Connection, Community, And Belonging:
Early Relationship Experiences In The Lives Of Women with A History Of
Sexual Exploitation

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B. Sc., University of Northern British Columbia, 2002

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment Of

The Requirements For The Degree Of

Master of Science

in

Psychology

The University of Northern British Columbia

June 2008

Canada

Abstract

The early relationship and same sex friendship experiences of women with a history of sexual exploitation were explored using an Interpretive Descriptive Phenomenological approach in order to identify additional risk and vulnerability for exploitation as a result of experiences of disconnection in early relationships. Embedded in Attachment Theory, a series of in-depth interviews with 3 women ranging in age from early 20s to mid 50s examined both early familial relationships and friendship experiences across their lifespans. Results indicated that early relationship experiences contributed to feelings of mistrust, isolation, powerlessness, and issues of identity that acted in concert to create vulnerability for exploitation. Practical implications emerged as the women linked their experiences to deficits in social skills and relational competencies.

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Acknowledgements

It is with deepest gratitude and humility that I offer recognition to those who have

walked this journey with me. For the women who gave so much of themselves in sharing

their stories, it is with the greatest sense of honour that I call you my friends. I would like

to express my deepest appreciation to my friends and family for all they have sacrificed. I

would also like to acknowledge my committee members Dr. Glen Schmidt and Dr.

Lorraine Lavallee for their time and commitment during this process. Finally, words cannot

express the depth of my profound appreciation and respect for Dr. Kyle Matsuba who

through his enduring kindness, patience, faith, and guidance became a teacher in the truest

sense.

Chapter One:
Personal Context

The first date that I had, or a trick we would call them, it was two guys that picked me ... the whole time it was like "oh my god, they're going to get mad, I'm not doing it right" but after that I was like "ooooh I was made for this" and I felt because they were praising me and telling me how good I was, I felt that I could do this, this could work for me and then after that I had the power and I was beautiful and men wanted me and that's what it was all about. I felt on top of the world. I felt like I belonged.

(Community Against Sexual Exploitation of Youth,
[CASEY] 2006b)

As a Master's student, I come into this research with a history of working around the issues of sexual exploitation in my community for the past 6 years. Sexual exploitation, defined as *"the act of coercing, luring or engaging a child, under the age of 18, into a sexual act, and involvement in the sex trade or pornography, with or without the child's consent, in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, food, protection or other necessities"* (McCreary Youth Foundation, 2004), was once thought to be largely an urban phenomenon and the majority of prevention and intervention efforts targeted urban centres with a visible presence of sexually exploited youth (McCreary Centre Society, 1999). As our understanding and awareness of sexual exploitation has grown, rural communities and smaller towns have had greater access to resources and information, and it has become evident that the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth takes place in both rural and urban communities (Carter & Walton, 2000). At first glance it may seem that the experiences of locally exploited children and youth are disconnected from our own, but strong links to the drug trade and organized crime, as well as long term health impacts have implications for us all.

Upon completion of my undergraduate degree, my early working experiences were tied to community development and building capacity regionally to respond to sexual exploitation. Over the last 6 years these experiences have led me into a deeper contextual understanding of risk, recovery and lifelong implications for youth engaging in survival sex. I have come to see that the exchange of sexual acts in order to secure basic needs is an act of survival and resistance. For many of these children, street level exploitation is a way of exerting some control over what is happening to them and becomes an act of self-determination. I believe that the problem lies not in the youth themselves, but in larger systemic factors that force them into a place of survival where their bodies become a commodity and their resistance efforts criminalized, while those who exploit them go largely unidentified and move through our communities with impunity.

The desire to explore early parental relationships and same-sex friendship histories of women with a history of exploitation arose out of personal experiences in working with sexually exploited youth. In the course of recent work on a year long project exploring peer-based programming (CASEY, 2006a), I had several significant discussions about friendships, relationships, and intimacy both one-on-one and in group settings. My desire to explore their experiences of same-sex friendships originated out of a conversation that emerged one day as the work was unfolding. I had been struggling to understand a pattern that seemed to be a recurring issue inside of our work together. It seemed like, as a group and as individuals, we were continually coming up against disclosure and withdrawal. It usually followed a consistent pattern wherein one of the women would share something of significance about her experiences, past or current, and the sense would be one of profound personal connection and openness. Within a very short period, at times mere hours, there

would then be conflict and what seemed to be active attempts to create distance between themselves and other members of the group.

A moment of clarity occurred one day during discussion about the importance of finding balance between life and work. Two members of the research group were struggling with some significant life challenges and disclosed concern over perceived vulnerability for addictions relapse. As a result of the group's concern for the two women, we felt it necessary to change the heaviness everyone was feeling and decided to spend the afternoon doing something fun. As we were sprawled out at one of their homes eating, talking, and doing manicures and pedicures one of the group members said "I have never done this before". I thought she was talking about the manicures and pedicures but quickly found out that she was referring to spending the afternoon with women talking and laughing. It was quickly revealed that this was a shared experience by all of the young women in the room (5 in total). They shared with me, and each other, that for them other women were seen as untrustworthy or as competition and that they did not build relationships with them. In that moment all of the struggles around disclosure and distance took on new meaning and I had the sense that it was a moment of significance that was worthy of deeper dialogue.

Chapter Two:

Overview of the Literature

Sexual Exploitation

In an overview of Canadian literature and programming initiatives regarding trafficking of persons and sexual exploitation several factors leading to increased vulnerability for exploitation were consistently found. Sexually exploited and trafficked youth tend to come from families with histories of inter-familial violence and have experienced societal rejection, stigmatization, and marginalization. These children have also been found to have issues with low self-esteem and addictions, are runaways or "throwaways," and have turned to trading sex acts as a means of survival, freedom, and self determination (see Jiwani & Brown, 1999 for a complete review). In the report *Our Kids Too: Sexually Exploited Youth in British Columbia* (McCreary Centre Society, 1999), the health status and risk behaviors of sexually exploited youth (SEY) were compared to those of street-involved youth and youth in school. Overall, the study stated the key findings as follows:

- Most sexually exploited youth are female.

- 80% had been in government care.

- 90% had been physically and/or sexually abused.

- Nearly all smoked cigarettes with approximately 40% smoking before they were 9 years old.

- A majority were frequent users of alcohol, marijuana, and other illegal drugs.

- Nearly 80% were thirteen years old or less when they first had sexual intercourse and two-thirds had 6 or more partners.

- The average age of entry into the sex trade was 13 years old.

- Over half had been pregnant.

- Nearly half tried to commit suicide in the previous year. (McCreary Centre

  Society, 1999, p. 6)

The identification of a single definitive pathway that leads children to become

sexually exploited remains elusive and it is generally accepted that it is the intersection of

several factors that create vulnerability (Carter & Walton, 2000; Dalla, 2003; Jiwani &

Brown, 1999; Walker, 2002). For many youth the pathway into exploitation is a slow

process of assimilation beginning with association with high risk peers, peripheral activities

such as spotting (a safety measure wherein a person accompanies another who is engaging

in survival sex work in order to record license plate numbers and descriptions of John's

cars), and selling or moving drugs. The continued exposure over time results in youth

becoming part of a subculture with its own hierarchy and rules and the creation of an

environment wherein the youths' wariness and resistance is gradually eroded and

exploitation and its related activities are normalized (L. Keefe, personal communication,

2004[1]).

Sexual exploitation is often spoken about in the context of broader issues such as

poverty, hunger, addictions, and homelessness. While systemic issues may force children

into situations of needing to use their bodies as survival tools, this must act in concert with

individual factors or we would see all children of similar backgrounds engaging in survival

sex and we do not. Early experiences of disconnection from family, mainstream peers, and

community have consistently been found in the lived histories of children vulnerable to

exploitation (Carter & Walton, 2000; McCreary Centre Society, 1999), and social isolation

has been found to create risk and vulnerability for initial exploitation and entrenchment (Assistant Deputy Minster's Committee on Prostitution, 2000; Capital Regional District, 1997). Despite the significance of social disconnection it appears that little is known about the youths' early relationship experiences and the means through which disconnection creates vulnerability. It may be that their earliest experiences of relationships and the worldviews they build based upon them create vulnerability for exploitation in ways we do not currently understand. In other words, vulnerability may not lie simply in personal histories of trauma and the presence of multiple risk factors, but in how those experiences shape their view of the world and their place in it that enables exploitation to occur.

In previous research conducted locally, it was found that sexually exploited youth consistently spoke of finding a sense of community and connection that was noticeably absent in their lives and they indicated that the activities associated with exploitation (i.e. addictions, generation of resources, and securing shelter, food or other necessities of life), this often became secondary to the relationships they built (CASEY, 2006b). When these relationships were examined more closely however, they were not without their contradictions. Peers were often spoken about as "family" but closer scrutiny revealed that the desires to have relationships and to feel connected to others conflicted with lived experiences of violence, betrayal, and manipulation that led youth to believe that maintaining their own safety meant that they could not fully trust anyone (Youth, personal communication, 2004[2]). This conflict seems to place youth in difficult and challenging circumstances as the path to stabilization and healing is often linked to self disclosure, trust, and non-sexual intimacy – the very things they seem to struggle with the most (S. Wheeler, personal communication, May 2006[3]).

As previously stated, this work originated out of research involving women with a history of sexual exploitation. As we spoke of their experiences of friendship, particularly with other women, they shared that building relationships with each other in the research project was a new experience for them that felt unfamiliar and uncertain and that this had been the case for them for as long as they could remember. While we did not delve into those experiences in a comprehensive way during that project, in the process of speaking about their challenges in building relationships with one another in the context of the influence they were having on the project, the women connected their current challenges to their lifelong experiences of relationships with women.

My sense was that the absence of same-sex friendships would contain significant information that, to my knowledge, had remained unexplored in the literature on sexually exploited youth. In order to begin to understand the absence of friendships with other women and how this may have contributed to vulnerability for exploitation this research explored the following four key areas; early familial relationships, same-sex friendship histories, how the women in this study came to view those experiences over the course of their lives, and their current friendship experiences with women including the quality of those relationships and any ongoing challenges. As the women had connected their experiences to their early relationships in their families, attachment theory was used as a theoretical underpinning for this work.

Attachment Theory

According to Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1978 as cited in Ainsworth, 1989), each of us carries with us a way of engaging with and relating to others that is the result of our earliest relationship experiences. Spoken of as coherent patterns of behavior, attachment

styles are based on early experiences that influence our sense of whether or not we can rely on primary caregivers for safety and security. In turn, this sense of security influences how children engage in the world as their sense of safety and security enables them to tolerate longer periods of separation with less distress. The result is ever-increasing independence and autonomy as children develop thereby supporting their capacity to explore the world and to establish connections with a variety of people (Ainsworth, 1989).

Early experiences of attachment have been linked to four patterns of social relations later in life based on dimensions of dependence and avoidance. Bartholomew (1990) developed a 4-group model distinguishing between those who seek out relationships and intimacy and those who avoid it, thus delineating four possible styles of attachment; one secure and three insecure (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Those identified as having a *Secure Attachment* style (low in dependence and low in avoidance) have received warm and responsive parenting that supported the development of positive evaluations of both themselves and others and are typically high in self-esteem and display the absence of serious interpersonal problems (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD, 2006). Those displaying a *Preoccupied Attachment* style (high in dependence low in avoidance), have experienced parenting that lacked consistency and was insensitive to the needs of the child while the child also receives messages of parental devotion. Often these children come to believe that the lack of love they receive from a caregiver results from their own unworthiness. Their feelings of profound unworthiness persist and they often develop an overwhelming need for the approval of others (Bartholomew, 1990). Preoccupied children have a tendency towards limited exploration of unfamiliar environments and increased preoccupation with personal suffering. They may

be frustrated easily and may also display impulsivity, high levels of anxiety, and may see themselves as helpless, unable to cope with distress, and unworthy (NICHD, 2006).

Those children classified as having a *Fearful Attachment* style (high in dependence and high in avoidance) are often characterized by a negative view of themselves and others. They demonstrate a desire for social contact and relationships with others, but also display a profound fear of rejection and a persistent distrust of others. They often display hypersensitivity to social approval and actively avoid both close relationships and social situations in an attempt to control their vulnerability for rejection (Bartholomew, 1990). Those children classified as having avoidant or fearful attachment organizations have learned to repress emotional signals and have a tendency to inhibit their emotions, particularly those that are negative, and over time come to avoid situations that are emotionally charged. The result may be that they minimize their feelings and negative emotions such as anger and distress are inappropriately redirected resulting in the creation of idealized beliefs about others and difficulty in controlling their anger. They are likely to encounter difficulties in social situations and building friendships based on their tendency for both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems (NICHD, 2006).

The final category, *Dismissing Attachment* style (low in dependence high in avoidance), is found in children who have learned to maintain their positive view of themselves through creating distance between themselves and others. These children have come to believe that relationships are not important and that independence is of greater value. They passively avoid relationships and focus heavily on work, hobbies and being able to do it on their own (Bartholomew, 1990). Children classified as having dismissive patterns of attachment (the least known group) do not display any organized attachment

strategies and are thought to be at greatest risk for ongoing psychopathology, such as increased levels of aggression, externalizing disorders, and conduct disorders (NICHD, 2006).

When a child feels that an attachment figure will respond during times of distress a sense of security results that supports the development of a view of the world as stable, predictable, and coherent contributing significantly to long term psychological and physical well-being. The lack of a sense of security, in contrast, limits the exploration and active engagement with the world that is needed to facilitate learning and development of higher level cognitive processes (Mikulincer et al., 1993; Mikulincer et al., 2003). The absence of a secure attachment figure has also been found to affect the ability to form beliefs about the self that are accurate and healthy (Griffith, 2004).

The importance of Attachment Theory to my work lies in the contributions to our understanding of how early relationship experiences influence our way of engaging with and building relationships with others. Evidence has been found linking children's socio-emotional development to early relationship experiences, supporting that the prosocial-empathic orientation and relational competence required for positive peer relations, peer group acceptance, and the ability to form friendships is rooted in early parent-child connectedness (Clark & Ladd, 2000).

Over the long term our attachment styles influence our behavior and social interactions on several levels as it is through attachment relationships as children that we build internal representations of ourselves and others that guide our social interactions and influence the appraisal and assimilation of new experiences (Ainsworth, 1989). Termed *working models,* Bowlby theorized that these internal representations take on ever-

increasing developmental importance as they result in general styles of social interaction that become stable over time (Bartholomew, 1990). The concept of working models was a point of interest in the initial development stages of this work as it was thought that it would be of relevance as we endeavored to begin to identify the process through which the early relationship experiences of these women have contributed to vulnerability for exploitation as tied to their understanding of the world around them.

Research has demonstrated that the working models developed by those children whose early experiences have lead to the formation of insecure attachment styles are likely to lead to ongoing developmental challenges that persist into adulthood and impede the formation of relationships across the lifespan (Allen, Aber, & Leadbeater, 1990; Hartup, 1996). Insecure attachment styles have been found to influence cognitive, sociomoral, and emotional development. Jacobsen, Edelstein, and Hofmann (1994) found evidence to support that children with secure attachment organizations scored significantly higher on tests examining concrete, formal operational, and deductive reasoning in adolescence, leading them to conclude that insecurity and anxiety interfered with the ability of insecurely attached children to engage in formal reasoning, which impeded their ability to progress through normative transitions in social interactions.

When relationships cannot be formed a person's relationship narratives are not given the opportunity or experience required to evolve, and their perceptions of themselves and others in relationships cannot deepen in complexity (Hauser & Greene, 1987, in Waldinger et al., 2002). Those who are unable to build friendships and positive affiliative bonds may also be limited in their understanding of themselves and others in a relational context (Griffith, 2004). Gilligan (1990) theorizes that for female adolescents, identity

formation is relational in that young women develop a sense of themselves through their relationships with others. She has found that if the relational contexts of the lives of young women do not support them to build relationships based on mutual empathy and empowerment, then girls may build conceptualizations of themselves that are distorted and restricted as their ability to act as themselves inside of those relationships is limited and incapable of supporting the development of a sense of worthiness. Frequently the result is a sense of disconnection and loneliness as young women come to see that there is something about themselves that leads to their exclusion, and that they are excluded because of who they are (Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991).

While the attachment literature provides an understanding of the importance of early relationship experiences and the affects of the inability to build supportive relationships, this work is focused on the role of same-sex friendships. As documented previously, children who are unable to form and maintain relationships, have been found to be at significant risk for the development of maladaptive coping and emotion regulation strategies that persist over time and can result in depression, conduct problems, psychopathology and social anxiety (Allen & Land, 1999; Shorey & Snyder, 2006). More specifically, research has shown that adolescent girls who are unable to build positive peer relationships, are at risk for engaging in externalizing behaviors to regulate their emotions including drug use and sexualized behavior (Golder, Rogers-Gillmore, Spieker, & Morrison, 2005). These research findings may be of significance to this work as the women involved in the prior CASEY research connected both their drug use and early initiation of sexual behaviors to subsequent experiences of formalized exploitation (CASEY, 2006). In my work, the intention was to understand how the absence of friendships affected the lives

of the women included in the study. To do this, the theoretical work required a general understanding of the importance of friendships overall and the means through which they support positive adjustment.

Friendships

Although the absence of friendships with other women stood out as important in the lives of the youth participating in the CASEY work, it was not until the literature was explored that the implications of this absence began to emerge. Friendships differ from relationships with parents in that they offer the opportunity for children to engage as equals in the world around them and are a critical component in the development of emotion appraisal and regulation strategies that enable the inhibition or expression of emotion in appropriate ways, offering the opportunity for children to develop a sense of themselves in the world through their connectedness to others. It is in friendships that children learn how to create a social support system that extends beyond their primary caregivers and those who can develop and maintain relationships demonstrate increased capacity for intimacy, empathy, and perspective taking leading to overall development of social skills needed for the formation and maintenance of supportive relationships across the lifespan (von Salisch, 2001).

Friendships are central experiences that support the development of relational competence. It is within the context of our relationships that we develop effective social behaviors that shape self-esteem and our perceptions and beliefs about ourselves as competent in our relationships with others (Engels et al., 2001). Relational competencies are thought to embody the social, emotional, and cognitive skills and behaviors children

need to adapt and succeed in society and are, in essence, the building blocks that lead to resiliency (Rutter, as cited in Howard et al., 1999).

According to Bernard (as cited in DeMar, 1997) social and relational competencies support positive adjustment through the provision of a sense of identity, the ability to act independently, and the opportunity to exert control over our environments. Those children who exhibit relational competencies are found to be more able to adapt and function effectively in society and are able to build the social networks that promote positive adjustment, while those who are not, are found to be at risk for maladjustment (Kuperminc & Allen, 2001).

Capacity for building relationships takes on greater importance during adolescence as children become increasingly independent and autonomous and their relationship needs are shifted to peers (see Allen & Land, 1999 for a complete review). This can be a difficult time of transition for some children as relationships deepen in complexity and begin to require greater levels of social competency and skills such as intimacy, conflict resolution, and alliance (Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001). Research has demonstrated that attachment styles become increasingly salient as children progress into early and mid-adolescence as their relationships begin to require greater capacity for engaging with others. Engels et al. (2001) examined the effects of parental attachment on the development of relational competence, emotional adjustment, and social skills in childhood and as children moved into adolescence. Their research found evidence supporting that attachment style exerted greater influence over the relational competencies of those in middle adolescence than those in early adolescence and was significantly related to both frequency of performing social skills, experiences of social anxiety, and perceived relational

competence. This may be significant in our understanding of vulnerability for exploitation as we begin to see evidence of behavioral risk indicators in late childhood and early adolescence, which may be connected to strategies for emotion regulation as insecure attachment styles in adolescent women have been found to contribute significantly to engagement in externalizing and risk behaviors to regulate emotions, particularly for those with low self-esteem and experiences of psychological distress (Golder et al., 2005).

Friendships and positive peer relationships, characterized by intimacy, security, trust, and instrumental aid and norm teaching have been demonstrated to act as buffers for depression, social anxiety, and risk behavior (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998, in Rubin et al., 2004). However, in order for relationships to promote adjustment they must be relationships with positive qualities (Criss et al., 2003; Nangle et al., 2003; Rubin et al., 2004; Wade & Brannigan, 1998). The mere presence of peer networks alone does not offer the same protection as close friendships. Although connection to peers is important for psychological adjustment, research has indicated the significance of peer relationships lies in the provision of greater opportunities to form dyadic friendship relationships, which are key to positive adjustment (Nangle et al., 2003). La Greca and Harrison (2005) examined multiple levels of interpersonal functioning as predictors of depression and social anxiety and their results indicated that peer crowd affiliation offered only limited protection against depressive symptoms, whereas negative qualities in best friend relationships predicted high levels of social anxiety and depression, indicating greater importance of dyadic relationships in regards to psychological health and adjustment (La Greca & Harrison, 2005).

In terms of the relevance to this work, Prinstein and La Greca (2004) found evidence linking the inability of girls to build peer-based relationships in childhood to risk behaviors in adolescence such as cigarette use, heavy episodic drinking, marijuana use, and higher numbers of sexual partners. According to the work of Fergusson and Woodward (2000), the result of early behavioral difficulties for young women may be a developmental trajectory that links early conduct problems with risk taking, choice of peers, early sexual activity, and maladjustment in school indicating that that both risk taking and problem behavior build upon one another creating psychosocial difficulties in later adolescence. This is of particular interest to my work as the youth involved in the previous CASEY research linked progressive stages of risk taking behavior to increased vulnerability for exploitation based on exposure to peer groups engaging in risk behavior and a process of desensitization wherein risky behaviors were normalized (CASEY, 2006).

As stated previously, not all children displaying the presence of risk factors become sexually exploited. We know from previous research work that young Aboriginal women are at greater risk in our community (CASEY, 2006; McCreary Centre Society, 1999), and that we often find young men exploited for their capacity for violence as they are recruited by representatives of local organized crime factions as enforcers or drug debt collectors (L. Keefe, personal communication, November, 2007). This research strives to illuminate some additional factors that contribute to increased risk for exploitation and as such considered the effect of attachment style on sexual behavior.

Research has demonstrated that attachment organizations differentially influence sexual behavior in adolescents and young adults (Cassidy, 2000; Feeney et al., 2000). Schachner and Shaver (2004) found that those individuals scoring high on the avoidance

dimension had sex for reasons not relating to intimacy such as fitting in with a social group, peer pressure, and elevation of social status. Anxiously attached people were found to engage in sexual behavior in order to meet needs for security and intimacy and for affirmation or coping with difficult circumstances. Those individuals classified as fearful (high in both avoidance and anxiety) were found to have sex to decrease sense of insecurity in relationships - such as fear that partners would leave them if they did not have sex, and worrying that their partners would not want them if they did not have sex.

In terms of how attachment style and risk behavior may contribute to exploitation, one study stood out as being of particular interest. Mezzich et al., (1999) examined the combined influence of low socioeconomic status, disturbed parent-daughter relationship, antisocial behavior, and early physical development in a sample of adolescent females. Their findings indicated that while the intersection of all factors increased risk for sexual engagement with older male partners, there was a greater likelihood of engagement with older males found in those identifying higher amounts of negative interactions with parents. In their analysis of motivation, it appeared that some of the young women may have viewed their relationships as *instrumental* as opposed to intimate and that some of the young women may have been using their sexual relationships as a strategy to meet other needs in their lives such as desire for autonomy, avoiding familial conflict, the need for protection, and associating emotional warmth and closeness with sexual contact.

Although not necessarily a warning sign for each individual, engagement in a sexual relationship with an older male partner has been frequently identified as a recruitment strategy used for procuring youth and grooming them for exploitation (L. Keefe, personal communication 2004). In their gendered analysis of sex work, Carter and

Walton (2000) found that the women they interviewed became involved in sex work during adolescence through their relationships with older men that shifted from romantic involvement to pimping situations through violence and coercion, indicating that the differentiation between pimp and boyfriend can be almost nonexistent. Of the women involved in the study, a significant number of them spoke of a sense of isolation and the loss of self-esteem prior to entering the sex trade. They attributed the isolation and low self-esteem to family histories of violence and poor experiences of government and foster system care. Their findings lend support to the idea that the survival needs met through exploitation go beyond food, shelter, and clothing as the exploitation itself becomes a means of satisfying needs for affiliation and social acceptance not found elsewhere.

In a study establishing a more direct connection between the roles of relationships and disconnection to increased vulnerability for sexual exploitation, Dalla (2003) found that the relationships of women involved in sex work were characterized by violence, abandonment, abuse, lack of warmth or bonding, addictions, and distrust, with many of the women being unable to recall a sense of attachment or closeness with anyone. In exploring the women's relationships with parents or parental figures, partners and children, Dalla (2003) found that their relationships lacked affection, were often dangerous and deceitful, filled with chaos and frequently contained elements of substance abuse, violence, and neglect. Their relationships with their male partners were often violent and described as lacking emotion and based on sex and drugs. Additionally, it appeared that the women did not seem to engage in deliberate decision making about who to have intimate relationships with or how the relationships would unfold, which may indicate a moving in and out of relationships based upon needs other than intimacy or affiliation.

While the above mentioned research may have contributed some increased understanding of sexual behaviors and motivations based on attachment style, for the purposes of exploring the relationships of women with a history of sexual exploitation, the influence of sexual abuse must also be considered. With upwards of 88% of sexually exploited youth disclosing histories of sexual abuse (McCreary Centre Society, 1999), it may be that their experiences of sexual abuse act in concert with other factors present in their early lives resulting in increased vulnerability for sexual exploitation.

In an examination of how experiences of sexual abuse affect the development of friendships and romantic relationships, Feiring, Rosenthal, and Taska (2000) demonstrated that adolescents with histories of abuse who indicated greater stigmatization – high levels of self-blame and shame - displayed a relational pattern of decreased levels of interpersonal intimacy and greater reliance on other-sex peers for support. The adolescents in their sample measuring high in stigmatization, as displayed in self-blame and shame, were found to feel less capable of finding peer acceptance and less able to build close friendships. The authors concluded that experiences of abuse and subsequent stigmatization may lead adolescents to come to see themselves as more competent in relationships as a sexual partner than building non-sexual interpersonal intimacy like that required in friendships thus creating vulnerability for relationships based on sexual attraction, as opposed to trust, intimacy, and reciprocity. While reliance upon cross-sex peers for relational supports and affiliation is not a risk factor for exploitation, research has demonstrated that it is in same-sex friendships that young adolescent women in particular find greater prosocial support and companionship, and the absence of same-sex friendships can result in self-perceived relational incompetence (Kuttler, LaGreca, & Prinstein, 1999).

Additional risk factors for exploitation may be found in the strategies young women develop to navigate through abusive experiences. Research has found that adolescent females may develop negative coping mechanisms to deal with sexual victimization as children that lead to behaving in sexually provocative ways in an attempt to control social situations (Peters, 2001; Stock et al., 1997), and that young girls may develop self-preservation behaviors that include delinquency, exploitation, and running away in order to escape or act out against abusive home lives (Herrera and McCloskey, 2001).

Overall, the combination of my personal experiences of working with sexually exploited youth as well as the literature included in this review indicated that important contributions to prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts would be found in exploring both their early experiences of familial relationships and same-sex friendships.

Chapter Three:

Method

Sample and Procedures

As outlined previously, participants selected for inclusion in this research came out of a group of youth and women who have been connected to CASEY, our local community action team addressing sexual exploitation. For the purpose of this research, 3 women - Lane, Fern and Starr (not their real names) - were identified who captured a range of experiences and diversity. I have worked with each of them extensively over the last two years in relation to research projects exploring the connection between homelessness and exploitation as well as the development of peer-based programming (C.A.S.E.Y., 2006a). We have worked collaboratively on several projects and have presented the work locally, provincially, and nationally. The three participants were selected based upon their ability to speak about and reflect on their experiences with insight and without risk of significant trauma. As well, each of them represents a different form of exploitation and are of significantly differing ages thereby ensuring a wide range of experiences captured in a small sample and they are all connected into a range of formal and informal support networks thus ensuring that they have access to support people if the interviews bring up difficult and challenging memories or emotions. The three women capture a lifetime of experiences with the youngest participant in her early 20s and the eldest in her 50s. All of the women have spent a number of years living in Prince George, with one woman experiencing exploitation in this community and two others being exploited in larger urban centres. The participants selected have all had relationships with one another for the past 4 years. Two of the women are professionals in the community and the third is a single parent currently planning to attend college or university.

A series of three interviews were conducted with three participants over the course of 6 months with each subsequent interview building upon the previous. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 – 2 hours. Each of the interviews had specific areas of discussion with time allocated for exploration and clarification of information shared in the previous interviews. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured with a focus on having the dialogue unfold as naturally as possible (see Appendix A for interview questions).

As the intention of this work was to reach some point of insight or understanding of the experiences of the women as they had come to see them, the use of a Phenomenological approach made sense. With its roots in German philosophy, phenomenology is at its core about the lived experiences of individuals as rooted in their subjective understanding of the world around them. Phenomenology moves away from reality as rooted in objective, external experiences into reality as actively constructed and changed by the individuals inside of it (Laverty, 2003). The meaning of an experience emerges out of how the story is told and shared by the individual and it is through the process of dialogue and reflection that meaning emerges (Rossman & Ralis, 2003). There is a great deal of variability within phenomenological research methods based on underlying philosophical assumptions and approaches advocated by diverse schools of thought, but commonalities do exist. Phenomenology contains within it a variety of methods that hold central the subjective lived experience (Creswell, 1998) while maintaining an open mind, and employing an iterative cycle of analysis remains consistent (Akerlind, 2005).

As qualitative methodologies continue to evolve and change, the result has been the emergence of meta-paradigms with crossover and blending that can result in blurred and unclear methodological divisions (Hill-Bailey, 1997). While this work falls closer in

alignment with the work of Moustakas (1990, 1994) in terms of generation and analysis of data (in Priest, 2002), the process unfolds similarly to that found in Descriptive and Interpretive Phenomenology in that the intention is to follow a process to identify themes and patterns of a phenomenon in order to construct a meaningful and coherent account of shared realities that have practical implications (Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). The work bridges various areas of phenomenology in both process and underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions and like many other studies it does not strictly adhere to one methodological approach and tends to overlap with other methodologies as the result of my own learning process and the practical decisions one is required to make during the research process (Giorgi, 2006). That being said, this work falls most closely in alignment with a framework of Interpretive Descriptive or Applied Phenomenology as defined by both the underlying intention and process of conducting the research (Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004; van Manen, 2002). Although a full review is beyond the scope of this work, some central elements must be outlined in order to orient the reader to the underlying approach used to guide the research process.

Applied Phenomenology is most frequently used in cases where the practitioner is focused on applicability to practice rather than dialogue regarding underlying philosophical orientations and has been found to have utility by those working in the human sciences (van Manen, 2002). Interpretive Descriptive Phenomenology evolved out of the desire to develop Phenomenological methodologies that had the capacity to respond to specific applied contexts that could incorporate some explanatory elements and would have implications for practice. Interpretive Descriptive Phenomenology views all human experience as contextually driven and constructed but at the same time acknowledges that

some realities are shared. The distinction is found in the use of small samples of particular clinical interest to explore subjective perceptions of experience for shared patterns and themes that will serve to inform practical and clinical understanding (Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham, & O'Flynn Magee, 2004).

Although not necessarily required to inform the reader about the process of the work, it is of personal importance to clarify my own orientation to Phenomenology, in particular as it relates to claims of truth and knowing as it offers some parameters for interpretation. Personally, my philosophy of research and the generation of knowledge and claims to knowing are aligned most closely with Hermeneutic Phenomenology with regard to its stance of the impossibility of separation of individual from experience as we cannot bracket all of the possible influences that shape our interpretations. As such, ontologically all interaction is interpretation and truth and absolute knowing is not possible as reality is constructed and knowledge reflects our best understanding of something and cannot be a claim to ultimate truth or reality (Laverty, 2003). Any definitions and understandings of experiences are viewed as interpretations influenced by and contained within the lived context and all realities are multiple (Moules, 2002).

The intention was to reach a point of understanding of the meaning of the experiences the women shared and not to define any meaning as the truth and any statements regarding the content are co-constructed and open to reinterpretation and reconstruction depending upon the interpreter (Hill-Bailey, 1997). It is not intended to be a statement of truth or an absolute account of the experiences of the women involved as the processes we engaged in created what we came to understand. Measures were taken to

ensure that the interpretation was trustworthy and credible, but it remains a subjective

interpretation.

Central to the use of any phenomenological approach is the process of bracketing,

or the suspension of judgment, in order to attempt to see phenomena more clearly with an

open mind and reduced biases or pre-set conceptualizations (Giorgi, 1997). This requires

the researcher to engage in self-reflective processes that will assist in calling forward the

experiences and assumptions that may influence interpretation (Laverty, 2003; Rossman &

Ralis, 2003). Some phenomenologists posit that bracketing cannot be achieved as

originally intended as all knowledge is socially constructed and contextually situated and

we cannot set aside their influence (see Priest, 2002). As such, for the purposes of this

work, bracketing was used as a process and tool intended to bring into awareness how my

own experiences affected the construction of knowledge (Rolls, & Relf, 2006). Viewing

bracketing from this vantage point supports the move away from speaking of prior

knowledge and experience as the creators of bias, into consideration for experiences that

contribute to shared meaning (Conroy, 2003). As this work involved learning and

development on my part as a researcher, the bracketing process was done throughout and

was a component of the research as my own previously unidentified conceptualizations and

biases related to areas we were exploring emerged and were challenged as the process

unfolded.

It cannot be said that all assumptions and personally held values were made clear

though the process; however efforts were made to ensure credibility and trustworthiness

during the analysis and interpretation processes. In particular, clearly defined stages of

interviewing, analysis, and interpretation were used (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Easton,

McComish, & Greenberg, 2000; Giorgi, 1997; Maggs-Rapport, 2001; Thorne, Reimer-

Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). Methodological rigor was ensured through the use of

the criteria outlined by Sandelowski (1986). Credibility contends that rigor can be found if

recognition of the experience under study is achieved when reading of the study's findings

produces a generalized sense of the issue under examination and those who have had the

experience can recognize it as their own. Fittingness is said to arise when the findings of

the study fit the data and the findings have relevance to the situation under study.

Auditability is achieved when decision-making processes can be shown to be systematic

and rationale is easily followed, enabling readers to arrive at either the same or

significantly similar conclusions or interpretations. Finally, confirmability speaks to the

neutrality of the study's findings as demonstrated through meeting the aforementioned

criteria (as cited in de Witt & Ploeg, 2006).

More specifically, 5 central questions guided meaning making throughout the

analysis process that fall in alignment with the concept of validity, as defined by

Polkinghorn (1989), in reference to the accuracy, groundedness, and supportability of

interpretations. The first layer of questioning refers to accuracy; has the content of the

subject's descriptions been influenced by the researcher to the extent that they no longer

accurately reflect the subject's experiences? The second layer of questioning examines the

accuracy of oral information captured in the transcription process. The third examines

alternate conclusions than those generated by the researcher and the exploration of those

alternatives. The fourth examines the ability of the structural (in this case thematic)

descriptions to link and connection directly to the original experiences. The fifth and final

question asks if the structural description arrived at can hold across situations (see Creswell, 1998, p. 208).

For the first layer of questioning, influence of the researcher, it is inevitable that the research process will influence the information shared. However, each of the transcripts was reviewed by my supervisor, the women participating and myself prior to subsequent interviews. In those times when it appeared as though interviewing process influenced the content, time was spent revisiting the previous content to ensure accuracy.

Accuracy of transcription was achieved through verbatim transcription and significant efforts were invested in ensuring their quality. Any information removed from the transcripts during the stripping process did not affect content as it referred only to information that could create risk for identification and not statements of meaning.

The third level of questioning, alternate interpretation, was ensured through dialogue with my research supervisor and his embeddedness in the content of the interviews alongside myself. He frequently challenged me to examine alternate conceptualizations and perspectives.

The fourth level of validity was achieved through ensuring that the themes that emerged were directly connected to the content of the interviews and not previous experience of working with sexually exploited youth or these particular women. This was done through the extensive use of direct quotes in constructing the themes and results section that follows. This ensured transparency and credibility through sharing the process and stages of interpretation.

The fifth and final layer, the ability of structural descriptions to transcend situations, was achieved by looking back into the individual layers of the women's stories to see if the

thematic descriptions could offer insight and adequately capture their early experiences. In other words, did the themes adequately speak to their experiences across their lifespan.

As outlined previously, this research has its roots in an earlier project that both the participants and researcher were involved in. As such, the first interviews began by revisiting that project and the conversation that led to the development of this thesis topic. Each participant was given a brief overview of where the idea for this research began and was asked to recall the particular conversation that inspired this work. They were then asked to share what their own experiences had been in relation to that conversation. The interviews then moved into exploring their early experiences of relationships and friendships, how they defined friendship, and significant experiences of friendships with women across their lifespan.

Interviews were conducted both in the homes of the participants and the researcher, with accessibility of child care as the determining factor for where the interviews were held. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and each participant was provided with a transcript of their previous interview for review prior to subsequent interviews. Prior to each interview the transcripts of previous interviews were read to identify areas requiring follow-up and clarification and to reconnect to their experiences. The second and third interviews each began with the opportunity for participants to speak about their experience of previous interviews and any insights or reflections they may have had. Additional clarification was needed for one of the participants following the third interview. Follow-up questions were sent to her via email and she responded with a written submission (see Appendix B for questions).

Data gathered during the research included transcripts of the interviews conducted as well as some notes taken during the process to capture my own emerging thoughts, feelings, and understandings. I knew from past experience that journaling was not the most effective way for me to capture information and weekly reflective dialogue sessions with my supervisor contributed an additional depth as we went through several iterative cycles of analysis (Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004).

Transcripts were stripped of identifying characteristics and read initially for statements of significance. Preliminary notes were made on each of the transcripts. Upon completion of all of the interviews, each participant's interviews were read over to begin to identify statements of significance which were then pulled from the transcript. Each statement was cut from the original transcript and placed upon a sheet of poster board with repositionable adhesive in order to allow for movement as themes began to emerge. Once all of the statements that had been cut from the transcripts were placed upon the poster board, they were read over closely and statements that appeared to be connected were grouped together and any statements that were similar and overlapping were removed with the statements that contributed greater understanding remaining on the board.

After the data had been condensed into key statements for each area, portraits were constructed for each participant based upon what appeared to be significant elements of their experiences. The portraits were intended to act as preliminary structures to guide further exploration, comparison and analyses as opposed to comprehensive detailed accounts of their experiences.

Once the analysis began to move from an individual level into the examination of shared similarities and commonalities, statements were moved from individual boards to

boards intended for collective analysis and the process of identifying themes was repeated. Each of the interview participants were colour coded to ensure that statements were attributed to the correct participant once cross-comparison began. During the process of interpretation and creating meaning out of the stories of the women, I relied heavily upon the weekly reflective dialogue sessions with my supervisor to assist me through the process and to challenge my perceptions and interpretations of both the content and process of the interviews.

It became apparent early on in the research that the content of the interviews was emotionally difficult for both the interviewees and myself as the interviewer. In order to support both the bracketing required for a phenomenological study, as well as the debriefing for myself as the researcher, weekly meetings were held with my research supervisor. It became clear early on that it would be important to process through my own experiences of doing the research work in order to support the depth of analysis required. In order to ensure that the intention of the research remained clear we frequently entered into dialogue that contained deeply personal elements of my own experiences as well as my own emerging understanding of the affect of those experiences on my interpretations of the research work that, at times, required my supervisor to enter into an expanded role as he supported me to move through the process as a valuable piece of the research work (Rolls & Relf, 2006).

Along with the debriefing supports provided by my supervisor, I processed my emotional responses through art, poetry, and journaling. There were several moments throughout the research process that were challenging for me and it became clear that I also needed to explore my own processes and issues that were coming up during the work. As

such, I also accessed supports through a friend who is a trained therapist. To be clear on this point, the dialogue we engaged in centered on my responses to the work and not the content of the stories the women shared.

Chapter Four:

Results

As the research began, the women reaffirmed that the sentiments expressed in the original C.A.S.E.Y. project resonated on a deep level with each of them. During the research process it was clear that as foreign as the idea of their experiences had been to me, having a life time of friendships with girls and women that were strong, long lasting, and a central aspect of my life was an experience that was just as foreign to them. There were moments during the interviews that left me with the impression that they could not understand my interest in their friendships. The process was a challenging one for each of us in unique ways as it caused them to reframe some of their own beliefs and experiences and it caused me as a researcher to question my own competency and skill to work within such a personal space with each of the women. For purposes of providing a contextual understanding of how the interview series began an excerpt from one of the initial interviews is provided below:

> *As I had said while we were going over the consent form, my interest in doing this research came out of the conversation that we had that day at Lane's house and how the women in the room had identified that they hadn't had friendships with other women because they were competition and couldn't be trusted. So the place I would like us to begin is with you just telling me about some of your own experiences around that.*

While the three women included in this work are unique in many ways, there were also several similarities and commonalities that emerged during their interviews. In particular, four central themes emerged; mistrust, isolation, powerlessness, and issues of identity which included self-worth.

Mistrust

As the origins of this research came from a conversation regarding the untrustworthiness of other women, it is not surprising that all three of the women spoke of profound feelings of mistrust. As this was anticipated going into the work, the intention was to explore their experiences in the hopes that some information would emerge that would provide insight as to the factors that lead to the depth of that mistrust. When considering all the information shared during their interviews it appeared that their sense of mistrust was the result of a combination of multiple experiences of abuse, abandonment, and betrayal that culminated in deeply held beliefs about the untrustworthiness of women.

Abuse.

In exploring each woman's history of friendship with other women we touched upon some of their most painful memories as experiences of abuse were interwoven with the stories they shared. While their abuse was frequently spoken of, it will not be explored in any detail during this work out of respect for their privacy. Elements of abuse contained in their stories will be shared only in those cases where the inclusion of some degree of detail is required to illustrate a particularly salient point, and in those cases as little detail as possible will be used. Suffice it to say that the childhoods of the women involved in this study were characterized by violence, multiple forms of abuse, and exposure to familial addictions that caused each of them significant distress and pain that continued to influence their experiences.

Abandonment.

Abandonment was a recurring theme for each of them as they shared their

experiences of difficulties in building sustainable, emotionally satisfying friendships with

women over the course of their lives. Of particular importance in each of their histories was

the perpetration of abuse by both the father/father figures and mother/mother figures in

their lives. The women recalled the relationships with their mothers/mother figures as

lacking in emotional warmth and responsiveness and feeling as though there was an active

withdrawing or unavailability on the part of their mother/mother figures that they

connected to feelings of abandonment.

> *...women in my life leave me. The men stay, men just abuse me, but the women abandon me. Like my Mom, my Grandma was a drunk, growing up we were really close, but she was still a drunk. My Aunt (#1) shipped me off to my Aunt (#2), my Aunt (#2) shipped me back here. (Lane, 1, p.20[4])*

When speaking of their relationships during childhood with their mother/mother

figures from a broader perspective, each of the women spoke of feeling not only that they

were physically and emotionally abandoned but that they also felt as though the

opportunity to be children was taken from them based on both the perpetration of abuse

and the absence, figurative and literal, of their mothers as they were subsequently required

to assume adult-like roles and responsibilities in their households. The women connected

these experiences to feeling as though they were not wanted or that their emotional needs

as children were of little importance.

> *I've known inside my family that I wasn't loved and I didn't belong and I never knew really why and I remember being beaten and really wishing that I was dead or wishing that I'd never been born because why? Why would anybody want this in their lives? (Fern 3, p. 9-10)*

Although abandonment was recurring and appeared to take place on several levels, perhaps the most egregious was found in the stories the women shared of being blamed for, or experiencing the outright denial of, the sexual abuse perpetrated against them. In moments during the interviews when the women were recounting stories of abuse in their childhoods and adolescence it was possible to get the sense that they felt as though what was so obvious and apparent was also dismissed or denied by those around them who were responsible for their care and safety.

> *My Grandma blamed me for my cousin molesting me. (Aunt #1), well (Aunt #2) didn't believe me, and then when I went to court for (Uncle #2) she blamed me. She wrote a testimony about me and was on his side of the courtroom. And (Aunt # 1), when I called the cops on (Uncle #1) and (cousins), she phoned me and asked "why did I do that" and I said "because it's true" and she said "where was I?" And I said "I don't know. Where were you?" Then she said "okay, are you sure this is what you want to do?" and I said "yeah" and she said "okay" and then that's when she never talked to me but she blamed me with (cousin) too... I was a girl I should have known better... All my Grandma said was "you shouldn't let him touch you".* (Lane, 3, p. 5-6)

In addition to experiences of abandonment that occurred within their families, the women could also recall becoming emotionally attached to other girls/women only to have those relationships end unexpectedly, resulting in the perpetuation of real and perceived abandonment.

> *When we moved into the city I went back to school and I was so excited because I would see XXX again. I remember the first break going out into the playground and running around everywhere trying to find her and then finally finding her, and she was standing in an alcove you know like the brick alcoves and I went running up to her and it was like she didn't know me. I was so excited and I was talking to her and she didn't answer me, it was just one word answers and she wouldn't look at me and it was very clear that she did not want even acknowledge me. I remember walking away just devastated because she didn't...god I haven't thought of this for years...because she didn't even want to know me. It was like everything we had been as friends, or that I thought we had been as friends, simply wasn't for her anymore. So I remember walking away and not knowing what I had done.* (Fern, 1, p. 7)

Betrayal.

Betrayal was a consistent element found in the stories of all of the women. While each of them shared experiences that contained multiple levels of betrayal by family members, it was in their accounts of betrayal by friends that they spoke most candidly about how those experiences shaped their interactions with others. Interestingly, each of the women shared a common experience of feeling betrayed by a friend of significance. The women each framed these experiences as people with whom they thought they had found real friendship for the first time. For each of them, the relationships ended in a particularly painful way that resulted in a future unwillingness or inability to trust other women.

> *I had really thought I had found friendship in somebody and then out of spite, I don't know why, she went and, I had told her about the abuse and everything, I practically lived at her place after that her and her Mom took me in. Maybe that could be part of too, jealousy, but what happened was she went and told everybody at school about the abuse...After that I just wasn't really interested in having friends...because all of my friendships ended in betrayal.* (Starr, 1, p.2)

These experiences resulted in the overall belief that women were untrustworthy and that they would hurt you if given the chance. The experiences of betrayal by these friends served to act as a bridge that lead to broad generalizations to all women as their experiences of being hurt and betrayed by both women in their family as well as their friends resulted in the belief that all women would hurt them.

> *You cannot trust other women to be friends they will take from you. If you let them get too close then you lose. You know? They get close enough to stab you. That's what happens. If you let them in too close, it just means they can get the knife in.* (Fern, 1, p. 18)

Another point of interest that stood out in the women's stories of friendship appeared when they were recalling women in their lives who had been a positive influence or with whom they had created some level of relationship to which they felt emotionally

connected. When sharing accounts of those relationships, they all spoke of those women as family and not as friends and referred to them as mothers, sisters, or daughters. While this may not be terribly unique in the language used to reference relationships that are particularly close or influential in a person's life, the difference for two of these women appeared to be that not only were they using the terms to refer to relationships that were of importance to them, but that the use of the alternate term also indicated a deliberate reframing that seemed to be connected to negative connotations associated with the use of the word friend. One of the women spoke in a particularly moving way about how she cannot even use the word friend to refer to her relationships as the term itself evokes feelings of uncertainty and danger;

> *So my jealousy and my insecurities and my perception of friendship as something that is about betrayal, and all of those pieces that I tie up in that bundle, and maybe that's why I put people in that box of not quite a friend. Because if they were a friend (voice cracking – speaking quietly, very emotional) they'd hurt me... If you're not quite a friend then it's safe (crying).* (Fern,1, p.19)

Isolation

In recounting their relationship histories the women spoke both of their families and peers and regardless of which relationships they were speaking of language emerged that indicated a lack of connectedness and a sense of isolation. Phrases such as not belonging, not being known, not being wanted, being outcasts and not fitting in were present for each of them. At different points in their stories they spoke of profound moments of loneliness as they were often relegated to the place of observer and could not figure out how to get beyond their sense of separation. Each could recall looking in at the friendships of other women and feeling as though they could not get there or have what those girls/women had.

Watching them [the girls at school] always hugging each other and telling each other stuff, sharing clothes and shoes and other stuff. I didn't ever have those kinds of friendships; I wouldn't ever "fit" into their clothes or their cliques. (Lane, Written response)

One of the more intriguing commonalities emerging out of the stories that the women shared was how each of them recalled relationships across their life spans that did not qualify as friendships. When explored in greater depth each of these relationships, which for all intents and purposes, contained the outward appearance of friendship seemed to be discounted for two key reasons; that the relationship had some aspect of utility inside of it and that the women themselves did not feel that the relationships contained elements of what a real friendship would look like.

All of them could recall relationships with women where they felt "used" or taken advantage of, as well as those where they were the ones using or taking advantage of the other. The first level emerged out of their stories as they spoke of instances wherein they sacrificed something of themselves or engaged in particular behaviors in order to secure or maintain a relationship. The second level, wherein they were the ones engaging in relationships for some sort of benefit, was linked to self-protection or self-interest as opposed to genuine friendship. This emerged in their stories as they recounted experiences of relationships that were based on some level of gain for them but were explicitly identified as not being friendships. When they recounted these stories it seemed that even though they had relationships they still felt a sense of isolation that was so pervasive that it remained a central part of their experience.

As we explored the issue of isolation as it presented itself in the women's stories they spoke of isolation from two different reference points; exclusion as a result of factors

present in their lives that prevented them from building friendships with others and the

sense that they lacked the required skills to build relationships with others.

Exclusion.

In looking at the elements of exclusion embedded in their stories the women

frequently spoke of aspects of their families that led to challenges in building relationships

with their peers. In particular, the women spoke of the affects of their abuse, frequent

moves, and isolation encountered based on poverty and ethnicity. The abuse resulted in a

sense of shame and secrecy as they could not tell other people about what was happening,

moving frequently meant that they did not have a consistent community to build

relationships in, and their poverty prevented them from having what the other children had,

leaving them as identifiable outsiders. While all of these elements appeared in each of the

women's stories, how the women connected them to their friendship histories varied.

Overall, it was the cumulative results of all of those things that influenced their capacity to

build friendships with others.

> *There was a lot of shame. It was like as a family we closed in on ourselves, which*
> *was not healthy because the things that were happening in our household were not*
> *healthy....so we had no relationships and no connections with the people around*
> *us...It's really hard for kids, I think, to try and make your way in the world when*
> *you're getting all of this crap, intentional and unintentional stuff, that's happening*
> *to you. On top of that I've got my mother telling me I am ugly.* (Fern, 1, p.7-8)

In addition to aspects of their lives that were beyond their control, the women also

spoke about how behaviors they engaged in that they identified as coping mechanisms also

set them apart as outsiders. For all of them there were moments in their stories where they

spoke about how they had managed to cope with the exclusion they felt as well as the

elements present in their lives with their families through drug use, sexualized

relationships, and sacrificing the self to become what others wanted in order to fit in. However, each of them recalled these behaviors as only further solidifying their sense of isolation.

> *I started hanging out with the bad kids, the ones who were misfits who didn't really fit in anywhere. And then drinking and drugging because it made me feel better and I didn't really have to face reality when I was stoned or when I was drunk. I could just pretend that none of it ever existed. That whole identity thing for some reason I just really got, I just wanted to fit in with everybody but I couldn't fit in with everybody. So I had to try it out here and there and it just didn't, it seemed in the end I didn't fit in anywhere and so in the end I just ran.* (Starr, 3, p.10)

Skill.

The women involved in this work clearly identified feeling as though they lacked the skills to build relationships with others. One of the areas that skill was connected to in their stories was the lack of opportunity to observe the behavior as they could not recall seeing adult women in their lives engaging in friendships. Language surrounding normalcy and familiarity surfaced in their stories as each of them spoke at some point of feeling as though their experiences with their families had led to misguided conceptualizations of what constituted friendship and how to be a friend. The women connected their experiences inside of their families to shaping their expectations for friendships and relationships overall as they literally did not have the opportunity to see how to have healthy relationships. The result for them was a sense that it was not normal to spend time with other women and that it was not something that they had developed the required skills to do. One of the women went so far to say that she struggles to even know what a friend is because of the experiences with her family.

> *I think that because of my experiences I just have a harder time even knowing what a friend actually is. I think that is the biggest piece of it because I never really had anybody in my life role model to me what a healthy relationship was...because I*

didn't have anyone to model anything healthy in my life it's hard for me to define what a friendship is today. (Starr, 3, p.15)

A second layer of skill emerged from the interviews as the women each spoke of the experiential learning process. The women's stories contained elements of not having the opportunity to build the requisite skills as they did not have friends to try them out with. The result for one of the women was an overwhelming feeling of separation and inability to read or decipher the friendship "dance" and she spoke of observing friendships almost as one would speak of observing a ritual of an unfamiliar culture.

I always feel that with the friendship piece I'm seeing it and it's like through a glass. Like I can't get past this glass to actually see it and do it. I'm stuck at this just observing, but not really hearing, and not knowing the why or the how. That's the glass separation, the glass divider. (Fern, 1, p. 5)

She went on to share a particularly poignant account of observing a group of adolescents at an airport out of her intense curiosity to figure out how to "do friendships". She went on to say that she often looks for opportunities around her to observe what it is exactly that friends are doing and how they are interacting with each other to see if she can figure it out for herself and somehow translate those skills into her life now.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness emerged in the women's stories on multiple levels. They spoke of being unable to avoid or escape from the abuses perpetrated against them as well as the inability to avoid recurring patterns in their relationships in order to build the kind of friendships they wanted. Although each of these levels of powerlessness held with it strong emotions, it was in the discussions about powerlessness to change their relationships that the women expressed the strongest feelings. Two of the women spoke directly to feeling as though they were "stuck" at some point in their development and that as they had not had

the opportunity to acquire the skills they needed to have friendships, thus they were unable

to move forward. Speaking about feeling emotionally stuck appeared to be particularly

painful for both of the women who shared this similar experience as they both expressed a

sense of grief and loss as they felt that something had been taken from them that they

would not be able to recover from.

> *I feel like because I never had a normal adolescence I never got to experience what it was like to be normal and to graduate from high school and to have sleepovers at my friends house or to do things like that, have fun summers. I was drinking and getting high so lots of times (voice breaking) I feel like I never got a chance to grow emotionally (crying). So I'm still stuck back there…I feel like sometimes I am 12 years old trapped in a 32 year old body. At the same time with all this education and this brain that has all this knowledge, emotionally I am still so young. I feel like I am trapped. Sometimes I think that the more I go to school and the more I learn (crying) maybe I can get away from that, but I can't.* (Starr, 2, p. 5)

Identity

As we continued to explore their stories of friendships the women spoke of the

disparity between how they envisaged friendship to be as compared to how they

experienced it. What emerged was the "absence of the other" – the true or real friend – that

had origins in how the women viewed themselves. In sharing their experiences the women

began to connect the absence of friendships in their lives to their perceptions of themselves

and how they influenced interactions with others. What stood out was that something

prevented the women from being real in friendships. Their experiences were connected to

the cumulative affects of their family histories and key friendship experiences as they had

resulted in some sense of the women withholding a piece of themselves from their

relationships.

> *I don't really remember anybody really knowing me, (pause) ever really. I don't remember talking to anybody except for XXX. I talked to her but not really about*

who I was. It was all meaningless shit and I don't think any of it was real because I couldn't be myself around people and women. (Lane, 1, p. 20)

When we delved into this more deeply, the women began to speak about the influence their experiences had on their identity which appeared to affect their relationships. What had first presented itself as a lack of skill, experience, or exposure began to transform into challenges arising out of their sense of not really knowing who they were as children or adolescents which appeared to hold some continued significance in adulthood.

> *I don't really know what a healthy relationship is, just what I have been told, because I have never actually seen a healthy relationship. I've never really experienced, in my opinion, what a real friendship is because I was always so afraid when I was younger to get close to too many people because they would find out my secrets. I think that as a child I didn't really know who I was...If I didn't know how to identify with myself how could I identify with others? What group do I put myself into, where do I fit?* (Starr, 3, p.8)

In order to get some sense of how their sense of identity may have affected their capacity to have the kind of friendships they wanted, I began to look for clues in the stories of how they had experienced previous relationships. One point of particular interest was how all of the women spoke about becoming whoever they needed to be to move through any given context. I have included quotes from each of them below as they, in an uncanny way, used the exact same terminology when speaking about this as they referred to themselves as chameleons.

> *I used to think when I was younger that I was a chameleon and it didn't matter where you put me I could fit in, because I could take on the colorings.* (Fern, 1, p. 14)

> *I feel like I am a chameleon. I can adapt to any kind of situation and I know how to be professional. I'm a great actor.* (Starr, 2, p.6)

> *I was always waiting for the signs to be hurt and if I saw them I would hurt first. I was never honest. I actually made up stuff to be a part of or to get them to like me*

more. I could have been whoever I was needed to be. A bitch, a good listener, a fighter, a lover, a snob, a bully... it didn't matter really; I was like that lizard who can change colours... lol... chameleon? (Lane, Written response)

When the stories of the women were examined more closely what began to emerge was not just the sense that they would take on aspects of their environments in order to fit in, but that there appeared to be some element of hiding or blending in as well. It appeared as though the skill that had enabled them to survive had at its core a sense of fear and unworthiness that was tied to negative perceptions of themselves and feelings of inadequacy that affected their capacity to be themselves in their relationships and to build the kind of friendships they wanted with other women.

...sitting across the table from someone and it's just me, I don't know that I'm worthy. Do I have value? Or that thing of what do I be now? I'm not I'm not the (profession), not the mentor... I don't know what it's like to just sit across from another human being and be a human being. (Fern, 1, p. 20)

Self-worth.

Given that the women identified not seeing friendships and healthy relationships around them, it was interesting to explore from where they were garnering ideas about what they should look like. Two of them spoke of the role of the media and one connected her experiences to watching other children around her. Regardless of where they were looking, each spoke of observing relationships and feeling as though they could see it but couldn't translate it into their own lives and attributed it to something about themselves that was preventing them from having those relationships. As we explored this together what emerged was fear of not being accepted for who they are and the barrier to having the kind of relationships they wanted with other women was in actuality connected to their feelings of doubt and questions of self-worth.

...my life is like chaos. Even to have somebody in my life that I can do things with or talk to would be just too much I think...Because um, I don't know. I just, I don't know. (long pause) I think that, I don't know. I kind of feel like I have to, it's too much of a hassle to have to go through oh, you know and this is sort of generic but "my name's XXX and I'm living with XXX, I have XXX, I was on the streets for how many years, I used to be a prostitute" you know? It's just too much work to even try to bother doing it. In order to be accepted, there is only certain people that will accept you, you know? I mean, there's lots of people in the community that accept me, but as for a friendship? It would take a certain kind of person to actually be able to not look at me for where I've been, but for who I am (voice breaking). (Starr, 1, p. 12)

Chapter Five:

Discussion

During the interview process efforts were targeted at exploring the essence of the lived experiences of same-sex friendships of these three women in an attempt to identify how they may have contributed to vulnerability for exploitation. Each of them recalled the absence of supportive relationships in their earliest memories and shared that they continue to encounter ongoing relational challenges in their present friendships with women. The women spoke about their friendship experiences in a way that indicated a feeling of loss and that something was missing from their lives. They linked their difficulties in creating friendships and relationships to histories of abuse and negative elements they were exposed to throughout their childhoods and adolescence. As the content of the interviews deepened, the women connected elements of their experiences to their sense of identity and beliefs about themselves and spoke of the implications for multiple relationships that reached beyond just friendship.

Contributions of early relationships

The women each identified that the relational challenges they encountered across the course of their lives had roots in their earliest relationships within their families. Their early lives were characterized by experiences of abuse, instability, and insecurity that the women connected to an active withdrawal from their families on their part and early feelings of isolation and lack of belonging. Histories of abuse influenced their capacity to build friendships early on in their lives in a significant way as they spoke of being unable to engage fully with their peers as they feared discovery of the sexual abuse and linked lack of peer relationships to opportunities for skill development that left them socially

inexperienced and isolated. They linked their sense of isolation to subsequent drug use and sexualized behavior and identified that they used the drugs and sexual behavior as a means of coping and creating a sense of affiliation that they had been unable to find with family and peers.

Their experiences fall in alignment with research that has found that adolescent girls who are unable to build positive relationships are at increased risk for drug use and sexualized behavior (Golder et al., 2005). They identified however, that their coping strategies served only to further limit their capacity to form friendships as their behavioral choices led to further separation from female peers. Research has found that the strategies children develop to cope with the abuse of their parents also influence other relationships (Finzi et al., 2001). This appeared to be the case for these women as their means of coping with experiences of abuse and feelings of isolation created further disconnection. The result was a self-reinforcing cycle of the use of coping behaviors to deal with feelings of isolation that only served to create further disconnection.

The women linked persistent and ongoing challenges encountered in friendships to the real or perceived inability to figure out what was expected of them or how to "do" friendships. This was connected to not seeing friendships around them in their families as well as to a lack of skill or ability. This may be connected to research that has shown that exposure to parental friendship networks facilitates the development of children's cognitive representations and concepts of friendship (Uhlendorff, 2000). The women each spoke of close supportive friendships with other women as something foreign and unknown. Not only had this been absent from their own lives, they also identified that they had not had

the opportunity to observe it as their mother/mother figures did not have friendships with other women that they could have learned from.

In addition to the lack of exposure to friendships through family members, the women also spoke of how the inability to form and maintain friendships as children and adolescents was a self-reinforcing process as they missed the normative stages of friendship development and were therefore lacking the required skills. They connected these feelings to missed opportunities for emotional growth and spoke of feeling as though parts of themselves did not get to develop fully and that they were delayed in relational aspects of their lives. They each identified the absence of opportunities to engage with peers and to develop skills normatively as they were dealing with negative elements in their lives while their peers were engaged in what they perceived as more "normal" activities. Although the absence of skill may be based in self-perception, research has indicated that experiences of abuse and maltreatment can negatively influence children's socio-emotional growth and may result in lags in development (Allen, Aber, & Leadbeater, 1990). It has also been demonstrated that the skills learned in friendships that support the development of appropriate strategies for emotion regulation and assist us in learning how to create supportive relationships across the life span do so by providing us with opportunities to practice and develop the skills required and that these skills develop incrementally (Allen, et al., 2005; Feiring, Rosenthal, & Taska, 2000; von Salisch, 2001). As such, it is likely that some of the challenges they continue to encounter in building positive friendships with women are connected to skill deficits.

The women identified feeling as though they had missed the opportunity to build the skills required to have friendships and that they continued to struggle as a result. They

shared common experiences of feeling as though they were unable to figure out what others were doing in the context of friendships and a sense of not being able to get *there* or to have *that,* which resulted in feeling as though they were outsiders. This was the central point around which feelings of powerlessness emerged in the women's stories as they spoke to their sense of both not knowing how to do what others seemed to be doing in the context of their relationships and the inability to figure it out as the opportunity had passed and they were now somehow stuck at that developmental stage and unable to grow through it.

Their experiences of feeling like they could not figure out or decode how to do friendships can be understood when examined in the context of social and relational competencies, as our earliest experiences of reciprocal, peer-based relationships assist us knowing how to read and respond effectively to social cues (Hartup, 1996). As relational competences have normative, skill-based elements one can see how the absence of relationships early in life influences the acquisition of social skills, as may be the case in the lives of these women. This is further supported in the work on attachment theory as vulnerabilities created by insecure attachment organizations have been shown to impair the ability to interact socially and to create satisfying relationships as individuals may not be able to read social cues accurately and to respond appropriately (Allen, Hauser, & Borman-Spurrell, 1996; Griffith, 2004).

Additional support for their perceptions of delayed development was also found in how they defined and conceptualized friendship. A set of behaviors as a core component to friendships emerged as the women spoke of clearly identified ways that women act as friends that distinguishes those relationships from others. It was interesting to see in the

stories of each of the women that there were clear parameters around what constituted

friendship that appeared to be narrowly defined. Although the significance of this was not

initially clear or self-evident, what stood out was that they had frameworks for friendship

that lacked flexibility to accommodate a wide range of experiences and the beliefs about

friendship contained within the stories of these three women had little flexibility or room

for negotiation. Their perceptions of friendship were based on media-driven imagery and

observation of friendship dyads and peer groups around them that lacked depth and insight

into the underlying emotional content of those relationships. Research has indicated that

without relationship experiences our narratives of both others and ourselves in the context

of relationships are not given the opportunity to evolve or deepen in complexity (Hauser &

Greene, 1987, in Waldinger et al., 2002), which may account for their simplistic

conceptualizations of friendship.

While the women identified feelings of isolation in childhood, it was during

adolescence that they began to see themselves as different and separate from their peers

and began to encounter increased feelings of social isolation. Normative stages of

development associated with friendships identify this time as being particularly significant

as affiliation needs are shifting from family to peers and friendships begin to take on

increased importance (Allen & Land, 1999). It is of significance that the experiences of

betrayal and abandonment by their friend of significance took place in the transitional

period between late childhood and early adolescence for each of them. These incidents

appeared to be defining moments in their lives as the combined experiences of betrayal by

family members and then their friend led the women to infer that betrayal was going to be

present in all of their relationships and that it was not safe to trust anyone. The result was the beginnings of what they identified as their chameleon-like tendencies.

Each of the women referred to themselves as chameleons in their relationships as their efforts to fit in or protect themselves became centered around skills of blending in to any environment or becoming whoever it was that others needed them to be in order for them to belong. The women connected this to a sense of guardedness and not allowing parts of themselves to show in their relationships as well as to strong feelings of unworthiness and that they needed to actively hide aspects about themselves or their experiences to gain or preserve relationships. While on one level this enabled them to create some links to peer groups, they each identified that this was not the same thing as friendship. The women recalled those experiences as lacking in connectedness as they were simply mimicking the actions they saw around them or enacting a role without underlying feelings of affiliation or emotional bonds as they could not be themselves in those relationships. The result was the loss of a sense of self and an additional layer of isolation as they then encountered feelings of both exclusion by others as well as questions of self-worth that led them to self-isolating behaviors as they believed they needed to be someone other than themselves to have friends.

Research has found that individuals experiencing social anxiety fear disapproval and as a result limit the information they share and disclose as a means of protecting themselves. However, their efforts of self-protection result in the inability to engage in appropriate self-disclosure and limit their capacity for reciprocity which has been shown to result in negative responses from those they interact with, thus serving to confirm their negative expectations (see Meleshko & Alden, 1993). For the women involved in this

work, their representations of relationships with women were built upon betrayal and abandonment, which were reaffirmed in their experiences with their friend of significance. The result for each of them was negative expectations and beliefs about friendships with women that were created around the sense of other women as untrustworthy and unsafe.

Each of the women recalled experiences that could be viewed as contradictory to their beliefs of not having had friendships and as it appeared in each of their stories it was a significant point for additional exploration. What came out of the content of their interviews was the significance of internally held frameworks for processing experiences and information. The stories of the women indicated that their beliefs about friendships led to expectations that were so strongly held that experiences that could be potentially viewed as contradictory were discounted or reframed to support their perceptions and beliefs about not having had friendships or knowing how to be a friend. This led back to the idea of working models and how contradictory information is often discounted or omitted in favour of maintaining internalized representations (Griffith, 2004).

It was anticipated that we would find evidence of negative expectations as early experiences have been shown to support the development of cognitive biases that shape perceptions and integration of information that result in confirmation of expectations through exclusion of contradictory information (Allen et al., 1998; Griffith, 2004; Ziv, Oppenhiem, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2004). However, what emerged was that the relationship experiences the women had, and were continuing to have, were significantly affected by beliefs and perceptions of themselves.

The exclusion or discounting of previous experiences may have been the result of the expectations as working models have been found to influence our interactions not only

through shaping our perceptions but also through the defensive exclusion of information

that is not aligned with expectations held within them, resulting in the decreased ability to

integrate information that is not aligned with our expectations of others (Allen et al., 1998).

However, in a study examining relational difficulties encountered by female survivors of

sexual abuse, Hall (2000) found that survivors struggle with trust and intimacy as the result

of the development of negative core beliefs that were built upon throughout childhood,

adolescence, and into adulthood that included beliefs of unworthiness. The finding of

interest in relation to this work was that it was the beliefs the survivors held about their

inability to build friendships that influenced their experiences more so than the absolute

lack of opportunity or skill. As we delved more deeply into the experiences of the women

in this work, what began to emerge was not just that the women anticipated betrayal to

occur, but that as they had experienced relationships that reaffirmed their expectations of

betrayal they began to attribute the recurring betrayals to something about themselves and

began to believe that they could not create friendships. Over time, what stood out was that

it was their negative beliefs about themselves and questions of self-worth that had affected

their experiences of friendship with women. As the content of the interviews reached

further into their stories the women began to speak about their experiences from a deeply

personal and emotional place and in those moments the women were unguarded and shared

their experiences in a way that allowed a glimpse into the depth of pain and loss they had

carried with them as the result of not having friendships with other girls/women. The

process felt like the excavation of layers of meaning that led us to the final point of each of

the women weaving all of their experiences together and connecting them resulting in an

overall sense of not really knowing themselves. The women each identified that the

survival strategies they acquired to cope with profound feelings of mistrust and isolation in their early lives resulted in ways of behaving and moving through their environments that led to a sense of fragmentation and not really knowing who they were. They frequently became who others needed or expected them to be in order to belong or protected themselves by hiding through blending in and becoming invisible. They each identified that they had done this for so long in their young lives that they continued to struggle to extricate their true and "authentic" selves from their habitual patterns of being chameleons.

The stories of the women indicated an overall lack of a coherent sense of who they were that became particularly salient when examined in the context of their experiences of close relationships with other women. Each had a strong desire to build the kind of friendships that they saw around them, but had experienced limited success for a variety of reasons. As mentioned previously, one of the consistently identified elements in each of their stories that emerged in relation to the challenges in building friendships with women that had carried forward into adulthood was the sense of not knowing how to "do" friendships. However, as we spoke of this repeatedly in their interviews and they elaborated on different aspects of this experience, our understanding continued to deepen and each of the women identified at some point that underlying their sense of not knowing what to do, was a deeper issue of not knowing how to respond in moments requiring them to just be themselves. When sharing these experiences, each of them spoke of not feeling worthy and the language they used indicated feelings of uncertainty about why someone would want to be their friend and if it was even possible that someone could be their friend once they knew who they really were.

It was as the women shared their deepest thoughts and feelings about their fears of unworthiness and ability to find lasting friendship with other women that a broader understating of their stories began to emerge. Research has found that those with low and unstable self-esteem and self-worth engage in activities that satisfy the other and may rely on validation from others to feel a sense of self-worth and self-esteem (Kernis et al., 2000; Wilkinson, 2004). The women involved in this work identified that they often played several different roles, resulting in a sense of fragmentation and what appeared, at times, to be a sense of something akin to social disorientation. They felt they could not read and participate competently in a relational context with other women as they could not identify what was expected of them. They spoke of their chameleon-like natures and becoming whoever it was that others wanted them to be, often at the cost of truly knowing who they were, as resulting in an absence of a solid, integrated sense of self that could transcend various situations and environments, which seemed to indicate the absence of a clear and consistent self-concept.

Self-concept has been defined as a cognitive schema that organizes information about the self, both concrete and abstract, that influences the processing of information relevant to the self, and is thought to include both a trait-based global perception of self as well as a domain or situation dependent component (Campbell, 1990). Self-concept contains both beliefs and evaluations of the self (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003) and is developed through our social interactions (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001; Tarrant, MacKenzie, & Hewitt, 2006). The self-concept is flexible (Gabriel et al., 2005) but overall psychological well-being has been linked to the existence of a core self that is consistent across roles (Donahue et al., 1993). The women in this work identified feeling as

though they lacked a solid sense of themselves as their survival strategies involved taking on multiple roles and identities. The issue was not that they felt that different aspects of themselves were more or less present in their relationships, but that they became more or less of what others wanted them to be which may or may not have incorporated aspects of their "true" selves, resulting in more of their attention and focus being directed towards figuring out what others wanted them to be.

Self-concept clarity refers to the extent to which the contents of the self-concept are internally consistent, clearly defined, and stable over time and is an indicator of a coherent sense of self (Campbell et al., 1996). Clarity of self-concept has been connected to self-esteem and overall feelings of psychological integration and has been shown to be a critical component of social decision making (Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). Self-concept differentiation refers to "the degree to which an individual's self is variable or consistent across personally important roles" and fragmentation may have implications for overall mental health as the person lacks the protection of an overall sense of a solid self (Donahue et al., 1993, p. 834). The concept of self-concept clarity may assist in illuminating this work as the women connected their chameleon-like behaviors to a lack of integration. Their behaviors created confusion and self-doubt when it came to building friendships with other women as they spent time figuring out who others wanted them to be, as opposed to engaging in self-reflective processes that may have promoted the development of a sense of unity in their adaptive responses to their environments (Kernis et al., 2000). This was readily evident in the stories of the women as they recounted experiences of engaging in behavior that they had no desire to be engaged in or that caused them distress and the deliberate and conscious setting aside of what they wanted in order to become the person

others required them to be. In some cases, the women went as far as using drugs and alcohol to shut out or close off their feelings in order to engage in the behaviors expected of them.

Negative interactions have been shown to have the potential to lead to negative self-evaluations and low levels of self-acceptance which is crucial for building friendships (Morgan & Kafer, 1985). This was clearly evident in the experiences of the women included in this work as they linked negative self-perceptions and issues of self-worth and acceptance to creating barriers to building friendships with other women, and to their challenges in relationships overall. They each identified that while mistrust had been the result of early experiences, the entrenchment of their guardedness and separation from other women became rooted over time in issues of self-worth and fear that they would not be accepted.

Connections to Exploitation

In the lives of these women it appeared that there were several factors that culminated in a sense of not really knowing who they were that resulted in both loss of self and feelings of profound isolation. It was these two elements working in concert that appeared to be at the heart of their vulnerability for exploitation. Their living environments forced them into focusing on their most basic survival needs as they encountered unsafe home lives, instability, and social isolation. The early relationship experiences of these women were characterized by abuse and violence that was actively perpetrated against them by both their mother and father figures. The result for each of them was an absence of connection and lack of feelings of safety in their lives with their families reaching back to

their earliest memories. These elements worked in concert to create an unpredictable world wherein their needs were often overlooked or used as leverage for abuse and exploitation. In addition to creating a lack of safety and connectedness inside of their families, the women identified that their experiences of abuse led to the development of skills and familiarity in terms of what was expected of them sexually that was absent in the context of other relationships. In sharing their stories, the women included experiences of using of sexualized behaviors during adolescence as a way of creating social acceptance and they identified this as significantly contributing to, or as being the first steps toward, more formalized exploitation. They identified that it was in the area of sexual behaviors that they felt they had been groomed to develop skills and that as they moved into adolescence they used those skills in attempts to gain acceptance or create a sense of affiliation with others. While those behaviors led them to being connected with a particular peer group, they did not foster the development of supportive relationships with same-sex peers and in some instances contributed to an increased sense of disconnection and mistrust with sexualized relationships becoming a means of securing affiliation needs.

In order to negotiate through adolescence, young women have been found to engage in resistance strategies that Robinson and Ward categorize as strategies for survival and strategies for liberation (as cited in Iglesias & Cormier, 2002). Survival strategies are characterized by short-term solutions that are potentially harmful and most commonly include substance use and early sexual activity that often culminate in increased social disconnection. The result is often a sense of invisibility and the adoption of stereotyped behaviors, negative self image, and the "self as defined by others" (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002, p. 266).

In the case of this work and its contributions to understanding vulnerability for exploitation, the women involved in this work each spoke of "surviving" in their environments as children and adolescents and linked this to the inability to develop to their fullest potential during that time as they were simply trying to make it through. The result was a focusing in on the need to make it through their daily lives and the use of skills that would assist them in doing so. The outcomes were secrecy, social withdrawal, shaping themselves to fit other's demands, addictions, and sexualized behaviors that, while enabling them to survive, came at the cost of establishing connections with others.

The sexual exploitation for each of them was a slow process that gradually led to the formal exchange of sexualized acts for survival needs. The groundwork for exploitation was laid in their experiences of sexual abuse as it led to sexualized behaviors becoming entangled with feelings of worth, affection, and validation and they identified using those sexualized skills to create affiliation that they had not been able to create in other ways. Over time, more and more of their lives were focused on sexualized behaviors and they spoke of exploitation as the natural progression of things as they needed to take care of themselves and they used "what they knew" as a tool for survival.

Limitations

Limitations to this work can be found in its theoretical framework, design elements, and participants. Attachment Theory has been viewed as restrictive, critiqued for the ever-increasing expansion into areas not initially intended by the original theory, and as lacking in theoretical clarity (Thompson, 2005). More specifically, Attachment Theory has been criticized for limited consideration of the influence of socio-economic factors on children's relational capacities, influences of temperament, the absence of inclusion of other

significant relationships outside of the mother-infant dyad (Birns, 1999). As this work

explored a range of experiences across the lifespan of the women involved, there were

multiple factors that shaped their relationships that exceed the boundaries of those

accounted for if one is restricted to those influences outlined by Attachment Theory. While

they identified that their relationships in early childhood influenced their interactions with

peers and that their mother/mother figures were of great significance, they also included

multiple aspects of their early lives including experiences of abuse, poverty, and instability

of social networks. This work was not intended to infer that the mother-child dyad was *the*

critical relationship, or that their relationships with their mother/mother figures led to their

exploitation. The intention was to begin to gain insight into their experiences of the

absence of friendships with other women and to explore significance of the absence, if any,

on vulnerability for exploitation. As such, the use of an Attachment framework was a

place of beginning and dialogue regarding the specific contributions of mother-daughter

relationships to exploitation is beyond the scope of this work. While it is acknowledged

that a more thorough examination of the early relationship experiences would be required

to infer any causal pathways and may lend itself to theoretical frameworks that include

broader consideration of both social and environmental factors (Ladd & Troop-Gordon,

2003), the stories of all three women indicated that their early relationship histories made

significant contributions to increased risk.

Design elements that limited this work are two-fold; the method chosen for data

collection and the influence of the prior relationship between the researcher and the

women. In terms of the influence of the method chosen for data collection, the limitations

resulting for this work lie in the experience of the researcher as opposed to the use of a

Phenomenological approach. It was clear in reviewing the interviews that there were points worthy of exploration or directions that could have been investigated more thoroughly that were not due to inexperience on the part of the researcher. The process was one of great learning and development for myself, but at times it was possible to see where the research could have gone if the interviews had been conducted by a more skilled and experienced interviewer. Recommendations for future work include the development of interviewing skills prior to commencing the interview process.

The prior relationships between the researcher and the women influenced the interviewing process in ways that were unanticipated. At the outset of the design stage it was anticipated that the relationship could potentially influence the content of the interviews by providing access to information that would not otherwise be accessible based on the participant's level of familiarity with the researcher. What was not anticipated however was that the participants' would also have expectations of the researcher based on their relationship. In particular, one participant expressed a sense of frustration as I, the researcher, should "know this stuff already" she went on to say that this was not based on her unwillingness to share the information but that it felt strange to recount experiences that we had spoken of previously and that it felt false and contrived. Again, this limitation could have been addressed by a more skilled and experienced researcher as they would have been able to blend their prior knowledge and the intention of this research to arrive at a deeper place in the dialogue.

The group of women selected for participation was limited in terms of size and was not intended in any way to constitute a group upon which any generalizations or inferences to the lives of other experiential women could be made. The work was exploratory in

nature and served the purpose of contributing preliminary information that may be worthy of future research and exploration.

Despite the limitations identified, this research serves to extend the work on sexually exploited youth, and more specifically, contributes information to understanding the process through which risk is created by early experiences of social disconnection. Additionally, the work begins to identify the absence of same-sex friendships as a significant contributing factor to pathways leading to exploitation. As such, this work makes valuable contributions to prevention and intervention efforts through illuminating an area previously unexplored.

Implications for practice resulting from this work include greater insight into the role of social disconnection in the creation of vulnerability for exploitation, practical programming elements, and the identification of important areas for additional exploration and research.

Findings in this research work indicated that experiences of social isolation, particularly during early to mid-adolescence, led to increased vulnerability for exploitation in the lives of these women. They each shared that the coping mechanisms they developed in response to experiences of abuse and feelings of isolation enabled informal exploitation to occur, subsequently leading to formalized exploitation over time. It was not unanticipated that such connections would be made. However, during their interviews each of the women spoke directly to the use of sexualized behavior to meet affiliation needs and how they increasingly relied upon this behavior as they were caught in a self-reinforcing cycle. Their sexualized behaviors resulted in ever-greater disconnection from same-sex peers, which then led to increased sexualized behaviors. This information contributes

significantly to the work on sexually exploited youth as prevention and intervention efforts

to date outline risk factors present only once formalized exploitation occurs. As such,

earlier points of intervention are often missed as the signs are more subtle or do not create a

significant sense of risk.

Additionally, prevention efforts that target relationship building and reducing social

isolation are more readily adaptable for use with a wide age range of children, thus

bypassing challenges encountered when seeking to speak about an issue that, in my

experience, has the potential to cause discomfort for families and those working with

children.

In regards to programming implications, the findings lend support to interventions

based upon premises of increasing social connectivity and identified elements that may

serve to strengthen such programs. In particular, the findings from this work suggest that

intervention efforts focusing on establishing connections with at-risk and high-risk youth

may also need to incorporate some aspect of developing relational competencies. Loosely

defined as the ability to identify and effectively respond to emotional states and social cues

of others (Clarck & Ladd, 1992), the development of age appropriate relational

competencies lead to the ability to develop and maintain supportive interpersonal

relationships across the lifespan (Engels et al., 2001). Crucial elements inside of such

programs may include working through processes of skill building to support the use of

effective social skills that would incorporate decoding and interpreting behaviors and

assisting youth in translating them into their own lives. Specific elements arising out of the

women's stories included skills for coping with social anxiety, working with negative

expectations and cognitive distortions, self-reflection skills, tools for emotion appraisal,

and strategies for appropriate regulation. Their stories also indicated that a mentorship, modeling, and guidance components may also be effective.

Directions for future research that emerged out of this work included exploring the effectiveness of above mentioned programming elements for at-risk girls/youth, a broader and more detailed dialogue of sexual exploitation as a means of meeting affiliation needs, and the identification of factors that lead to resiliency in at-risk and high-risk population groups with particular focus of the identification of elements and processes key to risk reduction.

Overall, the work opened the door to more questions and, while it was deficit-based in that it was an exploration of risk, the stories of the women contain within them elements of resiliency that are worthy of further exploration. It may be challenging to examine sexual exploitation from a framework of resiliency, however, the exploration may provide critical information that deficit-based frameworks cannot adequately capture.

Conclusion

The inspiration for this work was rooted in the belief that the histories of friendship for these women would be significant to our understanding of factors that contributed to increasing their vulnerability for exploitation. Their experiences confirmed the findings of other work in that vulnerability was the result of several elements that intersected allowing for exploitation to occur (Carter & Walton, 2000; Dalla, 2001; Jiwani & Brown, 1999). However, as this work focused on their relationship experiences, what emerged was more detailed information on the role of social disconnection as a primary contributor to the development of subsequent risk factors that created vulnerability.

The risk for exploitation in the lives of these women was based on a trajectory that

began with factors present in their early lives that worked in concert and led them to develop a sense of themselves in the context of a world that was unsafe, that they did not fit into and that offered them validation based upon sexual skills. The women had little connection to their families and peers and their experiences continued to reinforce their beliefs that people would only hurt them if they got too close.

The absence of supportive relationships with family and peers led to a sense of isolation and exclusion. Over time, these experiences led to internalized beliefs about their worth and lack of value in relationships which further limited their engagement with others. The result was limited capacity to build supportive relationships in childhood and adolescence, which they identified as contributing to their engagement in risky behaviors as a means of coping with ongoing abuse and feelings of isolation and powerlessness. Additionally, the development of chameleon-like tendencies that they used for protection and as a means of fitting into any given context came at the cost of their own sense of knowing themselves or being able to identify or articulate their needs in the context of their relationships. The one place that all of the women encountered a sense of competency, skill, and validation was in the context of sexualized relationships and behaviors and it became a skill they used to secure their most basic survival needs as well as to feel a sense of connectedness, belonging and affiliation. However, as time went on, what was once a tool used to create belonging and affiliation led only to increased isolation and became a self-reinforcing cycle.

In my experience, it is not often that discussions of any depth take place regarding affiliation needs as a contributing factor to vulnerability for exploitation. I have taken part in many discussions regarding risk in relationships as recruitment strategies, however, there

seems to be a profound discomfort in speaking of young people using their bodies in sexual exchange for feeling cared for and as a measure of their worth. This research clearly identifies that risk and vulnerability for exploitation in the lives of these women was found in their search for belonging that began long before they were ever exploited in the formal sense. Histories of trauma and abuse led to limitations in their capacity to form supportive relationships with peers. In their search for affiliation and belonging the sexualized selves of the women became increasingly salient as they used the skills they felt competent in. Over time, more and more of their needs became met through sexualized behavior and it was small step to move into formalized exploitation.

It was evident that they each continued to carry with them a sense of being outsiders and their experiences resulted in the creation of current beliefs that they do not know how to be friends and have not had friends, and that these beliefs shaped their experiences in a profound way. The perceptions they created led to the exclusion of experiences that could have been viewed as friendship and the inability to build friendships when the opportunities presented themselves.

Perhaps more importantly, it was clear that underlying issues of self-worth and self-concept contributed to the perpetuation of their experiences as they had developed ways of coping with feelings of unworthiness that limited their capacity to build supportive friendships with other women as they could not engage in an open and unguarded way. In all but one case, their profound feelings of mistrust prevented them from being able to see women as supporters and allies as they spoke of feeling as though they were always anticipating the moment when they will be abandoned or betrayed.

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Appendix A

Sample of questions broken up over three interview periods

First Interview:

1. Do you recall the conversation we had as a group when everyone identified that they had not previously had friendships with other women because they were "competition or couldn't be trusted"? Can you tell me a little bit about your own experiences around that?

2. How did you think you came to view other women that way?

   - Explore early experiences of friendships with other women to look for moments of significance and the meaning they created from them.

Second Interview:

Start with summary of previous conversation and reconnection to previous statements.

3. Last interview we spoke about … How would you define friendship from where you are at in your life now?

   - Look to identify core components and features that are important.
   - Explore significance of those specific features they identify as important to them.

4. What are your experiences of female friendships in your life now?

   - Explore if they have ongoing challenges.
   - Have their conceptualizations of women changed over time? If so, what was the process involved?
   - If they have ongoing challenges and do not have same-sex friendships, how do they view that and what meaning do they take from it? How do they feel about it?

Third Interview:

Provides opportunity to revisit earlier areas and to provide clarification and further exploration of areas that emerge as important.

Appendix B
Email Follow-up Questions for Lane

Follow-up Questions

1. You said in your interviews that you didn't see friendships with women in your life growing up. Where did your ideas about friendships come from? Have they changed over time? If so, how have they changed?

2. You had said that you were not able to be yourself in your friendships when you were younger. If you were not yourself or couldn't be yourself, who were you?

3. you had said that you had relationships but they weren't "real" friendships. How would a real friendship been different than the ones you were having as a child and adolescent?

4. you had said at one point in the interviews that what had enabled you to have a friendship with *L* was that you "grew up". You connected this to moving past needing to have sex to feel okay but I am wondering if you felt that there were parts of you that needed to grow in order to have friendships? If so, what needed to happen in your life to support the growth?

5. Did you feel stuck somewhere along the way or that your growth had stopped at certain points? If so, what growth stopped and why?

Appendix C

Ethics Approval

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

MEMORANDUM

To: Jody Stuart
CC: Kyle Matsuba

From: Greg Halseth, Chair
Research Ethics Board

Date: July 25, 2007

Re: **E2007.0523.059**
Connection, Community and Belonging: Same sex friendship experiences in the lives of women with a history of sexual explotation

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Thank you for submitting the above-noted research proposal and requested amendments to the Research Ethics Board. Your proposal has been approved.

We are pleased to issue approval for the above named study for a period of 12 months from the date of this letter. Continuation beyond that date will require further review and renewal of REB approval. Any changes or amendments to the protocol or consent form must be approved by the Research Ethics Board.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Greg Halseth

Footnotes

1. L. Keefe is a local expert on sexual exploitation with a long history of providing front line nursing services to marginalized and vulnerable populations in the downtown core. She has extensive political advocacy experience and has sat as co-chair of our local community action team addressing sexual exploitation of youth since its inception in 1995.

2. Youth in conversation. This refers to ongoing dialogue surrounding experiences of exploitation with a youth involved in a high-engagement project examining sexual exploitation within a local, northern context.

3. S. Wheeler is a local expert in the area of high-risk, street involved youth with over 15 years of frontline experience in the provision of high-engagement, street level youth services.

4. Referencing refers to participant, interview number, and page number in transcript.