

NARRATIVE THREADS OF TRAUMA TO ACTIVISM:

THE STORIES OF THREE WOMEN

by

Kristi A. Smith

B.A., University of British Columbia, 1994

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIRMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

EDUCATIONAL COUNSELLING

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

August 2005

© Kristi A. Smith, 2005



Library and  
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file    Votre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-28389-9*

*Our file    Notre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-28389-9*

#### NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

#### AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

### Abstract

This research tells the stories of three women's experiences in moving from trauma to activism. The aim of the research is threefold; documenting and understanding the narratives of these three women; identifying if and how, in constructing their stories, participants came to view themselves and their experiences in new ways; and contributing to counselors' understanding of traumatic experiences as well as the possible therapeutic conversations around activism. More specifically, I am interested in 'what' (evaluative function) narrative is being constructed in regards to the process from trauma to activism and also, 'how' (explorative function) this telling might shape participants ways of constructing meaning around their experiences. The resultant narratives are viewed as patchwork quilts. By definition patchwork quilts have no center. The patches can be varied in texture and style, highlighting the multiple perspectives, contradictions and complexities of these women's experiences.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	Page
Abstract	ii
Table of contents	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Dedication	vi
Chapter I: Introduction	1
Research Questions	3
Locating Myself	4
Significance of Proposed Study	5
Theoretical Framework	7
Limitations	9
A Note on Terminology	10
Summary	12
Chapter II: Literature Review	14
Trauma	14
Activism	16
Trauma and Activism	16
Chapter III: Methodology	19
Theoretical Perspectives	19
Methods	25
Research Participants	27
Ann	27
Sally	28
Lana	28
Treatment of Data	29
Validity and Trustworthiness	32
Ethical Considerations	34
Chapter IV: Results	37
Ann	37
Naming the experience	37
Mapping the effects	39
Development of Activism Participation	42
The Second Interview	43
Sally	46
Naming the experience	46
Mapping the effects	48
Development of Activism Participation	49
The Second Interview	51
Lana	55
Naming the experience	55
Mapping the effects	58

Development of Activism Participation	59
The Second Interview	61
Unforeseen Results	63
Chapter V: Discussion	65
Coherence Function	66
Distancing Function	73
Evaluative Function	76
Voice	76
Connection	79
Turning Points	82
Explorative Function	85
Limitations	87
Implications for Counselling	90
Looking Back	95
Suggestions for Further Research	96
Conclusions	97
References	100
Appendices	
Appendix A: Referral Form & Letter of Introduction	109
Appendix B: The Article	111
Appendix C: Informed Consent	112
Appendix D: Interview questions	114
Appendix E: Debriefing the Interview	115

## Acknowledgements

The completion of my thesis journey was made possible by the support of numerous individuals. First of all I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to my husband, Parker, for all his patience and support during this lengthy and often gruelling process. My parents remain, as always, my foundation and sources of constant encouragement. Thank you for raising me to share my voice! As new grandparents, your help has been invaluable, watching over Ella as I try to bring this educational chapter of my life to a close. To my sisters, Shannon and Trinity, your encouragement helped me to keep going. My grandmothers; whose voices are always with me.

I am indebted to the three women who bravely shared with me their stories. I offer them my thanks and gratitude for choosing to join me in this process. I stand in awe of their accomplishments as activists and their desire to make their communities better places.

I would like to extend my thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Dennis Procter. Thank you for joining me in this narrative dance, late in the game. Your guidance and feedback have been invaluable. Special thanks to my committee members, Dr. Corinne Koehn and Dr. Glen Schmidt, for their assistance in seeing this process to fruition. I would also like to thank Dr. Tom Strong for the beginning conversations.

Thanks to my many friends who have listened to me talk about my thesis for much too long and who always believed I would finish. A special thank you to my friend, Kareen who, on our regular walks, would hear the phrase, “that reminds me of my thesis.” Also, I have had the opportunity to be part of a thesis support group (a.k.a. the thesis slugs) and wish to extend thanks to its members; Margaret, Marion, Laurie, Bev, Barb, and Sue, for “holding the torch.” Finally, I would like to thank my teachers early on, Ms. Gamache, for providing the space to develop and find my voice, and to Mr. Drozda and Ms. Snyder for all those years ago telling me I could write.

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work  
To Parker and Ella.

“Thank you, Parker, for encouraging and supporting this process,  
and for keeping the faith!”

“And for Ella, my spirited girl - may you always have a voice!”

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In the moments that these words are typed, women and men of our communities will be confronted with various tragedies and sorrows. The effects of these experiences will be far-reaching and lingering. Lives will be interrupted in a profound manner and indelibly marked in ways I can hardly imagine. Often, these experiences become the seeds to isolation, despair, and depression. As practitioners in the field of mental health we are often invited to hear these stories of tragedy and sorrow. In these settings, as eloquently noted by Wade (1995), individuals who have experienced some form of violence or oppression are often “recast” or defined by some sort of deficiency label. In this way the status of ‘victim’ is perpetuated “thus entrapping her in a narrative of decline and terminal damage”(Wade, 1995, p. 175). Yet, as Wade (1995) goes on to describe, there are many forms of ‘resistance’ in response to traumatic experiences, in which peoples’ behavior indicates personal agency.

I am curious about what I have come to view as a particular form of ‘resistance.’ I am curious about the processes involved in the movement from trauma to activism. How does activism come to happen? There are many examples which speak to the shift(s) people experience from being considered a ‘victim’ to raising their voices and becoming activists. These shifts may be found within popular media. Consider the young man in the lower mainland high school who had been verbally and physically assaulted by his peers. Once hospitalized due to an assault, this young man, in his fight against homophobia, created a gay-straight alliance club in his school (The Citizen, 2000). Similarly, several years ago, a classmate in Taber, Alberta, murdered Reverend Dale

Lang's son. The Reverend now travels the country speaking to youth about violence, kindness, and forgiveness (Hong, 2000). These noted traumas appear to have been the impetus for both men to participate in social change and activism.

Traumatized women, have been the pioneers of social action and change in their communities, nationally, and internationally. In an edition of the Canadian magazine, *Chatelaine*, several women were profiled for their activist pursuits. For example, 18-year-old Lauryn Oates organized a chapter of Women 4 Women group out of her own home "to fight for the emancipation of the women of Afghanistan who are living and dying through a human rights catastrophe"(Armstrong, 2001, p. 46). Deborah Westerburg of Woodstock New Brunswick, helped create her town's first women's shelter along with developing the program, 'Making Waves,' in an effort to create awareness about dating violence. In the midst of my research I came upon the television program "Sixty minutes." In this episode the story of a South African woman, Charlene Smith, was being shown. Ms. Smith, a reporter, had been raped, and wrote in detail about her traumatic experience in a national paper. The program highlighted that such experiences are rarely shared and talked about with such public critical reflection. According to the program, the vast majority of women who are raped are black and live in townships, and rarely have their day in court. These are but a few names of women who have made waves in their communities and taken on the role of activist.

My curiosity rests upon the responses of women, rather than focusing on the type of 'trauma' that was exacted upon them. I was concerned that if only one form of trauma was included in this research then only one type of discourse would be revealed. For instance, in her research, Cain (as cited in Mishler, 1995) examined the personal stories

of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members, finding that a “collective story” was often developed. “Over time and through responses and sanctions of the group, each person’s story comes to take on the structure and content of the standard AA story” (Mishler, 1995, p.109). By including participants who had experienced the same ‘type’ of trauma, I was concerned that attention would be directed to what was done to participants, rather than to their responses of resistance in the form of activist pursuits.

### *Research Questions*

The purpose of my research was to investigate and understand the narratives of several women who had experienced a traumatic event and had become activists. More specifically, what critical movements occur in narratives as these women shift from a stance of ‘victim’ to one of ‘activist’? As well, how are women affected when they are invited to reflect upon their journeys and create meaning from these experiences? The aim of this process is threefold:

- To document and understand the narratives of those who have moved from a place of trauma to activism.
- To identify if and how, in constructing their stories, participants come to view themselves and their experiences in a new way?
- To contribute to counsellors’ understanding of the possible discourses around activism and social change that may occur within a therapeutic setting.

It is not my goal to define the process of moving from trauma to activism and from this make generalizations. It is more of my goal to understand and document the possibilities of such a process for several women. The former presupposes an objective meaning, which I do not adhere to in this research. It is my hope that this research will

represent the lived experiences of the women involved in this study, as well as highlighting the joint meaning making aspects of our conversations.

### *Locating Myself*

I believe it is important to locate myself in this research and further contextualize the knowledge therein produced. I am a white woman in my early thirties. For approximately seven years I have worked as a counsellor in a mental health centre, where the focus is working with children and families. In this setting I have listened to numerous stories of trauma and loss. There have been times when I have been overwhelmed by the weightiness of this type of work and other times when I am amazed by the resourcefulness and strengths of the individuals I have met.

When I began to consider a line of research that I would follow I was feeling somewhat bogged down. More specifically, I had returned to work and continued with my coursework. In both arenas I felt frustrated with what I perceived to be a sort of silencing and modernistic orientation towards therapeutic practice. More specifically, the larger structure of the facility where I worked was beginning to feel like I was being swept up in a discourse of pathology. At the same time some classes were taking on a similar feeling. I believe these experiences lead me to consider an area of research that might feel more hopeful.

### *Significance of the Proposed Study*

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral (Paulo Freire, 1999). Therapeutic interventions have long been criticized for approaching clients from an expert based model, focusing on deficiency and pathology (Gergen, 1990). Therapists

espousing theories within a modernist framework routinely help clients adapt and adjust to their environment, reinforcing power inequities and oppression that exists within social contexts. Similarly, much research views individual difficulties as resting within personalities rather than in the social context in which people move. Feminist theorists have long argued that the practice of therapy should lead to change in individual lives and social contexts (Brown, 1994). I believe as mental health practitioners, we must explore the notion of 'activism' within therapeutic environments if we are sincerely interested in siding with the powerless and oppressed.

In their book, *Social Action: A Mandate for Counsellors*, Courtland and Waltz (1998), argued that counsellor participation in social change is valuable and necessary. In addition, they stated that it is relevant "not only to intervene into clients' lives to help with the problem resolutions and decision making but also into the social context that affects those lives" (p. 11). If these contexts are not explored the narrative of victim status will most likely be maintained.

Here in Prince George, Schneider (1999) investigated the needs of 'victims' following violent crimes, along with counsellors' perceived notions of what 'victims' need. The response of victim-participants indicated a need to "regain control", rights, and some form of retribution. Interestingly, counsellor participants did not indicate the need for victims' rights or retribution. The implications and possibilities born from my study point towards social action as an alternative avenue for healing; "while victims expend effort and energy to seek out the agencies, systems, and processes that adjudicate retribution, counsellors can be supportive by providing encouragement, validation, and advocacy" (Schneider, 1999, p. 162).

It is not my position to argue that activism in the area of one's traumatic experience is the single remedy for healing. Instead, it is my hope that my research may contribute to what Gergen (1999) refers to as "generative conversations" that have the potential to occur within the therapeutic setting. These conversations may offer insight into the movement from 'victimization' to activism and how these movements may contribute to individual healing and societal change. "These narratives go on providing an alternative frame for the attribution of meaning to those experiences of life that would otherwise have been neglected"(White, 1995, p. 33).

The simple power of story telling may also be revealed in this research as a worthwhile and illuminating method for exploring trauma and activism including voices that are often ignored. "Its potential as a tool for social change is remarkable provided we pay attention to the interpretive structures that underpin how we hear and how we take up stories of oppressed groups" (Razack, 1998, p. 37). For instance, Razack (1998), looked at storytelling in the law, pointing out that feminists have "flooded" the courts with the narratives of women so that voices previously suppressed would be highlighted and included.

Legal rules and conventions suppress the stories of outsider groups. The fiction of objectivity, for example, obscures that key players in the legal system have tended to share a conceptual theme. Thus, judges who do not see the harm of rape or racist speech are considered to be simply interpreting...they are not seen to possess norms and values that derive directly from their social location and that are sustained by such practices as considering individuals outside of their social contexts (Razack, 1998, p. 38).

It is my hope that my research will contribute to a similar “flood” within the helping professions, particularly those in the mental health field who are regularly invited to participate in the action of healing.

### *Theoretical Framework*

My research is based on post-modern feminist and social construction philosophies. Traditional research paradigms embedded in modernist thought are often interpreted as objective truths. There is a danger with modernist paradigms in that it takes “on a positivist conception of knowledge. That is, there is a straight line between the knower and the known” (Razack, 1998, p.37). This seems particularly dangerous in the context of therapeutic relationships and wider mental health systems. We are challenged by postmodern thought to consider multitude of realities.

Social construction theory recognizes that the ways of coming to know ourselves, and the world we live in, are developed through our dialogue with others (Gergen, 1999). “The self unfolds with each communication about itself, rather than being a state that can be described once and for all”(Weingarten, 1992, p. 56). Based on this dialogical stance, I have come to understand that in the researcher/participant relationship I am involved in a collaborative effort with the participants (Strong, 2000).

Thus every telling of similarity and difference-every assay of the other-is not so much a reflection of the real as it is a reflection of our own modes of being. To read the other is to make manifest our own existence-how it is we construct the world and with what and herein lays opportunity to move beyond (Gergen, 1999, p. 107).

Gergen (1999) challenges us to critically reflect upon the construction of meaning in our lives and the social, historical and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. By doing so, we allow the possibility of change.

By reflecting critically on our taken for granted world, and the way in which our lives are affected by these constructions, we may be freed to consider alternatives. This same emancipatory quest serves as a stimulus to additional kinds of inquiry (Gergen, 1999, p. 101).

I believe that meanings are socially constructed, negotiable, multi-voiced and participatory.

Feminist philosophy, within a postmodern framework, acknowledges the “sociopolitical nature of relationships and interprets knowledge and power as being equivocal” (Biever et al., 1998). In locating myself within a feminist post-modern framework I adhered to the tenet of feminist thought; the personal is political (Gilbert & Rossman, 1993). There is an emphasis on recognizing societal and cultural factors that contribute to the lives of individuals and, in particular, the lives of women. “Feminist postmodernists (constructionists) are committed to subverting or disrupting oppressive knowledges by analyzing both dominant and subjugated discourses” (Avis & Turner, 1995, p. 148).

I acknowledged and emphasized the role of experience in the meaning making process. I did not view myself as an expert of my participants’ experiences. Similarly, I recognized that participants are fully self reflexive, and therefore play a critical role in the production of meaning and the possibilities for change. Feminist researchers highlight

individual standpoints, while at the same time paying attention to meanings that are born from larger social contexts (Brown, 1994).

My reading of the role of experience in meaning making suggests that experience must be analyzed and interpreted in order to see how it is socially organized and to uncover the ideological discursive and material conditions that construct it (Profitt, 1999, p. 21).

As Profitt (1999) argued, feminist research should “contribute to the empowerment of individuals, facilitate emancipatory forms of consciousness, and serve as a step towards developing forms of political actions” (Profitt, 1999, p. 43). In this vein, I hope that my research might serve as such a step.

### *Limitations*

There are inherent dangers in attempting to fully and accurately represent participants' stories. More specifically, Reissman (1993) warns of ‘narrative smoothing’, where parts of stories are excluded or obscured. This is inevitable; however, interviewer bias and narrative smoothing can to some extent be avoided if certain principles, as laid out by Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999), are incorporated. These principles include avoiding questions that suggest a desired response. As well, by critically reflecting on the questions I ask, I may come to see more clearly my role in the construction of meaning for this research.

Often in therapeutic practices and research there is a tendency to view language as a “vehicle for inner access-revealing or setting forth to the professional the character of the not directly observed” (Gergen, 1990, p. 354). I viewed my research from a relational perspective in that the participant and I were in the process of making meaning together.

Language is limited in its ability to fully represent the experiences of others, yet it is the primary manner in which we often seek to understand others and ourselves.

Another researcher might be drawn into the stories with participants in different ways and come away with different understandings and meanings. My interpretations, and experiences of this research “come through the lenses of my own life experiences” and, as such, do not lay claim to any universal truths (Brown, 1999, p. 10). From a feminist perspective it is critical to consider the findings from this research as not being the whole story.

#### *A Note on Terminology*

Largely based on feminist philosophies and pursuits, the term ‘victim’ began to be replaced with the term ‘survivor’. Initially the term was applied to individuals who had been faced with death, such as holocaust survivors and Vietnam veterans. Later it was applied more liberally to those who had experienced ‘victimizing’ experiences as a way to recognize personal strength, agency, and power (Janoff-Bulmann, 1992). In her research of women who have been abused by their male partners, Profitt (1996) highlights how language, particularly the use of the terms ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ has the potential to disregard women’s resistance and involvement in social action and change. Her concern is that the term ‘victim’ simply focuses on what has happened to a woman. More specifically, Profitt points out that we also need to take into account a woman’s coping and resistance. Similarly, when viewing ‘battered women’ as ‘survivors’ there is again potential for women to be “represented as objects of oppressive forces” (Profitt, 1996, p. 30). Therein lies the challenge; broadening our notions of ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’. “In our language and in our practice we must disrupt the cultural scripts that

ignore women's resistance and circumscribe their agency to exclude actions for collective social change" (Profitt, 1996, p. 35).

In this research the terms 'victimization' and 'trauma' will replace the usage of survivor and victim as much as possible to avoid victim blaming language and the potential focus on individual deficiency and psychopathology. The concepts of 'victimization' and 'trauma' will refer to those out of the ordinary experiences that participants were helpless to, producing a sense of loss, and posing a threat to individuals' well-being and self-preservation. As well, the loss produced will have an identifiable cause and/or agent (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Following a post-modern philosophical framework and, for the purposes of this research, activism will be viewed as a form of resistance, in which peoples' behavior indicates personal agency, moving beyond the realm of victim status and involving more than the definition of survivor (Wade, 1995). "That is, alongside each history of violence and oppression, there runs a parallel history of prudent, creative, and determined resistance" (Wade, 1997, p. 23).

In order to define 'activism' it seems appropriate to take a closer look at the notion of 'resistance' and its implications. Traditionally within therapeutic practices, resistance has been viewed as a type of defensive response. In response to those who have experienced traumas, mental health practitioners use labels related to psychological distress. Our conversations with clients tend to focus on the effects of traumatic experiences "thus entrapping her in a narrative of decline and terminal damage" (Wade, 1995, p. 175). Postmodern and feminist thought provides us with a shift in thinking and invites us to participate and construct a new style of discourse with our clients.

Wade (1997) contends that “any mental or behavioral act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression, or the conditions that make such acts possible, may be understood as a form of resistance” (Wade, p. 25).

Feminist theory conceptualizes the capacity to resist as a form of truth telling about what actually happened and truth telling about what is possible and available to each person as avenues for change (Brown, 1999, p. 26).

Through these lenses, activism in the area of one’s traumatic experience may be seen as a form of resistance, more obvious and ‘political’ than the numerous other subtle forms of resistance. Borrowing further from Proffitt’s (1999) work, activism is viewed as a form of resistance that may include involvement in advocacy groups whose goal is legal reform, education and/or policy change; self help and support groups positioned to create social change and action, as well as community education efforts.

### *Summary*

I have asked several women to join me in the process of this research to document and understand the movement from trauma to activism. I am curious to know if, as a result of our conversations, participants come up with new or different ways to think about their experiences. It is my hope this research will expand the dialogue and practices within therapeutic relationships around trauma and activism.

Post modern feminist, and social constructionist philosophies informed my research. This means that I have approached this research with the understanding that the participants and I are engaged in a process of creating and negotiating meaning with one

another. "Reality is constructed in the social discourse between oneself and one's emotional and interpersonal environment" (Brown, 1999, p. 8).

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### *Trauma*

During the 60s and 70s, concern and interest towards people who had experienced traumatic events began to take shape (Herman, 1992). The women's and civil rights movements brought to the forefront the oppressive contexts of people's lives, particularly experienced by women, African Americans, and Aboriginal people (Whalen, 1996). Soon after, advocacy groups such as MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), Parents of Murdered Children and victim assistance organizations emerged (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

During the 1960s 'victimization' surveys were developed as a tool to illustrate the prevalence and experiences of victims of violence (Whalen, 1996). Research involving trauma, were published in newly developed journals, such as *Violence and Victims*, *Victimology* and *Child Abuse and Neglect*. Prior to this a sort of "insensitivity" and near indifference existed towards those who had been victimized. Victims were neglected and marginalized within the justice system and fields of research, where various forms of oppression continued to exist (Greenberg & Rubach, 1992). In the United States, the first rape crisis centres and transition homes for abused women began to operate in 1973. By the 1980s, the victim assistant organizations were well established throughout North America. Until more recently the literature has primarily provided statistics regarding the prevalence of traumatic events and its effects (Janoff Bulman, 1992).

During the 1980's, research tended to focus on the psychological impact of 'victimization'. This new body of literature described the impact of personal trauma,

'victimization' and loss. Regardless of the victimizing experience, commonalities were found in terms of impact and psychological toll. Though not encompassing of persons' experiences following personal trauma and 'victimization', the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder classification in the DSM-IV, pointed towards the similarities that exist within the range of psychological and emotional impacts (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Janoff-Bulman discovered that the basic similarity amongst those that had experienced various types of trauma, was that their fundamental assumptions about the world were challenged, threatening their identity of self and others. Inherent in this experience were themes of denial-numbness, guilt, self-blame, and meaning making.

Other models of coping have also included such themes, focusing on the individual and society's response. Bowlby (1983) and Kubler- Ross (1970) proposed possible stages or themes, which emerged in response to personal trauma and loss. They too include meaning making as a piece of the grieving process. Meaning making was described as a reinvestment in life and acceptance of the experience (Bee, 1992). Through these lenses, activism may be viewed as a form of meaning making and reinvestment.

As noted earlier I am curious about the meaning women construct and apply to their activist endeavors. What draws women to such activities? Is it the task of reinvestment? It is here that these models and others fall short, tending to neglect the movement of 'victim' status to one of 'activist'. The literature does not appear to have dealt with this phenomenon in a comprehensive manner.

## *Activism*

Previous research has tended to view ‘trauma’ and ‘activism’ as separate phenomenon. Interestingly, alongside the increasing attention during the 60s and 70s of ‘victims’ experiences, was the increase in literature related to activism (Young, 1997). Once again the feminist and civil rights movements appeared to have facilitated such inquiry. Consciousness raising groups were born, and on campuses throughout North America there was much protest. Similarly, the impact of colonization and oppressive forces was noticeably met with voices of resistance, throughout the world.

The history of women’s activism is layered with pivotal moments. Canadian highlights include the right to vote (for white women only) in 1918; the notion of ‘personhood’ for women, achieved in 1929 through the suffragette movement; 1970s deletion of discriminatory sections of the labour and criminal codes and Citizenship Act, as well as the 1981 inclusion of an equal rights amendment of the Constitution for women (Armstrong, 2001).

Throughout North America the unrest of the 1960s witnessed many young women joining social reform movements, protesting military aggression, and war. However, the leaders of these movements were mostly men, often offering up their own form of hypocrisy, leaving some women feeling in the shadows and unheard. From these social reform movements the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed in 1966 and consciousness raising groups sprung up almost everywhere (Elliot, 1999). During the 1970s, women’s involvement in collective action forced society to acknowledge and take a closer look at the issue of “wife battering”. Transition homes, shelters, and rape crisis centers emerged on the scene (Profitt, 1996).

### *Trauma and Activism*

There is some indication the literature has observed the roles of 'victims' in 'activist' pursuits. Consider the founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Candy Lightner, whose 13-year-old daughter Cari was killed by a drunk driver in 1980. The drunk driver involved in this crash had prior drunk driving arrests and was sentenced to only two years for Cari's death. In December of that same year, Candy established the MADD organization which now boasts approximately three million members. In a study on the role of the 'victim activist' in the movement against drunk driving, Weed (1990), discovered that MADD "tends to be run by activists who have been victimized rather than victims who have become activists" (Weed, 1990, p. 469). Such results are intriguing in exploring how the experience of 'trauma' influences one's role as an 'activist', particularly with respect to previous community action. Weed (1990) pointed out that perhaps there is more to the stories of individuals who take on the role of 'victim activist' than the survey he collected revealed. Perhaps the line is not so straight from 'victim' to 'activist'?

More recently there has been some indication that the movement from victimization to activism is beginning to be explored. In particular, some feminist research has explored the processes through which women who have survived rape and abuse become socially active in an effort to confront and battle violence against women (McCaffrey, 1998, Profitt, 1999). McCaffrey (1998) explored why some women, who have been sexually assaulted, participate in social movements while others do not. She found that the main predictors of activism for women who have been sexually assaulted "included the absence of shame, an intermediate level of trauma following victimization, low

current negative effects from victimization and networks supportive of activism” (McCaffrey, 1998, p. 1). Still, such research appears to be more focused on the type of ‘victimization’ experienced rather than the movement it seems to inspire.

Profitt (1999) attempted to understand the processes involved for women who have been abused by their male partners and then participate in collective action in an effort to end violence against women. Profitt points out that services for women who have been abused have been extremely “professionalized,” often obscuring the needs of the women such services are there to support. Those women who are “directly impacted by violence have little participation in defining and responding to an issue that paradoxically has most affected them” (Walker, as quoted in Profitt, 1999, p. 9). Such findings support the idea of inviting conversations around activism in the therapeutic setting.

In summary, the literature revealed numerous investigations on the prevalence and impact of ‘victimization’ and trauma. As well, a body of literature has focused on coping with trauma and loss. The literature appears to address the issue of ‘activism’ in regards to students and women of the 60s and 70s. Unfortunately, it does not cast a longing gaze to how ‘trauma’ may facilitate participation in ‘activism’ or how such movement impacts individuals. Yet, it is clear through numerous media accounts that those who have experienced ‘trauma’ are taking action in terms of prevention and awareness programs, in addition to legal reform. As well, as Profitt (1996) and Wade (1997) pointed out, there are numerous “sites” of resistance by individuals who have experienced ‘trauma’ which are often unacknowledged, instead deserving to be understood and respected. More specifically, Wade (1997) suggested that therapists working with people who had experienced violence, ask questions that trace the many ways individuals may have

overtly or quietly opposed the violence that was occurring. It would appear that the movement from 'trauma' to 'activism' is a path not yet fully explored.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### *Theoretical Perspectives*

In order to understand the experiences of participants who have become activists in the areas of their “victimization,” I have utilized narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. Simply stated...narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 p. 20).

I have come to view narratives as stories which are seen to be social constructions “fully impregnated by their location within power structures and social milieu...only if we deal with stories as the starting point for collaboration, as the beginning of a process of coming to know, will we come to understand their meaning: to see them as social constructions which allow us to locate and interrogate the social world in which they are embedded” (Goodson, 1995, p. 98). For the purposes of this research, narrative is viewed as the structure “underpinning” the story (Frank, 2000). For me, it is the story that I am drawn to, offering invitations of understanding and questioning. The story is, as Frank (2000) so eloquently refers to, a “seduction,” which “grounds my standpoint, my sense of value, my origin of judgment, and my usefulness” (Frank, 2000, p. 364).

Social science researchers have recently begun to explore the narrative quality of lives and the sense of coherence that is developed. Stories have begun to be linked to theoretical frameworks (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Lucius-Hoene, 2000; Polkinghorne 1988). When considering narrative inquiry as a means of exploring the phenomenon of individuals moving from traumatic experiences to areas of activism, it seems relevant to begin with some broader notions.

In this research, participants were engaged in the act of remembering, and creating meaning from the resultant narratives. However, “the active interview” as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) refer to it, is not a simple process of remembering the past. Rather, research interviews provide participants and researchers the opportunities to collaborate and together make sense of the past. In this way “the respondent’s history is a history-in-the making, complexly unfolding in relation to what has taken place in the past to what is currently being made of the past, and to immediate prospects for the future” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 32).

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) viewed the stories that participants narrated in interviews as coming from a “stock of knowledge.” The stock of knowledge that is accessed in the interviews is dependent on the various roles participants speak too. This idea informs us that the ‘stock of knowledge’ activated is shifting and reflexive, stirring up various perspectives. “The aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing-the possible answers-that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 37).

Within this sort of interview the interviewer/researcher is also viewed as an active participant. For instance, the loosely based framework of questions I used orientated

participants to certain topics of discussion; naming their experiences, mapping the effects, development of activism, and debriefing our first interviews (see Appendix A). Similarly, in locating myself within the research process I recognized that I am in “the middle of a nested set of stories-mine and theirs”(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). As Clandinin & Connelly (2000) emphasize, it is “self deceptive” to assume we as researchers are neutral, silent observers.

The thrust of some research has been towards narratives by those who have experienced illness. Frank (2000) looked at the relationships that exist between illnesses, health, the medical care system, and the culture to which participants belong. He recognized the divide that exists between the lived experiences of those with an illness and the medical profession’s analytical responses. Furthermore, Frank pushes us to see the relevance of these stories in creating understanding, and offering support and assistance to others faced with illness.

Storytellers tell stories because the texture of any form of life is so dense that no one can describe this form of life; the storyteller can only invite someone to come inside for the duration of the story. Those who accept an invitation open themselves to seeing (and feeling and hearing) life differently than they normally do (Frank, 2000, p. 361).

Mathieson and Barrie (1998) used semi-structured interviews with cancer patients to locate prime narratives. They incorporated a detailed coding scheme to analyze the data. Consistent with a social construction orientation (Gergen, 1999), they viewed the narrative as being reliant upon narrators and listeners. The interview is viewed as an active collaboration between researcher and participants. More specifically, Mathieson

and Barrie (1998) recognized that the resultant narratives emerged from discourses available to researchers and participants. Researchers come with their own theoretical underpinnings and skills. Furthermore the uniqueness of the prime narratives was colored by such variables as gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

Though I agree with this notion of narrative, I have avoided the micro dynamics of analysis employed by these researchers in locating narratives. Such minute analysis may “overdetermine the consistency of themes and the constancy of meaning in people’s everyday lives” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, p. 165).

Narrative inquiry offers interpretations of experiences and events. These interpretations are often presented in a tentative manner “usually expressed as a kind of uncertainty, about an event’s meaning”(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 31). This sense of tentativeness can stir up tension and discomfort. We are forced to consider “the idea that the world has no fixed rules for assigning meaning to behavior” (Emihovich, 1998, p. 37). In response, as narrative researchers we are asked to find ways to build consensus and include voices that might otherwise go unheard (Emihovich, 1998). Narrative inquiry and analysis does not simply link events together but attempts to give meaning to events through the structure of a plot (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

French theorist, Michel Foucault coined the term “discursive field” in an effort “to understand the relationship between language, social institutions, subjectivity and power” (Weedon, 1987, p. 35).

Discourses is a rather broader term than narratives. Discourse circumscribes what we know and speak about, and how we can know and speak about it; it enables us to say

and think some things rather than others, thus shaping our sense of social reality (Jackson, 1998, p. 47).

Jackson (1998) pointed out that we draw from the discourses historically, culturally and socially available to us to tell stories about ourselves. Similarly, Law and Madigan (1998), cite the work of Michel Foucault as a key figure in highlighting the connection between what is said and “the complexities of social and power relations which prevail in a given context, and which constrain what is said” (Law & Madigan, 1998, p. 6).

Discourse viewed in this recursive manner suggests that meaning results not from language itself, but from institutionalized discursive practices, which constrain its use and pre-empt alternative uses and meanings. Hence, discourse can be viewed to reflect a prevailing structure of social and power relationships, which are actively constitutive in relationships (Law & Madigan, p.6).

The mental health field can be dominated by modernist discourses such as the medical model, which tends to focus on deficiency and pathology (Gergen, 1990). It has been my experience, while working at a non-profit counselling setting, that the demands of lengthy assessments can quickly draw clinicians into a discourse of deficiency (Wade, 1995). I viewed my interviews with participants as points of departure from these types of discourses. From this idea of discourse we can see that narratives require the consideration of larger structures. More specifically, narratives are “socially situated”, and “grounded” in various discourses (Jackson, 1998).

Drawing from social construction and feminist ideals, I borrowed Kathy Weingarten’s notion of intimate interactions. She argued that meaning is “intersubjective and a product of dialogue itself” (Weingarten, 1992, p. 47). As a researcher I am

involved in the co-creation of meaning, implying that new understandings and meanings have the potential to be developed. As described by Weingarten, intimate interaction occurs “when therapist and clients share or co-create meaning and are able to coordinate their actions, that is, they feel well understood or they respect each others’ efforts to understand,” (Weingarten, p. 48).

Often within the therapeutic setting, the possibility for intimate interactions is thwarted by issues of power. Therefore, in locating myself in the research I sought to avoid imposing only my meaning within the interview process, thus avoiding non-intimate interactions. From this perspective, a goal of relationship and of intimate interactions, might be described as the ability to re story one’s life by co-creating meanings with others without constraint or limit, rather than the ability to bring to a relationship a clear story about oneself (Weingarten, 1991, p. 289).

### *Methods*

A letter of introduction outlining my goals for this research was sent to various social service agencies within Prince George in order to invite women to participate in this study (see Appendix A). The agencies contacted were non-profit and involved in various forms of advocacy work. They included Victim services, AWAC (An Association Advocating for Women and Children), the local chapter of the Canadian Red Cross, Elizabeth Fry Society and the Sexual Assault Centre.

I received only one response to my letter of introduction. I then enlisted the aid of a writer from a local newspaper to help me recruit potential participants. In response to the article (Appendix B), I received a dozen phone calls from individuals who expressed an interest in participating in the research. Three women identified themselves as having a

traumatic experience at some point in their lives and had subsequently become activists in the areas of their traumatic experiences. These three women became the participants of my research. They took pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality.

At the initial meeting the three participants were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix C). It was made clear in this initial meeting and within the language of the consent form that participants were free to withdraw their consent at any point in the research process.

Data collection was based on two semi-structured interviews with each participant (see Appendix D and E). The interviews were audio taped and took place at jointly determined private locations. The interview questions in the first meeting with the participants were loosely organized around naming the experience, mapping the effects of the traumatic experience, and the development of activism participation (Appendix D). This framework of questioning focused on feelings, choices and actions of the participants, as well as taking into account the contextual features of participants' lives. Naming one's traumatic experience parallels the therapeutic relationship where individuals are given the opportunity to share their stories. Wade (1995) pointed out that naming the trauma is critical as many people who have experienced violence are never given an opportunity to speak about what happened to them. Mapping the effects of violence is similar to what White (1995) and other Narrative Therapists refer to as 'mapping the influence of the problem'. More specifically, White argues that often clients who have survived abusive experiences come to him for consultation because of self-destructive behaviors and that "these self destructive expressions of the abuse are shaped by the meanings that the person is giving to the abuse itself" (White, 1995, p.83).

Finally, the development of activism participation is similar to what narrative therapists consider the re-authoring of experience (Freedman & Combs, 1996). More specifically, alongside the traumas these women have experienced are stories of resistance and activism (Wade, 1995).

Polkinghorne (1995) sets out some criteria for developing a narrative, which I adopted. First, contextual features were included. More specifically, some of my questions focused on the roles of significant people in participants' lives. For instance, following the victimization how were participants' relationships with family and friends affected? As well, inward types of questions attempted to capture the feelings, thoughts, and decisions of participants. For example, how did participants' assumptions about the world change? The actions and choices of participants also were explored.

Prior to the second interview with each participant I reviewed the transcriptions and highlighted my own interpretations and what struck me about our conversations. Throughout the process I maintained a journal of my personal thoughts, ideas, reflections, and understandings. As a researcher I recognized my contributions to the construction of the narratives and the impact my views, questions, and responses might have in shaping the narrative. This was an attempt to lessen the impact of what Herda (1999) refers to as a *distanciation*, "a distancing of ourselves from our conversations" (Herda, 1999, p. 97), which may occur during the transcribing process.

In the second interview participants were asked to share their impressions and reflections on the previous interview (Appendix E). I shared with the participants my thoughts and ideas, and investigated whether they supported my interpretations. The participants were presented with excerpts of the initial transcribed interview to review

and comment upon. Participants were also invited to consider if, in sharing their experiences they had come to view themselves in new ways?

### *Research Participants*

#### *Ann*

Ann is a 38 year old woman and the mother of two children. Born in the lower mainland, Ann spent much of her childhood in northern British Columbia. At an early age she and her siblings were taken into the care of what was then referred to as social services, because of neglect and abandonment by her biological parents. At the age of seven she moved in with a foster family where she endured years of sexual and physical abuse. In her early twenties Ann married. Ann's husband was physically abusive and after several separations she, along with her children left him. Ann described that when one of her siblings approached her about the sexual abuse that had occurred in the foster care placement, they went to the RCMP and a criminal investigation ensued. Because of the historical reporting, charges were not laid against the family. Ann reached out for assistance and became involved with counselling services and advocacy groups. From this Ann has continued to be involved with supporting and assisting others who have experienced similar traumatic events. Ann continues to volunteer her time to many abuse and violence prevention projects.

#### *Sally*

Sally is in her early twenties. She is married and looking into post-graduate training. Sally grew up in a small northern community. Sally was sexually abused by a male family friend from the time she was eight years old until the age of ten. She disclosed the abuse to no one until the age of eighteen when she first told her Mother. Shortly

thereafter Sally and her Mom went to the local RCMP station and reported the abuse. Several other young women came forward and eventually charges were laid. Sally's abuser served a short time in prison. Sally has been involved in abuse prevention work and hopes to turn this into a career.

### *Lana*

Lana is married and in her early sixties. For a period of time she was a single Mom working a couple of jobs to support herself and a child. In her twenties she met and married her current husband. Lana's sister and only sibling had struggled with depression throughout most of her life and had made several suicide attempts. Lana was 27 years old when her sister committed suicide. Lana's sister left behind three children who ended up living with Lana, her husband, and her own children for a period of time. Lana helped to spear head one of the first support groups in her community. She continues to be involved with volunteer work pertaining to grief and loss issues.

### *Treatment of the Data*

I found it useful to consider the transcribed interviews, born from my conversations with the three participants, as a sort of patchwork quilt.

The quilting metaphor stresses that scientific inquiry is a slow painstaking process, a building process, rather than something that happens in the moment. It is not like a discovery occurring with an 'aha'; a sense of finding a holy grail (Flannery, 2001, p. 639).

By definition patchwork quilts have no center and the patches can be varied in texture and style, joined by a repetitive pattern. The roots of quilting can be traced back to Egypt and India, and eventually to the southern states where quilting became a social occasion.

The textures and colors of each quilt seemed to tell a story originally made with scraps of material and worn out clothes. Often the quilts were referred to as “turning waste into beauty” (Walker, p. 13). Though not a quilter, I found a sort of ease in imagining the interviews with the participants as patches (narratives) stitched together.

Flannery (2001) advocated the quilting metaphor, stressing that it highlighted the relationship between researchers and participants. In broadening the metaphorical boundaries of social science Flannery (2001), emphasized that knowledge is constructed rather than unearthed. We can look at a patchwork quilt as a whole but are also drawn to each square.

The quilting metaphor is particularly powerful because there is so much personal engagement involved in this craft, embodying ideas as well as emotions. It is difficult to separate the quilt as object from its emotional entailment and the same is often true in scientific inquiry, despite disclaimers to the contrary (Flannery, 2001, p. 639).

Paula Saukko (2000) applied the quilting metaphor when writing the stories of female participants who had struggled with anorexia. It was her aim to be “sensitive to the textures and nuances of personal stories or patches and, by stitching them together, points at discursive resonances between them” (Saukko, 2000, p. 299). Her research was written up in the third person narrative form in an effort to expose how the “voices of the author and the characters are always entangled with one another and are shot through social voices that speak through them” (p. 302). Saukko’s research highlighted the diversity of participants’ experiences as well as drawing readers to possible points of connection.

It was my hope that the second interview tapped into the ‘performative’ aspect of our conversations with one another. More specifically, I used what Gubrium and Holstein

(1998) refer to as ‘analytic bracketing’ when reviewing the transcriptions, allowing me “to focus on one aspect of narrative practice while temporarily suspending analytic interest in the others” (p. 165). This enabled me to separate the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of stories. I was interested in what narrative was being constructed in terms of the process from trauma to activism, as well as how this telling impacted participants. For instance, I was curious if there were aspects of participants’ stories that seemed clearer or different to them as a result of our conversation.

I was also interested in the evaluation of possible themes born from the transcribed interviews. I attempted to identify themes by borrowing Love’s strategy (1994), paying attention to the repetition of ideas, emotional cues by participants, participant’s interpretations and use of metaphors, and their responses to my interpretations. Emotional cues included visual and auditory cues. The concept of the *hermeneutic circle* fits with this process. Generated meanings between myself and the participants in the first and second interviews contributed to the writing of the final narratives while the narratives influenced my interpretations of those earlier meanings (Freeman, 1997).

I maintained a journal throughout the research process and following the interviews I would jot down my thoughts and interpretations. Also, I included in my journal visual and auditory cues I had noticed. When reviewing the transcribed interviews I looked back on my journal writings. As well, the second interviews provided me with an opportunity to check back with Ann, Sally, and Lana about what I deemed to be emerging themes. Finally, I highlighted my ideas of thematic content with colored post-it notes on the transcriptions. This process is similar in orientation to what Reason and Heron (1995) refer to as “action cycling,” engaging in cycles of reflection and action.

In my attempt to configure the data into a coherent whole I wrestled with how I might make sense of the transcriptions. I read the transcribed interviews several times before sitting down to write the narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998). As previously indicated, I viewed the transcriptions as pieces to a patchwork quilt. In this I wanted to highlight the dialogical production of the narratives. I followed Paulo Saukko's (2000) lead and wrote the three women's stories using the third person narrative form along with direct quotes from the transcriptions. By doing so it was my goal to make clear "that I am telling the women's stories from the outside" (Saukko, p. 302).

To reach this storied account I followed Polkinghorne's (1995) suggested configuration process. This process begins with a certain outcome. In this case I have chosen the outcome to be the second interview (Appendix B). What was it like for these women to speak to me? As well, how is it that these women became activists? From this viewpoint, elements of each woman's story were arranged chronologically. I then asked myself what contributed to the outcomes I was interested in. What meaning did the women attribute to their activism? What meaning did we construct together around their involvement as activists? The final writing began with the construction of a plot outline and finally a storied account. The storied account included excerpts from the transcribed interviews. Parts of these excerpts were underlined to indicate when participants spoke with added emphasis.

The development of a plot is similar in orientation and development to the hermeneutic circle in that "parts of a given text exist in relations to the whole and the whole in relation to the parts" (Freeman, 2000, p. 172). In its basic form, the plot outline of interest was the participants' movement from 'victimization' to 'activism'. How was

it that these women became involved in their activist pursuits? From this plot outline a storied account was developed.

### *Validity and Trustworthiness*

Often procedures used for establishing validity in qualitative research are borrowed heavily from quantitative research definitions and models. Polkinghorne (1988) pointed out that this type of process is rather limiting. He described validity as it pertains to narrative research as a “well grounded conclusion” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 175). Similarly, Riessman (1993) argued, “a personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of what happened nor is it a mirror of a world out there” (p. 64).

For the purposes of this research validity is defined as the process of establishing trustworthiness of the interpretations that are presented. Furthermore, distinction is made between “trustworthiness” and “truth”-“the latter assumes an objective reality whereas the former moves the process into the social world (Reissman, 1993, p. 65).

Reissman outlines four ways for approaching validation in narrative inquiry. First of all, are the interpretations reasonable based on others’ readings? Secondly, she recommends that interpretations be taken back to participants for further reflection, verification and discussion. Reissman also suggest that the narratives are coherent in orientation. More specifically, did the narratives create a complete and meaningful picture (Lieblich et al., 1998)? Finally, she asks us to consider the pragmatic use of the research. More specifically, will the research lead to further study?

In this research the following points are used to increase the likelihood that the findings were trustworthy and valid:

- I viewed participants as co-authors in the generation of themes and interpretations.
- I tried to be transparent with the three participants of my process.
- Initial interpretations and my sense of thematic content were shared with participants in a process of reflection and action (writing of storied accounts).
- I described how interpretations were produced and which interpretations I owned.
- Numerous quotations from the transcribed interviews are incorporated in the final storied accounts.

External validity is related to the generalizability of the findings. Generalizability is not the central focus of narrative research, rather the intent is to gain a fuller understanding of Ann, Sally, and Lana's experiences (Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Reissman, 1993). I am more concerned with what Lieblich et al. (1998) refer to as "consensual validation". More specifically, building consensus with participants and a community of researchers, as well as sharing the conclusions to a wider audience is of critical importance.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval for this study was granted from the University of Northern British Columbia Ethics Review Committee. Participants were provided with the opportunity to give free and informed consent. Consent forms (see Appendix C) along with referral forms and letters of introduction (Appendix D) were presented to participants and reviewed. Copies of the signed consent forms along with the information form were given to the participants for their keeping.

Participants were ensured that their confidentiality would be maintained throughout the research. More specifically, participants created pseudonyms for themselves. Early on in the research process, participants were provided with an opportunity to discuss their participation in this research. As their involvement in this research was voluntary, participants were given the opportunity to withdraw their participation at any point.

The transcriptions were made available to my advisor, committee members, and myself. Audio taped interviews and transcriptions will be kept in a locked drawer at my home for five years following the completion of my thesis after which time these items will be destroyed.

This research is based on constructing narratives with participants; therefore “the interventive nature of research is highlighted rather than denied, as are the multiplicity of voices” (McNamee, 1994, p. 82). When considering ethical standards it is important to consider the relational aspect of meaning.

This has bold implications for the research process and the issues of ethics because we at once realize that there are varying and competing perspectives and that any evaluation or judgement of a story is also a story and thus is similarly situated within a perspective. Consequently, the viability of research results and the ethics of any given research procedure can only be locally determined. And yet we must also remember that locally determined rationalities must also be coordinated with other locally determined rationalities. It is this constant process of discursive engagement that constructs our sense of ethics, truth, and knowledge (McNamee, 1994, p. 74).

Because I viewed my research in this way I recognized that my conversations with the three participants might cause them some discomfort. Therefore, following each

meeting and within the context of our conversations I checked in with each participant to what the research process was like for them. These women shared with me very personal information and I recognized the possibility for them to feel some discomfort and vulnerability. At the time of our meetings two of the three participants were involved with regular individual counselling. I invited them to share what this process was like with their counsellors. If I had a concern with regards to the other participant an appropriate referral would have been made.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### *Ann*

Ann contacted me after reading the article I had done for a local newspaper. I jotted down a few notes during our phone conversation and we arranged a time to meet.

A: When I saw the article I thought, oh this article is speaking to me!

Ann is in her thirties and the mother of two children. Ann is presently involved in various projects related to abuse and violence prevention. As requested by Ann, our meetings took place at her home. In our first meeting we discussed her experiences, the effects these experiences have had, and her participation in abuse and violence prevention work.

#### *Naming the experience*

This is not the first time Ann has named the violence she experienced growing up in a foster care placement and the violence within her marriage. In our second meeting she referred to our first meeting as a sort of “déjà vu.”

R: What was it like for you to have had that first conversation with me?

A: Well (pause) I didn't feel like you were threatening in any way and so, you know it was fine. It had been a long time since I had told my story to somebody I don't really know.

A: When I was at the support groups we did a lot of that, so you would meet women and tell your story probably in the first or second time we would get together as a group, so it kind of, it was a little bit of déjà vu to those days (laughter).

Ann refers to “those days” of naming the abuse in front of others as being an important part in her journey. The naming of the violence and oppression is “an important personal and political act, particularly so because violence is often quite effectively concealed by language” (Wade, 1995 p. 183). Interestingly it was one of Ann’s siblings who first named the abuse. While still married, Ann’s brother, who had struggled with alcoholism and had been recently released from a drug and alcohol treatment facility, approached Ann about the abuse they had endured. Ann names this one of the pivotal moments in her life.

A: ...when my brother got out of a treatment center he asked me, ‘cause he he knew I had been abused in the foster home too, he asked me how I was dealing with it. It wasn’t until that moment that I made the realization that I had been abused. And as soon as I made that realization that I had been abused it was sitting with me heavy.

After this “realization” Ann stated that she began to make a decision about her marriage.

A: I swore that I would never let it get so bad that it would become physically abusive again. The warning signs came up so I left.

### *Mapping the effects*

In naming the abuse she experienced Ann often refers to the loneliness, sadness, and isolation she felt

A: I kinda think my life was a bit of a sad story for a very long time. I was a petunia in an onion patch. I felt like I didn’t fit anywhere. I was very unhappy and very troubled growing up. I felt alone and like I didn’t fit with peers and things like that and yeah I felt victimized.

R: Hmmm. It sounds like a very lonely time.

When speaking about her foster family, Ann described that she was left to feel that she was not as important as “their real children.” She refers to this as a feeling that had followed her much of her life.

R: Did the abuse get you believing that you weren’t deserving of things?

A: I really struggled with my self-esteem and feeling secondary a lot in relationships of all kinds and just sort of struggling a lot emotionally and with eating disorders and things like that.

Ann described that feeling secondary continued into her marital relationship. When she initially became involved in counselling she referred to her ex husband as being “non-supportive.” He disapproved of her involvement in prevention projects related to sexual abuse, but she continued. When I reviewed this portion of the transcript I wondered what other forms of resistance came before this? Alongside this story of abuse and feeling secondary was one of resistance (Wade, 1995).

In talking about her years as a teenager Ann detailed periods of self-harm.

A: I felt like I didn’t fit anywhere. I felt alone and I was depressed. I struggled with depression for a long time and suicidal tendencies through my teen years.”

In mapping the effects of the violence and abuse she experienced Ann also described a sense of being unhappy. Ann stated that she knew for quite some time she needed some help.

R: So what lead you to reach out for assistance?

A: I just knew I was really unhappy and that things weren't working out for me and I just didn't have peace in my life. I was unhappy a lot and had troubles with relationships.

Ann described that it was being involved in therapy that lead her to being more keenly aware of the effects the abuse had on her.

R: What were your experiences like in counselling?

A: Well for a lot of time it was really focusing on the past and dissecting that, and figuring out how I felt. Ummm, it was making parallels with my victimization from my past to my present, figuring that all out, sorting it out and sometimes even now, when I do see him, I hardly ever see him anymore, but sometimes it is about awareness and parallels from my past and present, and uh a few of the relationships that I have struggled in, trying to figure out why I am staying in them.

In part of our first interview, Ann described a story of much unhappiness, a sense of worthlessness, (that she referred to as "feeling secondary"), loneliness, and a lack of peace. She also made mention of struggling with an eating disorder, suicidal gestures, and being involved in relationships she deemed to be unhealthy. It sounded like Ann viewed her experiences in therapy as the place where she began to recognize the far-reaching effects the abuse had had on her.

#### *Development of Activism Participation*

Once involved with individual counselling Ann talked about a period of "growing and changing." She became involved in a women's' support group. It was in the support group that Ann named her experience out loud and on numerous occasions.

R: How is it that you came to be involved with the advocacy work you do today?

A: After some time as a member of the group I started working with women who had been abused historically, and so I facilitated some of the groups. I just (pause) It just made me feel really good and really empowered to be able to help other people too.

In the transcribed interview and following this part of our dialogue with one another there is a long silence between the two of us. I had jotted down afterwards in my journal how moved I felt when she began to describe her volunteering experiences.

One day while reading the paper Ann became aware of a program that was to start in the community with its aim being to prevent abuse and violence. She was still married at the time and felt with a young family it wasn't the right time to be adding more volunteer work to her schedule. A year later she was still thinking about the program and becoming more curious about prevention work.

A: I started taking the training as a volunteer and just fell in love with the program. I felt like it was my life calling to be doing it and that everything I had lived through in my life and survived and all the pain I had gone through that had lead me to where I was. I just felt like my life had this natural flow that I never had before and a lot of my questions about who I was and why I was here and what I was doing. Spiritually it just felt like my life had opened up.

R: Wow!

Ann began to make some choices that she deemed to be "really tough."

R: I'm wondering if you make a connection between the work you have done and continue to do and these hard choices, like if the work you are doing has propelled you to make some of those choices.

A: Well (pause), Well no not really. I think that has been more personal work than work related to me. I want to stop having those secondary feelings. I want to stop allowing myself to be victimized in relationships.

R: Yes but do you think part of wanting to stop having those secondary feelings and being in those relationships was inspired in some way by your work?

A: Well (pause) Yeah all of that has helped me to build my self esteem. It feels like a life calling to me (pause). It feels like a natural progression. It doesn't feel like I'm going against the grain.

R: That sounds soothing.

In discussing the meaning Ann derived from her involvement in prevention work she described a different life that she created for her children; one in which their experience was in contrast to her childhood.

A: The teachers say they are such a joy and a pleasure and they are wonderful students and sportsmanlike and peacemakers. To me that is huge because it is not what my life experience was I've changed that. I've changed. They are reaping the benefits of the pain I have gone through in order to rise above.

When I asked Ann more about what sort of meaning she derives from her experiences she suggested that perhaps this was the path her life was meant to take.

A: Maybe if my life hadn't taken the path that it had I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing and I think what I am doing right now is very important and it is going to make a difference. What I am and what I'm doing, positive parenting, taking good care of myself, caring about my community. I think about how it will be different for my

kids and how I'm making different. I think about when I have grandchildren how life will be different for them and stuff. I think what I'm doing has a lot of meaning.

Early in this first meeting Ann described often feeling lonely and secondary. While discussing her involvement in abuse prevention work she expressed a sense of belonging.

R: Do you see the world in a different way than you used to say before you became involved with this program?

A: Very different. I feel like I fit in the world. I belong in this community in this neighborhood, with my family. I feel like I have strong roles, which I never could have said about myself before, or felt before. I can remember wishing I was somewhere else before, all the time, (pause) and now in my work I'm glad where I'm at.

### *The second interview*

Nearly a month later we met again at her home. During this second meeting the chatter of Ann's children is heard in the background. I brought with me portions of the transcribed interview for Ann to review. She laughed at seeing her words on paper. I asked Ann if she has come to view her story differently or to see it more clearly since we first met. She assured me that she hasn't and, as previously noted, she mentioned how in some ways it was a sort of "déjà vu" to her time in support groups and the telling and re-telling of her experience. Initially, Ann described her story as one whose content has remained the same, a narrative she has held for quite some time. Such an understanding seems to fit with what Franklin (1997) referred to as an information extraction model. This is the assumption that "feelings, ideas and/or knowledge reside in the person and come forth in the interview" (Franklin, p. 100).

Ann did not take up my initial invitation to see the 'performative' aspect of our conversation but, in reviewing the transcriptions, it did appear that she came to see some part of her story in a new manner.

R: Did you learn anything different about yourself or did our conversation leave you reflecting on anything in a new way?

A: Umm, (short pause). Not really. I guess it was good for me to talk about my experiences and I think I don't do that as much anymore. Sometimes I think maybe I don't tell people my story because I like to hide that part of myself away from people. I seem to do that more often than I used to. Now I have a lot more newer relationships and so, I kind of thought you know my story is a really big part of who I am and it made me wonder why I don't tell some people that I have in my life?

I asked if Ann had come up with some ideas of why she does not share this part of her life as much as she once did. She referred to herself as no longer being a victim and "struggling to get out." When Ann was a participant in the support group she viewed herself as battling with the effects of the abuse. I reminded Ann of her description of having "peace" in her life and "not going against the grain." I wondered if this might also have something to do with not talking about the abuse in her newer relationships.

A: Yeah, Yeah I think so. I don't make a conscious effort not to tell people or anything because I am ashamed or anything, because I'm not but ummm, I just think it is not where my energy is anymore.

In our first interview Ann had referred to her childhood self as a "lonely petunia in an onion patch." As earlier indicated, over time Ann has come to see herself differently.

A: Like I said I haven't told my story in quite some time, so it did make me realize, I sort of had this bigger realization that I have come a long way and that I'm in a very good place in my life right now. So I guess when I compare it to the last time I had told my story to somebody or something like that, it has a much better ending. The ending just keeps getting better and better (laughter).

The above quote struck me as another performative piece to our conversation. Here the process of story telling and co-authorship is highlighted, which seems "closer to the activist quality of life" (Newman & Holzman, 2000, p.98).

In reference to the lonely petunia in the onion patch I had asked Ann what her garden now looks like.

A: It's all weeds because I have no time to do it (laughter). No I think I'm just in there with all the other flowers I guess. There was a lot of pain that I carried in my mind not feeling like I fit or belong, or feeling left out or excluded.

I invited Ann once again to consider the connectedness between her emerging sense of belonging and volunteer work Ann then refers to her activist pursuits as having some spiritual component.

R: What do you mean by spiritual?

A: Well, I think that everybody has a spirit and I think that uh, some people are really fortunate when their spirits are nurtured through their childhood and they can grow into spiritual beings and enjoy themselves and feel good about themselves and the world that they are in. And I don't think that that happened for me and so I feel like I have a very, sort of new relationship with my spirit (laughter) and it's good and I am learning what it is and how it drives me and gives me peace.

I shared with Ann my curiosity as to what it is like to talk about her sense of spirituality and belonging out loud. She acknowledged that she rarely has these conversations and that in many ways it feels “odd” but also “really good” at the same time.

### *Sally*

I met Sally through a mutual colleague. Like Ann, Sally had read the article that I had completed for a local newspaper and was interested in participating. Sally is in her early twenties and recently married. At the time of our first phone contact Sally was a university student and working part time. She shared with me her desire to go on into graduate school. At Sally’s request our meetings took place at her work where we could use a private office. Sally’s previous volunteer work with projects related to child abuse prevention had lead to a paid part time position. Sally’s new position included research projects related to the evaluation of child abuse prevention programs. As well, for the past year Sally and her husband have provided respite care for foster children with special needs.

### *Naming the experience*

When I first met with Sally I invited her to tell me about the victimization she had experienced.

S: Ok well the primary event would be experiencing sexual abuse and that happened when I was eight years old. From the time I was eight until the time I was 10, so for two years in duration by the same person, you know a friend of the family. And for a long time I didn’t tell anybody.

At the age of eighteen Sally shared with her Mom about the abuse she had experienced as a child. It was the first time she told anyone.

S: I think it is a common experience of people who suffer abuse, a sexual abuse is that they don't want to talk about it or even acknowledge it and so you know it was just in the back, it wasn't me it was some other person.

Sally commented that imagining that the sexual abuse had happened to "some other person" made it easier for her to go on.

At the time of the abuse Sally was living with her parents and four siblings in a small northern community. The man who abused her often visited the family home. His wife and Sally's Mom were reportedly close friends. According to Sally there had been some rumors in the community that his man had sexually abused other girls.

S: I can still (pause) still remember you know at nine years old Mom asking me this or I was ten or something and me just going 'uh never heard of that before'. You know and just the threats that were there were such that I (pause) knew there were threats of what would happen to me if I did tell and then the fact that I didn't even at that time feel like I had a close relationship with my Mother.

It is quite common for perpetrators to use threats to maintain the silence of their victims (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Those "who sexually assault children attempt to circumvent the child's natural proclivity to avoid such acts through threats or a process of trickery and coercion known, unfortunately, as grooming"(Wade, 1997, p. 38).

Looking back Sally believes that on some level her Mom was aware that something was going on. Her Mom has never overtly acknowledged such awareness. Sally described the moment when she first named the abuse out loud as "enlightening."

S: But I did finally tell her and then that was when I went “Oh my God I am a victim!”

I was curious how Sally’s Mom reacted to the news of the abuse.

S: She was well (pause) ‘cause we don’t have I mean I could to talk to you for hours about how it is like with my Mom. She got pissed off right away and she was just I mean she was enraged.

R: Really?

S: and it was, it was you know “God dammit I asked you about this when you were young and you said no”. And she wasn’t able to accept that she had heard no.

Sally described that it was a sort of turning point in her life to name the abuse out loud.

R: And when you told your Mom do you think it sort of opened things up for you ?

S: It was like a floodgate and everything came flying out and it was ugly because it was getting stored down in there for so long. I had never really talked about it with anybody so then to have it come I just like ‘blech!’ and out it came.

R: Seems like a sort of throwing up?

S: Yeah basically and it was as ugly and miserable but certainly denial had been there and I still I am in that denial a lot of the time.

Shortly after the disclosure, Sally’s Mom did accompany her to the police station where Sally once again named the violence she had experienced. Sally was informed by the police that this man was now living in the United States and that there was very little they could do. Both Sally and her Mom remained diligent in their pursuit for some sort of justice. The man who had abused Sally eventually returned to Canada where he faced

nearly thirteen charges of sexual abuse. Sally reported that he served only three years in prison for the abuse he had exacted against Sally and several other girls.

For a couple of years following the disclosure to her Mom Sally reported that she struggled and did not want to talk about what had happened to her. Through victim services Sally became a part of a compensation program, which allowed her to become involved with counselling services. Sally named the process of counselling as a “looking back” which she referred to as also being “enlightening”.

### *Mapping the Effects*

Sally recalled that around the age of six or seven she was probably more “outgoing.” Sometime after the age of eight Sally reported that she became a “mouse.”

S: I was just so scared of everything.

At the age of twelve Sally’s father died of colon cancer. She stated that living with the aftermath of the sexual abuse and her father’s death “accumulated” and became “mixed up.” Eventually the family moved from the small northern rural community Sally had grown up in to a larger community in Northern BC. In the following exchange it becomes more evident how the abuse she experienced contributed to many of her difficulties.

R: How else do you think, I know it is hard to disentangle everything but how else do you think it impacted you growing up?

S: I guess I was busy trying to prove that I was all right and that you know I am not this victim. And you know I went down to the victim role, where I can see that in people that I see now, that are just so damaged and the hurt is so strong. And so I had smoked a lot of pot and I had a lot of boyfriends and really felt like at the time I felt

like I am strong I'd say 'you're not using me I'm using you.' And it was I guess kind of a way at getting back at them.

Further on in our conversation Sally described the more subtle effects of the sexual abuse. More specifically, throughout this initial interview Sally often used the words 'power' and 'control'.

S: But I do see there are more subtle things like, I want power. I like...I like to be in control of myself. I am highly controlled.

R: uh hmmm

S: You know that I always hold together and I am trying to be the strong one and the successful one and I try not to show weaknesses.

As the conversation proceeded Sally made connections between her need for a sense of power and control in her life to the activist work she was doing.

#### *Development of Activism Participation*

In our initial phone contact Sally commented that she was hoping to develop a career in the prevention of sexual abuse. I asked her more about this in our first meeting.

R: So when did you start thinking along those lines or when did you know...

S: Umm I never thought about it in any formal way at first. I just started to kind of I guess have a growing realization that I did not feel like a very likeable person and umm first of all like I said I thought I was resilient. I thought there's gotta be something in me that every kid's gotta know I wanna teach them because look at me I'm a survivor and I am doing awesome.

In her studies at university Sally ended up taking some psychology courses and was introduced to literature on resiliency. She stated that she saw herself in much of what she

was reading. Sally reported that it was a “happy coincidence” that she took these courses. These courses seemed to have provided Sally different lenses with which to view the world. Thus, as Gergen (1999) pointed out “what we take to be true about the world or self, is not thus a product of the individual mind...meanings are born of coordinations among persons”(p. 48). Sally was presented with new ideas and theories in the classroom and came away with new understandings.

Alongside her work with sexual abuse prevention Sally and her husband provide respite to foster children with special needs. Once again, Sally referred to the notion of power and how it has played a role in her activist pursuits.

R: You mentioned earlier when we started talking about control being so important to you and seeing the role of power in the world, do you feel that the work that you do gives you some sense of empowerment, some sense of control?

S: Yeah you know when I was eight years old I did not have any power and it wasn't my fault it's just that is how it was.

R: uh hmmm

S: But I guess what I see now is I really fight for other people who I see who don't have any power. That is what gets me you know. The girl I do respite with is profoundly handicapped, I mean she is to the point where she wears diapers and so I am looking after her. I am being her power in a way.

R: So you are empowering others?

S: Kind of yeah and that due to the nature of the people I work with, giving them the quality of life and things like maybe they didn't have that I get a real kick out of that. It's you know (pause) it's inspiration for me.

R: Sounds like it moves you.

S: Yeah exactly.

Research has shown that activist pursuits related to one's victimization can lead to increased feelings of self worth and a sense of meaning (Janoff-Bulman 1992; McCaffrey 1998; Profitt 1996,).

In our interview Sally made it clear that she now often sees herself as a "survivor".

S: That is one of the things that has really helped me is that I am not a victim anymore. I am being a survivor now and always trying to remember that and remembering when I get frustrated and I am angry I think 'Jesus I am never going to get over this', just trying to realize that parts of what happened made me stronger too.

When asked what it means to her to be a survivor Sally referred to it as "a paradigm shift". I inquired if in part this paradigm shift was related to her activism. Sally responded that she is unsure.

### *The Second Interview*

A month later Sally and I met again at her office. She was presented with the transcriptions from our first meeting. As with Ann, I asked Sally what it was like for her to have sat down with me. She said that after the first meeting she began to consider the notion of "survivor" in more depth. She shared how she preferred the term "survivor" to "activist."

R: What was it like for you to sit down and to talk with me?

S: It was pretty neat actually. I started really thinking about what it means to be a survivor. I mean I have been debating it with my Mom, my counselor, and my

husband and anybody I can get to listen to me, because it just brought up more, more into light.

Sally reported that to her being a survivor includes actively dealing with her pain. Yet she also used the term victim throughout both meetings. This type of dialogue pointed out that the conceptualization of women as “victims” or “survivors” in relation to the violence they have experienced is inadequate (Profitt, 1996).

Sally also shared how in naming the victimization that had occurred she felt differently than in other conversations.

S: One of the things that I thought was really good was that I didn’t feel bad. A lot of times when I recall the abuse I leave feeling a little bit sad or a little bit you know just like down a little bit and I didn’t after that I just thought I felt strong.

I asked Sally how I might have contributed to this way of feeling. She responded that I hadn’t asked for details of what happened to her and instead focused on the activist pursuits in her life. Sally noted that one of the weaknesses in her counselling relationship is that there is a lot of focus on the past

S: There is so much talk about the past and if you get so mired in the hurt and problems of the past and just talk about those, without talking about where you are now or where you’re going to be, then you are not really moving, I mean you are helping the client to release some of those feelings but ideally, you are going to get to a point where the client is going to move forward and that is where a discussion of activism might be.

In the first interview I had invited Sally to consider if, over the years, she had gained “a voice.” In this second interview she shared how this language did not quite fit for her.

S: That wouldn't be the way that I would put it. I guess I wouldn't have any good words to describe it. I mean for a psychology term I had no feeling of self-efficacy and my focus of control was external you know, but umm I don't know about gaining my voice. I have learned I need to make my voice heard.

Sally appeared to have wholeheartedly adopted the language of her psychology courses to frame her experiences. Yet, in this second meeting, she was open to considering the notion of voice.

S: I am so strongly convinced of what I want to say, to tell it to other people and I am not shy about sharing it with people and I guess that's having a voice. That's more my presence I guess and so having a presence in the community or within a certain group of people.

In reviewing the transcriptions Sally also shared her concern about having a lack of balance in her life. She commented that her husband too worries that she is doing too much.

S: That is the hardest part, and that's the thing, starting to realize that part of the sexual abuse takes away your valuing of yourself, so you will extend yourself to others before looking after yourself.

R: So even though some of the volunteer work and activism you do really inspires you and moves you, you've also thought about how you can go too far in it.

S: Oh absolutely!

Sally shared in this interview that she has been making a concerted effort to take care of herself and to "slow down a bit" since we last met with one another.

### *Lana*

Lana contacted me after reading the article I had completed for the paper. After reading the article Lana described feeling a sort of “zing!”

R: What was it like for you when you read my article? Did you immediately think of your experiences?

L: I did (pause) I thought immediately when I read through that I thought oh this sounds like me but I mean maybe it doesn't.

After speaking a bit longer we agreed that it did “sound like” Lana and we arranged a time to meet at her home. Lana is in her late fifties and lives with her husband. Lana had her first child at the age of nineteen while living in the lower mainland. Shortly thereafter the baby's father left her. Several years later Lana remarried. Lana was a founding member of a support group for those who have lost a love one to a suicide. She has been involved with suicide prevention work for quite some time.

### *Naming the Experience*

Lana's younger sister, Jane, had struggled with depression and alcoholism for quite some time. Jane had three young children. One night in November of 1971 Jane left her children at home, telling them they would be better off living with her Dad. Lana stated that the twelve-year-old son was “frantic” and begged his Mom not to leave the house. Jane left and her son called 911 anticipating that she was in danger. Her nephew shortly thereafter contacted his maternal grandparents. They raced over to get the children and begin looking for Jane.

L: It was a very cold night driving down the road looking for her. There was a bar she used to go to so my parents went there and when they came out they heard sirens, police and ambulance go by and so they instinctively followed them.

R: Wow!

L: They probably shouldn't have, maybe in retrospect (pause). They didn't have her loaded in the ambulance yet and I guess they drove up and the truck was on the side of the road, and my sister's body was lying on the middle of the highway.

Jane had apparently stepped out in front of the truck.

L: My god it must have been a couple of miles (crying) like I said it was just really cold but I guess the trucker said she just, she just was suddenly there, so that's what she did, she just stepped out in front of the truck. I think my Mom tried to fool herself for awhile that it was an accident but nah.

Lana's Mom contacted her later that night to tell her that her sister was dead. Lana was twenty-seven years old at the time of her sister's death.

L: I thought it was my husband calling to say goodnight and umm it was my Mom telling me my sister was dead (pause). It was such a weird thing ummm (pause) oh yeah I went bananas.

Lana was alone with her eight-year-old son. A neighbor spent the night with her until her husband had returned from work. I asked Lana to talk about how she initially felt following her sister's death.

L: I remember being, and this is a really silly thing but I remember being so mad at her and umm. She was a single Mom and she couldn't get any credit of course so I

let her use my Bay card and I let her borrow money to buy a stereo. I remember thinking, “who’s going to pay for that stereo now?”

Lana described feeling a lot of anger, guilt and hurt in the months following her sister’s death. As a family they rarely talked about Jane following her death.

R: So you never just talked about her?

L: Very little, very little...you know, ummm I remember that when we got on the plane I balled all the way. I do remember getting off the plane and going into the terminal and seeing my sister’s kids. And there was this... you know what happens. I could feel it. It was a physical thing. It was almost a physical straightening and a physical feeling of I have to get myself together because I gotta look after these guys.

Though Lana’s traumatic experience was different from Ann and Sally’s experiences it did fit with my working definition of ‘victimization’. As earlier discussed, this is an out of the ordinary experience, which produced a sense of loss and threatened Lana’s well-being and self-preservation. The suicidal death of her sister was an event that she had little control over. As indicated in much of the literature there are numerous similarities in the impacts people experience following a traumatic event (Herman, 1997).

For years Lana spoke very little about her sister’s death or the impact it had had on her life. One day she saw a bulletin regarding a panel discussion on suicide at a local school near her home. Lana described that although she spoke very little of what had happened she had read a lot of books about suicide and “watched anything on television” about it. She decided to go to the discussion.

L: So I went and uh I stood at the back and didn’t say much. I listened and very close to the end I said something. To this day I can’t remember what it was I said but

(chuckle) it must have made an impact because this one lady came to me after it was over and introduced herself and it turned out she was a counsellor.

This was one of the first times Lana had named her experience, as well as her feelings, in a public way. She exchanged phone numbers with the counsellor and was later encouraged to attend a weekend workshop about suicide prevention.

R: What was the weekend like for you?

L: It turned out to be the best thing I (inaudible) I cried all bloody weekend. That was the thing of it, I started talking about my sister and I cried.

The panel discussion and weekend workshop provided Lana with a space to name her experiences out loud. Lana described that from naming this experience she became keenly aware of the impact it had upon her life.

### *Mapping the Effects*

Throughout this first interview with Lana she described feelings of guilt and shame. Prior to her death Jane had made two other suicide attempts of which Lana was aware. Lana described that her shame was in part around “not taking these attempts seriously.”

L: I was very critical of her a lot of times. At one point and time she attempted suicide and ended up in the hospital and after she came home I was very mad. I wrote her this letter along with a plaque with a serenity prayer on it, but the letter...I don't even remember all I said but one thing I said was (pause) I said “You don't really want to die” and then she stepped in front of that semi truck and uh yeah (pause) so that I carried that for a long time (crying). A long time I carried that. And I didn't feel I could tell anyone that because then if I told anybody then they might blame me, that it would be my fault she was dead.

As stated by Herman (1997), guilt might be a way “to imagine one could have done better which may be more tolerable than to face the reality of utter helplessness” (p. 54). Years later Lana shared with her husband and the support group the feelings of guilt she felt.

I asked Lana how not sharing her feelings impacted her life.

L: Well I think what I did with it is I took it and put it in the back of my mind, in a place where I didn't visit very often. And because I couldn't handle the guilt and pain I put my sister back in that spot too. I had to put her there with the guilt because I couldn't separate the two.

Lana and her husband also ended up taking in her sister's three children and raising them as their own. Even in their presence she rarely spoke of Jane.

Similar to Ann's experience, Lana reported that her eventual involvement in a support group helped her to move in a new direction with her feelings.

L: My whole life turned around in that group...I don't know whether it is something I would ever had addressed as some other time in my life or whatever you know, but it did it did change me. It made me see...it freed me of the guilt so I could open up and think about my sister and tell my kids about her and celebrate her life and what she was and talk to her children about her.

Lana had begun to re story her experience and arrived at new understanding of herself and of her sister.

### *Development of Activism Participation*

Following her attendance at the weekend workshop, Lana and several others began discussing the need for a support group in their community for survivors of loved ones

who had committed suicide. They eventually developed a group and Lana reported that for the first six months she felt like a client.

R: What was it like for you to help create this group that had previously not existed?

L: It was amazing! It really was. It was so (pause) it's probably one of the most beautiful, meaningful, special things that I have ever been involved in.

Somebody once said to me "you know when you are ninety what's going to be one of the things your most proud of having done in your life. Well besides my children I would say this group.

Lana reported that her husband was very supportive of her involvement. She also described that she began to talk to him in a way she hadn't before.

When asked about the meaning she has derived from her activist pursuits Lana commented that her sister's death had new meaning.

L: Her death hasn't been for nothing. Because of that I have been there for other people and helped them.

R: You have been an activist?

L: I guess so. I guess that is what I thought when I read your article.

I was curious how else creating this support group had impacted Lana's understanding of herself and the world.

R: As we've been talking something keeps popping into my head and I keep thinking of a reclaiming of power. Does that fit for you at all with your story of helping to develop the group? You reclaimed a sense of power or something?

L: Ohh (long pause) power or empowerment. It gave me the ability to make changes for myself and for others and to think about my sister in a new way.

R: Did it allow you to not only see your sister differently but to see yourself differently?

L: Yeah I think so. That I wasn't the bad guy that I thought was. That to maybe get back some of my self-esteem.

Nearing the end of this first meeting I asked if Lana had ever considered herself to be an activist.

L: No, I never considered myself to be a victim either and now I feel maybe (pause). My sister was a victim. Yeah but no I would never have called myself an activist.

### *The second interview*

It was only three weeks later that Lana and I met again at her home. I was quite struck by Lana's response and her consideration to see herself as an activist.

R: I was wondering if since we talked if you have found yourself coming up with new ways about thinking of your experiences or looking at them differently?

L: Interesting that you ask me because I have been thinking "what is an activist really? I have never thought of myself in those terms but then I started thinking to other things and if you looked at it from that point of view you could say yeah "I was an activist."

Lana went on to list other activities that support the notion of seeing herself as an activist. For instance she talked about supporting her son's dry grad efforts in a very vocal way. Also, she spoke about Jane's daughter who was stricken with ALS and died in her early thirties. During her niece's illness Lana made a concerted effort to educate herself about the disease and helped care for her.

L: I don't know is that activism?

Lana also described that to her the word “activist” has had negative connotations.

L: I am from an age that when you think about activism you think about the sixties and you think about the Jane Fonda’s and you think about all those people who said to legalize pot.

In this way Lana reported that the word activist was a sort of “dirty” word.

R: Do you still see it as a dirty word?

L: It’s way different (laughter) oh for sure. Yeah I started thinking about it and thinking well maybe, maybe it isn’t just a big mouth maybe it’s a sort of thing well (pause) that isn’t fair let’s go do something about it.

I was also curious about what it was like for Lana to “weave” with me her story.

L: It was satisfying. Something that was so painful and so grievous for me ended up being something that all those years later culminated into that group.

R: Mmmm

L: It’s almost like a gift I gave my sister.

Part way through this meeting Lana gets up and brings back a plaque to the table where we sat. The plaque has her name on it and an inscription of the legacy she created by forming the support group. Lana refers to the plaque as being one of her most “precious items.”

In reviewing the transcriptions from our first meeting, Lana pointed out the dialogue about power and empowerment.

L: I redeemed something of myself because I had beaten myself up for so many years for not having done what I should have done and not being the sister I think I should have been or whatever and the guilt, all that guilt. When I got to tell my story it was a

shedding of all this extra weight...even though I wrote the letter, even though (pause) it still wasn't my fault. She made the decision to die. It was empowering I think.

Lana seemed to have decided that her involvement in the development of the group was an empowering one. Lana's activism appeared to have assisted her in deriving alternative meanings from her experience and feelings (White, 1995).

### *Unforeseen Results*

In response to the article I had done for a local paper, I received calls from women who did not necessarily want to participate, but who "saw themselves" in the article. A woman (who I will refer to as Rose) in her early twenties contacted me and shared that she had been sexually abused from about the time she was three years old until she was nearly a teenager. Rose described herself as sexually promiscuous during her teenage years and stated that she had struggled with an eating disorder. Rose then described, enthusiastically, how she began writing poetry in high school and has been writing ever since. She had recently submitted some of her work, which talked about her traumatic experiences growing up to an online writing site for young people. Rose stated that she was "finding a place to start", and that after reading the article she considered that one day she too might be an "activist".

I also spoke with another woman, 'Mary'. Mary's husband had died of cancer and she became a widow with young children in her late twenties. Mary became involved with alcohol and drugs and eventually lost her children to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. After several years of sobriety, Mary took MCFD to court to regain custody of her children and won. At the time of our phone call she was beginning a

career in the social services and talked about being an advocate for women. She had already spoken to several college classes in regards to her experiences.

In addition to the phone calls I received a detailed letter posted to my place of work (which had been provided in the article) and signed anonymous. The information in the letter made it clear that this was from a young married mother. The writer wrote of her “intrigue” about the research I was embarking on. The following is an excerpt from this letter.

A: I often feel compelled to tell my story but society’s ignorance silences me. Maybe this is finally a way for me to reach out without losing face. The article was titled from victim to activist, which really made me think about my current situation on a different level. I do see myself as a victim, but not as a public activist. The only activist I am is a private one.

The author explained that she contracted a chronic disease through a blood transfusion and that those with this disease are often pre-judged and condemned by society’s ignorance.

A: I have accepted society’s ignorance, but I am not willing to withstand it. As I said earlier, I am a private activist constantly expressing my hope for people to live life for today.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The purpose of this research is to explore and understand the narratives of three women who moved from a traumatic experience to a place of activism. It is also my hope to illustrate the meaning making process that can occur when participants take up invitations to view themselves as activists. More than this, I want to know if participants come to view themselves and their experiences in a different way following our conversations. As well, I hope to contribute to counsellors' understandings of traumatic experiences and the possible discourse around activism. In this chapter I will look more closely at the similarities and differences amongst the three women I interviewed and pay close attention to what is going on within the narratives.

In their research examining the narrative of a moderately mentally retarded young woman, Medved and Brockmeier (2004) highlight the possible functions of narrative inquiry. These include coherence, distancing, evaluative and explorative functions. As the above researchers point out, these functions are not mutually exclusive and like a patchwork quilt are "interconnected" and "overlapping."

In regards to the coherence function, stories provide us with a means to make sense of and give structure to our lives. Also, the way in which individuals tell the stories of their lives can at times provide them "with some distance from whatever threatens them" (Frank, 2000, p. 354). The evaluative function of narrative refers to the point of the story and the themes, which are generated from the story (Freeman, 1997). Finally, narratives not only allow individuals to look at their experiences in new ways, but provide a space

to create new meanings and understandings. As Frank (2000) describes, “storytelling is the recursive elaboration of the relationship between those sharing the story” (p. 354).

These functions have assisted me in organizing my thoughts and interpretations. I have chosen to follow Medved and Brockmeier’s (2004) lead and focus on these functions as they relate to my research questions as noted above. From these broader inquiries are several curiosities in line with the functions of narrative. How do Ann, Sally, and Lana come to make sense of their experiences? Is the research process an instructive and empowering one? What meaning do Ann, Sally and Lana apply to their activism participation? Furthermore, what understanding can be applied to the therapeutic relationship?

#### *Coherence Function*

“Coherence” is a popular and important term in narrative studies (Liebliech et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995; Reissman, 1993). In reference to a “good story” some theorists describe the need for coherence (Bruner, 1991; Lieblich et al. 1998). I believe the idea of coherence is useful in understanding the movement from trauma to activism for Ann, Sally, and Lana.

People strive to organize their temporal experience into meaningful wholes and to use the narrative form as a pattern for uniting the events of their lives into unfolding themes (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 163).

Earlier I defined trauma as those out of the ordinary experiences, which produce a sense of loss and helplessness, posing a threat to individuals’ well-being and self preservation. The notion of coherence alongside trauma is a challenging one. As Harvey, Mishler et al. (2000) highlight in their work with survivors of sexual abuse,

achieving a sense of coherence is difficult. Similarly, Langer (1991), in his work with holocaust survivors and the collection of oral testimonies, found that, “apparently the life threatening experience of terror cannot be absorbed into the temporal continuity of a life with a before and after. In some sense it stands outside of time-frozen, static, ever present and not forgotten” (p. 294).

I asked participants “how” they came to make sense of their traumatic experiences, presuming a sense of coherence already existed. This fits with what Langer (1991) refers to as the “listener’s” problem.

...wanting to hear stories with positive endings-liberation from the death camps successful lives after childhood abuse-we may interfere with survivors’ rights to tell their own tales, tales that may lack the coherence or resolution we and they desire. Or we may too quickly impose our own theories of trauma and recovery, disregarding the variability among trauma survivors in their trajectories of change (Harvey, Mishler et al., 2000 p. 308).

Ann, Sally, and Lana have all been involved in support groups and individual counselling, where they have had the opportunity to tell and retell their stories. For this reason I expected their stories to find a sort of sticking together, providing them with an opportunity to develop a coherent account. Each interview began with a similar phrase, with the intent of inviting the participants to name their traumatic experiences. In our initial meetings all three women responded to this question at great length. Where each woman chose to begin naming the traumatic experience is quite different.

### Exemplar A (Ann)

R: So Ann, I know we talked a bit already on the phone but could you tell me again what happened to you?

A: Mmm (laughter) I kinda think my life was a bit of a sad story for a very long time. I was very unhappy and very troubled. Yeah life was very hard for me and I really struggled with my self esteem and feeling secondary a lot in relationships of all kinds and just sort of struggling a lot.

Ann went on for a couple of more minutes before describing the sexual abuse she experienced as a child. She first spoke of her life as an adult and the struggles she has encountered such as an eating disorder and “challenging” relationships. Sally’s response was strikingly different, beginning her story at the point of trauma experienced.

### Exemplar B (Sally)

R: OK well why don’t we just start with you telling me a bit more about what happened to you and what you consider to be the trauma you experienced.

S: OK well the primary event would be the sexual abuse that happened when I was 8 years old, from the time I was 8 until the time I was 10. So for two years in duration by the same person, you know a friend of the family. For a long time I didn’t tell anybody.

Lana too begins her story close to the time of the traumatic experience but first acquaints me a bit more with the struggles of her sister and quickly moves back and forth in time.

### Exemplar C (Lana)

R: I know when we spoke on the phone you talked a little about your experience but could we start with you just telling me, a bit of a repeat, about what happened.

L: Sure I will, ummm gee (pause) there were two of us in our family. She was three and a half years younger than me. I moved to ( ) with my husband in September of 71. She had difficulty all her life with depression and that sort of thing and she had attempted suicide a couple of times with pills and that kind of stuff. She had serious problems but back then uh it was not regarded in the same light. So we moved in September and then the 26<sup>th</sup> she left the kids at home. But this day she left the house...

Lana goes on to describe in detail the day her sister committed suicide. She recalled sitting in her housecoat “knitting or reading or something” when the phone rang. It was her Mom informing her of her sister’s death. Following this naming of the experience Lana begins to cry.

I am orientated to their traumatic experiences in different ways and at different times in their lives. I am reminded of the research with holocaust survivors and the struggles of saying what happened particularly alongside a cultural expectation of moving on from the past (Langer, 1991; Schiff et al., 2001; Schiffrin, 2000). Survivors’ oral histories reveal continuous struggles with what happened, with how “to convey what happened, and with how to integrate the self of past experience with the self of current existence” (Schiffrin, 2000, p.313).

Similarly, in her research and practice with women who had been raped, Penn (1998) found that despite involvement in support groups and talk therapy, clients continued to be

besieged with flashbacks and lacked a sense of coherence when referring to the violence they experienced. As Harvey et al. (2000) found in their research with three women who had been sexually abused, I too am in the process of co-authoring a coherent account of the participants' experiences.

In reviewing the transcriptions I notice that I often clarify statements made by participants in what appears to be my goal for coherence. When our subjects find it difficult to provide a "right" answer, we as interviewers tend to reassure them, reflecting back with assessment that indicate what was said was heard as coherent (Harvey et al. 2000, p. 295).

In particular, when speaking with Lana about how she was impacted by her sister's death I offer up possible descriptions, referring to my own personal experience with a relative struggling with depression.

Exemplar D (Lana)

R: I had a family member who struggled with depression I remember feeling angry and sometimes feeling like "Why can't you stop doing this and get it together?"

L: (long pause) Yeah that's right. Fear, helplessness, and powerlessness and there is nothing, you can't (short pause) you can't make her change. You would like to take her and make her change, but you can't, you don't have that power and you are probably right.

Similarly, when speaking with Ann I inquire as to how her view of the world changed following the sexual abuse she experienced. Faced with a long pause in our conversation I offer up suggestions such as "unfair" and "unjust." Ann seems to let me know that I am off track and provides a description of her own.

A: (long pause) I think mostly I felt like I didn't fit anywhere.

In my first interview with Sally, when she was speaking of how affected she was by the sexual abuse, she referred to herself as becoming "a mouse of a child" on several occasions. In mapping the effects of the abuse I put forth some possible connections of my own.

#### Exemplar E (Sally)

R: You mentioned that umm you think that you became a sort of a mouse as child and quiet and see that connection with the sexual abuse.

S: mhm

R: I know it is hard to disentangle everything but how else do you think it impacted you growing up. You said something about sleeping with men?

Sally's response is in agreement with this line of inquiry informing me that in retrospect she sees it as "using them before they used me."

These women did not come to our conversations with neatly packaged stories. Holzman and Newman (2000) caution this sort of over identification with stories (the product) and advise closer attention be paid to the story making (process). Upon reflection on the transcribed interviews I wonder if at times I didn't really hear what Ann, Sally and Lana were trying to tell me. My responses, interpretations, and points of views are entangled in the production of these narratives.

Historically western narratives have demanded resolution, endings and conclusions (Nespor, & Barber, 1995). Clandinin & Connelly (2000) refer to this as the "Hollywood plot," where everything ends up working out in the end. Ann, Sally, and Lana's narratives illustrate the complexities of generating coherent accounts. Perhaps it is as

Gergen (1990) advocates, more important to view their accounts as “indicative of processes of relatedness, signs of particular forms of interaction” (p.365).

When discussing their ‘activist’ pursuits all three women speak at length of the meaning derived by their volunteer efforts. In this way it appears that their activism aids in developing a sense of coherence. Their efforts appear to provide major sources for their identities. When talking about her initial involvement as a volunteer in an anti abuse campaign, Ann refers to it as a “natural flow” where “a lot of my questions about who I was and why I was here and what I was doing, spiritually it felt like my life opened up.”

Exemplar F (Ann)

R: What is it like to talk about your volunteer work, the activism?

A: mhm sometimes I feel really good and I know that the reason I can be so effective in my work is because I have empathy and understanding, and I’ve umm walked a path, not the same as other people who are troubled but you know (pause) so I can draw on that and I can know it and I can have hope for other people. So I think (the work I do) gives you know, understanding and hope and yeah and that uh makes me feel good like there’s a reason for everything that has happened to me in my life.

Sally refers to her volunteer work within the community as being “fulfilling” and providing her with an opportunity to empower others. “That’s what I do, I try to give power to those who don’t have any.” In helping to develop and facilitate a support group for survivors of suicide, Lana describes being “changed”. Her words are profound.

### Exemplar G (Lana)

L: That is where my whole life turned around because since then I don't know where my life would be today. It changed me, it mhm, it made me see (short pause) it freed me of the guilt.

Lana goes on to describe her activism as "one of the most meaningful, special things that I have ever been involved in my life."

### *Distancing Function*

Narrative acts as a mediator between all this information and ourselves; it puts the information out there at arms length, gives it an intelligible order and makes it subjectively meaningful (Medved & Brockmeier, 2004, p. 753).

As earlier mentioned this is not the first time these women have named their experiences. Often people draw from a stock of cultural narratives, which might act to provide distancing and coherence (Gubrium & Hostein, 1998). If, as Jackson (1998) suggests, we draw on those discourses available to us to construct stories of ourselves it is interesting to gaze at the similarities and points of divergence between Ann, Sally, and Lana's stories.

In the beginning of our second interview, Ann is clear that her story has not changed over time.

### Exemplar H (Ann)

R: Did you come to view your story differently or see it more clearly after we had spoken?

A: No, I don't think so. I wouldn't say that. We did a lot of that in (referencing the support group she was involved with). So you would meet a group of women and tell your story the first and second times when we got together as a group.

In naming her trauma Ann draws strongly from the cultural script available to her through her support group. Similarly, Sally often refers back to the perspectives and terminology present in her college psychology classes. In the example below Sally relates how she began to see herself in this literature.

Exemplar I (Sally)

S: For years and years, I mean I, for the whole time I didn't tell anybody and when I plunged into psychology and I got a hold of zillions of literature

R: mhm mmm

S: Well I just thought, "hot damn there I am, look at that!"

Lana refers to the stages of grief when speaking of her sister's suicide. She describes in a later part of our first meeting that through group and individual counselling she became aware of where she was in the grieving process.

Ann and Lana's support groups and Sally's psychology classes provide them with language to make sense of themselves. As Gubrium and Holstein (1998) point out "telling one's experience, say of a group that shares a relatively crystallized repertoire of storylines presents one with a set of discernible plots, offering ways of giving shape and substance to experience in these terms"(p. 166). All three have also been involved in individual counselling. However, as the language of the public becomes more and more 'psychologized' it is not surprising to find this repertoire of wording in their narratives- "depression", "eating disorder", "self efficacy" etc., (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Aside from the cultural scripts made available to Ann, Sally, and Lana, woven into parts of our interviews are pronominal shifts, moving from first to third person when speaking. This also serves as a distancing function. This is most pronounced in conversation with Lana. In both interviews Lana shared an intense sense of “guilt” and “shame” around her sister’s death. Lana describes feeling “impatient” with her sister’s inability to “get her life together.” As indicated in an earlier chapter, following a failed suicide attempt and hospitalization by her sister, Lana wrote Jane a letter and attached it to a plaque engraved with a prayer for Serenity. In the letter Lana “accuses” her sister of really not wanting to die. In going through her sister’s personal items after her death, Lana came across the plaque. Part of the letter remained attached to the back. When sharing this with me Lana is crying so that parts of the interview become inaudible. She shares that one page of the letter was missing and she wonders if her sister had it the day she died. “That was hard and see I couldn’t tell anybody, I never felt that I could tell anybody that, who could I tell? Not even my husband.” Lana’s “guilt” and “shame” appear intimately connected to the pronominal shifts from first to third person. The following is one excerpt of this shift.

Exemplar J (Lana)

L: You can’t make her change. You would like to take her and make her change, but you can’t, you don’t have that power.

R: So you felt a sense of real powerlessness with your sister and her struggles?

L: I don’t know if I ever identified it as such. I was much younger then, I mean certainly I can...

R: Looking back?

L: Looking back I can see where that can certainly be the case but you know you learn and you grow and we learn not to be so proud you know? And we learn to have more compassion and caring, love, and that sort of thing.

Sally too, uses the third person on occasion. Sally describes why it took her so long to tell her Mom, and name the experience out loud. “You know because of course when you are a kid and you think this is common and people who suffer abuse don’t want to talk or even acknowledge it...” The shift from first to third person appears to act as a distancing device for Lana and Sally and possibly lend hand in developing a sense of coherence (Medved & Brockmeir, 2004).

These pronominal shifts were not found in my dialogue with Ann. It must be noted that I did not discuss the function of distancing with the participants and coming to view the narratives in this way is based on my theoretical understandings and readings as they relate to trauma and narratives (Medved & Brockmeir, 2004; Oppenheimer, 1998; Profitt, 1996; Wade, 1997).

#### *Evaluative Function*

Points of connection, divergence, and emerging themes are found when taking a closer look at the transcribed interviews and resulting narratives, highlighting the evaluative function of narratives. In looking at the production of themes it’s my hope to follow the cyclical process Reason and Heron (1995) outline when discussing co-operative inquiry. More specifically, they describe this as “a fully participatory process in which people engage together in cycles of action and reflection” (p.124).

At the second interview, Ann, Sally, and Lana were presented with the transcribed interviews. I invited them to consider my interpretations, and in particular what stood out

for me. In turn, Ann, Sally, and Lana shared their thoughts and interpretations. In this way we became partial co-collaborators in the generation of themes, perspectives, and insights (Hones, 1997). The themes generated in this process are by no means exhaustive. I imagine if I had the opportunity to discuss my interpretations further and receive more feedback from Ann, Sally, and Lana, we might have come to different ways of naming the themes as well as finding additional themes. In the end, I chose to articulate the findings with the notion of voice, connection and turning points. The articulation of themes and coordinating understandings has been challenging but beneficial. Gergen (1999) refers to this as a sort of “dance.”

### *Voice*

With all three participants I share my sense of “voice” as a critical construct when discussing activism. This interpretation springs from much of the feminist readings I had done throughout the research process (Belenky et al. 1997; Brown, 1994; Fine, 1994; Profitt, 1996; Razack, 1998). The authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, argue voice becomes a metaphor for women’s sense of self, connection, and development (Belenky et al., 1997). I believe narrative research provides a “counterpoint” to discourses that do not make room for the voices of subjugated groups (Saukko, 2000).

All three participants consider the metaphor of voice and the possibility that their activist pursuits provided them with a space for the development of ‘voice’. However, all three women respond with language of their own (different from mine).

Sally reverts to a cultural script she is possibly more comfortable with and one she is situated in. She uses terms like self-efficacy and locus of control. However, in our second meeting Sally has taken up my use of the term voice.

### Exemplar K (Sally)

S: I don't know about gaining your voice but I have certainly learned I guess, yeah it would be that because I have learned I need to make my voice heard, that's the biggest part of it.

The descriptions all three participants chose to use fit with my understanding of voice. Consider that Ann, as a child refers to herself as a "lonely petunia in an onion patch" while as an adult is more like a flower "in with all the other flowers." Sally describes her childhood self as "quiet as a mouse" and "scared of most everything" and presently feels a sense of "power" in her life. Lana talks about being "freed up" from the guilt and shame she carried. Similarly all three repeatedly use the words "power" and "empowerment". These descriptions are particularly important, considering all three women had been in situations of powerlessness. It is clear that our understanding of 'voice' is "continuously negotiable; no arrangement of words is self sustaining in the sense of possessing a single meaning" (Gergen, 1999, p.236).

In her research with survivors of incest and sexual abuse, Oppenheimer (1998) concludes that the opportunity to "speak out" in a public manner was empowering for women, contributing to a sense of well-being. Similarly, Profitt (1996) points out that involvement in social action allows women to "find a language."

Feminist/anti-oppressive liberatory spaces and discourses resonated with women, confirming and validating their realities and experiences. They facilitated the conscious articulation of previous ways of interpreting the world, gave meaning to their experiences and constituted an explanatory framework through which they could understand their present and past (Profitt, 1999, p. 209)

Upon reflection of their narratives I notice themes of silence also springing forward. As earlier mentioned Ann recognizes that she does not share her story with her friends. While organizing the support group, Lana points out that she rarely spoke about her sister or her sister's death with family members. In particular, it was not until years later that Lana voiced to her husband the sense of guilt she carried. Similarly there is silence between Sally and her siblings regarding the sexual abuse. She comments, "it's just, it seems too much of a leap almost to bring it up."

Ceballo's (1999) narrative research with an African American Social Worker highlights similar paradoxes of silence and voice. She incorporates the metaphor of African American women's quilting to illustrate the "fluidity" and complexities of identity in regards to her participant, Mary. In their activism, Ann, Sally, and Lana create a space for voice, which does always translate to other areas of their lives. Similarly, Mary espouses the importance of voice in her practice as a social worker while remaining silent to parts of her own story.

Certain aspects of our identities for example will be more salient in certain contexts, at different developmental time periods, and in varying conditions. Hence, it is only logical that the different parts of our identities will not always peacefully co-exist; there will be contradictions and inconsistencies in women's words and actions (Ceballo, 1999, p. 313).

### *Connection*

Within the fabric of Ann, Sally, and Lana's narratives is a sense of connection and community related to their activist pursuits. This sense of connection seems tied to 'making a difference.' The importance of connection seems to resonate the most in Ann

and Lana's narratives. More specifically, Ann describes feeling a sense of "hope" and "peace" as a prevention educator. But as she states, it "becomes more", connecting her to the wider community. Ann feels particularly "gifted" and "proud" when speaking with young male offenders. She has a sense of connection to a community where she influences change. This is in striking contrast to the "lonely petunia in the onion patch."

Lana refers to her activism as a "legacy." She speaks in detail of two women in particular with whom she feels a strong connection though they rarely see one another. One woman now runs the support group Lana helped to develop. Lana shares how another young woman stated that she "owed her life to me." When sharing these stories with me Lana brings out a plaque she was awarded. In part, the plaque reads "for dedication, inspiration and skill...your legacy will last." As Schneider (1999) found in her research, connecting to a community where change might be made beyond the individual psyche is an important and worthwhile process for survivors of trauma.

Sally's sense of connection seems to be made more strongly to the membership of being a 'survivor'. She stresses, "I do not want to be a victim!" Later Sally clarifies her point by informing me she is "not the typical person that seeks therapy, those people might be still enmeshed in their problems so deeply." The distinction Sally makes between herself as a 'victim' and as a 'survivor' is a strong one. Yet within her narrative, there is the possibility that these so called two distinct ways of being are not so separate. In our second meeting Sally states that perhaps she needs to look at the "whole situation".

For all three participants, joining others in the pursuit for social change is meaningful and rewarding. Feminist theorists have long highlighted the quality of connectedness as being critical to women's development (Elliot, 1999). No longer isolated by their traumas

each woman is connected to organizations struggling for social change. Perry and Rolland (1999) argue that connection to social activist groups is therapeutically beneficial, “opening up more room for hope, helping to strengthen a sense of empowerment and purpose, and generating the healing or sense of well-being that comes through the experience of connection and community”(p. 282). These researchers/family therapists see activism as an expression of spirituality, fostering connections.

But activism is not a private or solitary enterprise anymore than spirituality is. To the contrary, it grows out of the awareness that we are not alone and that our sense of dignity and well-being is intricately tied to our participation in community, to the experience of working for the common good (Perry & Rolland, 1999 p. 279).

Alongside feelings of connection there remains a sense of difference and distance woven into Ann and Sally’s narratives. Ann questions why she doesn’t share this “really big part of who I am” with her friends. She asserts that it must be because she is far removed from the “victim” she once was. Sally sets herself apart from the individuals she assists, viewing them as powerless. These points of disconnection are not surprising, considering that trauma challenges one’s sense of trust and security with others.

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion (Herman, 1992, p. 52).

### *Turning Points*

In their efforts to understand trauma and the process of recovery for women, Harvey et al., (2000) suggest the importance of 'turning points.' This research in part informs how I approach an evaluation of the transcribed interviews with Ann, Sally, and Lana. Each of them suggests possible turning points in the struggle to re-story their experiences. For all three women naming their experiences out loud, unexpected events, and being involved in activist pursuits have been significant turning points. These are by no means the only turning points but appear to be the ones emphasized in the narratives.

For Ann, saying out loud what had happened to her as a child came rather unexpectedly. It was following her brother's release from an alcohol rehab centre. He asked her how she was dealing with having been abused in the foster home that she had grown up in. Ann describes this as "a realization that I had been abused." Shortly thereafter, Ann becomes involved in counselling services with an agency whose focus was sexual abuse. "I realized I need to get help for myself." It was around this time Ann approached her then husband, making it clear that if he were to use violence against her again she would leave. Ann describes leaving her husband as another turning point in her life.

#### Exemplar L (Ann)

R: What do you think was sort of the pivotal point that moving from that feeling of being a victim to becoming more of a social activist?

A: Well, I think the pivotal point in my life came when I left my husband. With him I always felt that a part of me was being victimized. He was very non-supportive of me becoming a prevention educator. Leaving him and investing myself in working as

a prevention educator, and so it was really good timing actually and I felt like my life really started to turn then. That those were two really important things.

Beginning her work as a prevention educator, Ann becomes clearer of the oppression she deals with in her own home.

Sally did not tell anyone about the sexual abuse until the age of eighteen, when she “finally” told her Mom. In our second interview I checked back with Sally about naming the trauma as a possible turning point to which she agreed. She describes this telling as a “floodgate” and “everything came flying out, and it was ugly because it was stored down in there for so long.” Though telling her Mom about the abuse was a turning point it does not provide resolution. Sally notes that she “still is in that denial a lot of the time.”

For Lana the experience of her sister Jane’s suicidal death was not so easily hidden; however, similar to Ann and Sally, there was much silence surrounding this event, particularly amongst her family. Referring to her Mom and Step-dad, Lana explains that they rarely spoke of her sister. “We never would sit around and talk about my sister because that was the way that my mother held it all in and I didn’t know how. It made a big difference between us.” When Lana attended the panel discussion at a local elementary school she spoke out loud “for the first time” about her experience and the guilt she was carrying.

These turning points for Ann and Lana are prefaced by rather unexpected events: Ann’s brother’s surprise inquiry regarding the abuse and Lana’s coming across a bulletin regarding a panel discussion related to suicide. Sally remains unsure what lead to her telling her Mom about the abuse.

Becoming involved in areas of activism also represents significant turning points for these women. They are no longer positioned as victims and new storylines begin to emerge. Through these endeavours each begins to generate new meanings and understandings of their pasts and futures. Lana describes being “changed,” Ann’s life had “opened up”, and Sally talks about having a sense of “power.” Each speaks with much passion in reference to her activism.

Ann and Lana describe meaningful changes in their familial relationships since their activism. Ann describes parenting so differently from how she was parented. She is thrilled to hear teachers describe her children in such positive terms. Ann’s positive relationship with her children and their success is what is most important for her. For Lana as the development of the support group began and she was able to openly share her feelings of guilt, shame, and sadness she started to open up to her husband “even telling him about the letter.”

Sally appears to be at a different place stating that it is “too much of a leap almost” to talk openly about her feelings with her family. Sally speaks of how her Mom must have known something was happening. At one point Sally’s Mom did ask her if she was being abused. According to Sally, rumours were circulating in the community that “this man had abused some other girls”. She attributes her denial of the abuse to the poor relationship with her Mom and being silenced by her perpetrator through direct and indirect threats. Even now Sally and her Mom rarely speak about the abuse.

By identifying turning points I do not mean to suggest a linear way of viewing Ann, Sally, and Lana’s lives. In her book *Narrative Remembering*, DeConcini (1990), reviews the critical role of remembering in the development of narratives.

The activity of telling a story does not consist in the mere piling up of selected episodes in chronological sequence. To tell a story is to establish a relationship among the episodes, to grasp them together, to lift up some significance out of the plurality. To follow a story is to elicit a configuration from the succession, to relate episodic parts to meaningful wholes (DeConcini, 1990, p. 69).

I view time as non-linear in orientation. More specifically, “temporality is not a line but a network of intentionalities; the present is not a point but a moving field of focus” (DeConcini, 1990, p. 140). The notion of temporality becomes a central feature to narratives. “When we see an event, we think of it not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time. Any event, or thing has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 29). It is through the act of remembering that the past is reinterpreted.

### *Explorative Function*

Once we understand ourselves to be members of the same world as our “protagonists”, engaged in kindred reflections and analysis of that world, we begin to think of ourselves not so much as “researchers” but as their co-investigators studying practices of concern to us both (Nespor & Barber, 1995 p. 53).

Medved and Brockmeier (2004) point out that stories allow individuals to view themselves in new ways. They refer to this as the explorative function of narrative. The thrust of my research in part is to determine if Ann, Sally, and Lana have come to view themselves and their experiences in new, perhaps previously unnoticed ways. The resulting narratives indicate that this is the case. As earlier mentioned Ann, Sally and Lana were each shown the transcribed interviews, “so they can see the course of the

discussion, change parts of their conversation that, upon reflection, they disagree with and/or provide additional insights” (Herda, 1999, p.120).

Ann believes her story to be unchanged, informing me that it is not much different from when she first started talking about her experiences at a support group. Yet, since our first conversation she describes “this bigger realization”. Ann has not told her story in some time and she is struck by just how far she has come. She also questions, “why I don’t tell some people that I have in my life, the story of my life.”

Similarly, Sally shares how our conversation “highlighted” that she “survived”. This in turn has lead to conversations with her Mom, husband, and counsellor of what it means to be a survivor. In this way the generative aspects and meaning making processes of our conversations appear to have continued in other social milieu.

I am most struck by Lana’s responses in our second interview. She described viewing activist as a dirty word; “you think about all those people who said to legalize pot.” Lana begins to consider the possibility that she is an activist and that it is not such a dirty word after all. This line of conversation also leads to Lana viewing her past through different lenses. In her narrative she shares some of these experiences and then asks out loud “So is that activism?”

The narratives of Ann, Sally, and Lana illustrate how stories are not clearly demarcated. From a social constructionist perspective the reconstruction of meaning and understanding is in constant motion (Gergen, 2001).

Everything is not going to be packed up with pieces fitted perfectly into some programmed puzzle...and instead of the telescope that allows us to bring distant objects into sharp focus, we have kaleidoscopes that can shift the perspectives, alter

the arrangements and provide endless speculations about what is, was and could be (Gergen, 2001, p. 193).

In Chapter Four unanticipated results were shared. The article I did for a local newspaper also put in motion meaning making processes for several people who were not interested in participating in the research. In our telephone conversation the young poet, who I refer to as Rose, suggests that she might be an “activist.” This seems to be what Newman and Holzman (2000) refer to as the “performance” of conversation. More specifically, this is an activity, which is self-reflexive and potentially transforming. Not only does Rose begin to see herself in a new way, but also I begin to consider the notion of activism more broadly. Through her poetry Rose has found a way to give expression to her abuse experiences. She has chosen to share this expression with others in hopes that it might have a positive impact.

The writer of the anonymous letter I received suggests that she is re-storying her experiences and thinking about these experiences on a “different level.” These responses highlight the constant motion of meaning making that Gergen (2001) refers to, and the possibility for the re-storying of individual lives.

### *Limitations*

I have concerns that these narratives might be read as fixed entities and not as the generative conversations they are meant to represent. In their work on narrative research Lieblich et al. (1998) point out that a life story is a construct that “can never be fully accessed in research”(p.8). These authors warn of reading stories as “static” products like still photographs, recognizing that meaning is shifting. Furthermore, the readers of this research are for the most part an anonymous audience whose readings are further

mediated by various contexts. As Gergen (1999) points out “there is no escape from the standpoint one brings to the interpretation” (p.3). In this way the focus on the narrative shifts to the relationships and joint meaning making processes, which give way to the narrative.

If there is “no escape”, it is critical to speak to my position as a researcher, further contextualizing the knowledge production coming from this research. As noted in Chapter One I am a white, middle class woman, in her early thirties who has not experienced trauma in the manner it is defined for the purposes of this research. I have worked at a mental health agency for nearly seven years. It is my impression that often within the field of mental health there is a push for structure and clarity along with asking and answering why questions. I cannot pretend to be untouched by this context and I wonder how it has impacted the resultant narratives. Furthermore, I was drawn to this line of research having felt somewhat silenced at my place of work and in some academic settings. More specifically, within the larger system to which the counselling agency I belong to operates, discourses of pathology are prevalent. Certainly other discourses exist within the walls of the agency, but at times I felt at the end of the day that the discourse of pathology and deficiency prevail. The notion of voice has long been important to me and I was keen to become involved in a project where I would be exposed to women who were able to raise their voices. To me, this line of research has felt quite hopeful.

Though I have tried to come from a not knowing stance and approach my conversations with Ann, Sally, and Lana with a sense of tentativeness, there are obviously places in our conversation that this did not occur. In the end it was I who had

final say on what was presented and how these narratives were presented. “In conducting qualitative research we are still positioned as expert knowers drawing together the narratives that our informants provide and reshaping them into another academic narrative” (Jackson, 1998, p. 48).

Also, Ann, Sally and Lana were presented only with excerpts of the transcribed interviews rather than the full accounts. Furthermore these excerpts highlighted what struck me, to some degree limiting the scope of our conversations.

I also believe that as I proceeded with this research my comfort level increased. More specifically, I can recall feeling quite nervous upon meeting my first participant, Ann. I wonder what impact this nervousness might have had on the shape of our conversation. By the time I met with Lana, I felt much more comfortable and organized in my approach.

In assessing the validity of narrative research, Reissman (1993), points out the importance of *correspondence*-taking back the results to participants. To some degree this was achieved in the second interview; however, Ann, Sally and Lana did not view the final storied accounts, which I regret. However, it is also problematic to assume that had they seen the final narratives validation of the process would be complete, considering that “human stories are not static, meanings of experiences shift as consciousness changes” (Reissman, 1993, p. 66).

For the most part these are my interpretations and readings of the narratives, limiting what can be said about any of the stories shared. As Frank (2000) so eloquently notes “my methodological quandary has been and remains the limits of what can be said about

anyone else's story" (p.360). Similarly further readings of the narratives may produce other interpretations.

What we produce are readings or interpretations, warranted to be sure by 'local' evaluative criteria, but not underwritten in any final or definitive way by epistemology. Instead they remain unfinished and open to dialogue. Let us be up front about this. In this way, politics can take its place next to Epistemology-centre stage in the knowledge production process (Jackson, 1998, p. 39).

### *Implications for Counselling*

This research has brought me to consider the implications for counselling practice in several ways, within the philosophical frameworks of feminist and social constructionist theories. The mental health field is organized in such a way that often therapists are seen as experts, who help individuals who have experienced traumatic events to adapt to their environments. In these sorts of settings we often focus on a language of deficits, or at least what we view to be deficits (Gergen, 1990).

Feminist therapists view this as harmful adaptation—"they are harmed because adaptation requires that they thwart their own development and growth, and deny their own views of themselves, their nature, skills and behaviours" (Ballou & Gabalac, 1985, p. 80). Following a feminist position counselling is about facilitating individual changes and societal changes. Feminist therapists are concerned with empowering individuals. Empowerment is seen as the capacity for clients to believe in themselves, view themselves as agents of change, capable of authoring their own life narratives (Brown, 1994). I believe empowerment to be similar in orientation to the notion of voice. In Chapter One I noted that feminist research/counselling should contribute to the

empowerment of individuals. Ann, Sally, and Lana's activism participation has been empowering and assists each of them in making sense of their experiences. It appears that our conversations around activism were also empowering, highlighting the strengths of each woman. I wonder if the discursive invitations in my own therapeutic practices have been empowering?

This research process has been a reflexive one, leading me to consider and question my role in the therapeutic relationship much more intently. In her book *Decolonising Methodologies*, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) reminds us that research "is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (p. 5). Therapy might be viewed in the same manner.

Similarly, McNamee (1994) draws striking comparisons between research and therapeutic practice. In both arenas there is relational dependency where research and clinical practice are viewed as "discursive moments that are not isolated from the shifting yet real (as in locally real) meanings and actions that participants construct together" (McNamee, 1994, p. 79). In this way, our attention shifts from the so-called individual psyche to the meaning making processes between counsellor/client; researcher/participant. When considering research, McNamee (1994) asks us to "question the questions raised in the research process" (p. 77). We need to apply the same reflexivity to our own therapeutic practice and consider that our perspectives, philosophies, and theories are based on dialogic exchanges, embedded in wider social structures. Why did I ask the questions I did? For what purpose? When looking at girls' development, Jackson (1998) asks us to go further and question-"who is listening

and what is the nature of her relationship with the speaker-especially with respect to power” (p. 96).

It is my hope that reflexivity would avoid the essentialization of clients. This is not to argue that commonalities do not exist when considering clients’ struggles, particularly with respect to trauma. Rather, “focusing on similarities cannot, and should not, be used to deny differences” (Rosewater, 1990, p. 300). It is also my hope that reflexivity would create a space for clients’ voices to be truly heard.

Ann, Sally, and Lana’s narratives suggest that we might also pay closer attention to the contradictions and complexities of our clients’ lives. For instance, all three women at times struggle to establish a sense of coherence in their narratives when reflecting on the past. Similarly, although all three women have found a space for their voices, there remain spaces of silence and disconnection. Ceballo’s (1999) research echoes this sentiment.

By allowing for paradoxes in the lives of women we study, feminist scholars can highlight the underlying struggles often embedded in the midst of women’s positions of marginality or uncover previously hidden vulnerabilities in women’s positions of agency and power (Ceballo, p. 312).

In considering the metaphor of a patchwork quilt, when working with clients, I am drawn to these sorts of complexities, opening myself up to new meanings and understandings. In this way, I imagine that I work towards establishing more intimate interactions with my clients; co coordinating our understandings and actions (Weingarten, 1992).

I asked Ann, Sally, and Lana to consider themselves as activists. In the context of these conversations new meanings and understandings were formed. Similarly, social

constructionist theorists and narrative therapists ask us to consider our questions and responses within the therapeutic relationship as invitations. This is in sharp contrast to viewing ourselves as “fixing” clients’ problems with specific interventions or assisting clients in adapting to their environments. (Strong, 2000).

If we are to view our questions and responses as invitations then we cannot deny the collaborative nature of the therapeutic relationship. More specifically, counsellors might consider that realities are socially constructed, constituted through language, and organized through narratives (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In this way, focus shifts from the individual to the development of new meanings and understandings and the shared *intentionalities* between therapist and client.

In their activism it appears that Ann, Sally, and Lana have found a space for voice, a sense of connection and purpose. It is worthwhile for counsellors to consider activism as a possible form of discourse within the therapeutic relationship. In their work in family therapy, Perry and Rolland (1999) argue that “woven” into various forms of activism is hope. That is, that “in spite of the evidence, that such imagined and preferred alternatives can be made real and that that which is amiss can be set right” (Perry & Rolland, p.274). As mentioned in chapter one, Schneider’s (1999) research, assessing the needs of “victims”, also points in this direction.

We might also begin casting a critical eye to our own practices and the larger bureaucratic systems to which we belong (Lee & Walz, 1998). Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1999) speaks critically of education processes. His philosophies can be applied to counselling practices. Consider the following quotation, replacing education with counselling.

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integrations of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Freire 1999, p.16).

This does create some tension when considering our work as counsellors. In our professional practices and personal lives there may be instances where we have inadvertently sided with the oppressors. In their call for counsellors as agents of social change, Lee and Walz (1998) ask us to reflect on our memberships in communities and within the counselling community. From a feminist standpoint one of our priorities as counsellors needs to be changing power systems that have the potential to further traumatize individuals (Amundson et al., 1993). At first glance these feel to me like heavy implications. However, Ann, Sally, and Lana have inadvertently empowered me to want to strive for such change. Considering the traumas these women have experienced and their ability to make changes in their communities rejuvenates my sense of hope and desire to follow their lead.

In Chapter One I began by locating myself and sharing my frustration with the larger mental health system and academic institution of which I was a part. Nearing the end of my research process I've begun to look back on these experiences with a shift in meaning and understanding. Alongside the feelings of frustration runs a sense of thankfulness. Within these larger systems I have come across other mental health practitioners who have helped to shape my theoretical perspective and practice. I am reminded of the ever-

shifting meaning making processes and how these processes have contributed to my professional and personal life.

### *Looking Back*

Looking back on the research process there are changes I would make. This process has assisted me in refining and rethinking my position as a researcher, working with narrative and as a counsellor. Perhaps as Bochner (2001) states, that is precisely the point, drawing us to “what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what understanding they can be put” (p. 154).

More specifically, I feel that in the writing of their narratives I took too much control. As Ceballo (1999) recommends, I would have written up a first draft of their narratives and presented it to them for further discussion and exploration before writing the final narratives. In this way, Ann, Sally, and Lana would have been much more involved in the final storied accounts. As well, I believe that by doing so I would be making clearer that we were in the process of constructing meaning together.

My second meetings with Ann, Sally, and Lana revealed that they continued to consider our conversations and in particular the idea of viewing themselves as activists. Upon reflection, I wish I had asked them that if they were to keep close to their hearts and minds the idea of being an activist could they imagine their lives being different? And if so, in what ways? I imagine this type of questioning might have further highlighted the performative aspects of our conversations. As well, this may have further illustrated the possible implications of a discourse around activism.

In considering the evaluative function of Ann, Sally and Lana’s narratives, I also would also have incorporated the constant comparative method from grounded theory to

assist me in generating and organizing themes (Glaser, 1965). At times I felt rather disorganized in my approach and it is only in coming to the end of my research that I have found other ways of analyzing narratives that I now consider to be more useful. I believe the constant comparative method may have assisted me in feeling less thwarted in my approach to the analysis of these narratives. However, I also believe that regardless of my treatment of the data, narrative analysis is a slow process with no clear and easy answers (Reissman, 1993).

At times I drifted into limbo, in response to my struggles with the research process. With the benefit of looking back I would have made stronger attempts to connect with researchers who were also engaged in narrative analysis. I believe conversations with other researchers would have been helpful in clarifying my own understandings and position with respect to narrative research. As well, I believe that this might have provided me with a community of support in ways that friends and family were unable to offer.

#### *Suggestions for Further Research*

I view my research as being a possible starting point for further research. More specifically, for wider “abstractions” to be made comparative research would be useful (Reissman, 1993). There are various avenues this could take. First of all, I would recommend that more narratives of women who have moved from trauma to activism be documented as a means of understanding this phenomenon more fully. For my research, the number of participants was small as is the case with most narrative research. If the goal is considered to be learning “about the general from the particular” (Reissman, 1993, p. 70), additional narratives are essential.

The ways of 'doing' narrative research are varied as a patchwork quilt. Other researchers have incorporated letters and journals as well as interviews (McSheffrey, 1992; Hones, 1997). Throughout my research I maintained a journal for reflections and interpretations. Future research might include participants maintaining a journal between interviews.

Like the patchwork quilt the possibilities for further research seem substantial. For instance, the reporter who wrote the article I completed (Appendix B) suggested distinctions exist between women activists living in the north and those living in larger centres in the "urban south". Closer to home we might look at activists in the larger centre of Prince George compared to narratives of activists living in smaller northern communities. This type of inquiry could incorporate questions highlighting these contextual features to assess for possible diverging experiences.

In a similar vein, it would be of interest to look at the narratives of men who have moved from traumatic experiences to activism participation. Farther down the line comparisons between men and women might be made.

Narrative research is a useful and meaningful way to understand lived experiences. Further research might also consider applying methods of narrative research to understand the experiences of individuals' experiences in therapy, particularly individuals who have experienced trauma.

### *Conclusions*

When considering the narratives of Ann, Sally, and Lana the metaphor of a patchwork quilt leads us to points of connection and divergence. All three women have found a sense of purpose and meaning in their activism. Though the research process has come to

a close, the stories of Ann, Sally, and Lana have not and how each woman continues to reshape and re-story her experience goes on. The interpretations presented in this research are not meant to advance only generalizations or resolutions; however, I recognize that there is a likelihood of this occurring, as is the case with much academic writing.

It is possible to forget this point in extractive research where we distance ourselves from the places and people we study. As researchers, our ways of telling stories and putting them together into articles and books seem to push towards endings and conclusions that resolve narratives (Nespor & Barber, 1995 p.60)

I hope by viewing the participants of this research as co-authors in the meaning making process I have minimized this happening to some extent.

The narratives of Ann, Sally, and Lana, point to narrative inquiry as a reflexive process, constructed through our interactions with others and the discourses available to us (Jackson, 1988). They highlight the complexities of each woman's experience in moving from trauma to a place of activism. Naming their experiences out loud, unexpected events, and the first steps of activism, served as turning points. These experiences provided Ann, Sally, and Lana opportunities to reconstruct their stories from 'victim' to 'activist'. The process of developing voice and a sense of connection was threaded throughout their stories and emphasized in their activism.

Each woman took up my invitation to view herself as an activist in a different way. Lana, no longer sees activism as such a "dirty word" and begins to consider other areas of her life in these terms. Ann, recognizes that she has come "a long way", while Sally starts to consider that "survivor" and "victim" are not mutually exclusive terms.

Their stories illustrate the powerful nature of activism. Ann refers to her community efforts as having a “spiritual” component. Sally speaks at length about her sense of empowerment, and ability to “give power to others.” Meanwhile, Lana is able to talk openly about her sister’s life and death. Ann, Sally, and Lana’s narratives challenge us as counsellors to consider how we might incorporate a discourse of social action into our practices. Their narratives also challenge us to consider that the movement from trauma to activism is not so straightforward and neatly packaged.

## References

- Amundson, J., Stewart, K., & Valentine, L. (1993). Temptations of power and certainty. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 19, 111-123.
- Armstrong, S. (2001). Here's to the activist. *Chatelaine*, 74 (1), 44-52.
- Avis, J. M., & Turner, J. (1995). Feminist lenses in family therapy research: Gender, politics and science. In S. Moon (Ed.), *Research methods in family therapy* (pp. 145-169). New York: Guilford.
- Ballou, M., & Gabalac, N. (1985). *A feminist position on mental health*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Bee, H. L. (1992). *The journey of adulthood* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Macmillan Publishing.
- Belenky, M.F., Clinchy, B.M., Goldberger, N.R., & Tarule, J.M. (1997). *Women's ways of knowing*. New York: Basic Books.
- Biever, J.L., De Las Fuentes, C., Cashion, L., & Franklin, L. (1998). The social construction of gender: A comparison of feminist and postmodern approaches. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 11(2), 163-179.
- Bochner, A.P. (1997). It about time: Narrative and the divided self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(4), 418-438.
- Bowlby, L. (1983). The impact of death on the family system. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 5(4), 279-294.
- Brown, L. (1994). *Subversive dialogues: Theory in feminist therapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18, 1-21.

- Ceballo, R. (1999) Negotiating the life narrative: A dialogue with an African American social worker. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 309-321.
- Clandinin D., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- DeConcini, B. (1990). *Narrative remembering*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Elliot, J. (1999). Feminist theory. In J. Capazzi, & D. Gross (Eds.), *Counselling Psychotherapy: Theories and interventions* (2nd ed., pp. 145-169). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Emihovich, C. (1998). Distancing passion: Narratives in social science. In J.Hatch & Richard Wisniewski (Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 37-48). London: The Falmer Press.
- Fine, M. (1994). Dis-stance and other stances: Negotiations of power inside feminist research. In A. Gitlin (Ed.) *Power and method: political activism and educational research* (pp. 13-31). New York: Routledge.
- Flannery, M.C. (2001). Quilting: A feminist metaphor for scientific Inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7 (5), 628-643.
- Frank, A.W. (2000). The standpoint of storyteller. *Qualitative Health Research*, 10(3), 354-365.
- Franklin, M.B. (1997). Making sense: Interviewing and narrative representation. In M.M. Gergen & S.N. Davis (Eds.), *Toward a new psychology of gender* (pp. 99-116). Florence, KY: Routledge.

- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: W.W Norton & Co.
- Freeman M. (1997). Why narrative? Hermeneutics, historical understanding and the significance of stories. *Journal of narrative and life history*, 7 (1-4), 169-176.
- Freire, P. (1999). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Gergen, K. (1990). Therapeutic professions and the diffusion of deficit. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 11(3), 353-368.
- Gergen, K. & Semin, G. R. (1990). *Everyday understanding*. London: Sage Publications.
- Gergen, K. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Gergen, M. (2001). *Feminist reconstructions in psychology: Narrative, gender and performance*. California: Sage
- Gilbert, L. A., & Rossman, K. M. (1993). The third decade of feminist therapy and the personal is still political. *Counselling Psychologist*, 21(1), 97-102.
- Glaser, B.G. (1965) The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12(4), 436-445.
- Goodson, I. F. (1995). The story so far: personal knowledge and the political. In J.Hatch, & R. Wisniewski (Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 89-98). London: The Falmer Press.
- Greenberg, M. S., & Rubach, R. (1992). *After the crime: Victim decision-making*. New York: Plenum Press.

- Gubrium, J.F., & Holstein, J.A. (1998). Narrative practice and the coherence of personal stories. *The Sociological Quarterly* (39), 163-187.
- Harvey, M.R., Mishler, E.G., Koenen, K., & Harney, P.A. (2000). In the aftermath of sexual abuse: Making and remaking meaning in narratives of trauma and recovery. *Narrative Inquiry*, 10(2), 291-311.
- Herda, E. A. (1999). *Research conversations & narrative: A critical hermeneutic orientation in participatory inquiry*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Herman, H.J. (1992). Telling and retelling one's self narrative: A contextual approach to life-span development. *Human development* 35 (6), 361-375.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The active interview*. (Qualitative Research Methods Series 37). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Holstein, J.A., & Gubrium, J.F. (2000). *The self we live by: Narrative identity in a postmodern world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hones, D.F. (1997, March). *Knower in part: Transforming the story, the teller, and the narrative researcher*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Hong, K. (2000, March 16). Taber victim's father to speak on youth violence: Raising funds and awareness for Cedars Christian High School. *Prince George This Week*, p. A11.
- Jackson, S. (1998). Telling stories: Memory, narrative and experience in feminist research and theory. In K. Henwood, C. Griffin & A. Phoenix (Eds.), *Standpoints and differences: Essays in the practice of feminist psychology* (pp. 45-64). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma*. USA: The Free Press.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1970). *On death and dying*. New York: Collier Books/Macmillan.
- Langer, L. L. (1991). *Holocaust testimonies: The ruins of memory*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lee, C. C., & Walz, G. R. (1998). *Social action: A mandate for counsellors*. Alexandria, VA: American Counselling Association.
- Lieblich, A., Ruval-Mashiach R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Love, J. (1994). The hermeneutics of transcript analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 2(1). Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/BackIssues/QR2-1/love.html>.
- Lucius-Hoene, G. (2000, June). Constructing and reconstructing narrative identity. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal]*, 1(2). Retrieved October 21, 2001, from <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs-e/2-00inhalt-3.htm>.
- Mathieson, C.M., & Barrie, C.M. (1998). Probing the prime narrative: Illness, interviewing, and identity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 8(5), 581-601.
- McCaffrey, D. (1998). Personal trauma and politicization: The political consequences of sexual assault. (Doctoral dissertation, State University of New York at Albany, 1998). *Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A*, 59 (6A), 2192.
- McLeod, E. (1994). *Women's experience of feminist therapy and counselling*. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

- McNamee, S. (1994). Research as relationally situated activity: Ethical implications. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 6(3), 69-83.
- McSheffrey, R. (1992). Mathematics experiences of women and girls: A narrative inquiry. Unpublished master's thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.
- Medved, M., & Brockmeier, J. (2004). Making Sense of Traumatic Experiences: Telling your life with Fragile X Syndrome. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14(6), 741-759.
- Mishler, E.G. (1986). *Research Interviewing, context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mishler, E.G. (1995). Models of narrative analysis: A typology. *Journal of narrative and life history*, 5(2), 87-123.
- Nespor, J., & Barber, L. (1995). Audience and the politics of narrative. In J. Hatch & R. Wisniewski (Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 49-62). London: The Falmer Press.
- Newman, F., & Holzman, L. (2000). Beyond narrative to performed conversation. (In the beginning comes much later). *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 12(1), 23-41.
- Oppenheimer, J. (1998). Politicizing survivors of incest and sexual abuse: Another facet of healing. *Women and therapy*, 21(2), 79-87
- Penn, P. (1998). Rape flashbacks: Constructing a new narrative. *Family process*, 37(3), 299-310.

- Perry, A. V., & Rolland, J. S. (1999). Spirituality expressed in community action and social justice: A therapeutic means to liberation and hope. In Walsh (Ed.), *Spiritual resources in family therapy* (pp.272-290). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In J. Hatch & R. Wisniewski(Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp.5-24). London: The Falmer Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Profitt, N. J. (1996). "Battered women" as "victims" and "survivors": Creating space for resistance. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 13(1), 23-38.
- Profitt, N. J. (1999). Compassionate Fire: Women's stories of subjective and social change. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences* 59 (8-A): 3212.
- Razack: S. H. (1998). *Looking white people in the eye: Gender, race and culture in courtrooms and classrooms*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Reason, P., & Heron, J. (1995) Co-operative Inquiry. In J. Smith, R. Harre, & VanLangenhove, L. (Eds.), *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*. London: Sage.
- Reissman, C.K. ( 1988/89). From victim to survivor: A woman's narrative reconstruction of marital sexual abuse. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 59(3), 232-251.
- Reissman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis: Qualitative research methods*. Series 30. USA: Sage.

- Rosewater, L. B. (1990). Diversifying feminist theory and practice: Broadening the concept of victimization. In L. S. Brown, & M. P. Root, (Eds.), *Diversity and complexity in feminist therapy* (pp 299-312). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Saukko, P. (2000). Between voice and discourse: Quilting interviews on anorexia. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6, 299-317.
- Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews and questionnaires*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Schiff, B. & Cohler, B. J. (2001). Collected stories in the life narrative of holocaust survivors. *Narrative Inquiry*, 11(1), 159-194.
- Schiffrin, D. (2000). Mother/daughter discourse in a Holocaust oral history: "Because then you admit that you're guilty." *Narrative Inquiry*, 10(1), 1-44.
- Schneider, P. (1999). *What do victims of violent crime need?* Unpublished Masters' Thesis, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada.
- Schools take on gay rights issues: Students battle homophobia by forming gay-straight clubs. (2000, March 10). *The Citizen*, p. 7.
- Smith, L.T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Strong, T. (2000, July). *Meaningful moments as collaborative accomplishments: Research from within consultative dialogue*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Searching for Meaning 2000, Vancouver, Canada.

- Wade, A. (1995). Resistance knowledges: Therapy with aboriginal persons who have experienced violence. In P. H. Stephenson, S. J. Elliott, L. T. Foster, & J. Harris (Eds.), *Towards understanding aboriginal health in Canada*, 31 (pp.167-204). Victoria, Canada: University of Victoria.
- Wade, A. (1997). Small acts of living: everyday resistance to violence and other forms of oppression. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 19(1), 23-39.
- Weed, F. (1990). Victim activist role in the anti drunk driving movement. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 31(3), 459-473.
- Weedon, Chris (1987). *Feminist practice and postructuralist theory*. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Weingarten, K. (1991). The discourses of intimacy: Adding a social constructionist and feminist view. *Family Process*, 30, 285-303.
- Weingarten, K. (1992). A consideration of intimate and non-intimate interactions in therapy. *Family Process*, 31(1), 45-59.
- Whalen, M. (1996). *Counselling to end violence against women: A subversive model*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- White, M. (1995). *Re-authoring lives: Interviews & essays*. Richmond, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Young, M.A. (1997). Victims' rights and services: A modern saga. In R.C. Davis & A.J. Lurigio (Eds), *Victims of crime* (pp. 194-210). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## Appendix A

### Referral Form and Letter of Introduction

#### “Trauma to Activism: What’s In the Journey?”

Hello! My name is Kristi Smith and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Education (counselling) program at UNBC, working on my thesis to complete my degree. I am interested in exploring the journeys’ of women who have experienced a traumatic event and are now involved in activist pursuits in the areas of their trauma. I am inviting participation in this study in the form of two interviews, listening to the stories of women about this process. It is my hope that this study will contribute to the ways in which mental health practitioners work with clients who have been traumatized as well as increase our understanding of how women move from trauma to ‘activism’. Also, this exploration will aid in the understanding of how social action may impact healing and play a role in therapy. I would greatly appreciate your assistance in reaching potential participants for this research. If you know of women who are interested in participating, could you please refer their names and phone numbers to me. Otherwise, potential participants can reach me for more information about the study at 962 7215 or by e-mail at [kpfrancis@shaw.ca](mailto:kpfrancis@shaw.ca). Thank you for your assistance.

### Guidelines for Participation in this Study

I would like to interview women who:

- experienced any form of 'trauma', referring to any out of the ordinary experience, which produced a loss and sense of helplessness, threatening their sense of well-being.
- view themselves as participating in 'activist' pursuits related to the areas of their trauma. This participation may include advocating for legal reform or social policy change, support and self help groups aimed at social change, and/or community education.

Sincerely,

---

Kristi Smith, BA

4581 Rainer Crescent

(250) 962 7215

[kpfrancis@shaw.ca](mailto:kpfrancis@shaw.ca)

---

Dr. Dennis Procter

UNBC, 3333 University Way

## Appendix B

## 'The Article'

# From victim to activist

## *UNBC grad student seeks women's stories*

The most decisive system changes are those made from the inside. Systems of government, systems of education, systems of business, the examples are everywhere.

The examples are just as clear when talking about a system of grief and reconciliation. Trauma hits like a destructive wave, but there are those who clamber out of those waters to ride the wave, and change the world by doing so.

Historically, think of Terry Fox, think of the Mothers Against Drunk Driving, think of Helen Keller. Closer to home think of Vicki Read and Bonnie Mooney and Gloria Biron. People who bounced from the position of victim to the position of advocate and activist.

It doesn't always happen that one is victimized, which then motivates you to become an activist. It takes a specific kind of person in specific circumstances. Kristi Smith is a professional counsellor and also a graduate student at UNBC. Her current research looks at women of Northern B.C. who have become activists after first being a victim.

"My focus isn't the victimization or the activism, it is the story in between. How did they move from this place to that place," says Kristi. "I am most interested in stories. I think most of our lives are lived out through stories, so that is very valuable to research. Polls, surveys, these are important research tools but we don't live our lives that way. It is all done through stories."

She wants to know the stories of northern women in particular, because of the inherent differences found beyond the influence of the urban south. Victims feel their pain, vulnerability, loss, outrage, helplessness in equal doses no matter where they live, but being an activist in the north doesn't have the same level of anonymity as it does in a big city. There are also fewer resources and fewer helping hands. On one hand there is the risk of standing alone, on the other hand there is the reward of one person making a difference. The nuances of this situation is what Kristi's research is trying to elaborate.

"Victims talk about a sense of powerlessness," she says. "Activism might replace that sense of agency that was taken away from them. Activism is, I think, a form of resistance. We hear so much sorrow and sadness and this project is great for me because it is filled with so much hope."

To complete her research, Kristi needs to talk to more people who have been victims and are now activists. She knows of the obvious examples, but there are many activists who volunteer for their cause and do not seek a spotlight for it. She would like to meet people like that, as well. The victimization can be almost anything - sexual assault, disease, death of a loved one, witness to a

trauma, natural disaster, intense damage to property or people. The things people have a hard time talking about, which is exactly why activists are so remarkable.

"I will meet people wherever they are comfortable," says Kristi. "I tape my interviews so I can transcribe them, but also so we can interpret them together. It is not just me involved in this

process, the people I am interviewing share the experience."

The research will eventually be shared with the counselling community. She thinks the stories told by the women she interviews will do much to inform her profession. As it stands now, activism is not an alternative for healing that counsellors encourage, but this might change that. That would make Kristi an activist herself, propelled to action by all women who become activists. Right now, though, she just wants to listen.

To take part in Kristi's research, reach her by calling Intersect Youth & Family Services Society at 562-6639.

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent

I \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent to participate in a research study to be undertaken by Kristi Smith, a MEd candidate (Counselling) at the University of Northern British Columbia. I understand that the purpose of the research is to explore the experience from trauma to participation in activist pursuits.

I acknowledge and understand the following:

1. The aims, methods and anticipated benefits of the research have been explained to me as stated in the letter of introduction.
2. At an agreed upon date I will participate in an interview(s) with Kristi Smith. I will permit and understand that the research interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed in full or part. At a later date I will meet with Kristi Smith to discuss possible themes revealed in the transcriptions.
3. My confidentiality will be protected throughout the study. A pseudonym will be used in the transcriptions and description of the resulting themes to ensure my anonymity.
4. Transcriptions will be kept strictly confidential, and available only to Kristi Smith, her advisor and myself. Raw data will be kept in a locked drawer for five years following the retrieval of information and then destroyed.
5. I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study, in such an event, my participation in the study will immediately cease and any information obtained will not be used.

6. I understand that the results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in academic journals. I will be contacted prior to publication and/or presentation of the research, as individual results will not be released without my authorization.
7. I understand that sharing my experiences may result in feelings of pain and distress, therefore at my request a referral will be made to an appropriate counselling agency.
8. I can contact Kristi Smith at (250) 962 7215 or through email at [kpfrancis@shaw.ca](mailto:kpfrancis@shaw.ca) to obtain a copy of the research results. Kristi Smith will be working under the supervision of her faculty advisor, Dr. Dennis Procter, at the University of Northern British Columbia. He too can be reached for inquiries regarding this study at (250) 960-5401 or email: [dprocter@unbc.ca](mailto:dprocter@unbc.ca). Further inquiries, concerns and/or complaints may be directed to the Faculty of Graduate Studies at UNBC at 960-5820.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (printed name), understand the above stated information and voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant      Date      Witness

## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

#### Naming the experience

1. Can you tell me a little about what happened?
2. Prior to this what was life like for you?
3. Prior to this how did you view the world?

#### Mapping the effects

1. How did this experience impact your life (physically/emotionally)?
2. How did your assumptions about the world change?
3. How did this experience influence the way you felt about yourself?
4. How has this experience changed you?
5. How were your relationships with family and friends impacted?
6. Prior to this experience what were your relationships with friends and family like?

#### Development of Activism Participation

1. When did you become involved in (form of activism)?
2. How is it that you came to be involved?
3. What factors motivated your involvement?
4. What is your role in this form of activism?
5. How have your assumptions about the world changed?
6. What sort of meaning of life have you derived from this participation?

## Appendix E

Debriefing the Interview

## Looking back

1. In retelling your story with me have you come to view yourself differently?
2. In what ways, if any, has our conversation impacted your life?

## Or

1. What is it like for you to look at the movement from the experience to your role as an activist?
2. What sort of things have you learned about yourself?
3. Have your relationships with friends and family changed since becoming involved in this form of activism? If yes, in what ways?