on her innocence, we might insist on the capacity of *all* women to bring their *force* or *will* to bear upon the world. (emphasis added)

As this passage suggests, the purpose of Pearson’s work is to dispel the myth that men are intentioned offenders and women are innocent victims. In so doing, she explicitly disparages feminist dialogue which presents women as passive victims and aims to counter feminist work by describing women’s capacity for and use of violence.

In 1995, Pearson authored a piece entitled “Behind Every Successful Psychopath,” which details Karla Homolka’s involvement in the murders of three young women, one of whom was her sister. In telling the story, Homolka’s culpability is emphasized. Pearson (1995: 53) describes Karla in videotapes shown to the court as “assertive, vivacious, demanding of the camera’s attention, her make-up bright, her body bruiseless,” and as “a comfortable, high-spirited woman ordering her boyfriend around as he taped.” In a like minded piece, “Women Behaving Badly,” Pearson (1997b) claims that women are statistically as likely as men to initiate acts of violence. To support this contention, she relies on controversial Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) research⁵ and presents anecdotal stories of men abused by women. Pearson also cites a study by Claire

⁵ See chapter 2 for a discussion of CTS research.

Renzetti, in which Renzetti (1992: 115) states that “violence in lesbian relationships occurs at about the same frequency as violence in heterosexual relationships,” to support her argument that women are as violent as men.⁶ As evidenced by this sampling of Pearson’s work, her perspective is that women’s violence is as frequent and malicious as men’s violence, and that feminists (as well as women in general) have attempted to hide this violence from public view.

Accounts presented in the media and by writers like Patricia Pearson epitomize the dominant discourse on women’s violence. They are indicative of what we, as a society, are being told about women’s propensity for violence, about the ‘nasty’ nature of that violence, and about the character of the women involved. Nancy Berns (2001) situates these perspectives within what she terms a ‘patriarchal resistance discourse’; a discourse representing a political countermovement – or backlash – to feminist constructions of domestic violence. Berns contends that there have been two main discursive strategies employed in this resistance discourse: degendering the problem and gendering the blame.

First, while feminists emphasize the role of gender and power in explaining the nature and extent of violence against women, the resistance discourse reframes the problem as ‘human violence.’ A typical example of this strategy of degendering the problem is as follows: “Domestic violence is neither a male or a female issue – it’s simply a human issue” (Brott as cited in Berns, 2001: 266). Much of Pearson’s (1995, 1997a, 1997b) writing is also representative of this type of resistance discourse. As Berns

⁶ Note that, in more recent writings, Renzetti (1999b) clarifies that her 1992 study was not a study of prevalence rates and, as such, should not be used to support the claim that abuse in lesbian relationships occurs as frequently as it does in heterosexual relationships.

(2001: 267) suggests, “arguing that men and women are equally violent is the most significant and frequent strategy used for degendering the problem.”

The second discursive strategy employed is to gender the blame (Berns, 2001). Two of the tactics involved in this strategy are declaring that ‘women are violent too’ and critiquing the social tolerance for women’s violence. While it is important (and valid) to recognize and attempt to understand women’s violence, what many feminists take issue with is the manner in which this generally occurs. According to Berns, within resistance discourse, much of the focus is on female abusers and, although some authors acknowledge that men are violent, men’s abuse of women is rarely discussed. In gendering the blame, these writers often cite studies of violence and abuse in lesbian relationships to claim that ‘women are as violent as men.’ What is more, isolated, unrepresentative acts of female violence are typically held up as the norm. Other tactics employed in this type of resistance discourse include holding female victims responsible for their own victimization and blaming feminist advocates for promoting a ‘male-bashing’ campaign. So, the patriarchal-resistance discourse frames domestic violence as a human issue but when it comes to explaining violence and abuse, the focus is on the culpability of women. In brief, violence is degendered and blame is gendered. These discourses are troubling, not because they maintain that women are violent, but because this discussion is taking place in the context of a political countermovement to feminist constructions of domestic violence. What is needed, then, is a discussion of women’s violence that is not embedded in or part of a backlash to feminist work.

At present, it would seem we are at an impasse. On the one hand, feminist academics and advocates have been active in producing knowledge about and increasing

awareness of women's victimization. On the other hand, mainstream writers and the media, in part to counter this feminist work, have portrayed women as being as violent as men and propagated stereotypical depictions of the Violent Woman as 'bad' and/or 'mad.' In this polemical discussion, women are defined either as helpless victims or cast as evil and/or insane individuals who, behind a veil of secrecy, perpetrate violence.

Because feminists, for the most part, have been unwilling to address the issue of women's violence, it is these popularized accounts and resulting stereotypes which predominate our current understanding of women's violence. "It is the voices of anti-feminists, such as Patricia Pearson," Claire Renzetti (1999a: 47) cautions, "that are shaping the public consciousness about – as well as many clinical and criminal justice responses to – women's use of violence." Throughout the last decade, a number of feminists have presented similar arguments: that it is time for feminists to undertake the work of understanding and explaining women's violence, as existing accounts are both inaccurate and dangerous. Liz Kelly (1996:36), for one, stresses that it is imperative that feminists develop "a thoughtful, collective reflection of what abuse by women means for us; how we locate it in our theoretical framework; [and] how we approach naming, defining and studying it." More recently, in explaining one of the central purposes of her book, *No More Secrets: Violence in Lesbian Relationships*, Janice Ristock (2002: 24) states:

My hope in writing this book is to witness the stories that women told me and to help create new discursive forms and spaces so that we can speak about relationship violence in ways that are less likely to be misused, defused, or ignored.

As these comments suggest, there is a pressing need for critical research, from a feminist perspective, on women's use of violence. This involves locating women's violence

within a structural context and, thus, challenging the dominant discourses around the Violent Woman. There also needs to be a shift away from focussing on the most exceptional, sensational cases of women who kill (such as Karla Homolka) to a consideration of the range of violent behaviours that women engage in. This will allow for an understanding that avoids depicting women who use violence in stereotypical ways, namely, as passive victims, evil miscreants or psychologically disordered.

To this end, the purpose of this thesis is to begin to address the gaps in the feminist criminological literature by producing an account of women's violence that challenges the predominant constructions of the Violent Woman as 'victim,' 'bad' and 'mad.' Specifically, the aims of this study are to explore: (i) the extent to which these constructions are relevant to understanding women's violence; and (ii) the extent to which women identify with these constructions in making sense of their violent behaviours.

Organization of the Thesis

To begin our discussion, chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the women's violence literature. Focussing on three main sources of information – official statistics, quantitative research and feminist criminological qualitative research – this literature review examines the substantive concerns raised in the women's violence literature to date. Following this review, the study's theoretical approach is elaborated upon. Because this research is concerned with both the extent to which feminist and mainstream discourses are relevant to explaining women's violence, and the extent to which criminalized women identify with these discourses, a combination of a materialist and

discursive approach is applied. Drawing on materialist and intersectionality theories, this study situates women's violent behaviours in the social and structural contexts in which they occur. In so doing, one can see how gender, race and class based inequalities intersect in and impact upon women's lives generally, and how they contribute to women's use of violence more specifically. Using postmodern perspectives on discourse and subjectivity, this study also aims to uncover the identities reflected and represented in women's narratives about violence, especially in terms of whether women who engage in violence see themselves as 'victim,' 'bad' or 'mad.'

Chapter 3 details the methodological approach of this study. To better understand women's use of violence, and in keeping with the tenets of the standpoint feminist epistemological approach, women who had encountered and used violence in their lives were asked to share their standpoints on their experiences. A total of 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2001. Sixteen of the women were either serving a sentence or being detained on remand at a provincial jail, and one woman was participating in a Women and Anger group sponsored by the Elizabeth Fry Society. The women's narratives on their experiences served as the starting point for developing a critical, feminist analysis of women's use of violence.

The analysis is divided into three chapters. Throughout, the goal is to showcase the limits of the categories of 'victim,' 'bad' and 'mad,' as each are fraught with tensions and contradictions. In chapter 4, I examine the extent to which the feminist 'victim' discourse resonates with the women's accounts of their lives. Consistent with the findings of previous feminist qualitative research studies, each of the women interviewed for this study discussed being victimized at some point in her life. While the feminist 'victim'

discourse is widely reflected in the women's narratives, an examination of the complexities of the women's stories reveals that feminists may have erred in employing victimization as an all encompassing explanation of women's violence. The aim of this chapter is to draw out the complex ways in which women's experiences of abuse are connected to their use of violence, and to highlight some of the problems with using the 'victim' label as a master status to make sense of the Violent Woman.

The mainstream discourse which casts violent women as 'bad,' as exemplified by traditional criminologists like Caesar Lombroso (1895) and contemporary writers like Patricia Pearson (1997a), is the subject of chapter 5. Here, the stories of women whose violence occurred in the context of the inner city (where race and class-based inequalities are particularly pronounced) illustrate the importance of attending to the structural contexts in which women's violence takes place. Rather than reflecting underlying abnormalities or signifying something inherently negative about their characters, these women's violent behaviours are significantly connected to the contexts in which they take place. Moreover, while some of the women identify with the 'bad' label, they do so only in specific contexts, and at the same time as identifying with other, contradictory labels.

Chapter 6 challenges the psychological discourse which presents the Violent Woman as 'mad.' Although a significant number of the women interviewed for the present study had been involved in psychological counselling – and had subsequently been labelled as suffering from some kind of psychological disorder – the psychological discourse holds limited resonance in their stories. Some of the women draw on psychological terms to describe their feelings in particular circumstances, but they do not

see their disturbed mental state as the cause of their violence. Indeed, these women identify themselves as more angry than 'mad.'

The final chapter concludes our discussion by reviewing the utility of each of three predominant constructions of the violent woman – 'victim,' 'bad' and 'mad.' By shifting the terrain on which discussions of women's violence take place, this study highlights that each of these constructions, while having some resonance in the lives of the women interviewed, fails to capture the complexity of their experiences. Given the diverse contexts in which women's use of violence occurs, and the fractured nature of the women's identities which emerge from these experiences, violence in the lives of criminalized women cannot be rendered plausible by simply imposing a master status template, like 'victim,' 'bad' or 'mad.' Implications of the present study and areas for future research are also included in the concluding remarks.

Chapter Two

Women's Violence: Substantive and Theoretical Concerns

Criminology has typically neglected women who come into conflict with the law, including those charged with a violent crime. In the 1970s, feminist criminologists began to critique this omission, arguing that the criminological canon – the knowledge deemed most important to understanding the major tenets of the discipline – is male-centred (Cain, 1990a, Comack, 1996a; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1998; Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1988; Klein, 1973; Naffine, 1997; Smart, 1977). Since that time, feminists have highlighted the sexist nature of mainstream criminological theorizing and produced empirical research to address some of the limitations of existing knowledge. Despite these efforts, many would argue that women, as producers and subjects of knowledge, remain at the periphery of the discipline (Comack, 1999a; Daly & Maher, 1998). This is not to say, however, that the Violent Woman has been completely neglected in criminological discourse. Early criminological writers, such as Caesar Lombroso (1895) and Otto Pollak (1951), theorized about the causes of women's criminality (see chapter five). And, beginning in the 1980s and especially since the mid 1990s, there has been an increase in the number of criminological studies which focus on and/or include women (and girls) as research participants.

In this chapter, the women's violence literature will be reviewed and organized according to four main substantive areas of concern.¹ First, what is the extent and nature

¹ There is growing body of literature on women who kill, particularly women who kill their male partners in self-defense (see, for example, Comack, 1993b; Noonan, 1993). This literature is not considered here because the present study focuses on women's violence in broader terms, meaning not on the rare instances where women are charged with murder.

of women's criminality? Specifically, what percentage of crime (and violent crime) do women account for, and for what types of offences are women most likely to be charged? Second, what generalizations can be made about women who come into conflict with the law? Third, is it accurate to say that women are 'men's equals' in violence? Last, and most importantly, what are the issues considered significant in understanding women's use of violence? Three main sources of information will be consulted in constructing answers to these questions: official statistics, quantitative research and feminist criminological qualitative research. Following this review, I will elaborate on the theoretical approach of the present study, which aims to address some of the current limitations of the women's violence literature.

The Extent and Nature of Women's Crime: Consulting the Official Statistics

Gender appears to be the single most crucial variable associated with criminality. Put more bluntly, most crime is committed by men; relatively little crime is committed by women. (Heidensohn, 1987: 22)

The most accessible sources of information on both the extent and nature of women's crimes are the official statistics. These sources include data provided by the police through the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR) and the Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR II).² The official statistics support the customary claim that crime is 'something that men do.' In 1962, women represented eight percent of those charged with a Criminal Code offence and, as of 2000, this figure increased to 17.4 percent (Statistics Canada, 2002a). These data indicate that women's involvement in

² The UCR provides aggregate data on the number of Criminal Code and other federal statute offences reported to the police, and the number of persons charged by the police (Statistics Canada, 1998). The UCR II provides more comprehensive (but less representative) information on criminal incidents (for example, the age and sex of the accused).

crime is on the rise but, even now, women account for less than one-fifth of those charged with an offence.³ The difference in the extent of crime perpetrated by men and women, often referred to the gender-ratio problem (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988), is one of the “most enduring truths in criminology” (Snider, 2003:357). Indeed, the only offences for which women are over-represented (compared to men) are sexuality-specific crimes (such as prostitution) and, more recently, welfare fraud (Shaver, 1993; Snider, 2003).

In terms of the nature of women’s crime, the majority of women charged with a Criminal Code offence are charged for non-violent offences. In 1991, for example, violent offences comprised 14 percent of women’s charges, whereas theft, fraud and other property offences accounted for upwards of 50 percent (Johnson & Rodgers, 1993). In comparison, 21 percent of men’s charges were for a violent offence, and 30 percent were associated with a property-related offence. More recent statistics demonstrate a similar pattern for women. In 2000, 116, 951 adults were charged with a violent crime in Canada; 17, 516 (or 15%) of those accused were women (Statistics Canada, 2002a). Holly Johnson and Karen Rodgers (1993: 98) explain that women’s participation in property offences (as opposed to violent ones) is “consistent with their traditional roles as consumers and, increasingly, as low-income, semi-skilled, sole-support providers for their families.” Thus, what the official statistics point to is that women constitute a small

³ In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, there was much discussion, in academia and in the media, about a ‘female crime wave’ and the emergence of a ‘new female criminal’ (Adler, 1975; Simon, 1975). The basis of these arguments was that as a result of the women’s liberation movement, women’s gender roles were changing, and their opportunities and motivations to engage in crime were consequently increasing. These claims have since been refuted because of the numerous logical errors made by the primary proponents and the lack of supporting empirical evidence (Gavigan, 1993; Naffine, 1987; Smart, 1979).

proportion of those charged with Criminal Code offences and that most of women's involvement in crime centers on property-related offences.

Given that the focus of the present study is women's violence, it is useful to look at women's involvement in violent crime more closely. In 1997, Statistics Canada provided data on the sex of the accused and the victim in all cases involving a violent offence (Statistics Canada, 1997 as cited in Marleau & Hamilton, 1999). According to these data, 48 percent of all violent crime is accounted for by male violence against women, 39 percent involves male-male violence, seven percent is female-female violence, and six percent is female violence against men. So, similar to crime in general, violent crime remains very much a male phenomenon, one that manifests most often in the form of male violence against women. When women are charged with a violent crime, it is commonly for a minor assault. In 1996, 64 percent of women's violence charges were for minor (or level one) assaults (Statistics Canada, 1996). Twenty-two percent of women's charges were for more serious (level II and level III) assaults, such as assault with a weapon and assault causing bodily harm. The remainder of women's charges were for other assaults (7%), robbery (4%), sexual assault (1%), abduction (.5%), attempted murder (.5%) and homicide (.4%). The statistical pattern for men was similar, except that men are much more likely to be charged with sexual assault (9% men vs. 1% women). These data are informative in that they highlight that the majority of women's violence is much more mundane than the renderings of mainstream discourse – represented by writers like Patricia Pearson (1997a) and the media – would have one believe.

To review, the official statistics reveal that: (i) women consistently commit a smaller number of crimes than men; (ii) the majority of women's crimes are for non-violent offences; and (iii) when women are charged with a violent offence, in the majority of instances, it is for a minor assault. While the official statistics are useful tools in understanding the extent and nature of women's involvement in crime, it should be noted that they are necessarily limited. To some degree, this is because the official statistics represent only those cases where a defined criminal act has been detected, and the accused apprehended and charged. Also, the official statistics on crime may reveal as much or more about law enforcement practices and priorities, legal precedents and community values than they do about the 'reality' of crime. Beyond these rudimentary limitations, using criminal categories to understand human behaviour is problematic (Comack, 1996b; Smart, 1989). Margaret Shaw and Sheryl Dubois (1995: 3) explain that the criminal classification of violent behaviour "structures and gives 'meaning' to events in a way which obscures the diversity of cause, intent, circumstance and history of the event." That is to say, the official statistics on offences provide official versions of individuals' actions but impart very little about the contexts in which these behaviours take place or the perspectives or understandings of those involved. For these reasons, it is useful to consult other sources of information, such as criminological research, on women's use of violence.

The 'Typical' Woman in Conflict with the Law

Within the criminological discipline, research on women who come into conflict with the law is relatively rare. Since the 1980s, however, there have been a number of quantitative

and qualitative studies which either include or focus specifically on criminalized women. These studies have provided a number of important insights, one of which is a consensus on the demographic characteristics of the 'typical' woman who comes into conflict with the law (Comack, 1996b; Easteal, 2001; Johnson & Rodgers, 1993; Patterson, 1995; Robertson, Bankier & Schwartz, 1987). As a group, criminalized women tend to be young (a majority are under the age of 25), single, economically marginalized and white. Regarding relationship status, the majority of women charged with a criminal offence are not in a married or common-law relationship; however, they often have children for whom they are the sole-supporters and caregivers. The poor socio-economic position of these women may be explained, in large part, by their lack of formal education, employment experience and/or job skills. For instance, in a study of the demographic profiles of women detained at a provincial remand centre, it was found that 55 percent of the women did not receive any education beyond junior high school and 90 percent were unemployed at the time of their arrest (Robertson, et al., 1987: 750-751). It is important to note that while the majority of those women charged in Canada are white, Aboriginal women are over-represented relative to their numbers in the general population. In 1996, for example, Aboriginal women represented 20 percent of women serving time in a federal institution, but made up just 2 percent of all women in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2000: 177).⁴ According to Carol LaPrairie (1993), it is violent crimes in particular for which Aboriginal women are disproportionately charged and convicted.

In addition to these demographic patterns, two other features emerge in the literature as being common amongst women who come into conflict with the law. First,

⁴ The corresponding figures for the Prairie Provinces are as follows: Aboriginal women represent less than 20 percent of the population and upwards of 80 percent of all incarcerated women (Dell, 2002: 128-129).

many criminalized women report abusing alcohol and other drugs (Blanchette, n.d.). Ida Dickie and Leanne Ward (n.d.), in a study of women convicted of assault and robbery, found that two-thirds of the women were intoxicated (from alcohol and/or other drugs) at the time of their arrest. The second, more significant, factor is the overwhelming percentage of criminalized women who report having been victimized as a child, an adult or both.⁵ In 1991, the Canadian Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women released a report which indicated that of the 191 women interviewed, 68 percent said that they had been physically abused and 53 percent sexually abused at some point in their lives (Shaw et al., 1991: vii & 31). The figures among Aboriginal women were substantially higher: 90 percent reported being physically abused and 61 percent sexually abused in childhood and/or as adults. Similarly, in a study of women incarcerated at the provincial level in Manitoba, Elizabeth Comack (1993a) found that 78 percent of the women admitted to the jail over a seven year period had been physically and/or sexually abused as children and/or as adults.

To summarize, women in conflict with the law tend to be economically and socially marginalized. They are often dealing with the responsibilities associated with caring for children. Most have a history of physical and/or sexual abuse.⁶ And, as the official statistics make clear, the majority of women's criminal charges are for property offences or minor assaults. Consequently, criminalized women are often referred to as "high needs / low risk" (Arbour Report, 1996).

⁵ At present, no comparable data exist for men.

⁶ In describing women who come into conflict with the law, it is important to recognize that these women are not Other: the lives of 'criminal' women and 'law abiding' women are similar in a number of respects. These include having troubles dealing with family and friends, and struggling with how to best support their children. As evidenced by the demographic picture outlined above, what differs for the majority of criminalized women is their social location in society (i.e., their class positioning and their race).

Are Women Men's Equals in Violence?

The majority of the quantitative research on the issue of women's violence has aimed to determine if there is a sexual symmetry in violence – if women are men's equals in violence. More specifically, it has employed the Conflict Tactics Scale to measure and compare women's and men's use of violence in domestic relationships. Recall that it is this research that is often referenced to support the claim that 'women are violent too' and, in some cases, that 'women are as violent as men.'

The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) was developed by Murray Straus (1979) with the intent of measuring how individuals (and families) manage interpersonal conflict in their day-to-day lives. This quantitative instrument is a 18-item survey which measures three different approaches to conflict (reasoning, verbal aggression and physical violence), as well as differing levels of severity within each of these three approaches. Items range from the least severe, reasoning responses (e.g., "discussed an issue calmly"), to more severe, verbal aggression responses (e.g., "threw something"), to the most severe, physically violent responses (e.g., "used a knife or gun"). Each respondent is asked how often he/she has used these tactics in conflicts with his/her partner and how frequently his/her partner has employed each tactic in the previous year. The responses are then used to estimate the rate and severity of violence used by male and female partners in the course of conflicts. Holly Johnson (1996: 57) indicates that studies using the CTS "consistently produce equivalent rates of wife battering and husband battering on both minor and severe types of violence." They also, according to Claire Renzetti (1999b), have been used to argue that violence and abuse occur with the same frequency in lesbian and gay relationships as they do in heterosexual ones. Indeed, it is these

research studies (see, for example, Kennedy & Dutton, 1989; Straus & Gelles, 1986) that have been the primary source of data used by Patricia Pearson and others in the patriarchal-resistance discourse.

The critiques of the CTS – of its construction and administration – are numerous. Daniel Saunders (1988) lists three chief shortcomings. The CTS does not examine: (i) the *motives* behind the actions being reported (i.e., if the violence was brought on by frustration or the desire to control); (ii) the *social context* in which the violence occurs (i.e., if the respondent was acting as an aggressor or in self-defence); or (iii) the *consequences* or outcomes of the violence (i.e., if the victim was injured and, if so, the seriousness of that injury).⁷ The CTS has also been critiqued for its failure to distinguish between the severity of different forms of violence (DeKeseredy & Maclean, 1998). For example, pushing a person down a flight of stairs and shoving someone out of the way who is blocking your escape are counted as equally violent acts in the scoring of the scale. In addition, it has been established that men are less likely to self-report using violence than women, and that women regularly discount the violent behaviour of men; therefore, studies using the CTS may underestimate the incidence and severity of men's violent behaviours (Johnson, 1996; Currie, 1998).⁸ At a broader level, the validity of the instrument has been questioned because it assumes that violence by men and women is

⁷ This limitation is especially problematic in light of a recent Statistics Canada report (2002b:23) which uses numerous indicators to demonstrate that men's violence against women generally has more serious consequences than women's violence against men. These indicators include that women victims are five times more likely than male victims to be hospitalized as a result of the violence, and three times more likely to be obliged to take time off of paid or unpaid work to deal with its effects.

⁸ Likewise, CTS studies that find rates of violence in lesbian relationships approximate those in heterosexual relationships also come into question, as women tend to self-report higher levels of violence than men do.

the same, which seemingly ignores gender differences in power, responsibilities and status (Dobash et al., 1992).

In response to these critiques and to challenge the sexual-symmetry thesis, Elizabeth Comack, Vanessa Chopyk and Linda Wood (2000; 2002) conducted a quantitative study of women's and men's violence using Police Incident Reports as the source of data. According to Comack et al. (2000), police reports offer a number of advantages as a basis for information on violent crime. These include: being collected close in time to the actual event; offering a complete and detailed account of the incident; providing information on what, if any, injuries were incurred; and being based on a variety of information sources (e.g., statements from complainants, accused and witnesses).

Comack et al.'s (2000; 2002) research generated four indicators that may be used to counter the claim that women are men's equals in violence. First, a list of 17 violence tactics was generated to capture the differing degrees of severity in the violence used in an incident (these ranged from "property damage/theft" to "shooting"). In incidents of partner abuse, there were obvious gender differences in the violence tactics employed. That men accused were nearly twice as likely as women to "push/pull/grab," and women accused were more likely to "pinch/bite/scratch/poke" is but one illustration. Comack et al. (2002: 244) posit that

the picture that emerges is one of men using their physical strength or force against their partners ... [and] women – lacking the physical strength or force of their male partners – resorting to the use of objects or weapons during the course of an event.

The second indicator is that female complainants were much less likely to use physical violence than male complainants (23% of women vs. 65% of men), which challenges the

common depiction of partner violence as 'mutual combat.' Third, it was found that women accused contacted the police in 35 percent of cases (only 5% of male accused did the same). If telephoning the police is indicative of the belief that one is in need of help, then this finding suggests that women accused are often not the primary aggressors. Finally, women accused were much more likely to be injured during the course of a violent incident than male accused (48% of women vs. 7% of men). These four indicators, in tandem, indicate that contrary to the findings of research using the CTS, there is *not* a sexual symmetry in violence.⁹ Clearly, the extent and nature of women's violence is qualitatively different than that of men's.

The greater part of quantitative research into women's violence has been aimed at either trying to establish or challenge the claim that women are men's equals in violence. These types of studies are valuable in that they provide empirical support for the argument one is advancing. Nevertheless, many feminists are reluctant to employ quantitative methods in their research. Some feminists argue that one cannot gain a complete understanding of women's experiences with numbers – that quantifying women's experiences offers an overly simplistic, superficial understanding of women's lives (Naffine, 1997). What is more, feminist work is inherently political, and given that positivism stresses the possibility and the virtue of objective and value-free research, many feminists are skeptical about employing this approach (Reinharz, 1992). It follows that the majority of feminist research in criminology uses qualitative research

⁹ Russell Dobash and Rebecca Dobash (2004) present a similar argument using quantitative and qualitative findings from interviews with 190 men and women about their own and their partner's use of violence. Dobash and Dobash (2004:324) conclude that "intimate partner violence is primarily an *asymmetrical problem* of men's violence to women, and women's violence does not equate to men's in terms of frequency, severity, consequences, and the victim's sense of safety and well-being" (emphasis added).

methodologies.

Feminist Qualitative Research: Constituting the ‘Woman in Trouble’

The qualitative research around women’s criminality, which comes mainly from the work of feminist criminologists, has been focussed on understanding why women engage in crime or use violence. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, much of this research situates or locates women’s crime within the context of their experiences of victimization. As a result, feminists have come under heavy criticism – especially by writers like Patricia Pearson and Donna Laframboise – for downplaying women’s use of violence and for presenting all women who use violence as passive victims of abuse. While a comprehensive review of this research is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is useful to review the issues feminist criminologists have deemed significant in understanding women’s use of violence.

At the preliminary stages, feminist qualitative research into women’s criminality sought to learn about the histories and biographies of the women involved. Given that criminological theorizing and research, prior to the introduction of feminist studies, concentrated on understanding the criminal behaviours of men, very little basic information was available to practitioners, policy-makers and academics about the lives of criminalized women. To this end, beginning in the 1980s, feminists interviewed women in conflict with the law about their personal backgrounds and about how they understood their criminal violations in the context of their life histories (see, for example, Adelberg & Currie, 1993; Carlen et al., 1985; Carlen, 1988; Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez,

1983; Gilfus, 1992).¹⁰ Out of this research, the thematic story that emerges is one of women leaving home, by choice or by force, in their youth (often to escape abuse by family members) and eventually living on the streets and struggling to make ends meet. Based on interviews with 16 criminalized women Meda Chesney-Lind and Noelle Rodriguez (1983), theorize that because of women's experiences of victimization, their process of criminalization is unique. In summarizing the women's stories, Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez (1983: 63) conclude:

The picture that emerges is one of young girls faced with violence and/or sexual abuse at home who became criminalized by their efforts to save themselves (by running away) from the abuse ... In the sex segregated world of crime, most began as prostitutes and then graduated to minor property offenses. For many, the transition to crime was made easier by dependence on drugs, which, in turn, then escalated their involvement in illegal activities.

For these women, experiences associated with gender (i.e., abuse) and class (i.e., living on the streets) were overriding ones in accounting for their criminal behaviours.

A similar argument is advanced by Pat Carlen (1988) in her book *Women, Crime and Poverty*. Carlen identified two key characteristics to explain women's involvement in crime: living in residential care (because of the need to escape an abusive/neglectful home) and class (poverty). Using data obtained from 39 interviews with women charged with a myriad of offences, Carlen concluded that criminalized women are doing as well as they can within conditions that are not of their own choosing. She states, "Women on the margins saw crime as the best method of both solving their financial problems and getting some control over their lives" (Carlen, 1988: 22-23). Committing property offences (such as theft, fraud or break-and-enter), as well as violent ones (such as uttering

¹⁰ Note that none of these research studies focussed exclusively on women who use violence, however, many of the women interviewed had been charged with an assortment of property and violence-related offences.

threats or assault) were, to the women interviewed, merely survival strategies used at home, in care and on the street. Mary Gilfus' (1992) research also reinforces the notion that women's criminality must be understood in the context of their life histories.

According to Gilfus (1992: 85):

The nature of the violence to which some women have been exposed serves as a strong force in the 'criminalization' of women, that is, the survival strategies selected by (or which are the only options available to) women are the beginning of a process of transition from victim to offender.

The experiences that materialized as important in these early studies, then, were women's histories of abuse, their subsequent struggles to live independently with few resources and the use of illegal means to survive.

In commenting on these feminist qualitative studies, Kathleen Daly (1998) rightly observes that a leading scenario of women's lawbreaking is presented. She terms this the 'street woman' scenario. In each of the studies outlined above, the focus is on women's running away from or leaving home because of abuse, and being pressed into illegal means (be it working in the sex trade, selling drugs or committing property and violent offences) to survive life on the streets. According to Daly, while the leading feminist scenario marks an advance over previous research (which did not consider the gendered contexts in which women's criminal behaviours occur) it is overly simplistic. Using interviews with 40 women who had been convicted of a criminal offence in New Haven, Daly developed a more multidimensional account of how and why women get caught up in crime. In addition to the street woman scenario, she identified four other typical pathways that bring women into conflict with the law: battered women, harmed and harming women, drug-connected women and other women.

'Battered women' are women who "would not have appeared before the court had they not been in relationships with violent men"; their crimes consist of resisting or fighting back against male abusers (Daly, 1998: 143). 'Harmed and harming women,' like battered women, have experienced violence and abuse (harm) by family members and/or intimate partners. The difference, for this group, is that these behaviours are reproduced in their behaviour toward others (harming). Some of these women became violent when they were drinking (often to cope with their experiences of abuse), while others perpetrated violent offences (like robbery) to support their addictions. 'Drug connected' women were women who used and/or sold drugs as a result of relations with intimate partners or family members. Unlike street women, these women did not live on the streets nor were they addicted to drugs. The final, 'other,' category was used for women whose offences had economic motives unrelated to drug addiction or street life.¹¹

In her concluding remarks, Daly (1998: 148) states:

The street woman scenario can be misleading in overemphasizing the effects of criminalizing drugs or poverty. Having suffered abuse as children or adolescents, girls or young women not only run away from home to survive life on the streets, they may also be emotionally crippled. ... At issue for the group of harmed and harming women is not just that their survival or poverty is criminalized but that their anger or violence is criminalized.

While Daly's approach is somewhat limited in that she places women into predefined 'boxes' (and those who did not fit into an 'other' category), her work highlights the importance of examining the different ways in which women's experiences of abuse contribute to their criminal and violent behaviours.

¹¹ In terms of the frequency of each of these pathways, the harmed and harming pathway was most prominent (15 of the women), followed by the street woman scenario (10), the drug-connected pathway (six), the battered women scenario (five) and the other category (four).

In her book, *Women in Trouble*, Elizabeth Comack (1996b) also develops a more detailed account of how women's experiences of victimization are connected to their coming into conflict with the law. Comack maintains that abuse is a gendered feature of women's lives; gender-based violence reflects and reinforces women's inequality in society. Using interviews with 24 women, Comack (1996b) illustrates how women's law violations can be understood as part of their coping with, resisting and surviving their abuse experiences. In coping with abuse and the effects it has on their lives, women may do things that constitute committing a criminal offence. For instance, one of the women featured in the book describes contending with the abuse she experienced by committing fraud. Other conflicts with the law may arise from women resisting abuse; for example, if a woman physically retaliates against her abuser and then is charged with a criminal offence. Finally, in surviving abuse, law violations can be understood as part of the lifelong process in which women struggle to live with and through the conditions of their endangerment. Throughout the analysis, the argument being advanced is that in explaining women's crime, one needs to pay attention to women's structural locations in the wider society (their age, class and race), and to their corresponding effects on the choices and resources available to women for coping with, resisting and surviving the abuse histories.

Laureen Snider (2003: 364) asserts that the "female inmate constituted by the intersection of power and knowledge in feminist criminology has been, on the whole, the Woman in Trouble." To be sure, even the most recent publications on the topic of women's violence emphasize the influence of women's abuse experiences on their behaviour (see, for example, Eastal, 2001; Marleau & Hamilton, 1999; Maeve, 2000).

The importance of these and earlier research studies should not be minimized. Feminists have worked tirelessly to draw attention to the pervasiveness and devastating effects of male violence against women, and to the culpability patriarchy and capitalism in intensifying women's troubles. Furthermore, this work has been inspired by the goal to educate the public and criminal justice officials about women's needs and, on a more practical level, to improve the treatment of women who are incarcerated. As was argued earlier, though, feminists have not done enough in the way of violence-specific research and, when they have, there has been too much focus on the effects of victimization and not enough investigation into other important factors. As Margaret Shaw (1995: 115) makes clear:

Much of the current discourse about the position of women in conflict with the law centres around their low social and economic status in society, the extent of social controls over their behaviour, and, particularly in Canada, their position as victims of violence. This status has tended to replace one social label with another – the unfit mother or the fallen woman ... becomes the helpless victim with low self-esteem.

Recall that the traditional criminological accounts of violent women and those currently permeating popular discourse describe them as 'bad' or as 'mad.' Rather than offer a real challenge to these depictions, feminist work seems to have merely replaced them with a new label, namely, that of 'victim.' This is problematic not only because our knowledge and understanding of women's violence is oversimplified and incomplete, but because it denies women individual agency (Faith, 1993b; Shaw & Dubois, 1995). It would seem, then, that future feminist research needs to take up these stereotypes, both so that feminism can respond to the current claims being made about women who use violence in mainstream discourse and to move the feminist understanding of the issue forward.

Theoretical Concerns: The Material and the Discursive

The purpose of the present study is to begin to address the gaps in the feminist criminological literature by producing an account of women's violence that challenges the dominant constructions of the Violent Woman as 'victim,' 'bad,' and 'mad.' There are two general research questions guiding this research: (i) to what extent are the predominant constructions of the Violent Woman relevant to understanding women's use of violence?; and (ii) to what extent do women identify with these discourses in making sense of their violent behaviours? Addressing the first of these questions involves locating women's violent behaviours in the social and structural contexts in which they occur. Materialist feminist and intersectionality theories are useful in this regard, as both underscore the determining influence of social structures, like patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism, in women's lives. Focussing on the societal structures which condition women's lives allows one to get at how gender, class and race-based inequalities intersect in and impact upon women's lives generally, and contribute to their use of violence more specifically. The second research question shifts the focus from context and structure to a consideration of discourse and identity. Here, postmodern perspectives – like that utilized by Joanna Phoenix (2000) in her work – come into play. Postmodern writers point to the importance of attending to the discursive terrain, how language shapes and limits the ways in which we experience and construct ourselves (Ristock, 2002). In the remaining sections of this chapter, these materialist and discursive approaches will be elaborated upon, focussing on how they contribute to this research.

Materialist Feminism and Intersectionality Theory

The project of materialist feminism, much like other feminist perspectives, is to “construct knowledge on the nature and causes of [women’s] oppression, with a view to changing that situation” (Kuhn & Wolpe, 1997: 85). The materialist (or socialist) feminist perspective emerged in response to the limitations of Marxist and radical feminist theories in accounting for the complexity or totality of women’s subordination (Jaggar, 1983). The limitation of Marx’s theory, in brief, is that it focuses on capitalist class domination and minimizes other forms of oppression. For Marx, the mode of production and class inequalities are of paramount importance, while the mode of reproduction and structurally-based gender inequalities are not given serious theoretical attention. In Heidi Hartmann’s (1984: 174) terms, Marx’s theory and the constructs employed are “sex blind.” Consistent with the reduction of society to class relations, Marxists predict that the abolition of capitalism will bring about the emancipation of all of society’s members, including women. The problem with this conception of women’s liberation, of course, is that it ignores the other structural relations which constrain women’s lives.

What materialist feminism borrows from radical feminism is its attention to patriarchy, or to the gendered power relations which oppress and constrain women.¹² This focus on patriarchy has been combined with Marx’s historical materialist analysis of class inequality to produce a more complete understanding and explanation of women’s oppression – or to place patriarchy in the historical context of capitalism (see Ursel,

¹² Materialist feminists challenge the radical feminist focus on patriarchy as the primary determinant of women’s oppression on two main grounds (Hamilton, 1996). First, there is an overemphasis on biology; specifically, that women’s biology (as reproducers) determines their social position (as an oppressed group). Second, radical feminism is ahistorical; that is, it sees patriarchy as stable and universal and fails to examine how gender relations vary across time.

1992). One of the first feminists to undertake this synthesis was Zillah Eisenstein (1977).

The perspective advanced by Eisenstein (1977:5) is that

socialist feminists are committed to understanding the system of power deriving from capitalist patriarchy [where capitalist patriarchy is used to] emphasize the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring.

In her work, Eisenstein defines patriarchy as the “institutionalization of sexual hierarchy” or the “sexual ordering of society which derives from ideological and political interpretations of biological difference” (1977: 24-25). Unlike previous articulations of materialist feminism which highlighted the importance of either class (production) or gender (reproduction),¹³ Eisenstein employs a dual systems approach, whereby there is a dual base in society of capitalism (class) and patriarchy (gender). These two systems are conceptualized as being mutually dependent: each system adjusts and responds to the needs of the other, and no one system is regarded as primary or as determining the other. As Comack (1996b: 29) notes, materialist feminism draws attention to how “class and gender relations operate to produce structured inequalities in both the public [productive] and private [reproductive] spheres.” Accordingly, in applying this theory, one must consider both the exploitation of women in capitalist society (as wage labourers), and the oppression of women in patriarchal society (as mothers, domestic labourers and consumers).

While this theoretical perspective provides the analytical tools necessary to situate women’s lives within the wider societal context, it is not without its limitations. One critique of materialist feminism is that in articulating the determining and constraining nature of social structures, it offers an overly structuralist and static account of social life

¹³ See, for example, Juliet Mitchell (1966) and Gayle Rubin (1975) respectively.

(Comack, 1996b). Moreover, the arguments presented often imply that women have no agency to change the circumstances that constrain them. These arguments highlight that some materialist feminist analyses focus too much on the reified entities of capitalism and patriarchy, and not enough on the actions of individuals within these wider societal contexts. Sandra Morgan (1990: 283-284) argues that individual action or human agency may be brought into materialist feminism by focussing on the “active struggle of human actors to modify, change, and transform oppressive social relations, [and] on the complex process by which ideologies, history and material circumstances are interpreted and actively negotiated by women.” In the present study, women’s actions and behaviours are located in a structural context, but the focus of the analysis is on how women uniquely experience and respond to the conditions of their lives.

The second general criticism of materialist feminism is that in speaking about the inequality that women, ‘as a group,’ experience, it downplays or ignores differences amongst women. Because of this, there has been a critical challenge to materialist feminism from the women whom this theory claims to represent. These critiques originated in the United States in the 1980s, as Black women actively opposed feminist accounts which did not speak to the particular ways in which minority women are oppressed. Following these initial critiques, other groups of women – including Aboriginal, francophone, Third World and lesbian women – also articulated their marginalization within mainstream feminist approaches (Johnson, 2002).

Rather than disregard the feminist focus on gender and class altogether, writers like Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1994) argue for an intersectoral approach. Crenshaw, who is generally credited with developing intersectionality theory, speaks of ‘structural

intersectionality,' which is an analysis of how a multitude of structures (i.e., not 'just' patriarchy and capitalism) contour women's lives. Rebecca Johnson (2002: 7) explains the parameters and the importance of the intersectoral approach this way:

Intersectionality theory [focuses] on the very specific ways that gender intersects with a number of other dimensions in the lives of women. This has often meant focusing on the lives of women who had been at the margins of mainstream theorizing. ... The increased attention to the concrete experiences of women who have been caught between multiple systems of oppression has generated some important insights. One is the importance of focusing not only on the specific kinds of victimization that occur at these intersections, but also focusing on the unique strategies of resistance that emerge there.

Key to this approach is that systems of oppression are not separate and, therefore, not additive (Brewar, 1997; Collins, 1993; Grillo, 1995; Razack, 1996). The effects of oppression, these writers stress, are experienced simultaneously. Black, poor, heterosexual women, for example, are multiply oppressed, as the effects of race \times class \times gender relations intersect in their lives. Intersectionality theory offers a way in which to broaden the materialist focus on class and gender, and is particularly relevant to this research because over two-thirds of the women interviewed were Aboriginal. In the present study, then, the materialist feminist approach is used to analyze how a complex of structural factors intersect in women's lives and contribute their use of violence.

Postmodern Perspectives: Discursive Constructions and Multiple Identities

In addition to attending to the structural contexts in which women's violence takes place, this research is also concerned with how women make sense of their violent behaviours. Specifically, this involves paying attention to how women constitute themselves and, in the process, what discourses they draw from and resist. This shift in focus is accompanied by a move from materialist considerations to postmodern ones. While materialist and

postmodern approaches are seemingly incompatible theoretical perspectives,¹⁴ each offers insights in terms of how to make sense of women's violence and to approach the questions of interest in this research. In the present study, then, these contrary perspectives offer two different lenses through which to understand the violence of criminalized women. Materialist approaches are used to locate women's violent behaviours in the social and structural contexts in which they occur, whereas postmodern perspectives are used to analyze how criminalized women represent themselves in narratives about their violence. In particular, feminist postmodern understandings of language, discourse, subjectivity and identity inform this work.

The starting point of analysis in postmodernism is language. From a postmodern perspective, language – rather than reflecting reality – shapes and limits how we experience and define the social world (Weedon, 1987; Ristock, 2002). It follows that, for postmodernists, there is no one language; language consists of multiple, competing discourses. Discourses may be defined as ways of framing knowledge. More specifically, they are “the sets of assumptions, socially shared, and often unconscious, reflected in language that produces meanings, constructs knowledge, and organizes social relations” (Ristock, 2002: 21). Each discourse offers a unique way of representing social reality and giving meaning to the world, and is accompanied by one or more socially constructed categories. Some discourses and discursive categories carry more weight or power than others (such as expert medical and legal discourses) and, as such, are more likely to be

¹⁴ Postmodern feminists reject the project of creating grand theories (or narratives), and critique the modernist notion that knowledge production will have certain or predictive effects. In contrast to the materialist approach, postmodern feminists question the usefulness of structuralist explanations and of using theory to speak about all women, for all women. See Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of how these two perspectives are combined in the present study.

regarded as 'true' reflections of reality or experience (Smart, 1989). From the postmodern perspective, though, there is no one definitive reality or truth. Indeed, postmodernists typically reject the idea that an objective material reality exists, arguing instead that social reality is constituted through language and discourse.

For this reason, discourse analysis is a key feature of the postmodern approach. Discourse analysis involves examining the underlying assumptions of and understandings produced by particular discourses, as well as disrupting or interrogating the boundaries of the categories constructed within those discourses. According to Janice Ristock and Joan Pennell (1996: 9), discourse analysis also involves challenging binary ('either/or') constructions of social reality, and considering 'both/and' and 'neither/nor' constructions. In this way, discourse analysis allows one to attend to how language structures (and, oftentimes, limits) our understanding of a particular issue. These insights – about discourses and accompanying categories – form part of the analytical framework applied in this research. In the present study, the focus is on the three main discourses which exist to explain the violence of criminalized women. Each of these discourses reflects a different perspective on women's violence, and is accompanied by a specific categorization of the Violent Woman. Using postmodern perspectives, this study explores whether any of these discourses alone is capable of explaining the complexities of women's violence. As well, it examines if and how women employ categories, like 'victim,' 'bad' and 'mad,' in accounting for their violent behaviours.

Feminist postmodern understandings of subjectivity and identity also inform the analytical approach developed for the present study. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, postmodern writers highlight that it is through language and discourse that our

sense of self is produced. In Chris Weedon's (1987: 21) terms, language "is a place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed." Subjectivity, then, is discursively constructed. While postmodernists understand subjectivity as one's conscious and unconscious sense of self, the term identity is used to refer to the "social self that is named and experienced" (Ristock & Pennell, 1996: 115). Two other points on subjectivity and identity are worth noting. First, the discourses a subject draws from in constructing his/her sense of self (or identity) is governed by the social position from which he/she interprets the world. Second, this sense of self is precarious (or in flux) and contradictory (or multiple).

Postmodern insights on discourse, subjectivity and identity have been incorporated into a number of recent studies of women's violence. Janice Ristock (2002), for one, includes a discursive element in her study of violence in lesbian relationships. In describing her methodology, Ristock (1992: 38) notes that she treated the "interviews and focus group discussions as accounts – constructions that reveal their subjectivities as a way of understanding the participants' sense of self and their ways of understanding their relation to the world." By paying attention to the particular language that participants made use of in telling their stories, Ristock (p. 39) addresses the question: What does the participants' language "suggest about the ways in which their experiences have been produced by the available discourses and their social positionings within those discourses?"

Wendy Chan's (2001) study of women charged with homicide also adopts a postmodernist perspective. In her work, Chan displaces the dualism of sex/gender with the postmodern understanding of sexed subjects (and subjectivities), in recognition that

both sex and gender are constituted through language. She argues that “although women are capable of violent acts as gendered beings, this fact has to be understood socially and culturally” (Chan, 2001: 35). Also in keeping with the postmodern approach, Chan adopts a view of women as constituted across multiple axes of identities. In these terms, women’s identities are not discrete nor are they are coherent; rather, they are multiple and non-unified. The Violent Woman, according to Chan (2001: 36), is “defined across multiple positions which are capable of acknowledging her position in relation to the variety of discourses and practices which produces her identities.”

Joanna Phoenix’s (2000) work is particularly instructive in the context of the present study. In her study of women in prostitution, Phoenix understands identity as a discursive device which permits women to make sense of (and thus be sustained within) prostitution. Phoenix’s exploration of women sex trade workers approaches the interviews with the women by treating the women’s narratives as a source or reflection of this identity-making process. In analyzing the women’s accounts, she aimed to uncover “the constellation of different, diverse and multiple ways which women represented themselves in their stories” (Phoenix, 2000: 42). Hence Phoenix’s study, like Chan’s (2001), focuses on the multiple nature of women’s identities. Phoenix (2000: 42) understands identity not as “the ‘essence’ of a person or a set of personal characteristics; nor is it used to signify the central author (or self) who elaborates and gives meaning to their story.” Instead of denoting ‘selfhood,’ identity is understood as the imagined or portrayed personage of these women. Much like Phoenix, the present study aims to uncover the identities that are reflected and represented in the women’s narratives on their experiences.

Concluding Remarks

The Violent Woman has been largely neglected in mainstream and feminist criminological theorizing and research. This chapter has examined the substantive concerns that have been introduced in the women's violence literature, focussing on three main sources of information: official statistics, quantitative studies and feminist criminological qualitative research. The official statistics illustrate that women commit significantly less crime than men and that when women are charged with a violent offence, it is usually for a minor assault. These statistics are limited, though, as they tell us little about the characteristics of the women charged, the contexts in which women's violence takes place or the understandings of those involved. Recent research studies which include or focus on criminalized women address some of these gaps. For one, there is a consensus in the literature about the demographic and social characteristics common to most women who come into conflict with the law. Specifically, criminalized women tend to be young, single and economically marginalized, and a large proportion of those charged are Aboriginal. Moreover, these women often report abusing alcohol and/or other drugs, and the vast majority have a history of physical and/or sexual abuse. Criminalized women, then, are often referred to as 'high needs / low risk.'

The majority of quantitative research on women's violence aims to determine if there is a sexual symmetry in violence. Generally, this research employs the Conflict Tactics Scale and concludes that 'women are as violent as men.' It is these research studies which Patricia Pearson (and other writers who may be situated within the patriarchal resistance discourse) makes use of to degender the problem of domestic violence. As Nancy Berns (2001: 267) highlights in her writing, "arguing that men and

women are equally violent is the most significant and frequent strategy used for degendering the problem.” More recent quantitative research studies point to the limitations of the CTS and draw on other data sources to challenge the sexual-symmetry thesis. Comack and her colleagues (2000, 2002), for instance, used Police Incident Reports to counter the claim that women are men’s equals in violence. Their research used four separate indicators to illustrate how the extent and nature of women’s violence is markedly different than that of men’s. Quantitative studies such as this one are useful in that they may be used to respond to the claims that are being made about women’s violence in mainstream discourse. However, in general, quantitative research on women’s violence produces an overly-simplistic account of women’s lives which fails to capture the contexts in which their violent behaviours occur.

Within the criminological discipline, the majority of research on women in conflict with the law comes from feminist criminologists. Beginning in the 1980s, feminist criminologists interviewed criminalized women about their experiences of abuse and how these contributed to their own law violations. Daly (1998) explains that these early studies presented a leading scenario of women’s conflicts with the law. In short, the focus was on how women’s experiences of victimization in the home led them to eke out a life on the streets, where they resorted to illegal means to survive. More recently, feminist criminologists (such as Comack, 1996b; Daly, 1998) have provided more complex accounts of how women’s experiences of violence and abuse are connected to their coming into conflict with the law. The main contribution of these studies was in pointing to the importance of situating women’s law violations in the social and structural contexts in which they take place. Nevertheless, feminist research has yet to attend

adequately to the issue of women's violence. None of the studies reviewed in this chapter focussed exclusively on women who were violent, and those that do tend to account only for the most extraordinary instances of women's violence, where women have been charged with the murder of their abusive male partners. Further, feminist criminological research has been critiqued – by both feminists and non-feminists alike – for focussing too much on the effects of victimization and not enough on other important factors in accounting for women's violence.

The purpose of the present study is to begin to address the gaps in the feminist criminological literature by producing an account of women's violence that challenges the predominant constructions of the Violent Woman. Accordingly, this study is guided by two general research questions. First, to what extent are constructions of the Violent Woman as 'victim,' 'bad' and 'mad' relevant to explaining women's violence? Second, to what extent do criminalized women identify with these discourses in narratives about their violence? Two streams of theoretical thought inform this study: materialist feminist theory (including the intersectionality approach) and postmodern perspectives. Based on materialist feminist and intersectionality theories, this research aims to situate women's violence within the context of the intersecting and contingent structures of patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism. Attention to the discursive content of the women's narratives – and the identities produced therein – is consistent with postmodern perspectives on discourse and subjectivity. In the following chapter, I outline the methodological approach of this research.

Chapter Three

Epistemological and Methodological Concerns

In the earliest renderings of the criminological discipline and current mainstream discourse, the Violent Woman is presented as either 'bad' or 'mad.' More recently, feminists have countered these constructions, focussing on how women's 'victim' status under conditions of patriarchy contributes to their conflicts with the law. The aim of the present study is to analyze women's narratives on their experiences in terms of the extent to which these discourses are relevant to explaining women's violence and the extent to which criminalized women identify with these discourses. Accordingly, both materialist and postmodern perspectives frame the analysis presented in the chapters to follow. In this chapter, it is argued that standpoint feminist epistemology offers a way in which to combine these seemingly contrary theoretical perspectives in analyzing women's accounts of their violence. What is standpoint epistemology? How can women's narratives – their standpoints – serve as an entryway to engaging in materialist and discursive analyses?

Standpoint Feminist Epistemology

Beginning in the late 1970s, feminists from various theoretical positions and disciplines offered a critical perspective on the relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power (Harding, 2004). During this time of critical reflection, standpoint feminism emerged as an epistemology that emphasizes the importance of women's perspectives and understandings in producing women-centred knowledge. In the discipline of criminology, as in other disciplines, the experiences of men have constituted

the bulk of mainstream knowledge. In response, one of the expressed aims of standpoint feminism is to advance the value of using women's experiences – their standpoints – to develop “more complete and less distorted knowledge claims” (Harding, 1990: 95). “A social history of standpoint theory,” Sandra Harding (1993: 54) writes, “would focus on what happens when marginalized peoples begin to gain a public voice.”

Within standpoint epistemology, knowledge production is understood as an inherently political process; knowledge arises out of historically, socially and culturally specific sites. Thus, when producing knowledge, one needs to be aware of the site one is speaking from. In Maureen Cain's (1990b: 133) terms, this involves being theoretically reflexive: “thinking about oneself in terms of a theory and understanding theoretically the site one finds oneself in.” For Cain (1990b: 132), a standpoint is a particular site, “one which its creator and occupier has agreed upon to occupy in order to produce a special kind of knowledge and practice of which he or she is aware in a special, theoretical way.” In the case of standpoint feminism – and feminist knowledge production – this starting point or site is women's lived experiences.

The earliest articulations of the standpoint feminist approach borrowed heavily from the theoretical insights of Karl Marx. Marx theorized that the working class' perspective on their experiences of exploitation and oppression was privileged; their subordinate position allowed them to better understand their own experiences and those of the dominant group (Harstock, 1987; Hennessy, 1993). Likewise, standpoint feminists argued that to appreciate the oppression that women 'as a group' experienced, one must go to women to get their vantage points (Harstock, 1987: 165). Writing in 1983, Allison Jaggar put it this way: “the special social or class position of women gives them a special

epistemological standpoint which makes possible a view of the world that is more reliable and less distorted than that available either to capitalist or to working-class men” (Jaggar, 1983: 56).

Not surprisingly, these early expressions of the standpoint approach have been critiqued for discounting and downplaying differences between women. Carol Smart (1990: 82) locates these critiques – and similar criticisms of the materialist feminist approach – as part of the “demise of sisterhood,” by which she means “the realization that women were not all [of] white, middle class and Anglo-Saxon, Protestant extract.” In offering her challenge to standpoint feminism, Smart (1990: 83) claims that

Feminism resisted this realization by invoking notions of womanhood as a core essence to unite women (under the leadership of the said, white, middle-class and Protestant woman). However, black feminists, lesbian feminists, Third World feminists, aboriginal feminists and many others simply refused to swallow the story.

To address the obvious shortcomings of the approach, more recent articulations of standpoint feminism explicitly account for women’s different and diverse standpoints. For instance, in a recently published reader on standpoint theory, Harding (2004:9) argues that “because different groups are oppressed in different ways, each has the possibility (not the certainty)¹ of developing distinctive insights about systems of social relations in which their oppression is a feature.” Harding (2004: 20) specifically draws attention to the importance of the “intersectionality of gender, class and race” and to “the necessity to theorize multiple standpoints of the oppressed.”

¹ What Harding is highlighting here is that simply to be a woman (or a member of an oppressed group) is not sufficient to guarantee an informed, critical standpoint on one’s experiences. Jaggar (2004: 60) also makes this point, arguing that “the daily experiences of oppressed groups provides them with an immediate awareness of their own suffering but they do not perceive immediately the underlying causes of this oppression or even necessarily perceive it as oppression.”

Women's Standpoints as Sites for Materialist *and* Postmodern Analyses

Materialist and postmodern analyses start in entirely different places. Materialist (modernist) approaches – like materialist feminism, intersectionality theory and the standpoint epistemological approach – generally focus on how social structures and material conditions intersect in and impact upon individuals' lives. In contrast, postmodern perspectives eschew the idea that an objective, material reality exists, claiming instead that social reality is constituted through language and discourse. Many feminist writers take issue with this contention. Patricia Hill Collins (2004:263), for one, maintains that oppression is not “solely about language – for many of us, it remains profoundly real.” Similarly, Nancy J. Hirschmann (2004: 324) argues that feminist analyses need to retain “at least some notion of ‘material reality’ that is not entirely captured by discourse, as a way to hold onto the very concrete, immediate and daily ways in which women suffer from the use and abuse of power.” Despite these tensions between modernist and postmodernist perspectives, numerous feminist writers suggest ways to “move beyond conceiving modernism and postmodernism as mutually exclusive categories” or to introduce “postmodern potential” to standpoint epistemology (Weeks, 2004: 181; Hirschmann, 2004: 317)

In her work, Elizabeth Comack (1999b) argues that by problematizing the different conceptions of standpoint, it is possible to incorporate postmodern insights into standpoint epistemology. Specifically, Comack notes the importance of distinguishing between women's standpoint(s) and feminist standpoint(s). Women's standpoints are grounded in their everyday lives; they are influenced by their social context, their personal histories and their cultural repertoire. Different women are likely to have

conflicting and unique standpoints, arising out of their specific social locations in society, characteristic personal biographies and the modes of thought available to them. As such, there is no general woman's standpoint, rather, "the subjects/agents of knowledge for feminist standpoint theory are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory" (Harding, 1993: 65). Moreover, as Harding's (2004) and Jaggar's (2004) comments above make clear, women's standpoints on their experiences should not necessarily be regarded as 'pathways to Truth.' Like all knowledge, women's understandings (or standpoints) are partial. They are influenced by prevailing ideologies, dominant discourses and the structures which condition women's lives.

Creating a feminist standpoint involves putting women's standpoints together to produce knowledge about women's experiences. Comack (1999b: 300) describes this process as being analogous to quilt-making. It involves listening to and hearing women's stories, and piecing women's experiences and insights together in a significant and patterned way. Where Comack brings modern and postmodern perspectives together is in her understanding (and, thus, analysis) of women's standpoints as both experiential and discursive. She writes:

there are experiences which women encounter in their lives (the 'non-discursive') as well as women's ways of making sense of those experiences and their effects (the 'discursive') ... The 'women's standpoint' is both experiential and discursive. It refers to women's knowledge about their experiences, which is informed by their social context, their histories and their culture. (Comack, 1999b: 294-303)

In these terms, women's standpoints – as sites of knowledge production – act as entryways into doing material and discursive analyses. Put another way, producing a feminist standpoint involves critically analyzing both the experiential and discursive

elements of women's standpoints. In the context of the present study, this allows for attention to both material (structural) and postmodern (discourse) concerns.

Enter the Present Study . . .

In the present study, women's lived experiences are the site of knowledge production. To better understand women's use of violence, and in keeping with the tenets of the standpoint feminist epistemological approach, women who have used violence were asked to share their experiences and understandings. From the women's narratives about their violence, a feminist standpoint is produced. Too much of the literature on the issue of women's violence relies upon politically-motivated speculation and superficial statistics. What is needed, then, is an alternative account of women's violence, one that begins in an "objective location – women's lives" (Harding, 1991: 123).²

To re-iterate, the general purpose of this study is to produce an account of women's violence that challenges the predominant constructions of the Violent Woman. At the same time, it is to allow the voices of women who have been "silenced or subordinated by, or excluded from, dominant discourses," to be heard (Cain, 1993: 74). There is a call in the literature for this type of research (Kelly, 1991; Shaw, 1995). In addition, to begin to fill in the gaps in the literature, this research focuses on understanding women's violence in broader terms, meaning, not just on the rare instances where women are charged with murder or in terms of an exclusive focus on partner violence.

² Harding (1993) argues that feminist, politically-directed research is more 'objective' than research which adheres to the goal of value-neutrality, precisely because it acknowledges the context under which knowledge is produced.

In doing this work, I acknowledge at the outset that it cannot be guaranteed that the feminist standpoint will be 'correct.' To some degree, this is because of the necessary partiality of the knowledge produced (see Comack, 1999b, 296-297). This knowledge will be partial because (i) the questions asked of the women will limit the information they provide about their life histories and experiences, (ii) it will depend upon what the women choose to share and disclose, (iii) of the limited amount of time available to talk with the women about their lives and (iv) it will be based upon the selections from the women's narratives that I identify as relevant to the analysis. Nevertheless, this research aims to use this site to produce knowledge that is both *about* women (because it emerges out of women's stories and experiences) and *for* women (because it has the political goal of challenging the dominant discourses on women's violence). The following sections will outline the primary questions of interest and the methodological approach of this study, as well as introduce the 17 women who participated in this research.

Research Questions

There are two key questions of interest in the present study. These are: (i) to what extent are the predominant constructions of the Violent Woman as 'victim,' 'bad' and 'mad' relevant to understanding women's use of violence?; and (ii) to what extent do women identify with these discourses in making sense of their violent behaviours? The analysis of these questions is separated into three chapters, each of which deals with one of the predominant constructions. Chapter 4 reviews the feminist 'victim' discourse and discusses the extent to which this discourse resonates with the women's accounts of their violence. Chapter 5 challenges mainstream discourses which cast violent women as

'bad,' while chapter 6 centres on the psychological construction of violent women as 'mad.'

In addition to the two main questions of interest, there are three general objectives of this research and a number of specific research questions corresponding to each. The first objective is to produce general, basic knowledge about what women's violence looks like. In other words, what *form* does women's violence take; specifically, what types of things do women do when they are violent and what is the outcome of the violence? Also, in what *context* does this violence take place? What led up to the violent event and who was the violence directed towards?

The second objective is to produce knowledge about how women understand their use of violence. Put simply, *why* do women choose to respond to particular situations with violence? What do women see as contributing to their violent behaviours? In the context of intimate partner relationships, is women's violence solely about fighting back? Is women's violence, in the context of living on the street, a strategic survival strategy? How does the issue of control relate to women's use of violence – is it about asserting control, losing control or both? These first two objectives – to describe the nature of women's violence and account for why women use violence – address two basic areas that have yet to be adequately attended to in the feminist criminological literature.

The third, more theoretical objective is to locate women's use of violence within the nexus of gender, class and race relations in society. Are there specific social and/or structural contexts in which women's violent behaviours emerge? How do the gendered features of women's lives (e.g., experiencing violence) connect to their uses of violence? Do women who are economically marginalized use violence as a way to survive the

conditions of their lives? Are there significant differences between Aboriginal and white women's accounts of their violence? How does race, as constitutive of structural and cultural differences, intersect with class and gender? In the present study, the women's narratives offer a starting point for theorizing about how gender, class and race inequalities figure in the women's lives, specifically in terms of their use of violence.

Methodological Approach

The method chosen to investigate these questions was to interview criminalized women about their experiences of violence.³ This approach was selected for a number of reasons. First, within feminism, the importance of first-hand, experiential accounts is stressed (see, for example, Gelsthorpe, 1990). Second, there is little in the criminological literature that includes criminalized women's views on and accounts of their violence (Shaw & Dubois, 1995). Third, consistent with a standpoint epistemological approach, the aim is to keep women's experiences and understandings at the forefront of the analysis. In their discussion of 'methods from the margins,' Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna (1989: 64) state that

we want methods that will enable people to identify and examine how living on the margins affects their lives, their opportunities, the way they think and act. In this way we can begin to focus on the social relations which daily help to construct that experience. In particular, methods from the margins must focus on describing reality from the perspective of those who have traditionally been excluded as producers of research.

In consideration of all of these factors, then, the method of interviewing women seemed the most appropriate one to use to investigate the above-listed research questions.

³ In establishing the parameters of this study, it is important to note that the focus is on women who have been criminalized. Criminalized women are not representative of all women who use violence.

The interviews for the present study were conducted in the summer of 2001, as part of a larger, SSHRC-funded research project on gender and violence. The principal researcher on this project (Elizabeth Comack) developed the interview schedule in consultation with myself (see Appendix A), and conducted all of the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit information about participants' accounts of violent events which they had experienced, the prevalence of violence in the participants' lives and the meanings the participants attached to their violent behaviours. There were three main parts to each interview. First, women were asked for some general demographic information (i.e., their age, race, education and employment experience, relationship status, and if they had children). Following this, the women were asked about their experiences of violence as children and as adults. The participants were encouraged to discuss incidents of victimization and incidents in which they perpetrated violence. Overall, the questions were asked in a manner that attempted to draw out a life history or autobiographical narrative for each of the women interviewed. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed at a later date.

To recruit participants, the principal researcher contacted Program Coordinators at the provincial institution for women (the Portage Correctional Centre) and at the Elizabeth Fry Society (where women participate in a Women and Anger group). These Coordinators (and the principal researcher, when possible) explained the purposes of the research to prospective participants and invited their participation. A total of 18 women volunteered to be interviewed: 16 from the Portage Correctional Centre (some who were serving time for a sentence and others who were being housed there on remand) and two

from the Elizabeth Fry Society group.⁴ At the beginning of each of the interviews, the participants were informed about the nature of the study, and issues of confidentiality and anonymity were discussed. Also, as per the ethical guidelines of the University of Manitoba, each participant signed an informed consent form, which explained the voluntary nature of their participation (see Appendix B).

The Participants

By way of summary, the participants ranged in age from 18 to 45, with a mean age of 29 and a median age of 28. The median age for Aboriginal women (25) was lower than that for white⁵ women (31). Over two-thirds (13) of the women interviewed identified themselves as either Métis (7) or Aboriginal (6), and the remaining four women as white. Much like women in conflict with the law generally, most (12) of the participants had obtained a grade 11 education or less. Two of the women had completed grade 12 (or its equivalent), two had some college or university education, and one had completed a university degree. In general, the Aboriginal women in the sample had lower levels of education than the white women. Similarly, Aboriginal women were more likely to report having no 'legitimate' employment history, whereas all of the white women were employed, at some stage in their lives, as labourers or as skilled professionals. Specifically, six Aboriginal women had no formal employment experience, six worked in

⁴ In recruiting women for the purposes of this study, it was made clear that women who had used violence were of primary interest to the researchers. However, one of the women who volunteered for the study had never used violence and, therefore, was not included in the sample.

⁵ The use of the term 'white' (instead of Caucasian) acknowledges that white people are not racially neutral or nonracial. As Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 1) highlights, "in the same way that both men's and women's lives are shaped by their gender, and that both heterosexual and lesbian women's experiences in the world are marked by their sexuality, white people *and* people of color live racially structured lives."

the service sector and one worked in a position requiring a certified degree. Examples of the women's labour/service jobs include serving, bartending, telemarketing and cleaning; the skilled professional positions were legal administrative assistant and government employee.

All of the women discussed having had intimate relationships with male partners. At the time of the interview, though, the majority of the women were single: 8 were single, 3 were in dating relationships, 3 were divorced or separated from their partners, and 3 were in common-law relationships.⁶ There were no notable differences in marital status between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. All but two of the participants had children. Of those women who had children, the average number was three. Aboriginal women tended to have more children (average of 3.4) than white women (average of 2.0). The number of children ranged from one to six; children ranged in age from less than one year to 21, with a median age of six.

In terms of their own use of violence, 15 of the women indicated that they had used physical violence against another person as a child and/or as an adult. One woman discussed having violent 'outbursts' and one woman had never inflicted injuries on anyone other than herself. All of the Aboriginal women interviewed engaged in violence at some point in their lives. The violence ranged from relatively minor incidents (pushing, slapping) to more severe assaults (with a weapon or causing bodily injuries). Two of the participants had been charged with attempted murder, one as a youth and one as an adult. The two most frequent contexts in which the women's violence took place were within intimate partner relationships and during the commission of a robbery. Eight

⁶ Note that this information is based on what women reported during the course of the interview, which sometimes contradicted the answers given in response to the relationship status question.

of the women had used violence against a male partner and nine women had perpetrated at least one robbery as either a youth or an adult. The women had also used violence in other contexts. Five women talked about getting into physical fights with male friends, acquaintances and/or strangers; five women had assaulted other women; three women had used violence toward a family member; and four women assaulted a person in a position of authority. Also worth noting is that 16 of the women had conflicts with the law for non-violent offences, such as fraud, theft, break and enter and breach of a court order.

A number of characteristics emerged as common amongst the women interviewed. First, and in keeping with the findings of previous feminist studies, all of the women had been victims of physical violence, sexual violence or both at some point in their lives. In fact, all but two of the women (88%) reported experiencing abuse both in childhood and as an adult. Three other themes materialized as important in the women's narratives on their experiences. Over one half of the sample (9 women) discussed working in the sex trade to support themselves. These participants were all Aboriginal. In addition, 7 women (47%) reported addictions to cocaine; again, all of these women were Aboriginal. A large proportion of the women interviewed (10 or 59%) had also abused other drugs, and this was especially prevalent amongst Aboriginal women (8 of the 10 women). Lastly, about two-thirds of the participants (11 women) made reference to being assessed by or engaged in counselling with a 'psy' professional at one time in their lives. These themes (of victimization, working in the sex trade, abusing drugs and involvement with 'psy' professionals) are explored throughout the analysis chapters.

Analyzing the Women's Accounts

The process of conducting the analysis involved reading and coding the interview transcripts several times. The starting point was to do a thorough read of each of the transcripts. Based on the women's narratives on their experiences, I wrote-up a brief summary on each of the women, which outlined their social characteristics, their experiences with violence as children and as adults (as both perpetrators and victims), and any initial thoughts and insights (see Appendix C). I also constructed a short (two to three page) précis of each of the women's stories. These summaries served as quick reference points as to who the women were and what their experiences have been.

During the second reading of the transcripts, I focussed on the experiential or material content of the women's narratives. To explore what women's the violence looked like, detailed notes were taken on each violent incident discussed, focussing on the varying forms the violence took, the person(s) it was directed towards, and the outcomes or consequences of the violence. At the same time, I highlighted the social situations and structural conditions surrounding the women's uses of violence. This involved attending to the specific contextual factors which gave rise to a particular violent incident, as well as locating a woman's violence within the context of her biography. In order to organize the information collected, a journal was constructed which outlined and elaborated upon the women's narratives about their violence.

Following this, I focussed on the discursive content of the women's narratives. This involved: (i) reading the interview transcripts for evidence of the three predominant discourses, and (ii) examining if and how these discourses shape and limit how women speak about their violence. To look for evidence of the predominant discourses, I used

three differently coloured pens to highlight the extent to which the ‘victim,’ ‘bad’ and ‘mad’ discourses mapped onto the women’s accounts. For the feminist ‘victim’ discourse, the focus was on women’s experiences of victimization, how they coped with those experiences and, most importantly, the extent to which experiences of victimization were connected to women perpetrating violence themselves. Reading the transcripts to evaluate the ‘bad’ discourse involved examining women’s violence outside of the context of abusive intimate partner relationships, with specific emphasis on the structural contexts in which the women’s ‘bad’ behaviours occurred. This involved shifting attention away from the particular characters of the women involved, to the material conditions surrounding their violent behaviours. To investigate the utility of the ‘mad’ discourse, women’s accounts of being engaged in counselling with ‘psy’ professionals, diagnosed with psychological disorders, and/or prescribed psychotropic medications were coded for further review. I also reviewed the transcripts to see if the women used these experiences to explain their violence. Coding the transcripts in this way provided me with a general sense of the extent to which the three discourses under review resonated with the women’s accounts, and also pointed to some of the places where the dominant constructions did not correspond with how the women accounted for their experiences.

Analyzing the discursive content of the women’s narratives also involved attending to the particular language the women used to make sense of their experiences. Specifically, I examined whether the women drew on ‘victim,’ ‘bad’ and/or ‘mad’ categories in narratives about their violence. I looked for instances of women identifying themselves as victims of violence, as well as instances where the victim category seemed overly narrow or limiting (i.e., where the women identified themselves as aggressors or

perpetrators, or as both a victim and a perpetrator of violence). I also noted examples of women referring to themselves as 'bad' (e.g., as mean, evil or different than other women) or as 'mad' (e.g., as psychologically disturbed or sick). In the process of analyzing the women's accounts, it became apparent that some of the women identified with other, contrary labels in telling their stories. These instances were noted for future reference. As with the selections coded in the second phase of the transcript review process, my comments on and analysis of the discursive content of the women's narratives were noted in an analysis journal.

What resonance do these discourses have in the women's lives? Are the women victims? Bad? Mad? Each of the three analysis chapters which follows begins with a brief introduction to the history and content of the discourse under review ('victim,' 'bad' or 'mad') and includes an analysis of the women's narratives in relation to the two key questions of interest in the present study.

Chapter Four

The Victimized Woman of Feminist Discourse

Beginning in the 1970s, a priority of feminist politics was to make public the pervasiveness of male violence against women. In part, this involved grassroots organizing to rally community and state support for the development of services to provide emergency accommodations and counselling to women experiencing abuse. By some measures, this lobbying was successful.¹ Commenting on the situation in Manitoba, Jane Ursel uses increased government funding of community-based family violence intervention programs (from \$52 thousand in 1982 to \$4 million in 1990) and an accompanying increase in the number of services (from 2 to 25 over the same time period) to argue that “the battered women’s movement did have an impact on the state, specifically the criminal justice and social service systems’ response to wife abuse” (Ursel, 1991: 276).² What furthered feminist efforts to transform violence against women from a private problem to a public concern was the production of concrete information about the vast numbers of women affected. In 1993, the Violence Against Women Survey (the first national survey to provide detailed data on violence against women) determined that 51 percent of Canadian women had experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual assault since the age of 16 (Johnson, 1996). Survey results also revealed that 25 percent of all women have experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner and 39 percent of women have been sexually assaulted at some time in

¹ Of course, feminists disagree about whether or not engaging the state can bring about substantive social change or real improvements in the conditions of women’s lives (see Snider, 1991).

² Similar trends are evident at the national level. The number of shelters for abused women in Canada has increased from 18 in 1975 to 508 in 2000 (Federal Provincial Territorial Working Paper, 2002).

their lives. In explaining these and similar findings, feminists articulated that we live in a male-dominated society, one where men – by virtue of their gender – have the power to oppress and constrain women in the public and private spheres. Feminist activism, then, has been instrumental in calling attention to the pervasiveness of women’s victimization and its roots in the patriarchal nature of society.

In addition to locating women’s experiences of abuse within a structural context, feminists have also highlighted the role of societal structures – in particular, patriarchy – in explaining women’s conflicts with the law. Patriarchal relations and restrictive gender roles, feminists argue, have not only led to male violence against women but resulted in some women using violence themselves. In her discussion of the battered woman syndrome, Sheila Noonan (1993: 257) notes that the typical answer to why women killed their husbands was that they “just couldn’t take it [the abuse] anymore.” Similarly, Ellen Adelberg and Claudia Currie (1993: 118) identified “child and wife battering, sexual assault, and women’s conditioning to accept positions of submissiveness and dependency upon men” as key to explaining women’s involvement in crime. More recently, Katherine Maeve (2000: 473) concluded that “women in prison have often suffered physical and sexual abuse as children which substantively contributes to their substance abuse, violence and criminal behaviour.” While some feminists include a consideration of the effects of class and racial inequalities in their theorizing (see Carlen, 1988; Comack, 1996b), the focus remains largely on how women’s experiences of violence and abuse are connected to their coming into conflict with the law. In short, the feminist criminological perspective is that “victimization is at the heart of ... [female] lawbreaking and this ... best

explains women's involvement in crime" (Chesney-Lind & Faith, cited in Snider, 2003:364).

As the above makes clear, the common argument advanced in feminist theorizing and research on women in conflict with the law is that a woman's law violations are inextricably tied to her experiences of victimization. The Violent Woman of feminist discourse is the 'victimized woman'; her violence is not of her own making but is a response to her victim status under conditions of patriarchy. This understanding marks an improvement over previous constructions in many respects. For one, feminist qualitative research allowed women to share their stories and develop their standpoints on what contributed to their troubles with the law. Factors rarely considered in previous literature – such as women's histories of physical and sexual abuse, their subsequent struggles to live independently with few resources, and the use of violent and other illegal strategies to survive – were showcased as significant to explaining women's crime. Despite these advances, the feminist discourse has yet to penetrate mainstream theorizing and research, and has been subjected to heavy criticism, especially by writers like Patricia Pearson (1997a) and Donna Laframboise (1996). According to Pearson, feminists use 'abuse as an excuse' to downplay the seriousness of women's violent behaviours and, in so doing, deny women agency. Pearson (1997a: 28) claims that

In essence, what is lost in the way we view female aggression is moral and rational content. Women are not responsible actors imposing their will upon the world. They are passive and rather *deranged little robots* who imperil themselves on a cue. (emphasis added)

Pearson's appraisal of the feminist discourse is that it erroneously portrays women as innocent victims who have been forced to react violently (being abused essentially

programs women to then use violence themselves). Her assessment, in contrast, is that women are rational actors who consciously choose to use violence.

Laframboise (1996) similarly castigates feminists for emphasizing the connections between women's abuse experiences and their violent behaviours. She writes, feminists "suffer from a view of the world so skewed that no matter what outrageous claim is made, if it 'proves' female victimization they're prepared to believe it" (p. 114). Laframboise goes on to say that "feminism may be satisfied with double standards and excuses, but in the real world, women are no angels" (p. 125). Like Pearson, she charges the feminist discourse with condemning women to perpetual victimhood, denying them the capacity to act violently or in any other self-directed manner. Following their critiques, both writers fill the pages of their respective books with a litany of examples of women 'behaving badly,' with little to no attention to the contexts in which women's violence takes place, including women's experiences of abuse.

The sentiments expressed by Pearson (1997a), Laframboise (1996) and other writers (e.g., Fekete, 1994; Sommers, 1994) may be located as part of what Nancy Berns (2001) terms the 'patriarchal resistance discourse.' They represent a fierce backlash to the feminist discourse surrounding women's victimization and seek to discount the feminist contention that there are gender differences in the perpetration of violent crime. For reasons outlined previously, feminists have been reluctant to address the issue of women's violence generally and the types of comments put forward by Pearson and others more specifically. The aim of this chapter is to critically analyze the feminist construction of the Violent Woman. How relevant is a 'victim discourse' for

understanding the lives of the women interviewed? Do the women's narratives reveal connections between experiencing abuse and being violent? Or does focussing on victimization amount to simply employing abuse as an 'excuse' for women's violent behaviours? Lastly, do the women identify with the feminist representation of them as victims?

The Nature and Impact of Women's Victimization Experiences

I think my life has been pretty much, you know, everywhere here and there dotted with that violence in the air. (Cynthia)³

While each of the 17 women's stories is certainly unique, one salient similarity running through their biographies is the incredible amount of violence that they have witnessed and experienced as children and adults. By way of summary, all of the women reported being abused as children and/or as adults: 16 of the women discussed being victimized in childhood and 16 women reported the same in adulthood. The vast majority (14) of the women were physically abused as children. The abuse ranged from hair pulling, slapping and pushing to biting, whipping and severe beatings, and was perpetrated primarily by fathers, but also by mothers, step and foster parents, as well as other family members and teenage dating partners. A number of the women also discussed episodes of neglect – such as being left alone with their young siblings for days on end – as common in their early childhood. In addition, over one-half (10) of the women were sexually abused as children; in all but one instance, the abuse was not confined to a single incident.

Beginning as early as age four, women reported their breasts and vaginas being fondled,

³ Pseudonyms have been used in place of the women's names to ensure anonymity. Names of women known to me have been used in their place.

being coerced to touch and manipulate male genitalia, and forced vaginal and anal intercourse. Again, men in positions of trust and authority (fathers, grandfathers, uncles) were the most common perpetrators of the abuse, but cousins and young male acquaintances and boyfriends were also involved. Experiences of sexual abuse also pervaded many of the women's adult lives: nine of the women reported being sexually assaulted by their partners or acquaintances or in the context of working in the sex trade. All but one of the women were abused by one or more intimate male partners at some point in their lives, with the violence often beginning in adolescence. In the following discussion, I draw upon selections from several of the women's narratives to illustrate the nature and impact of some of these experiences.

Childhood Experiences: Violence, Victimization and Broken Families

For many of the women, violence presented early on in their lives, as they grew up in households or environments where violence was a regular feature. Women spoke of their fathers' repeated and severe abuse of their mothers. They recalled seeing their mothers battered and bruised, neighbours and friends calling the police in response to the abuse and spending time in women's shelters when their families were in crisis. In reflecting on her childhood, Rachel said:

My father was constantly beating on my mother ... My mom and I slept together a lot ... I remember I used to hold her, listening to her heart 'cause I was afraid it was going to stop ... My mom's nerves were shot. Like, I didn't understand the amount of (sighs) stress and ...

(And the worry she must have had?)

And anxiety, yeah.

In looking back, Rachel does not “think any child should have to grow up in that situation. It’s awfully scary.”

In addition to witnessing violence in their homes, the women also spoke about experiencing abuse themselves as children. While some of the women framed their experiences as strict or harsh discipline, others spoke about abuse resulting from their not being adequate caretakers of their siblings or parents. Sarah, for example, grew up in a home with two hearing-impaired parents and was charged with the responsibility of acting as their contact to the outside world.

I’d go home and then I’d go down to my room and hide because I knew that if I stood around, walked around and stuff ... I’d get yelled at And I usually ended up getting beat with a skipping rope.

(Did the skipping rope come out very often?)

Oh yeah. I used to get C-shaped bruises all over my legs. I don’t know why the school never reported it.

According to Sarah, her father “had no tolerance whatsoever. I think he resented the fact that he depended on me so much.” Other women were not able to explain what brought on the seemingly random abuse that they received at the hands of their family members during their youth.

Whether in terms of witnessing or experiencing it themselves, violence was a normative feature of the majority of the women’s childhoods. In response to their mother’s or their own abuse, many of the women were moved around a lot as children. This involved being transferred back and forth between parents, residing temporarily with other family members, and placements in foster and group homes. For some of the women, particularly those who fled with their mothers to escape abuse, relocating was associated with increased financial hardships; they recounted moving into small, mice-

infested houses, eating scraps of food for dinner and having to work to help make ends meet. Some of the Aboriginal women interviewed also commented that their families' transience translated into them losing contact with their siblings. Andrea's experience provides one such example.

Well, I grew up all over the place ... I went to my Dad's care and I got beaten up all the time. He told me he was in boarding school and that's the only way he could love his children is by treating them as badly as he was ... I didn't live with him that long ... I lived with him for maybe a month. But the violence never stopped there. It was, uh, my grandmother's home, my grandpa would fight my grandmother lots, when they'd drink. And the kids would hide. I would find a place to, to keep safe. Um, sometimes we spent the night over the dike up on the reserve.

Because of all of the moves, Andrea lost contact with both her brother and sister. She knows only that they were 'adopted out' but not how to connect with them again. This was but one of the consequences of growing up in an abusive environment.

Dating and Partner Violence: Transitioning from Childhood to Adulthood

The most common context in which the women reported violence breaking out was in their relationships with boyfriends and intimate partners. After being victimized throughout her childhood, Andrea encountered additional abuse in her intimate partner relationship.

It happened every, twice a week, once a week ... Hit me with rope, he'd throw me on the ground, on the floor, kick me. I told him a few times, 'Why don't you just do it? Why don't you just get it over with?'

Sarah's situation also went from bad to worse when she married at a young age to escape her obligations at home and her abusive father. In talking about her (ex) husband, Sarah remarked,

He violated me in every sense of the word. I mean anything you can come up with he's done to me. You know, thrown knives at me, raped me, sodomized me.

He would make me sit down and insult me and carry on for six, seven hours until I would just mentally lose it. And as soon as I stood up, then that was it, I had done something to provoke him to beat the crap out of me.

Other women spoke of incidents where they were choked, stabbed, held underwater, beaten unconscious and sent to hospital because of their injuries.

While many of the women did manage to escape the abuse, they often encountered additional violence in their subsequent intimate partner relationships. Lisa's story provides an example. Lisa started dating her first boyfriend when she was 15 years old. In reflecting on that time in her life, she said,

He had a lot of control over me ... He was so abusive ... There was times he'd come look for me in the park or somewhere if I was hanging out with my friends. He would have a knife, he used to carry a knife, eh. He'd just come lift me over his shoulder and I'd be, like, brought home. And then he'd beat me up, you know. And, um, that continued for a year.

When Lisa's partner threatened to "punch" their newborn daughter, she decided that it was time to leave him. "I said to myself, that's it, you know, like, you can hurt me, 'cause I'm used to it, but you can't hurt my kid, man." Ending the relationship, however, did not protect her from future abuse. Lisa's first partner stalked and harassed for several months after she had left him. She was also abused within the context of her second intimate partner relationship.

He just drank all the time ... He'd still beat me up when I was pregnant but, you know, just push me around and steal my cheques ... And I was so mad because I knew that I was in a trap and I couldn't get out of it.

These few examples do not provide a complete account of the women's experiences of victimization; however, they do impart the insidious nature and persistent frequency of the abuse the women survived. Clearly, the women identified experiences of intimate partner and other abuse as significant, life altering events. As Andrea noted at the conclusion of her interview:

It does [help to talk to other women in prison] because, you know, we've been through ... the same things. We cry together in here ... I always wanted to be free from everything that happened to me. It's all up to me to let it go or [let it] destroy me as a human being.

The Feminist Discourse and the Women's Narratives

Previous feminist criminological research has established that the majority of women in conflict with the law have been victimized at some point in their lives (see Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983; Carlen 1985 & 1988; Gilfus, 1992; Marleau & Hamilton, 1999). In this research, the feminist discourse is very much reflected in the women's narratives; there is an obvious affinity between feminist constructions of the victimized woman and the women's experiences of violence and abuse. In sharing their stories, it was these experiences that the women considered significant and were most willing – and most able – to talk about. Frances Heidensohn (1994) sees this as one of the positive impacts of modern feminism. In comparing her research with criminalized women in the 1960s to the 1990s, she claims that women are now better equipped to share their standpoints on their conflicts with the law. In the past, not only did women “not easily find voices, there were only limited discourses in which they could express themselves and few places where such expressions could be made” (p. 31). According to Heidensohn, feminist research has provided “deviant women with a particular language, a way of expressing themselves” (p. 32). Likewise, Laureen Snider (2003:364) argues that “victimization discourses originating in feminist knowledge claims are now widely employed by the female offender and inmate.” To downplay or deny the importance of victimization in the women's lives would be to discount their standpoints. What remains to be explored, though, is how these experiences connect to the women's own uses of violence and

whether the 'victim' discourse allows women sufficient space to express the complexity of their experiences.

Victimization and Violence: Making the Connections

Kathleen Daly (1998: 136) uses the analogy of the "black box" to represent what we know (or more precisely, do not know) about what lies between women's experiences of victimization and their perpetrating violence themselves. While previous feminist criminological research has established the pervasiveness and far-reaching impacts of male violence against women, questions remain around how women's experiences of victimization connect to their own violent behaviours. In the process of analyzing the women's narratives, it became apparent that there are both indirect and direct relationships between victimization and violence. Four of the women's stories will be elaborated upon (in varying degrees) to illustrate the nature of these connections.

Deanne's Story

Deanne is a Métis woman in her early thirties. About one year prior to the interview, Deanne was charged with robbery (an offence she maintains that she was not involved in) and was serving a sentence for breaching the conditions of her release (she did not complete a mandated addictions treatment program). When asked whether she thought there were differences between women's and men's violence, Deanne replied

Like, I don't know. Like, maybe [the men] got abused or something, when they were young. And then when they grow up, they just can't ... just can't hold it in, and they abuse their wives and children.

In making sense of why women – and men – engage in violence, Deanne understands

victimization as being a key determinant.⁴ Abuse has figured prominently in her own life since early childhood.

My stepdad, the one I grew up with, was an alcoholic. And he used to fight my mom – he almost killed her. And we [moved to] Winnipeg to get away.

(How was that?)

I don't know, I was kinda scared and shy, like, 'cause I didn't know anybody.

After losing her father at age three, Deanne spent time living with her grandparents and then with her mother and stepfather. Her stepfather's aggression was not confined to the abuse of her mother. Deanne mentioned one incident where she got "the strap" for stealing a piece of candy from the corner store (something that most children experiment with). When Deanne and her mother moved to Winnipeg to escape the abuse, the oldest siblings (a brother and a sister) were lost to the family; Deanne does not recall what happened to them. Regrettably, the move did not shelter her from the violence she had encountered as a young child.

In junior high, just as she was becoming settled in the city and making new friends, Deanne was sexually assaulted by two male acquaintances.

I was in about grade eight, no grade seven or eight. And I was working in my step-grandpa's laundromat. And then, after closing time, I was cleaning up and these two guys, I knew them, like, from school and that. And my friend was there with me and she didn't do nothing, she didn't help me. And I was cleaning the washroom and that's when I got raped. And then (sighs), I phoned my mom and my mom phoned the cops.

Around the same time as this incident, Deanne started drinking alcohol and doing solvents, often going to school intoxicated and getting into fights. By the age of 16, she had dropped out of school (having previously been a good student), had been charged

⁴ Other women replied similarly to this question. Jennifer, for example, said, "I honestly think that with, with men it's the same thing because even men that have sexually abused someone, they have been sexually abused too."

with more than one offence of break and enter, and had run away from several foster and group homes. It was at this juncture that Deanne started to work the streets.

(What was that like?)

Uh, I don't know. It's, it just felt like I could get easy money, get money to support my drug and sniffing habit.

(Did you ever have bad dates?)

Couple times, yeah ... That's why I don't work the streets no more, 'cause too much girls got killed.

From her late teens through her twenties, Deanne had three children and continued to struggle with her addiction to sniff and other drugs.

For Deanne, the violence "really started happening" when she married at 26. Like so many of the women, the violence that Deanne encountered in her own intimate partnership with a man had devastating and long-lasting effects.

He used to beat me up all the time. And the one time when we went, um, when we got welfare, that's our rent money, he robbed me. Like he fought me for it, beat me up and took all that money.⁵ He went to jail a couple times, once for beating me up.

Deanne locates her own violence as rooted in her troubles coping with the abuse that she has experienced.

(So, do you think that you're a violent person?)

No. Sometimes. Like, um, when I'm really, really drunk, like, I don't remember and I try to hurt my boyfriend.

(Do you think, in those times, who starts it do you think?)

I do. Yeah. 'Cause I think about, like, when I'm drinking, I think about the past, like, what my husband did to me and put me through. And I think about that time when I got raped, long time ago ...

... I don't know, sometimes when I'm really drunk I bring it up. And that's what gets me mad.

⁵ Deanne received only \$67 every two weeks, making it difficult to survive without resorting to illegal avenues like theft.

(Yeah. So you'll just take it out on your husband or whoever?)

Yeah.

In Deanne's biography, victimization experiences appear not simply as remnants of her past but as events that permeate her everyday life. In addition to thoughts of suicide, she has trouble sleeping and is often woken by nightmares about the abuse. A short time before her recent incarceration, Deanne was raped by an adult male acquaintance. In talking about what might help her get over that, she explained, "I don't know. To see a psychiatrist, a psychologist, that's what I need to see. It's still inside me. It still bothers me ... And every time I think about it, I just wanna cry and scream." Deanne is not offering abuse as an excuse for her violent behaviour; however, being abused has had a profound impact on her ability to manage her day-to-day life. It is only when she drinks that her unresolved emotions – originating in a series of abusive relationships with family members, intimate partners and male acquaintances – are released in the form of her own use of violence. Deanne's violence, in this context at least, appears to be less about her 'imposing her will upon the world' (Pearson, 1997a) and more about her being unable to contend with the emotions that are tied to her experiences of victimization.

Rita's Story

In her mid-thirties, Rita has been in and out of the Portage Correctional Centre numerous times,⁶ charged with an assortment of assault and robbery offences. Her most recent

⁶ At one point in the interview, she commented that she telephoned the institutional staff during her last release, a clear indicator that she has spent significant portions of her life incarcerated.

charges stem from an incident where she assaulted her common-law partner. Rita has never worked for wages and has six children who are not currently in her custody.

Like many of the other women, Rita witnessed and experienced violence throughout her childhood. Rita's mother, in an attempt to escape from an abusive husband, moved the family to Winnipeg when Rita was six. Rita remembers that, despite these efforts, her father "wouldn't let her [mother] go." The abuse in the home persisted until neighbours contacted the police, and Rita and her siblings were apprehended into another family member's care. When they were returned, her mother had started drinking heavily and began to abuse Rita and her younger siblings.

And I remember a lot of people being in our place all the time, like parties, big parties, everybody boozing it up and fights ... My mother would pull us around by the hair, you know, pull us around by the hair. Uh, one time she threw my brother on the ground and she started biting him all over.

Rita's life was also complicated by conflicts at school with other kids. Being the only Métis family in the neighborhood, Rita and her siblings found themselves constantly getting "beatings from the kids at school."⁷

Like we go to school, we were the only half-breeds there, you know ...

(Was it, was it racism you think?)

It was racism, yeah. Um also had to do with, the kids had to walk by our place and they were so scared to walk by our house, they would walk on the other side. 'Cause my mom would always be drinking.

In telling her story, Rita also revealed that she was sexually abused by her cousin between the ages of four and five and by her grandfather during her adolescence. The

⁷ In her work on the racialization of crime, Yasmin Jiwani (2002:73) argues that "the situation of Aboriginal women victims of violence exemplifies the complexities of the intersecting forms of oppression that combine to render particular groups more vulnerable to violence." Rita's experiences at school offer one example of how race and gender-based inequalities intersect in Aboriginal women's lives, thereby increasing their risk for violence.

abuse that seemed to affect her most was from a boyfriend that she started seeing when she was 15 years old. On one occasion,

He locked me in the bedroom and wouldn't let me out to go to the washroom. And he came back and he gave me a beer bottle to piss in. And how the hell was I supposed to piss in a beer bottle when I was like eight and a half months pregnant? Well I dove, I wanted to get out of the house so bad ... I dived through the double windows and I landed outside on my stomach where the, where the shit hole was...

(The septic field you mean?)

Yeah. And I started running ... He started following, going down the dirt road and he knew, well, she's gotta be around here. I'm running and running.

Rita made it to a nearby highway and was intending to hitchhike a ride out of the situation.

And all of a sudden my boyfriend's car comes up. And he's coming like a maniac, like, ready to kill me. And he jumped over one curb, spun the car around and now he's starting to chase me. He gets out of the car and I know he's gonna beat me. So I turned around and I started running, like, running around the car, trying to dodge him. Like, nobody back then would stop and help.

Once the boyfriend had Rita in the car, he punched and kicked her in the face and stomach and then forced her to do "dirty stuff." Following the attack, he passed out on top of her, ensuring that she was unable to escape.

On her 18th birthday, Rita was violently abused again. Her boyfriend (who was incredibly possessive) kicked Rita in the face with a steel-toed boot when he thought that she glanced in another man's direction at the bar. She recalled, "And nothing but blood. I can remember stars and blood." When she attempted to leave a short time later, the boyfriend pulled her out of a taxicab and dragged her by the hair to his car. Once at the house, "He started beating me up in the bedroom, punching my stomach left and right, like he's right on top in, uh, knee, knee position" At one point, she thought

I might as well give, you know, give a couple of shots. So I started giving a couple shots myself and I got it worse. And then he beat me up and raped me in

the bedroom again, eh. And the next thing you know I have to stay there. He didn't want me goin' anywhere – this is after everything was over. And then he passes out on me, you know, this was his way, like can't go nowhere, eh.

Two days later, Rita gave birth to a baby who was “black and blue” as a result of the beating. Shortly after she left the hospital, Rita was finally able to escape the abuse – but she was not able to forget about it.

And I started drinking a lot after. I started drinking a lot.

(How come?)

I don't know. Probably from all the anger and stress from my, my relationship. And I started drinking a lot. And I started being very abusive.

(With your [new] partner?)

Yeah. I started being very abusive, beating him up.

(How come?)

I don't know. I didn't like him. At one point, I didn't like men. I hated them. It's because of all the abuse I took from my boyfriend.

Later in the interview, Rita mentioned a conversation that she had with her daughter about the man who abused her so brutally.

I says, 'I hate your dad.' I says, you know, 'All the shit he's done, he's nothing but a rape-er and a scare-er, you know. Very abusive ... I don't know, still today when I think about him. I'm angry, I'm angry. I've got a lot of anger inside.

When asked about whether or not her violence is connected to her drinking, Rita responded:

Yeah, yeah. I'm not like that when I'm sober.

(No.)

No. I'm not a violent person.

(What do you think the alcohol does?)

Brings out the anger, brings in all the, brings out all the frustrations.

Rita, like Deanne, makes the connection between being victimized (particularly in terms of the inability to deal with the long-term effects of the abuse) and being violent herself.⁸ While she does not attempt to justify her violent behaviour by saying that she was a victim of abuse, Rita's story illustrates that being abused is often precipitous to women's own use of violence. After Rita left her abusive partner, she started to drink heavily and with the drinking came the exhibition of her own violent behaviour. Other women also discussed using alcohol to cope with their experiences of victimization. Linda, for example, related that "I used to drink 'cause my problems. If I was thinking about, like my husband, my ex-boyfriend, then I used to just drink, to like forget." Similarly, Cynthia said that "I think it was more pain and the alcohol was helping to stop the pains ... The more I drank, the less I had to face reality, the less I could, you know, remember." These examples are not meant to suggest that victimization 'causes' violence. Nevertheless, for Deanne and Rita, experiences of abuse are at least indirectly connected to their own use of violence. In both instances, it was when they were drinking – and overwhelmed by unresolved feelings of hurt and anger – that they became violent. This is a connection that will be explored further in chapter six. For some of the other women interviewed, the relationship between victimization and violence was even more direct.

Liz's Story

Liz is a 26 year old white woman who has been previously employed in a variety of service sector jobs. This and her previous conflicts with the law relate to her

⁸ She also stated that the key to her not being violent is dealing with her underlying emotions: "I need counselling because of my anger. I got so much anger built up."

writing bad cheques (fraud charges). Similar to the other women interviewed, Liz was physically abused as a child. When asked about what growing up was like for her, Liz responded,

My mom was always around,. She didn't work too much 'cause my dad wouldn't let her. Um, my dad was a [occupation] and when he did come home, I was the one, I got the beatings. I got them. Um, he'd throw me up and down stairs and hit me with, with my dolls, or a belt, or a spoon or whatever. My brother did something wrong, I got the beating.

When she was 12 years old, Liz's mother asked her father to leave – and he did.

And so my mom said, 'That's it. Get out.' And he left.

(What was it like for you after he left?)

I was happy. I was glad he was gone.

(Were things better then?)

Well it was. We had a hard time because we didn't have a lot of money or anything like that but it was a lot better than him being there.

Although Liz's childhood markedly improved after her father left the home, she subsequently partnered with two men who, much like her father, were controlling and abusive. She started dating her first boyfriend at 17 and describes him as a "bad alcoholic" who gave her "beats all the time." The last incident, which prompted her to leave, involved a very public beating with a belt in the open area in front of their apartment building. Two days after her relationship with him ended, Liz started seeing another man. Liz's second boyfriend introduced increased danger to her life, as he did things "worse than [her first boyfriend] ever did."

Like I couldn't wear certain things, I couldn't put make-up on. I had to phone him constantly. [First boyfriend] didn't care where I went, he was drunk all the time. So it, it doesn't matter. It could be no drugs, it could be no alcohol, it could be nothing and they'd still beat you up.

On one occasion, he punched Liz in the face and strangled her, leaving her with a black eye and strangulation marks around her neck.

The only context in which Liz has ever used violence is in defending herself against her abusers.

(Have you ever used violence?)

Um, I fought back once with my [first boyfriend]. And the last time, I fought with my [second boyfriend], I fought back. But I don't go around beating people up or anything like that. No, that's not my thing...

(What made you decide to fight back?)

Um, I don't know. I was sick of getting beaten up all the time. Just, I guess something snapped in me and I just decided, forget it, I'm not gonna sit here and take it anymore.

(So what was, what was that like, I mean, did it make a difference when you fought back?)

Yeah, they stopped dead in their tracks. Couldn't believe I was fighting back ... I don't know. I guess they, they think they have this control over us, that they can do whatever to us that they want. And eventually they're, they're just shocked that we fought back, and they're just, 'Okay, well now she's gonna fight me back. What's the use?' They, it's like they get a joy out of it. They get this thrill out of beating the crap out of women.

Liz's use of violence, then, may be understood in the context of resisting male violence.

Since coming to the prison, Liz has received counselling and credits this with finding the strength to leave her abusive partner and to testify against him in court.

Linda's Story

Linda is a Métis woman in her early twenties. At the time of the interview, she was being detained on remand for a series of thefts and robberies perpetrated with her cousins.

Much of Linda's violent behaviours, like Liz's, have occurred in the context of fighting back with her intimate partners.

Linda described her childhood as “generally good.”⁹ The abuse she did encounter was at the hands of multiple boyfriends. Two years after having her first child, Linda gave birth to twins at 16. In remembering their father, she remarked, “It never worked. He always, uh, put me in the hospital and that. And he had, like, a gun to me before.” When this relationship ended, Linda became involved with and married another man. The relationship became violent shortly after the marriage ceremony.

Everything was okay when we were boyfriend and girlfriend, then after we got married, a month, first month, everything was just so different. He changed. That's when he started to hit me and that.

It was in this relationship that Linda started to fight back.

He was all drunk and he stabbed me. And he got charged with, uh, like for stabbing me.

(Where did he stab you?)

In the lung ... And after I healed, I guess he came out of jail and I started seeing him again. Then that's when he started fighting me again. This one time I just couldn't take it anymore, that he was fighting me, and, uh, I was on the ground and I stood up and I punched him in the face two times. But it still didn't help.

(Did you get charged for that one?)

Uh, yeah.

Women's violence, in the context of resisting abuse, produces differential results.

Recall that for Liz, fighting back made a difference; in both instances, her becoming violent ended the abuse (during those particular incidents at least). For Linda, her resistance efforts did not stop the abuse and resulted in criminal charges for her under Manitoba's zero-tolerance policy.¹⁰

⁹ Linda did state that she was molested at age 10 but provided no further details.

¹⁰ This policy mandates that the police lay a charge when there are “reasonable grounds to believe that a domestic assault or some other offence has occurred” (Winnipeg Police Department, 1993: 6). Since the policy's introduction in 1993, the proportion of women's charges accounted for by partner violence has increased substantially: from 23 percent in 1991 to 57 percent in 1993 (Wood, 2001).

Whereas Liz's violence occurred only in the context of directly responding to abuse, Linda was also violent in other contexts. Similar to Deanne and Rita, Linda often gets violent when she is drinking.

(You say that you drink, 'cause of all that stuff that's gone on with your partners. Um, do you think you have a lot of anger around that?)

No, just hurt.

(It just hurts, yeah. Do you think, would you define yourself as a violent person?)

No, I don't. Just (pause). Like, when I'm drunk then, I don't know, there's a part of me, like, no one sees of me before. Then I just lash out.

In these instances of 'lashing out,' too, there are expressed connections between Linda's experiences of victimization (and her drinking and feelings of hurt) and her use of violence.

Drawing the Connections Between Victimization and Violence

The stories presented here – of Deanne, Rita and especially Liz and Linda – are akin to those contained in previous feminist research on women's conflicts with the law. Indeed, the women's stories share many parallels in terms of the connections that have been outlined between victimization and violence. In Kathleen Daly's (1998) research on women's pathways to lawbreaking, she highlights two scenarios that explicitly link victimization to criminal behaviours: harmed and harming women and battered women. The category 'harmed and harming women' is meant to capture situations where women's physically and emotionally difficult experiences in childhood are later reproduced in their own harming behaviour. Typically, such a woman has been "abused by an adult male" and "her criminal acts occurred when she was unable to control her rage, often when she was drunk or unable to cope with problems" (Daly: 1998: 141).

Deanne, Rita and Linda's stories could be located within this scenario. Each of these women were abused as children (and as adults) and these experiences of harm had a sustained impact on their lives. The 'battered women' pathway applies where women "would not have appeared before the court had they not been in relationships with violent men" (Daly, 1998: 143); a scenario which corresponds to Liz's use of violence. For Liz, the connection between victimization and violence was immediate, as she was only physically aggressive in the context of fighting back.

Feminists have also framed women's law violations as being part of their resisting and coping with their abuse experiences (Comack, 1996b). The notion that women's violence may be explained as resisting their abusers was represented in some of the women's accounts. All of Liz's violence, and much of Rita's and Linda's, may be located within the context of resisting abuse at the time it was happening. In coping with abuse, violence may be "located as one of the ways in which a woman contends with the abuse and its effects on her life" (p. 83). Through drinking and then engaging in violence, Rita, Deanne and Linda were all struggling to cope with their histories of abuse. The connection – between drinking to cope with abuse and becoming violent – appeared in each of these women's stories; however, the lines between victimization and violence were not linear. The women's own violent behaviours emerged in differing contexts: Rita and Deanne were violent with partners who did not physically abuse them, while Linda engaged in violence outside of the context of an intimate partner relationship. Clearly, women have complex, plural responses to their experiences of abuse. Being victimized was experienced uniquely by each of these women and the effects expressed differentially over time.

In sum, the examples of women's violence presented here are comparable to those delineated in previous research. The feminist discourse, with its emphasis on the prevalence of victimization and far-reaching impacts of patriarchy in women's lives, resonates with the women's stories. It is a discourse that reflects a majority of the women's experiences. Within the women's narratives, however, there is also evidence that the connections between victimization and violence are more complex than those suggested by previous feminist research. Moreover, attention to how women represent themselves in their stories highlights some of the limitations of relying on women's status as 'victims' to account for all of their violent behaviours.

Finding Fractures: Tensions and Contradictions in the Victim Identity

While the women's narratives offer support for the feminist discourse on the Violent Woman, they also reveal some of the tensions and contradictions inherent in casting violent women solely as victims. That is, there are contexts in which the women do not unitarily identify themselves as victims and instances where being victimized does not appear to contribute, either indirectly or directly, to women's violent behaviours. These fractures appear most acutely in Cynthia's story.

Cynthia's Story

In many regards, Cynthia's¹¹ childhood was much like the other women interviewed. She grew up in a home where "there was always violence," and describes her father as "very loud and boisterous and scary ... and mean." Throughout her early years, Cynthia

¹¹ When asked about her racial/ethnic status, Cynthia indicated that she was Métis; however, she referred to herself as a "white woman" at one point during the interview.

witnessed her father's constant abuse and mistreatment of her mother, was abused herself (often being held accountable for her younger siblings' behaviours), and moved around a lot, between her parents and both sets of grandparents. Now 40, Cynthia has reflected a great deal on how violence and victimization have figured in her life.

In part to get away from the abuse at home, Cynthia married young. "About 17, 18 till about 28, I was really (sniffs), I had the marriage, the two kids, the house with two cars, good jobs." Cynthia described her first long-term relationship as "good," aside from the occasional argument, until she initiated a trial separation. Within days of her moving out and taking the two children, "He (her ex-husband) broke into the house and he had a gun with him. And, uh, first he beat the shit out of me and then, uh, he wanted to use the gun." Despite the fact that a family member was able to intervene in the incident, the consequences were still severe. Cynthia "had welts for maybe like three-four months after. It still affects me now, in the mornings especially, 'cause he just choked. I was just full, head-to-toe, of bruises." Cynthia's next partner was "really, super, super abusive." In discussing their relationship, Cynthia said

He started controlling who I talked to and giving his opinions on who I should see and shouldn't see. And then the first slap came and it shocked the shit out of me. But it just kept happening more and more and I kept trying to fix it more, or fix me more and more so I wouldn't get this.

Violence was a regular feature of Cynthia's life during this period. At one point, the couple was evicted from several apartments (because of neighbours calling the police in response to the abuse) and was known to almost "every police officer in the city."

In providing her interpretation of the dynamics of the relationship, Cynthia identified herself as a victim; however, this was not a status that she assumed unconditionally.

Like when I am on the job or something, I can be aggressive, I like a challenge. I can be aggressive, so for them to picture me in my job, those who knew me in my job, to, to a pitiful creature that is on the floor, you know, that is considered nothing. For them to see those two, you know, as one person, is kind of, no it ain't going to work. But I was that. I felt like two people. On the job, I was happy and I was secure and I could boss anybody around, it didn't bother me ... But when I left that, when the bell rang it was time to go home, then it was, oh god, what is going to happen when I get home, you know. I don't even want to go home, just always lived in, never knowing what was going to happen.

This portion of Cynthia's narrative illustrates that while she was willing to embrace the victim discourse in understanding the power and control which her abuser exercised in the relationship, she was also aware of a separate identity, one where she was active and in control of her life. In her words, she was "two people," represented by two contradictory identities.

In addition to the tension between being a victim in one context and not in another, there was variation in the extent to which Cynthia saw herself as a victim within the context of the relationship. After residing with her second partner for some time, Cynthia lost custody of and contact with her children. Feeling alone, Cynthia "hooked up" with her partner again. It was at this time that she "started drinking just as much as he did" and the boundary between being a victim and a perpetrator of abuse began to blur.

And, uh, we moved onto [street] and for the next six months, because I was so mad at everybody, like, nobody was on my side, nobody understood me, nobody knew what I was going through. And, uh, for the next six months, I hit, basically I think I tried to compete with him, you know, who is going to get drunkest the fastest (chuckle). And sometimes if I knew, you could always tell when he was angry, which with me was, by that time, eighty percent of the time. So sometimes if I could see him stewing and the snide remarks coming and stuff and then, uh, I actually sometimes would hit first. You know, if you are going to get this, if I am going to get beat up, let's just start it now, get it over with.

Here, Cynthia does not definitively define herself as either a victim or a perpetrator of violence. As such, her account points to the need for an understanding of women's

violence that acknowledges the fluidity of – and tensions within – women’s status as victims.

Though feminists have been reluctant to do so, it is also important to acknowledge that women’s violence occurs outside of the context of intimate partner relationships. Cynthia, for instance, was charged with assault with a weapon for a physical confrontation with a woman in front of a North-End drinking establishment about one year prior to the interview. She does not remember the incident well (she was on prescription medication and also had been drinking at the time), however she was able to explain what happened by piecing together her memories with the statements of witnesses and the police.

I guess it was pretty down and dirty. She [a witness] said that I had backed up against a wall and this girl had backed up and get with her friends. And as they started to walk away, she said, ‘Come on bitch, want some more, want some more.’ And apparently, I guess I had taken a beer bottle, I don’t know if it was one that was on the ground or one that was in that six pack, smashed it against the wall and I said, ‘Okay, let’s go.’ And she came at me and we went. And, uh, when the police were called, the police came and tried splitting us up and an ambulance arrived because she was bleeding pretty bad. And, uh, they were trying to get her in the ambulance but I was trying more. So apparently I was fighting the paramedics and I was fighting the police to get at this girl still.

Cynthia (as well as many of the other women interviewed, as we will see in the next two chapters) often initiated violence outside of her intimate partner relationships. An obvious limitation of the feminist ‘victim discourse’ is its inability to account for or explain women’s violence which occurs in these contexts.

Constituting Violent Women as Victims

Does the feminist discourse – which essentially defines the Violent Woman as the Victimized Woman – make sense for the women interviewed in this research? While the

feminist discourse has been the subject of intense criticism, its utility was affirmed here. In each of the women's accounts of their lives, victimization appears as a pervasive and normative feature; all of the women experienced violence and abuse as children and/or as adults, and the impact of these experiences was significant and long lasting. For many of the women, the connections between being victimized and their own uses of violence were readily apparent. Nowhere is this more the case than in Liz's and Linda's stories, where their violence consisted of actively resisting abuse at the time it was happening. The connections were also evident, but more complex, in some of the other women's stories. Cynthia's violent behaviours occurred in the context of an incredibly abusive relationship, but it was she, at times, who initiated the violence and abuse. Likewise, Deanne and Rita used violence against partners who were not physically abusive.

In these instances, it cannot be said that being abused 'caused' the women to be violent, as the connections between victimization and violence were neither solid nor direct. Nevertheless, the women's experiences of victimization clearly contributed to their own uses of violence. Whether it be in terms of drinking alcohol to cope, being overwhelmed by feelings of hurt and anger or instigating fights to 'get it over with,' much of the women's violence was rooted, in one way or another, in their experiences of victimization. In this sense, the feminist discourse which locates women's violence in terms of their status as 'victims' of male violence – or in the structural context of patriarchy – has considerable merit. That is not to say, however, that women's victim status should serve as a master narrative to understand their violent behaviours. The victim discourse is limited in the extent to which it explains incidents where women

initiate violence in their intimate relationships and, even more so, where women perpetrate violence outside of the context of partner abuse.

Although the feminist discourse around the Violent Woman is somewhat incomplete, women do draw on it in telling their stories and understanding their violence. While the women were questioned about experiences of victimization and perpetrating violence, it was evident that the majority of the women were more comfortable detailing their victimization experiences and its effects on their lives than their own use of violence. Further, some of the women – like those featured in this chapter – explicitly connected these experiences to their own use of violence. In this respect, the women seemed to make use of feminist discourses, as Heidensohn (1994) suggested, which acknowledge the significance of women’s experiences of victimization and the gendered contexts in which women’s violence takes place. The feminist discourse was also utilized in the women’s narratives in terms of how they understood their own culpability in entering into and staying in abusive relationships. In company with many feminist writers, Cynthia resisted the discourse that essentially blamed her for the abuse she encountered. She commented, “I still can’t see myself being able to picture one [an abuser] off right away, like everybody assumed I should have been able to (short pause). That is such a big misconception. Whoa. Such a big one.” When a social worker told her, ‘It’s your fault that you picked these men,’ Cynthia responded with: “But wait a minute here, I was in an abusive situation. I eventually did get out!”

Nevertheless, there were also places where the victim discourse did not resonate with the women’s accounts. Some of the women accepted the victim discourse insofar as it explained the power imbalances in their relationships with men, but they did not

identify themselves as victims across all aspects of their lives (or adopt the 'victim' label as a master status). Cynthia, for example, described her identity within her relationship as being in flux, varying from passive victim to instigator. She also stressed that she acted very differently at home as opposed to work – on the job, Cynthia maintained an aggressive, assertive and in control personae. Other women also talked about being active employees, friends and parents in the contexts of their day-to-day lives. Moreover, when the women were asked whether they saw themselves as victims or as perpetrators of violence, their responses were quite varied. In some instances, women identified unambiguously as victims, forced to use violence in conditions not of their own choosing. In other accounts, women identified themselves as perpetrators of violence, both within and outside of the context of intimate partner relationships. In still others, women identified themselves as both a victim and a perpetrator of violence, making it erroneous to categorize the women as either victims or perpetrators. Understanding the complexity of women's violence, then, requires paying attention to the multiple and overlapping identities represented in their narratives.

To conclude, feminist criminological theorizing and research have provided critical insights into the significance of the structural context of patriarchy (specifically, victimization experiences) in women's lives and in explaining their violence. In the present study, women's narratives revealed a multitude of connections between women's experiences of abuse and their subsequent uses of violence. In drawing out the nature of these connections, though, feminists may have erred in employing victimization as an all-encompassing explanation of women's conflicts with the law. Focussing on patriarchy (and victimization) does not reflect the scope or the complexity of women's experiences

and, at the same time, obscures the contexts of poverty and racism in their lives. In addition, women identify with multiple statuses in making sense of their violent behaviours, including, but not limited to, that of victim. To this extent, there is a grain of truth in the critiques lodged by Pearson (1997a) and others. Constituting the Violent Woman as 'victim' only captures part of her story – and runs the risk of downplaying her agency and her potential for violence.

While the feminist discourse has some resonance in the women's lives, can the same be said of the view that casts them as 'bad' women? This is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Constituting Violent Women as Bad: From Lombroso to Pearson

When women commit violent crimes they are seen to have breached two laws: the law of the land, which forbids violence, and the much more fundamental 'natural' law, which says women are passive carers, not active aggressors. (Lloyd, 1995:36)

The construction of the Violent Woman as 'bad' in criminology has a history that dates back to Lombroso and Ferrero's classic depiction of *The Female Offender* in 1895. In this and much of the ensuing criminological discourse around women's violence, two distinct groups of women are created: 'good,' non-criminal women and 'bad,' criminal women. Whereas 'good' women are characterized as gentle, chaste and caring mothers and wives, 'criminal' women are cast as wicked, manipulative and deceitful. The Violent Woman is branded as particularly unnatural; her actions betray what it means to be 'womanly.' In Ann Lloyd's (1995: 36) terms, "Such a woman is doubly deviant. Not only is she being tried for her crime, but [for] how she measures up to the idea of proper womanhood." For early writers like Lombroso, it was a woman's sex (or biology) that explained her 'badness'; that is, there was something aberrant about a woman's physiology that propelled her to act in an 'unnatural' or violent manner. In contemporary popular discourse, the 'bad' label persists; however, women are portrayed more as rational, culpable actors than as controlled by their biology. Common to these understandings is that it is something about a particular woman – whether it be her genetic and chromosomal makeup or her cold and calculating character – that causes her to be violent. The purpose of this chapter is to critically assess the construction which casts violent women as 'bad,' evil and unlike women in general.

The Road from Lombroso to the Present is Surprisingly Straight¹

Although Caesar Lombroso and William Ferrero's (1895) theoretical ideas are clearly outdated – and their methods and findings have been deemed unreliable – feminist writers argue that their book, *The Female Offender*, had a significant impact on the criminological discipline, specifically in how it theorizes women's crime (Gavigan, 1993; Heidensohn, 1996; Morris, 1987; and Smart, 1977). According to Dorie Klein (1973: 7), mainstream criminologists have relied, to varying degrees, “on those sexist ideologies based on *implicit* assumptions about the physiological and psychological nature of women that are *explicit* in Lombroso's work.” Before elaborating on how Lombroso's legacy is reflected in contemporary discourse, it is useful to first consider how he viewed women's criminality.

Based on a series of measurements of the skulls and other bones of women offenders (mostly women who worked as prostitutes), Lombroso (1895)² concluded that women criminals were, by nature, different than other women. While he considered all women to be inherently jealous and inclined to vengeance, Lombroso argued that these ‘defects’ were neutralized in ‘normal’ women by their limited intelligence and their inclination to fulfill maternal roles. Criminal women, in contrast, lacked these so-called normalizing physiological traits. Lombroso likened this distinction – between ‘non-criminal’ and ‘criminal’ women – to the difference between a “normal sister” and a “monster” (1895: 151-2).

The born female criminal is, so to speak, doubly exceptional as a woman and as a criminal. For criminals are an exception among civilized people, and women are

¹ Borrowed from Klein (1973: 7).

² Given that the majority of criminological texts credit Lombroso with this work, only his name will be used in this and subsequent citations.

an exception among criminals ... As a double exception, the criminal woman is consequently a monster. Her normal sister is kept in the paths of virtue by many causes, such as maternity, piety, weakness, and when these counter influences fail, and a woman commits a crime, we may conclude that her wickedness must have been so enormous before it could triumph over so many obstacles.

He goes on to say that in the female criminal, there is “an inversion of all of the qualities which specially distinguish the normal woman; namely, reserve, docility and sexual apathy” (Lombroso, 1895: 297). Here, we see the good woman/bad woman dichotomy being enshrined in criminological theory and explained by biological difference. For Lombroso, the criminal woman is not only a “double exception” but a “monster,” and it is her unnatural biology or her lack of “feminine qualities” that explains her involvement in crime.³

Since Lombroso (1895) introduced his understanding of women’s criminality, numerous criminological theories have similarly relied on unquestioned assumptions about women’s nature to explain their conflicts with the law. In the early 1920s, for example, W.I. Thomas (1923) alleged that women instinctually have a greater need and desire for love than men, which leads some women to engage in prostitution. According to Thomas, ‘good girls’ were able to neutralize their want for love and keep their bodies as an investment for marriage, while ‘bad girls’ traded their bodies for sex and excitement (conveniently, the good girls in Thomas’s study had no economic motive to engage in prostitution). In 1951, Otto Pollak proffered his theory of women’s crime. Pollak – like those before him – understood women’s criminality as having a physiological base. Specifically, women’s ability to conceal orgasm, as well as

³ Interestingly, Lombroso (1895: 151) argued that while women’s violence was rare in comparison to men, when the “bad qualities” of women were awakened, they were transformed into a “born criminal more terrible than any man.”

menstruation, pregnancy and menopause, were all cited as contributing to women's deceptive and vengeful nature. Unlike other mainstream theorists, Pollak argued that women did not commit significantly less crime than men; rather, women were simply better at ensuring that their activities went undetected. He saw women's isolation in the private sphere, accompanied by their adherence to conventional caretaker roles, as hiding their inherently sinister side from public view (Leonard, 1982). Also advancing a biological determinist approach, John Cowie, Valerie Cowie and Eliot Slater (1968) claimed that the majority of women, by virtue of inheriting specific genes, were more passive than men. Like Lombroso, Cowie et al. claimed that some women were predisposed toward crime and deviance and, further, that these women (girls) could be identified by a distinguishing physique as "oversized, lumpish, uncouth and graceless" (1968: 167). Indeed, all of these theoretical accounts, from Thomas to Cowie et al., are consistent with Lombroso's approach to theorizing women's crime in that they reduce women's criminality – and by extension their violence – to their biological and/or psychological nature.

In 1973, Dorie Klein proclaimed that the "road from Lombroso to the present is surprisingly straight," meaning that much of the criminological theorizing around women continued to rest on the assumption that their criminality is the result individual characteristics. To some extent, this continues to be the case, especially within mainstream theorizing.⁴ In a like-minded piece, Carol Smart (1977) critiqued the theories

⁴ Katherina Dalton (1961; 1980), for example, used Pre-Menstrual Syndrome (or women's hormonal changes) to explain their criminality. More recently, Gove (1985 as cited in Morris, 1987) explained the stability of men and women's crime rates over time as evidence of the persistence of biological differences (where women's conciliatory nature explains their lower incidence of criminal activity).

of Lombroso (1895), Pollak (1951) and Cowie et al. (1968). Smart noted that these theories were unscientific (as they were based on common-sense understandings of human nature) and used sexist ideologies (or ideologies which attribute to women socially undesirable, intrinsic characteristics). Further, these theories failed to distinguish between sex (as a biological category) and gender (as a social category). That a woman's behaviour is socially defined as unfeminine – or as masculine – is simply not evidence of her being sexually or biologically abnormal.⁵ Lastly, Smart (1997: 93) highlighted that in these formulations “the social and cultural conditions under which the act took place can be relegated to the vague status of ‘environmental’ factors whose only role is to occasionally ‘trigger’ the inherent pathology of the deviant.” Thus, the purpose of Klein's and Smart's pointed critiques was to challenge the widespread assumption that there is something inherently wrong with or different about women who come into conflict with the law, and to advise one to look beyond individual pathology in making sense of women's behaviours.

Patricia Pearson's (1997a) perspective on women's violence follows from those advanced by mainstream criminologists and, as such, is subject to many of the same criticisms. In an effort to emphasize women's capacity for agency and violence (and, at the same time, downplay their status as victims), Pearson (1997a: 23) asserts that women are “responsible actors imposing their will upon the world.” While Pearson's work departs somewhat from traditional theories in that she does not use women's inherent nature to explain their crime, she too stereotypes women who use violence as ‘bad.’

⁵ Also worth noting is that these theorists, in defining the ‘good woman’ as the epitome of femininity, conceptualized femininity in classist, racist and heterosexist terms. Within these theories, women who are economically marginalized, non-white or lesbian would likely be looked upon as ‘bad’ regardless of their behaviours.

“Female prisoners,” writes Pearson (1997a: 210), “are not peace activists or nuns who were kidnapped off the street and stuck in jail. They are *miscreants, intemperate, willful and rough*” (emphasis added). These women are said to differ qualitatively from other women, and are depicted as the epitome of the cold, calculating actor. Feminist writers have critiqued Pearson’s work for perpetuating the assumption that the Violent Woman is, by definition, different than other women, and for failing to locate her violent behaviours in any kind of context. Wendy Chan (2001: 30), for one, noted that Pearson failed to demonstrate

any real understanding of why women choose to respond to particular situations with violence. As a subject of discussion, the topic of violent women as presented by Pearson goes no further than recognizing that women are using violence because they *choose* to do so. (emphasis added)

So, much like earlier formulations of the bad or evil woman, attention to the contexts in which women’s violence takes place is noticeably absent in Pearson’s theorizing.

The following sections will discuss the extent to which the ‘bad’ label resonates with the accounts of the women interviewed for the present study. Does the ‘bad’ construction make sense when one considers the contexts in which women’s violence occurs? Is there something inherently wrong with or different about women who use violence? Do the women utilize the ‘bad discourse’ in telling their stories?

Contextualizing Women’s Violence

The construction of the Violent Woman as ‘bad’ continues to be reflected in contemporary discourse and popular media portrayals of women who are violent. Put simply, the primary shortcoming of the ‘bad woman’ construction is that it concentrates solely on the woman involved and ignores the context in which her violence takes place.

The majority of feminist research in the area focuses on women's violence that occurs in the particular context of abusive relationships. In the present study, eight of the women interviewed perpetrated violence against an intimate partner. Two women were only violent with their partner in the context of fighting back; four of the women reported resisting abuse and initiating fights with their partners; and two women only talked about instances where they perpetrated the abuse. To date, there has been little research on the other contexts in which women's violence occurs. Over two-thirds of the women in this study were violent outside of the context of an intimate partner relationship. Specifically, five of the women reported getting into fights with male friends, acquaintances and/or strangers; five women assaulted other women; three women used violence toward a family member; and four women assaulted a person in a position of authority. In addition, nine of the women had committed robbery as either a youth or an adult.

One of the advantages of this research, then, is that it allows for an investigation of the other contexts in which women's violence takes place. In this section, two of the women's stories will be elaborated upon in some detail to describe what this violence looks like and, more importantly, to locate the violence within the women's biographies.

Violence and the Street: Working in the Sex Trade and Crack Cocaine

The two most common contexts in which women reported violence breaking out was in their intimate relationships with men and on the street. While the previous chapter focussed on women's violence in the context of an intimate relationship, the focus here is on what may be termed 'street violence.' In Kathleen Daly's (1998) discussion of women's pathways to crime and violence, she used the 'street women' scenario to

describe women who run away from home and then commit an assortment of violent and other offences on the streets. According to Daly (1998: 136), for these women, “life on the street leads to drug use and addiction, which in turn leads to more frequent lawbreaking to support a drug habit.” In general, these women do not complete high school and have no or negligible employment histories, and move between incarceration and time on the streets. This pathway was most evident in the Aboriginal women’s stories: 10 of the 13 Aboriginal women left home in their youth and nine worked the streets at some point in their lives.⁶ Jennifer was one of these women.

Jennifer’s Story

Jennifer is an Aboriginal woman in her early twenties who, since she was eight years old, has spent much of her life on the streets. With a grade five education and no legitimate employment history, she survived by resorting to illegal means – such as working in the sex trade and robbery – to support herself. At the time of the interview, Jennifer was awaiting a transfer to a federal penitentiary to serve three years for a series of assaults and robberies she perpetrated during a 13-day drinking and drugging binge.

Jennifer described her childhood as “pretty hard.” Both her mother and father drank a lot, and their relationship was on and off throughout her youth.

Um, it was really hard, um, growing up without my dad.

There’s not much times that I remember my dad coming to see me but when I did they’re all sad thoughts about my dad. Like, if they’d get back together, my dad would, um, drink. He would go to work on the week, during the week, and then he would get his cheque on Friday. I remember my mom always saying that, you know, ‘Oh fuck, just because you’re, just because you, you got your cheque, you’re looking for something to argue about.’ And sure enough my dad would be,

⁶ Given that this chapter focuses on the structural context in which women’s violence takes place – especially in terms of the intersections between gender, race and class – I have selected four of the Aboriginal women’s stories to inform the discussion to follow.

like, he would either slap my mom or do something to her and then go walk out the door with his cheque. And then what was heartbreaking was on Sundays when my dad was broke, and he was, you know, coming off his drunk. He had no more money to drink, he'd be crying out the window.

When Jennifer was a toddler, a man she referred to as her stepfather would call her to the basement and make her watch him “jerk himself off.” The abuse progressed and when Jennifer was just five years old, he tried to have anal sex with her.

My mom went somewhere and he had, he, he took me in the bathroom of our, of our house and he, of our apartment, and he tried to have anal sex with me. And I don't know how, he didn't get far, like he didn't do it completely but he tried to. And, um, he used to, he used to do all sorts of things like that ... And when he would see my mom coming home, he would start giving me a spanking and he would call me a bitch and a whore. And he told me, 'You better not tell your mom, you better not tell your mom!' And when my mom walked in the door and I was crying he would tell my mom that I was being bad.

Feeling unable to talk to her mother about these experiences and having no one else to turn to for support, Jennifer resorted to staying out late and running away. Once on the streets, she started associating with a new crowd, and began abusing sniff and other drugs. “By the time I was 11, I was drinkin' pretty heavily. I was, you know, trying to, I was trying to be with the older crowd.” Before the age of 15, Jennifer had dated two abusive men. Her first boyfriend was over 10 years older than her and stabbed her a total of five times during their two-year relationship: three times in the face, once near her armpit and once on her wrist.

When she was 12 years old – and feeling overwhelmed and “fed up” with everything – Jennifer called her parents and told them about the abuse.⁷ Though they supported her completely and both made efforts to stop their drinking, Jennifer's parents were ultimately unable to help her. For the next couple of years, she moved between

⁷ After the abuse was reported to the police, the man who sexually abused Jennifer admitted to the offences and served three months in a provincial institution.

foster homes and her mother's, and always "ended up back on the streets" of Winnipeg's inner city. It is here, specifically in the context of working in the sex trade, where all of Jennifer's violence took place.

Jennifer started working the streets for money when she was just nine years old.

Um, I was with some older girls ... So, I was sniffing, I was sittin' with them, we were sniffing, and all of a sudden a guy pulled up. And my friend Alyson, this girl knew that guy and she knew that he liked young girls. And so, um, she took me in the car with her and that was when I did my first blowjob. Um, he paid me 100 and some, 150 dollars for a blow job.

I guess I felt, I felt really excited that I had 150 dollars and for something, for something that was happening at home and I wasn't getting nothing.

With time, Jennifer worked more and more to support her increasingly serious drug addictions. In her words, she needed "substances to cope with dealing with life." She started with sniff and alcohol, then turned to marijuana and acid and, eventually, got into Ts and Rs⁸ and cocaine. "I started staying up like three, four days at a time, standing out there on the street right around the clock. I was 14 and really hooked on it, hooked on coke." More than any other drug, Jennifer's addiction to cocaine compelled her to work often. Whereas with other drugs the high "lasts a while," with cocaine, "you're done your high within a couple minutes" and then you "need a fix and need it now." The more time Jennifer spent working in the sex trade, the more bad dates she had.

I noticed that when I started doing cocaine I was more strung out than I was when I was doing Ts and Rs. Um, because of the movements I made in my body, guys would be able to know that I was on drugs and they would want to take me because they knew that they could take advantage of me.

One incident was particularly violent and prompted her to start carrying a knife.

Jennifer was in the backseat of a car having sex with a John. Just as he was "ready to go

⁸ Ts and Rs are the mixture of the prescription drugs Talwin (a pain killer) and Ritalin (a stimulant). When injected together, they produce a high similar to the effect of heroin mixed with cocaine.

off' he

wrapped his hands around my neck, his hands around my neck, and he just started choking me ... I was fighting him and I couldn't hardly speak because he was choking me so hard, and then I was going, 'I can't breathe,' (raspy voice), like that, like, making noises.

After blacking out a couple of times, Jennifer thought of her family and managed to gather the strength to get "the big man" off of her. She ran into an acquaintance on the street who retrieved her shorts from the sidewalk and walked with Jennifer to her dealer's house. In response to her saying that she did not want to go back out on the streets to work, the dealer handed her a knife and told her to use it on her next bad date. Three days later, she did. When a man made it obvious to her that he was going to force her to perform fellatio and that he had no intention of paying for it, Jennifer brandished the knife.

And I told him, 'Hey, hey, don't, please don't ... Well, he let go of my hair and the first chance that I got I pulled the knife out that was given to me and I started screaming around in his car and telling him, 'You fuckin' bastard.'

In talking about the incident, Jennifer remarked how good it felt to finally be the one in control.

He was really scared. And that's something that I wasn't used to, I was always the one being the victim, I was always the one that was in control of and this time I was being in control.

Subsequent to this incident, Jennifer regularly "jacked up Johns," meaning she used a weapon to scare and intimidate men and then take their money. In each instance, she was using alcohol and other drugs, as she "wouldn't have been able to do it straight." Usually, this practice was reserved for men who "triggered" her by calling her names.

If a guy was giving me the right amount of money but then triggered me, like if I was drunk or something and, you know, he all of a sudden called me a bitch or a whore, well I would think back to when my stepdad used to call me a bitch and a whore and spank me ... Doesn't matter how much money they're paying me, I'll jack them up. I'll think of what my stepdad did to me and take it out on that man.

Other times, she would do it because she saw men strolling the streets as “scum” who deserved it.

I started getting the idea in my head, well, these guys shouldn't be out here, they're probably at home sexually abusing their own kid, they're fuckin' sick enough to be out here to look for the youngest girl on the street.

After being charged with assault with a weapon at age 17, Jennifer replaced the knife with a syringe (if she had continued to carry the knife, she could have been charged with breaching the conditions of her weapons prohibition). Apparently, this was an even more effective scare tactic: “Once they seen that needle, they, like, totally froze.”

In the months preceding her most recent incarceration, Jennifer's life temporarily took a turn for the better. She met a man who she could talk to and who she felt at ease with, became pregnant with her second child (her first remains in her mother's custody), and stopped using substances. Unfortunately, her boyfriend was apprehended on a Canada-wide warrant about one month prior to her due date and her baby was taken from her immediately after being born. Ironically, the social worker involved was the one who “gave up on her” as a child. Jennifer maintained that she attended pre-natal classes and only used once during her pregnancy, making the baby's apprehension a devastating disappointment to her. Following this, Jennifer became deeply depressed. After a 13-day binge of drinking and doing cocaine, she ended up in custody with some 22 new charges.

Is Jennifer simply a ‘bad’ woman who coldly calculates her use of violence?

Patricia Pearson would likely look at Jennifer's actions – using weapons to scare and rob male ‘Johns’ – as evidence that she is a highly aggressive and dangerous woman.

Attention to the context in which these actions took place, however, reveals that the situation is much more complex than that.

In Jennifer's account of her experiences with violence, she identified herself as "both" a victim and a perpetrator. Like so many of the women, Jennifer's experiences of victimization had a profound and long-lasting impact on her life. To escape being sexually abused by her stepfather, she started running away at age eight; however, street life did not shelter Jennifer from being abused. She explained, "Like, I learned on the street and from being beaten up from my boyfriends and everything, I learned to take a really good lickin.'" Around the same time, Jennifer started using alcohol and other drugs to cope with her feelings of anger and confusion. It was her addiction to cocaine that drove her to spend the majority of her time working in the sex trade. Other women discussed the power of their addiction in similar terms.⁹ Cheryl, for instance, remarked

Like this bad date would just, you know, rape the shit out of you and then kick your ass, and then, you know, you'd be laying there on the ground all beaten up and violated.

[So what would you do?]

Dust myself off and get back up and go back to work.

[But how did you deal? I guess the drugs, is that how you dealt with it?]

The drugs, the drugs took over. You make it. Something was inside your body, it felt like the devil was in your body and you didn't care. And all you wanted was in that drug. That devil was the drug and you just wanted to keep pushing it in your arm - no matter what the cost.

Because Jennifer was afraid to continue working as a prostitute but still depended on the money to support her cocaine addiction, she started carrying a weapon. It is worth restating that all of her violence occurred in the specific context of the inner city streets and was directed toward male 'Johns.'

For Jennifer, using knives and syringes to threaten and rob men felt good – not

⁹ Of the 17 women interviewed, seven discussed abusing cocaine, all of whom were Aboriginal.

because she was a 'bad' or evil woman – but because she had never been in a position of power before. Finally, she was not the one being victimized, and she had some means to control what happened to her. “And after that [the first incident where she used the knife], I had a rush. I had a rush of being in control. Well after that day I didn't, I can tell you honestly that I don't think I've ever had a bad date again.” While Jennifer's use of violence initially protected her from bad dates, her violent behaviours seemed to escalate out of control in the days before her most recent incarceration. In her words, Jennifer got “carried away.” Clearly, attention to the range of contextual factors which contributed to Jennifer's use of violence – including her experiences of abuse, working in the sex trade and her addiction to cocaine – is key to understanding how it is that she came to behave so 'badly.' Cheryl's story further illustrates how the context of the street figures in women's use of violence.

Cheryl's story

Cheryl is an Aboriginal woman in her twenties who, like Jennifer, has no education beyond the elementary level and no formal employment history. The majority of her conflicts with the law are a result of robbing acquaintances and/or strangers on the street. Having been deemed an “unfit parent” by Child and Family Services, she is not allowed contact with either of her two children.

Cheryl grew up on a rural reserve and resided with her grandparents for most of her early childhood. According to Cheryl, her parents were “alcoholics” who “abandoned” her and her three siblings. Although Cheryl felt somewhat fortunate that her

grandparents were able to take in her and her brothers and sister, life with them was punctuated by violence and abuse.

My granny would beat us all the time, like when we were small. Because, um, I don't know, it felt like she had all this anger and mostly she took it out on us kids. Like, we weren't the only ones living there, there was about six other kids living with her too ... Like she really did a number on us when we were little kids. And especially me 'cause I was the oldest one and I was stuck with the responsibility of looking after my brothers and sisters ... It was pretty hard work doing all that.

While all of the children were physically abused by their grandmother, Cheryl was also sexually abused by her grandfather. She did not detail these experiences but did share that her grandfather used to give her special privileges (like extra food or television time), which made her feel like he was paying her to put up with the abuse and to keep it a secret. When Cheryl was 10 years old, her aunt – who suspected that she was being sexually abused – took her to a doctor so that she could talk to someone about the abuse.

I didn't feel good at all because I wrote, my statement was so long from, from telling of all the things that he done to me, like all the sexual things ... And the cops intervened, they went to my reserve, they talked to my granny and they showed them my statement. They showed them everything I said. And that's what ruined me. My granny called me a liar.

Cheryl's disclosure improved the situation in that it put an end to the abuse, but it was met with extreme anger and disbelief by the majority of her family.

Shortly after making the official statement against her grandfather, Cheryl was abandoned by her family a second time and “thrown” into foster care on a different reserve.¹⁰ This was an especially tough time for Cheryl, as she felt betrayed by her relatives, had no friends on the reserve and did not get along with any of her foster parents. From age 10 to 13, she frequently “took off” and ran away, and was moved from foster home to foster home. In talking about these years of her life, Cheryl commented,

¹⁰ Cheryl does not know what happened in her grandfather's case. Given that she was never asked to testify in court, it is likely that the case was dismissed or stayed.

“So I had it pretty rough when I was a kid, like, I hated life when I was young ... I hated being alive.” When she was 13 years old, Cheryl was returned to her father’s care, and spent her time living either with her father, in a group home or with her grandmother. At this point, Cheryl had essentially “stopped caring” – “I’d be a really mean person. Like, I wouldn’t care about other people’s feelings or I wouldn’t care if I got killed” – and she began to use violence herself. On the reserve, she fought regularly with other girls, describing it as a “back and forth revenge thing” between herself and a group of girls who used to pick on her.

At the age of 16, Cheryl removed herself from care and moved in with a man. Two years later, the relationship “fell apart” and she left him because of his problems with alcohol and his abusive behaviours. With nowhere else to go, Cheryl ended up on the streets of downtown Winnipeg. Much like Jennifer’s experiences, Cheryl’s life on the streets revolved around working in the sex trade and an addiction to cocaine. During the interview, she remarked, “like, these are million dollar arms.”

I’m HIV positive – because of drugs ... I was shooting up and I was using drugs and I was selling my body. I was really, like, you know, that’s so humiliating when you’re standing on a street corner ... You just get this really, this evil rage inside your body where you just have to give up everything, like, you don’t care if you die tomorrow. You don’t care if, you know, you’re all high and you’re sitting in some dirty little house, you know, shooting up with everybody else’s rigs ... All you care about is that shot. And you’ll go to any length to get it – you’ll go, you’ll do violence, you’ll do crime, you know.

Aside from fighting with girls on her reserve, Cheryl’s own use of violence was very much connected to living on and working the streets.

Like I was always constantly fighting in Winnipeg, like, especially being on the streets. When you’re a prostitute, you constantly gotta fight for your corner. Or if somebody, if you take someone else’s date out and stuff like that, like, you’re always fighting. It just – no end.

Violence was also the typical means she used to exact “revenge” when necessary. On one occasion, Cheryl and two male friends went to one of her ‘trick’s’ houses to get him back for taking advantage of her. They beat and robbed the man and then left him “bleeding on his head.” As mentioned previously, the majority of Cheryl’s violence involved robbing people. During one incident, she and a girlfriend pinned a female acquaintance against a wall and stole her beer. A nearby camera recorded the assault and the police later apprehended the two. The most recent robbery, for which she was serving time, happened when Cheryl was drinking and doing drugs and decided to hold up a group of people she came across on the street. “These people I didn’t even know. I just held a knife on them, out of the blue, people I don’t even know.”

In some regards, Cheryl identified with constructions that cast violent women as ‘bad.’ She referred to herself as a “mean” person numerous times throughout the interview and also remarked that she was not “mother material.” After she revealed that she gave her daughter to Child and Family Services, she said, “It’s like I’m a psycho here, eh ... I didn’t know how to look after her.” In this sense, Cheryl seemed very much aware of the widespread assumption that ‘proper’ women are good mothers and, by definition, not violent. Nevertheless, she was also cognizant of how her experiences of abuse and her current connection to the street contributed to her violent behaviours. According to Cheryl, a lot of her anger comes from her experiences growing up, and her use of violence is the only way that she knows how to release that anger.

Like what are you supposed to do when you’re on the outs and then you all of a sudden, like, somebody gets you all mad. Like, the first thing that comes to mind is kick their ass, you know. If somebody is gonna piss you off, you know, do it.

In the context of ‘street life,’ resorting to violence is not an unusual response. Rita explained it this way:

I'm not a mean person, it's just that I don't like people screwing me around. ... Growing up, I had to fight. I had to work the streets when I was a young age just to survive, you know, eat, buy clothes, do everything on my own. I had to do that.

For Cheryl, violence was a way to manage her day-to-day troubles. If she needed to protect herself or her street corner, she would fight. If she was wronged in some way, she retaliated physically. And if she wanted money to buy drugs, she robbed someone. Being 'mean' or acting violently was not indicative of some kind of underlying pathology; it was how Cheryl survived the conditions of life on the streets.

Intersections: Gender, Race & Class

Does the discourse which defines the Violent Woman as 'bad' make sense for the women interviewed in this research? These two women's stories reveal that the 'bad woman' construction fails to capture the complexity of the women's stories. Because mainstream criminology theorists and writers like Patricia Pearson (1997a) do not consider the social situations or structural contexts which give rise to women's violent behaviours, they tend to explain very little about women's lives or their use of violence. Jennifer and Cheryl's stories, in particular, draw attention to how gender, race and class-based inequalities contribute to women's use of violence.

Conditions of patriarchy, poverty and colonization were overwhelmingly present in Jennifer and Cheryl's lives. Both women were physically and sexually abused as children. In general, Aboriginal women, especially women in prison, are more likely to be abused than non-Aboriginal women (Jackson, 1999; Shaw et al., 1991). Margaret Jackson (1999: 197) adds that Aboriginal women's experiences of victimization are unique. In her work, she makes reference to a special 'context of difference' for Canadian Aboriginal people, one that is grounded in the colonial legacy of assimilationist policies

and practices, and is marked by poverty on reserves, broken families, alcohol abuse and the abuse of children in care. Similarly, Patricia Monture-Angus (1999: 25) argues that “colonialism has had, and continues to have, a negative impact on the ability of Aboriginal people to maintain peaceful and orderly communities.” One can see this ‘context of difference’ in Jennifer and Cheryl’s stories. As young girls, their experiences of victimization were compounded by financial hardships in their homes and not having consistent familial support. Indeed, the majority of the Aboriginal women interviewed – including Jennifer and Cheryl – grew up in homes and communities devastated by alcohol abuse and violence. As a result of these experiences, many of the women ran away as children and subsequently struggled to survive independently on Winnipeg’s inner city streets.

The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba noted a trend whereby Aboriginal women “move to urban centres to escape family or community problems” and find that “what they were forced to run to is often as bad as what they had run from” (1991: 495). Likewise, Sharene Razack (2002) argues that Aboriginal women (and men) who migrate to urban centres are spatially segregated in marginalized areas. According to Razack (2002: 129), these areas are ‘racialized spaces,’ where Aboriginal peoples are essentially contained in Canada’s colonial geography. Within racialized spaces, such as Winnipeg’s inner city,¹¹ violence has come to be seen as a routine, even natural feature. Jennifer started spending time on the streets when she was just eight years old. Cheryl left her

¹¹ In Winnipeg, Aboriginal people represent approximately 84 percent of the inner city population (Loxley, as cited in Gill, 2002); within the inner city, the poverty rate among Aboriginal households is 80 percent (Lezubski, Silver & Black, 2000). It follows that Comack and Balfour (2004:93) refer to Winnipeg’s North End (or inner city) as “not only a ‘racialized space,’ but also a space occupied by disenfranchised citizens with few resources.”

reserve when she 16. Seeking escape from the abuse in their homes, both women ended up encountering additional violence on the inner city streets. Their own use of violence – rather than reflecting that something was intrinsically wrong with them – was normative within and significantly connected to the context of street life. Jennifer and Cheryl’s violence was perpetrated either while working in the sex trade or during a street robbery or assault and was usually economically motivated. Other women also explicitly connected their violent behaviours to the specific context of the inner city. One woman remarked that the only way for her to stop using violence was to “stay away from Main Street.”

In sum, attention to the social situations surrounding women’s use of violence and to the broader structural context provides an understanding of women’s violence that moves us past the contention that violence is simply an individualized, rational choice made by ‘bad’ women. As Razack (1998: 24) notes, “Rights rhetoric, beginning with the idea that each person is free to pursue his or her own interests, masks how historically organized and tightly constrained individual choices are.” Jennifer and Cheryl’s accounts underscore that women’s violence, specifically that which occurs in the context of street life, is often a ‘rational choice’ in an ‘irrational context.’ Women’s use of violence is best understood, then, as a complicated response to a complex set of circumstances and not – as Pearson (1997a) would contend – driven by the particular characters of the women involved.

Finding Fractures: Tensions and Contradictions in the Bad Identity

As the above makes clear, the main limitation of the ‘bad woman’ construction is that it ignores the context in which women’s takes place – both in terms of the circumstances surrounding a particular incident and the wider societal structures that condition and contour women’s lives. Aside from this, the bad identity is itself fraught with tensions and contradictions. The women’s narratives reveal that while some women purposefully portray themselves as ‘bad’ in certain circumstances, this is not an identity that applies across all contexts or to all aspects of women’s lives. Sharon and Kelly’s stories will be detailed here to demonstrate the nature of some of these fractures in the ‘bad woman’ identity.

Sharon’s Story

Sharon, a Métis woman, was at 18 years old the youngest woman interviewed. Her story shares many similarities with Jennifer and Cheryl’s in that she comes from what may be described as a broken home and she spent some of her teenage years on the streets.

Unlike these women, though, Sharon’s life seemed to vacillate between being on the streets and a more conventional existence. She has some secondary education (she completed grade nine) and has worked in the service sector (as a telephone surveyor and a server). At the time of the interview, she was serving a two-year sentence for robbery and kidnapping.¹²

¹² Basically, the charges were a result of a break and enter gone wrong. On the night of the incident, a man unexpectedly returned home during what was supposed to be a routine break and enter. Rather than leave – as Sharon suggested – her boyfriend insisted that they continue. He restrained the man with ties, covered his head with a sheet and forced him to help them load and unload the car, all at knifepoint. When they were apprehended and charged months later, Sharon was sentenced to just under two years and her boyfriend received seven years; he had a prior record for similar incidents and took the lead role throughout the commission of the offence.

At the age of two, Sharon was completely removed from her Aboriginal family and her community; she was adopted by a religious family and moved to a small town in Manitoba. From what she can recall, her biological father had problems with alcohol and drugs, and her parents' relationship was abusive. Although these were not issues in her new home, her adoptive parents were strict disciplinarians, often delivering harsh punishments (like pulling out "a good-sized pasture full of weeds") for minor infractions, (like "not vacuuming properly").

And my parents used to, um, use, they called it discipline but we [she and her older sister] don't really think it was discipline. We think they went over the line.

(What would they do?)

Um, they would, like, hit us. And, well, my mom pulled my hair. And, you know, pushed us around.

Sharon also felt confined at home, as she was rarely allowed to go out or to visit with friends. At the age of 15, and with the consent of her adoptive parents, Sharon went to live with her biological mother in the city. Within a month and a half, her mother "kicked her out" because Sharon kept "messing up." Throughout the course of the next year, Sharon was briefly returned home, then temporarily placed in foster care and eventually sent back to live with her adoptive parents.

During the summer months, Sharon spent her time working in the service sector to save up money to pay off a fine.¹³ In the fall of that year, Sharon, at the urging of her parents, started attending high school in a nearby urban centre. She dropped out before the end of the first month of classes.

I was just, because, um, I was so used to always going to that little school in our little town and they don't teach us half as much as we get in the cities. I couldn't keep up. And I was getting frustrated. So I would smoke drugs all day and skip

¹³ The previous year, she and a group of friends stole a van and 'rolled it,' causing several hundred dollars damage.

school. And then I got even more behind and more frustrated. So then I ended up running away from home again and I went to my sister's house.

At the time, Sharon's sister was living with a group of gang members in the city; the Spartan gang was in the process of breaking up at the time and a few of the members were residing together at a clubhouse in the interim. During her stay there, Sharon drank and did drugs (mostly marijuana) "all of the time," and started to get into "quite a bit of trouble." It was at this juncture that Sharon ostensibly stepped into the 'bad girl' identity.

I got into a few fights and it wasn't even (clears throat) for my purposes, you know. It was for other people asking me to fight because, well, the first time it was because this girl, um, she came down there to party with us and she punched my sister for no reason. And somebody came up to me, one of my friends, and he said, 'Well, this girl just punched your sister. What are you gonna do about it?' So then I went out there and I beat her up.

On a second occasion, Sharon and a group of girls beat up a girl who owed one of the male gang members money.

He told me to beat her up. And I told him I didn't know how to fight. And he says, 'Well you do because you fought that other girl' ... And I didn't know how to get out of it. So then my sister said she would beat her up and I didn't want my sister to get in trouble, so I thought I would do it instead ... But, um, so I did fight her. I started the fight, my sister got into the fight and our other friend got into the fight.

(Somebody get hurt?)

Yeah, she got hurt. Really bad.

Prior to these two episodes, Sharon had never been in a physical fight. According to her, she just "went for it" because she knew that was what was expected of her. As a result of these and other incidents (breaching the conditions of her parole by not residing with her parents), Sharon was sentenced to four months in the provincial youth centre. She credits her time there with getting her out of an incredibly unhealthy situation.

Following Sharon's release from the youth centre, she worked as a server for a couple of months and lived with a friend in her parents' small community. Feeling

“bored,” she started dating a man who was recently released from jail. Together, they regularly committed break and enters to get money to buy alcohol and drugs, including the one she was serving a two year sentence for at the time of the interview. After the incident occurred and before the two were apprehended, Sharon and her boyfriend fled to another province. Because she was afraid of her boyfriend being caught if he continued to commit break and enters, Sharon worked the streets to get money.

(Was that hard to get into?)

Very ... I hated it and I'm very ashamed of it ... 'Cause if he didn't have money for his drugs, he'd be mad. So then I felt, then I felt like I was being forced to do it. And that was even worse.

On the streets, Sharon was offered crack and soon after started to smoke it. To her mind, life could not get any worse, so she decided to “cross the line” and do cocaine. Within a couple of months, Sharon turned herself in to the police. The stress of being prosecuted – in addition to working as a prostitute, being on cocaine and being in an abusive relationship – was too much for her. In her words, “I was so messed up it wasn't even funny. Uh, everyone that knew me around the time and saw me thought I was brain dead for the rest of my life.”

Sharon's story reveals one of the fractures in the ‘bad’ identity. Namely, it is an identity that some women assume in specific situations for a particular purpose, but not one that applies across contexts. In her case, she only acted violently when called upon to protect her sister or to do the gang's “dirty work.” Outside of the context of these incidents, she did not identify herself as ‘bad’ or violent. When asked if she saw herself as a violent person, she responded, “I don't think I'm a violent person. Like, no matter how mad I get, like, I've been challenged to fight, even here [at the jail] and I always backed out because, I don't know, I think that there's so many cons to it.” Also worth

noting is the intense remorse that Sharon felt after committing these acts. She recounted “feeling really bad about it [but] not until later, you know, because when you’re in it, you don’t really think about it.”

Other women also talked about donning the ‘bad’ reputation in selective situations. Emily, for instance, referred to women’s violence as “just trying to pull solid.” When she first entered the institution, Emily wanted people to be scared of her, so she purposefully portrayed herself as bad. “Pulling solid” affords a kind of power, especially in prison, since “you get what you want if people are scared of you.” Emily has since changed her behaviour because she is ready for people to “like her.” Rita also identified with the ‘bad identity’ to some extent. She explained that she and her siblings fought to maintain a tough standing as kids; being a bully taught the kids in the neighbourhood “not to fool around with us, you know.” This was a reputation Rita carried later in life when she was living on the streets; “A lot of the people didn’t like me, you know, ‘cause I would not back down from nobody. Didn’t matter how big they are, fuckin’, it didn’t matter to me.” While Rita regarded these actions as necessary in the context of surviving street life, she also felt remorseful. She said, “It hurt me so much because I hate hurting people.”

The ‘bad’ identity, then, seems to be one that some women choose to assume at particular points in time to survive both life on the streets and in prison. In other words, while some women identify as ‘bad’ in some contexts, this is not an identity that definitively defines who the women are, nor does it apply to every aspect of their lives. Kelly’s story illustrates how women can indeed be both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ at the same time.

Kelly's story

Kelly is a Métis woman in her mid thirties. Her story, more so than any of the other women's, showcases the limitations of constructions which group women into distinct 'good' and 'bad' categories. In Kelly's words, she led a "double life." On the one hand, she was a caring and loving mother to her five children, ranging from age five to 17 (her sixth child was adopted shortly after he was born). On the other, she abused cocaine and committed violent robberies. To understand how this fracture – between being a 'good mother' and a 'violent woman' – developed, it is necessary to locate Kelly's actions in the context of her biography. Kelly's life, much like the other women interviewed, was difficult from the outset.

Kelly was the youngest of seven children and, for the majority of her childhood, was raised by her father. Her mother was forced to leave the family to save her own life.

I remember my mom always having casts or black eyes, bruises on her face. And then when I was five or six she left. Her doctor told her, 'You're gonna have a nervous breakdown or he's gonna kill you. You have to leave.' So my mom left him. She tried to take us with her but he wouldn't let her.

Kelly's father was a "bad alcoholic" and regularly abused her and her siblings. She talked about receiving regular "beats" at home, as well as him fondling her breasts beginning when she was about 12. Despite Kelly confiding to her teachers about the abuse, no one did anything about it. "You know, nowadays kids will go to school with a bruise or something, they get investigated. When I went to school with bruises ... nobody cared." When Kelly was 14 years old, her mother returned to the province and she and two of her siblings moved in with her: "I just went and lived with my mom right away. Uh, I never went back to him or nothing." Kelly's life certainly improved as a result but she continued to have troubles coping with the abuse she experienced at the hands of her

father. Soon after the move, Kelly started using alcohol and drugs (mostly marijuana and pills) with her peers, and skipping school to get drunk and high on drugs. According to Kelly, she did it because she “liked the feeling” and it made her “forget about” her dad.

Kelly started seeing her first partner when she was 17; they lived together for a couple of years and had two children together. During the first pregnancy, Kelly quit drinking and doing drugs entirely. Being a good mother – especially considering her own experiences with her father – was of great importance to her. In fact, the reason why she left her first partner was because she feared that he was a danger to the children (he was using and dealing drugs at the time). Shortly after the breakup, Kelly met and married another man. Throughout the course of their six-year relationship, they had two sons and one daughter. In the beginning, their partnership was “good” and they “never fought.” The situation changed about two years into the relationship when Kelly received a telephone call from a woman claiming that she was sleeping with her partner and about to have his child.

After that, I went out and started drinking more. I'd go out after work and I would drink. And then I got into cocaine with some people in the bar, like, customers. They'd say, 'Come on, let's go for a drink.' And I'd go. And I never used to, I'd go right home from work before.

(What, what changed?)

I couldn't trust him anymore because just the thought, like, he, he's such a good liar. He was seeing this woman for a year, I didn't know it ... Like we would have had a good sex life, sex three times a day sometimes, you know. He had his, the house was always spotless. The kids are taken care of. He had it all.

In her mind, Kelly had a “happy life” and was a “good wife and a good mom,” so her partner's infidelity came as a complete shock to her. It was at this point that the fracture in Kelly's life began to develop; she was trying her best to be a “good wife and a good mom” and also regularly abusing drugs.

Kelly and her second partner continued to live together for four years but things were never the same. What prompted her to end the relationship was a “huge argument,” in which her son witnessed her partner raising his voice and pushing Kelly to the floor. When Kelly’s son said that he was “scared of [his stepdad],” Kelly told him, “You don’t have to be scared, We’ll leave.” She moved out with her children that day and soon after the fracture between her “good” and “bad” selves became even more pronounced.

This is where the nightmare really begins (laughs). I moved into this little place with my four kids. And, um, it was a tiny little two bedroom house and I was still wired on coke ... But I wasn’t working, I was just on welfare. So I started robbing places. I had this 16 year old girl that would baby sit and I would go out for the night and go rob somebody or a store and go get high. And I’d come home like four or five in the morning and then I’d have to get up a couple hours later to get the kids ready for school. And it was terrible.

Kelly was literally leading two lives – at night she would rob stores to get money, while during the day she was doing her best to lead a ‘normal’ life. Within a month, Kelly was arrested for armed robbery.

And I had, I stabbed this guy. That’s why I got caught. And the police were there instantly and arrested me on the scene. I was on the front page of both newspapers. All my family found out and they were just floored ‘cause, like, months before my sister was trying to get me in the contest for mother of the year, you know (laughs) ...

(Would have been interesting if you’d won the contest).

Yeah. Oh yeah (laugh). Wouldn’t look too good, no.

(The papers would have loved that (laugh). Mother of the year.)

Since serving a short sentence for robbery and completing a mandated treatment program, Kelly has struggled to regain custody of her children. What she finds particularly frustrating is how involved Child and Family Services (CFS) is, especially considering the lack of interest they showed in protecting her and her siblings when she was growing up.

CFS, they, uh, started getting involved because they would come and just pop in on me for no apparent reason. And, uh, I would be sleeping or I'd be tired. I'd be depressed, you know, I was never high. And they'd say, 'Oh we got a complaint that you were on drugs.' I said, 'Do I look like I'm on drugs?' ... So they took the kids, they apprehended the kids without a piss test or anything.

After the children were taken away the second time, Kelly's life seemed to fall apart. She started abusing drugs again and was incarcerated for shoplifting and welfare fraud. Her three youngest children are currently in the custody of CFS and Kelly visits with them as often as possible in the institution.

In Kelly's story the tensions and contradictions in the 'bad identity' are readily apparent. At one and the same time, she was a woman charged with armed robbery and a candidate for mother of the year. She was both a woman who acted violently and a woman who cared for and was committed to her children. Many of the other women also expressed how much they loved their children and how central they were to their lives. Andrea, for instance, stressed that she needed to deal with her own issues and stop drinking for the sake of her children. "That's what I want in life too ... I wanna be able to be there when they fall, pick them up ... I know what I want in my life and this is what I have, I have to do." Similarly, Yvonne said,

People say that, uh, violence is like a vicious cycle, like, if your mother did it to you, you'll do it to your kids kind of thing. And I don't think that's true actually 'cause, uh, I've never spanked my kid, not once. I refuse to do it. I find other means, uh, I buy a lot of books, you know. I'll send them to their room, take their toys away, take privileges away, you know.

Other women talked about their children being their primary motivation for staying out of trouble. Liz stated, "I just wanna raise my kids. Stay away from this, this place." These examples from the women's narratives demonstrate that the women did not see their use of violence as negating the possibility that they could be good mothers to their children.

Clearly, women are not either 'bad' or 'good,' "monsters" or "normal sisters," or "miscreants" or "nuns" (Lombroso, 1895: 152; Pearson, 1997a: 210). Instead, what the women's stories illustrate is that the Violent Woman can be both 'good' and 'bad' at the same time. She can perpetrate violent acts without identifying as a violent person, she can feel remorseful for her violent behaviours, and she can simultaneously be an armed robber and a caring mother.

Constituting Violent Women as Bad

Because of the crime I committed, it may be difficult to accept my assertions that I should be granted human rights and that I could still maintain decent values. It is a most abstract conundrum, to wrap one's mind around the fact that a killer and/or a prisoner could also be a good person. These are definitively contrary pictures ... (Horii, 2000: 104)

Are violent women 'bad'? The passage above comes from Gayle Horii (2000), a woman who was charged with the second-degree murder of her stepmother and sentenced to the statutory minimum of life imprisonment. Horri (2000: 104) explained that what she did in less than five minutes of her life seemingly wiped out who she was for the forty years previous to the incident. Herein lies the central limitation of constituting the Violent Woman as 'bad.' By focussing solely on the woman involved and on her violent behaviours in particular, this construction not only fails to consider the contexts which give rise to women's violence but also disregards the fractured and multiple nature of the women's identities. In so doing, the 'bad woman' construction tells us very little about the women involved or their use of violence.

To date, feminists have been reluctant to acknowledge women's violence that occurs outside of the context of abusive relationships (Kelly, 1991, 1996; Renzetti,

1999a). As a result, other accounts and explanations of women's violence have been able to predominate – like the one put forward by Patricia Pearson (1997a) – and feminists have been unable or ill-equipped to offer a response. The women's stories presented here demonstrate that women do have the capacity for violence within *and* outside of the context of intimate partner relationships. The violence ranged from fighting with peers as youths, to using weapons to rob strangers and acquaintances, to physical battles over street corners, to teaming up with other individuals to assault and injure other men and women. While it is important to acknowledge women's capacity for violence, these acts need not be used to present the Violent Woman as the epitome of evil. Writers who constitute violent women as essentially 'bad' seem to confuse what women do (or choose to do) in particular contexts with who the women are.

Locating women's violence within their biographies allows us to explore why women choose to respond to particular situations with violence. In each of the women's stories, a complex of situational and structural factors present as important in understanding their use of violence. By paying attention to the broader structural context – including women's experiences of abuse and their growing up in homes and communities devastated by poverty, alcohol abuse and violence – one can make sense of how the women ended up on the streets of the inner city. And it is within this racialized space where the majority of the women's violence took place. Some of the women used violence to protect themselves from bad dates. For others, violence was a means to get money to support themselves and their addictions. For still others, it was merely a part and parcel of surviving street life. In any case, the women's use of violence – rather than

reflecting some kind of underlying abnormality or signifying something about the women's characters – was significantly connected to the contexts in which it took place.

Contextualizing women's violence not only reveals the constellation of factors which contribute to their violence but also the fractured, multiple nature of the women's identities which emerge from these experiences. In the present study, the analysis of the particular language the women used to represent themselves highlighted the limitations of Lombroso (1895) and Pearson's (1997a) 'bad discourse.' The 'bad woman' identity these writers project held some resonance for the women but only in specific contexts and for limited frames of time. Some of the women, for example, purposefully portrayed themselves as bad when working as a prostitute or as an outside member of a street gang as a way to control and survive their experiences. A minority of the women also referred to themselves as "mean" or "not mother material"; however, they understood their violent behaviours as 'normal' or reasonable in the context of street life. Still other women simultaneously identified themselves as perpetrators of violence (or 'bad') and as loving mothers (or 'good'). In general, then, discourses which group women into distinct bad/good (and perpetrator/victim) categories do not adequately reflect the multiple, overlapping identities criminalized women adopt in making sense of their experiences.

Given the diverse and complex contexts in which women's use of violence occurs, and the fractured and layered nature of the women's identities, the usefulness of accounts which constitute women who use violence as 'bad' becomes questionable. The next chapter interrogates the last of the three predominant constructions of the Violent Woman – the one which casts her as 'mad.'

Chapter Six

The Mad Woman: Locating Women's Violence in Psychological Terms

Madness has been variously constituted throughout history and across cultures. In contemporary Western society, the symptoms of 'madness' are generally understood as expressions of disease within individual bodies or psyches. 'Psy' professionals – including psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and psychiatric nurses – are considered expert in determining who is 'mad' and in prescribing the appropriate cure. In the context of the criminal justice system, psychological experts classify, diagnose and treat individual women and men in conflict with the law. More significantly, according to Dorothy Chunn and Robert Menzies (1990: 34), these professionals are enlisted to explain the crimes of "legal subjects that might otherwise remain ... incomprehensible and devoid of reason." The Violent Woman is one such legal subject. Her use of violence marks her as different from the 'normal' or 'good' woman and, therefore, requires explanation. In offering an account, the 'psy' discourse locates a woman's violence in psychological terms. The Violent Woman is not just abnormal but 'mad' or insane; as such, her violence may be attributed to any manner of psychological dysfunctions or personality disorders. If a woman kills her abusive partner, for example, the psychological explanation is that she has battered woman's syndrome. If a woman purposefully injures her newborn infant, she is said to be suffering from postpartum depression. In both instances, women's violence is reduced to a symptom of an underlying physiological or psychological abnormality. Is this a useful lens through which to understand women's violence? Does the 'psy' discourse have any resonance for

the women interviewed in the present study? Such questions are the subject of this chapter.

Women and the ‘Psy’ Discourse

Feminist writers have argued that the ‘psy’ professions treat men and women differently (Busfield, 1996; Chesler, 1972; Ehrenreich & English, 1973; Williams, 2003). From what constitutes a psychological problem to the types of therapies and medicines prescribed, there are seemingly different standards for men and for women. Rather than provide a detailed expose on the ways in which psychiatric institutions and practices are sexist, this section will introduce some of the potential pitfalls of relying on the ‘psy’ discourse to name and understand women’s experiences.

To start, as many feminist writers have pointed out, gendered assumptions influence how mental illness or ‘madness’ is constituted. Put another way, the ‘psy’ discourse draws from – and perpetuates – conceptions of psychological normality which are gender based. The results of Broverman et al.’s (1970) frequently cited study provide one example of how judgements of mental health (and by extension illness) are gendered. This research involved 79 ‘psy’ professionals of both genders and varying levels of experience and education. Each was given a list of 122 bipolar items to consider (e.g., ‘Not at all aggressive’ and ‘Very aggressive,’ and ‘Very emotional’ and ‘Not at all emotional’) and provided with one of three scenarios. One group was asked to select the attributes which best represented a healthy, adult man; the second to do the same for a healthy, adult woman; and the final group to select items for a healthy, adult person. Predictably, and consistent with gender-role stereotypes, clinicians (male and female)

chose different characteristics to distinguish a healthy man and a healthy woman. Specifically, they regarded a healthy woman as one who was more submissive and emotional, and less independent and aggressive than a healthy man (Broverman et al., 1970: 4-5). In other words, passivity and dependency – and presumably satisfaction in roles that mandate the same – represented health in women. It is also noteworthy that while clinicians constituted a healthy man and a healthy adult in similar terms, their conception of a healthy woman did not match that of a healthy adult person. As Allison Morris (1987: 54) makes clear, “what this means is that if clinicians adhere to this standard of mental health, women are likely to be viewed as unhealthy adults, *simply because they are women.*”

Indeed, women are over-represented in nearly every category of mental health statistics. Women are more likely to be referred to psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists than men, and are more likely to be diagnosed with some form of psychological disorder (see Chan, 2001). Women also have a greater likelihood of being prescribed psychotropic medications as part of their treatment, with the standard ratio being approximately two to one (Busfield, 1996: 3). In her critique of the prescription of benzodiazepines (commonly referred to as tranquilizers) in Canada, Janet Currie (2004) highlights that women are more likely to be prescribed the drugs compared to men, and are also more likely to be directed to take them for longer periods of time.¹ Also significant is that prescriptions for women are often for what are undoubtedly not strictly internal psychological problems. Tranquilizers, Currie notes, are regularly prescribed to

¹ These findings also apply to Aboriginal women: Aboriginal women are nearly twice as likely to receive benzodiazepine prescriptions than Aboriginal men (Currie, 2004).

women to cope with grief and stress, as well as after childbirth and during menopause.² Women are also over-represented in the other typical modes of psychological treatment, including hospitalization. According to a recent Health Canada report on mental illness in Canada (2000), women – across all age categories – are more likely than men to be hospitalized with some form of psychological or personality disorder. These findings, in tandem, point to the tendency of the ‘psy’ discourse to medicalize and syndromize women’s experiences. In the same way that women who are assertive and independent are at risk of being pathologized by the ‘psy’ profession’s rendering of them, so too are women adjusting to natural processes such as childbirth or having understandable troubles surviving the conditions of their day-to-day lives.

Criminalized Women are ‘Madder’ Still

If more women than men are viewed as ‘mad’ it is hardly surprising that the view female offenders are madder still is expressed. (Morris, 1987: 55)

Women are statistically much less likely to come into conflict with the law than men. It follows that when a woman is charged with or convicted of a criminal offence, it is often assumed that there is something different about or wrong with her. In the Canadian penal system, ‘psy’ professionals – and their accompanying disciplinary jargon – play a principal role in shaping how this difference is named and understood.³ Having been trained in the basic tenets of the psychological discipline, including its claim to be an

² That one in three status Aboriginal women over the age of 40 in western Canada were prescribed benzodiazepines was also cited as evidence that these drugs are being prescribed for non-medical reasons, like “numbing patients” to the “harsh reality and mental pain of poverty” (Currie, 2004: 4).

³ ‘Psy’ professionals have been involved in the administration of these institutions since their inception and especially since the 1960s (Kendall, 1996; 2000).

objective and value-free science, these professionals are conferred the status of experts and granted the authority to interpret and explain all manner of human behaviour. It should not be surprising, then, that the majority of women serving a custodial sentence in Canada have been slotted into one of an assortment of possible psychological diagnostic categories and subjected to some form of psychological treatment.

In 1990, the Correctional Services of Canada (CSC) released a report on the mental health of women serving time in a federal institution (Deurloo & Haythornwaite, cited in Kendall, 2000). The report indicated that women prisoners had substantially more psychological problems than men and, further, that only 5 percent of incarcerated women showed no evidence of a serious psychological disorder. More recently, the “Mental Health Strategy for Women Offenders” (also produced by the CSC) reported that women in prison are more likely than their male counterparts to be diagnosed with depression, schizophrenia and all of the classes of anxiety and personality disorders (Laishes, 1997).⁴ Moreover, the report maintained that it is women’s deficient “thoughts and behaviours that are the *source* of [their] problems” (Laishes, 1997:10, emphasis added). Thus, not only are psychological labels attached to criminalized women with alarming regularity, their ‘pathological’ minds and bodies are named as the cause of their troubles, including their conflicts with the law.

This individualized approach is also manifest in the way that criminalized women are described in psychological reports submitted to the court as part of the sentencing process. In their review of a series of clinical assessments of women (and men) made at a psychiatric court clinic in Ontario, Chunn and Menzies (1990: 41) found that

⁴ The only disorder which men were more likely to be diagnosed with was antisocial personality disorder (Laishes, 1997).

clinicians typically presented impoverished and institutionalized women and men as authors of their own unhappy fate, or as the victims of internal pathological processes more so than of social or financial misfortunes. (Chunn & Menzies, 1990: 41)

Speaking of women specifically, Chunn and Menzies (1990: 51) note that 'psy' professionals "recurrently ignore structural factors and locate the source of the deviance in the woman herself." Wendy Chan (2001) presents a similar argument based on her reading of the psychiatric assessments of women and men charged with homicide. Because of prevailing stereotypes about criminalized women, Chan argues, women are particularly vulnerable to being constituted and condemned as 'mad.' She writes:

the institution of psychiatry relies on negative and stereotypical gender assumptions in constructing and labelling female defendants as mentally disordered. They are portrayed as irrational, their crimes are viewed as an aberrant act unfitting that of a 'normal' woman, and their diagnosis of a mental disorder explains their behaviour. (Chan, 2001: 107)

The tendency to invoke a woman's psychology to account for her criminal behaviour is also evident in the increasing acceptance of expert testimony on the battered woman syndrome (BWS) in Canada and elsewhere. In 1990, the Supreme Court of Canada formally recognized the BWS as a legal defence strategy (Noonan, 1993).⁵ Specifically, the Court's decision made it permissible for a defence lawyer to use expert testimony on the psychological effects of 'battering' to mitigate or absolve his/her client's liability in a case. The syndrome – consistent with the 'psy' discourse from which it emanates – understands women's experiences in psychological terms. Basically, the syndrome is said to arise when women, caught in the "cycle of violence," develop

⁵ This decision was based on the case of Angelique Lyn Lavallee, who was charged with second-degree murder in the death of her common law partner. The lawyer in the case was the first in Canada to introduce expert testimony on the battered woman syndrome as part of a self-defence argument (see *R v. Lavallee*, 1990).

feelings of helplessness and powerlessness (see Comack, 1993b: 18-19). The pathology within the woman (i.e., the syndrome) explains why she is psychologically unable to leave the abusive relationship and her state of mind at the time of the offence. While individual women have benefited from the admissibility of evidence on the BWS (in that they received an acquittal), feminist writers argue that these privileges are not without consequence (Comack, 1993b; Hird, 2002). Elizabeth Comack (1993b: 47), for one, states that in the process of using the syndrome to defend a case

abused women are transformed into victims – not so much of their male abusers as of their dysfunctional personalities. Their deviance not only requires explanation, but intervention by the therapeutic experts.

By translating a woman's actions into the symptoms of a syndrome, the 'psy' discourse offers an account which medicalizes and depoliticizes her experiences. Why does a woman (or more precisely, her lawyer) have to prove that she is suffering from some kind of syndrome for her behaviour to be legally justified? What about the structural constraints that limit a woman's choices to leave an abusive relationship? And what happens to women (such as lesbian women or women of colour) who typically do not fit the criteria of the psychological syndrome? What legal remedies are available to them to mount a case of self-defence?

At the outset of this discussion, it was argued that there are some drawbacks of relying on the 'psy' discourse to name and understand women's experiences. The 'psy' discourse, particularly in making sense of women who are not stereotypically feminine, routinely constructs women as psychologically disordered or 'mad.' In the same way, women's experiences – of stress, poverty and abuse to name but a few examples – are individualized and syndromized. To be sure, the Violent Woman is particularly

susceptible to being labelled as deeply disordered and having her experiences rendered pathological by the 'psy' discourse. The remainder of this chapter will draw on the women's stories to critically assess the extent to which the psychological discourse resonates with how the women understand their experiences and their violence.

Explaining Women's Violence in Psychological Terms

The women's narratives, thus far, have been analyzed in terms of if and how the 'victim' and 'bad' discourses are relevant to explain their violence. Given that this chapter centres on the constitution of violent women as 'mad,' it follows that the focus here is on the women who had some involvement with the 'psy' professions. This is complicated by two factors. First, this type of analysis usually involves a review of psychological records, to which the researchers did not have access. Second, the interview schedule did not include specific questions about the women's interactions with 'psy' professionals or their interpretations of the psychological discourse. Despite these limitations, this research does offer something unique to this subject area. Whereas the central issue in the critical literature on gender, madness and crime is how labelling a woman 'mad' affects the sentence meted out by the court, here the focus shifts to the extent to which the 'psy' discourse is a good lens through which to understand women's violence. Do the women identify with the 'psy' labels that they have been assigned? How relevant is the 'psy' discourse for understanding the women's violent behaviours? Are they 'mad'?

Resisting 'Psy' Labels

Throughout the course of their interviews, many of the women did comment on their experiences in psychological treatment centres and with psychological counsellors. Specifically, 11 of the 17 women interviewed made reference to being assessed by or engaged in counselling with a 'psy' professional at one time in their lives. This group of women was diagnosed with a multitude of disorders, ranging from anxiety disorder, postpartum depression and clinical depression to posttraumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia and dissociative disorder. Consistent with their diagnoses as psychologically disordered, six of the women mentioned either currently taking or being previously prescribed psychotropic medications. Those most frequently discussed were tranquilizers (such as Clonazepam, Razepam, Xanax and Valium) and antidepressants (such as Paxil and Zoloft).

Focussing on one of the women's stories, the following will illustrate how some women actively resist the psychological construction of their experiences and the discourse that uses psychological terms to explain their involvement in crime.

Emily's Story

Emily is a 19 year old Aboriginal woman. Just prior to her incarceration at the jail, she had completed high school and was working in the service sector. Emily's most recent charges stem from a break and enter incident where she and a younger friend broke into a retail store after a night of drinking, for which she received a six-month custodial sentence. In talking about her conflicts with the law, particularly her use of violence, Emily expressly connected her 'criminal' behaviour with her experiences growing up.

Emily and her two siblings were moved around a lot as children. Before the age of six, she had lived in four provinces and moved at least that many times. Given her age at the time, Emily could not recall what prompted the moves other than that her father “liked to move a lot.” Some of Emily’s first memories are of her father and mother separating when she was seven years old, and her mother briefly remarrying another man a couple of years later. Her stepfather, Emily recounted, raped her sister and sexually “bugged” her. They were aged 16 and 10 respectively at the time.

I just kept it in till I’m, like, 12. I didn’t say nothin’ to anybody. Though I did, I told my worker and she had to, she had to tell the authorities, like, that I was underage...

(Once you told your worker, I mean, were you able to talk to your mom and your sister and that about it?)

My sister believed me. My littler brother already knew it was happening. He didn’t even, I remember he started crying. He said, ‘I know.’ He saw him, he said. ... My mom didn’t believe me. She thought I was lying ‘cause she thought I didn’t want to, she thought I didn’t want her to be with him.

As a result of Emily’s worker (and her sister) reporting the abuse to the police, the stepfather was charged. During the ensuing criminal trial, her mother was called to testify and stated that her daughter was lying and that the abuse never happened. Emily, who also testified before the court, recalled that the judge presiding over the case got “mad” and said to her mother, “I don’t understand you, how could you pick a guy over your two daughters?”⁶ Being sexually abused – and not believed or having someone to talk to about it – is something that Emily has yet to completely contend with. She remarked, “Like I’ll never forget. It’s always going to be there – and that’s all I know.”

Shortly after the court proceedings concluded, Emily’s biological father moved

⁶ The man was found guilty in the case and received, in Emily’s words, an unjustly lenient sentence of “only probation.”

back into the family household. According to Emily, this introduced increased instability and violence to her life. "He would beat us kids, like, all the time ... He was mean. I would always take the beatings for my little brother." Even though Emily told her mother that she did not want to continue living if her father was going to stay and later "just about killed" herself, Emily's father continued to reside with the family for several years. Feeling unsafe and lacking anywhere else to go, Emily started to run away and to drink with friends in a nearby rural community. It was at this juncture, when she was 13 years old, that Emily started to use violence herself.

Even, like, this girl, her name is Samantha. I beat her up really bad and I was only 13. ... Just about killed her. And I was only 13. ... She was in the hospital. I broke her ribs and I cut open her lip, right here. ... I just kept kicking her.

(Had, what had been going on before then?)

It was probably, my dad was always beating us up, always fight us, my mom.

(So do you think, do you think you had a lot of anger or...?)

Yeah. I still have anger today. Lots. I get mad easy, very easy. I get really frustrated.

(How do you get it out?)

I lash out at people.

Initially charged with attempted murder, Emily was ultimately convicted of aggravated assault and sentenced to 18 months at the Manitoba Youth Centre. She said nothing about what, if any, counselling or treatment she received while incarcerated.

After her release from the Youth Centre, Emily returned home but was sent to a group home soon after because of conflicts with her father. At the age of 16, she started dating and moved in with her first intimate partner. Much like her previous close relationships, this one was marked by violence and abuse. During the course of their two-

year relationship, Emily was beaten numerous times and had two miscarriages as a result of the abuse.

I didn't know I was pregnant and I fell – he pushed me down the stairs. And he took off and I was hemorrhaging. I was really sick. So I phoned the ambulance myself, and they got me there in time. I would've died.

(You had a miscarriage?)

The baby was [damaged so much inside] from falling down the stairs ... Then I got pregnant a second time. And I remember him coming home, and he was mad about something, I was only 16, 17. I was 16, I guess, going on 17. And he told me that, uh, something, that, uh, something like, 'I put that kid in there, and I can take it out.' And he beat me for something over his food. And I had a miscarriage.

About one month after this incident, Emily got pregnant a third time. She did not want to leave her partner – because she was “in love with him” at the time – but she decided that getting away was the only way to ensure that she did not miscarry again. After he went to work one morning (and in spite of his warning that she had better be there when he got home), Emily called her mother and asked for her help to leave. That day, her mother came to pick her up and Emily bought a bus ticket to rural Manitoba, where her family resides. There, her grandmother helped her through the pregnancy and provided her with some much needed support.⁷

Emily's experiences with her partner only added to the feelings of anger and frustration that overwhelmed her as a child. And, as an adult struggling with many of the same issues, violence continued to be the only way that Emily knew how to release that anger or to get it out. In her words,

Got so much anger in me that it always comes out, especially, like, when I drink with my family. I blame everybody and I just [sigh]. I blame everybody.

(What do you blame them for?)

⁷ While dating her partner, Emily was introduced to and started using crack cocaine. Her grandmother, with the help of a medicine man, helped Emily to withdraw from the drugs.

For not being there – and still today, not being there.

When asked if she saw herself as a violent person, she responded:

When I drink I get really angry. I black out and I get violent. I get – I throw stuff and break stuff and fight everybody, try to fight everybody. Always with my family I go and fight with them. I get drunk and I'll go and fight with them. Once on the reserve, my mom and my brother, we were living there last summer. I was drinking with them and my aunties, and I went crazy. I just started smashing windows, throwing rocks at windows and fighting with my auntie ... And I bit my auntie's face up.

Emily has also used violence to confront the man that sexually abused her and her sister as children.⁸

I told her I'll never leave him alone. I'm always going to do that to him. Make him pay, make him suffer.

(So have you confronted him before?)

Yeah. I tried to stab him last year. ... He phoned my house and he was asking for my mom. And I knew it was him and I said, 'Don't phone here.' And I kept hanging up and he'd phone back. 'Come outside,' I says, 'She wants to meet you outside.' And I was drunk. Came outside. And I had a knife. I fell. He seen the knife and he phoned the cops.

Much of Emily's violence occurred in this context of drinking – and fighting – with her adult family members.

Since her incarceration three months prior to the interview, Emily had been seeing the resident psychologist at the prison. As the above account makes clear, Emily maintains that her use of violence is a product of the anger that she has around the abuse she experienced growing up. "That's part of why I'm in here today ... It's always going to bug me – no matter how much I talk about it." The psychologist, however, constructs her problems somewhat differently.

⁸ Soon after her mother and biological father separated a second time, Emily's mother reunited with her stepfather. Because her mother has temporary custody of her young daughter, Emily is apprehensive and angry about him being involved in her life again.

And my counsellor tells me that I'm disturbed. He doesn't actually tell me that, but that's what I think he's telling me, that I'm disturbed.

(Do you think you're disturbed?)

Nope. Just angry. [pause]. Tries to give me pills. He tries to tell me I'm schizophrenic.

(Schizophrenic?)

Yeah. And I just told him, 'No I'm not.'

(And he wants to give you pills to help that.)

Yeah.

Clearly, Emily's understanding of why she is violent— and her standpoint on whether or not she is suffering from a psychological disease — is at odds with the psychologist's interpretation.

Is Emily simply a 'mad' woman? Is this a useful way to frame her experiences and understand her violence? Before the age of 20, Emily was sexually abused by her stepfather, physically abused by her father and involved in an incredibly abusive relationship with an intimate partner. In addition, she had little to no support in dealing with these experiences. That Emily is angry or even disturbed seems understandable considering what she has been through. Moreover, to have survived these experiences and to be able to talk about them demonstrates Emily's incredible strength — a strength that she was aware of. "I'm a strong person," she remarked, "I've survived lots. I've lived it." Rather than look to the contexts in which Emily's feelings of anger and violent behaviours emerged, the psychologist located the source of the problem as an internal pathology and suggested that she had schizophrenia: "an enduring psychosis that involves the failure to maintain integrated personality functioning" (Nevid et al., 1997: 598). In so doing, he avoids any focus upon the social conditions that gave rise to Emily's anger or

her culpability in perpetrating violent behaviours. In these terms, it is understandable that an account that minimizes how Emily's experiences growing up contributed to her use of violence and, at the same time, casts her as suffering from an 'enduring psychosis' does not resonate with her.

In Emily's account of her experiences, there was a recognition that she had problems, whether it be feeling sad and alone or frustrated and angry. What she did not accept, however, was the contention that her violent behaviours were caused by a psychological condition. Emily did not see her feelings and emotions as pathological; nor did she identify with the psychiatric label of 'mad.' Indeed, as will be illustrated in the discussion to follow, more so than 'mad' or insane, the women interviewed for the present study identified very much as angry women.

Finding Fractures: More Angry than 'Mad'

Sharon Lamb (1999:127) argues that women's anger is a source of "agency/power" that is rarely acknowledged in the feminist literature because it does not fit with the typical version of what it means to be a victim. In the present study, one of the central themes that came out of the women's narratives was the connection between anger and violence. This theme was first introduced in chapter four, where two of the women's stories revealed a complex interaction between women's experiences of victimization, drinking alcohol, anger and violence. Recall that Deanne's violence, in large part, consisted of drinking and then releasing anger during physical fights with her intimate partner. Similarly, Rita related her use of violence to the anger that she had about her first abusive partner. For both women, it was when they were drinking – and overwhelmed by

unresolved feelings of hurt and anger – that they became violent. Likewise, Emily, whose story was presented above, discussed drinking alcohol and then becoming angry and violent with her adult family members. Contrary to the psychological construction of her problems, Emily did not identify herself as ‘mad’ or schizophrenic; in her words, she was “just angry.”

In this section, three of the women’s stories will be elaborated upon in varying degrees to further establish how women’s anger figures in their use of violence. To this end, it is to Mandy’s story that we now turn.

Mandy’s Story

Mandy is an Aboriginal woman in her early thirties. At the time of the interview, she was on remand awaiting trial on a number of criminal charges (including impaired driving causing harm and criminal negligence causing harm) related to a tragic driving accident in which Mandy was badly injured and her brother was killed. Overwhelmed by her feelings of grief about the accident, Mandy said, “As soon as I walked in this building everything just shut down ... I can’t eat. I can’t do nothing.”

Mandy was the youngest of seven siblings by about seven years. While her older brothers and sisters had a “rough life,” Mandy explained that her father had “settled down” by the time that she was born. She did not recall a lot about her childhood except that she often felt very alone, as her older siblings had moved out of the house and her parents drank a lot. Things worsened for Mandy when, at the age of seven, her parents separated.

So then I moved around, after that I moved around lots ... I think I mostly lived with my mom ... We lived in a room about, we lived in a place the size of this room.

In talking about this time in her life, Mandy said that her mother did not “take care of” her and that she would often stay out late or sleep over at a friend’s place to get out of the apartment. She would also go regularly to visit with her father.

My dad went to stay in a veteran’s hospital, and then so if I got scared or something I would just go over there.

(What would you get scared about?)

Well my mom, if she was drinking. And, but the man she lived with was, it was him and his brother – they were good people – but they would be drunk too. ... And, like, other people would come there and drink and I didn’t even know who they were ... So that’s why I didn’t mind school. But then I knew when I’d come home from school, like, they’d be drinking and stuff. It was actually depressing (chuckle). Winnipeg was depressing.

At the age of 11, Mandy was placed in the care of a “good Christian” family for several years. From what she can recall, her parents put her on a bus and “no one ever picked” her up. When she was 15 years old, Mandy met up with her older sister and returned to Winnipeg. For the next five years, she lived with and took care of her father. When his health deteriorated to the point where he had to be hospitalized, Mandy moved in with her partner; the two have now been in a common-law relationship for over 10 years.⁹ Mandy described their partnership as “good” and said, “Like, he never hit me or anything and stuff, which is good.” Other than these details, Mandy spoke little about her experiences growing up or with her intimate partner. Instead, the majority of the interview focussed on the violence that she had witnessed and experienced in her lifetime, and the far-reaching and long lasting effects this had on her.

More so than the other women interviewed for this study, Mandy’s narrative on her life was saturated with images of violence. While her parents were still together, for

⁹ For the previous three years, Mandy’s partner has been incarcerated. Given that she is currently in jail and the Crown is seeking a four-year sentence in her case, she does not know whether or not they will be together after her release.

example, she was present at numerous drinking parties where people would get “beatin’ up and stuff like that.” Also during her childhood, Mandy recalled walking through a dark house and “bumping into” the body of a woman who had hung herself in her home. At the age of 10, she saw her second dead person.

And this guy fell down the stairs. They were fightin’ in the hall and I was standing there and I didn’t know what to do. ... I think they were robbing him or something, he fell down the stairs and he just laid there ... Later on I found out that that guy was dead, he broke his neck or something.

These encounters with violence continued and intensified in Mandy’s adult life. She described one incident where her partner and another man were fighting over a gun and it discharged, killing the other man. “Like, I held human brains in my hand,” she said. Mandy was told to ‘Just get rid of it. Don’t flush it. Just go out and get rid of it’ – and she did. Mandy also recalled being wedged in the backseat of a car with a man who had been stabbed in the neck and was grabbing at her for help, and seeing a friend lying dead on the railway tracks after being hit by a train. In reflecting on all of the violence that she had seen, Mandy remarked that “It all seemed normal when you live on a reserve, seeing all that violence.” However, her experiences have left her with nightmares – “and they’re always of dead people.”

Mandy is also troubled by blurred recollections of being sexually abused as a child. When she was eight or nine, she remembers her sister’s then boyfriend laying on top of her; she does not know if he did something to her but she “always” thinks of it. She also reflects often on an incident that occurred when she was living with her mother.

I was living in that same ugly room with my mom. You had to go down the hall to the washroom and I was in the washroom and then these, these three guys came in. ‘Cause the door was locked. And then I was standing there and the door got kicked open and I was standing there.

In addition to these thoughts, Mandy has body memories and the smell of certain men's perfume makes her cringe, both of which suggest that she was a victim of sexual abuse.

If I use the washroom or something, I don't know, it's a weird feeling. Or my nipples, or something touches my nipples, like, it just sends me into this, like, I just get depressed and then really angry. So I'm thinking, like, something must've happened. That's all I can figure out. So I think maybe that's where I am getting all this anger from.

Although these thoughts and memories distressed Mandy through her teenage years and early twenties, it was not until after her father passed away that she started to be intensely disturbed by them.

And after my dad died, oh, that's when I started having troubles. 'Cause, like, he'd also look after me, like, even though he couldn't walk or anything. I still, like, he's my dad, he'll protect me, you know. And after that there was nothing.

Since her father's death six years ago, Mandy has been overwhelmed – on several separate occasions – by an intense rage inside of her. These feelings of anger have led to numerous incidents of violence on Mandy's part, especially (though not always) when she has been drinking. One of these occurred when she was staying with her mother after being released on bail for the driving accident. Mandy had a couple of drinks of hard liquor and then “blacked out.” Days later her mother relayed to her what had happened and how she came to be charged in the assault of two police officers.

'Cause I seen that whiskey there, but that's the last thing I remember. And the very next second I was way near my house in this field hiding. ... I got up and I looked towards my house and the police were there and I thought, oh my god, something happened to my mom. And I ran towards the house and the cops just grabbed me. And I didn't know why they were grabbing me, so I started fighting. ... And I didn't even wanna know what went on 'til I phoned, I got my worker to go talk to my mom 'cause I was so scared to talk to my mom. She said, 'No,' she said, 'You were just really scared.'

According to her mother, it was because Mandy did not want to “hurt her mom” that she had left the house and run into the fields, which suggests that Mandy is able to exercise some control (or agency) over how she releases her anger. On other occasions, she has

done things like rip a door off of the wall, hurl a chair around the room and throw her much larger brother off of her when he is trying to calm her down. In each instance, Mandy “gets so angry” and feels like her “mind’s gonna explode.” Like Emily, she has to do something physical – like scream or be violent – to get the anger out.

Is the ‘psy’ discourse relevant here? Are these violent incidents symptoms of an underlying psychological disorder? Based on Mandy’s interactions with the prison psychologist, she had recently been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder and dissociative disorder, neither of which were terms that Mandy seemed to understand nor identify with. This is not to say, however, that the ‘psy’ discourse held no resonance for Mandy. She did rely on select psychological terms to name her emotions in particular circumstances (for example that she was depressed when her father died or was having anxiety attacks since her brother’s death). Several of the other women interviewed also used psychological terms, in particular depression, to describe their feelings around specific events or times in their lives, including their experiences of violence and abuse. This finding is not surprising, as psychological terms offer a socially recognized and legitimated way to describe one’s feelings. Nevertheless, Mandy did not see her mental state as what was key to explaining her use of violence. For Mandy, her violent behaviours – as well as the feelings that troubled her – only made sense when placed in the context of the violence that she herself had witnessed and experienced. According to her, she had to “figure out” and address her anger around these experiences before she could completely understand and/or gain control over her own propensity for violence. Mandy, much like Emily, identified herself as more angry than ‘mad.’

Other women located their violence in similar terms. Lisa, for instance, understood her violence as something that happens when the anger inside of her is “triggered” by an outside source. For Lisa, this generally occurred in one of two contexts: either when she was fighting back with her intimate partner or in response to being called names by her partner or a family member. In her discussion of fighting back, Lisa outlined how anger has contributed to her own use of violence:

I used to fight him back, though, man. I started getting scared of myself. I started shooting needles, eh. And I noticed when I come down from that I would, um, I'd wanna break everything. Like, I started thinking of ways, like, how I wanna kill him, you know. I started thinking of, like, what's close by, you know, like, is there a knife, you know, I'll stab him this time. And I'd throw everything at him, you know. Yeah.

(Were you angry?)

Yeah I was angry. I would just freak out because I was put under so much pressure. And I was pregnant. And he would want me on the street, and I had to support both of our habits. And I would have to sleep with some guy to get the money, you know.

Anger had also figured prominently in Lisa's use of violence in other circumstances. In her words,

When he [her partner], uh, talks down to me, that's when I, uh, break things. And then, like, try stabbing him ... 'Cause it's, like, I see the rage man.

I remember one time I beat both my sisters up really bad. And, um, I was gonna give my mom a good lickin' too but I just decided to, you know, leave her alone.

(How come you beat your sisters up?)

'Cause they called me a crack whore and I just freaked out on them.

Since the age of 11, Lisa has cycled in and out of numerous different custodial facilities and treatment centres, none of which have acknowledged or helped her to resolve what she sees as the cause of her troubles and her violence – the resentment and anger that she

has around her parents' (and more recently her partner's) treatment of her and the situations she was made to endure growing up at home and on the streets.

Women's Anger and Expressive Violence

To date, there has been little research on how women (and men) understand their violent behaviours. Ann Campbell (1993), however, has done some work in this area. In her book, *Men, Women and Aggression*, Campbell (1993) argues that while men and women both have the capacity for violence, the ways in which women and men understand their violence are notably different. She writes, "Both sexes see an intimate connection between aggression and control, but for women aggression is the *failure* of self-control, while for men it is the *imposing* of control over others" (1993:1). Consistent with this understanding, Campbell posits that women's violence is generally expressive (or a release of hurt and anger) and men's violence is largely instrumental (or a means of asserting power and control). This work, at least in so far as it explains women's violence, holds some merit here.¹⁰ Emily, Mandy and Lisa each referred to an inner anger or rage that was overwhelming and uncontrollable, and of using violence to release that anger. About her capacity for violence, Mandy said "I know I have it in me somewhere, where it's scary, 'cause it's just, like, it's uncontrollable."

The correspondence between Campbell's (1993) ideas and the women's narratives on their experiences is perhaps most evident in some of Lisa's remarks. In talking about her own use of violence – and women's more generally – she said,

¹⁰ Note that this is not meant to imply that all women's violence is purely "expressive." Recall that Jennifer and Cheryl, as discussed in the previous chapter, both used violence to exert power over others and as a means to do what was necessary to survive life on the streets. In other words, the categories of instrumental (or men's) and expressive (or women's) violence are not mutually exclusive.

I think women's [violence] is more, like, spontaneous acts of violence almost, like, where something can trigger them into doing something that they wouldn't do. But, like, they don't do it intentionally. It just happens, you know.

(It's like a loss of control.)

Loss of control, yeah. ...

(How does it feel afterwards?)

I feel better. I feel like hurting him [her partner] more when I, like, fight with him.

('Cause it feels so good?)

... It doesn't feel so good, it just, like, it's, like, um. I don't know. I just feel like hurting him.

('Cause you're getting it out?)

Yeah. 'Cause I'm getting it out. That's exactly why.

Rachel also connected her 'criminal' behaviours to losing control of and expressing her anger.

I guess I glossed things over and I stuffed and stuffed and stuffed. And the stuffing of anger over the years, uh, burst, um, prior to me coming here, and was, uh, a catalyst I guess for my criminal behaviour. I went totally out of control (clears throat) after being in control for so long.

Thus, for these women at least, anger is at the centre of much of women's violent behaviours. When Emily felt angry, she "lashed out" and "tried to fight everybody;" Mandy's anger, at times, manifested in the form of a violent explosion; and Lisa was violent when something or someone "triggered" the anger inside of her. For some of the women the source of their anger was somewhat intangible (like in Mandy's case), whereas for others it was more identifiable (such as being abused by parents or intimate partners). In Angela's story, both the source and the target of her anger were quite specific.

Angela's Story

An Aboriginal woman in her mid thirties, Angela had been charged with attempted murder, the most serious violent offence of all of the women interviewed. At the time of the interview, she was being held at the jail on remand and anticipated that she would be there for the duration of her upcoming criminal trial. Much like the women discussed above, Angela saw her violence as rooted in feelings of hurt and anger. For her, these feelings were explicitly connected to a strong dislike and distrust of men.

When Angela was six years old, her mother and father separated. Similar to the other women's accounts of their parents' relationships, Angela recalled that her father drank a lot and would often beat her mother. After the separation, Angela and her three siblings were "shipped back and forth" between her mother's place in Winnipeg and her father's in a small town just outside of the city, although the children resided primarily with their mother. These years were incredibly tough on Angela and her siblings, as her mother had started to drink heavily and they had little money for basic necessities like food.

We wouldn't go to school and my mom was always drinking. We had a house full of kids, like, my cousins. My auntie would drop off all of the kids, and at that time I was like 13 or 12 ... And then my auntie and my mom would go out, and they would go out for days or they'd come at, at closin' time, drink till morning and then they'd leave. And then we'd have no groceries.

Around the same time, Angela had started drinking and sniffing – and working the streets to get the money to buy alcohol and other drugs. One evening, after her mother and aunt had left, Child and Family Services (CFS) came to apprehend Angela and the other eight children in the home, ranging in age from one to 13.

We were sniffing in the basement. All the kids were on the main floor and some of them were upstairs ... I wouldn't open the door for them. They were banging ...

And then I was thinking, oh, I'm not gonna get picked up, and so I ran out the backdoor and then ran into a cop.

Fearing that her mother and aunt would not know what happened to her and the other children, Angela ran away on the first night that she was taken into care. She went first to her home; when she did not find her mother there, she canvassed the local drinking establishments and asked if anyone knew of or had seen her mother. After hours of searching in cold temperatures, Angela returned home and found her mother and others there partying. Though she was able to evade CFS and the police for a short while, Angela was eventually re-apprehended. She recalled being "dragged off" with her mother crying and saying, "I'll get you out, I'll get you girls out." Because her mother had been labelled as an "unfit mother," Angela was never returned to her care.

When she was 14 years of age, Angela's father assumed custody of her and she went to live with him on the reserve. Her experiences there would have a long-lasting and profound effect on her life. Despite the fact that it was a dry reserve, Angela said that there was "always a party going on" and that she and her friends drank "all of the time." After one of these parties, when Angela was 15 years old, her boyfriend asked her to go for a ride with him and his two male cousins.

So we were driving around, we were drinking, and then they went and parked ... And this guy is grabbing me in the backseat and he's tryin' to, like, he's trying to pull my pants down. And then I started biting him. And then his other cousin, the one that's in the front seat, jumped in the back and they were trying, they were trying to rape me. ... He's holding my arms, and then the other two are grabbing at my pants, they even ripped my panties off. And then, uh, I couldn't fight anymore, 'cause I was tired ... And then when they were done with me they acted, like, my boyfriend acted like nothing happened.

Following the sexual assault, Angela's boyfriend took her to his sister's where she stayed but she was unable to sleep for the entire night. On the walk home the next morning, Angela felt "ashamed" and too upset to talk to the group of friends she came across. To

get away from her boyfriend and to avoid having to interact with or explain herself to her friends, Angela went to stay with a relative in Winnipeg for a couple of weeks. While she was there, she tried to commit suicide by taking a “bunch of pills.” Angela was not able to talk to anybody about the rape until years later.

After Angela returned to the reserve, she purposefully “avoided” men for some time. When she was ready, she started to date her second boyfriend and soon after realized that he too was abusive. She described one incident where he grabbed her hair from behind, forced half of a bottle of whiskey down her throat and then beat her after she had passed out. “And then I blacked out – ‘cause I drank half a bottle – and that’s when I woke up and ... felt something on my face here. ... It was blood.” Two months later, Angela’s decision to end the relationship was met by her boyfriend with a “shot in the face” and forced sexual intercourse. Angela also discussed being sexually assaulted a third time, at the age of 29, when she and a friend attended a drinking party at a reserve. Despite her efforts to protect her sexual safety, Angela was raped late in the evening by a group of male acquaintances.

I didn’t feel good ... and the woman that lived there said, ‘You can go sleep in a room, I’ll give you a knife, you know, to lock the door. So, okay, I went in the room and put a knife in the door and went to sleep. And then when I woke up my pants was off and there was a guy laying beside me, and this is my auntie’s boyfriend. And then, oh I felt awful ... And then, like, my friend told, like she’s handicapped, eh, she was laying on the bed, I mean the couch in the living room, and she saw those guys going, and there was, like, four of them, taking turns on me, I guess when I was passed out.

Angela also thinks that she may also have been sexually abused in her childhood. Like Mandy, she had vague recollections and dreams of a man’s face coming down over hers but was unable to remember any specific details around what had happened or when. Consistent with the other women’s narratives on their experiences, Angela discussed

being deeply affected by her experiences of sexual abuse. At one point in the interview, she commented that she wished that she was “dead” or “never born.” Since her initial suicide attempt, Angela had hung herself in the basement (her brother found her and “cut her down”) and had overdosed on pills a second time. She had also seriously slashed one of her arms.

The majority of Angela’s criminal charges were for being intoxicated in a public place, though she had also been charged with assault “about five or six” times. Angela made it clear that, in each instance, the violence was directed “against men,” whether it was male acquaintances at drinking parties or her mother’s abusive male partner.¹¹ In discussing her use of violence to confront her mother’s partner, Angela said

‘Whatever you do to my mom, I’m gonna do to you.’ I was just kicking him, kicking him in the face, stomping on him. My shoes are all bloody ... And then I guess his liver swelled up, ‘cause he drinks lots, eh.

Angela’s most serious use of violence – and that for which she was currently being detained on remand – occurred after a day of drinking with a male whose relationship to her was not specified. Given that the charge had yet to be dealt with by the Courts, she was unable to provide a lot of information about what had happened. Angela connected this (and her other violent behaviours) with the strong negative feelings that she has toward men. Beginning after the first time she was raped, she “couldn’t stand it” when a man touched her and would “have to be drinking” to be around or go out with a man.

Like Deanne and Rita, it was when Angela was drinking that she thought or had

¹¹ Two of the official criminal charges were for assaulting a police officer. On the first incident, Angela “touched a cop on the shoulder” and he turned around and pepper sprayed her and charged her with assault. The second charge came when Angela said, honestly, that she did not know the names of the gang members who lived in the suite neighbouring hers. The police officer grabbed her by the hair, pushed his shoe into her back and pulled her arm so far back that he nearly broke it, which leads one to question why she was the one charged with assault.

flashbacks about “all the years men did those things to” her, and became angry and violent. In reflecting on the night of the stabbing, Angela said, “I must’ve exploded ‘cause I held, held everything in all this time. And it finally happened.” Having been overwhelmed by the intensity of her anger on more than one occasion, Angela was “scared to drink” for fear that she might “kill a person next time.”

Similar to Emily and Mandy, Angela had received little support in dealing with her experiences. Her first opportunity to even talk about the sexual abuse came when she was in treatment for substance addictions.

Like, we had a woman’s group, like, just all women were clients at that treatment centre. And then it was my turn to talk and then I broke down. It’s my first time I ever talked about the rape.

(How did that feel to be able to talk about it?)

It felt, uh, I was choked at first. And then I couldn’t talk and then they just passed. But then I talked to this other woman, eh. I, uh, talked to her about the abuse, like, the rape and then I felt better. And then I didn’t talk, talk about it for a long time, until I came here.

Since coming to the jail, Angela has been seeing the resident psychologist and a counsellor from the local woman’s shelter. To be able to talk about her experiences – and to cry and get some of the feelings out – has helped Angela start to “heal.”

Angela’s story further illustrates how integral women’s anger is to understanding their use of violence. For Angela, this anger resulted from a series of abusive relationships and encounters with men; in this respect, she was not alone. At least one of the women introduced in each of the three analysis chapters spent some time discussing how their experiences of abuse have made them distrustful of and angry toward men.

Rita, who was introduced in chapter four, said

At one point, I didn’t like men, I hated them. It’s because of all the abuse I took from my [first] boyfriend ... Being sexually abused, you know, as a kid. As I got older, being raped a few times, eh. It just, just got a lot of anger and hate towards

men. Never, no, never trusting them at all, couldn't ever trust them ... I used to think men were just nothing but pigs, perverts, ew. I used to cringe, hate them. And to have a man touch me, it was just like, ew.

On two separate occasions, Rita was so overwhelmed by this anger that she had to stab herself to release it. Jennifer and Cheryl, whose stories were elaborated upon in chapter five, also discussed the connections between victimization, anger and violence. Both women had been sexually abused in childhood by male family members. Jennifer saw "all men" as "scum," and purposefully directed all of her violent behaviours toward male 'Johns.' Similarly, Cheryl said

That's where all my anger comes from ... A woman can get raped and they probably have that in their conscience all their life. They just wanna beat up everybody around them, like me. What happened to me was I hated men, I hate men still today.

In the telling of their stories, then, the women pointed to the contexts in which their feelings of anger emerged, making it clear that an internal pathology played little to no part in producing these feelings or causing their violent behaviours.

Constituting Violent Women as 'Mad'

(Do you think that people respond to women who are violent differently than they respond to men who are violent?)

Yeah. I think they see it like it's really wrong for a woman – like some sort of taboo or something. (Mandy)

Are violent women 'mad'? As the above excerpt from Mandy's narrative makes clear, there is a widespread perception that there is something unnatural or taboo about the Violent Woman. The 'psy' discourse is one of the principal proponents of this perspective. Simply by virtue of her use of violence, the 'psy' discourse casts the Violent Woman as in some way sick. While many of the women interviewed for the present study did have some contact with 'psy' professionals and had, at one time or another, been

diagnosed with some kind of psychological dysfunction or personality disorder, the 'psy' discourse held little resonance for them. For one, none of the women subscribed to the 'mad' identity; they did not identify themselves as psychologically disordered. Granted, some of the women did rely on psychological terms to describe how they felt at different points in their lives (such as being depressed, anxious or disturbed by memories of abuse) but they did not see these feelings as pathological. To the contrary, the women located their problems and feelings within the context of their biographies and actively resisted the psychological construction of their experiences. Further, none of the women used the disorders they had been diagnosed with or made reference to an underlying psychological problem to explain their violent behaviours. More so than 'mad' or insane, the women whose stories formed the focus of this chapter identified themselves as angry women.

At the centre of each of Emily, Mandy and Angela's accounts of their violence was a discussion of how anger contributed to their violent behaviours. For Emily, this anger began to take shape in early childhood; she connected her first use of violence, at the age of 13, to anger. In Mandy's case, anger had become unmanageable since her father passed away and had manifested in a series of violent explosions. Angela too had been overwhelmed by feelings of anger, feelings that she associated with her disdain for men. Because the 'psy' discourse tends to view women's anger (and their violence) as symptomatic of an underlying psychological problem, it bypasses the possibility for a more complex understanding, one which considers the broader social and structural contexts in which women's feelings develop and their choices to use violence emerge. As Susan Williams (2003: 13) explains,

Therapists reinforce the cult of individualism by imposing responsibility for all of a woman's problems on the woman herself. As long as women can be sold the

myth that our problems are the result of unique and individual experiences, we will be powerless against the social conditions that create [them].

In large part, the women pointed to their experiences of abuse at the hands of men to explain how it is that they came to be so angry. Liz Kelly (1988), in her study based on 60 interviews with women survivors of rape, incest and domestic violence, found that the most common consequence of experiencing violence or abuse (reported by 92% of the women) was that their attitudes toward men were affected. One of the women who she interviewed commented that she no longer trusted men, while another said that she hated men for years after the abuse ended. As outlined above, these sentiments were echoed by many of the women interviewed for the present study. Rather than see these feelings as pathological, as the 'psy' discourse tends to do, Kelly (1988: 203) understands them as "part of women's active and adaptive attempts to cope with the reality of sexual violence." While Kelly did not focus on women's anger or their own use of violence, these too may be connected to women's active efforts to contend with their experiences of abuse. Emily said that she was angry about the abuse she had experienced and because her family, particularly her mother, was not there to support her. For Emily, violence was a way to release that anger or to get it out. After Mandy's father passed away, she was inundated by images of the abuse that she had witnessed and experienced; her violent outbursts were a direct consequence of this. Angela's standpoint on why she was violent also focussed on her experiences of abuse. It was when Angela would drink that she thought about being victimized, "exploded" and became violent herself. Each of these women, in company with several of the other women interviewed, explained their violence as something that happened when they were overwhelmed by anger, and it was an anger that they felt they were entitled to.

To conclude, the main limitation of the 'psy' discourse – much like the discourse which casts violent women as 'bad' – is its inattention to the complex of situational and structural factors that women deem important to understanding their use of violence. By presenting women's violent behaviours as the mere products of internal failures or weaknesses, the 'psy' discourse ignores the sociopolitical context in which women's feelings of anger emerge and their violence takes place. The 'psy' discourse is also limiting in that it relies on one category, namely 'madness' or mental illness, to explain women's violent behaviours. Psychological problems, for example feelings of depression and anxiety, were a part of some of the women's experiences; however, the women did not adopt the 'mad' label as a master status. Instead, the women's narratives reflected that women deploy multiple, sometimes contradictory identities, such as victim, perpetrator and angry person, in making sense of their violence. Thus, much like the other explanatory frameworks that have been put forth to explain the Violent Woman, the 'psy' discourse ultimately fails to capture the complexity of the women's lives and their experiences.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Power is a relation. It inheres in difference and is a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects. (Weedon, 1987:113)

At present, three dominant discourses exist to explain the violence of criminalized women. Traditional criminological discourse, in company with the majority of mainstream portrayals, typically presents the Violent Woman as 'bad' or evil. While early criminological writers focused on women's biological nature to explain their violent behaviours, more recent mainstream accounts frame women's violence as a rational, willful choice made by 'bad' women. In offering an explanation, psychological discourse generally attributes women's violence to some manner of psychological dysfunction or personality disorder. Here, women who use violence are not only depicted as abnormal; they are pronounced 'mad.' Common to the 'bad' and 'mad' discourses is that it is something about a particular woman – whether it be her chromosomal or genetic makeup, her cold and calculating character or her psychological disposition – that causes her to be violent. In part to challenge the widespread assumption that there is something inherently different about or wrong with women who use violence, feminist discourse locates the Violent Woman in the structural context of patriarchy. Women's violent behaviours, feminists argue, are inextricably tied to their experiences of violence and abuse at the hands of men. In these terms, the Violent Woman is the 'Woman in Trouble,' and her use of violence is a response to her experiences of victimization under conditions of patriarchy.

As the introductory quote above suggests, these discourses and accompanying labels not only describe a particular reality – in this case, that violent women are ‘bad,’ ‘mad’ or ‘victims’ – they also constitute the women themselves. Thus, the application of these labels is not without consequence. In some cases, it may be tantamount to defining the Violent Woman as inherently wicked or severely disturbed; in others, to constituting her as a passive or helpless victim. Moreover, these discourses govern criminal justice responses to – as well as public perceptions of – women who use violence. Patricia Pearson (1997a), for example, maintains that women who use violence are essentially different than other women, and that sentences meted out by the criminal justice system should reflect the conscious choices that these ‘bad’ women have made. Undoubtedly, Pearson’s depiction of the Violent Woman (and others like it) has played a part in legitimating the increasingly punitive treatment of women charged with violent offences, reflected in women’s rising conviction and incarceration rates in Canada and elsewhere (Snider, 2003). In the present study, 17 interviews with criminalized women have been used to examine the veracity of Pearson’s account and the other predominant discourses on women’s violence. What resonance do the three competing discourses have in the lives of criminalized women? Are the women bad? Mad? Victims?

Shifting the Terrain: Complex Contexts and Fractured Identities

The overriding purpose of this research has been to produce an account of women’s violence that challenges existing constructions of the Violent Woman as ‘victim,’ ‘bad’ and ‘mad.’ In so doing, this study has attempted to shift the terrain on which discussions of women’s violence take place. This shift has involved three moves. The first has been

to consider the range of violent behaviours that women engage in. The majority of research on the issue of women's violence focuses on the rare instances where women are charged with murder. In contrast, the women who participated in the present study had perpetrated violence of varying degrees of severity and had been charged with a variety of violent (and other) offences. The second move has involved using a materialist theoretical approach to analyze the social and structural contexts in which women's violence takes place, not only in terms of gendered contexts (like abusive intimate partner relationships), but also contexts marked by race and class-based inequalities. Related to this, the focus of the analysis has shifted from the particular characters of the women involved to the various, contingent social structures which intersect in women's lives and contribute to their use of violence. The third and final move has involved drawing on postmodern insights to attend to the multiple, fractured nature of the women's identities. This has meant uncovering the particular language women use in framing their sense of selves, specifically in terms of whether they rely on the 'victim,' 'bad' and/or 'mad' discourses in telling their stories. By making this shift, then, what insights have emerged? To what extent are the dominant discourses relevant to understanding women's violence? And to what extent do women identify with 'victim,' 'bad' and 'mad' categories in narratives about their violence?

The analysis of the women's narratives – their standpoints – has explicated that each of the dominant discourses, to varying degrees, fails to capture the complexity of the women's experiences. More so than the 'bad' and 'mad' discourses, the feminist 'victim' discourse did resonate with or map onto the women's accounts. In the present study, much the women's violent behaviours have been situated within the broader structural

context of patriarchy, as they were in some way connected to the women's experiences of violence and abuse at the hands of men. In some of the women's accounts, the relationship between the context of victimization and the women's own use of violence was clear and direct; that is, some of the women's violence consisted of actively resisting the abuse of their male partners at the time it was happening. For the majority of the participants in this research, though, the relationship between the context of victimization and the women's use of violence was more complex than delineated in previous feminist accounts. Put simply, the connections between victimization and violence were neither straight nor certain. Within some of the women's narratives, for example, there was an indirect connection between drinking alcohol, past experiences of physical and sexual abuse, and women's own use of violence. Specifically, many of the women discussed perpetrating violence against non-abusive intimate partners, acquaintances, friends and family members when they consumed alcohol and were overwhelmed by unresolved feelings of hurt and anger tied to their experiences of victimization. The women's accounts also illustrated other ways in which their experiences of victimization in childhood contributed their subsequent violent behaviours. Several of the women, in telling their stories, explained that they had run away from home as youths in an effort to stop the violence in their lives, and soon after had started using violence themselves to survive the conditions of street life.

In numerous places throughout the analysis of the women's narratives, then, this research has pointed to the various ways in which the structural context of patriarchy (specifically women's experiences of victimization) accounts for women's violent behaviours. In this sense, the present study has offered support for the feminist focus on

women's experiences of violence and abuse in explaining their conflicts with the law. Nevertheless, the feminist 'victim' discourse does not allow for the complex, plural responses women have to their experiences of victimization, including their feelings of anger and their use of violence outside of the context of abusive intimate partner relationships.

This research has also demonstrated that, by focussing mainly on women's experiences of victimization and their corresponding effects, the feminist discourse tends to obscure some of the other contextual factors which contribute to women's violent behaviours. In the present study, one of the most common contexts in which women's violence emerged was on the inner city streets. Aboriginal women, in particular, discussed using violence in the specific context of living on the streets and/or working in the sex trade. Through analyzing the complexities of these women's stories, this study has highlighted some of the specific ways in which gender, class and race-based inequalities intersect in women's lives. Much like the other women interviewed, the Aboriginal women's accounts revealed that episodes of violence and abuse were common in their childhood. For these women, though, experiences of victimization were situated within homes and communities deeply affected by ongoing processes of colonization, where poverty, alcohol abuse and violence were regular features. After these women left home to escape the conditions of their lives, they ended up on Winnipeg's inner city streets; a space marked by the vast over-representation of Aboriginal peoples and occupied largely by citizens with few resources. In accounting for their violence which occurred in the context of street, the women maintained that using violence to handle

day-to-day conflicts and troubles was normative; in one women's terms, violence was something that she simply "had to do" to survive the conditions of life on the streets.

In terms of the relevance of the three dominant discourses, then, none reflect the scope or the complexity of women's experiences. While the feminist discourse draws attention to the prevalence of victimization and the far-reaching impact of patriarchy in women's lives, it tends to simplify the connections between victimization and violence, and to downplay how race and class-based inequalities account for women's use of violence. Meanwhile, 'bad' and 'mad' discourses, which reduce women's violence to an individual flaw or weakness, completely disregard the significance of the contextual factors which give rise to women's violent behaviours. Clearly, attending to structure and social context, as this study has done, is key to explaining why some women choose to respond to particular situations with violence. Yet, a structural framework alone is not sufficient to account for how women themselves understand their actions. At the subjective level of experience, criminalized women deploy multiple, fluid and often contradictory categories in making sense of their experiences.

In addition to evaluating the extent to which the three dominant discourses explained women's use of violence, the present study has also examined the extent to which criminalized women make use of these discourses in narratives about their violence. In so doing, the limitations inherent in slotting criminalized women into fixed categories like 'victim,' 'bad' or 'mad' have come to the fore.

The majority of the women did employ the feminist 'victim' discourse in telling their stories. Some of the women embraced this discourse to explain the power and control which their abusers exercised within their intimate partner relationships, while

others used it to express the wide-ranging impacts of experiences of violence and abuse in their lives. For example, in many accounts, the women reflected upon how their experiences of victimization permeated their day-to-day lives and, thus, formed part of their sense of self. To this extent, the category 'victim' did correspond with how criminalized women represented themselves in narratives about their violence.

Nevertheless, only one of the women interviewed explained her violence solely in terms of her status as a victim of male violence. To be sure, the majority of the women who participated in the present study did not adopt the 'victim' label as a master status.

To the contrary, in some of the women's narratives, they represented themselves as both victims and perpetrators of violence. In these accounts, the women spent some time detailing their experiences of victimization and its effects on their lives, and also acknowledged their own capacity for and use of violence. Women discussed incidents where they initiated violence against their intimate partners, used violence to protect themselves or exact revenge on the streets, and lashed out violently against friends and family members. When asked whether they saw themselves as perpetrators or victims of violence, many of the women replied, "both." That many of the women who participated in this research did not represent themselves as *either* victims *or* perpetrators in their narratives, but as *both* victims *and* perpetrators points to the limitations of categorizing women who use violence simply as passive victims of abuse.

In addition, several of the women's narratives reflected that they saw themselves as both victims and as angry women. In this sense, the women seemed to adapt both feminist and psychological discourses in making sense of their violence. In telling their stories, several of the women explained their use of violence in terms of being

overwhelmed by (or, in some cases, losing control of) their anger. While the psychological discourse typically interprets women's anger and loss of control as indicative of an underlying psychological problem, the women did not frame their experiences in this way. From the women's standpoints, their violence was rooted in the anger generated by their experiences of physical and sexual abuse as children and as adults. These women did not identify themselves solely as 'victims,' nor did they see themselves as necessarily 'mad' or insane. Instead, the women acknowledged their agency in perpetrating violence, and made use of multiple categories of experience in making sense of their violent behaviours. They represented themselves, at one and the same time, as victims, perpetrators and angry women. As such, neither the feminist 'victim' discourse nor the psychological discourse alone is capable of representing how criminalized women identify themselves in accounts of their violence.

The 'bad' discourse also does not reflect the layered and often contradictory categories women use to account for their violence. Some of the women interviewed for this research did represent themselves as 'bad,' but only in particular contexts and at the same time as identifying with other, contrary identities. For example, some of the women's accounts contain instances where women discussed purposefully portraying themselves as 'bad' when working as a prostitute or in their position as an outside member of a street gang to control and survive their experiences. As well, the women's narratives reflected that they, at times, identified simultaneously with both 'bad' and 'good' personas. Some of the women expressed remorse for their violent actions, while others maintained that they were capable of being both 'bad' (or violent) and 'good' (or loving and caring mothers) at the same time. Women also employed expressions like

“two people” and “double life” to make sense of their seemingly contrary identities. Much like the ‘victim’ and ‘mad’ discourses, then, the ‘bad’ category alone is not sufficient to capture the multiple, fractured identities women make use of in narratives about their violence.

In sum, by shifting the terrain on which discussions of women’s violence take place, the present study has challenged the three discourses which exist to explain the violence of criminalized women. Accounts which frame women’s violence as an individual flaw or weakness (the ‘bad’ and ‘mad’ discourses) not only ignore the social and structural contexts in which women’s violence takes place, but also disregard the fractured nature of the women’s identities. Women are not either ‘bad’ or ‘good,’ “monsters or normal sisters,” or “miscreants” or “nuns” (Lombroso, 1895: 152; Pearson, 1997a: 210). Nor are they ‘mad’ simply by virtue of their use of violence. Put simply, there is nothing essential, inherent or fixed about the Violent Woman. And, while the feminist ‘victim’ discourse marks an advance over accounts which stereotype violent women as either ‘bad’ or ‘mad,’ it too is limited in its explanatory power. By focussing so squarely on the structural context of patriarchy and on women’s status as victims of male violence, the feminist discourse does not adequately reflect women’s experiences. The Violent Woman can, at one and the same time, be a victim and a perpetrator of violence. Constituting her as a victim only captures part of her story, and runs the risk of discounting her potential for anger and violence. Based on this analysis, the argument advanced here is that none of the predominant discourses alone is capable of representing violence by women. This brings us to our final topic of discussion: implications of the present study.

Not ‘Bad,’ ‘Mad’ or ‘Victim’ will Suffice

To date, feminist research and theorizing have increased awareness of the prevalence of male violence against women and the far reaching impact of women’s experiences of victimization on their lives. The resulting feminist discourse has supported the development of specialized services to support female victims of male violence. And, as this research and other feminist accounts make clear (e.g., Heidensohn, 1994; Snider, 2003), the ‘victim’ discourse originating in feminist knowledge claims is very much reflected in criminalized women’s narratives about their violence. Nevertheless, as currently constituted, the feminist discourse tends to disregard how structural conditions other than patriarchy figure in women’s use of violence, and to downplay women’s culpability as perpetrators of violence.

In her work, Myra Hird (2002: 95) notes that “whilst recognition of the circumstances of much of women’s violence against male partners is essential, social justice cannot be served by the categorization of women as only victims.” Likewise, the present study has argued that a range of contextual factors contribute to women’s violence, and that women identify with multiple discursive categories in making sense of their violent behaviours. This argument holds two general strategies for how to best support women in their efforts to move out of and beyond the violence in their lives.

First, given that social and structural contexts account for much of women’s violent behaviour, efforts to address violence by women must attend to the material conditions of their lives. This involves continuing to challenge patriarchal laws, practices and discourses, and to support women who are dealing with experiences of violence and abuse. It also involves ensuring that women have access to the resources that they need

for resolving their troubles, including meaningful employment, adequate levels of social assistance, safe and affordable housing alternatives, as well as accessible and affordable childcare options.

The second general strategy for supporting women to address the violence in their lives is to create spaces – both literally and figuratively – in which women can discuss and acknowledge their own violent behaviours. In practical terms, this means expanding the parameters of programming offered within existing services for victims of abuse (such as women's shelters and women's resource centres), and/or developing new sites where women are permitted to talk about their feelings of anger and their use of violence. It also involves advancing discourses on women's violence that resonate more accurately with women's experiences (including their own use of violence).

To this end, feminists must follow-up on recent efforts to engage in critical analyses on the issue of women's violence (see, for example, Chan, 2001; Hird, 2002; Ristock, 2002). In the next frontier of feminist criminological theorizing and research, there is the potential to produce accounts which will move understandings of women's violence forward, and which will allow feminists to better respond to the claims of backlash writers like Patricia Pearson (1997b). In this regard, the analytical framework developed for the present study – which combined materialist and postmodern concerns – provides some ideas for future research efforts.

Specifically, there are a number of ways in which future research might expand upon the present study to be more inclusive. For one, all of the participants in this research had been criminalized, meaning they had been charged with and/or convicted of a criminal offence. To explore some of the qualitative differences between the violence of

criminalized and non-criminalized women, future research could include participants who have not been subjected to criminal justice interventions. What is the social positioning of these women? In what social and structural contexts does their violence take place? What discursive categories do they use in making sense of their violence? As well, future research could be more inclusive in terms of sexualities and race/ethnicities. All of the women who participated in the present study identified as heterosexual, and while Aboriginal women were represented in the sample of women interviewed, women from other ethnic/cultural groups were not. Future studies might draw on accounts from a broader sample of women to produce an account of women's violence that includes a diversity of women's perspectives. Lastly, this research raises some interesting and important questions about how we understand men's violence. Using an analytical framework that includes materialist and postmodern perspectives, future studies might challenge existing discourses around the violence of criminalized men. How and where is violence situated in men's accounts of their lives? How do criminalized men constitute themselves? In the process, what discourses do they draw from (and resist)?

Concluding Remarks

To the extent that the Violent Woman has been constituted as either bad/mad or a victim of patriarchy, efforts to understand women's use of violence have been at an impasse. Moving forward involves recognizing that each of the predominant discourses on women's violence – and their accompanying constructions of the Violent Woman – fails to address the complexities and the particulars of women's lives. Women perpetrate violence in diverse and complex social and structural contexts. Moreover, they draw on

multiple discursive constructions in articulating how they understand their violent behaviour. Clearly, violence in the lives of criminalized women cannot be rendered plausible by simply imposing a master status template, like 'victim,' 'bad' or 'mad.'

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Part I: Demographic and Social Characteristics

How old are you?

How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

How far did you go in your education?

How do you currently support yourself? What (other) kinds of work have you done?

What is your current marital status?

Do you have kids? How many? How old are they?

Part II: Childhood and Teenage Experiences

I'm interested in learning about your experiences of violence – how it has figured in your life – not only in terms of violence that has been directed at you or that you've witnessed, but also your own use of violence.

Perhaps we could start with your memories of your childhood...

Could you tell me a bit about yourself, in terms of where you grew up, your family background?

Did you live with your parents?

How many siblings do you have?

Could you describe what life was like for you as a child and teenager? (Economic situation, schooling, friendships?)

Who would you say were your main sources of support? Who did you go to if you had problems? Did you get along well with other members of your family?

What about violence? Did you have any experiences with violence as a child / teenager? Can you tell me about this? What happened?

What about your own use of violence? Can you recall being violent yourself as a child or teenager? Can you tell me what happened?

In looking back on your childhood and teenage years, what kind of effect – positive or negative – do you think your experiences had on your life?

How old were you when you first left home? Can you tell me about the circumstances?

Part III: Adult experiences

Has there been violence in your adult life? Can you tell me about it?

What about violence from an intimate partner – a boyfriend or husband – can you tell me about that? (Was there drugs or alcohol involved?; when would it happen?; did you fight back or use aggression/violence of your own?)

How would you explain your own use of violence? Why do you think you fight/use violence?

Have you ever been in conflict with the law because of your violence? Can you tell me about it? (How many times?; what was the charge?; who was involved?; what happened with the charge?)

Do you think of yourself as a ‘violent person’? Do you see yourself as a ‘victim’ or a ‘perpetrator’ of violence?

Do you think women’s use of violence is different than men’s?

How do you deal or cope with violence? Are there certain strategies that you’ve found help you?

Do you have anyone you talk to about this stuff?

What do you think needs to be done to help people cope with the violence in their lives? What does it take for people not to be violent?

What are do you see as your strengths?

Is there anything else you would like to say or add to what we’ve already discussed?

Appendix B

Consent Form

Understanding Violence in Men's and Women's Lives

I understand that Professor Elizabeth Comack is undertaking a study to address how men and women who have been involved in violence understand that experience. I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary, and will involve a tape recorded interview of approximately one hour in duration. I understand that at any time during the interview I may refuse to answer a question, request that the tape recorder be turned off, or choose to withdraw from the study without prejudice or consequence.

I understand that the information I provide during the interview will be held in strict confidence. **Only the researcher (Elizabeth Comack) and the research assistant who transcribes the interview will have access to the tapes, and the tapes will be destroyed once the research is completed.** Confidentiality and anonymity will also be maintained in the reporting of findings. For example, while my words may be cited verbatim in the final report, my identity – and the identity of any other person named during the interview – will remain confidential, but with one exception: *any information related to the abuse and/or violence against children must be reported to the appropriate authorities.*

I understand the purpose of the research and what my participation will involve. I am willing to participate in this study and to discuss my experiences as someone who has been involved in violence. I give permission to Elizabeth Comack to use the content of our interview for research purposes. A copy of the final report will be made available to me upon my request (by phoning 474-9673).

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Dr. E. Comack
Department of Sociology
University of Manitoba
(204) 474-9673

Date

This study has been approved by the Department of Sociology Ethics Review Committee. Any complaint regarding procedure may be reported to the Head of the Department of Sociology at 474-9260 for referral to the Ethics Review Committee.

Appendix C
Interview Summary Form

Demographic and Social Characteristics	
Interview Number	
Name Assigned to the Woman	
Age	
Race/Ethnicity	
Education	
Employment	
Marital Status — include reference to present and previous intimate partner relationships)	
Children — Number — Ages	
Other Demographic/Social Characteristics	

Childhood and Teenage Experiences

Parents, Family, Siblings — draw out sources of support	
School Experiences, Relationships with Peers	
Alcohol/Drug Use — types? reasons why?	
Violence (‘Perpetrator’) — form & outcome — relationship to victim(s) — context	
Violence (‘Victim’) — age(s) — relationship to perpetrator(s) — nature of abuse	
Other Conflicts with the Law	
Other Comments	

Adult Experiences

Transition from Childhood to Adulthood — when did she leave home and why? — connection to the streets?	
Alcohol/Drug Use — types? reasons why?	
Violence ('Perpetrator') — form & outcome — relationship to victim(s) — context	
Violence ('Victim') — relationship to perpetrator(s) — nature of abuse	
Other Conflicts with the Law?	
Other Comments	

Other Information

Does she see herself as a violent person? Explain.	
Gender & Connections to Violence	
Class & Connections to Violence	
Race & Connections to Violence	
Gender X Class X Race Connections	
Involvement with 'Psy' Professionals — yes/no — explain	
Discussion of Control?	
Strengths?	