Loss, Trauma and the Familial Ideal:
Some Australian Women's Responses to the Incestuous Abuse of their Children

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**Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy**
October, 1999
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Chapter 1

Part 1
From mother blaming to mother-defining: the conceptualisation of women and their families in the clinical literature on incest

The role of 'the mother' in child sexual abuse, particularly in paternal incest, has been a hotly contested issue in the clinical literature. Discussion initially centred around the role of women in the cause and maintenance of abuse, in particular about whether they "collude" in the incestuous relationship. The focus then moved to the extent to which women performed as 'protective mothers'. In this discussion I will not critique broadly the way in which women have been portrayed, since excellent reviews exist elsewhere (Humphreys, 1990; James and MacKinnon, 1990; Wattenberg, 1985; Elbow and Mayfield, 1991). Rather, I will focus on the way in which women's decisions about their family relationships have been portrayed within the clinical literature on incest, and the conclusions about women and their families that have been drawn.

Two themes have dominated the clinical literature. First, that women's decisions following a father's incestuous abuse of a child have represented a choice between husband and child and secondly, that when given an *unrestrained* choice, 'protective mothers' would inevitably put the interests of their children above those of their partners. As a consequence women have been deemed to be protective mothers (or not), based largely on the nature of their on-going relationship with their husbands.

While early definitions of protection appeared to include preventing the abuse, later views held belief that it had occurred and reporting it to the authorities as defining protectiveness. However, as Krane (1994) identified, the perception of women's protectiveness is increasingly based on their immediate response to the abuse, in particular their willingness to separate

from the offender. This assumption, often implicit in the clinical literature, was made explicit by Faller (1988) who devised a five point scale of protectiveness which assessed women who stay in the marriage as less protective. She described as "very protective" those women who left the home with the children or required their partners to leave after the disclosure of abuse. But those who did not separate, even though they insisted that the abuser seek help and ensured that they never left the child alone with him, were considered only "somewhat protective". In a similar vein, Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelsohn and Coulter (1989) developed an instrument measuring parental reactions after abuse and seeking separation is seen as an indicator of support for the child. 'Protectiveness' in these analyses is constructed as making a choice in favour of the child and against the man, as represented by leaving the marriage. As well as defining them as 'unprotective', any attachment to their marriages that women have shown, has led them and their families to be viewed as dysfunctional.

1.1 Dysfunctional Women in Dysfunctional Families: The Historical Analysis of Incest

There have been several broad conceptual phases in the understanding of incest which are evident in the literature. The first was influenced by Freud who initially concluded that childhood sexual abuse was the cause of 'female hysteria', but later recanted this in favour of the belief that accusations of abuse represented unresolved oedipal fantasies (Herman, 1981; Mulligan, 1986). This notion held currency for decades, and even in the second phase, when abuse was finally recognised as having occurred, Freud's influence led to female victims being accused of 'seduction' (Humphreys, 1990). However it is the third phase which is of particular relevance to this discussion, since it was characterised by the broadening of the lens to include 'the context of abuse' (the family), and led to a focus on mothers. Two assumptions underpinned the literature in this phase. First, since abuse did not occur in 'normal' families, the specific abnormality of 'incest families' needed to be understood. Second, if abuse did occur, 'normal' women would be expected to leave the marriage and a failure to do so must signify a deficit on the part of the woman. In either case, women were seen to stay with their husbands out of their individual or family weaknesses.

The clinical literature often has assumed not only that women will remain with their partners after a disclosure of incest, but that maintenance of the family was either the *aim* of the abuse or the *toleration* of it in the first place – the so called "collusion theories". These assumptions have led women to be characterised in one of three ways: as dysfunctional women who are psychologically dependent and unable to face life alone; as part of a dysfunctional family which wants to preserve itself at any cost; or as powerless and without choices.

1.1.1 Dysfunctional Women

Based largely on Psychoanalytic notions of oedipal conflicts or Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988),[1] for decades women were assumed to maintain their marriages out of their own psychological deficits. Their perceived psychopathology was seen to influence them in every aspect of their family lives including their initial choice of a partner (Zuelzer and Reposa, 1983), in allowing or causing the abuse in the first place (Justice and Justice, 1979), and in colluding with the continuation of the abuse in order to maintain their marriages (Lukianowicz, 1972). The list of women's perceived psychological deficits is lengthy. They have been described as "infantile" (Lukianowicz, 1972), as ignoring the abuse in order to maintain a position in which they remain "psychologically comfortable" (Tinling, 1991), as "weak, dependent and intimidated", and fearful of the abandonment of the family by their husbands if they should take a stand against the abuse (Cohen, 1983). The analyses of women's central role in the occurrence and continuation of the abuse also focussed on their own psychological development, and perhaps not surprisingly, their perceived psychological deficits were seen as a consequence of their own inadequate mothering. They are described as either rejected by their own mothers (Lustig, 1966; Bennett, 1980) or as overly dependent and attached (Machotka, Pittman and Flomenhaft 1967; Zuelzer and Reposa, 1983).

These unresolved childhood issues were seen to determine the relationships within the families they created and more importantly, to be the underlying cause of the incest. So for example, their 'attachment problems', born out of unresolved rage at early childhood losses were seen as leading them to

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[1] In chapter 6 I look in more detail at Attachment theory and argue that the early analysis was a mis-reading of Bowlby's ideas.

withdraw from their own children, or alternatively to seek to reverse roles with them, particularly daughters (Bennett, 1980). By this logic their children became not only their mothers' comforter, but the sexual partner to their fathers. The women's fears of intimacy or over-attachment to their own mothers, it was argued, resulted in sexual problems with their husbands who were eventually forced to turn to their children for sex and comfort (Justice and Justice, 1979). Paradoxically, while considered psychologically 'weak,' women were held to be functionally powerful as they 'directed their husbands sexual energies' toward their children (Lustig, 1966). Dale and colleagues concluded:

> Although many mothers in sexually abusing families present
> as being passive and subdued, this is by no means
> necessarily a powerless position. Withdrawal can be a very
> powerful position (Dale et al., 1986, p. 6).

The women's perceived fragile emotional and psychological state was held responsible, not only for the occurrence of the abuse, but for their acquiescence in its continuation. The personality deficits of 'the mother' were not only seen as contributing to the incest, but as the primary cause of it since without them the incest would not have occurred (Zuelzer and Reposa, 1983). This 'collusion' was seen to be in the service of maintaining their family, borne out of their psychopathology and inherent weakness. Women's 'fear of losing their husbands', it was suggested, determined their every action:

> … These women were extremely dependent on their
> husbands and would have allowed them to do anything they
> wanted for the price of remaining with them (Lukianowicz,
> 1972, p., 305-306).

1.1.2 Dysfunctional Families

In the second stream of analysis the focus was less on the women's deeply pathological personalities, but more on the deeply disturbed families which they were seen to inhabit and create. The dysfunctional family view tended to follow one of two arguments; women were either central parts of dysfunctional units which psychologically dependent and weak members feared losing (Machotka, et al., 1967; Cohen, 1983; Gutheil and Avery, 1977; Anderson and Shafer, 1979), or they were equal participants in a family

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'system' in which the incest 'symptom' signified a problem in the family as a whole (Alexander, 1985; Reposa and Zuelzer, 1983; Levang, 1989; Cornille, 1989; Madonna, Scoyk and James, 1991).   In either case the incest was seen as an attempt to maintain the family. As this shift occurred terms such as "incest families" (Zuelzer and Reposa, 1983; Cornille, 1989), "non-participating members" (Machotka, et al., 1967), "incest couples" (Levang, 1989), and "incest parents" (Madonna, Scoyk and James, 1991) came to dominate the literature, and the identity of women and their children could not be differentiated from the actions of the offender.

The initial family dysfunction view was based on Freudian analysis. It held the collective psychopathology of the family as the cause of the abuse and as the reason for attempting to preserve the family, whatever the cost. Every family member was seen as complicit since, "The preservation of the family group is the central function of incest…." (Lustig et al., 1966).   However, 'mothers' were still held as central to the occurrence of the incest as the conclusion drawn by Machotka and colleagues below, was repeated throughout the literature in one form or another:

> … she is in effect the cornerstone in the pathological family system (Machotka et al., 1967, p.,100).

In the second family dysfunction analysis, informed by the application to families of the emerging Systems theory, personality characteristics were seen as less important than the interpersonal dynamics.   The central thesis of this view was that incest was a 'symptom' which occurred in a family which was unable to deal with other underlying issues, usually of separation and loss. Incest was seen as the 'circuit-breaker' and 'tension-reducer', whose purpose was to allay the threat of family disintegration. Alexander (1985), who complained that viewing incest with "righteous indignation" only exacerbated family isolation, argued that the abuse should be seen simply as another symptom of family dysfunction:

> Incest should not be viewed as an end in itself, but simply as a behaviour symptomatic of a family that is isolated from the environment; that is avoidant of the differentiation of roles, functions and individual members; and that uses the incest behaviour as just one more means to avoid growth and change that

is inherent in adolescents seeking outside contacts and eventually
leaving home (Alexander, 1985, p.,82).

Some authors have portrayed the family systems view as less blaming of 'the mother' than the previous analysis, since she was only one member of a dysfunctional unit (Koch and Jarvis, 1987; Hildebrand and Forbes, 1987; Maddock and Larson, 1995). Responding to feminist and other critiques of these ideas, there was a shift to abandon the notion of "collusion" in favour of the "unprotective mother". However, even when explicitly cautioning against holding women as collusive, this view still ascribed women's 'tolerance' of the abuse to their fear of family disintegration (Hildebrande and Forbes, 1987).

1.1.3 The Unprotective Mother

The family dysfunction theories continued to exert considerable influence on the treatment of incest. While seemingly acknowledging men as responsible for their own actions, those adhering to family dysfunction theories have changed their complaints from women as colluding with the occurrence of the abuse, to describing them as 'failing to protect' (Humphreys, 1992). As Krane summarised it:

Re-written from the acts committed by men to mother's failure to
protect, women are central to both problem and solution (Krane,
1994, p. 264).

Many authors consequently made a point of defining responsibility for the abuse with the offender, but the role of therapeutic intervention was (and often remains) to assist women in accepting their 'role' in causing the conditions in which the abuse occurred and in becoming 'appropriately protective' (Giaretto, 1981; Sgroi, 1982; Furniss, 1983; Hildebrande and Forbes, 1987; Bentovin, Elton, Hildebrand, Tranter and Vizard, 1988; Sykes and Winn, 1989; Trepper and Barratt, 1989; Maddock and Larson, 1995). This view, still seen as an essential aspect of assisting families after incest, is best summarised by Maddock and Larson (1995, pp., 341, 342) who argue:

As a general guideline for therapy, we consider nonoffending spouses
equally responsible with perpetrators for the family dynamics that
have set the stage for incest to occur … and we hold them

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accountable as adults who are expected to put effort and energy into resolving these issues and caring for their children. In most cases we consider unwillingness to be involved in family and marital therapy a negative sign reflecting the presence of unresolved issues of her own.

The aim of therapeutic intervention constituted a confusing double bind for women. It was generally assumed that women would wish to stay in the relationship and despite judging them harshly for this, the clinical literature was full of advice and diagnostic schema to assist counsellors to safely reunite or maintain families after the disclosure (Sgroi, 1982; Giaretto, 1981; Server and Janzen, 1982; Furniss, 1983; Dale et al., 1986; Levang et al., 1989; Orten and Rich, 1988; Cottrell, 1990; Maddock and Larson, 1995). In some cases this was seen as preferable to allowing the woman to separate and risk selecting another unsuitable mate:

> Should the perpetrator be removed from the home, the untreated mother may replace him with someone of similar potential. Should the perpetrator remain in the home and participate in treatment, protection is enhanced by the concomitant change and growth in the mother (Koch and Jarvis, 1987, p., 99).

1.1.4 A Feminist Analysis: Helpless Victims of Patriarchy

Arguably the most significant shift in the conceptualisation of the role of 'the mother' in incest came with the women's movement. The feminist analysis transformed the perception of incest as an aberration and introduced notions of gender and power to the debate. The sexist values and prejudices underlying the conceptualisation of incest were exposed, as was the way in which responsibility for men's sexuality had become reassigned to women. However, despite the breadth of the challenges which the early feminists posed to the field of sexual abuse, several assumptions remained remarkably consistent with prevailing views. Although theorising these issues differently, feminists did not initially challenge the notion of women's collusion in incest and accepted the assumption that women usually wished to protect their marriages after incest.

The early feminist response was associated with victim services where increasing numbers of adult women disclosed childhood abuse. Feminists challenged the prevailing

Freudian notions that incest was more likely to be a seduction fantasy on the part of the victim than an actual occurrence. They sought to uphold the truth of these women's experiences and to recast them into the political domain. It was the women's movement which first acknowledged that incest was a common experience for women and children from 'normal' families and was not a consequence of the pathology of a few families (Mulligan, 1986; Dominelli, 1989). This genesis in victim services had an important impact in how the women were conceptualised. With victims frequently describing alienated relationships between themselves and their mothers, and the latter's apparent inability to protect their children, many feminist writers continued to assume that women did indeed 'collude' as this quote from Herman and Hirschman demonstrates:

> The message these mothers transmitted over and over to their daughters was: your father first, you second. It is dangerous to fight back, for if I lose him I lose everything. For my own survival I must leave you to your own devices. I cannot defend you, and if necessary I will sacrifice you to your father (Herman and Hirschman, 1977, p.,746).

However, as is obvious from this brief extract, the feminist analysis of *why* this apparent collusion occurred was markedly different from that which had come before it. It was not personality deficits which they identified as inhibiting women's choices, but their lack of power. In response to the kind of descriptions previously outlined, feminist authors began to more critically review the role of 'the mother' and exposed the assumptions and values underlying these descriptions. These included beliefs about the *men*: that men have sexual rights over women; that abusers must be 'sick' and helpless, rather than behaving consistently with patriarchal roles; and that men have sexual 'needs' which must be fulfilled, even at the expense of their daughters. They also exposed the underlying beliefs about *women*: their role as nurturer, sexual object and dependent spouse; the expectation for them to be omnipresent protectors; assumptions about their power to influence outcome; and the belief in home as a safe haven where all family members are equal (Herman, 1983; Carter et al., 1986; McIntyre, 1981; Dietz and Craft, 1980; Dominelli, 1989; Birns and Meyer, 1993). Whilst not directly refuting the 'facts' of women's collusion, these authors sought to highlight the powerless position of women within a patriarchal family and social structure.

The picture which emerged from the early feminist critique was that women were helpless victims of patriarchy, without personal agency and without choices. The analysis of women's powerlessness, both in the home and society, and the contextualisation of women's responses beyond individual families is still an important aspect of the feminist contribution. These analyses have provided a much more sympathetic view of the woman's position, but in some circumstances have perpetuated the assumption that women do invariably side with their partners, as this comment demonstrates:

> If the abuse is incestuous, … the non-offending parent
> will ally with the offender due to his power ….
> (Schonberg, 1992).

In the most recent phase of research and clinical literature which has emerged since the late 1980's, writers informed by the feminist analysis have begun to question many of the assertions underlying the generalisations that women have been unable to respond protectively to their children. Interested in the subjective experience of women and the multiplicity of factors which influence them in their responses to incest, these authors have sought to understand the complexity of women's experiences; not only their lack of power but also their ability to act despite the real constraints which exist (Mulligan, 1986; Faller, 1988; Sirles and Franke, 1989; Everson et al., 1989; Hooper, 1989, 1992; Humphreys, 1990; Johnson, 1992; Carter, 1993).

1.1.5 The Emergence of the 'Protective Mother'

The interest in researching women's subjective experiences arose from feminists from a variety of backgrounds including social work, sociology, psychology and nursing. Some of this research found its way into clinical journals. It offered a departure from the earlier feminist analysis which had attempted to re-theorise women's position in incest, but had not generated data which directly challenged the findings of the earlier literature; specifically the assumptions that women were disbelieving and unsupportive. Writers pointed to the variability of women's responses and increasingly, to occasions when many women were able to protect their children despite the enormous constraints of a patriarchal family structure. There was an increasing awareness that the portrayal of women in families where incest had occurred could only be understood by looking at the

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broader context in which women's roles were defined, and in particular the history of mother blame across a broad spectrum of presenting problems (Mulligan, 1986; Walters et al, 1988; Kaplan, 1990; Wedenoja, 1991; Humphreys, 1999).

Arguably the greatest contribution of the emerging literature is in the re-conceptualisation of women's powerlessness and as a consequence, the challenge to the notion of women's collusion. Feminism, it has been argued, had inadequately theorised the issue of power (Hooper, 1989; Elbow and Mayfield, 1991; Humphreys, 1992), and was insufficient to explain why incest occurred in some families and not in others (James and MacKinnon, 1990). Responding to the mother blaming stance previously outlined, this body of literature has focussed largely on women's role in protecting their children and in believing that abuse has occurred. It has also sought to understand the constraints which exist for women in responding to their children's needs.

The emerging research has challenged the 'fact' of women's disbelief when faced with the disclosure of abuse and their 'failure' to take protective action. While Pierce and Pierce (1985) had found that most women do believe and support their children, with 85% of their sample doing so, and Sirles and Franke (1989) reported that 78% of their mothers responded with belief, others concluded that coming to believe was a process. Assuming a choice between 'belief' and 'disbelief', it was argued, was a simplification of a complex process. Both believing and not believing simultaneously, or fluctuating in belief have been found to be normal responses to the crisis which ensues with the discovery of incest (Mulligan, 1986; Humphreys, 1992). Similarly fluctuating in *support* is a common response to father-child abuse and writers have sought to normalise this and to locate means of assisting women toward support, rather than judging them for their perceived failures (Faller, 1988; Everson, et al., 1989; Hooper, 1989; Schonberg, 1992; Humphreys, 1992; Dempster, 1996).

The emerging literature has demonstrated that the complexities of their relationships with the abuser and the child are central to women's responses to incest. For example, Sirles and Franke (1989) found that women were most likely to believe the abuse occurred when the offender was an extended family member (92.3% believed) than if he was a biological father (85.9%) and least likely when he was a stepfather/de-facto partner

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(55.6%). These findings are consistent with those by Knudson (1981), Faller (1988), Everson et al, (1989), Humphreys (1990), and Sirles and Lofberg, (1990), that the *nature* of a woman's relationship with the abuser will impact on her response in a number of areas including the extent to which she can 'believe and support' her child (Faller, 1988; Hooper, 1989; Humphreys, 1992). A woman's final response to a disclosure of incest, including whether to believe and what action to take to protect the child, is dependent on a complex interplay of factors including the material and emotional consequences of belief, the information and support available to her, the history of her relationship with the man and child, the extent of her crisis (Faller, 1989; Everson, 1989, Sirles and Franke, 1989; Humphreys, 1990; Dempster, 1996).

As a result of this research the literature is now less interested in the extent to which mothers cause incest or maintain it. It is now rare to find specific chapters in text books which highlight the position of the mother, other than those which seek to explain the impact of disclosure and its aftermath on her in more sympathetic ways, or which argue for maternal support (Friedrich, 1995; Dempster, 1996; Breckenridge and Laing, 1999; Foote, 1999). Journal articles are also more interested in advocating women's position in support of their child and redressing mother-blaming practices (Barratt, 1993; Dwyer and Miller, 1996; Breckenridge and Baldry, 1997; Miller and Dwyer, 1997; Crawford, 1999; Foote, 1999a). Still, remnants of the earlier analysis remain (Maddock and Larson, 1995).

However parallelling this trend, the evidence that women do respond in supportive ways has re-ignited an interest in those who do not appear to do so. Consequently there has been a renewed focus on conceptualising the limitations to women's support. That is, to understand the conditions which prevent women from responding to disclosure in ways which are considered protective and supportive (Barratt, 1993; Crawford, 1999). [2] This focus emerged out of the evidence that maternal support significantly enhances a child's

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[2] Paradoxically there is also a move to doubt women's allegations of abuse against husbands. As Humphreys (1997, 1999) points out, in the context of divorce proceedings women have been accused of false and vexatious allegations. Women's attempts at protection have therefore placed them in a double bind. While this is a trend noted in the literature and practise, it is not pursued in this review.

recovery from abuse (Leifer, Shapiro and Kassem, 1993). While the notion of collusion no longer pervades the literature, polarisations of women's responses remain and they have become categorised as either protective/supportive or unprotective/unsupportive. As Berkowitz (1997) and Breckenridge and Baldry (1997) note, the impact of the notion of failing to protect has become another form of mother blame and has been demonstrated to influence the responses of workers and policy makers.[3] In this country, experience in workshops with practitioners suggests that 'failing to protect' has become a loosely veiled re-invention of some of the aspects of collusion, including that women probably knew the abuse was occurring (Breckenridge and Berreen, 1992). Even if no longer applied to all women and while no longer dominating the literature, these notions remain influential on practise.[4]

The theme now dominating the literature is an exploration of the factors which limit women's capacity to respond 'protectively' or 'supportively'. This has highlighted two main domains; the impact of their own childhood history of abuse and their current social conditions, including the presence or absence of support (Gomes-Schwarz, Horowitz, Cardarell, Salt, Meyer, Coleman and Sauzier, 1990; Cole, Woolger, Power and Smith, 1992; Schonberg, 1992; Sheinberg, 1992; Leifer et al., 1993; Deblinger, Stauffer and Landsberg, 1994; Green, Coupe, Fernandez and Stevens, 1995; Manion, McIntyre, Firestone, Ligenska, Ensom and Wells, 1996; Cloutier et al., 1998; Hiebert-Murphy, 1998; Krekelwetz and Piotrowski, 1998).

1.1.6 The Impact of a Woman's Childhood Abuse

In seeking to differentiate between those women who are perceived as responding supportively or not, researchers have been influenced by the evidence that women who have a history of childhood sexual abuse (CSA)

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[3] In some parts of the United States a woman can be held legally culpable for 'failing to protect' if she "...knew or *reasonably should* have known that the minor was in danger of sexual abuse (Berkowitz, 1997, p.81, italics in original).
[4] In a Melbourne workshop by William Friedrich in February 2000 a participant queried what one ought to do with "collusive" mothers. Similarly, in a series of workshops I presented in 1999 on women's responses to incest, participants readily accepted normalising accounts of most women's responses - the 85% who respond supportively, even though in crisis. However they struggled to conceptualise those who may not respond in this way, other than through the concept of collusion. It is this which leads me to suggest that the notion remains alive and well, even if by other names.

are more likely to have their own children abused. Goodwin, McCarthy and Di Vasto (1981) found that 24% of a group of mothers of physically or sexually abused children had a history of incest, compared with 3% of a control group whose children were not abused, suggesting that the children of incest victims were eight times more likely to also be abused. However when the researchers broadened their definition of abuse to include extra-familial abuse, the figures were 38% and 24% respectively, making them only 1.5 times more likely to be abused. Oates, Tebbutt, Swanston, Lynch and O'Toole (1998) found that 34% of mothers of sexually abused children divulged child sexual abuse compared to 12% of a control group, suggesting a three-fold increase in risk. Others have found figures ranging from 41% to 74% of non-offending mothers in various clinical populations reporting their own CSA (Faller, 1989; Gomes-Schwarz et al., 1990; Leifer et al., 1993; Deblinger et al., 1994; Hiebert-Murphy, 1998). These are significantly higher than the abuse rates of around 30% for women in the general population (Russell, 1983; Deblinger et al., 1993; Goldman and Padayachi, 1997; Wyatt, Loeb, Solis and Carmona, 1999). However, in contrast the rates of abuse in the control groups of the comparative research cited are low and suggest an under-reporting in these controls.

These low reports in control groups may represent a failure to recall or acknowledge a history of CSA, rather than proof of no abuse and could be due to several factors. There is evidence that some victims struggle with how to define their experiences and therefore may minimise past abuse (Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, Waizenhofer and Kolpin, 1999),[5] and as Russell (1986) notes, some kinds of abuse (such as sibling incest) are notoriously under-reported. This indicates that respondents may not be immediately likely to define or report their experiences as abuse. Perrot, Morris, Martin and Romans (1998) contend that women are selective about discussing issues of abuse, so research which relies on self report of a control group may not provide conditions conducive to the disclosure of abuse experiences. Conversely those already attending services because of their children's abuse may be more prepared to acknowledge such issues. In addition, Goodwin et al., (1981) reported that some respondents who had previously denied incest on their questionnaire later revealed it in therapy, adding further uncertainty to the conclusions which can be drawn from such comparisons. Finally, a child's abuse may trigger memories of a woman's

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[5] For example, 8.5 % of their respondents in research with adolescents, indicted that they were "not sure" whether they were abused.

own abuse, so that they are more likely to recall their own CSA (Russell, 1986). However, despite these cautions there does appear to be a higher incidence of CSA in mothers of incest victims than in the general population, though the extent and relevance of this remains unclear.

The hypothesis that all forms of child maltreatment are transmitted between generations has long been popularly accepted. However, as Kaufman and Zigler (1989, p.,129) point out:

> Being maltreated as a child puts one at risk for becoming abusive, but the path between the two points is far from direct or inevitable.

Most research on this issue concerns physical abuse or neglect, where a high proportion of parents who maltreat their children have been found to have their own history of abuse (Tomison, 1996). Kaufman and Zigler have argued on a number of occasions (1987, 1989, 1993) that the evidence for the transgenerational transmission of abuse is overstated. This is due to retrospective study designs, non-representative samples, definitional variations, and the use of clinical records and case studies for the collection of data. Differences in research design have led to estimates of between 18% and 90% as rates of transgenerational transmission of maltreatment. They conclude that:

> ...although a history of abuse is more common among parents who maltreat their children, many parents who do not report abusive childhood experiences become abusers and a sizable number of parents who were maltreated as children do not (Kaufman and Zigler, 1989, p.,132)

In relation to non-offending mothers in cases of incest, attempting to link a woman's childhood CSA with the subsequent abuse of her child by a third party, can be seen to be even more spurious.

The transgenerational hypothesis has been applied to sex offenders and as with other forms of maltreatment, estimates of transmission rates vary wildly (Welfare, 1996; Tomison, 1996). It is also complicated by the substantial evidence that victims are more likely to be female, and yet the overwhelming majority of offenders are male (Russell, 1986; Goldman and Padayachi, 1997; Wyatt et al., 1999). The most that can be drawn from available evidence is that CSA as a child is a risk factor in offending and in a woman's child being sexually abused. But in Kaufman and Zigler's words, these are neither "direct" nor "inevitable" outcomes and the mechanism by

which the abuse history becomes relevant is not yet clear (Gomes-Schwarz et al., 1990; Faller, 1989b; Tomison, 1996).

The initial interest in a woman's CSA stemmed from an assumption that there was a causative link between a mother's history and her child's subsequent abuse. Historically, the transgenerational theories variously postulated that a woman who had a history of incest either selected an abusive partner; re-enacted her own abuse through her child as an attempt at resolution; suffered such sexual dysfunction that this led to rejecting of her husband and, inevitably, to the abuse of her child; or unconsciously believed that it was acceptable to abuse children (Meiselman, 1978; Goodwin, McCarthy and Di Vasto, 1981; Sgroi and Dana, 1982; Bennett, 1992). These ideas were encapsulated in the conclusion that women were "incest carriers across generations" (Meiselman, 1978). The assumptions of mother blame which underlie these theories of incest have already been exposed, as have the short-comings of the studies on which they were based (Deblinger, Hatherway, Lippmann and Steer, 1993; Wattenberg, 1985).

A maternal history of CSA as a direct causative link to her child's abuse has not been substantiated, however the differential role of such a history remains of interest (Deblinger et al., 1994). The research focus has now sought to understand the mechanism by which abuse may be transmitted across generations and the extent to which a history of sexual abuse affects a woman's response to her child (Main and Goldwyn, 1984; Faller, 1989b; Gomes-Schwarz, et al.,1990; Deblinger, et al.,1994; Heibert-Murphy, 1998). In chapter 6 I will review theories on the mechanism of the transgenerational cycle. At this point I will limit the discussion to that literature which has sought to understand how a woman's CSA may affect her support of her child.

While this issue has been the focus of attention in the literature for over a decade, the research evidence that a maternal history of sexual abuse negatively impacts on her response to her child's abuse is inconclusive. It appears that while it may increase a woman's distress, a history of abuse does not increase her chances of responding negatively to her child's disclosure. However, broader aspects of women's childhood experiences, in particular the nature of the relationship with their own mothers have been shown to be more predictive of their responses. Deblinger et al., (1994) reported that CSA had no impact on non-offending mothers' level of support. Similarly Gomes- Schwarz et al., (1990) found that although they

tended to have a more traumatic childhood than the norm, as a group adult survivors were no more likely to respond negatively. Leifer et al., (1993) also reported that this was not a factor which differentiated women whose children were placed in fostercare, an outcome usually related to lack of maternal support.

It is clear from the research that survivors whose children are abused are not an homogenous group and can be differentiated on a number of levels including other aspects of their childhood history, their current social circumstances and psychological functioning, and the extent to which past abuse has been resolved (Goodwin et al., 1981; Perrot et al., 1989; Gomes-Schwarz et al., 1990; Leifer et al., 1993; Deblinger et al., 1994; Heibert-Murphy, 1998; Green et al., 1998). Of interest is the suggestion that childhood experiences other than sexual abuse may negatively impact on women's responses (Gomes-Schwarz, et al., 1990; Leifer et al., 1993). There is increasing evidence that other forms of maltreatment may be related to transgenerational transmission of all forms of abuse and neglect. However, rather than confirming earlier mother-blaming hypotheses that a maternal history of abuse causes and maintains incest the research evidence highlights the inadequacy of such explanations. Not all mothers whose children are abused have a traumatic childhood history and it is not inevitable that those who do will respond in unsupportive ways. Rather, the evidence is that such childhood experiences alone are insufficient to explain the transgenerational occurrence of abuse of any kind (Kaufman and Zigler, 1989). This is pursued in detail in chapter 6.

1.1.7 The Relationship Between a Woman's History of Abuse and the Current

Conditions of her Life

The literature has underlined the importance of women's current life circumstances in responding to their children. Leifer et al., (1993) concluded that lack of support for her child was not an inevitable consequence of a maternal history of sexual abuse, but that current functioning was a better predictor of that support. They found that substance abuse was the mediating factor: Women who suffered CSA were more likely to have a problem with substance abuse and the presence of substance abuse was more likely to result in lack of support. Gomes-Schwarz et al., (1990) also found that women who were overburdened were less likely to respond in protective

or supportive ways, whether or not they had a history of abuse themselves. This differs from Deblinger et al., (1994) who concluded that despite women with their own CSA showing increased distress and feelings of aloneness, this did not impact on their support to their children.

The potential connection between a woman's need for support and her capacity to support her child is important because of the impact disclosure can have on women and particularly those with their own history of abuse. There is substantial evidence that women with their own history of abuse are more likely to be highly distressed by their children's abuse (Deblinger et al., 1993; Hiebert-Murphy, 1998; Green et al., 1998), to attempt suicide (Goodwin, 1981) and to have mental health problems (Oates et al., 1998). However despite this, Krezlewetz and Piotrowski (1998) found that a history of CSA may encourage protective and supportive behaviour on the part of women. Female survivors of abuse are also more likely to have poor social support networks (Gibson and Hartshorne, 1996; Hiebert-Murphy, 1998), to experience a dissatisfaction and lack of support in marriage (Russell, 1986; Cole, Woolger, Power and Smith, 1992; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans and Herbison, 1994; Varia, Abidin and Dass, 1996), and to favour avoidant and emotion-focussed coping styles which may inhibit problem-solving (Johnson and Kenkel, 1991; Long and Jackson, 1993; Hiebert-Murphy, 1998). Coupled with the risk of increased distress these findings point to the need for the provision of support to non-offending mothers particularly if they have their own history of abuse. However, as I go on to argue in part 2 of this chapter, a recognition of women's need for support in their parenting should not assume that with adequate support all women will respond inevitably or 'naturally' as 'protective' or 'supportive mothers'. This is particularly so when protection and support are judged by the presence of unwaivering belief and a decision to choose the child over the husband (Krane, 1994).

1.4 Research on Women's Decisions about their Marriages

I have argued that women's support and protection have frequently been assessed by their decisions in relation to their marriages. However, there is only one other research project which enquires directly about how women make these decisions after paternal incest (Sirles and Lofberg, 1990), though a number of clinical papers and qualitative research

articles cite separation and reunification rates in various populations. These studies are generally small and not representative, but they suggest that the decisions women make about the future of their marriages are varied. For example, in eight separate reports spanning the period 1977 to 1992, separation rates ranged from 100% to 15%. Specifically, Browning and Boatman (1977) [6] cited all of their eight families as separating; at the other extreme, Burgess et al., (1977) reported that 11% of their sample separated; Giaretto (1981) claims that only 15% of families attending a clinical programme for incest, fail to reunite; Server and Janzen (1982) note that 69% of 55 families attending a family reunification programme separated over a two year period; Hubbard (1989) cites 45% of 11 families separating; Sirles and Lofberg (1990) found that 48% of the 128 women in their sample, eventually divorced; Hooper (1992) comments that 82% of the 11 women she interviewed separated from their partners; and Johnson (1992) noted that 66% of the six women she interviewed separated or were already divorced at the time of disclosure.

The range of findings evident in these reports and the vast time span covered, suggests that it is not inevitable that women will maintain their marriages after the discovery of incest as had been assumed in the clinical literature. The different social considerations and financial possibilities for women in the 1990's may mean that they have more choice than they did when much of the mother blaming literature first evolved in the 1960's and 1970's, and greater community awareness of sexual abuse may be reflected in women's greater willingness to believe the allegations of abuse (Mulligan, 1986; Humphreys, 1990; Hooper, 1992). But the figures cited do not appear to reflect an historical shift toward women leaving relationships, as their choices have improved. Rather the figures suggest that women continue to struggle with the decision; many choose to end the marriage, and some to maintain it.

Questioning exactly what influences the resolution of this struggle led Sirles and Lofberg (1990) to conduct the only research of which I am aware, which focuses specifically on how women decide the future of the marital

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[6] The number of families in the research was 14, but only 8 of these involved paternal incest.

relationship after incest. They examined data from intake interviews at a child guidance centre in Washington. Permanent separation was deemed to be divorce taking place after disclosure. 48% of the 123 cases ended in divorce, and the divorce and non-divorce cases were compared. They concluded **no** significant relationship existed for the following variables:

- the relationship of the abuser to the child (biological

  father/stepfather)
- mother's employment status (68% were employed)

- presence of physical abuse of the child

- denial or admission by the abuser (69% denied)

- type of abuse

- history of alcohol abuse by the abuser

- child's secrecy.

Significant relationships were found for the following:
- age of the victim (72.7% separated when preschool age; 61.5% when latency age; 33.8% when teenage)

- who the abuse was revealed to (separation was much more likely when abuse was revealed to the mother, rather than a friend or professional)

- history of physical abuse of the mother (separation occurred in 68% of families where mother had been abused)

- mother's initial belief or disbelief (separation was much more likely when the disclosure was initially believed by the mother)

- duration of sexual abuse (the longer the abuse, the more likely families would remain intact).

Reviewing the results, they challenged some of the earlier myths which painted mothers as weak, passive and willing to keep the family together at all costs, but suggested that women in families which divorced were more able to use social resources in both initially reporting the abuse and in protecting their children (Sirles & Lofberg, 1990).

This study provided valuable information about families divorcing after a disclosure of incest and pointed the way for further research, however it had limitations which are heightened when located within the concurrent research on women's subjective experiences. Most obviously, focussing on 'divorce' does not attend to those women who were not legally married and yet who, it is apparent in the research, are least likely to leave partners – those in defacto relationships. It is also clear that women go through a complex process after disclosure, but by focusing on divorce the researchers captured families at a particular point in that process. This obscured the importance of the process itself in reaching decisions. While other researchers have not focussed directly on this question, they have highlighted that separation and divorce may occur over an extended period, even if not an immediate response to the incest (Hooper, 1992; Hubbard, 1989; Johnson, 1992). Further, women's choices may not simply be in terms of the child or the man, but may involve attempting to support both of them. Johnson (1985, p.229) concluded that for the women in her research decisions depended on:

> ...the age of her daughter at the time of disclosure; whether the daughter will still be in the home and will require further protection from the father; if the mother feels the husband has been punished, if there are leverages available to enforce new behaviour in her husband; and what her conditions are for staying together.

The anecdotal evidence from case material supports these findings. Hewitt & Barnard's (1984) description of a group programme run for mothers whose children had been incestuously abused, reported that of the ten women who had remained 'emotionally attached to their husbands' after the disclosure, over a period of time three subsequently decided to end the relationship with the abuser. Burgess, Holstrom and McClausland's (1978) discussion of divided loyalties after incest, further underlined these aspects of decision-making. In one case example they described the process by which a woman decided to reunite with her husband after initially separating from him, due to his abuse of her daughter. Their description highlighted the range of complex and sometimes contradictory factors influencing her decision. She considered her relationship with her husband, her sense of failure as a mother and wife, pleas from her mother-in-law to take him back, her daughter's willingness to have him back, his agreement to abide by

certain conditions and discussions with her counsellor.   Finally, she explained:

> I want to do my best. I want to be sure I have tried
> everything before making a decision to break up the family
> (Burgess et al., 1978, p.,120).

In summary, the available evidence suggests that not only will many women choose to end their marriages, but whatever decision they make will be based on a subjective and shifting assessment of a range of competing needs and issues. Significant in these appears to be the nature of familial relationships and their perceived role as mothers and wives in these families. In part 2 of this chapter I will explore how the clinical literature on incest has viewed these two dimensions of the decision-making context for women. That is, the perceptions of families and of women as mothers which have characterised the literature.

Part 2
Explorations of Motherhood and Family

In this section I explore the perceptions of families underlying the clinical literature, and the way in which women in these families came to be constructed as 'mothers'. Within the incest literature families were initially portrayed in such pathological terms that it was indeed difficult to imagine anyone making an informed choice in favour of preserving them.   From the psychoanalytic through the 'family systems' analyses and including the feminist critique, families where incest occurred were described as 'pathological', 'dysfunctional' or 'patriarchal'. Despite this negative perception of families women continued to be defined in that literature by their family roles and relationships, particularly in relation to their children. There is an emerging understanding that family relationships are more complex than previously portrayed, but despite this recognition the parameters of the central debate have remained; that is, the extent to which mothers support and protect their children in response to sexual abuse. This has meant that in the clinical literature, women continue to be constructed primarily as 'mothers', and in doing so the multi-dimensional nature of their lives frequently remains obscured.[7] The inadequacy of these analyses of women's relationships in their families is highlighted in this chapter by an overview of the feminist discourses on family and motherhood. These have been central preoccupations of feminist theorising over the last three decades. This interest has grown out of a recognition of their centrality in constructing women's lives, which emerged with the so called 'second wave' feminists of the 1960's and 1970's (Gordon, 1982; Gittins, 1993; Tobias, 1997). Motherhood can be seen as one aspect of the ideology of the family and yet requires a separate discussion since it has remained the issue which most divides and connects feminists across the spectrum of political thought.   In this discussion I will review the way in which feminists have

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[7] I use the term 'multi-dimensional' and 'uni-dimensional' in relation to women. Coincidentally Krane (1994) also uses these terms, but since I had developed them prior to becoming aware of her work, I do not credit her at this point. However her influence on my conceptualising is appropriately cited throughout the thesis.

conceptualised the family and motherhood. In doing so I will attend to the relevance of feminist theorising in understanding women's responses to father-child incest.

1.4 The Construction of Women as 'Mothers' in the Clinical Literature on Incest

Throughout the clinical literature on incest, a discernible transformation took place over several decades. Once there was an interest in the family and in understanding the 'context' of abuse, women lost any independence of identity and existed only in relation to their family roles. They were described as 'wives', 'spouses', and much more frequently 'mothers'. On the rare occasions in the family dysfunction literature where they were called 'women', this was usually as a literary device to avoid repetition of the word 'mother' rather than from any recognition of their claim to their own identities (Gutheil and Avery, 1973; Lukianowicz, 1972). For the most part they were referred to as objects of others, rather than subjects in their own right. They 'belonged to' their children as mothers and to their husbands as wives, but their own interests as women remained invisible.

Throughout the family dysfunction literature women were judged by the extent to which they were seen to have failed in these wifely and mothering duties (Humphreys, 1990). Women's lists of failures as 'wives' include sexually 'frustrating' and 'deserting' or 'rejecting' their husbands (Lukianowicz, 1972; Kaufman et al., 1954; Lustig, 1966), and 'creating opportunities' for their husbands to offend by going out, working outside the home, taking a holiday, and leaving others to do the housework (Justice and Justice, 1979). Even dying was described as 'desertion' (Zuelzer and Reposa, 1983). In reviewing the literature one could be forgiven for concluding that the role of a 'wife' was to provide sex on request and see to the housework (Cohen, 1983; Kaufman et al., 1954; Machotka et al., 1967). The list of transgressions committed by one woman in an 'incest family' included the following, and serves as representative of the manifest failings of all 'incest mothers':

> Refusal to have intercourse with one's husband, … setting up one's daughter's room next to the husband's … requiring the daughter to take over household duties … being absent from the house … are all covert but unambiguous messages both to the husband and to the daughter that the daughter is to assume some of the functions normally exercised by the wife (Machotka et al., 1967, p. 110).

While the women's failings as 'wives' were lamented by many in the literature the strongest rage was reserved for their perceived failings as 'mothers' (Sgroi, Blick and Porter, 1982; Gutheil and Avery, 1983). Women have been seen to 'relinquish responsibility' as a mother (Kaufman et al., 1954), to 'lack psychological investment in their children', (Zuelzer and Reposa, 1983), and even that the incest represented their daughters' revenge against their bad mothering (Cohen, 1983). Throughout the literature the word 'mother' eventually became synonymous with 'woman' and multi-dimensional women became judged by the extent to which they were seen to respond as 'mothers' (Kaufman, et al., 1954; Lustig, 1966; Machotka et al., 1967; Lukianowicz, 1972; Justice and Justice, 1979; Mrazek and Bentovim, 1981; Bennett, 1980; Zuelzer and Reposa, 1983; Dale et al., 1986; Hildebrande and Forbes, 1987; Tinling, 1990).

The feminist critiques of this literature exposed the biases under-pinning these conclusions, including the myth of the all-powerful, all-knowing mother (Humphreys, 1990). Feminists criticised the expectation that women fulfil their maternal role to the exclusion of all else and challenged the underlying assumption of motherhood as natural and fulfilling (McIntyre, 1981; Wattenberg, 1985). Rather, the feminist analysis argued, women's mothering is conditional on the circumstances in which it is conducted (Schonberg, 1992; Hooper, 1992; Sheinberg, 1992; Dempster, 1996).

However, in subtle ways the feminist response has sometimes been confused in its attitude to the central construction of women as mothers. Not only have women continued to be referred to as mothers in almost all of the clinical literature, but enabling them to be more effective mothers has often been used as an argument for their empowerment (Sheinberg, 1992; Schonberg, 1992). This view does not necessarily challenge the expectation that women are the key to protection:

> Mothers universally developing confidence, reaching out from isolation, and becoming in tune with their children will help protect future generations (, p.,43).

Though no longer explicit, it is still frequently expected that if constraints to them doing so are identified and removed, women would put the interests of their children first and would function as 'protective mothers'. This construction of women as mothers began with the early mother-blaming literature but has continued to the present, despite the challenges to other aspects of the literature. There are two primary reasons why feminists have not yet adequately challenged this. First, the parameters of debate have been largely set by the early mother-blaming literature. In simplified form the assertions in the various phases of the literature go something like this: *Phase 1*; women collude in incest and are central to both its occurrence and continuation. They fail in their role as protective mothers. *Phase 2*; women may 'collude' but this is out of their powerlessness in exploitative marriages, and a patriarchal social system. If given resources they can be protective mothers. *Phase 3*; women do not collude, nor is there widespread failure to protect their children. Many women are able to perform as protective mothers despite the real constraints which they face. *Phase 4*; if most women can respond supportively what is wrong with those who do not do so? In each phase, the extent to which women are 'protective mothers' has remained the central focus. The second reason why the construction of women as mothers has not been adequately challenged, is that within feminism, motherhood has remained an area of intense debate and divergent views.

1.5 Feminists Constructions of Motherhood

While the women's movement has been accused of being anti-maternity, it is more accurate to say that feminists have embraced all positions on motherhood from idealisation to denigration (Glenn, 1994; Umansky, 1996, Tobias, 1997). The range of debates pursued in the feminist literature have included whether motherhood delivers power or subordination to women; whether it is the 'experience' or the 'institution' of mothering which is oppressive; accusations that some feminist theorising has become

essentialist and universalist in its assumptions about women's experiences of motherhood; the role of mothering in the reproduction of patriarchy; the compatibility of feminism and maternity; the role of reproductive technologies in giving women choices or usurping their centrality in conception and child-bearing; and the relationships between mothers and daughters, to name a few (Mitchell, 1971; Rich, 1976; Dinnerstein, 1977; Chodorow, 1978; Ruddick, 1982; Eisenstein, 1983; Snitow, 1992; Glenn, 1994; Gordon, 1990; Umansky, 1996; Brush, 1996). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to adequately explore the detail and breadth of these debates. I will focus instead on the issue which has emerged as central to this thesis; how have feminists conceptualised women's relationship to mothering, and what are the implications for women after incest.[8]

1.5.1 The Idealisation and Denigration of Motherhood

The centrality of motherhood to feminist theorising began with second wave feminism, and in the beginning represented a reaction against the 'compulsory motherhood' of the 1950's and '60's (Eisenstein, 1983).[9] The family was seen as the *context* of women's inevitable oppression and motherhood as the major *cause*. Some feminists were scathing in their criticisms of motherhood and the female body and saw freedom from reproduction as the key to emancipation (Firestone, 1970; Snitow, 1992). As Eisenstein (1983, p.69) summarised it, many feminists in these early years chose not to be mothers "… because motherhood – the bearing and raising of children – seemed to be rather more a barrier to fulfillment in women than a vehicle for it."[10]

However, some feminists, including those who were mothers questioned the inevitability of motherhood as "tyranny" (Firestone, 1970). Adrienne Rich's (1976) exploration of motherhood as both "experience" and "institution" represented a defense of the possibilities of maternity when it could be freed from the impact of patriarchy. The institution, represented by the ideology

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[8] Excellent overviews and analyses of the historical debates exist elsewhere, and the reader is referred to these for greater detail. See for example, Snitow, 1992; Glenn, Forcey and Chang, 1994; Umansky, 1996; Eisenstein, 1983, 1991; Brush, 1996.

[9] Umansky (1996) also argues that the focus on motherhood was in part borne out of feminism's attempts to find a common association among women which transcended class and race, and that the centrality of the mother in the black American culture was a powerful influence on white feminist theorising.

[10] Snitow (1992) has argued that feminism was never anti-maternity. Rather, she says, questioning the inevitability of motherhood was so radical as to be seen as anti-motherhood. Nevertheless, women from inside and outside the feminist movement perceived that motherhood was in danger of being abandoned to patriarchy, rather than transformed to meet women's interests (See, for example Roiphe, 1996).

of motherhood was identified as patriarchy's attempt to alienate women from control over their bodies, lives and children. It could be seen to limit women's choices about *whether* to mother, the *conditions* under which they mothered, and the extent of their lives *outside* mothering (Thorne, 1982).

Within the ideology motherhood had been both mystified and denigrated but as Glenn (1994) noted, these contradictions could be accommodated. It was idealised as instinctual, totally fulfilling, and as responsible for the creation and sustenance of human development. At the same time status was attached to productivity in the 'public' world rather than the home, mothers were blamed for the psychological ills of their offspring and experts offered advice and training on how to mother appropriately.

And yet, suggested Rich (1976), it was not motherhood *per se* which was inevitably problematic for women. Rather, it was the conditions under which women were expected to mother which were at fault. She argued that fertility was historically a source of great power and creativity and that despite patriarchy, women were still managing to resist domination on a daily basis by salvaging, what she called "tenderness", "trust in our instincts", and "courage" in their mothering practices (Rich, 1976, p.279). [11]

These two polarised positions of feminism in relation to motherhood, (the potential power attached to maternity versus the inevitable oppression), have been criticised on two key fronts. First, they have been accused of universalism and essentialism, assuming that white, middle class, heterosexual women's interests and experiences inevitably reflect those of all women (Glenn, 1994; Hill Collins, 1994; Umansky, 1996). Second, though both intended to transcend patriarchal control of reproduction, in the final analysis they reflected that part of the ideology which had so frustrated feminists; the perpetuation of the process of idealisation and denigration. Chodorow and Contratto (1982, p.57) accused several influential feminists of "the idealization of maternal possibility". They argued that Rich, along with other
feminist writers such as Dinnerstein (1976), Flax (1978) and Arcana (1979), implied that if the conditions of women's mothering were to change then they could indeed be "perfect mothers". They argued that this analysis had its roots in Freud's theorising of the significance of the early mother-child

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[11] One of the most articulate and widely cited of feminist writers who can be traced to this tradition is Sarah Ruddick (for example, 1982). I will not be specifically analysing her contribution, since for the purposes of this discussion it is the theme of pro-maternity that I wish to pursue rather than the detail of the arguments.

relationship as the basis for later psychological development and that 'maternal idealisation' and 'mother blaming' are two sides of the one coin. Both assume the 'all-powerful' mother. As they summarised it:

> Feminists take issue with the notion that a mother can be perfect in the here and now, given male dominance, lack of equality in marriage, and inadequate resources and support, but the fantasy of the perfect mother remains: If current limitations on mothers were eliminated, mothers would know naturally how to be good (Chodorow and Contratto, 1982, p.65).

It is an issue taken up by Glenn (1994), who argues that some feminists have been captured by the parameters of the dominant constructions of motherhood and utilise language which serves to romanticise and idealise motherhood in the same way that 'anti-feminists' have. These ideas are apparent for example, in the women's peace movement where women's rights are asserted on the basis of "…special knowledge or moral qualities by virtue of being mothers" (Glenn, 1994, p.22).

Brush (1996) identified these ideas as feminist *maternalism*, and explored their representation in contemporary feminist discourse. As she explained:

> By *maternalism* I mean arguments that support women's personhood and claims to integrity, autonomy, dignity, security and political voice on the basis of what Molly Ladd-Taylor calls mother-work. Maternalists claim entitlements to citizenship rights and benefits on the basis of mother-work as a source of women's political personhood (Brush, 1996, p.430).

Reviewing the work of thirty feminist authors in the area, she described maternalism as "feminism for hard times" (Brush, 1996, p.431). In highlighting the benefits and dangers of basing feminist politics in mother-work, or in what Ruddick (1982) called 'maternal thinking', Brush outlines the maternalist argument that to adequately 'protect, nurture and train' children, mothers need conditions to promote their autonomy and security. While applauding the empowerment of mothers within the state and support for 'mother-work', she highlights the dangers of such an approach. These include the reservation that maternalist arguments have historically been used to moralise *against* women, a process which has inevitably meant that some women are 'protected' and others 'condemned'. Brush concludes that the balance of evidence is that maternalism is *not* an adequate foundation for feminist politics. She writes:

> Maternalism has not increased the value of mother-work in either the market or social policy …. Maternalism has nowhere radically redefined the sexual division of labor. The same failings could plausibly be levelled at feminism more generally, of course, which is why maternalism looks good, in principle, when feminists are feeling beleaguered.   This is exactly what I mean when I claim that maternalism is feminism for hard times ….. The jury is still out … on whether maternalism mixed with a focus on women as citizens, workers, and sexually autonomous beings will generate better outcomes in the future than it has in the past (Brush, 1996, pp.453,454).

Arguments which call for women's empowerment on the basis of their maternal duties should therefore be accepted cautiously. And yet it is these ideas I suggest, which have crept into the contemporary analysis of incest, while their implications have remained relatively unexplored.

1.5.2 The Relevance of Feminist Theorising on Motherhood, to the Clinical

Literature on Incest

The influence of Rich (1976) and contemporary maternalist arguments are evident in the clinical literature on incest, which I previously outlined. Underlying the defense of 'mothers' by some writers, including feminists, is the assumption that it is the *conditions* of their mothering which prevents them from responding as 'protective' and 'supportive'. This is a short step from suggesting that with adequate resources, knowledge and support they will inevitably respond in their children's interests, or even that women's and children's interests coincide. I am left with the same ambivalence about feminist maternalism that Brush (1996) articulated: The research demonstrates that responding as 'mothers' is costly for women and that they require support in doing so (Hubbard, 1989; Humphreys, 1990; Hooper, 1992; Dempster, 1996). However an expectation that if constraints are addressed women will respond *inevitably* or *naturally* as 'mothers', risks condemning those who fail to meet such expectations.

The danger of the maternalist arguments when applied to incest is that they contribute to the process by which women are transformed into 'mother protectors'. Krane (1994) argued that the child protection system relies heavily on women to perform the role of 'mother', and that intervention into the lives of families after sexual abuse has been weighted toward ensuring they responded as 'mother protectors'. The consequences of this she argued,

was to shift the emphasis from men's offending behaviour to women's failure to protect children and "… thus to interventions that seek to transform women into effective protectors" (p.,14).   In her critique of Canada's child welfare model, she observed the following: [12]

> Re-writing the problem as mother's failure to protect solidifies the centrality of women in responses to the problem (of men's abuse of children) …. (I)nvestigation, assessment, and ongoing casework practices implicitly or explicitly aim to transform multi-dimensional women into largely one-dimensional mother protectors (Krane, 1994, p.,281).

Krane does not dispute that children need protection from harm, but questions the automatic assumption that 'mothers' must provide it. This process of transforming women into 'mother-protectors' she argues, involves emphasising the mother's belief, support and protection as a priority and disregarding the woman's own needs and responses; that is, it involves *obliging* them to protect, rather than allowing a real choice. While women's feelings may be acknowledged in this process, the *real* purpose of protective and clinical intervention centers on enlisting their belief in and support for their children, and encouraging anger at and rejection of their husbands. The consequences of this for women are enormous:

> This translation of "protection" to mean that children need a nurturing, supportive mother is so natural and acceptable that it is almost beyond any question. In fact it is rarely apparent and articulated. At the same time, this realization of protectiveness ensures that women will be investigated, inspected, evaluated, adjusted and transformed …. (Krane, 1994, p.,264).

There exists however, a dilemma for feminists who do not wish to transform women into 'mother protectors'. That is, social citizenship brings with it obligations as well as rights, and parents have a responsibility to protect children from harm. However translating this citizenship obligation into an expectation that women respond without ambivalence or uncertainty (Leifer et al., 1993), and that their level of support be demonstrated by their ready willingness to leave offending men (Faller, 1988; Everson et al., 1989), is an error of logic. Recognising women's person-hood does not mean that they must respond inevitably as 'mothers'. Rather, as I argue in the concluding chapter, it requires practitioners to engage and invite women into protective

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[12] The intervention model she identified in Canada, is consistent with that of Victoria.

and supportive behaviours, while still recognising their own rights and choices as adults.

While the clinical literature has contributed to and helped confine women within this construction of 'mother', the feminist-inspired research has successfully highlighted the emotional, psychological, practical and social constraints which encourage women's disbelief and the challenges involved in 'acting protectively'. It has been demonstrated that simplistic expectations obscure the reality of the often conflicting and contradictory demands made upon women. For what does it mean when the demands of a loving, protective 'mother' are in conflict with those of a loving, supportive 'wife' as happens after a disclosure of father-child incest (La Fontaine, 1990), or when a woman's perceptions of her own interests are in conflict with those of other family members? Hooper eloquently highlighted the implications of the family context of abuse for women. She argued:

> In a social and economic context which structures women's
> priorities to place their husbands' needs first, then their
> children's and then their own ... and where more status and
> economic security is attached to marriage than to motherhood,
> it is not surprising that mothers' reactions to sexual abuse in
> the family also reflect the threat to themselves as wives ... as
> well as mothers .... (W)hile professionals may clearly define
> what has happened as abuse, to mothers it may be a mixture
> of betrayal of trust, infidelity, rejection by both partner and
> child as well as abuse (Hooper, 1989, p.24).

The response is not just about marriage versus motherhood, as though they represent distinct choices. Hooper (1992) pursued this idea when she argued that the desire for a 'normal family' which implicitly includes father *and* child, constitutes a powerful aspect of women's responses to incest. Yet the way in which *family* figures in women's lives has also been inadequately conceptualised by feminists in relation to incest, despite a rich history of theorising within feminism.

1.6 Perceptions of Families In the Incest Literature

Perceptions of 'incest families' over the history of the clinical literature have been determined by the dominant view of families prevalent in the social sciences at the time. For example, the influence of structural-functionalist views led to families where incest occurred initially being seen as an aberration and abnormal. As a consequence, the way in which these families differed from the 'haven' of the 'normal' family was the focus of enquiry and their failings and inadequacies dominated descriptions.[13]

Feminist analysis then drew on the broader critique of the family which began with second wave feminism and which held the family as the primary site of female oppression and exploitation (Thorne and Yalom, 1982; Gittins, 1993; Tobias, 1997). It is not surprising then that the view of 'incest families' which emerged throughout the literature was of an oppressive, damaging, loveless unit with few apparent redeeming features (McIntyre, 1981; Carter et al., 1986; Dominelli, 1989). In the following description by feminist writers, this view of the family is apparent, as are some of the earlier views of individual weakness and vulnerability, albeit in a more sympathetic form:

> Incest is activated by a particular family when two
> emotionally deprived, emotionally dependent parents play
> the roles that patriarchal society has assigned them: He
> blusters and she defers; she helplessly placates and he
> demands; he intimidates or batters and she withdraws.
> When this domestic tyranny has completely isolated both of
> them and created distance between mother and daughter, he
> molests his daughter and calls it 'love' (Carter et al, 1986,
> p.302).

Many families where incest occurred could be described in this way, and a number of studies have found that violence and sexual abuse of children frequently coexist. Estimations of this vary but there is evidence that physical violence may be present in over half the reported cases of incest (Tormes, 1968; Dietz and Craft, 1980; Gordon and O'Keefe, 1984; Truesdell, McNeil and Dreschner, 1986). As one study concluded:

These results support the conjecture that some fathers in incestuous families underscore their authority by physical abuse of their wives and physical and sexual abuse of their daughters (Dietz and Craft, 1980).

There are marked parallels between the clinical literature on incest and violence. But despite these parallels, constructing women's attachment to their husbands after sexual abuse *primarily* as powerlessness due to violence, is inadequately supported by the research evidence. Sirles and Lofberg (1990) found that women who were subject to violence were more likely to divorce after incest, not less likely as would be predicted by this analysis. The evidence suggests that there are marked differences between women's responses to physical violence against themselves, and sexual abuse of their child.[14] But the deserved criticism of systems theory and the demise of structural-functionalism, has left a vacuum in ways of conceptualising this issue, apart from the feminist analysis of women's powerlessness. This description left little room for understanding how women could possibly wish to maintain their marriages, if given real choices. And yet, as I have argued, the evidence that women have been so reluctant to give them up is inconclusive.

While there are clearly commonalities in decision-making between women subject to violence and women whose children are abused, there are also differences. Sirles and Lofberg's (1990) findings that women who have been physically abused are more likely to leave when their children are sexually abused, that economic independence has no apparent influence on this decision, and that they leave when their children are younger,

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[13] Structural functionalists viewed the traditional family, as represented by bread-winner husband, home-maker wife and children, as the 'natural' and socially desirable form (Boss and Thorne, 1989). The family was romanticised as a private haven, and this, together with Freud's lingering influence, meant incest was seen as an aberration.

[14] This is not to suggest that women's responses to violent partners may not include similar issues to those responding to incest. Rather, I am highlighting the evidence that whatever reasons women stay in violent relationships, once a man has sexually abused her child she is more likely to leave him if she has also been subject to violence. This suggests that powerlessness is an inadequate explanation. However similarities in the treatment of violence and incest in the literature are worth noting. As with incest, it was invariably assumed that women stay in violent relationships, though research suggests that a substantial proportion leave after episodes of violence (Gelles, 1976; Strube and Barbour, 1983; Kirkwood, 1993; Mullender and Morley, 1994). Staying in the relationship was also seen as evidence of weakness and psychopathology, until the feminist analysis demonstrated the constraints to women leaving (Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce, 1991). In looking at factors which influence women's decisions, it is apparent that there is a complex interaction of objective and subjective variables. It has consistently been shown in relation to violence that economic independence is critical, with women more likely to leave when they are employed, and that severe and frequent violence is more likely to result in women leaving home. However subjective variables such as the woman's belief in the man's ability to change, her commitment to the relationship, the extent to which she experiences guilt over her capacity to protect herself, and perceived conflict between her roles as wife and mother, are

all suggest that the picture is more complex than fear and disempowerment.[15] In fact Tormes (1968) had earlier suggested that men were more successful in ensuring their wives would stay if they used methods other than overt violence.[16] She reported that several of the men in her study ruled through "affection", and through making themselves indispensable. The presence of violence and abuse, has blinded some feminists to explanations other than powerlessness. The construction of family life as inevitably detrimental to women, and women's attachment to their families as based on power and control, failed to account for the complexity of women's experiences in their families. While feminist discourse in relation to the family moved beyond this characterisation, these ideas have not yet figured prominently in the incest literature.

1.7 From Abandonment to Transformation:
Feminist Engagement with the Institution of the Family

Since Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963) gave voice to the disillusionment and oppression of the middle-class housewives of America, feminists have had a strong interest in the Western institution of the traditional family. This interest has included debates about the extent to which it is a site of oppression or power for women; analysis of women's work, including caring and housework; and the relationship between employment and family tasks, to name a few (Tobias, 1997; Finch, 1989). These debates have followed a similar path to the one on motherhood, and have tended to polarise around the issue of family as 'institution' and 'experience'. Feminist conceptualisations of the family can be roughly divided into two phases. The early focus conceptualised the traditional family as detrimental to women's interests, and as inevitably oppressive for women (Tobias, 1997).[17] However this consensus evaporated as a second

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also central in her decision (Gelles, 1976; Pfouts, 1978; Strube and Barbour, 1983; NiCarthy, 1987; Mullender and Morley, 1994).

[15] This is not to suggest that in *particular* instances, fear is not the predominant factor. However it appears to be inadequate as a *general* explanation.

[16] The cycle of seduction and violence is also recognised in the violence literature, but this not the pattern to which Tormes (1968) was referring.

[17] A range of authors have described aspects of the history of feminism's vexed relationship with the family (Hughes, 1997; Tobias, 1997; Thorne and Yalom, 1982; Epstein, 1988; Hess and Sussman, 1984; Gittins, 1993), and I will not do so at length here. In particular, Thorne (1982) has summarised and categorised the early feminist critiques, and remains a useful summary.

phase quickly emerged, characterised by a recognition of the complexity of women's relationships and both the negative and nurturant aspects of family life. This has culminated in a current interest not only in women's oppression, but also in the way in which domination is resisted, and attempts to transform the institution itself.[18]

1.7.1 Feminist Critiques of 'The Traditional Family'.

> *Feminist thinking has not only demystified the home as a workplace but as a locale of intense intimacy, of close encounters not always of the loving kind. It has x-rayed the greeting-card image of the smiling family to reveal the barred teeth of rage and pain: cases of incest, rape, wife battering, murder of the soul - not isolated, but remarkably well spread. The family has been unmasked in its oppressive relations, besides the more cliched supportive ones .... Family harmony exists, but it is an achievement, not an omnipresent, given, natural condition (Bridenthal, 1982, p.234).*

The early consensus about the need for radical change within the family, represented in the preceding statement, was a reaction against the ignorance and romanticism of the structural functionalist representations of the family. Feminists highlighted all that they did not - conflict, power, and the historical and cultural specificity of the so called 'traditional family' (Boss and Thorne, 1991). These critiques can be compacted into three overlapping and interconnected themes: challenging the myths of the monolithic family, and the heterogeneity of family forms both historically and culturally; highlighting the family's role in legitimating women's oppression; and underlining the role of gender in determining familial experiences (Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako, 1982; Thorne and Yalom, 1982; Gittins, 1993; Finch, 1989; Baber and Allen, 1992; Epstein, 1988; Tobias, 1997).[19]

While structural functionalist views had been based on the notion of the modern family as 'natural' and inevitable, feminists highlighted the

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[18] This is not to suggest that there is a consensus in the second phase. See for example Iris Marion Young's chapter on 'House and Home' for discussion of some of these issues as they continue to emerge in contemporary feminist debate (Young, 1997).

[19] Epstein (1988) argues that critiques of functionalism and debates about women's inequality existed within sociology for forty years, and that these have been largely ignored by feminist scholars. However she does concede that it was Friedan's (1963) critique of structural functionalism and her elucidation of the experiences of women in modern families which first brought these issues into the public domain. So while some of the critiques outlined below may have overlapped and coincided with other writers, not particularly feminist in orientation, I will limit my discussion to the feminist contribution to these debates.

relatively recent construction of the current family form of breadwinner-father, caregiver-mother and dependent children, and the gendered nature of the underlying ideology (Gittins, 1993). It was pointed out that some cultures

have no word for 'family', and that far from supporting the notion of universality, the anthropological and historical evidence is that the family was "… a moral and ideological unit that appears, not universally, but in particular social orders..." and further, that "...we will not find Families exist in a society where public and political life is radically different from our own" (Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako, 1982, p.27). Defining the family as nuclear, heterosexual, and with man as breadwinner and wife as home-maker, has meant that other familial arrangements have been denied legitimacy. So single-parent, homosexual, childless families have all been seen as inferior to the dominant family form. This ideal, which has been enshrined at every level of our social world, including legislation, social policy, religious practices and economic arrangements, has served to "... reinforce the ideology and penalise or ostracise those who transgress it" (Gittins,1993, p.71).

Feminists identified the family as a *social* institution with a *social* purpose, characterised by an ideology rooted in patriarchy and which was consequently oppressive to women. This analysis belied the notion of family as 'private' and separate from the 'public' sphere (Thorne and Yalom, 1982; Flax, 1983; Epstein, 1988; Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Baber and Allen, 1992; Gittins, 1993; Tobias, 1997). It was this nexus between the public and private which feminists identified as the source of women's subordination. While radical feminists located women's oppression within reproduction, socialist feminists emphasised men's control over production both within the home and in the 'public world'. As Delphy and Leonard (1992, p.1) explained:

> ...domestic groups are not just random sets of people united by bonds of affection and kinship who live together and share out the jobs that need doing ... Rather they are also (indeed they are primarily) part of a system of *labour relations* in which men benefit from, and exploit, the work of women .... Family relationships can and do involve *economic exploitation*, even though 'economic' and 'exploitation' are supposed to be kept apart from the nice cosy world of the home (italics in original).

Feminists have argued that the economic exploitation inherent in the ideology of the family, extends beyond particular families to represent women's 'proper place', so that even when employed outside the home, women have been channelled into and exploited in jobs designed to imitate the mother/wife role (Thorne,1982).[20]

Firestone (1970) argued that the power inequity at a societal level made inequality an inevitable outcome of heterosexual union. Her conclusion, that the answer was to do away with the family itself, was widely shared by feminists (Tobias, 1997), and the inevitability of the inequality of family life remains a concern for some feminists. Gittins summarises it thus:

> Contemporary ideology of the family presents marriage as an equal partnership between a man and a woman who love each other. In reality, the social, political and economic structures of modern industrial society are such that only in the rarest of cases can marriage ever be equal (Gittins, 1990, p.90).

While the ideology might dictate the family as 'haven', feminists have pointed out that the term itself, suggestive of a common, family experience, belies the differences for those who comprise it. The two core organizing principles of family life, it has been argued, are gender and generation (Thorne, 1982; Goldner, 1988; Epstein, 1988), an idea encapsulated in Jesse Bernard's (1972) coining of the term "his and her marriages" . The term 'the family' denies and obscures the multiplicity of experiences of family life, between families generally, and within particular families. In a multitude of ways, feminists have demonstrated, understanding family life is impossible without resorting to an analysis of gender (Oakley, 1974; Thorne, 1982; Goldner, 1988; Epstein, 1988; Finch, 1989).

The focus of the different experiences of men and women in families has been on the issues of caring and violence. It is noted that while men 'escape' to home, women continue to be burdened by disproportionate responsibilities for the care of others, but it is the issue of violence which has been most powerful in underlying the fallacy of the 'family as haven'

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[20] Michael Gilding (1991) explored the way in which Australian women historically were directed into becoming housewives and mothers, or what he calls the "construction of dependency". Outlining the "compelling economic inducements to marriage" from the late nineteenth century, he demonstrated the role of the State, at a variety of levels, in ensuring that women's economic security was linked not to workforce participation, but to marriage (Gilding, 1991, p. 49 ff). Activities of the State which he identifies included changing the census classification which biased categories toward breadwinners and dependents; new school curricula which more actively directed boys toward the workforce and girls toward domesticity; the "living wage" for women being half that of men; and the rise of the cultural, medical and psychological experts who warned women of the dangers of the workforce to themselves and their families.

(Epstein, 1988; Finch, 1989; Gittins, 1991; Dempsey, 1997). The level and extent of violence led some radical feminists to conclude that the family as it exists is by nature, dangerous to women:

> ... it seems clear that as long as patriarchal power relations exist in any society, every child is a potential incest victim, and every father a potential rapist (Begus and Armstrong, 1983, p.239).

While some saw the family as inevitably oppressive, others blamed the ideology, but the family itself was deemed to hold possibilities beyond exploitation and oppression. These arguments reflect the similar debates which have occurred in relation to motherhood; the difference between institution and experience. These observations led Tobias (1997, p. 214) to note:

> .... (T)here has been a sizeable retreat from the original starting point on which liberal, radical, socialist and Marxist feminists all agreed: that "the male-dominated, child-centred nuclear family was the single most important site of female oppression". That consensus no longer exists.

1.7.2 Feminist Transformations:

Exploring the Potential of Family Life

From the early 1980's some feminists had begun to argue for an acknowledgment of the complexity of family relationships, and to lament the contradictions and dilemmas of family life. Current feminist scholarship is interested in the dialectical nature of women's relationships to, and in, their families and the plurality of family life. Initial disquiet with the abandoning of the family as the feminist solution was related to three concerns. While oppressive, the family also afforded women some influence and recognition. It was also the site of intense connection and emotional fulfilment, and the alternatives were inadequately theorised and constructed. At the same time as other white, largely middle-class feminists raised concerns about the complete abandonment of the traditional family, the voices of racial minorities and working class women drew attention to the fact that they had very different experiences of the family and of motherhood.

Gender alone, it was argued did not determine women's experience, nor was the family solely the source of conflict and oppression. For women of colour and working class, their families can be just as much a sanctuary and

a source of influence as of oppression.[21] It has been argued for example, that class is an essential mediator in the meaning of 'family', since family ties are what sustain people who have little opportunity of social mobility (Rapp, 1982, p.179). In relation to race, American women of colour argued that the experience of slavery and current economic oppression meant that they were more likely to have to struggle for the right to be with their families than to seek to escape them (Hill Collins, 1994). While white women demanded the right to abortion on demand, indigenous women, including Aboriginal women of Australia were having their children stolen from them, or being forced to undergo abortion or sterilisation (Hill Collins, 1994; Hughes, 1997; Tobias, 1997).[22]

There arose an inherent dilemma for feminists in pursuing the demise of the family, since many women did not identify with that aim and many placed greater value on, and experienced more prestige in, their family-related roles than their roles outside the home (Bose, 1980; Berk, 1985; both in Epstein, 1988). As Young (1997, p.151) so neatly summarised it, "Not all homemaking is housework". Even when women recognised the very inequalities which feminists had identified, this did not necessarily extend to a wish to abandon the family. For example, in Dempsey's (1997) Australian study of rural women's attitudes to carrying a far greater burden of the housework and childcare responsibilities, he found that they did not appear to see this as 'unfair'. This is despite being well-educated and adhering to 'liberal' beliefs and attitudes, including an expressed belief that tasks 'should be shared'. He concluded:

> ...the study failed to confirm the feminist prediction that if women experienced both the burden of a double workload and exposure to a feminist point of view they would come to see they were being treated unjustly by their husbands and press them to share responsibility for housework. Seventy-two percent of the women who were employed and taking overall responsibility for housework reported that the division of housework was fair. Further, two thirds of the women

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[21] This discussion by no means attempts to capture the detail of the criticism that much feminist discourse on the family had been white and middle class. The breadth and depth of writings in this area is beyond the scope of this thesis, but the reader is referred to Hill Collins (1994) or Umansky (1996) for further discussion of the issues relevant to this area of feminist theorising and practice.

[22] The ability of all women to control their own reproduction is a central feminist concern, and this discussion is not meant to detract from feminist fights for abortion. Rather the point is made that control of their own reproduction for some women is not about access to abortion, but the right to bear and keep their children. Feminist discussions of the family were not always cognisant of these interests.

engaged in full-time paid employment said the division of
housework was fair (Dempsey, 1997, pp.16,17).

Findings such as Dempsey's and those cited in Epstein could be seen as
relating as much to women's reluctance to make demands on men when they
place a high priority on maintaining a secure future for their children, or
inequalities in opportunities and rewards outside the home (Epstein, 1988).
However the tension remains that not all women appear to share the early
feminist enthusiasm for abandoning the family (Baber and Allen, 1992).
This has become increasingly obvious as feminists have begun to attend to
the emotional dimension of family life. Women's experiences in families,
many feminists noted, are about dominance *and* intimacy (Goode, 1982;
Collier et al., 1982), creativity *and* exploitation (Baber and Allen, 1992),
powerlessness *and* resistence (Richards, 1997; Baber and Allen, 1992;
Epstein, 1988; Young, 1990).   Zaretsky's lament also rings true for many
feminists:

> It is a tragic paradox that the bases of love, dependence and altruism in
> human life and the historical oppression of women have been found within
> the same matrix (Zaretsky, 1982, p.191).

1.7.3 Current Directions in Feminist Views of the Family

Current feminist discourses recognise the patriarchal roots of the institution
of the family, at the same time as struggling to account for the variety and
complexity of relationships which women experience in their particular
families. There is a burgeoning interest in understanding the way in which
women contribute to family life in both resisting domination and in
struggling to connect in meaningful relationships (Epstein, 1988; Baber and
Allen, 1992; Tobias, 1997; Young, 1997). Rather than abandon the family
there has been a shift to extend what Tobias (1997, p.167) calls "...the real,
tangible benefits of family: financial security, ... recognition in the home,
and maternal power...." to other groups, such as same-sex couples.   This
shift represents an attempt by many feminists to reclaim the family, and is as
much a reaction against the essentialist nature of some early feminist
arguments, as it is an attempt to change the nature of the institution.[23]   The
new scholarship is typified by the work of Baber and Allen (1992) and
Young (1997), who adopt very different theoretical positions but coincide in

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[23] This is not without tension, as pointed out by Snitow (1994), who argued that attempts in the late 1970's and early
'80's to reclaim 'family' for a variety of forms, were unwittingly in danger of neglecting the critiques against which
these benefits needed to be seen.

seeking to subvert blanket rejection of 'the family' and to highlight the transformative possibilities within it.

The current focus on what Baber and Allen (1992, p., 3) called "the internal contradictions of family life" has opened a range of aspects of women's lives in families to legitimate enquiry. For example, Walker (1994) has explored women's caring of their
elderly or infirm mothers and has demonstrated that alongside the gender prescriptions which place women as primary carers, are the positive aspects which may evolve for women of both generations in such arrangements. The new feminist theories in relation to the family acknowledge the social structures which underpin women's experiences and which are often oppressive, as well as recognising that women are not entirely victim to those structures.   Baber and Allen (1992, p.5) summarised this view:

> ...women, throughout their lives, shape and are shaped by their families and the society in which they live. We present women as active constructors of their own reality rather than merely as passive respondents to sociohistorical events and family socialization....Women are (frequently) treated as if they were all the same; their experiences flattened and portrayed as part of the monolithic family that feminists have deconstructed as a myth ….

Feminist analyses of the family have implications for the conceptualisation of women's responses to incest. However before exploring these fully, it is important to revisit the tension between women's agency and the power of the ideology of family and motherhood.

1.8 The End of the Familial Ideology?

Does the current feminist scholarship in relation to the family mean feminists need no longer be concerned with critiquing the "ideology of the family", or that the ideology has been replaced by a healthy and all-satisfying pluralism? Indeed, if by 'ideology' we mean a set of dominant (and dominating) ideas and practices to which people are inevitably subject, then the feminist analysis of the family and women's actions after incest, would not make sense. If however, we embrace a notion of ideology which

presupposes that people both contribute to the maintenance of social structures as well as being enormously constrained by them (Giddens, 1979), then the notion of ideology remains relevant.

Richards (1997) discussion of family ideology assists in conceptualising this issue. She defines 'ideology' as "...sets of ideas that hang together and hang around, influencing behaviour" (Richards, 1997, p.163). Her definition does not reify ideology into a rigid or constant entity which unrelentingly acts *upon* people, but rather suggests something far less solid. Ideas are seen to *influence* rather than *determine* behaviour and to have an enduring quality in that they 'hang around'. Suggested in this definition is the notion that these ideas are at once powerful but not all-powerful; that people are active agents but not totally free agents. She argues:

> People live their lives and make their family choices in the context of a pervasive societal knowledge about families that is widely accepted and taken for granted .... Ideology is not a concrete, fixed thing, a set of unshifting rules of behaviour that can be confronted and rejected .... Rather, ideology is fluid and usually invisible, operating within a taken-for-granted context of behaviour.... In Australia there is a growing body of evidence that family life is dominated by sets of ideas that qualify as ideology... (Richards, 1997, pp.162-163).

1.8.1 The Familial Ideology in Contemporary Australia

Australian studies have identified various aspects of what could be termed the 'ideology of the family' (Wearing, 1984; Burns, 1986; Richards, 1997; de Vaus and Wolcott, 1997). These ideas have gone through various transformations, but remain remarkably powerful, and even when challenged by new ideas, are not necessarily discarded themselves (Wearing, 1984; Richards, 1997). The family ideology influences amongst other things, the decisions men and women make about marriage, who can be considered 'family', the way in which household tasks are divided, the roles relegated to family members including men as economic providers and women as nurturers, decisions about having children, and the meaning of women's roles as 'mother' or 'wife' (Wearing, 1984; Gilding, 1991; Gittins, 1993; Richardson, 1993; McMahon, 1995). However as Baber and Allen (1992, p.5) note, women are not passive recipients of an unchanging ideology:

> Although societal beliefs, norms and opportunities define women's real and perceived options, the choices that women make also influence the direction of societal change. Both individually and

collectively women's decisions may perpetuate or transform social institutions.

The changes to the Australian family in the last twenty years, including the dramatic increase in "working mothers", pay testimony to the fact that women and men defy aspects of those ideas. However just because behaviour changes does not mean the end of the ideology underpinning the traditional family. In Richards' studies of women in the mid 1970's and then men and women in the 1980's, she demonstrated that the same sets of ideas in relation to motherhood held strong currency over that time. Both studies demonstrated that ideas were debated and subject to change, but they also showed what she called "...the extraordinary ability of traditional ideas to hang around, even when manifestly inappropriate to people's needs and wishes" (Richards, 1997, p.163).

Further evidence of the pervasiveness of the ideology are apparent in Australian surveys of family values which demonstrate that women's roles in mothering and marriage are still seen as central to the family and similarly, that the family should be a central preoccupation for women. De Vaus (1997) summarised three national, random sample surveys from 1989 to 1995, totaling almost 9000 respondents. The results, which he concludes can be generalised to the adult Australian population, showed the way in which so called 'traditional' family values remain both powerful and yet subject to change.

Respondents overwhelmingly believed that women's priority should be to their family and children. For example, 88% agreed that even when the youngest child is at school, 'mothers' should not work full time and 73% believed that 'if a woman works her main responsibility is still to home and children' (de Vaus, 1997). However the primacy of motherhood is only one aspect of women's familial relationships. Respondents were also affirming of marriage, leading de Vaus to argue that while the 'traditional' view of marriage is undergoing somewhat of a transformation, the centrality of the family and the emphasis on adults being "a couple" are pervasive. He found that the views respondents held in relation to marriage and divorce were

often contradictory, perhaps reflecting the tension between the ideology and the reality.[24]

The sanctity of marriage and motherhood are clearly aspects of the familial ideology reflected in the majority of people still holding that the 'two-parent family' represents the desirable norm. Children's interests, it is believed, are served by the presence of both mother and father. Thus, 62% of total respondents believed that two parents are needed to raise a child and 57% that a single mother raising children is not acceptable. This is despite the research evidence that single parenting per se is not harmful to children, though the poverty which frequently accompanies it may be (Amato, 1987; Hooper, 1994; Young, 1997).

1.8.2 Feminist Reflections: The Ideology and Incest

It is clear that the ideology of the family remains pervasive, even if under broad renegotiation. But what does this recognition, together with the feminist scholarship on the family contribute to our understanding of women's responses after incest? Primarily they require us to attend to the complexity of women's relationships within their families; the constraining aspects of the familial ideology as well as the extent to which they have agency and choice. The clinical literature on incest has not yet made adequate use of the feminist conceptualisations of families and of women's relationships within them. An analysis of women's oppression has been explored but this has restricted the focus to women's powerlessness. Others have recognised women's resistance in protecting their children's interests despite the impact of patriarchy, but have not adequately located these responses within the feminist discourse on families.

An adequate feminist conceptualisation of the family and of the lives of the women in this research, needs to be able to account for the influence of 'the ideology', or to paraphrase Richards (1997), those ideas which 'hang around' and continue to 'influence behaviour,' as well as the ability of women to contribute to, challenge and reconstruct the ideology itself. Notions of the family which focus just on the differences between families and on the ability of individuals to determine their relationships, risk falling

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[24] Almost half (44%) believed that you should stay in a marriage if your partner became mentally or physically disabled, and 78% held that 'marriage is for life', but alongside this was an acceptance of divorce when people were unhappy.

into a kind of relativism which does not give adequate attention to the 'institution', to the power and influence of the structural and ideological aspects of family life. On the other hand focussing only on those constraining aspects and not attending to the capacity of individuals and groups to resist and influence, leaves one open to the universalist and essentialist criticisms which feminism sought to decry in its early critiques of the family. Recognising what Baber and Allen (1992, p.1) call the "plurality" of family life, need not entail abandoning the valuable insights afforded by the critiques I have outlined throughout this chapter. Rather it requires feminists to sit with the tensions associated with women's central position in family life - the domination of women and their agency.

The recent feminist scholarship has much to offer in understanding women's responses to a disclosure of incest. It requires us to locate women's attachments within a social and historical context which highlights the powerful material and ideological constraints which exist for women in any negotiation of their family relationships; but paradoxically it also requires us to attend to the contradictions of their experiences and the dialectical nature of those relationships. Recognising that women have not just been victims within their families, but have also managed to resist domination attends to the extent to which they have agency in their decisions. It raises the possibility that their responses may not be simply about weakness and psychopathology, or a robotic adherence to an unquestioned dogma and requires us to consider how their relationship with the ideology of the family is represented in their responses to incest.

1.9 Summary

In this chapter, I have explored how women's decisions about the future of their marriage after incest have been understood in the clinical literature. I have argued that the debates in the literature have both reflected and reinforced social assumptions about incest and the role of women in families. Throughout the literature women have been judged in part by the nature of their on-going relationship with their husbands, and the extent to which they are seen as attached to their families. Families have been seen as pathological and patriarchal, and only recently has there been any attempt to understand the complexity of family life. Researchers informed by

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feminism, arguing that previous portrayals have been uni-dimensional, have provided evidence of the complexity of women's lives and of the range of factors which impact on their decisions after a disclosure of incest. However, the clinical literature has continued to highlight one aspect of the women's lives, and in doing so has overshadowed other aspects of being women and contributed to the social construction of mothers in situations of incest. Feminist attempts to challenge the mother-blaming literature have inadvertently been constrained by the parameters of those early debates, and have not made adequate use of the breadth of feminist scholarship on the family and on motherhood in understanding incest and women's responses.

Chapter 2

The Research Methodology:
Feminism and the 'New Epistemology'

As discussed in the previous chapter, recent research on the position of women in families where incest has occurred has sought to redress the earlier imbalance in the literature. This imbalance has in part resulted from observations and interpretations of the woman's experiences which have been made by ostensibly 'objective' observers; mostly male and mostly in positions of power and influence. This project abandoned any presumptions of 'objectivity' on the part of the researcher, and rather was fuelled by my curiosity about how the women themselves made sense of their experiences, and a desire to incorporate this knowledge into formulating alternative conceptualisations of their actions. In short, the project could be described as being within the feminist tradition of research; a tradition which is not characterised by a single method or technique, but which seeks to place women's experience and interests to the fore.

2.1 Feminist Research:
On Women's Experiences and in Women's Interests

The common theme in all feminist research is that it seeks to understand women's experiences and to develop knowledge which is in women's interests (Cook and Fonow, 1986). Growing out of feminist scholarship in a range of fields in the social sciences, the ensuing debates and observations coincided with the broader theoretical critiques of the scientific/positivist tradition in science. These critiques were influenced by the work of Kuhn, Hanson, Feyerabend and others (Gergen, 1985), who recognized that scientific knowledge in the natural sciences, far from being pure and objective, was socially constructed. Feminism's critique of positivist research, intersected with the Marxist, social constructionist and interpretive traditions, which emphasise that object and subject are linked, and that social knowledge is always embedded within its historical and cultural context (Weskott, 1979; Gergen, 1985; Hatty, 1991).

Feminists however, have gone further than other critical theorists, and have not only rejected notions of scientific objectivity, but have demonstrated that how one defines knowledge and truth is itself *gender* related. This has determined the construction of theories in all of the social sciences, from the study of the 'individual' to the 'universal'; from psychology to sociology (Keller, 1978; Sherif, 1987; Millman and Karter, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Luepnitz, 1988). Keller, in her seminal work, argued that despite its claim to be "emotionally and sexually neutral", the scientific tradition of "objectivity" represented a "masculine" bias. In this tradition, distance and

reason are privileged over feeling and subjective experience. She argued that:

> ...an adherence to an objectivist epistemology, in which truth is measured by its distance from the subjective, has to be re-examined when it emerges that, by this definition, truth itself has become genderised (Keller, 1978, p.51).

Feminists have not limited their critiques of research in the social sciences to epistemological issues. They have also criticised the content, purpose and method of much social research (Harding, 1987). Within the diverse and differing emphases of the feminist critiques, there has been a pervasive view that positivist research has failed to tap women's experiences, has been a-historical and a-contextual, and that when women have been visible, they have been the *objects* of knowledge rather than *benefiting* from it (Weskott, 1979; Stanley and Wise, 1990; Klein, 1983). With notable exceptions[25] women as 'objects' of research, have rarely had their subjective meaning explored and valued. This is particularly so for women who are defined as *mothers*, be they mothers of schizophrenics, abused children, or troubled adolescents (Wedenoja, 1991; Walters, 1988; Mulligan, 1986).   Their experiences have been described and judged by others, with little attention to the social location and biases of who is doing the describing.

While feminist critiques of positivist research may be easy to identify, when it comes to translating epistemology into practice, there is no particular technique or method which is uniquely feminist, and there is great variation between feminist research approaches (Stanley, 1990).   Indeed there is debate about whether there is such a thing as 'feminist research' (Stacey,

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25 See, for instance, the examples of fine feminist research in Nielson (1990).

1991), or whether the dilemmas and inconsistencies associated with the task of research implicitly make it impossible to undertake research from a feminist position. It is beyond this thesis to adequately explore the complexity of these debates. Rather, the starting point for this project was the desire to pursue research in a way which would pay more than lip-service to feminist interests, and to seek knowledge from a feminist viewpoint, not just critique the dominant view. With that rather pragmatic aim in mind, it is possible to define in a broad sense, that which characterises 'feminist research.'[26] It is not *method* which defines feminist *methodology*, but rather the complex interplay of aspects of the research which Klein neatly summarised in the following way:

> 'Feminist' for me implies assuming a perspective in which women's experiences, ideas and needs (different and differing as they may be) are valid in their own right, and androcentricity - man-as-the-norm - stops being the only recognized frame of reference for human beings. And by 'methodology' I mean both the overall conception of the research project - the doing of feminist research - as well as the choice of appropriate techniques for this process, including forms of presenting the research results (Klein, 1983, p. 89).

Cook and Fonow (1986) who, like Stanley and Wise (1990) and Jayaratne (1983) would argue against the tyranny of insisting upon a particular method, define five broad principles which they

see as characterising feminist research. Feminist research, they argue:

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26 As Jayaratne (1983) notes, there is a popular misconception that feminist research must be qualitative. She argues that quantitative research undertaken in women's interests can also be a powerful tool in fighting for women's rights. Alternatively, there has been decades of qualitative research which could not be defined as feminist.

(1) Acknowledges the pervasive influence of gender

- women and women's experiences are the focus of inquiry

- values the personal, private, intimate and internal world

- acknowledges that much social science 'knowledge' about human behaviour is about male behaviour, and that masculine is frequently equated with universal

- acknowledges the gender of the researcher and her gender experiences as an important element of the research

(2) Focuses on consciousness raising[27]

- Sees the research process itself as an opportunity to raise the awareness of both the researched and the researcher, and to lead to social change.

(3) Rejects the separation between subject-object

- rejects the dichotomy of subject and object, as a privileging of the value of neutrality.

- argues that strict separation does not produce better research or more valid knowledge, but reinforces the objectification and subjugation of women

- sees research as an interactional exchange

(4) Privileges the examination of ethical concerns as central

- holds ethics as a central consideration in the research process

- includes attention to the use of language which perpetuates women's subjugation
- attempts to anticipate the impact of the research on the researched.

(5) Has an emphasis on empowerment and the transformation of social institutions

- emphasises the need for knowledge "for" women, not just "about" women; that is, the generation of knowledge which is in women's interests
- argues that the accumulation of knowledge is not in itself enough. It must be directed towards altering conditions of oppression and exploitation of women

Thompson (1992) argues in addition, that feminist research on *families* must attend to the contradictions of family life, and the diversity of women's experiences. Attention must be given to women's resistance to oppression, and the way in which they maintain agency in their lives.

If "feminism" and "research" combined create particular dilemmas (Stacey, 1991; Thompson, 1992), Cook and Fonow's principles can be seen as encouraging the researcher's reflexivity, which keeps those dilemmas as central to the process of knowledge generation. In examining the process and presenting the findings of this project, I will

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27 "Consciousness raising" may be a rather outdated term, identified as it is with the beginning of second wave feminism in the 1960's and 1970's, and positivist notions of the 'right way to think' about things. For the purposes of this research, I take it to refer to the raising of mutual awareness, for researcher and participants.

highlight some of the dilemmas and difficulties which arose as I attempted to remain faithful to the principles they defined.

2.2 Research Design: Reflections on the Research Process

This project was designed as a qualitative study. Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1990, pp.6ff) describe qualitative researchers as seeking to:

> ...uncover the thoughts, perceptions and feelings experienced by informants. They are most interested in studying how people attach meaning to and organise their lives, and how this in turn influences their actions. (Therefore,) ....the focus of qualitative research is not to reveal causal relationships, but rather to discover the nature of phenomena as humanly experienced.

There were several reasons why a qualitative method was chosen. The recognition of the difficulties which face researchers in the area of sexual abuse influenced the choice of method, in particular, the difficulty in defining representative populations and gaining access to subjects (Patton, 1991; Conte, 1991; Matthews, Raymaker and Speltz, 1991; Plunkett and Oates, 1990; Finkelhor, 1986). However, the major influence was the interest in women's subjective experiences of their decision-making. There was no qualitative research specifically addressing this question and in Australia, only one other qualitative project had investigated the experiences of non-offending mothers (Humphreys, 1990).

Qualitative research concerned specifically with women whose children have been sexually abused, has highlighted that access to participants, the emotional intensity and social sensitivity of the topic, the impact of the

experience on the women, fears of being judged, problems of researcher interpretation, time required to engage them in discussion and transcribe lengthy interviews, are all issues which complicate research in this particular area (Humphreys, 1990; Hooper, 1992; Johnson, 1992). In deciding on a method for this research, particular attention was therefore given to several, sometimes competing aims. These included gaining access to women whose children had been abused, maximising the likelihood of their involvement, and in the spirit of feminist practice, attempting to make the experience a useful one for them.[28] With all of these purposes in mind, the method chosen consisted of five parts:

- An indepth, individual interview with 10 women, which was audio-taped and then transcribed.

- A review of the interview transcript by the woman, and a telephone interview including her response to the transcript.

- Analysis of data using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) "grounded theory" technique.[29]

- A group interview at the end of data collection and initial analysis, to allow for member checking of content and interpretation.

- Keeping of a journal by the researcher.

This all occurred within a process of on-going dialogue with the literature to find ways of understanding the women's responses, and to identify gaps in the clinical literature. I will attend to issues of reliability and validity before outlining the research process in detail.

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28 Since I was an experienced interviewer and was used to discussing intimate and difficult issues with people, in-depth interviewing presented itself as the most obvious method of gaining information. To enhance validity and remain consistent with feminist research principles, a process also needed to be included which gave women the opportunity to reflect on both the interview and my interpretation of the data.

29 Consistent with post-positivist and feminist research principles, all aspects of the research process are considered equally important, and the role of the researcher is a consideration in all phases of the research process, including data gathering, analysis, and presentation of the findings (Klein, 1989; Steier, 1991).

2.2.1 Issues of Reliability and Validity

The social nature of qualitative research means that standards by which the 'objectivity' of positivist research is judged, are not appropriate. Yet this does not mean that knowledge generated through qualitatative research is not rigorously tested. Rather, Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that the canons usually used to judge quantitative research, particularly in respect to *validity* and *reliability*, need to be redefined to fit the complexities of qualitative methods. Validity refers to the extent to which a finding is seen as correct; and reliability is the extent to which it can be replicated (Minichiello et al., 1990). Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 252) suggest that qualitative research should be judged on the basis of the "validity, reliability and credibility of the **data**"; the "adequacy of the **research process** through which theory is generated, elaborated or tested"; and the "**empirical grounding** of the research findings" (bold in original). Each of these can only be ascertained if the researcher provides adequate detail to allow the reader to make her own assessment of these issues. To that end, I will attempt to make the process of theory building transparent, and will attend to specific issues related to validity and reliability as they pertain to the research process.

There is some debate about processes for assuring validity and reliability of data and even about whether these ideas are an attempt to inappropriately impose positivist measures and assumptions onto qualitative methods (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Kellehear, 1993). For example, the literature widely cites Denzin's (1970) argument in favour of triangulation (the use of a combination of techniques to collect data) in order to overcome problems

with reliability and bias. However, Minichiello et al., (1990) cite a number of authors' concerns with triangulation, and in particular that multiple strategies of data collection should not be used to "adjudicate between accounts" (Silverman, 1985, in Minichiello et al., 1990). Similarly, Welfare (1996) notes that peer checking of a researcher's analysis is frequently recommended to aid reliability.[30] However, she goes on to observe that this process may say more about the *shared meaning* of those coding than the *actual meaning* of those interviewed.

With these tensions in mind, in this project I decided to focus on creating multiple opportunities for participants to contribute data, and to make the process of analysis and interpretation transparent so that the reader could be aware of researcher bias. The strategies of data collection (the in-depth interviews, participant checking of interview transcripts, a telephone interview and the presentation of findings to the women in a group setting), rather than testing the truthfulness of accounts, provided multiple opportunities for reflection on the part of the participant.

Interviewing a woman does not guarantee that the story one gets is her unedited, personal perspective, and it is impossible to assess whether the account is 'true'. However, the reliability and validity of in-depth interviewing is dependent not just on the 'truthfulness' of the informants' answers, but also on the extent to which the interviewer is able to understand the informants views, and to contribute to a conversation which asks the

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[30] This is a process where someone else also codes the data and themes are compared for agreement about what the data actually says.

'right' questions (Minichiello et al., 1990).   The efficacy of the research is therefore based on the interaction between the researcher and her informants.

Minichiello and his colleagues argue that the researcher's responsibility is to stay connected to both 'the empirical world' as well as to what informants say, to ensure some kind of 'fit' between the two. They explain:

> The in-depth interviewer is constantly engaged in checking perception and understanding against a host of possible sources of error to draw tentative conclusions from his or her current understanding of the situation ….

However, the interviewer's role should not be reduced to that of a detective, seeking the ultimate truth about events. They go on:

> Interview statements should not be treated as accurate or distorted versions of reality. We would argue, along with Silverman (1985:176) that interview data 'display cultural realities which are neither biased nor accurate but real' (Minichiello, et al., 1990, p. 210).

The 'truth' of the interview encounter will not only be influenced by the informant's view of the role of the researcher (Jorgenson, 1991), and the researcher's capacity to ask the right questions (Minichiello et al., 1990), but also by dominant social values and beliefs (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). An adequate account of the research process therefore needs to include three parameters – the informants, the researcher and the social context, all of which are discussed throughout this thesis.

Sampling procedures and recruitment of participants

All participants were voluntary and were drawn from the clinical population of a government funded family therapy centre, where I was employed as part of a specialist team working with families after sexual abuse. Experience suggests that recruitment of subjects is more likely when they are already connected to the researcher (Matthews, Raymaker and Speltz,

1991). However, for ethical reasons women who were my clients were not invited to participate, since it was considered that they may be less free to decline the invitation. Extending the point, I considered that I would be more likely to engage referrers in inviting women to participate, if the *referrer* was committed to me and the aims of my research. Since my colleagues were both supportive of my research aims and available to refer participants, my own agency therefore provided a convenient recruitment setting.

The women were invited to participate in the research by their therapist who, if they were interested, gave them an introductory letter (Appendix 1), and gained their permission for me to contact them. I would then follow up with a phone call and arrange an appointment. It was made clear that there was no obligation for women to participate, that they could withdraw at any time, and that access to services would not be affected.[31]

In total, twelve women were approached to participate. Ten accepted the invitation, and two declined.[32] Most success was had in recruiting participants if two conditions were present; one, the therapist was committed to the research aims and two, the research was presented to therapists and potential participants as a potentially enriching experience for them, not simply as something to be endured. Given the history of

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[31] At that early stage the project was titled "Mothers whose children have been sexually abused by a male partner: the process of deciding whether to stay or separate". Both referrers and potential participants were therefore well aware of my interest in women's relationships with their partners. Such transparency is considered central to feminist research. The dilemma of course, was that women might feel defensive about this particular issue and less inclined to participate. However despite the expected sensitivity, there was little difficulty in recruiting participants.

[32] One was concerned about confidentiality and whether she may be affected by pending mandatory reporting laws, which were just being introduced in Victoria. The other was too busy. Significantly, this woman's therapist was somewhat ambivalent about inviting her to participate, because of her perceived burden. Even though she had agreed to speak to me, in response to her therapist's concerns I was also quite tentative when contacting her. She declined the invitation.

pathologising women because of their decisions about their marriages, I also went to some lengths to contextualise my interest in this question. For example I would usually say on the phone some version of the following: "We know quite a lot about men who abuse, and how this affects children who are abused. Even though we know mothers are important and we expect a lot from them, I don't think we've paid much attention to what it must be like for you as women. I'm interested in understanding what this has been like for you, and how you have managed to juggle the different pressures you are under. I hope this will help us to provide better support to other women in the future." They were assured that the information would remain confidential and that identifying material would be changed (see introductory letter and consent form, Appendix 1 and 2).

Referrers were asked to invite any women who fitted the common feature required for the project. That is, that they were women whose children had been sexually abused by the woman's partner (husband, defacto, lover), and where disclosure had taken place at least three months earlier.[33] Unlike some other studies of this population (for example, Humphreys, 1990), there was no attempt to verify whether or not the allegations of abuse had been substantiated.[34]

Recruitment of participants was influenced by a process known as "theoretical sampling" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The basis of theoretical sampling is that theories emerging from on-going analysis direct the

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[33] It was felt that anything less than three months would be too difficult for women who were still in great crisis.

[34] I was interested in how the women made decisions throughout the process, including whether lack of substantiation was a factor in their response. It was also the case that a number of the children abused were into young adulthood at the time of disclosure, and were therefore outside the influence of child protection authorities. This meant that unless

subsequent collection of data.   So, for example, after the first four interviews emerging theory led me to recruit women who had remained very connected to their husbands.

 However, Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 181) point out that theoretical sampling does not only dictate the selection of *subjects*, but may refer to the process of selecting *data*. So, they argue,

theoretical sampling can be done on "…previously collected data as well as from data yet to be gathered."   As the researcher becomes more "theoretically sensitive" she can return to and re-code old data in the light of newly emerging theories. It was this process which most approximated my own data gathering. As I analysed interviews and began to formulate theories, this directed (initially) the kinds of participants I recruited. As theories began to be more defined, I recruited any women who fitted the basic selection criteria, to see if the emerging theories also held for them. On-going analysis and theory generation then led me to be less selective about *who* I interviewed, and more selective about the *kinds of issues* pursued.   In the light of these emerging theories old data was then re-sampled and theories further refined, until saturation of data was achieved.[35]

The nature of the sample available to me was at all times influenced by the recruitment context.   This context is therefore worth exploring in some

they chose to go the police, there was no external process of substantiation – the women needed to rely on their own assessment of the men and children. I did not wish to exclude women who may have had little external assistance in determining the truth of their children's disclosure.

[35] Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 188) regard saturation of data as having been reached when: " no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category; …the category development is dense, insofar as all of the paradigm elements are accounted for, along with variation and process; … (and) the relationships between categories are well established and validated."

detail. My work place had not initially been established as a specialist sexual abuse service. On the contrary, the service was funded by the state Health Department, through the Office of Psychiatric Services to assist families where a member had a mental illness. In relation to children, the definition of 'mental illness' could be more loosely interpreted, and in practice meant that we were frequently working with children and families who had been through other child and adolescent psychiatric services, or who were involved with the child protection authority (CSV). At that time, specialist treatment services for sexual abuse were either individually oriented (that is, they saw victims alone), or were reluctant to see women who were 'not supportive' of children, which by definition included those who were maintaining a relationship with the offender. On the other hand, CSV workers were required to work toward reunifying children and families, and were left without therapeutic services for those families who were arguably most at risk – where mothers struggled with belief and/or wished to reunite with their husbands. In response to referrals a team was established to undertake clinical work with victims, offenders and non-offending members, and to support each other in theory and practice development.[36]

Because of the nature of the clinical approach taken by the recruitment agency, it is possible that my sample included a disproportionate number of women who were wishing to reunite with their husbands. On the other hand, since families could refer themselves, the agency also attracted very

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36 Unlike some family approaches (Maddock and Larson, 1995) we did not see offenders with other family members. They were seen in individual therapy until it was considered by us and their families, that they had changed significantly enough to warrant conjoint sessions with other family members. The process by which this was determined was complex and cannot be adequately described here. A series of articles by team members describes aspects of our work (for example, Dwyer and Miller, 1996; Miller and Dwyer, 1997).

supportive parents who had felt excluded from their child's individual treatment elsewhere, or who wanted to include siblings and others in supporting their children.   The sample may therefore have included a disproportionate number of women who were very supportive of their children.

The women in this research therefore represent a clinical population, the characteristics of which are largely determined by the recruitment context. However since most of the conclusions in the clinical literature have been based on observations of clinical populations, limiting my sample in this way also provided an opportunity to compare and contrast these women's experiences with the assumptions in the literature.

2.2.2 The Interviews.

An in-depth, individual interview was conducted with 10 women, using a semi-structured interview technique. Interviews ranged from one hour to three hours, with most lasting one and a half hours. Nine of the women were interviewed once only; one was interviewed twice because recording equipment malfunctioned the first time and it was inaudible. Nine women were involved in follow up discussion on the phone, which constituted a second, informal interview and was also included in the data.[37]   They were all given the choice of time and location of the interview. Nine chose their own homes and one chose my office.

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37 The tenth woman moved house the week after the interview, and was not able to be contacted

Prior to recruiting participants an interview guide was developed from the literature, clinical experience and my own 'hunches' (Minichiello et al., 1990). This was used to focus the interview, and as a check-list at the end. This guide (Appendix 3) was not a static instrument. It developed over the course of the interviews as ongoing analyses highlighted other relevant themes. Since the women were aware of the research question prior to the interview, I tended to allow them to tell their stories in their own words, including whatever they thought was relevant. The interview check-list was then used at the end to ensure all relevant issues were covered. Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and using grounded theory techniques, analysed for emerging themes which were used to inform subsequent interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).[38]

2.2.3 Data Analysis

> *The aim of data analysis is to find meaning in the information collected. Data analysis is the process of systematically arranging and presenting information in order to search for ideas (Minichiello et al., 1990, p.285).*

In qualitative methods, theories are teased out of (or grounded in) the data, hence the name 'grounded theory'. Analysis and data collection occur concurrently, with the emerging understandings, ideas and 'hunches' tested

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[38] This process of allowing women to include what they thought was relevant proved very useful. They fact that they had all, for example, included a great deal of information about their lives prior to the abuse demonstrated the importance of issues of time and history in their decision-making. This was both implicit in their choosing to include it, and explicit in what they actually said.

out in ongoing data collection for as Minichiello et al., (1990, p.285) note, "Without analysis occurring in the field, data has no direction".

The process in this research involved conducting an interview, reflecting on and analysing the data, conducting further interviews, reflecting, analysing and revising, and so on. I first dissected each interview, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, for themes, words and issues which arose, on both a *content* and *process* level. These were then 'coded', or put into categories which connected and intersected, representing emerging ideas and eventually theories. Any one sentence or paragraph could be coded under several categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Analysis took place continually, up to and including final presentation of the findings, since how one analyses the data influences what one sees and how one presents this, which in turn influences how one analyses the data. For example, as was evident in the introductory letter to participants, I came to the project interested in women's decisions as represented by living with or separating from their husbands. However as I began analysing the data I began to see that focusing on living arrangements was a false punctuation. The on-going analysis led me to be interested in the ambiguity of women's responses, and to theorise living arrangements as one part of a series of decisions women made in the pursuit of resolving a much greater dilemma; the future of their families.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that the validity of qualitative research can only be judged if there is sufficient description of the emergence of major theoretical categories. To illustrate this I will describe in detail the emergence of one category of *women's experience of abuse*, and how reflection on this lead me to challenge my own assumptions, and to ask new questions of the data. This eventually formed the basis for a core category in understanding aspects of the women's responses. The following edited transcript begins with one woman talking about her own experience of sexual abuse, and her concerns about her daughter.

> **Woman 4**: ... that's why I encouraged her all that time to get it all out, to do those things because I can see, you know, what it has done to my life.
>
> **Interviewer**: What's the impact been for you?
>
> **Woman 4** : Look in so many ways, like you know, self esteem, everything. You know it just screws your whole life, and I just hope that Vicki doing what she has done, acknowledging, eventually getting help. You know she goes to (a counsellor) and they say to her that she doesn't need any help...I think she does. You know, I think if she gets help it is going to enable her to live a full life, a normal healthy life. Maybe if she doesn't she is going to end up like I have been in the past.
>
> **Interviewer**: How would you describe that?
>
> **Woman 4:** Being stuck, you know, back there when I was first abused, in emotion, in many ways. Five or six ....

In the above extract, these paragraphs were coded under a broad category of *abuse*, which was divided into more specific categories including:

-Abuse/impact on child/fear (the woman's fear of the impact abuse might have on her child)

-Abuse/woman's experience of abuse/impact on herself/negative (the woman's own experience of abuse, and her perception of the negative impact on her life).

This theme, of the woman's own experience of abuse, emerged from a number of interviews very early in the process. This was on a *content* level (they talked about it); but also on a *process* level (they talked about it in particular ways, and in the context of other things we were discussing). This was an important distinction which occurred to me when I was getting very frustrated analysing the first interview. Every time I had tried to talk about the child's abuse, we ended up talking about the woman's own abuse. At first I wondered whether it was a distraction from a difficult issue, or even perhaps evidence of her 'self-centredness'. But then I began to ask other questions - why is she telling me this now? What is implicit about how these things link for her? Have other women been abused? How do they talk about it? Is the way they talk about it consistent with the way I experience them? Are there similarities and differences in how women talk about their experiences, and the decisions they make? How is a woman's experience similar to, or different from her child's?

By assuming that what this woman had to say was relevant and important, I was awakened to a major theme which impacted on women's decisions - the connection between their own abuse and their child's. In pursuing this theme further, and comparing and contrasting what women had to say about it, it became apparent that the *fact* that a woman had her own experience of abuse, was less important than the *sense* she had made of that experience. This realisation led to the development of a core category, which was based

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around the *meaning* of experience, rather than a *description* of experience. This forms the basis for much of chapters 5 and 6.

2.2.4 The Relationship between the Literature and Analysis

Qualitative analysis is not limited to the data collected in interviews, nor does it stop at the completion of the last interview. In qualitative research an important aspect of theory building is to ensure that 'the broader conditions which affect the phenomena under study' are also part of the analysis. As Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.256) explain:

> … the analysis should not be so "microscopic" as to disregard conditions that derive from more "macroscopic" sources: for instance, those such as economic conditions, social movements, trends, cultural values, and so forth. And these must not simply be listed as background material but **directly linked to phenomena** through their effect on action/interaction, and through these latter to consequences (bold in original).

As data was analysed and theories began to be more solidly built, I constantly returned to the literature to attempt to understand these other macroscopic conditions. This was for two reasons. It allowed me to question the data in the light of theories in the literature; and it assisted in highlighting aspects of the women's experiences which were absent from, or differently defined in the literature.

In this phase of analysis I did not limit myself to the clinical literature on incest. I drew more broadly from theories and concepts which might not have been used adequately in that literature but which might provide

insight into the women's decisions. So for example, as the importance of women's sense of "family" emerged in the data, I went back to the incest literature to see how this was understood. As described in chapter 1, women's attachment to their families was seen in pathologising ways. However the data was telling me that these women's experiences in their families was not just about weakness or powerlessness. I then sought out theories which would explain the ambiguity of their experiences; their agency and their constraint. This led me to Gidden's (1979) structuration theory and the feminist discourse on the family. These ideas were then used to further question and analyse the data. In this way the analysis of the data and the analysis of a broad array of literature were constantly informing each other in the development of the theoretical explanations which finally appear in the thesis.

2.2.5 Participants' Reflection on the Interview

Transcribed interviews were returned to the participants to allow them to correct, change or delete information, a practice often adopted in qualitative feminist research. This was to aid 'internal validity' (Minichiello et al., 1990) by ensuring that the women had an opportunity to correct factual or transcribing errors, but also to allow them to reflect on the interview and to reconsider the extent of information they wished to divulge. I would then follow them up by phone. I considered this an essential protection to each woman, since if I had been successful in developing rapport with her, she may have found herself talking about things she would later wish to edit. This provided an opportunity to fill me in on changes to their position since the interview and to reflect on the interview itself. As well as assisting in

validity of the transcripts, this added a dynamic quality to the data gathering, as the phone conversation became another, but less formal interview.

Only one of the seven women who reviewed the transcript decided to remove anything; an account of a relationship with another man unconnected to the abuse, which she thought may be identifiable. Another initially intended to delete one part of the interview, where she had discussed a sexual encounter of which she now felt ashamed. However after we discussed the way in which the incident was a powerful description of how badly her self-esteem had suffered throughout the process, and how this seemed to link so closely to the abuse of her daughter, she agreed to leave it in. She then went on to reflect on these events, and the impact on her, in ways which she had not been able to do in the initial interview.

Two women chose not to receive a copy of the transcript because they believed they would find reviewing it too distressing, and others appeared to have only read it cursorily. Hooper (1992) also found that her informants were frequently not keen to read a transcript of the interview. This suggests that some of the practices we consider essential to feminist research, may be derived more from our own expectations of what constitutes an equal or accountable relationship, rather than informants' views.[39] Many women clearly do not welcome reliving such a painful and powerful conversation. On the other hand, two women commented specifically that they had used, or intended to use the transcript to show others what their experience had

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39 One woman had not read the interview, claiming not to have had time, but her apparent difficulty in reading the consent form led me to believe that she may have been illiterate. At the time it seemed more respectful to accept her own explanation, that she had 'too much to read'.

been like. This practice, like all others which become routinised, should be considered thoughtfully, and discussed with research participants before being implemented.[40]

2.2.6 Group Interview

At the initial contact, all women were advised that I intended to conduct a group interview after I had analysed data, to feed back my findings and invite their comments. This was considered an appropriate way of validating my findings, as well as allowing the women an opportunity to reflect on their shared experiences. This session eventually took place at the completion of analysis, between twelve to eighteen months after interviews were conducted.

Only 3 of the 10 women attended the group session. They did so because they were interested in the outcome of the research, and wanted the opportunity to compare their experiences with other women. Of those who did not attend, one wished to, but was unable to do so; two declined the offer because they wanted to put the abuse behind them, and were not keen to meet with other women; two had moved house or changed unlisted telephone numbers and were not able to be contacted; and two failed to respond to a letter. Put another way, only four were specifically interested in attending, four were apparently not interested, and two were unknown. At first I considered that the greater than expected delay in conducting the group session may have been the reason for the low response. However the

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40 For the two women who did not want to receive the transcript, I contacted them by telephone to clarify my understanding of what they had said, and to update their current circumstances. A third woman moved house the week after the interview, was no longer involved with the referrer, and had an unlisted phone number. I was therefore unsuccessful in contacting her.

three women who attended were among the first to be interviewed, so time did not appear to be the major factor. Rather, it appeared to have more to do with the extent to which the women felt that they would find a group forum supportive. All those who attended the group meeting had chosen to end their marriage. Those who specifically declined the offer were still in the relationship. They were willing to have further discussions with me, and clearly were still supportive of the aims of the research, but did not wish to attend a group session. I speculated that these women had frequently been criticised for their decisions and may have been wary of further criticism from others.

Indeed, during the group interview, the women who had left relationships expressed their surprise that other women had not followed their path, so this fear may have been well founded. The women's reflections in the group setting traversed less of the ambiguity of their experience than was evident in the individual interviews. This may have been due to their distance from events with the passage of time, and their experience of getting on with their lives. However, it may also be a reflection of the considerations Anderson and Jack (1991) raised, when they noted that women's accounts may reflect two perspectives; their lived experiences and the dominant discourses on women. Jack (1991) argues that this is reflected in the "moral language" they use, and which represents their perceptions of the moral imperatives dictated for women. Their accounts may therefore provide as much evidence of how women are *expected* to behave, as they do about women's *experiences*. It is possible that a group setting where the focus of discussion was on an issue so loaded with social expectation ("choosing" husband or child), may have elicited such moral language

more than a separate, individual interview. By implication, future researchers may consider whether individual interviews might be more useful in exploring the moral ambiguities of experience for this group of women.

One of the reasons for the group interview was to enhance validity by checking my interpretation of their experiences. However, in the group session women were less interested in my explanations and more concerned about what decisions they made. As I attempted to protect their confidentiality by not highlighting specifics, they carefully checked among themselves. When they realised that each person present had left their husbands, they abandoned any focus on the research and instead talked at length about their current lives and the on-going impact of the abuse.[41]

2.2.7 Researcher's Reflections

The post-positivist recognition of the role of the researcher in the process and outcome of research has lead to interest in how one maintains a self-reflexive stance.[42] A process by which researchers monitor themselves, as well as details of the research data, are seen as essential to critical self-reflection (Stanley and Wise, 1990; Steier, 1991; Minichiello, et al., 1990). I did this by maintaining a journal to record my own attitudes, values, beliefs, theories and emerging issues. This process was used in compiling and interpreting the data and in articulating the research process outlined throughout this chapter.

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[41] Since no new data was elicited from the group interview, this is not specifically referred to in the findings.

42 See, for example, the selection of essays by prominent social constructivists and constructionists edited by Steier (1991), which explores methods and theory of self-reflexivity

The researcher is highly influential in the collection of data in an interview format, as noted by Jorgenson (1991, p.11).

> ... how the researcher defines the domain of the problem and constructs the interview, how she receives the responses and judges their relevance to her research focus, all are elements which shape the nature of the 'data' being elicited.

An important aspect of the interview was the 'identity' which I attempted to adopt and which the women assigned me.[43]   Jorgenson (1991, p. 223) explains this further:

> Interviewers embody multiple identities in the research context .... We cannot specify the 'you(s)' who will be created by participants in a particular encounter, but we can foster conditions in which those identities most facilitative to the interview conversation might emerge.

I anticipated that the extent to which these women may have been judged, an experience borne out in their stories, may have made them careful about how they represented themselves to me, and fearful of the judgements I may make. I concluded that their 'truthfulness' would be largely an interactive process dependent partly on my capacity to remain respectfully curious about them and their experiences. I did not wish to perpetuate any feeling of stigma on the part of women, based on perceived criticism of their actions. But I did want to encourage them to help me understand their position, however criticised that position may have been. The interviews were therefore a delicate balance of respecting their position, but asking the

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43 I I attempted to adopt the position of what Reinharz (1992, p.27) calls the "knowledgeable stranger". I was a stranger, in that they didn't know me, but I met them through a context which underlined certain aspects of myself - I was a female therapist, and had 'expertise' in the area of sexual abuse.   One consequence of this was that my interest in them was not simply 'voyeuristic', and that they could see that their input may benefit other women in provision of services. When I asked the women why they had agreed to the interview, even though they had had so many people in their lives, they invariably replied that they wanted to help other women .

difficult questions and pointing out inconsistencies. I was at times taken aback at their candidness and their willingness to disclose aspects of their lives in the hope that it may help others. For many women it appeared to have been the first time they had been treated as experts on their own experiences.[44]

> The interviews were in all cases very emotional experiences, for me and the women. They frequently cried, showed me pictures of their families, things they had written or drawn about their experiences, and asked questions about other women I had interviewed. Being used to the role of therapist, I struggled continually with the balance between helping the women talk about painful and personal aspects of their lives, but in a way which was about *research*, not *therapy*. This differentiation quickly proved to be not only impossible to maintain, but a false dichotomy, as evidenced in the interview with Woman 4. The research interview appeared to assist her in understanding herself in ways that years of therapy had not done.

Somehow being a 'knowledgeable stranger' (Reinharz, 1992) who knew little about her but who needed her to be the expert on herself, was very empowering for Woman 4. Prior to the interview she maintained a somewhat distant and self deprecating position, telling me that she was 'thick', that she probably could not help me, and that I shouldn't be surprised if she did not remember who I was when I arrived at her home.

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44 Both Humphreys (1990) and Hooper (1992) discuss similar processes of engaging the women in discussion, but they commented on the length of time it took to conduct the interviews (on average two to three hours, and three and a half to four hours, respectively). My interviews lasted on average, one and a half hours, but the richness of data did not seem to be diminished by this. It is possible that one of the factors which assisted recruitment - their therapists' confidence in me, and my "identity" as a therapist - may have enhanced the engagement process.

However during the interview she was intensely engaged, and appeared to use the interview questions as an opportunity to explore her own ideas and behaviours. In a way I had not expected, the experience of research interviewing challenged my view of myself as a therapist. The position of informant-as-expert appeared to be more empowering than some carefully crafted feminist therapy. This challenged me to struggle to introduce this dynamic into my therapy and influenced my attempts to develop collaborative relationships with women, an issue I take up further in the concluding chapter.

In undertaking feminist qualitative research we break down some of the comfortable barriers which exist between researcher and participant, and to some extent enter the world of our informants. This requires adequate support for researchers, who inevitably become very close to the data. [45] Despite being very experienced working in the area of sexual abuse, after each research interview I would be exhausted. This was in part due to the rigour of monitoring myself, my responses and the women's communications; but it was also related to the powerful content with which I had to connect to fully understand the world of the women I was interviewing. I had to leave all tapes and transcripts for some time after the interview, before I could begin to analyse it, so that I would not be overwhelmed by the emotional power of the content.[46]

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[45] Though I used a transcript typist to transcribe interviews, I would listen to the tape a number of times to aid initial analysis. I also did all corrections myself after closely comparing the transcript and tape. One interview I had to completely transcribe myself because the woman spoke so softly, and in such obvious emotional pain, that it was impossible for anyone else to decipher. I also underestimated the need for support for my transcript typist, a woman working from her own home. It became increasingly apparent that she found the content of the interviews disturbing, and that delays in returning tapes were less to do with technical problems, and more with the impact of the task.

[46] At the time of the interviews I was heavily pregnant with my first child, and analysis was conducted in the first months of his life. While it was possible, and on occasions I did continue to work while feeding or holding my baby, I soon discovered the emotional content of the research required me to separate me as 'mother' from me as 'researcher'.

2.2.6 Presentation of Findings

In presenting the findings of this research, I have chosen to use the women's own words as much as possible. Whilst it has obviously been necessary to edit interviews and to present quotes out of context, I have tried to ensure that these excerpts remain true to the stories as told by the women. This isn't without difficulties of its own, since a written word cannot show, for example irony or pain (Reinharz, 1992). I have tried to evoke these where it is an important part of the women's communication, by adding them in brackets, for example (crying), or by describing the context of the conversation.

The women frequently refer to members of their family by name. For confidentiality purposes I have changed these. Rather than replace the name with a bracketed (husband) or (daughter), or to create many pseudonyms, I have assigned a common name to all the men and children. For ease of reference, in the interview excerpts, all the men who abused are called "John". The children who were abused are called "Vicki", "Darren", "Debbie", and "Jane", because in some families more than one child was abused. I have also chosen **not** to assign names to the women, or use initials, but simply refer to them by number; Woman 1, Woman 2, and so on. There were two reasons for this: As I came to know the women I simply had great difficulty in assigning them new names, which never seemed to suit, or seemed to accentuate certain aspects of them. In addition, I wished to underline the multi-dimensional nature of their identities; they are so often referred to in the literature as 'mothers', that I wanted to keep to the fore, the

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Interestingly this was a solution which many of the women themselves adopted in relation to their own dilemmas. The woman as 'mother' was often separated out in time and space from the activities of woman as 'wife'. (This is discussed in detail in chapter 5.)

recognition of them as 'women'. It could be argued that my solution stereotypes and depersonalises them. This is not my intention, and I do not believe one can read their accounts without seeing them as unique, real people. While this method is not flawless, I felt it was less confusing and depersonalising than the alternatives. To ensure each woman maintains an individual identity, I profile them briefly in the appendix.

2.3 Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study, some of which have already been touched upon, but are summarised here. While saturation was reached in relation to the data analysis, there were a limited number of subjects fitting the criteria who were available to be recruited. This meant that it was not possible to continue recruiting subjects until no new categories emerged. So, for example, there were no women who had never been abused themselves who immediately left their husbands. An understanding of such a category of woman (if she exists) is therefore not available from the data. However qualitative research does not purport to explain each and every contingency, and this does not in itself detract from the validity of the findings which arise. Finally, while the data collection process attempted to allow multiple strategies, not all participants took part in all of these and the only strategy common to every participant was the in-depth interview. The researcher is therefore very involved in all aspects of the process including data collection, analysis and interpretation. I have attempted to assist validity through transparency of process, but recognise that this remains a limitation.

2.4 Introduction to the participants

In recognition of the individual and shared contexts of the women (Steedman, 1991), both individual stories and demographic detail are provided in this thesis, and are summarised in Appendix 4.

2.4.1 Group Profile

The Women

Ten women were interviewed between March and December 1993. Eight of them were Australian born, one was Southern European, and one was born in the United Kingdom. They ranged in age from 34 to 52. As a group, the women had a comparatively low level of education, with nine never having completed secondary schooling. Only one had a tertiary qualification. Low education was reflected in their employment histories, where they tended to occupy unskilled or semi-skilled positions: one woman was employed in a professional position; six were, or had been in unskilled positions; and three were, or had been in semi skilled positions which required training (such as nursing assistants or teachers aids). Of the seven women who were employed at the time of disclosure, four experienced severe disruption to their employment as a result of the abuse and its aftermath. At the time of interview, half the women were still employed; two worked full-time, and three part-time, and the number totally dependent on social security benefits had risen from two to five.

A surprising number of the women had previous experience of sexual abuse within their family of origin, or extended family. Seven of the ten women volunteered that they themselves had been sexually abused as children. One other had a sibling who had been abused by a stranger, and another had a brother who had abused his children as an adult. This figure is much higher

than estimations of childhood abuse for the general population[47] and for studies of mothers of victims.

> The number of women in second (or subsequent) marriages was also much higher than the general community (nine of the ten women). Again the significance of this can only be speculated, though one likely factor is the increased risk of abuse to children by stepfathers, and the associated impact of invasive and enduring abuse (Mullen et al.,1996; Russell, 1986).

The children

The women had 29 children between them, 16 of whom had been sexually abused. Only one of the victims was male. Four women had two children, which compares with the fertility rate for Australian women in 1994 of 1.85 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, cited in de Vaus, Wise and Soriano, 1997). Three of the women had three children, two had four and one had five children.[48]

The issue of risk associated with the number of children in these families is worthy of further comment. Once there was an offending man in the house, those in two-child families were no safer than children in larger families. Both had a 1:2 chance of being abused by their father or stepfather. The

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47 For example, Russell (1983) reported 28% of females recalling sexual abuse before age 14; Goldman and Padyachi (1997) found 39% of the females in a sample of Australian tertiary students recalled abuse before 17; Mullen, Martin, Romans and Herbison (1994) found 32% of a random sample survey of women in New Zealand reported abuse.

48 This suggests at first glance that they had larger families than the norm which has been cited as a risk factor for abuse (Humphreys, 1990). However it should be noted that the fertility rate of 1.85 has been seen as a distortion of women's *actual* child-bearing practices (de Vaus, Wise and Soriano, 1997, p.48). ABS figures of women's life-long child-bearing demonstrate that 27% of Australian women who had completed their child-bearing had three children, and 23% four children. This means that half of women, based on 1994 figures, could be expected to bear three or more children in their lifetime, with only one third (32%) having two children. It is arguable therefore whether the women in this research had excessively large families in comparison to the general population. The ABS figures refer to women aged 45-59, who would be expected to have completed their child-bearing. Of the six women who had borne more than two children Three of them fitted this age range and could be said to have

greatest risk factor appeared to be the child's sex. Boys in these families had a 1:4 likelihood of being abused, while girls had greater than a 1:2 chance. Girls were even more likely to be abused if they were the oldest child or oldest girl. In only one case was the female victim *not* the oldest girl in the house. In seven families, only one child was abused, while in three families two or more children were abused. The picture which emerges is of offenders targeting oldest children, and if undetected, going on to abuse subsequent children as they reached similar age. This happened in all cases where there were multiple victims.

The abuse

Interviews were conducted from three months to seven years after disclosure. Two thirds of the children were in adolescence or young adulthood at the time of disclosure, though for most children the abuse commenced during the latency period of their childhood. The significance of the offender being a father/stepfather is apparent in the nature and duration of the abuse the children had to endure. The length of time of abuse ranged from one instance (one child) to more than 12 years (2 children); with 15 of the 16 children suffering at least one year of abuse. Abuse ranged from touching of genitals (fifteen children) to vaginal or anal intercourse (six children), with one child also involved in the production of pornography.[49]

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completed their families. (Two of them had four children, and one had three.) than two children did not fall within these ages, being 36 and 38 years old. (Two of these had only three children, and one had five.) Therefore only one of them could be seen as having a much larger family than her peers.

49 Though the word 'ranged' is used, this is not meant to indicate a less serious or damaging form of abuse. Many factors determine the impact abuse has on a child, not solely the nature of the abuse, though intercourse is seen as particularly damaging (see chapter 6).

The relationship to the offender: The woman

The women had all made significant commitments to their partners prior to learning of the abuse. At the time of disclosure, eight of the ten women were married to, and resident with the man who abused their child. One was in a defacto relationship with him, while the other was separated from her husband but considering reuniting. Nine of the women had borne children in previous relationships, and six of these had also borne children to the abuser.

Humphreys (1990) suggests that a woman's perceptions of the *nature* of her relationship with an offender is more important in dealing with the abuse than the '*type*' of relationship (for example, whether she is married, defacto, or parent of the offender). For these women, the perceived quality of the relationships were variable. Three women had been subject to violence in the marriage and in retrospect considered the marriage to be 'not a good one'. However at the time of disclosure two of them were still committed to the marriage, and the third was separated but considering reuniting. The seven other women considered themselves satisfied with their marriages, or felt that difficulties were minimal and manageable; part of the highs and lows of married life.

The children

Of the sixteen children abused, offenders were more than twice as likely to be in a stepfather role, with eleven children abused by their step-father (or mother's defacto) and five by their biological father. Of those abused for more than three years, the abuser was as likely to be their father as their step-father. For the children in this study it appears that *some* men who

begin with step-children may later go on to abuse biological children, and that it may be their older siblings' disclosure which serves to protect biological children, not an inherent reluctance of biological fathers to offend. In one case a father began with his step-children and moved down through the children, including his biological child. In four of the five families where women had borne children to the offending men, but where only step-children had been abused, disclosure occurred before the biological children reached the age when their siblings had been abused. In the other, the mother suspected that her husband may have also abused his biological daughter.

2.4.2 The Decision

The decisions women made in relation to their marriages are discussed in detail in chapter 4 and therefore only briefly summarised here. At the time of initial disclosure eight of the ten women attempted to maintain their marriages, two decided on permanent separation. Over a period of months or years (details of which are discussed in chapter 4 and in individual summaries in appendix 4) a further four women decided to end their marriages. By the time of the research, only two remained firmly committed to the marriage and two more remained undecided. Six had permanently separated.

2.5 Summary

This thesis is based on feminist and qualitative methods, and involved in-depth interviews with ten women attending a family public therapy service. Data was analysed using grounded theory techniques and specific attention was given to locating the women's experiences in both the 'macro' and 'micro' conditions of their lives (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). While the findings which follow attempt to remain true to the women's experiences, in the final analysis they are an interpretation of those experiences which is informed by my own biases, values and theoretical orientation.

Chapter 3

Introduction to the Findings

In writing this thesis it was necessary to allocate issues to sequential chapters. But this should not be taken to suggest that the issues in women's lives could be so neatly delineated, nor that their deliberations were part of a linear process, a working through from 'A' to 'Z'. In reality all of the themes, issues and events intersected and overlapped. They were neither distinct nor separate; each was formed through and in relation to the other. While all of the themes I will discuss in chapters three to six were apparent for all of the women, how they connected and came together was unique for each individual woman. It is therefore true to say that they formed a convergence of influences, rather than a hierarchy.

In the following chapters exploring the women's decisions about their marriages, I present the research findings and attempt to locate them theoretically. Findings and the debates and issues surrounding them are explored concurrently within each chapter. This necessarily means that the discussion moves in and out of the women's voices and my own. I have

chosen to do this rather than to present findings and theoretical analysis separately for several reasons. First, the two are inextricably linked and reflect the research process. My voice is always present, if less visible behind the women's words; I do after all choose, situate and interpret what they have said. Similarly, their voices are present, if hidden, behind my opinion; it was with their words in my head and what I learned from them, that guided me through the literature to understand their experiences. Second, dislocating theoretical arguments from the women's experiences, while arguably easier for the reader, may have sacrificed the multiplicity of lenses available to understand the women's responses.

Threads of the Tapestry:

Time, Grief and Power

There were two major themes which influenced the decisions women made after the disclosure of abuse. These were: **1) the perceived interests of their families,** and **2) the meaning which they attributed to the abuse**. These constitute the dominant part of the findings and are detailed in chapters 4 to 6. Less directly determining of the women's responses and yet still central to the process of decision-making, were issues related to time, grief and power. These pervaded all aspects of the process but did not on their own constitute 'factors' in the decisions. The analogy of a tapestry may elucidate their role. Themes related to 'family' and 'meaning' can be likened to the form and detail of the image represented in the tapestry. But the image itself is made of countless threads which together constitute the form of the picture, and yet are not easily differentiated and are meaningless on their own. The themes of time, grief and power are three of the threads which contribute to the complex tapestry representing the women's decisions. I have chosen to highlight them because they are either absent in most discussions of 'non-offending mothers', or where they are acknowledged, the experiences of the women I interviewed differ from or challenge the conclusions in the literature. Because they relate so inextricably to the larger themes explored in later chapters and to avoid repetition, I limit my focus in this chapter to a broad discussion of the way in which these threads pervaded women's decisions.

3.1 Reflections on Time and Grief

"There's no point where you suddenly decide"

Time is the theme which links all aspects of the women's decisions. The processes involved in responding to sexual abuse are frequently discussed as though they are fixed in time. For example, 'disclosure' is often portrayed as though it is inevitably a single event, yet there is ample evidence that disclosure and discovery are themselves processes (Hooper, 1992; Sorensen and Snow, 1991). Similarly women are seen to 'believe' or 'disbelieve', to be 'supportive' of the child or 'not supportive', to 'choose' husband or child, as though these positions are embraced completely or irrevocably. The evidence from this research is that the women and their decisions could not be understood without allowing for time: the time before disclosure, including their own childhood, the way in which the man entered their lives, and the understanding they had of their family relationships prior to learning of the abuse; the disclosure, a process which occurred over time and whose meaning developed and emerged with new information or events; the waves of adjustment, crises and recovery which swept the women across the subsequent months and years

3.1.1 Women's Prior Experiences in their Families

In my conversations with the women about the decisions they had to make, I would ask them some version of, "Where did this all begin for you?" Invariably they would tell me the story of their lives with their partner and children, always including the years before the abuse was disclosed. Frequently they would include their own childhood. The importance of this

was implicit; the decisions they made were not explicable without understanding their relationships over the passage of time, including before the abuse occurred or was known about, during the disclosure process and for years afterwards.

Little attention has been given to women's subjective experience of their family relationships prior to disclosure or discovery. However, as I demonstrate in chapter 5, the nature of family relationships and the meaning which the women had attributed to behaviour and events prior to learning about the abuse were central to their response[50]. For professionals associated with child protection, the moment of disclosure acts like a prism through which all information about the family and previous relationships is refracted. Through the prism a child's promiscuity, substance abuse, angry outbursts, running away, academic failures, all become comprehensible as symptoms of the abuse (Russell, 1986; Finkelhor and Browne, 1985). An offending man's attentiveness to the child, his domination of the woman, or the nature of his sexual relationship with his wife are all deemed to be consistent with his offending behaviour. However it was evident from the women in this research that they started from the other side of the prism.

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[50] I have discussed some of the issues raised in this chapter in previously published articles which I co-authored. In both articles, my contribution arose from clinical experience, together with findings from this research. My co-author's contribution was based on her clinical experience and her own research with female victims of abuse. Where ideas in

For them, the information from the disclosure was filtered through their

previous experiences of their families. It

 was therefore impossible to understand the women's responses without

understanding their view of their family history and relationships. The crisis

which disclosure entailed was partly due to the need to reconcile conflicting

meanings between what the women thought was happening in their families

and what was actually happening. As Woman 10 so clearly explained:

> I couldn't reconcile John with what he did. Up until then he was a
>
> good father … and pretty good husband … I trusted him.   I
>
> honestly, totally trusted him ….

Another influential aspect of the women's experience of their families over
time related to their family of origin. Their childhood experiences provided
the foundation on which much of their adult life, including their current
family relationships, was built. The most significant of the experiences
discussed by the women was their own family experiences, particularly if
this involved a history of childhood sexual abuse. A history of abuse, while
it did not dictate how each woman would respond, did act as a major
determinant of the meaning she would attribute to her child's abuse and
impacted on her own life in often unacknowledged ways. The centrality of
this issue is discussed at length in chapter 6.

3.1.2 Disclosure' as a Process of Discovery

'Disclosure' is used to denote the process by which someone other than the

child and offender finds out about the abuse. While there is ample evidence

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this thesis are not my own or are elaborated elsewhere, they are appropriately referenced.   (See Dwyer and Miller,
1996; Miller and Dwyer, 1997).

that children rarely tell all details of the abuse in the initial breaking of the secret (Sorensen and Snow, 1991) and that the details of the abuse and the nature of the relationship usually emerge over time (Jenkins, 1990), 'disclosure' continues to be reified as though it is an event. However as Hooper (1992, pp.53, 54) argued, 'discovery' is a more accurate representation of the process of finding out. She points out that:

> …(Disclosure) suggests a single point in time when all is revealed
> …. Discovery is an active and interactive process which develops
> over time and has no clear beginning or end.

The experiences of the women in this research support Hooper's conclusion. Three of them had prior suspicions so the discovery process began well before the 'disclosure'. None of the women knew enough from the initial 'disclosure' to enable them to make a decision as to what was required of them. Finding out 'something' had happened did not necessarily equip them to define that 'something' as abuse, let alone to hold their husbands responsible (Chapter 5). Discovery entailed a complex process of gathering information, assessing this against the meaning they had previously attributed to events and behaviours, observing and assessing current relationships, and considering future relationships and the competing interests of family members. In short, discovery was itself a process of attributing meaning.

3.1.3 Decisions as 'Attempted Solutions'

If discovery is a process and if the meaning of events evolve, it follows that the decisions will also not be fixed in time. Rather than decisions representing a single, time-limited event they were by their very nature, processes which were negotiated and evaluated over days, weeks, months

and sometimes years. Fixed characterisations of the women as 'believing' or 'supportive' depending on the nature of a decision made at any particular point in time are therefore inaccurate and inadequate. In fact the word 'decision' is itself a distortion of the women's experience. Rather than 'decisions', which suggests a determined and fixed response, the resolution of these choices can be understood as *attempted solutions* to conflicting demands. [51]

> I have chosen the term attempted solutions because it best captures the dynamic process involved in responding to the choices the women faced. They did not simply make a choice and abide by that. They continued to reassess and evaluate their choices and if necessary, to apply new solutions. In this way the decisions relating to the future of their relationship with their partners can be seen as attempted solutions to the conflicting demands they experienced. Inherent in such a definition is the notion of on-going evaluation, since attempts were continually reassessed to see if they met their aims.

3.1.4 The On-going nature of Disruption and Adjustment.

There is substantial evidence that the disruption to women's lives continues for months and sometimes years after the period of initial disclosure (Hubbard, 1989; Humphreys, 1990; Hooper, 1992). The lives of women in this research were characterised by the 'sustained disruption and turmoil' which Hubbard (1989) identified. When they reflected on their experiences, the extent of their pain was palpable, as is evident in these three extracts:

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[51] The term 'attempted solutions' was coined by strategic family therapists, to connote the way in which people may become involved in interactions which are intended to help a situation, but which actually end up maintaining the problem (Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974). They describe how, for example, in an effort to assist a depressed man, family members may attempt to cheer him up. The lack of success of these efforts leads to feelings of failure and frustration, and exacerbates the original depression, until the attempted solution - attempts at cheering him up - becomes part of the problem. When I use the term I am not intending it in quite this way. While for some women the

Woman 7: Oh it was just terrible, just devastating...

Woman 2: There's two victims isn't there, not just the one.
It's always treated as if there's the one.

Woman 4: Well to be quite honest it's been hell and I'm still going
through it...

The disruptive impact on the women was not limited to the initial phase of discovery, but permeated every level of their lives over lengthy periods. On-going evaluation of their attempted solutions brought with it on-going decisions and the consequences of these decisions. As part of that the women also moved between adjustment and crisis. For example a new relationship, a child leaving home, finalising divorce, a further disclosure could again bring the woman temporarily toward crisis or adjustment. The time elapsed since initial discovery varied from three months to seven years, and while time could assist some women in resolving issues and making firmer decisions, it was not inevitable that time would decrease the level of disruption to their lives. Woman 10's reflection a year after the discovery of her child's abuse is testament to this:

> **Woman 10**: … It was like an atomic bomb had fallen over my head, and I'm not exaggerating. Time helps but ... it definitely doesn't lessen the pain …. It's not there 24 hours a day, thinking of it. I used to think, how can I live my life like this.

The passing of time allowed them to attempt solutions and to reassess and reflect on those solutions, but whatever their decisions all of the women experienced on-going turmoil. This occurred on a number of levels, including on-going uncertainty about the implications of their decisions and eventually, attending to the associated losses. The example of two women's different experiences illustrates this: four years after disclosure, Woman 7 still felt undecided about the future of her marriage, and torn

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solutions they attempted may have become part of the problem they were trying to resolve, this was not the case for all of them.

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between her wish to stay in the relationship and her daughter's disapproval.

The indecision left her unable to firmly grasp a future:

> **Woman 7**: ....I've just got to sort of get on with my life and try and build - if I'm staying with John - I've got to try and work at this relationship. I can't be forever depressed or wondering what to do, you know, not coping very well with the indecision .....

On the other hand Woman 4 had made a firm decision but discovered that resolving her feelings about her marriage was a lengthy and multi-layered process:

> **Woman 4**: ...So I went through this grieving process, with the end of the marriage. And when I saw him again, it's almost as if I had to deal with it again in another way. In a way where I have to take some control over it and actually finish it inside here, let it go .... It's about being in charge of yourself, but inside .… Not just letting things happen, but taking control emotionally....

3.2 Grief and Loss

...it would have been a big help if someone had said, 'It's quite possible you will go through a grieving process'. Because when you separate from someone, especially when you do it suddenly, it's just like your husband has died (Woman 4).

The extent of losses which women face at the discovery that their children have been abused has only recently been theorised. While others have noted aspects of grief in passing, Hooper (1992) was the first to conceptualise the experience of 'non-offending mothers' as a response to loss. Unaware of her work at the time, I also argued that grief and loss provide a useful framework for understanding the responses of women to their children's abuse (Dwyer and Miller, 1996). Further, I argued that the grief may be unacceptable to both the women and to the world at large; that is, their grief may be 'disenfranchised' (Doka, 1989).[52]

3.2.1 The Nature of Losses

In many ways the lives of the women in this research were full to over-flowing with losses. These went beyond the experiences directly associated with the abuse of their children and included losses well before and after that

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[52] Since the material for the article on disenfranchised grief which I co-authored was drawn from this research (Dwyer and Miller, 1996), some of the quotes from research participants may appear in both this chapter and that paper.

time. Seven of the ten women had been sexually abused as children; three of them had been subject to violence in their marriages; nine had borne children in previous relationships meaning that their current marriages were built in the aftermath of previous losses. For two women, husbands they had loved deeply had died and four had been abandoned by men; two had immigrated from overseas, leaving family behind; five had felt unloved and uncared for as children. These are just the losses they had endured before the abuse was known. After the disclosure, whatever the decision in relation to their marriages, they lost the family life they thought they had known; their view of themselves as protective or effective mothers; the belief that their children would confide in them if something happened; their sense of sexual worth; their trust in their husbands and often, other men; their sense of knowing themselves and their own reactions. They lost privacy and normality, friends and family. Those who separated from husbands lost businesses, jobs, homes, neighbourhoods, financial security, and dreams of a future life together. Those who maintained the marriage also lost homes, financial security, relationships with children and grandchildren, family and friends. The brief comment below goes some way to capturing the extent of those losses:

> **Woman 4**: …. I suppose your whole lifestyle changes, everything changes. You have to start all over, start from scratch all over again, claw your way back.

Friendships were a common casualty of the abuse and subsequent events. They were lost either directly as a result of the abuse because friends disapproved of the women's responses or indirectly because the women did not feel able to confide in them. Some lost friends because they opted to

stay connected to their husbands, while others were criticised for leaving. Whatever the decision, shame, grief and the wish not to burden others intervened to make it very difficult for women to secure support for themselves:

> **Woman 10**: I have a friend who has just had a baby and I'm not going to go hurting her …. I suppose when you look at it, the reason I don't have support from people is I don't want to burden them with it ….

> **Woman 7**: … you felt you couldn't turn to anyone. I've got no family here. Such a difficult sort of thing to tell my friends ….

The financial losses women experienced were extensive and included not just their current financial position, but their longer-term security. Two women lost businesses run jointly with their husbands, one being declared bankrupt and forced onto the pension. Another had to stop work completely while still another was forced to cut her work hours dramatically because of the stress of events. One woman, married for thirty years and on the verge of retirement, had to cancel her plans and accept a transfer to a position she loathed for the sake of financial security. Five women faced the actual or threatened loss of the family home. The financial and material impacts of the abuse, which had such severe consequences for the women and their children, are rarely the subject of discussion in the literature on 'non-offending mothers' and yet were central aspects of their experience.

Other less tangible losses were more difficult to quantify than the financial and material, but had far-reaching consequences for the women's sense of their own ability to survive. Learning that their husbands had sexually abused their child threatened the women's beliefs about their families and relationships in fundamental ways. Not only did they have to reconcile the image of their husband with the new reality but also their most basic assumptions about what was happening in their families. They were forced

to re-examine just how much of their family life was kept secret from them and the kind of marriage they thought they had. As with Hooper's (1992) respondents, they were generally not well equipped to understand why children do not disclose abuse from the beginning and were, therefore, vulnerable to the belief that this was a reflection of their inadequate mothering rather than the success of the offender at maintaining the secret (Salter, 1995; Hooper, 1992; Miller and Dwyer, 1997).   The resultant loss of self-esteem and identity, I have argued, left them ill-equipped to meet the enormous challenges they face:

> Women's very sense of who they are may be sorely damaged by the discovery of incest, which challenges every aspect of their identity …. Even when they hold their husbands entirely responsible, they may be racked by a sense of failure that they had 'chosen' this man in the first place. Many women are perplexed at their response to the disclosure, wonder why they experience their choices as so difficult, and are shocked that they still feel anything for the man or find themselves unable to separate …. They may begin to question their very sense of who they are, and feel ill-placed to face the decisions they are required to make (Dwyer and Miller, 1996, pp.140,141).

Losses were not restricted to the present nor the image of their past, but extended well into their future. They lost the future they thought they were going to have, including the expectation of growing old with their husbands and their children growing into healthy adulthood. Women 3 and 10 poignantly described having to let go of the life they had planned:

> Woman 10**: (***tearfully***) I don't want him back, and yet I grieve for how it was going to be.**

Woman 3: ... All these various things flit into your mind. I have given up my entire future for them. (*very tearful*) But I think, what else can I do? In all conscience I could not do anything else....

Many women were so traumatised by the abuse and their faith in their own judgement, in particular their ability to choose trustworthy men was so shattered, that losses included the loss of a future relationship. As a result they experienced a deep pessimism about life, and as these two quotes demonstrate, five of them doubted that they could have a relationship with another man in the future, at least while their children were at home:

Woman 1: I would like to meet a man and I've tried to, but then every time I go forward a little bit, I take a step backward and I think, 'No, I don't want this ..... It's too soon'. It's too soon in my life. It's too soon in my kids' lives. I really feel ... that the minute a man went to raise his voice or to do anything to these kids, I'd be a crazy woman.

Woman 2: .... How can you trust anybody? How can you bring anyone home? How do you know its not going to happen again? What right have you got to inflict something like that on your children....

3.2.2 The Disenfranchised Nature of the Women's Grief

The losses experienced and the associated grief is best conceptualised by Doka's (1989) term 'disenfranchised grief', which represents the experience of those whose grief is outside the socially prescribed parameters. That is;

> … the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. The concept … recognises that societies have sets of norms

– in effect "grieving rules" – that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve (Doka, 1989, p.4).

He argues that grief is disenfranchised when either the *relationship*, the *loss*, or the *griever* is not recognised (Doka, 1989). The recognition attached to society's "grieving rules" can be explicit, as in industrial awards which articulate for which relationships workers are allowed to take bereavement leave; or may be implicit, as represented for example, by which losses are sanctioned in greeting cards (Doka, 1998).

The extent of the women's losses which I have outlined above are so all-encompassing and the context of those losses so loaded with social expectations and values, that they can be considered unique among disenfranchised grievers. That is, the losses permeated and organised every aspect of their lives. Yet, because the reason for the losses – the sexual abuse of a child – is so reviled, and because of the need to act quickly there was little space or opportunity for the women to grieve. In one fell swoop their husbands were redefined as 'sex offenders' and their love and attachment to them as 'weakness' or 'collusion'. Grieving for the loss of a man who most others saw as a sex offender was not acceptable to those with whom they came into contact, nor frequently, to the women themselves (Dwyer and Miller, 1996).[53]

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[53] While there are many models of loss resolution and grief counselling Hooper's (1992) utilisation of Marris's (1986) ideas, is the most thoughtful and expansive on the subject of grief in relation to this group of women. She demonstrates that 'resolution' of loss and associated grief, are complex processes which are related to previous experiences of attachment and loss, the meaning of the abuse to the women, the level of support and validation available to them, and the availability of time to work through the associated conflicts. My conceptualisation of their grief as 'disenfranchised' is consistent with her analysis, and further emphasises the way in which the social responses to their losses exacerbate their difficulties. Disenfranchising grief may complicate the feelings of helplessness, anger, and guilt sometimes associated with loss, and inhibit their resolution (Doka, 1998).

The marriage was the loss most obviously disenfranchised. This applied to either the actual end of the marriage, or where this did not happen, mourning the losses associated with the betrayal and sense of failure. The experience of the women in this research bears some similarity to couples undergoing marital dissolution, which Martin (1989) contrasts with the experience of widowhood. He notes that the death of a marriage does not recruit the support and sympathy of the actual death of a partner, and that there is an absence of rituals to aid resolution of grief. There is also no sense of finality and couples must continue to deal with the relationship with the ex-spouse.

Several women in this research used the metaphor of death in relation to their marriages and indeed, the suddenness of the disclosure, the loss of the man they thought they knew and the implications for their lives, all bore a great resemblance to the unexpected death of a partner. However these losses could not be publicly mourned and acknowledged since the predominant attitude toward a husband who sexually abuses is that 'you are better off without him' (Dwyer and Miller, 1996). The women were therefore left to struggle with these overwhelming feelings alone, as Woman 3 explained:

> **Woman 3**: ....in my mind I knew that he was dead for me. I don't think I indicated that because I just sort of couldn't, because he has been for so long part of my life....

3.3 Reflections on 'Agency' and 'Power'

Central to feminist theorising - and the discourse on incest is no exception - is understanding the relationship between the gendered distribution of power and women's subjugation. A full exploration of the concept of power is beyond this thesis, and yet the issue has been a central aspect of the feminist discourse on sexual abuse in general and the position of 'non-offending mothers' in particular. Because of its historic importance and because it emerged as a central thread in the women's experience in this research, the issue of power therefore warrants attention. However to contain and limit the discussion, I will borrow the invitation Iris Marion Young offered in her introduction to *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990). I share her aim in not offering an all-encompassing theory – in this case of 'power'- but rather to participate in a process of critical reflection. She writes:

> .... some models of reflection, analysis, and argument aim not at building a systematic theory, but at clarifying the meaning of concepts and issues, describing and explaining social relations, and articulating and defending ideals and principles ....(This paper) makes arguments, but these are not intended as definitive demonstrations. They are addressed to others and await their response, in a situated political dialogue .... (Young, 1990, p.5).

Giddens (1982) observed that "…power is chronically and inevitably involved in all social processes .…" but warned against elevating it to "…the prime position in action and in discourse .…" He summarised some

of the pitfalls in such an elevation of power, pitfalls which I consider have occasionally befallen feminist explorations of the position of 'non-offending mothers':

> Power then becomes a mysterious phenomenon, that hovers everywhere, and underlies everything. I consider it very important to reject the idea that power has primacy over truth, or that meanings and norms can be explicated as congealed or mystified power. A reductionism of power is as faulty as economic or normative reductions are (Giddens, 1982, pp.226-227).

The women's lives as they emerge throughout the following chapters, were full of exploitation and their 'choices' were always severely constrained or impossibly loaded. Yet they were not passive in the events of their lives. They could be physically dominated by husbands who were paradoxically emotionally dependent on them; they could have aspects of their lives controlled by authorities, and take the same authorities for a merry dance; they could clearly articulate certain conditions of their experience and yet be oblivious to others; they resisted attempts at controlling them and struggled to maintain agency in the face of overwhelming odds. In practice they were neither power*ful* nor power*less*; neither passive victims nor totally free agents. Rather the nature and exercise of power in their relationships was complex and variable.

To clarify this issue, I borrow an often-used distinction in feminist discussions of power; the distinction between 'power over' and 'power to' (Goodrich, 1991). *Power over* refers to the capacity to restrict the actions of others and at it's most corrupt, includes the use of violence. *Power to*, on the other hand, refers to the capacity to act. I will argue that the power of the women in this research was usually of the latter. That is, that they

rarely had 'power over' others, (though they were subject to others' attempts at control of *them*); but that they resisted these attempts in order to maintain their 'power to', a word I use interchangeably with 'agency'.[54]

Much of the discussion which follows is limited to the individual expression of power and resistance and does not include discussion of the women as a 'group' (Young, 1990). The attempts at controlling individual women could be seen as based on their belonging to a particular group – "mothers" – membership of which inevitably invokes deeply held expectations of behaviours. The actions of their husbands catapulted them into reluctant membership of a sub group – that of "non-offending mothers"- which further marginalised them and deprived them of collective support. Eduards (1994, p.183) has noted that the exploitation of women requires that they be "…deprived of their sense of agency to act as a group …." An important aspect of the power over these women rested on the social isolation and shame of being a "non-offending mother" and the lack of a collective voice. For that reason, the complexity of the women's power cannot be understood only by focussing on their individual relationships; it is also necessary to locate these individual experiences more broadly and to embed them within the previous discussion of family and agency.

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[54] It is debatable of course, whether the women's resistance constitutes 'power' (Sanders, 1998). If by 'power' we mean the capacity to intervene and influence outcomes (Giddens, 1984) then acts of resistance which influence the course of events can be seen as residing in 'power'. However this need not assume 'equality' of capacity to influence outcomes. Rather, I argue for a recognition of the complexity of the power relationship which formed the conditions of the women's lives, and the agency they possessed in conducting their activities.

3.3.1 The Power of Resistance: the Marriage

The women's marriages were the site of extensive exploitation and violence. However to describe them simply as 'powerless' would not do justice to the complexity of their relationships nor to the extent to which they managed, in subtle yet significant ways, to resist domination. It would also fail to acknowledge the interdependance which characterised the marital relationships and the way in which power relations shifted over the course of time.

The nature of their subjugation was easily apparent. Three women were subject directly to physical violence, while the abuse of their children constituted an indirect violence toward all of them. However even within the most violent of relationships, the women resisted the attempts at controlling them. This is not to minimise the violence or intimidation, since they were always aware of the potential threat; but the ways in which they resisted were also significant, particularly given the risks inherent in doing so. For example, Woman 1 resisted her husband's control by maintaining friendships with a number of elderly women, one of whom eventually helped her to escape her husband's torment; Woman 4 fought to maintain her own view of the world, despite her husband's threats; Woman 5 enlisted the support of a church group whom she knew would defend her against her husband's demands. None of these acts are equivalent to their husbands' 'power over' them, but they do represent hard fought for maintenance of their 'power to', even if diminished and restricted. These may seem like small acts of resistance in comparison to the threat of bodily harm, but they assisted the women to maintain a sense of their own agency, and throughout

the process of making decisions, this capacity allowed them to take important stands for themselves and their children. For example Women 1 and 4 were most steadfast in their decisions to end their marriages, despite years of violence and with little support or encouragement, forged new lives for themselves. Even for Woman 5, who initially decided not to leave the relationship, the physical domination was only one aspect of what constrained her.[55] She eventually dealt with this effectively by using the involvement of external authorities to mandate her husband's removal from home.

Whether or not there was violence, the women managed to maintain a sphere of influence within their families. But whatever influence they may have accrued in other areas it was clear that their centrality in the family was located around their support and nurturance practices. That is, whatever role the men played in dominating family life, they remained emotionally dependent on their wives. It may be argued that the role of emotional nurturer does not constitute 'power' since it requires unconditional responsibility for others, with no guarantee of reciprocal support. To an extent this was true, but it was clear from the women's accounts that the ability to withdraw such support and nurturance (or indeed continue to give it despite the attempts of others to dissuade them), ensured a degree of control in their family lives. After disclosure offending men became dependent on continued support, including to portray themselves as

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[55] This should not be taken to suggest that these or other women subject to violence by their husbands, are able to freely leave the relationship. In all cases it took enormous courage and careful planning, and for some women the danger may be too great to even attempt this. The point is rather, that the women resisted in whatever way they could, and for two of them this included escaping the marriage.

'family' men, rather than as 'sex offenders'.[56] This quote from Woman 6 underlines this point. She married after the disclosure partly to demonstrate that she and her husband were trying to rebuild their relationship:

> **Woman 6**: … it just seemed like the right thing to do, because our family was trying to work things out and if we got married, then that looked more permanent, like we're trying ….

As with all other aspects of the women's responses, time was an important element. The extent to which women experienced a sense of personal agency developed throughout the months and years of the discovery and adjustment process. Five of the women spoke specifically of their growing sense of competence and confidence which they gained after the discovery of the abuse. Women 8 and 9, both of whom felt dependent on their husbands and unconvinced of their ability to survive alone, paid testament to their growing strength which was accompanied by discernible changes in their relationships with their husbands:

> **Woman 8**:   I just had to take over the role of Mum and Dad. I had to take over both roles, and I tell you it's not easy to do. I mean over the years I've improved a lot.

> **Woman 9**: I have just become stronger, and I won't take crap from anybody any more. I won't even take it from John. I won't take it from my kids.

The power relationships in their families were neither fixed nor linear, and the same could be said of their relationships with those external authorities

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[56] The extent to which men were emotionally dependent on their wives was surprising, given the nature of some of the relationships prior to the abuse being discovered. It may be that the discovery process itself initiated a shift in the power balance, since the secrecy surrounding the abuse had been one source of power over the child and the women; and the involvement of external agents in the form of police and child protection workers, provided in some senses an ally for the women in resisting husbands' domination.

with whom they came into contact; the police, child protection workers, court officials, legal officers and counsellors.

3.3.2 The Use of Formal Authority

In the aftermath of the abuse and discovery process, the women's lives were open to workers from multiple agencies associated with child protection, criminal prosecution, divorce and therapeutic support. Five women had contact with child protection (CSV), seven with police, five with the Family Court or lawyers in relation to divorce or separation, and ten with counselling services. Since counselling was usually provided separately to the child victim, the offender, woman and other family members, nine women had contact with more than one counsellor. With this array of agencies, all with different mandates and emphases, it is not surprising that the power relationships between them and the women were varied and changeable. At their best they could be characterised as partnerships where the women felt supported in grappling with the dilemmas they faced. At worst they resulted in estrangement between the women and those who were there to ensure the protection of the child.

The kinds of agencies involved could be characterised as either therapeutic or child protection/legal. Within both kinds their experiences varied and revealed the paradox of some professionals appearing reluctant to exert control and give firm direction, and others leaving no room for self determination. Woman 7 for example, sought help for her daughter's severe depression from a total of six professionals including her local doctor, two psychiatrists and several counsellors. Although the child

disclosed to two of these, neither told her mother nor notified child protection authorities. When Woman 7 finally learned of the abuse, no-one gave her clear advice or information. This was a problem, not of domination, but of professionals failing to take adequate responsibility and authority, as she explained:

> **Woman 7**: You know at that stage we needed people to guide us really. It was hard to make decisions for yourself.

The essence of a helpful relationship appeared to be providing respectful guidance, but this did not mean simply supporting women without challenging them. Some counsellors were able to challenge some of the women's ideas or beliefs without alienating or blaming them as Woman 2's circumstances demonstrate:

> **Woman 2**: Well it mainly came from when I went to see a therapist with her. She just made me, or helped me, to focus in a different area. Sometimes you just get your ideas set on one track and it's difficult to shift it. And because I was so involved in the situation it was very hard to see it - the therapist helped me see it - from two sides. So she was very helpful, but it is so hard ….

The experiences with legal and child protection authorities were similarly varied, and women required both advice and a recognition of their difficulties. In all circumstances, the most damaging attitude encountered was one of blame, since feeling blamed appeared to incite women's resistance. Five women experienced the intervening authorities as not understanding the depths of their crisis nor acknowledging the difficulty of their choices, and the relationship became polarised. Woman 2's experience was not atypical of this group:

> **Woman 2**: I thought that (the Community Police) were extremely cold. I wasn't happy with them at all. I mean sure, they were there to protect Vicki, but as far as I was concerned, they did nothing for me. (They treated me) like a bit of dirt .... As though I was partly to blame ....

Seeing the authorities as accusing them of collusion did not stop with the initial intervention. One woman described attending court to observe her husband's sentencing on charges of incest. The sentiments she encountered there further alienated her from the legal system:

> **Woman 8**: ... (The magistrate) turned around and says, 'I don't believe that the mother didn't know anything was going on.' And I tell you, I wanted to get up there and smack him right in the mouth and say, 'Listen you. Who the fuck do you think you are? How can you say that the mother knew' ....

While these women felt blamed for the abuse, another had to fight to convince the authorities that the abuse had occurred at all. Woman 1 believed that because the notification was made in the context of Family Court negotiations, and the extent of her traumatic response to the abuse made it difficult for her to respond to questions in a clear and articulate way, she was subject to the suspicion that she had invented the accusation:

> **Woman 1**: No I don't have any confidence in any legal system .... They just, they listen to me and because I get a little bit, there's so much to tell about, you know. With CSV they will come out, all they want to do is listen for an hour, you know, straight out questions, answers - like you were in court, you know. You just get so buggered you can't get it all out. I just sort of feel that ... the CSV officer, she just didn't get even half the gist. She just believed that it was just a hatred thing there, of me turning the kids against their father, but that is not so ....

Giddens (1979) notes that not all actors are equally powerful and that the 'mobilisation of authority or force' may allow one player greater influence. For these women, the agencies had the formal authority to initiate legal action, make recommendations to the court about children's interests and supervise access and living arrangements, all of which could coerce them into a direction against their wishes. The extent to which they managed to keep control of their own affairs demonstrates the limitations of such formal authority and yet, the women's capacity to challenge such authority was limited to resistance. They did not have an equal capacity to exert power or influence over the professionals with whom they came into contact, though in a recursive way, their activities of resistance influenced the activities of the authorities. The extent to which they did manage to resist directly or in subtle, even devious ways, was notable. They fought in court for contact with their husbands, demanded new workers, sought out alternative counsellors, and in some cases flaunted orders by continuing to have contact with their husbands without the authorities' knowledge. As with their husbands, these attempts at resisting may seem minor compared with various worker's ability to take out a court injunction or remove a child from a woman's care. However, in practice the formal mandates only existed if there was direct evidence of the women acting outside existing orders and this was rarely the case. Woman 9's response is an example of the way in which women resisted:

> **Woman 9**: I don't think any body has got the right to ask me to choose .... (F)or Community Services to tell me that, no, I couldn't have any contact with him at all, I don't think they have that right. I had to really yell and scream at them, and I had to stand up in court and tell the judge that I wanted to be able to support my husband if he got in touch with me ....

As has been noted, not all relationships with external agencies were characterised by such struggles and even for those that were, the involvement of child protection and legal intervention sometimes brought unintended consequences. Three offending men went to prison for abusing their children and for two women this provided an enforced opportunity to gain confidence and skills in living alone, which empowered them in future negotiations with their husbands.

The legal system also provided protection for women in standing up to abusive men. This was through either issuing of Intervention Orders in the Magistrate's Court, to prevent men from contacting women and their children; or through Supervision Orders issued in the Children's Court which required children to reside as directed, and set access conditions.[57] Three women took out Intervention Orders against their husbands, and one of them utilised this in preventing him from harassing her daughter. However Woman 5's experience suggests that issuing of the orders was only one step in the process of a woman reclaiming her life from her husband's domination. She described how this enabled her to evict him but did not change the overall power differential, since the power remained with the *order*, not herself:

> **Woman 5**: Yes, well we had the protection of the law. Someone else was fixing it for me. Even if John wanted to come home, he couldn't come home and I didn't have to fight him or anything ...

(On the other hand):

> The order was holding us together to a degree, because I didn't have to stand on my own two feet and I didn't have to

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[57] In Victoria, the Magistrates Court deals with adult criminal matters, and the Children's Court with issues of child protection or juvenile crime.

say, 'John you are not coming home.' It was black and white. 'John you *can't* come home.'

In such circumstances women's power or agency was limited to the leverage afforded by official intervention and involved them utilising such court orders for their own ends. In essence it was another form of resisting their husbands' domination. The women's stories suggest however, that such arrangements can only be temporary and that a sense of resolution only came when they experienced genuine agency in making decisions. As long as the 'decision' was being made by someone else, their own agency was severely constrained and the women continued to see the issues as unresolved.

3.3.3 The Importance of Agency in Decision-making

As I have argued in Chapter 1, there is frequently an expectation after a discovery of sexual abuse that the most protective action a woman can take is to separate from her husband (Hooper, 1992; Krane, 1994). Protection is constructed as a choice between man and child. A great deal of effort by the intervening authorities is therefore directed to this end and where persuasion is not effective, children may be removed from home. The women in this research experienced such threats as effective in coercing them to separate from their husbands. However, as the previous discussion suggests, the authorities may have had the capacity to temporarily separate couples but they could not determine women's feelings nor their future intentions. It was apparent the experiences of the women in this research that whatever action authorities required them to take, in the final analysis the women themselves needed to feel in control of the decision-making process. A mandated

requirement to separate might make women live away from their husbands and give them space to gain confidence, but it could not make them feel in control of the process. In those cases where the decisions were determined by the authorities, or even by their husbands, women struggled to reconcile this with their own wishes.

Whatever the apparent differences between these women and their actions, all shared the common need to make the final decision about their marriage and yet, insisting on this right has seen them portrayed as collusive, weak or powerless. However, when placed against the backdrop of the pervasive influence of the family as the site of fulfilment and well-being, rather than forming an unusual group explicable by their inadequacy, women's need to be in control of the future of their marriages, and their reluctance to desert them too hastily can be seen as a predictable process of marital breakdown.

Research on women's experience of marital breakdown suggests that grief and pain are universal (Grossman, 1986; Straus, 1988). Women invariably feel responsible for the failure of the marriage, regardless of whether or not they initiate the divorce, and may experience it as degrading and a rejection of their own self worth. Even when marriage ends as a consequence of the man's infidelity, women may feel responsible for their lack of desirability or sexuality (Grossman, 1986). It is apparent that divorce is a process through which people work at an uneven pace, and it is not unusual for women to delay the end of even an unhappy relationship for months and sometimes years. Grossman found that even those who initiated divorce after their husbands had an affair, usually did so after some time of recovery from the initially intense pain. As she summarised it:

> ...the decision to divorce is not one that is typically made easily. It is preceded by a long period of internal turmoil (Grossman, 1986, p. 63).

A sense of control and resolution are seen as central to women's adjustment after divorce (Grossman, 1986; Strauss, 1988), but loneliness, isolation, fear and guilt are common early outcomes of divorce for women whatever the cause of the break-up, and grieving for the lost hopes and the good times is part of the process of adjustment.[58] Positive outcomes of divorce is associated with "...being prepared for the divorce decision, agreeing with the divorce decision, high marital conflict, a decreased degree of attachment to the ex-spouse ... and receiving social support (Straus, 1988, p. 231).[59]

None of the women I interviewed had expected or been prepared for divorce prior to the disclosure of abuse, and even the one who was separated had been considering reuniting. To the extent that they were committed to the marriage, whatever the quality of the relationship, and the centrality of their families in their lives, none tended to fit the criteria predictable of good adjustment at the time of disclosure or months following.

Woman 2 is an interesting example of the need to be in control of the process. She had lost one husband through death, had divorced her second husband, and was now being required to leave her third. She was well placed to contemplate the differences of losing a partner through choice or chance:

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[58] Straus (1988, p.230) has complained that much of the research on women and divorce is based on a "deviancy model of divorce" and focuses on the "inevitable adjustment period", rather than their long-term, over-all functioning. She correctly highlights that there are a range of reactions to divorce and that many women exhibit a "resistance and resourcefulness" which is absent from the accounts of adjustment difficulties.

[59] Conversely, a "...continuing emotional relationship with ex-husband, high family orientation, and low self-orientation..." are all involved in negative outcomes for women (Straus, 1988, p. 231).

Woman 2: Well when you make the decision for yourself
it's all planned, and it's totally different when the decision is
taken away from you ….

It was not just the authorities whom the women resisted in taking the
decision away from them. In the two cases where the men had decided to
separate against the women's own wishes, they remained unresolved to the
decision. In contrast, whether they maintained or relinquished the marriage,
when the women did feel that the decisions were their own they experienced
a sense of control and authority in their lives. Woman 5 contrasted her
experience when the court order required her to separate from her husband,
with finally making that decision for herself. Her comments demonstrate
that the external control, though useful in protecting her child and in standing
up to her husband, had simply replaced one kind of domination with another:

Woman 5: …. It wasn't my decision. Now this is my decision, and

that is something else again. I have never had a decision. My

decisions have always been John's decisions.

As they gained control of the decisions they needed to make the women
began to utilise their own resources in readjusting to the disruption and loss.
Many utilised self-help skills including drawing, keeping a journal,
pursuing old interests or taking up new hobbies. A central part of
adjustment however was developing a sense of respect and understanding
for their own behaviours and feelings. Agency was not just about decisions
in the outside world, but also about an internalised sense of trusting their
future judgement and past choices. Those women who approved of the
actions they had taken, or who understood the circumstances which

constrained them, were more likely to feel in control of their lives. In contrast, those who felt that they had made bad choices, or who experienced a lack of control about the outcomes, were in most ongoing turmoil. These two quotes from differing positions demonstrate this point. On the one hand, Woman 9 felt she had made the right choices:

> **Woman 9**: ... I mean it hasn't been easy. This has been probably the worse twelve months of my life. I've learnt a lot and I've lost a lot. I feel that so much is going to come out of this, even though what has happened has been traumatic for my kids and for me, I feel that only good can come out of it. I wouldn't wish it on anybody....

In contrast to this, at the time of interview, Woman 10 was deep in self loathing and was unable to move on in her life because of her own judgement that her initial attempt to maintain her marriage had been wrong and 'weak'. She was left with no space to attend to her own grief and losses and her anger at herself and her husband was overwhelming:

> **Woman 10**: See the whole issue is, forget the damned anger and the damned grief and the damned everything, and let's just get back to life. I can't really (let out) my emotions because then I would just get a gun and shoot him in the head and end of story .... (The relationship) is like gone, buried. I made it gone, it's finished and I really don't even have time to deal with it.

3.4 Summary

In this chapter I have explored the women's need for time to go through the process of making meaning of the events around them, and to reconcile conflicting meanings. I showed that all aspects of discovery and decision-

making were processes and entailed reflections on the past, present and future. Each of these also entailed a series of profound and far-reaching losses, the recognition of which remained disenfranchised. I have argued that the issue of women's power or powerlessness is complex and multi-faceted. Wherever others had power over the women they resisted in an effort to maintain their own sense of agency, however constrained or restricted this may have been. In addition, while discussions of power in these contexts are often limited to issues of equality *between* people, the women's experiences demonstrated that a sense of agency involved both external and internal dimensions. That is, agency was reliant on both the capacity to act, but also a sense of 'self-respect' for the nature of those actions. This did not necessarily involve approving of all of their behaviours and feelings, but required an understanding of the conditions which influenced those acts and constrained their choices.

In making sense of the women's experiences it is necessary to account for the paradox between individual agency and structural constraint; and between their capacity to articulate reasons for their decisions, and the existence of other conditions of their actions of which they may remain unaware. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1979, 1982, 1984) is useful in accounting for both of these. In particular, Iris Marion Young's (1990, 1997) feminist application of aspects of his ideas assisted in making sense of a range of experiences of these women, including those which at first appear confusing and contradictory. In the next section I go beyond the specifics of the women's experiences, and begin to map a conceptual framework for the chapters which follow.

3.5 Conceptualising Agency and Ideology:
The Theory of Structuration

Giddens has attempted to overcome the dualism in sociological theorising about 'structure' and 'action', as represented by structural-functionalism and hermeneutics. In the first, structure is seen to have primacy over action, while in hermeneutics action and meaning take primacy over structure (in 1993)[60]. He sees himself as both appropriating and departing from these major traditions. He does this by recognising the influence of structure but also affording people 'knowledgeability'. The three central ideas from structuration theory which I utilise here are his concepts of 'practical consciousness' and 'discursive consciousness'; the notions of the 'duality of structure' and the 'recursiveness of social life'; and the 'unintended consequences' and 'unacknowledged conditions' of our actions.

1. Practical and Discursive Consciousness

Giddens sees people as competent actors in their world. Their actions, the outcomes of which cannot always by predicted, are based on what he calls 'capability' and 'knowledgeability'. By

capability he means the 'possibility that they could have acted otherwise', and knowledgeability refers to "...all those things which members of the

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[60] The 1993 reference is from Cassell's *The Giddens Reader*. This work includes a commentary and introduction by Cassell, as well as substantial direct extracts from Giddens' own work. To avoid confusion, when I am referring to Cassell's comments I will cite him as Cassell (1993); when I draw from Giddens' own extracts within the book I will refer to Giddens (in 1993), and where I use the original text of his work, I will cite it as Giddens (1979, 1982) etc.

society know about that society and the conditions of their activity within it" (Giddens, 1982, p.9). His conception of 'knowledgeability' refers not only to conscious knowledge, but also to the 'tacit' knowledge that people possess which enables them to 'go on' in society. This is encompassed in what he calls 'practical consciousness' and 'discursive consciousness'. Discursive consciousness is that level of knowledge which can be articulated or verbalised. Practical consciousness is, in Young's words, "on the fringe of consciousness, rather than the focus of discursive attention" (Young, 1990, p.131).[61] Giddens contends that most of the 'knowledge' incorporated into social practices is *practical*, rather than *discursive*, and that the line between the two is 'fluctuating and permeable', both for the individual and between different individuals in different activities (Giddens, in 1993, p.91).

Young (1990) cites aspects of racism and sexism as examples of practical consciousness. She argues that the basis of some racist beliefs have 'receded from discursive consciousness' because it may no longer be acceptable to behave in openly racist or sexist ways. However these beliefs and practices continue to exist and to be perpetuated by meanings or responses which are largely unconscious. So for example, conceptions of what is considered 'beautiful' or 'smart' or 'courageous' are rooted in values and

beliefs which may themselves be sexist or racist, but which are no longer a part of discursive consciousness.

A similar argument could be put in relation to mother-blaming or victim-blaming practices. It is no longer acceptable to hold victims responsible for being abused, and becoming less acceptable to hold mothers responsible. However, at the level of practical consciousness, knowledge about female and male sexuality, what constitutes good or bad mothering, how victims should respond to abuse – all of these inform actions and responses in ways which remain unarticulated and largely 'on the fringe of consciousness'. The basis of this knowledge is not available to discursive consciousness and therefore remains unacknowledged and unexplored.

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[61] In this sense Giddens is not referring to a Freudian sense of 'the unconscious'. Indeed he is critical of Freud and

These ideas are helpful to the previous discussion of ideology. Aspects of the ideology of the family can be seen as comprised in discursive consciousness and others as practical. And while none of the women in this research would have articulated adherence to 'the ideology of the family' as a reason for their decisions, they nonetheless possessed the knowledge of the nature of, and rules governing relationships within families and the practices associated with being wives and mothers.

The paradox of the *endurance* and *transformability* of ideas and practices is well conceptualised by Giddens. He does not see the gap between discursive and practical consciousness as rigid but is at pains to point out the permeability. As he notes:

> …the division between the two can be altered by many aspects of an agent's socialization and learning experiences. Between discursive and practical consciousness there is no bar; there is only the differences between what can be said and what is characteristically simply done … (Giddens, in 1993, p.94).

He goes on to describe one of the tasks of social research as investigating and articulating the nature of the mundane, everyday knowledge in order to open it to critique and transformation. The outcome of such social investigation may itself eventually become part of a society's practical consciousness, a process he calls the 'double hermeneutic' (Cassells, 1993, p.35). In later chapters I will argue that much of the practical consciousness the women possessed in relation to sexual abuse could be traced to early Freudian notions of female sexual fantasy and oedipal desires, and patriarchal beliefs about men and women's sexuality. While the root of these beliefs may not have been known by the women, the 'knowledge' (for example that girls seduce men) was a powerful element of their decision-making. Paradoxically the extent to which social researchers, especially feminists, have challenged this 'knowledge' and the way

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specifically differentiates practical consciousness from the 'unconscious'.

in which some of these challenges are themselves being absorbed into practical consciousness was also apparent, and is discussed in more detail later.

2. The Recursivenes of Social Life

Discussions of ideology, as Giddens observed, often appear to suggest that people are 'dupes' to some unarticulated but pervasive belief system. On the contrary, he posits a far more complex and interdependent relationship between structure and action. Central to his ideas is the notion that people draw from sets of rules in order to participate in social practices, and that these rules 'structure' or shape the practices themselves. However, the rules are also recursively shaped by peoples' actions. This involves what he calls 'the duality of structure', whereby structure is both the 'medium and outcome' of social practices (Giddens, 1979). That is :

> ...neither subject (human agent) nor object ('society' or social institutions) should be regarded as having primacy. Each is constituted in and through recurrent practices (Giddens, 1979, p.8).

He uses the example of language to explicate this notion. In speaking English we are both governed by, and perpetuate the rules of, the language. That is, in order to be understood we must follow the rules; and yet the language's continued existence and people's comprehension of it is dependent on its continuing to be practiced according to the rules. There is thus a recurrent relationship between the language's existence and the way in which individuals use it (Cassell, 1993).

The rules which structure social practices are both constraining and enabling since, as Cassell (1993, p.13) summarised it, " At each point of structural reproduction there is also the potential for change". This helps explain how the

'familial ideology' as theorised by feminist scholars can be seen as both structuring of social practices, as well as subject to change; as *constituting* action, as well as being constituted *by* action. Like Richards (1997) notion of ideology, Giddens requires us to entertain a kind of paradox: The power and resilience of ideas and practices are acknowledged, at the same time as a recognition that it is people's actions in adhering to them which maintain and/or re-construct those ideas. People are therefore not passive players in the social world but have agency and the capacity to challenge and negotiate with social institutions.[62]

3. Unacknowledged Conditions, Unintended Consequences

Giddens argues that the articulated reasons for actions may be only part of the actual basis for actions, since the practical consciousness, may constitute what he calls the 'unacknowledged conditions' of their behaviour (Giddens, 1979). Understanding the conditions of people's actions must not therefore be reliant solely on their articulated reasons.[63] Further, while people act with agency and intention, actions may also have *unintended consequences*. Together with practical consciousness these may form part of the 'unacknowledged conditions' of their actions. Unintended consequences can be understood as those outcomes which are a result of what is done and would not have happened if the person had acted differently, but which they could not have intentionally brought about (Cassell, 1993).[64] The reproduction of social institutions is dependent on both acting intentionally and unintended consequences. As Giddens summarises it:

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[62] For example, McMahon (1995), demonstrated that in relation to "motherhood", women are neither subjugated and passive in their paths to and experience of mothering, but nor are they entirely free from shared patterns and meanings which can be located particularly along gender and class lines. Similarly, Finch (1989), established that there was a complex relationship between women's caring practices and the mandates of the familial ideology. She demonstrated that decisions as to who supports whom in families, under what conditions and within what limits, are based on the 'social expectations', or what for these purposes might be defined as aspects of the family ideology, (such as the notions of 'duty' and 'obligation', or expectations connected to gender and 'morality'). But they are also influenced by personal and interpersonal considerations about the particularities of specific relationships, including the presence or absence of feelings of affection, or the strength of the relationship between two people. These represent small ways in which ideologies are negotiated, challenged and maintained.

[63] This issue emerged as central to this thesis and is discussed at length in chapter 6.

[64] I cited earlier the unintended consequences for women whose husbands were sent to prison – they frequently developed a sense of confidence and independence which was neither forseen nor intended by the sentencing judge.

All I do under some description I do intentionally and knowledgeably. However this scarcely makes me the master of my own fate. In following the routines of my day-to-day life I help reproduce social institutions that I played no part in bringing into being. They are more than merely the environment of my action since … they enter constitutively into what it is I do as an agent. Similarly, my actions constitute and reconstitute the institutional conditions of action of others, just as their actions do of mine ….(Giddens, in 1993, p.141).

Giddens ideas provide a useful conceptual boundary for the chapters which follow. Within this conceptualisation the women emerge as neither passive nor operating entirely of free will; the knowledge they possess as both constraining but subject to negotiation; the women's behaviour as participating in forming as well as being influenced by, beliefs and practices which may not be fully articulated. It becomes obvious that understanding the women requires understanding both the power of social structures to influence the lives of individuals, as well as their ability to 'make their own lives' despite the external constraints (Finch, 1989). The meaning of their behaviour can only be understood alongside the meaning they ascribe to other's behaviour, and to events as they unfold.

3.6 Summary

I have outlined aspects of Giddens' Structuration theory which are useful in understanding the complexity of women's agency, and the constraining nature of other conditions of their actions. The remainder of this thesis is therefore given over to establishing three dimensions of the women's decisions :

- the subjective meaning of their behaviour, or the "...meaning of action, not the establishment of a hierarchy of causes" (McDermott, 1988, p.69).

- the 'practical consciousness' on which they drew, but not all of which they could articulate, and

- the nature of the 'unacknowledged conditions' of their actions

I therefore explore the discursive and practical consciousness associated with the ideology of the family and the way in which the women both contributed to and were constrained by this ideology; the women's subjective meaning within the parameters of their tacit knowledge about sexual abuse; and the women's own history of abuse, as one of the unacknowledged conditions of their actions.

Chapter 4

Balancing the Best Interests of the Family:

"You kind of feel guilty anyway"

Women whose children have been sexually abused have been accused of trying to 'keep their families together at any cost'. As noted in Chapter 1, this has invariably been seen as based on self interest, weakness, or as evidence of their particular psychopathology; and as a choice in favour of the man over the child. The women interviewed for this research did indeed work concertedly to protect the interests of their families. However contrary to suggestions in the literature this was not as simple as keeping the family living together, nor did it signify a choice of one in favour of the other. A major source of pain at the decisions they were required to make came from the sense that their separate connections as 'wife' and 'mother' were aspects of a larger whole. Their primary interest appeared to be in maintaining the integrity of their families; that is, the 'family' was seen as a unit, an entity which both encompassed and went beyond the interests of particular individuals. How the women defined familial interests was informed by their perceptions of the values, expectations and contradictions inherent in the 'ideology of the family', or in Giddens' terms, their practical and discursive consciousness, and their decisions represented their negotiation with that ideology.

4.1 Negotiating the Familial Ideology

My findings accord with Hooper (1992) who concluded that considerations about 'family' were central to women's responses to incest. She commented:

> The dominant familial ideology was reflected in recurring references by many of the women to the desire to be a 'normal family', that is with both partner and child(ren) (Hooper, 1992, P. 85).

Her respondents, and those interviewed for this research, are not peculiar in their attachment to their families as has been suggested in the clinical incest literature. Rather, their responses are consistent with the prevailing attitudes discussed in Chapter 1. De Vaus (1997) summary of the family values research, reads as a summary of those the women articulated or enacted. He concluded that the majority of Australians surveyed:

> … held many traditional family values …. Most people saw the home as the locus of what is important in life, and …. (a) majority believed that two parents are needed to bring up a child …. Most people believe in the ideal of life-long, monogamous marriage and think that it is too easy to get a divorce …. There was, however, also evidence of a shifting away from certain traditional family values …. There was general acceptance of woman working so long as children and family came first...(de Vaus, 1997, pp.9,10).

The women in this research recognised the inherent conflicts between individual and familial interests and the acknowledgment of this caused them intense pain:

> **Woman 7**: …. But as for making decisions like I had to, it was as if I had to decide between my daughter and my husband, and yet I feel guilty really. You kind of feel guilty anyway ….

4.1.1 Marriage as a Foundation for Family Life

As many writers have demonstrated, the relationship between the woman and the abuser is significant in her response to a disclosure of abuse even when he is not her husband (Humphreys,1990; Faller, 1988; Sirles and Lofberg, 1990; Hooper, 1992). For each woman I interviewed, the relationship was indeed central, and the fact that the offender was her husband intensified the dilemmas she experienced. A woman's evaluation of her marriage was not limited to the nature of the connection between herself and her partner, but the marriage itself was seen as the foundation on which the 'family' was built. Rather than choosing husband or children, marriage and maternity were closely connected since her identity as a *mother* was tied in part to her ability to provide a competent *father*. Considerations about the future of the marriage were therefore indivisible from considerations about the broader interests of the family.

Women were particularly vulnerable to the belief that children needed fathers and would be deprived if they were raised by mothers alone. Nine women had borne children in previous relationships, and for six of these the man's role as a competent father was an important aspect in the decision to marry him in the first instance. This is evident in the words of these three women:

> **Woman 4:** .... Then he sort of, he wormed his way into our life. He got there with my son. I suppose I was very concerned that the children didn't have a father. I was very concerned to do the right thing by them.

> **Woman 7**: ... She demanded attention. I suppose she missed her father. He'd play with her and do silly things with her

and that.... I thought John was wonderful with her. Because he hadn't really had a lot of experience with children.…

Woman 8:.. Darren was three weeks old when I met John. I mean he sort of accepted him straight away as his son.

Of course in considering the interests of their families, women were not thinking only of the abused child and the man. All of them had other children to be considered. If these children had a good relationship with their father and were not seen as being at risk of abuse themselves, women suffered a major conflict between what they saw as the needs of the abused child and his/her siblings. The demands of being a 'good mother' did not dictate a clear decision and the 'interests of the family' were not easily apparent:

Woman 2: Vicki should have stayed at home and John should have moved out....I should have stuck by Vicki. I mean Vicki is my daughter...

Interviewer: So why didn't you, if that's what you think, what got in the way.

Woman 2: Probably my younger daughter, disruption to her as well. Probably just trying to keep the family unit intact

Woman 10: ... the youngest didn't know about it at that stage.... I just thought God what an awful thing to learn about your father. So I didn't want her to know, rightly or wrongly, I didn't want her to know.

It is not surprising in these circumstances that the solutions women saw available to themselves were also not based solely on considerations 'for' or 'against' the marriage but incorporated their perceptions of the interests of their families.

4.2 The Nature of Attempted Solutions

In chapter 3 I suggested that 'attempted solutions' was a more adequate term than 'decisions' for the process the women went through. In this chapter I explore what these solutions looked like, what dilemmas they were trying to resolve, and how they evaluated them over time.

Solution A: Death of a Marriage

For Women 1 and 4 a sense of family had been an important motivation to marry in the first place, but the abuse undermined the marital relationship to the extent that family interests were not seen to be served by continuing it. The solution to their crisis was to put greater distance between themselves and their husbands. For Woman 4 this involved going to the police, having the man leave and having no further contact with him; for Woman 1 enlisting the help of a solicitor and consolidating her earlier separation. Woman 4's explains the inevitability, for her, of the decision to separate:

> **Woman 4**: I guess I knew the whole time that if I found proof that would be it. You know that he would have to go because there was no way that I would let him sexually abuse - no matter what it did to me or us as a family. So I had no hesitation in doing it.

> **Interviewer**: Somehow it was what you had to do to protect Vicki?

> **Woman 4**: Yes, and anger at how he had lied to me.

As she is careful to correct me, the decision is not based *solely* on protection of her daughter. It was also fundamentally about what he had done to *her* by lying. That is, her husband had betrayed herself *and* the child; he had failed as both a husband *and* a father.

Despite such a clear and unambiguous rejection of the marriage her emotional response was less clear cut. Over a year later, as she finalised her divorce, she was suddenly dealing with her own emotional turmoil and facing for the first time the reality of the choice she made at the time of disclosure - that is, to relinquish the relationship in which she had been a good, nurturing 'wife'. Her connection with her husband and the role of caring for him did not disappear simply because she decided he must leave:

> **Woman 4**: Well what I am going through now is feeling sorry for him, and I don't understand why I do. I mean I hate him for what he has done, and yet when we had to go to court, I nearly went to pieces that day when I saw him .... Everything I had to do, you know it was like this adrenalin wash over me. I just did it and ... I never really spoke to him about it. I just said you have done this, now get out .... I still have a long way to go.

For Woman 1, who also decided to end the marriage, disclosure came at a time when she was already separated but considering reuniting with her husband:

> **Woman 1**: I used to say (to my older daughter), 'Look, you know, I want to be with him. He makes me feel good about myself because he is good to the kids .... I miss that family life - the life of togetherness'....

Disclosure helped her resolve to stay separated but in doing so she had to relinquish the dream of a 'family life' and the hope that anything could be different with him. Her driving force was the protection of her children but alongside this, was the knowledge that the family she sought was not possible with him. That is, he was a failure as both a husband and a father:

Woman 1: I know that I have done the right thing by leaving him. I know that I have. I mean I get hung up with guilt complexes at times. And yes, I did take his babies away from him, but it was take his babies away from him or have them growing up demented .... I feel that I have got lots of time on my hands to dwell and to convince myself that no, no, this happened .... And it's your life; it's him or it's you, and who are you going to choose? You or him!

Both Women 1 and 4 used the word *security* in reflecting on what their marriage represented to them.   Despite years of violence toward themselves from their husbands they had continued to see the children's interests as requiring a father. The abuse nullified the marriage as any kind of secure foundation for family life. Instead, their families' wellbeing was now dependent on finding an alternative sense of 'security' which they did through a renewed sense of motherhood. This is taken up later in this chapter.

Solution B. The interests of family survival: Maintaining both relationships

Eight of the ten (Women 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10) initially tried to maintain the interests of all family members by keeping the whole family together. As Woman 9 put it, "I wanted to help John as well as them".   In making their decisions they considered the values central to their own construction of family, and a 'broken family' was not seen to be in anyone's interests. The responsibility for juggling the needs of family members was theirs, and the aim of 'keeping the family' provided a possible solution to their heart-felt dilemma of having to choose:

Woman 7: (very tearful) Because I had no family here. And I didn't want to lose them. I would rather us all stay together than face a broken family. I'd been through that.

Woman 2: ... And I didn't want to lose either of them. And I just thought, surely we can be strong enough to work it all out. Like, I didn't realise it would take so long and I didn't realise it would have its toll.

For these eight women, this initial decision to maintain the family involved both the child and the man living under the same roof and the couple continuing a sexual and intimate relationship. However in no case could this be construed as condoning the abuse, since in these circumstances the job of protection fell to the women. Despite the clinical literature's assumptions to the contrary, staying together did not necessarily mean that women left the children unprotected, though their attempts at protection may not have always been successful:

Woman 5: It was a real strain. I just spent nights with my ear to the door, you know.... And I just tried to keep them apart .... I kept saying, Vicki close your legs. Vicki sit properly. And even with washing the clothes - I know this had nothing to do with it - but I hung all the underpants up one end so that if he had to go to the garage he wouldn't bump his nose into the things... And I'd hide them, I'd put other clothes around the underwear, and his clothes would be up the other end of the clothes line. I know it's stupid isn't it.

Woman 8: ...The kids stayed here, they all stayed here. But I couldn't sleep at night. If I heard him get up, I got up.....

The situation where both the man and the child remained in the home was very difficult for the women. Although it met their hope of maintaining a family, the toll on themselves was often enormous. Woman 10's comments give insight into the dilemmas she could not reconcile:

Woman 10: I thought I'm a really strong person, I'm going to work it all out. And I talked to him endlessly and endlessly and endlessly, and I talked to her endlessly and endlessly and endlessly, trying to make her feel that what happened wasn't her fault ....(W)e agreed that he'd stay to see how it was going to be, if I could actually live with it. And of course all that time, I was thinking what am I doing, what am I doing? He should be out of here, he should be gone, he should be gone; I'd better tell him tonight, I'm going to tell him tomorrow...

The inadequacy of terms like 'protective mother' and 'choosing' the child or offender, when that is seen as determined by the decision to maintain the marriage is encapsulated by Woman 3's experience. She was devastated by the disclosure after thirty years of marriage, and in her case the interests of the family were eventually seen as living separately from a father who she now knew to be abusive. But this decision was not made in an instant nor without experiencing conflict. Over a period of weeks while both her husband and one daughter continued to live with her, she prepared herself for a decision. She gathered information about her rights in relation to the family home, explored alternatives, arranged counselling and finally decided that her husband leaving was the best solution. Before making this decision, she stood by an earlier commitment to go on a holiday with him which had been planned to explore an eventual retirement destination. Her experience of the holiday may be seen as further evidence of her internal conflict:

Woman 3: ....Of course I would have given anything not to go away, because I didn't want to be with John .... But we'd sort of booked the fares, and I knew I had to do something .... I went away with the knowledge that there was going to be the counselling and I had done all I could do before we went away. But then I had to endure the two weeks away. Really I never want to go (there) again. And yet that was my most dearest wish, to get there (very tearful) .... I had been thinking about John's retirement, and I had thought ... that it would be lovely

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there .... John ranted and raved a bit because he expected me to be the same. There without the children, he thought it was just going to be us again, which I thought, "Well, how can he think like that?" …. It was just a horrible period of time, it was an awful holiday.

Whether one judged this woman several weeks after disclosure, at the point of asking her husband to leave, or at the time of going on holidays with him would lead us to very different conclusions about her 'protectiveness'. Yet clearly, the process she went through was an inextricable part of her making sense of the situation, and deciding what action to take. Her decision that the marriage wasn't sustainable was made despite going on the holiday and perhaps was partially confirmed by this as she found that even without the children present, the relationship with her husband had been forever changed. She then sought a solution which would benefit what remained of the family unit. But her solution, she acknowledges, involved considering the needs and vulnerabilities of all involved, including her husband. Her decisions cannot be characterised as being 'for' the child and 'against' the man. If anything they are an attempt to be 'for' *everyone:*

> **Woman 3**: ...with John's heart problems and things, I was thinking goodness me what if he became very sick, because I knew that stress aggravated it. And I really was thinking of both lots .... (but) on this occasion I had to put the children (first). The welfare of the children, was the main thing. They had to have the continuation .… (But) I wanted to be sure that he was set up alright …. I just wanted to have peace of mind that I wasn't saying to him, 'Go', and that he was going to be in some terrible place ….

Of the eight who initially attempted to maintain the family by all living together, seven soon moved on to a new arrangement which represented a further attempted solution to emerging difficulties. In five cases the

eventual intervention by authorities required them to separate or risk losing their children. Having to choose living arrangements for these five women still did not, at this point, amount to choosing one over the other. Rather, decisions were based on what they saw as the long-term viability of their families. In four cases it was the man who left, in one the child. In each case the decision as to who would leave was seen as an interim solution based on what was most likely to lead to eventual family reunification and was made together with the man and sometimes the child.

> **Woman 6**: .... And then CSV came in and either Vicki had to go or John had to go. So John left.
>
> **Interviewer**: Whose decision was that for him to go?
>
> **Woman 6**: His and mine.
>
> **Interviewer**: What made you both decide that it would be John?
>
> **Woman 6**: Because if Vicki went I probably would never see her again.
>
> **Interviewer**: You feared you'd lose her?
>
> **Woman 6**: Completely .... It would have damaged the relationship.

Even when the child left, this did not amount to abandoning her, nor a simple choice of one over the other. Woman 2 attempted to continue to mother her daughter by deciding where she would stay and ensuring she continued to have contact with the family.

> **Woman 2**: ...Vicki stayed at her girlfriends house. She stayed there for a while. But I wasn't happy with her staying there because I didn't like the influence of her girlfriend, so then she moved in with friends of ours...

4.2.1 Negotiating Living Arrangements

In understanding the women's experiences one needs to focus not just on the decision to stay or separate, but on the future of the marital relationship as a whole. In no case did a forced decision to separate determine the nature of the relationship in families. The couple continued to determine their own decisions as to whether or not the marriage was over.

Woman 6 explains how having her husband leave did not mean abandoning the relationship. Rather it was an attempt to satisfy the authorities enough not to lose her children; the hope being that the marriage could be maintained until it was safe to reunite:

> **Woman 6**: Well if John really cared about me, you know Vicki's not going to be living at home forever... she would have eventually moved out of home.... See I could have still then seen John. It wouldn't have been behind her back.... But that any relationship between John and I would have been sort of, been put on hold until Vicki left home or got married.

When living apart from their husbands women organised their lives around the attempt to maintain their families in different ways. They attempted to maintain connections with both the child and man by conducting their marriage and mothering separately, or by allowing him to be a father to other children but not the abused child. This often meant they were going to exhausting lengths to see their husbands, including travelling long distances by train to visit him in prison, allowing access to some children and not others and having a part-time marriage.

Woman 6: I moved to this house. John moved back into the flat then and we started trying to build the family relationship again, with John sort of leaving at night...

4.3 Renegotiating and Evaluating the Attempted Solutions

Having attempted a solution which was aimed at addressing the interests of all family members, women then needed to evaluate their solution over time. Did it in fact resolve their dilemmas? Was the solution sustainable? What were the costs associated with it?

4.3.1 Maintaining the Marriage:

Women 7 and 9's Experience

Of the eight women who initially attempted it, only Woman 9 maintained faith that the interests of her family lay in continuing her marriage. While she knew this would entail her older children not living at home, this still met her hope of 'maintaining a family' because she believed she could have a relationship with both her children and husband:

> **Woman 9**: I am going to get my husband back and we are going to live together as a family, and my girls are going to come and visit me. I don't think they will ever live with me again and that is sad, but that's just the way it is. And Sally (the youngest daughter) is going to have the mother and father (deep sigh) that she deserves to have .....I know that as the years go on and they come and visit, we will have a good relationship with John and I, and Sally and the other girls.

This can be contrasted with the experience of Woman 7. Because of increasing evidence that her daughter would no longer tolerate a

relationship with her stepfather, it became obvious to her that the man and child were irreconcilable and that she would remain forever torn between them. She remained in a state of uncertainty, unable to secure either relationship though continuing to live with her husband. It is clear from her story that maintaining the relationship with the man did not come without cost.

> **Woman 7**: Oh I suppose I'm just angry .... While she was coming home I think I could cope with it a bit more.... (John and I) had a bit of a blow up last night. Because he gets really despondent, because I'm continuously angry with him, and I think to myself I shouldn't. If I'm going to stay here I should try and you know, find a stable relationship .... He wants to know if it's going to go on like this for ever and ever....

4.3.2 Ongoing Ambivalence and Uncertainty:

Women 5 and 6's Experience

Ambivalence and uncertainty pervaded many of the women's attempts at resolving their dilemmas. For Women 5 and 6 this ambivalence continued over a period of years. Despite attempted reconciliations and enforced separations, by the time of interview they remained uncertain of their futures. Woman 6 hoped for reconciliation with her husband but was increasingly uncertain this would happen. Like Woman 7, she felt that she had lost out in both relationships and it appeared that her continued hope for reconciliation with her husband was partly because of the lack of hope in her future with her daughter:

> **Woman 6**: ...I would have got rid of John if I knew that this was how it was going to work out ….

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Woman 5 was interviewed at a time when she was increasingly ambivalent about her decision. Initially she felt satisfied with her solution, believing she could maintain her family by conducting her marriage and her relationship with her daughter separately, by living apart from her husband.

> **Woman 5**: ...It makes me feel I'm in the ideal situation. I've got a part-time husband, you know. I can go and see him when I want to, and I don't have to if I don't want to.... I feel like I'm in the ideal situation. I don't really want to change it...

But she had also began to have doubts as new information encouraged her to reassess the relationship with her daughter, which she had formerly taken for granted. She began to wonder whether she would finally have to choose between her husband and child:

> **Woman 5**: Well I've been going to a group thing, where there are some women who have been abused and their children have been abused, not unlike myself. And ... there were two women in particular - the mother still lives with the man who abused them, and it was their step father, and they won't talk, won't have anything at all to do with their mother.... It just really opened my eyes, listening to their story because ... the fact that they hate their mother, like really hate her, you know. I fear that's going to be what happens with Vicki because I still associate with John.

4.3.3 Ending the Marriage

While Women 1 and 4 had ended their marriage in the first instance, four others later followed suit but for differing reasons: For Women 2 and 10 new evidence emerged which suggested their children would continue to be at risk

with their husbands.[65] Woman 3, as noted, began by staying together but soon separated as the impact on her children became obvious and her husband failed to understand this. Woman 8 became increasingly disillusioned about her husband who remained self-centred and unsupportive of her.   But ending the marriage was not a simple solution for any woman and often caused them great distress as Woman 8, testifies:

> **Woman 8**: It was hard, very hard. I mean, I think I had an appointment with the divorce class five times last year, and I kept saying, "I can't do it. I won't do it." But this time I am so adamant. I am going to do it.

In summary then, of the eight women who initially attempted to maintain their families by continuing the marriage, only one saw this as a satisfactory solution (Woman 9);   another continued to do so but felt that her relationship with both her husband and her child was damaged (Woman 7); one had lost both relationships but was hoping a marriage was salvageable (Woman 6); one remained unresolved though leaning toward ending the marriage (Woman 5) and four had permanently separated or divorced (Women 2, 3, 8 and 10). In their own terms then, only

 one of the women found the initial attempted solution met their aim of meeting the best interests of their families.[66]

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[65] Woman 2 learned that her husband had also abused younger relatives when an adolescent, and Woman 10's husband confessed that he had once again approached her daughter for sexual favours.

[66] During the process following disclosure, Woman 5 had become more aware of the impact on her, of witnessing childhood violence. This led her to consider the impact on her own children, of witnessing John's violence to her. At a follow up phone call several months after the interview, she indicated that she had decided to permanently separate. Though she had come to similar decisions in the past, she had never seen them through. In this instance she reported that she had had no contact with John for three months, the longest period she had ever sustained, and it appeared that this time she may carry out her decision. However because of her previous on-going ambivalence, and because it was not possible to check out her final actions, I have continued to class her as ambivalent, but leaning toward ending the marriage.

4.4 Aspects of the Familial Ideology

I have argued that all the women made their decisions based on their assessments of the best interests of their families and that this was not demonstrated by a simple choice of husband or child: Rather the different relationships were integral aspects of the whole. That is, they were influenced by the familial ideology and in negotiating this had to reconcile contradictory constructions of marriage and motherhood which were in inexorable conflict after the discovery of incest. There are a range of aspects of what could be loosely called the ideology of the family apparent in the women's accounts. These include:

- the centrality of women to the family and of the family in women's lives
- the notion of the family as an entity beyond the individuals which comprise it
- the primacy of the model of the 'normal' family, including two heterosexual parents and children
- the belief that children need their fathers and the more contemporary notion that fathers should be involved with, and have a close relationship with their children (even step children)
- women's role as nurturers to their children and husbands
- marriage as based on love and companionship
- the sanctity of the marital contract
- the existence of the marriage as separate from the family but also as the foundation for it

4.3.1 The Women's Constructions of Marriage

The way in which these aspects of the ideology were manifest is explored below, first in relation to marriage and then to motherhood. Evident in all the women's descriptions are the underlying values, beliefs and expectations they held in relation to their marriages. These included what are the central characteristics of 'husband' and 'wife'; what are the important elements of a 'good' marriage; how should partners respond to adversity; what responsibility do they have for each other and under what circumstances can these be challenged? The construction of contemporary marriage as based on 'love' and 'partnership' and the underlying values of trust, companionship, and mutual support were all evident in the women's accounts, as was the perception of women's responsibility for marital success or failure. While the ideal may have been far from the actual experiences of their marriages, the women were influenced by sets of core values which remain central to the ideology of the modern family (de Vaus, 1997).

In considering their solutions the women's attention to their particular constructions of marriage were far-reaching and went beyond the dichotomies of 'nurturer' or 'provider'. No women decided to end their marriage without also going through a process of considering their underlying or foundational beliefs and values about marriage. Analysis of these kind of considerations could lead a woman to see her marriage as 'dead' or worthy of resurrection. For no woman was the *fact* of the abuse alone, reason for a final end to the marriage, a finding also supported by Hooper (1992). Woman 5 summarised this issue:

Woman 5: .... we were going to get back together slowly because we had been living apart for two years .... It wasn't because of the child abuse. It was because things were just not right, you know .... There was more to it than just the sexual abuse. I mean that was part of it, but that was only this much. There were more things.

These other 'things' centred around the basic values and conditions which the women attached to partnership; that is, whether their marriages could survive without the basis of trust, versus abandoning the marriage without trying to resolve things. Whether at the point of disclosure or weeks, months or years afterwards, the issues the women considered when deciding whether or not a marriage should end were strikingly similar.

1. Trust

For all women trust was a basic tenet of their marriages prior to disclosure. This trust was both the screen behind which men abused and it's destruction was a source of acute grief for the women.

Woman 10: (deep sigh) I trusted him. I honestly, totally trusted him. And perhaps that was one of the reasons I didn't pick up anything. But at the same time, how can you live in a marriage, how can you have a person if you don't trust them? If you have reasons to, but I didn't have reasons to. I trusted him. And still I'm trying to work out how he could (deceive me)....

Woman 3:(Tearful) Well I just can't believe that I didn't see something, you know. I just totally believed in him, and I backed him in everything he did and whatever he said with the family, and I was just totally unquestioning...

Trusting the men not to abuse their children was not dependent on trusting them in other aspects of their lives. For example Woman 1 knew her husband to be violent and unreliable, but she never thought that he would harm the children:

> **Woman 1**: I just didn't believe that there was a man that was capable of being so sick with them. Even though I had been belted around by a man .... I have never dealt with someone that was playing mind games...

For Women 1, 3 and 4 it was partly their sense of betrayal and lack of trust which spelled the end of their marriage. The abuse itself [67] eventually damaged the foundations of the relationship to such an extent that they saw little possibility of maintaining it. This was regardless of whether or not the marriage had been experienced as a good one prior to disclosure.   They saw trust as one of the essential elements of a marital relationship and theirs

 had been shattered by their hurt and sense of betrayal over the abuse. As Woman 3 explained:

> **Woman 3:** (very tearful) This has sort of done something to me, that I feel betrayed, and that for me he is just sort of dead. I can't feel anything more for him, it's just been somehow severed.

The trust was not just about sexual fidelity but also about having been entrusted with the care of their children. The betrayal was therefore of the women *and* their children; as husbands *and* fathers:

> **Woman 4**: I couldn't have stayed with him after he'd done that .... Because of not trusting him ever again. Because he

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[67] 'The abuse itself' appears obvious enough, but we cannot understand the damage to the trust, without understanding the meaning which the women attributed to the act of abuse. The reason why the abuse was so damaging is taken up in later chapters when I explore the meaning of the abuse for the women.

was supposed to be caring for the kids and abused them, I mean sexually abusing Vicki .... All the trust would be completely shattered, and I think that is the most important thing in a relationship, trust...

At the time trust was no longer sustainable the marriage was also not sustainable.

2. ... for Better or Worse

For the women who initially attempted to maintain their marriages other values about marriage frequently came to the fore; values such as caring for others, standing by your partner through adversity, and working at relationships. The marital vow to stand by their husbands 'for better or worse' was a powerful aspect of what they characterised as essential to their marriages.

> **Woman 7**:... I mean does it all go away just because you move away, does everybody magically just forget it all?... And then I think to myself well every time somebody does something terribly wrong do you just run away and don't help them through it? I mean I'm not really that type of person.

> **Woman 2**: I'm all for working harder at it and I think given working harder at it and the effort put into it, I think any marriage can work. It's just a lot of people take the cowards way out and don't work hard at it and that to me is a lot of it.

How women evaluated their relationships was complex, and involved a range of considerations. However a decision to end or maintain the marriage was not dependent only on whether or not the marriage was satisfactory to

them prior to disclosure.[68]   Despite the presence of violence or other problems, which one might assume was evidence of a 'bad marriage', there were other aspects of the relationship which the women valued. Woman 5 summarised these tensions and contradictions in discussing her relationship. She recalled the way in which the violence had dominated her in ways beyond the physical:

> **Woman 5**: ... I was at a point where I'd been with him for 5, 6, 7, years, I don't know how long. And every thought that I had was his thought. If somebody said, oh what a lovely day, I'd say 'hang on a minute I have to check with John' .... I had no thought at all of my own...

However it was not just powerlessness due the violence which kept her connected. Just as constraining of her choices were the foundational beliefs and values about the primacy and sanctity of marriage, as she explained :

> **Woman 5**: ...You marry someone, you marry them for life. And there's nothing that can't be worked out.

The physical violence was not the sum total of these relationships. Woman 1 for example, had been physically and sexually abused by men for most of her life. Her current husband was extremely violent.   He had burned down their house and served a prison sentence for the manslaughter of his previous girlfriend. However despite this history he had also given Woman 1 confidence in herself as a sexual partner; an experience which was new and extremely meaningful for her because of earlier experiences of abuse. Her sense of self as a sexually functioning, adult woman was an inextricable part of her construction of marriage:

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[68] Indeed one of the women who eventually ended the relationship (Woman 3), had what she considered at the time to be a good marriage. Three other women reported years of violence, and one of these (Woman 5) wished to maintain

> **Woman 1**: Oh yes, he got my confidence in bed, sexually. That's how he got me. And then once I got ... tied up to him there, and he made me feel good about myself .... My first husband used to say to me things like, that his hand was more exciting than me ... I was made to feel that I was a misfit as a person, as a woman, you know, as everything...

3. Romantic Love

Contemporary Australian marriages are based on notions of love and companionship (Edgar, 1997). Several women described the demand to choose between partner and child as a battle between 'heart and head'. Each struggled with what they saw as 'rational' choices - generally the expectation that they 'choose' their children. They struggled to explain their feelings of connection to their husbands. For these women *love* was the term which best described their feelings.

> **Woman 9**: You've got all these people that tell you that you should do this, and you should tell him to get lost, but when you love somebody it is really hard. Even though he has done what he has done and there is probably no excuse for it, until a woman is put in that position ..... Like if it was you I couldn't say to you, 'Tell him to nick off'. Because when you love somebody it's just so hard.

For Woman 9 'love' represented part of the solid foundation of marriage, but for Women 5 and 6 it was seen as something more powerful than themselves, something to which they surrendered, at times unwillingly.

> **Woman 6**:   I love John, I love him very much. I still do. Oh God I wish I didn't.

> **Woman 5**: ... And I hate loving him, I hate myself for that you know.

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her marriage. Others who fought hard for their marriages (Women 6 and 9) felt they had had unsatisfying and exploitative relationships prior to the disclosure.

The four women who remained connected to their husbands at the time of interview (Women 7 and 9 who were living together, and Women 5 and 6 who were ambivalently separated) all saw their relationships with their partners as their primary source of support and 'love'. Each of them had begun the relationship having suffered overwhelming loss, and in three cases rejection in previous marriages. They were either estranged from their extended family or had no family available for support and limited friendship networks. The experience of 'love' in their marriages, and an intense desire to create a 'family' were therefore powerful inducements to maintain the relationship:

> **Woman 9**: ... I feel sometimes, the whole time, even though John is the reason for this, I have felt that he is the only one that I could rely on and get support from.

> **Woman 6:** I suppose because he was the only one that really seemed to care about me.

In contrast, the end of love heralded the end of the marriage. It was Woman 8's sense that she no longer felt love for her husband which convinced her to finally divorce him:

> **Woman 8**: Because I don't love him any more. My love has gone for him. Whereas last year I still had that bit of love there. But (now) there is nothing ….

4. Women's Responsibility for Marital Success or Failure

The influence of the family ideology intersected with the women's experiences in their families prior to and during the discovery process. In describing the beginning of their relationship with the man who had abused their child, nine of the women talked of having been through difficult and

vulnerable times as they struggled alone with the complex task of raising children. Their experiences were full of loss, abandonment, violence or loneliness, and the men who eventually abused their children filled an aching space in their lives. Two of the women had been so distressed when previous relationships failed that they attempted suicide. The promise which marriage held of life-long connection was shattered by the break-up.

> **Woman 5**: I could just never come to grips with it, like the rug had been pulled out from under my feet. I remember thinking that, you know, my world's just collapsed. I put all my life into getting married. I mean this was the man that I was going to spend the rest of my life with, and now it's no more, and it was just unbelievable.

The experiences of previous relationships were important, not only because of the vulnerability of the women at the time of meeting the men, but also because of the sense of guilt they carried over the failure of these relationships. Whether the relationship had ended through death, abandonment, or their own decision the women frequently carried a sense of responsibility for its failure. Their sense of responsibility was not limited to failing the marriage or their partners but included having failed their children in provision of a good father, as is clearly evident in the words of these two women:

> **Woman 6**: Well the marriage had broken down and I was the only common denominator in both marriages. And so therefore it had to be my fault. And I was no good to anyone, and the kids would be better off with someone else....

> **Woman 2**: ... Because the way I look at it, three marriages: God, how many more! I feel a failure .... (tearful) I just feel I've done wrong by the kids.

Past failed relationships, and the women's sense of responsibility for them, provided an important context for decisions about the current marriage. They perceived their responsibility as safeguarding the marital union and by extension the foundation of family life. For many women a decision to end the marriage therefore carried further guilt and failure. But the familial ideology is not just about marriage and considerations about marriage overlapped with, and at times contradicted, considerations about themselves as mothers. There were distinct values, experiences and beliefs associated with motherhood which informed the solutions the women saw as available to them.

4.4.2 The Women's Constructions of Motherhood.

The ways in which women constructed maternity varied. As discussed, considerations about providing a *father* and a secure family were aspects of being *mothers*. Other dimensions of motherhood were informed by the nature of the relationship with their children which remained or was resurrected after the abuse; their perceptions of the child's needs and their ability to meet these needs; the extent to which their identity was associated with motherhood; and the child's apparent wishes and interests in relation to the man.

1. The history and nature of the mothering relationship

Invariably, in order to allow the abuse to occur, an abuser has to ensure secrecy.   Offenders themselves have indicated that they do this by disrupting the relationship between the child and his/her potential supports and there is a growing awareness in the literature that the relationship

between mother and child cannot be understood without attending to the active role of the man in defining this relationship (Conte, Wolfe and Smith, 1989; Jenkins, 1990; Humphreys, 1990; Laing and Kamsler, 1990; Wyre, 1997). It appears from the women's stories that their husbands had spent months, and more commonly years in ensuring that they could come between mother and child. Damage to the relationship between the mother and child, so often evident after a disclosure of sexual abuse, may frequently be a *consequence* of the abuse and the methods the abuser used, not simply a *cause* of it as the early literature assumed (Laing and Kamsler 1990; Hooper, 1992; Foote, 1999a).

Whether or not the men acknowledged this behaviour as intentional or even conscious, the effect, as told in the women's stories was to create a context where abuse could occur and also the context in which the woman would make decisions. Prior to disclosure the mother-child relationship was impacted by the child's negative behaviour which was often associated with the abuse; by the child's loss of faith or confidence in her mother for not knowing of and protecting her from the abuse; and by setting them up as competitors. If men abused when women were nearby, the implicit message to the child was that the women were unable or unwilling to provide protection. Not surprisingly this affected a child's ability to trust in her mother:

> **Woman 7** :... He'd play with her and do silly things with her....Apparently he sort of started tickling her in bed and things like that, even when I was there.

> **Woman 3**: ... with my parents as a little girl I used to hop under the covers - and I used to encourage that .... Debbie tells me that

she remembers, even as a little girl, John would be pushing up against her .... Things like that, that, I just I never even thought of.

Woman 8's husband would wait until she was out before abusing the children which allowed the impression that she had abandoned them to him:

> **Woman 8**: I was going through the stage where he didn't want anything to do with me (sexually), and I thought 'What have I done?' ... I started going out with my girlfriend, because I thought 'Well stuff you.' That's when the kids turned around and said it was worse when I was going out.

For three women whose daughters were adolescent, the method of dividing mother and child was to single out the child victim for special treatment and groom her as a sexual competitor for the man's attentions:

> **Woman 4:** ... I guess I was jealous in a way, because I felt something was going on and she was taking him away .… And I think he might have worked it that way too .... I suppose he probably enjoyed it to think that Vicki and I were sort of competitive over him .…

> **Woman 6**: I felt like he'd do more for her than he was doing for me .... I did really feel like I had competition .... I was giving everything, doing everything I could for John and he was doing everything for Vicki.

The women's sense of themselves as 'good' mothers - protective, intuitive and all knowing (Humphreys, 1990; Hooper, 1992) - was thrown into turmoil by the disclosure of abuse. Their children's inability to disclose to them earlier if at all, and their 'failure' to pick it up themselves meant that the women's sense of competence as mothers and belief in their relevance to their children was sorely undermined. This sense that they 'should have' known meant that women were measuring themselves against a standard of motherhood which they could not meet, but which formed one of their constructions of themselves as mothers.

Invariably this meant that they had failed, which added to their sense of guilt and incompetence and further impeded their relationship with their children.

Just as their relationships with their husbands changed and developed throughout their attempted solutions, so too did their relationships with their children. The two women who initially enforced a permanent separation as their first solution (Women 1 and 4) each had ambivalent marital relationships but a strong sense of themselves as mothers. Indeed for Woman 1 it was at the core of her identity and her only sense of pride and achievement had come from believing she had been a 'good mother':

> **Woman 1**:...(T)he only thing that I know that I felt good about, and the only thing that kept me going, is that I loved my kids. And I used to do a lot for them and do the best I could with them, you know.

After a decision to separate, or as they leaned toward separation, all women experienced motherhood as giving meaning to their lives. Significantly this was not the direct *cause* of their decision but evolved *alongside* it. They experienced an increasing sense of pride in themselves as mothers through developing a closer relationship with their children or performing their mothering tasks in a way which was helpful to or appreciated by their children:

> **Woman 5**: ... It was really funny, I was cutting up sandwiches and it just felt really good, making sandwiches for the kids, you know. I was being, I was being a mum! First I was just going through the motions, but now I'm being a mum.

This is not suggestive of a simple causative link between staying in the marriage and a poor mother-child relationship. Rather the women's

experience of themselves as mothers was only one element which impacted on the level of conflict they experienced, the possible solutions they saw for themselves, and the way in which the success of attempted solutions was evaluated. Contrast Woman 5 above with Woman 9, who felt increasingly abandoned by, and no longer central to her children. In a recursive way this experience could be seen as both a result of, and influential on, her decision to maintain her marriage:

> **Woman 9**: .... I come home 'cause I want to spend time with the girls or with Debbie, and she goes off and ignores me anyway, so I sit at home by myself. She listens to her music or watches her videos or goes off with her friends, and I am still stuck here with myself.

This can be understood in two ways. First, an enhanced sense of themselves as mothers diverted attention from their own losses and needs and reinforced the success of the solution they were attempting. Second, since the abuse had formed a major part of the context of the mother-child relationship, the cessation of the abuse and the absence of the man from the home gave women and children an opportunity to develop a new relationship. A renewed sense of competence as a mother was most likely to develop for women when the man was absent and when there were no further barriers to the relationship between them. Contrast for example, Women 5 and 6. Neither of them preferred that their husbands leave home and both were active in maintaining a relationship with him after authorities insisted on his removal. Woman 5 was encouraged to participate in counselling with her daughter and in relation to her own needs. She began to give greater value to her relationship with her daughter and her own capacities as a mother. Woman 6 on the other hand, whose daughter had denied the abuse and who

had been set up as a sexual competitor to her, experienced the intervention of authorities as further alienating them from each other. In her case, much of her early counselling took place with her husband, with less attention to the mother-daughter relationship:

> **Woman 6**: ....And the woman from CSV would take Vicki out for an hour or so. She (Vicki) wouldn't talk to me. She got really, really distant from me then. Before she would talk to me, and then, why should she? She's got her own little counsellor.... It completely broke down any communication between Vicki and myself....

2. The importance of mothering in their children's lives

While constructions of marriage were characterised by an enduring quality, the women's expectations of their relationships with their children were more variable. There were those, like Women 1, 3 and 4 whose identities as mothers included maintaining strong adult connections, so that they expected to continue to mother their children, even into adulthood. This was based on either a special bond which grew out of childhood or a negotiated adult relationship:

> **Woman 4**: Well (my daughter and I) are more friends than anything now .... I think that we both agreed that we... get on much better living apart than we do together.... So that was, you know, the best way for our relationship.

> **Woman 3**: (tearful) This sounds big-headed but I can say it because (Vicki) has said it - I know she loves me dearly .… I'm very grateful for her to feel like that .... She was going through a trauma a little while ago, and we were both tearful. And she said to me, 'I don't love anyone more than I love you.'

Several women voiced the belief that a mother's role diminishes with a child's age, based around the notions of a child's need for individuation and

separation from the mother. Whilst some feminist writers question the assumption of individuation as a universal, developmental norm (Silverstein and Rashbaum, 1994; Debold, Wilson and Malave, 1994; Walters, 1988), for many of the women interviewed, this belief that their children would and should separate from them formed part of their tacit knowledge in relation to motherhood. Having older children at the time of disclosure meant the mothering role was already changing.[69] As a consequence, with their children in adolescence and potentially leaving home soon, the conflicts involved in maintaining the marriage were diminished for these women:

> **Woman 8**: …. He gets out (of gaol) in six months. Darren is old enough to leave home. Vicki is going to be old enough to leave home.

> **Woman 9:** Because now Vicki and Debbie are nearly 17, Jane is nearly 15 and they are just old enough to make their own choices, and they have to start making their own choices.

Sirles and Lofberg (1990) found in their research that the younger the children the more likely that women would leave a marriage after sexual abuse. The findings in my research were less clear cut than that but there is some evidence that the age of the child can be an important consideration given the implications this has for the woman as a mother and the family as a whole. This included the age of non-abused children, and as highlighted earlier, their perceived needs in relation to their father.

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[69] Another obvious consequence of older children is that their need for ongoing protection would be perceived as more finite. That is, they would leave home and no longer be at risk from the offender. Whether or not the offender was seen as posing a risk to younger children not already abused, depended on the women's understanding of the dynamics of the abuse, including who she held responsible, and whether she saw him as a sex offender. These issues are complex and are taken up in chapter 5 when I discuss the meaning attributed to abuse.

3. The child's interests and wishes

After disclosure women attempted to assess the interests of their children and one way in which they gauged this was to observe the relationship between the child and the man. Those who maintained the marriage did not have an initial belief that it was against the children's interests. Tacit knowledge holds that if children are abused they ought to exhibit a dislike for the abuser. This fails to consider the methods the abuser may have used to secure the child's trust, and the constraints on the child to make her feelings known. In the clinical literature there has been particular attention paid to the way in which children accommodate to the abuse and the abuser (Summit, 1983; Berliner and Conte, 1990; Wyre, 1997). This understanding is not part of the discursive consciousness about abuse. The women shared the misunderstanding about the nature of the relationship between the abuser and his victim, and if there was not a clearly conflictual relationship the women assessed that their children were in favour of maintaining the marital relationship and that the child was not demanding that her mother choose:

> **Woman 8**: I think it's the same with Vicki. They want both. They want their Mum and their Dad.

> **Woman 2**: ... Vicki didn't want him to go...Just before Christmas he said to Vicki, "… You belong here with your Mum. I'm going to get a flat, and I'll move out until we get it sorted out". And Vicki said, "No your place is here. This is your home".

Some children were able to give clear messages that they did not want contact with the man who abused them, which assisted women, like Woman 1, in being clear about the child's interests and wishes:

> **Woman 1**: ... Vicki kept on saying to me, 'Mum, if he gets access to Kelly I'm going to run away with her' .... Vicki, won't have a bar of him. I mean, she just feels sick when he rings ....

Not all children were able to be clear; not surprising given the fear that victims of abuse frequently hold that they will be responsible for their families breaking up (Dwyer and Miller, 1996). In cases where the child's wishes remained unclear the women had difficulty in interpreting the behaviour - was she trying to give a message that she didn't want to see the man or was she simply acting out? In these circumstances women had to make their own assessment of whether a child would support, or tolerate, continuing the marriage:

> **Woman 9**: ... I am getting mixed messages from all of them.... (S)he told me she was fine about John and I getting back together, but she tells Community Services something different.

While a lack of congruence between a child's wishes and a woman's understanding of this has been portrayed in the literature as evidence of a poor relationship, there may be a more benign reason. Given the immense crisis and trauma associated with the disclosure, a child's inability to let her mother know her wishes may also be a function of her protection of her mother.[70] Children may have been influenced by their mother's distress and unwilling to further exacerbate this by being clear about their own wishes.

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[70] Grossman's (1986) research on divorce suggests some useful parallels. One of the most significant findings of her research was the interactive nature of women and children's responses to divorce. Each was influenced by how they perceived the other to be responding. So for example, if the mother was grief stricken, children tended to be concerned for her, and to either have their own grief heightened, or to hide some of their own feelings. In these circumstances, if women relied on the child's expressed wishes or response to the separation, this may not have been indicative of their child's true feelings. In a similar way, when the women in my research relied, in part, on their children's expressed views about their (step)fathers and whether or not they wanted the marriage to continue, this may not have been an accurate insight into the child's wishes.

Alternatively they may have felt intensely ambivalent themselves and enjoyed aspects of their relationship with their fathers when the abuse was absent (Dwyer and Miller, 1996).

4.5 Explorations of Motherhood

The centrality of these family values and beliefs were evident in all of the women's discussions. The inadequacy of the exploration of these issues in most of the clinical literature on women and incest is remarkable. The mother-blaming literature individualised women's attachment to their families and failed to acknowledge the influence of the familial ideology. The feminist literature assumed that women were 'socialised' into this attachment or 'inundated from the moment of birth' with the expectation of womanhood (McIntyre, 1981). Neither considered their families as anything other than pathological nightmares to be escaped or endured at any cost. In reality however they were complex, changeable, and the site of both hope and failure, influence and exploitation. Though the familial ideology constrained them in ways they would not have acknowledged, the women were not 'dupes' to the cultural imperative of the family but actively contributed to the maintenance of the ideology through their decisions and actions. And yet their actions also highlighted the fallacy of aspects of the ideology, in particular the notion of motherhood as 'natural' or inevitable.

The clinical literature's failure to account for women's complex attachment to their families has meant that their 'choosing' their husbands has been seen as 'unnatural', since it is at odds with the image of the 'protective mother'.

However, the mother-child relationship, like the marital one, is demonstrated in this research to be highly contingent. There is, it appears, nothing 'natural' about a woman choosing a child over a husband. Indeed feminist researchers have been active in demonstrating that there is little 'natural' about motherhood and have underlined the importance of women's social context in their experience of mothering and the meaning it holds (Badinter, 1981; Oakley, 1979; Wearing, 1984; Boulton, 1983; Brown, Lumley, small and Astbury, 1994; McMahon, 1995). Even Bowlby 91988) has argued against the notion of motherhoos as entirely 'instinctual' and has noted tesearch which demonstrates that women's responses to their newborn babies are influenced by the level of support available in labour and post-delivery. The available evidence suggests that "mothering" behaviour is neither wholly instinctual nor learned. Rather it is a complex combination of experiences, social forces and biology.

In this section I will locate the women's constructions of motherhood by exploring the contingencies upon which maternal identity and meaning can be seen to rest. I will argue that aspects of the mother-child relationship which the familial ideology assumes or takes for granted are in fact highly dependent and that this is reflected in the decisions the women made.

4.5.1 Motherhood and Meaning

That mothers and children have a close loving relationship is a foundational belief of the familial ideology, and is true for some women and some children. However many relationships are more conflicted and ambivalent

than the ideal suggests.[71] Genevie and Margolies (1989, p. 192) found that just over half of the 1,100 women surveyed in their representative North American sample had conflictual or ambivalent relationships with their children. Unconditional connection was far from the 'norm'. As they summarised it:

> About 37% of mother-child relationships were infused with feelings of ambivalence: A mother's positive feelings about her child were counterbalanced by equally strong negative feelings. Another 15% were almost completely negative ...

Despite this, the ideology holds that a child will confide in her mother about important issues and that a mother will be supportive of the child. For a woman whose child is abused, she therefore fails both by not protecting her child and because her child could not disclose to her immediately. There is no empirical support for this position; indeed there is substantial evidence of the reverse. Salter (1992) concluded after an exhaustive survey of the literature that it is *not* normative for a child to disclose abuse at the time it is occurring, though children's failure to do so has been seen as evidence of poor mothering. For the women I interviewed, the fact that they did not know about the abuse and yet believed that they should have, was enormously undermining of their sense of themselves as competent mothers. Indeed Genevie and Margolies (1987) concluded that the more women feel they have somehow failed their children, the less able they are to meet the challenges inherent in parenting. The expectation itself may, therefore, further alienate children from their mothers.

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[71] This discussion is not meant to deny women's intense feelings of love, protection and grief associated with their children (See for example, Ross, 1995). Rather it contextualises these experiences in relational and social terms.

Perceptions of good mothering which form the basis of the ideology have been assumed to be based on the best interests of the child. The bases of these have largely receded into practical consciousness. It is now 'common knowledge' that a 'sensitive' mother remains constantly 'in tune' with her child and subjugates her own needs. However feminist researchers have questioned the assumptions inherent in these definitions of mothering:

> ...conceptualizations of motherhood and of good mothering merely reflect ideas about children. What children are thought to need for development is generalized to define good mothering (Phoenix et al., 1991, p. 40).

By contrast, the feminist-inspired research has attempted to understand women's experience of mothering and the process by which maternal identities develop. Boulton (1983) and McMahon (1995) for example, both found evidence for the notion of motherhood as socially constructed; a woman interacts with dominant social meanings and her own experiences in developing her identity as a mother.[72] Together these two studies demonstrate that women do experience motherhood as a particularly significant activity, but that the extent to which a woman finds meaning in motherhood is highly dependent rather than inevitable or instinctual.[73]

McMahon's (1995) study of 59 Canadian women concluded that having a child led women to becoming "mothers" (as distinct from "parents") and that the experience was both "engendering and transformative". Consistent with Richards (1997) view of ideology, she argues that far from being "natural"

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[72] Hooper (1992) has also relied on Boulton in making sense of the experiences of women after abuse of their children. My findings correspond with, and support hers, as discussed later in this chapter.

[73] While I concentrate primarily on the findings of Boulton and McMahon, they are not alone in finding that motherhood is socially constructed. See for example, Elisabeth Badinter's (1981) study of the mothering practices of eighteenth century French women.

on the one hand or "mandated" through social prescription on the other, a woman's path to and experience of motherhood is complex:

> ...Becoming a mother is not simply an expression of gender identity acquired in childhood; it is also an experience that produces in women a gendered sense of adult self. That is, it reproduces ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are conventionally associated with being female (McMahon, 1995, p. 191).

However, while women go through a process of becoming mothers and meeting the expectations this entails, there is nothing inevitable about this process. It is a consequence of women's interaction with their children, partners, social and cultural location and subjective view of their own identities.

Indeed Boulton (1983) who studied 50 mothers of pre-school children in outer London, established that a woman's identity and meaning as a mother was highly contingent and dependent on social interaction. She suggested that the relationship with her husband was "central" to a woman's experience of mothering and whether or not she found it "rewarding". She identified two dimensions of women's experience of motherhood; their response to the day-to-day requirements of looking after children, and the meaning it held for them. She distinguished between what may be experienced as enjoyable (or not) and meaningful (or not) and summarised women's responses into four typologies of experience; "fulfilled", "in conflict", "satisfied", and "alienated". Which category fitted particular women's experience, depended on aspects of their relationship with their children, including feelings of being wanted and needed, and the nature of their relationship with their partners.

Husbands were particularly important in recognising and supporting women in the endless, thankless tasks of child-rearing which the children themselves were too young to acknowledge. A partner understanding and sympathising with a woman's frustration helped her to accept and normalise her own ambivalent feelings and these were less likely to contaminate her overall experience of mothering. In contrast, women whose husbands were unsympathetic or blaming of them tended to feel more guilty and less accepting of their children's behaviour. Boulton argued that the parenting partnership is a significant locus for the development and sustenance of meaning and for the validation of adults' own sense of identity.

Two thirds of her sample experienced a sense of "meaning" as mothers. That is, the experience of looking after their children was significant, they felt that their contribution was valued and worthwhile and that caring for their children was a "major purpose in life" (Boulton, 1983, p. 119). However a full one third did not experience meaning in mothering, though it is this meaning which is significant in sustaining women through the inevitable boring, stressful or demanding times. She summarised it as follows:

> A sense of meaning and purpose does not come automatically or inevitably in motherhood. It is not wholly instinctual and there is nothing as straightforward as the automatic fulfilment of a need. Rather, a positive commitment to her children and a sense of meaning and purpose in looking after them must be created and sustained in the values, meanings, and interpretations given to children and child care by those directly involved in it as well as by the society in which they live (Boulton, 1983, p. 119).

To the question, 'What meaning does mothering hold for women?' the answer is, 'It depends' (McMahon, 1995). In summarising a range of studies (Boulton, 1983; McMahon, 1995; Genevie and Margolies, 1987; Phillips, 1988), I concluded that the meaning of motherhood in a woman's life is dependent on :

- a sense of her own competence, as evidenced by the child's behaviour and others' views of that

- feeling needed - a sense of being helpful and connected to the child

- characteristics of the child including gender and 'personality'

- the woman's social context (class, culture, the presence or absence of supports)

- the relationship with her husband and between husband and children

- the age and number of child(ren)

- her own experience of being mothered

The two most universal findings are about the ambivalence of the mothering experience - it is both good and bad - and that women will experience mothering in different ways. Generalising assumptions about women's *experiences* of motherhood are therefore misleading and unfounded. And yet, that is not to say that women will not be subject to guilt, shame and criticism when their maternal self does not fit the dictates of the ideology.

These findings provide a useful insight to the experience of the women I interviewed. It was clear that the nature of their relationship with their children was significantly influenced by the presence of their husband before and after disclosure. But it was also dependent on the extent to which the

women perceived mothering as important to the ongoing life of their children. Those who felt needed by their children, identified through either their young age or their expressed closeness to their mothers, were more likely to continue to see mothering as an important option for themselves. A belief that their children did not need them meant that an ongoing relationship with their husband was not dependent on resolving this potential conflict. Hooper (1992) considered the response of 15 women whose children were victims of sexual abuse, in the light of Boulton's (1983) study of mothering. As I did, Hooper found that women's relationships with their children had often been influenced by the abuse for lengthy periods of time prior to disclosure. The child's behavioural disturbance which was likely an impact of the abuse, or a mother-child relationship made precarious by the secrecy imposed by the abuse, meant that women's experience of mothering was frequently vexed. As she put it:

> A history of unexplained difficulties prior to discovery undermined women's confidence in themselves as mothers, their pride in their child and their sense of being needed and wanted (Hooper, 1992, p. 37).

The symptomatic behaviour some abused children exhibit can be grossly disturbed and disturbing (Salter, 1995) and Hooper found that difficulties experienced by the child impinged on the women's sense of competence and meaning in their mothering, both before and after disclosure. Of particular interest to my study, she concluded:

> When the abuser was their partner, the effects on their own relationship with the child were exacerbated by the interaction with him as well (Hooper, 1992, p. 38).

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That is, the kinds of relationship which the man developed with both the woman and the child as discussed earlier in this chapter, not only formed a significant aspect of the context of the woman's relationship with her child, but also the context for how she evaluated herself as a mother and the meaning which mothering held for her.

Most motherhood studies have been conducted with women with pre-school children. While this has highlighted the way in which women enter motherhood and develop identities and meaning as mothers, it leaves begging, the question of whether motherhood changes throughout the life course. There was evidence from my research that not only did women's expectation of their centrality to their children's lives change as they grew older but also that the nature of the relationship could change for better or worse given different parenting conditions. In one of the few studies of motherhood including respondents from throughout the life course, Genevie and Margolies (1987) found that adolescence was the most difficult and conflictual time for mothers and children and that despite the workload of young children, mothering toddlers was experienced as the most rewarding and fulfilling. They concluded that mothers of young children experienced greater reciprocity (that is, they felt more loved and needed) than those of adolescents, with some improvement again when they reached adulthood. The reasons identified by Genevie and Margolies (1987) are consistent with Boulton's (1983) findings for mothers of preschoolers. A sense of meaning in mothering is dependent on whether women feel competent and validated as a parent, as evidenced by the child's behaviour (and with adolescents, the 'kind of person' s/he has become); and a sense of being needed by and

connected with the child. In summarising the experiences of those who found mothering adolescents most rewarding the researchers wrote :

> Their children did not usually defy them; they did not get into serious trouble; they did not go through the "normal" rebellion associated with this stage; their children's independence was not a rejection of mother's values but an affirmation of them. Reciprocity was not at an all time low, but rather an all time high (Genevie and Margolies, 1987, p. 164).

These findings are all consistent with the stories of the women I interviewed. Their constructions of themselves as mothers were based on the nature of their relationship with their child and the extent to which they felt needed and competent: A child's symptomatic behaviour and the mother's sense of alienation and failure this induced often formed part of the context of disclosure and decision-making; the mother-child relationships were highly dependent on the extent to which the women were assisted or impeded by social circumstances, including the activities of the abusive man and later, the authorities; and the extent to which they saw their mothering role grow or diminish in the future.

An important characteristic distinguishing my group was the number of women who were in second marriages. All but one of them had experience of mothering alone prior to marrying the man who eventually abused their children. There is no research which focuses particularly on how single parents experience mothering as compared to partnered women, though 25% of McMahon's (1995) sample of 59 women were lone mothers. She did not compare the two cohorts, focussing on class differences rather than marital status. She did find however that children could be "...both the occasion of,

and the compensation for the "hardness" of life..." as a lone mother (p. 171). She found that whatever the attachment and commitment to the children, working class women were more likely than their middleclass counterparts to say that they would hesitate to "do it over again" if they were given choices. She concluded that the *conditions* of lone parenting were more influential in effecting their identity as mothers rather than something intrinsic to that position. I have already noted Boulton's (1983) conclusions about the importance of the father in supporting a woman and in contributing to her sense of herself as a mother. The normal hardships of parenting are obviously exacerbated by being alone.

The women I interviewed expressed an ambivalent but dynamic relationship with their children - they were the reason for their current situation, but like McMahon's (1995) and Grossman's (1986) respondents, relationships with children could provide comfort from an otherwise unbearable situation. For all women who permanently separated from their husbands their children did indeed provide a reason for 'going on', and they were either confirmed in their strong identity as mothers, or developed a greater sense of maternal competence and meaning. For most women though this was an emerging meaning and one which grew out of the experience of mothering after the separation. Having been single parents before, it was not a state they entered easily or without ambivalence.[74] As Woman 3 put it, it wasn't that she

did not believe she could manage alone again (indeed she had done so twice before) but that she wanted 'a family' and to decide for herself whether that

was possible under the current circumstances. The expectation that women will respond primarily as mothers fails to acknowledge the contradictions inherent in the ideology of the family. Attachment to the ideology does not encourage women to choose husband over child; and the contingencies of maternal identity do not make it inevitable that women will respond primarily as *mothers*.

4.6 Summary

I have argued that the solutions which women saw available to themselves after disclosure were based in part on their attempts to protect the interests of their families. Whose individual interests were seen as falling within that depended on the women's particular constructions of 'family', 'marriage' and 'motherhood'. These influenced how they saw their roles in relation to their husbands and children and the values underpinning the negotiation of the conflicting interests of family members. I have demonstrated that women's considerations about the marriage could not be seen independently from their considerations about their children's interests, and that provision of a 'father' was one aspect of mothering. Moreover, while the clinical literature characterises women's choices as *between* the man and child, most women attempted to choose in the interests of *both*. The women's solutions represent their attempts to negotiate the contradictory and conflicting dictates of the 'ideology of the family' as represented in contemporary Australia. I also argued that the expectations that women

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[74] None of the children exhibited grossly disturbed behaviour which Hooper (1992) observed as alienating and defeating of their mothers. Continuing and severe behavioural problems can rob women of a sense of competence and of 'making a difference' which may otherwise sustain them through separation.

respond to their children as *mothers* first and foremost are based on notions of motherhood as natural and instinctual. Utilising research on women's experience of motherhood and the creation of meaning in their lives, I have drawn attention to the extent to which mothering is a social experience and the mother-child relationship contingent on a range of circumstances.

Chapter 5

The Attribution of Meaning:

From Personal Experience to Social Constructions

In this chapter I explore the process by which the women attributed meaning to the disclosure, the abuse and subsequent events, and the way in which this assisted them in their negotiations with the ideology of the family, as previously discussed. I argue that the meaning which the abuse and surrounding circumstances held for the women could not be assumed; rather they attributed meaning based on a complex process incorporating aspects of what could be called the practical and discursive consciousness relating to incest, together with their own personal experiences. I demonstrate that concepts such as 'belief' or 'disbelief' are inadequate in representing the process of meaning-making which the women underwent in defining the solutions they considered appropriate and available to them. I argue that the range of meanings they attribute to the abuse, while closely connected to their own experiences, can also be seen as consistent with the discursive consciousness in relation to incest, as evidenced by professional and community attitudes summarised in the literature.

The seemingly definitive sound of the term 'sexual abuse' obscures the great variation in terms of its nature (extent, duration, frequency, presence or absence of force), its impact on all involved, and the complexity of the relationship between abuser and victim. While the definitions of abuse adopted in the professional literature tend to be all-encompassing and to assume a kind of sameness once the term 'sexual abuse' is applied, the term itself has contested meaning. To give full power to the belief that their husbands had abused their child, the women needed to attribute particular meaning to the information before them.

'Sexual abuse' assumes that there is a power differential which has allowed one person to sexually maltreat another; that there is a lack of consent, with the victim either unable to consent by virtue of their capacity to do so, or in lay terms, not being a willing participant; that the perpetrator was responsible for the behaviour and did so willingly; that the act was 'abusive', that is a harmful or negative experience for the victim. Yet these conclusions were not necessarily the most apparent to the women. The process of attributing meaning was more complex than merely deciding whether or not they believed sexual contact had occurred, and belief alone was not sufficient to dictate a woman's response. It involved an exploration of why it had happened; who was responsible; was it consensual or unwelcome; and was it harmful? There were a myriad of possible answers to these questions, and in seeking answers the women drew on their knowledge of the man, the child and of sexual abuse.

5.1 The Relationship Between Belief and Meaning

Much of the literature has focussed on whether women believe their child when a disclosure of abuse is made. The term 'believe', like 'sexual abuse' seems simple enough. The Oxford dictionary defines it as "to accept the truth or reality of a proposition". Women are therefore seen to either believe or not believe that their children have been abused. However Humphreys (1990) has demonstrated that the issue of belief is complex; belief is 'fluid', in that it shifts and fluctuates over time, and women frequently both believe and disbelieve simultaneously. All the women interviewed for this research believed that some level of inappropriate sexual activity had occurred, but all experienced some level of disbelief. Moreover their responses suggest that the term 'belief' or 'disbelief' may itself be inadequate - not only can women both believe and not believe simultaneously, but there are *dimensions* of belief. For example a woman may believe "something" happened, but not believe the detail; or believe the detail but not see the child as a victim; or see the child as a victim but perceive the man as a victim too. All of these conclusions are open to the women as they struggle to give meaning to the events, each of which will impact on the solutions they perceive to be available. Humphreys (1990) identified those factors which assist women toward belief. I add to her work by highlighting the dimensions of belief; that is, the levels of meaning which went together to create a *particular* meaning for the women. Of central importance to their deliberations were considerations about what constituted 'abuse'; the causes of it; who or what was held responsible; the perceived impact on the victim; and the extent to which the man was seen as culpable. The nature and level

of their belief was subject to change as the women sought to give meaning to the abuse, it's circumstances and ramifications.

The first question a woman faces is whether she believes 'something' has happened. For most women this occurred after disclosure; but for three, arose out of a suspicion that something was 'not quite right' for a period before disclosure. At whatever point this was required of them, all women were influenced by a range of issues, some of which assisted their belief, and others which raised doubts as to the accuracy of the disclosure. They were assisted toward belief by :

- Clear evidence or proof, such as when they discovered the abuse themselves, as did Women 4 and 10.

> **Woman 10**: I actually caught him at it .… In the middle of the night .… He wasn't in bed and I thought I heard some noise or something and I just got up .… It was right there in front of me.

- Their knowledge of, and trust in the child's character, and a belief that the child would not lie about such a thing.

- Their own recollections of incidents, and whether in hindsight these were consistent with the child's claims.

- The sheer detail of the disclosure:

> **Woman 3**: .… And I knew she wouldn't have been telling lies because it was too descriptive....

- The abuser's response, which led them to suspect he was guilty, or an admission from the abuser, which meant that women did not have to decide who was telling the truth:

> **Woman 7**: I suppose at first I thought it couldn't possibly be, and I suppose I didn't want to believe either....and then eventually it sort of came out. He didn't deny it or anything.

- Action by authorities, demonstrating that others believed the child, assisted one woman in finally believing the veracity of the child's claims:

> **Woman 8**: Well, when I seen the police were involved, I thought 'It must be true. The kids hadn't lied'.

> Conversely other events and circumstances raised doubts or confusion about the accuracy of the disclosure. These included:

- Misbehaviour on the part of the child before disclosure, which cast a shadow over the child's trustworthiness. Women were then confused about whether the child's word was reliable or whether there was an alternative agenda behind the accusations.

- Absolute denials from the abuser, which required the women to struggle with conflicting stories and weigh up other evidence.

- Inconsistencies in the child's story, or between the child's story and man's admission. Some men made partial admissions, but denied either the extent or duration of the abuse as claimed by the child. This was particularly confusing for the women, who had to determine who to believe in detail:

> **Woman 6**: I think some of the things that she said might have been a bit twisted....

- Previous denials by the child which left the women suspicious or uncertain. Three women had harboured suspicions and directly or indirectly confronted the child, only to be reassured nothing was happening. Woman 4 found her own proof, and the disclosure confirmed Woman 5's fears; but the subsequent disclosure by Woman 6's child left her in doubt:

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Woman 6: ... And it was not long before Vicki made the allegations against John, that I suggested to her that maybe something sexual was happening. And she got into a flying rage with me, because she said she wasn't like that and she wouldn't do anything like that, and if anything like that was happening she would have told me. And that would have only been a few months before she said that it was happening, and that it had been happening for years.

Because belief was not absolute, women could fall into both of the categories above; that is, they could be assisted toward belief by the first set of factors outlined, but still harbour doubts about the extent or circumstances of the abuse. Some level of belief that the abuse occurred is a precondition for the woman to perceive that any action on her part is necessary, and all of the women believed that inappropriate sexual conduct had occurred. Such belief however, was not sufficient to dictate the decision women might make as to the *nature* of the action required. To resolve the dilemmas associated with belief, the woman needed to attribute some *meaning* to the abusive behaviour. Belief that the sexual misconduct occurred is therefore only one thread which goes to make up the complex web of meaning associated with the abuse.

5.2 The Dimensions of Meaning

The attribution of meaning went to the heart of whether women saw it as abuse, how serious they considered it to be, and who they held to be responsible. They were not passive recipients of information in this meaning-making process, but actively brought to bear, a range of personal experiences and in Giddens' (1979) terms, 'tacit knowledge'. At the heart of

this process was the question - what is *sexual abuse*, and in particular, *incest*?

In giving meaning to the disclosure, the women drew on their perceptions of the man, the child, their family relationships, and their knowledge and experience of sexual abuse. This influenced what they saw as the nature, and the impact of abuse, and their expectations about how abusers and victims behave. In this way they attributed meaning to their child's experience, and the man's behaviour, through answers to a series of questions which influenced the choices they perceived themselves to have[75]. Why did it occur, who was to blame, and was it harmful?

5.2.1 What Happened and Why?

In understanding the abuse, the women went beyond the detail of what actually happened. In the only other study focussing on decisions to divorce after incest, Sirles and Lofberg (1990) found that the nature of abuse was not significant in the eventual decision to separate. That was also generally true for the women interviewed for this research, as typified by this comment.

> **Woman 8**: Well Darren is still confused. He doesn't really remember himself. The fact is that it happened. I don't know how, I don't care how long or anything like that, it happened ….

However for two women (2 and 7), the nature of the abuse was an important consideration, since it linked with other dimensions of their meaning-

making, particularly around the culpability of the man, and the damage to the child. Comparing their husbands' behaviour and the consequences for their children with a 'worse case scenario', (frequent and invasive sexual acts, over a long period of time), meant that these women saw it as less 'abusive'.

> **Woman 2**: ...I think it's how far the act has actually gone. Because I mean you hear of kids that are sexually abused over a period of time. I couldn't handle that at all. I'd kill. Definitely! I really would. I suppose I was fortunate, if you can say fortunate, that it was only a minor incidence. Well you can't really say minor incidence, but compared to what other kids have been through it was only minor. To us it was still a major thing.

> **Woman 7**: ...you've probably talked to a lot of women and in various degrees their partners have been abusive - but as far as I can see, ... I'd like to think the degree of the abuse perhaps changes your feelings.

Just as the women had a prior relationship with their children, which provided a *meaning-context* at disclosure, so too did they have an existing relationship with their husbands, and their understanding of their husbands' character and his response to the disclosure were important aspects of attributing meaning. Hooper (1992) has previously found that women's perception of the abuser influenced their ability to believe him capable of abuse, and this was also true for the women I interviewed. In seeking a solution to the crisis of disclosure, they sought to reconcile the image of their partners, with the act of abuse. That is, could the man be defined primarily as an 'abuser'? Believing that abuse has occurred need not presuppose that the man will be defined as such. This depended on their

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[75] The women did not articulate these questions in the form I have outlined here. Rather these questions were embedded in the themes which they described in deciding the future of their marriages. The extrapolation of these into question form is my interpretation.

understanding of the causes of the abuse, and whom they held to be responsible. Why did it happen, and whose fault was it? The issues of cause and responsibility were intrinsically intertwined. When it was not seen as the man's singular responsibility, or when circumstantial reasons could be found to explain the abuse, the marital relationship remained a possible option. Woman 10 speaks for many of the women when she explains the importance of knowing why, since it goes to the heart of their own self doubt. The question is not only 'why did it happen' but 'why didn't I know about it?'

> **Woman 10**: ... I hate not having answers. It makes me feel totally powerless, totally stupid. If I had some sense, if I had some answers, that maybe it's like one and one is two. Now it's like, what the hell has happened; and why; and where was I when it happened ...

Women found many explanations to their question of 'why'. Some of these are reminiscent of the kinds of ideas about abuse which have abounded in the literature, and which constitute the tacit knowledge about incest, at the levels of both discursive and practical consciousness. These include the notion of men's inevitable sexual need, as represented by this comment.:

> **Woman 1**: ... I have tried to get to him and ask him why .... How could he do it? When I knew he used to go to brothels, and knew that he was, you know, a womaniser, and I accepted those things in my life. Why did he have to touch my girls?...

5.2.2 Who is to Blame?

Central to all explanations was the attribution of responsibility; does responsibility lay with the man, his past, the child, the family circumstances, or the woman, to name a few possibilities. Who is held responsible for the abuse clearly impacts on the meaning ascribed, and the

decisions seen as necessary thereafter (Hooper, 1992). When the abuse occurred in the context of relationship difficulties, it could be seen as part of those difficulties, rather than a deliberate act of abuse by the husband. In this way, the marriage, rather than the man, could be seen as in need of reform:

> **Woman 2** : That's what killed our marriage, working seven days a week and it was just too much. We had a business relationship, we had a family relationship, and a relationship with the kids but we didn't have our own relationship

As women sought to understand how and why the abuse could happen, the relationship between the man and the child was sometimes seen as significant. The fact that the man was the child's stepfather lent itself as a possible explanation. This put the *cause* of the abuse as the relationship rather than the man, and helped convince some women that the abuse was not likely to be repeated.

> **Woman 2**: Because it was a different relationship. With Vicki and John - it wasn't a father and daughter….

> **Woman 5**: I don't know. I just think because she's his step daughter, that he did what he did.

Noting the extent to which sex offenders frequently have their own history of sexual abuse, there is a common perception that being abused as a child *causes* a man to offend. The women were influenced by psychological theories of abuse and frequently saw the abuse as caused by stressful experiences in his adult life or childhood, be they things which he suffered, such as his own abuse, or things which he lacked, such as appropriate role models. Those women who attempted to maintain the relationship were influenced by these views of causation. If he too was a victim of his life

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circumstances, then he was held as less responsible for the outcome, and more deserving of her support and nurturance:

> **Woman 2**: ... he has had a really rough life. He was institutionalised when he was seven. His mother tried to kill him that many times. Whether that had a bearing on it ....

> **Woman 6**: ... and John has said that he was sexually abused too. Probably about Vicki's age ... and also John doesn't know what a father's role is. Because he was brought up by his mother from the age of two ...

Inherent in these explanations was the assumption that the man had not set out to purposely abuse the child; that he was misguided, under stress, or reliving his own childhood abuse. Just as 'the past' could be viewed as responsible for his behaviour, so too could 'circumstances', that is that the abuse somehow just happened; that it was unplanned and unintentional. Explanations given by many abusive men, and often found in the literature, that the abuse was a result of misguided love, or affection gone too far (Wyre, 1997), were all apparent in the women's stories, as was the sense that men are victims to their sexual desires.

> **Woman 6**: I believe that if Vicki was sitting on his knee and he was giving her a cuddle, well then he might touch her breasts or he might rub her legs. That that's his way of showing affection. He has a lot of trouble showing that he cares about anyone....I really don't think that he did it intentionally.

> **Woman 2**: ....she did something to her back, and she was asking John to massage her back. He was massaging her back, and this was on about the fourth or fifth night of the back massaging when the incident took place. It wasn't just straight, you know, going to her bedroom...

As discussed in chapter 4, constructions of marriage and motherhood which define women as nurturers, mean that the perceptions of the man or child as a 'victim' is more likely to encourage a woman to be protective and supportive toward that person. A conclusion that no excuses were acceptable, and that the abuse was the man's responsibility, was more likely to be connected to a view of the child as a victim, and as requiring her mother's support. The two women below were unequivocal in locating responsibility with the men:

Woman 1: No, he hasn't gone into detail, but he just says...he was so upside down, back in those days. I said, no John, that's no excuse.

Woman 4 :... There is no excuse for what he has done

What women saw as causes also influenced who they held to be responsible. If it 'just happened', could he really be held responsible? If it was a bad marriage wasn't she somehow also to blame? If he couldn't be in control of himself, shouldn't she and her children have been? In this way responsibility was redistributed away from the man. Women who did not hold the man entirely responsible tended to see the child as complicit and even as partly to blame. By virtue of children's age or previous behaviour, they could be seen as contributing to, or failing to stop the abuse, or in the case of a sexualised child, as 'seductive'. Children who have been sexually abused frequently develop highly sexualised behaviours (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985; Russell, 1986) and in these circumstances, the consequences of abuse were sometimes confused with its causes:

Woman 6: Oh I really felt that she'd participated, that it wasn't that she was unwilling.

In this way the methods the man had relied on in gaining access to the child, particularly setting children up as sexual competitors (as in the case of Women 2, 4 and 6), ensured that some women would be more likely to see the child as sharing responsibility.[76] In such circumstances, the abuse was one factor which was able to come between mother and child, both before and after disclosure.

> **Woman 8**: Those two I think they could have said straight out, 'Mum, Dad is doing something' …. With Vicki and Susan sometimes I am very disappointed in them because they didn't say anything.

> **Woman 2**: Her behaviour pattern in the few months prior to that - oh she'd been coming on to guys a lot older than her, like about ten years older, so that was a concern in itself....

> Attributing responsibility was not limited to the man or child. Self blame was also a recurring theme. Women blamed themselves for not knowing, for not stopping it, for not being a good enough wife, and for not being attractive enough:

> **Woman 2**: ... I probably just thought, well I was extremely overweight at that time so I probably thought ... he must see her as more attractive ...

The extent to which women held the men to be responsible was significant in the decisions they saw available. To choose not to maintain the relationship, they needed to be clear about holding the man responsible for the abuse rather than the child, themselves, circumstances or the marriage. However holding him responsible did not necessarily alleviate their own sense of failure at not having protected their child. Guilt was ongoing,

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[76] This clearly connects to the women's view about causes, and whether power and control were seen as residing in the man. However it also reflects the popular misconception that children, particularly adolescents, are able to prevent or

regardless of whether or not they believed they had somehow *caused* the abuse. Even when a woman had acted immediately and protectively once the abuse was confirmed, as did Woman 4, she still blamed herself for not having acted sooner. She hinted at the destabilising burden of self-blame, when I asked what advice she would give other women in her predicament. Despite her own struggle, she knew the importance of holding the man responsible:

> **Woman 4**: Try not to blame yourself .... Try to put the blame where it belongs ....

Attributing meaning to the abuse was not a singular act which took place at disclosure and remained static. Women continued to construct their own understanding of the causes, impact and responsibility for the abuse. A shift in the women's perceptions of causes and responsibility influenced the solutions they attempted. New information led Women 2 and 10 to give up their marriage. For both women, the new evidence convinced them that it was not the stressful circumstances nor marital relationship which were responsible for the abuse, but the man himself; that his behaviour was not an aberration but was consistent with a part of his character they had not known existed.

For these two women their changing perceptions of their husbands defined them more clearly as 'an abuser' and their children as 'victims' of both the abuse and deception. For other women however, their on-going experience of their husbands confirmed that the men were more than abusers, and were

stop abuse.

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capable of change. Woman 9 saw her husband as continuing to change and as worthy of another chance.

> **Woman 9**: .... He has changed, I've changed and I just know that it will never happen again.... Him going to jail was the big difference in him. He's just matured heaps more in the last twelve months....

In attributing meaning women were also influenced by their husbands' response to disclosure. They reported that seven of the men made some admission to the abuse at the time of disclosure or soon after. The other three men initially denied the abuse, though only one continued to do so.[77]   The decisions the women made were less dependent on whether the man admitted or denied, but more on what each woman took this to mean. For those women who initially maintained the marriage, the admission was seen as evidence of the man's honesty, his regret for his behaviour, his openness to change, and/or his need for her support:

> **Woman 2:** .... John told me straight away .... But he was not, how can you say, he was quite open to me. I mean he knew what he had done was wrong, and he felt really sick about it.. Anything that I wanted to know he answered, and he answered openly .... If he hadn't been so open about it, I think it would have been different. He didn't try and hide anything....

> **Woman 10**: I think to an extent he was relieved he was found out.

Woman 9, whose husband also admitted it, remained confident about her marriage. She was convinced of his basic integrity and believed that their

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[77] Admissions by two men were only partial, in that they admitted to some abuse in court, but claimed at various times that they did so only to protect the child from giving evidence in a contested hearing.

relationship was better than before the disclosure. This gave her confidence in reuniting, and reaffirmed her decision to support him.

> **Woman 9**: …. Even though he has done, I know what he has done, but that is not the man I love …. He is a good man …. It is just stupid things like John helping me hang out the washing, or taking out the garbage, or helping me with the dishes, or doing the vacuuming. He did nothing like that before and I just know that ...we are going to be a normal married couple ….

On the other hand, the way in which a man admitted could be seen as further evidence of his failure to understand the impact of his behaviour, or to be truly repentant. Woman 1's husband admitted it, but in a way which was completely without regret. Woman 3 was also shocked at the nonchalant way in which her husband admitted to the abuse, and his lack of awareness of the cost to others:

> **Woman 1**: .... He doesn't deny it. He doesn't deny it. ... And he said to me ...well at least I wasn't as bad as what your father did to you.

> **Woman 3**: I said, 'Well, I just sort of find it so bad, so terrible'. And he said, 'Well I didn't think it was so much …. All I can say is that I am sorry' .... I just couldn't believe that (the children) were going to such lengths to take their lives, and that they were so distressed .... This I don't think, is what John took seriously, because he didn't consider it was very bad, and he didn't realise the ramifications of the whole thing.

5.2.3 Was it Harmful?

In concluding to what extent the behaviour was 'abuse' women also assessed the child, including evidence of being harmed. Concluding that it had had a negative impact on the child assisted in defining it as abuse, and in making

subsequent decisions. For Woman 3 for example, it was the dreadful impact on her daughters which became increasingly apparent after her separation from her husband, which finally persuaded her not to return to the relationship.

> **Woman 3**:Well I thought we'll see how things are in three months or so, but as I say, the effects on the girls - the depths of the effects - made me realise that I can't just turn back.

However defining the abuse as harmful was not always as simple as it sounds. As discussed in the previous chapter, prior to disclosure the man and the abuse had already been active in organising family relationships. Children were usually adept at keeping their own suffering secret, with fourteen of the fifteen having endured over a year of abuse, and nine of these over four years. In the meantime, the women had attributed other meaning to the child's negative behaviour, such as rebellion, an unreliable character, or adolescence. Thus rather than the child's behaviour being seen as evidence of a negative impact of the abuse, the meaning of the abuse and it's impact was often being filtered through an already damaged picture of the child's character. In this way, those children most symptomatic prior to disclosure - those who had exhibited negative behaviours in response to the abuse - were paradoxically less likely to have this immediately recognised as a consequence of the abuse.

Seven of the women had been aware of behavioural problems with the child prior to disclosure, and all but one of these had developed her own sense of understanding   about   this.   Their   explanations   variously   included 'adolescence', 'disobedience', or personality descriptions such as 'strong willed', all of which were normative ways of understanding children's

behaviour. None of the behaviours were perceived by the women as so outside the normal range that they were compelled to seek alternative explanations.[78] If women perceived a negative impact on the child's life, the abuse was more clearly defined as 'damaging' and the child as a 'victim', and in retrospect, some earlier behaviours were even reinterpreted in the light of the abuse.

Only Woman 7 had been aware prior to disclosure, of serious non-normative problems and she sought help from a range of professionals before learning of the abuse. Until then, she was at a loss to understand her daughter's severe depression, other than thinking she may have been responding to the death of her father.[79] Of all the women, she was alone in attributing severe impact to the abuse, but continuing to maintain the marriage. She had to struggle to *resist* the implications of her daughter's suffering, because whenever her daughter was clearly having trouble coping, Woman seven became increasingly angry at her husband. This issue was not resolved for her at the end of the research process, and she remained ambivalently connected to him. Her experience suggests, at least for the women interviewed, that once a negative impact of the abuse was acknowledged, the marriage could only be sustained with difficulty.

Women also considered the relationship between the man and child in defining an impact of the abuse. When children did not appear to have a conflictual relationship with the abuser, they

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[78] Woman 6 was aware of what could be called sexualised behaviour by her daughter then aged eight. But the behaviour preceded her relationship with her current partner, and she had not considered her child as precociously young for the behaviour. The reasons for this are dealt with at some length in part two of this chapter.

frequently did not perceive a negative impact. The absence of conflict, or an apparently positive relationship, could be seen as evidence that the child must not have been too traumatised, or disturbed by the abuse:

> **Woman 5**: Well I'd never known her to be angry about him ... doing it. I've never known her to say, you know, he's a horrible man or anything. It's always been fondness that she's displayed of him.

5.3 Contextualising Meaning:

Professional and Community Attitudes to Child Sexual Abuse

There is a danger when focussing on women's responses that their views and behaviour be dislocated from its social context. I argued in Chapter 4 that the women's attitudes and values in relation to their families could only be understood within the context of the prevailing ideology of the family. So too, their attitudes to and beliefs about sexual abuse need to be socially located to be fully understood. A number of studies investigating the attitudes and practices of workers in the field of child sexual abuse, have demonstrated the diversity of views held, and the criteria which appears to influence attribution of responsibility, beliefs about the impact, the appropriate consequences of intervention, and the underlying causes (Dietz and Craft, 1980; Pierce and Piece, 1985; Eisenberg, Owens and Dewey, 1987; Ringwault and Earp, 1988; Kelley, 1990; Breckenridge, 1990; Johnson, Owens, Dewey and Eisenberg, 1990; Jaudes and Morris, 1990; Pellegrin and Wagner, 1990; Reidy and Hochstadt, 1993). In this section I

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[79] Unfortunately this conclusion placed the child at increased risk, because Woman 7 was thankful that the child's

will review some of the literature on professional and community attitudes to child sexual abuse. I will argue that not only do women's views reflect those of the broader community, but that the prevailing culture of mother blame discourages women from attributing responsibility to the offender, and encourages an internalising of blame which exacerbates problematic responses to abuse.

In the following discussion I will focus on the three themes which, I argued, influenced women's attribution of meaning to their child's abuse. That is, what constitutes abuse, whether it is damaging, and who should be held responsible. I will locate these views by reviewing the research on professional and community attitudes to child sexual abuse (CSA), asking the following questions: Who do professionals and the broader community hold responsible for CSA, particularly incest; what do they think should happen as a consequence of abuse; and what do they understand about it's causes and impact? I will demonstrate that there is significant variation in views about these questions, and that the standard by which 'mothers' are often judged after a disclosure of abuse, (a standard which dictates they should believe the child, remove the offender, be aware of the impact on the child, and hold the offender to blame for what is essentially a criminal act), is not one which the broader community can meet.[80]

stepfather was attentive to her.
[80] In this discussion I will use research on community and professional attitudes up to the early 1990's, which reflects the time at which the women in this project learned of their children's abuse and were interviewed for the research. There is evidence that attitudes change in response to public education and increasing awareness (Breckenridge and Bereen, 1992; Reidy and Horschadt, 1993), and that this is reflected in the response of non-offending family members (Hooper, 1992), so I will locate their views with those prevailing at the time.

1. Attribution of Responsibility

Women have been criticised for blaming their child, themselves or circumstances for the abuse, as though the most obvious action is to hold the offender entirely responsible. This is despite the history of the clinical literature discussed in chapter 1, which has variously held the child, the mother, and the family as partly or equally to blame. There is also substantial evidence that in both the professional and general community, responsibility has not always been situated with the offender. The attitudes in the clinical literature have both contributed to and reflected a lack of consensus about who should be held responsible in cases of incest. Surveys of professionals involved in the child protection field demonstrate that responsibility is not inevitably nor consistently applied to offenders, but is dependent on a range of issues which may not be directly connected to the abuse. Who is responsible has been found to be related to:

- characteristics of the child. Offenders are more likely to be held responsible when the child is young than if she is adolescent (Kalichman, 1986; Reidy and Hochstadt, 1993). Responsibility has also been shown to relate to how a child presents at interview (Pierce and Pierce, 1985), and the extent to which she resists the abuse (Broussard and Wagner, 1988; Johnson et al, 1990; Smith, Fromuth and Morris, 1997).

- characteristics of the workers. Respondents views are influenced by their sex, the professional discipline to which they belong, their experience in the field, and whether they have their own history of abuse (Kelley, 1990; Johnson, et al., 1990). For example, one study found police more likely to

find offenders responsible, and nurses to see mothers as responsible (Kelley, 1990).

- a familiarity on the part of the worker with the incest literature. Dietz and Craft (1980) found mother-blaming attitudes were more prevalent when workers were versed in the literature.

These issues, which are objectively unrelated to the abuse, clearly figured in the women's considerations. Teenage children were more likely to be seen as provocative and able to resist or disclose, and women were informed by their knowledge of abuse, their child and their husband. The endorsement of such considerations by the broader professional community suggests that myths and misunderstandings about how offenders abuse and how victims respond are shared by 'mothers' and the world at large, and that the women's responses in relations to these issues are less to do with their personal failings or psychopathology, and more to do with the tacit knowledges about incest.

Holding mothers, and to a lesser extent victims responsible for sexual abuse, has remained remarkably constant over a ten year period. Dietz and Craft (1980) found in their study of the attitudes of 200 protective service workers in Iowa that 87% believed that mothers gave 'unconscious consent' to father-daughter incest, and 65% that she was equally responsible for the abuse. These views were held even when the evidence from clients themselves conflicted with this. A decade later, Kelley (1990) surveyed 228 professionals involved in child protection in the United States and found that only 12% held the offender entirely responsible. 84% attributed some

responsibility to the mother, whether or not the offender was part of the family, and 20% attributed some responsibility to the child. Reidy and Hochstadt's (1993) report that only 10% of their sample blamed mothers, which they saw as reflecting growing awareness of offender responsibility, demonstrates the way in which formerly held 'truths' are being reassessed in the discursive realm.   However Breckenridge (1990) cautioned in her findings that although the overt mother-blame evident in the studies by Kelley (1990) and Dietz and Craft (1980) may not be so apparent, workers still hold attitudes which are detrimental to mothers. For example, 71% of New South Wales child protection workers in her survey, believed that mothers usually or sometimes knew the abuse was occurring, though there is no research evidence to support this supposition.

It could be argued that women's attitudes should more correctly be compared to the general community, since they do not approach their children's disclosure with the benefit of training and professional experience. However in their survey of residents of two Melbourne suburbs, Martin and Pitman (1987) argued that there appeared to be a congruence between attitudes of professionals and the general community.[81]   Their view appears to be borne out by other surveys of non-professional populations. Of particular interest in this discussion is the survey by Wallis (1992), which was commissioned by the state of Victoria's Protective Services Department and investigated community attitudes to sexual abuse. The survey included respondents from across the state and was considered representative of community attitudes. They were more likely than the professionals above,

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[81] The respondents included 182 on sexual abuse and 177 on physical abuse, gained from a letter box survey in the municipalities of Waverley and Oakleigh

to apportion some responsibility to the child; 27% believed the blame may rest with the child "in some cases" and only 68% believed the offender was always responsible. Further, 11% held non-offending adults at least partly to blame, even if they were not aware of the abuse, and 31% agreed that mothers "should probably take part of the blame". Similarly, in a study of college students in America (Broussard and Wagner, 1988), assigning responsibility was dependent on the manner of the child, particularly the level to which she was seen to resist the abuse. The offender was held more responsible and the child less so, when resistance was high.

Only 13% of Wallis's (1992) respondents believed "you could rely on a child telling the truth", suggesting that the knowledge pertaining to sexual abuse does not equip women well to meet the expectation that as mothers, they have absolute 'belief' in their children's disclosure. The attribution of responsibility to the offender does not therefore appear to be a straight forward or inevitable conclusion. The sense of self-blame and even the level to which victims were held partly responsible by women in this research, are entirely consistent with the biases and beliefs held more broadly in the community. Such views do not equip women to respond in ways which are seen to be most 'supportive' to children; to the contrary, they encourage the kinds of uncertainties and confusion evident in the responses of women in this research, and they encourage the internalisation of blame for both their own victimisation and the victimisation of their children.

2. Consequences of abuse

The research evidence is that people view child sexual abuse as a serious issue and one which requires intervention, but there is not consensus on the nature of that intervention, and the factors which should determine it. In particular, whether a child or offender should be removed from home, and whether he should be incarcerated, have been issues of varied opinion. While viewing CSA as serious, workers appear to be relatively uninformed about the immediate and long-term impact. As with other aspects of the meaning-making highlighted in this discussion, views appear to be based on some accurate knowledge, but also highly influenced by issues which may be totally irrelevant to the process. For example, 33% of Eisenberg et al.'s (1985) cohort believed girls would be more seriously affected than boys and that the gender of the offender, and relationship between offender and victim were seen as influencing impact. That is, abuse by males, and cross-generational abuse were seen as more serious, and female respondents were more likely to believe harm would result than were males. Ambivalence about the extent to which abuse is harmful is evident throughout the research. For example, 10% of Eisenberg et al.'s respondents believed the child would gain some enjoyment from the abuse, and in Kelley's (1990) study, while 90% believed abuse would cause serious psychological problems, 7% believed there would be little or no effect. As with many of the women in this research who saw issues like 'fear of boys' or disliking sex as potential consequences, the knowledge of impact by workers was largely limited to similar issues such as relationship problems, sexual fears, difficulties with children and depression (Eisenberg et al. 1985). The understanding of even these issues was inaccurate, with 30% of Kelley's (1990) group believing a child victim would grow up to be an offender,

especially if they were boys, and 5% that they would be homosexual. There was less awareness of the more immediate difficulties which children face: respondents did not include 'promiscuity, suicidal behaviour or mental illness' as likely consequences, even though these appeared on the list of possible effects from which they were required to choose (Eisenberg et al. 1985).

It appears that despite the view that CSA is serious, abuse of a child by a father/stepfather may be seen as requiring a special response. Kelley (1990) reported that 60% of her respondents believed that it was acceptable for an offender to continue to have unsupervised access to a victim, particularly if he was the child's father. A number of studies have found that offenders should be removed from home, but not gaoled (Dietz and Craft, 1980; Kelley, 1990), and others have concluded that workers attitudes to such questions are not dependent entirely on the nature of the abuse or risk to the child (Jaudes and Moris, 1990). For example Pellegrin and Wagner (1990) found that attitudes depended on whether the workers saw the mother as supportive, believing and compliant to a treatment plan; Eisenberg et al., (1987) on the severity and nature of the abuse, but also on the discipline and experience of the practitioner; and Kelley (1990) and Pierce and Pierce (1985) that it was the gender of the victim and the presence or absence of violence which influenced attitudes. Dietz and Craft's (1998) report that most child protection workers in their study believed offenders should be removed from home but not gaoled, despite the fact that 80% believed the abuse was accompanied by violence to the victim and/or her mother, suggests that when it comes to incest, workers find the attribution of

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responsibility and the meaning of behaviours as confusing an issue as mothers themselves.

Kelley's (1990) finding that attitudes to whether offenders should go to gaol were dependent on his status and occupation, and whether physical force were used, are alarming. There is no connection between social status and offending, and the presence of physical force is only one way of coercing a child. Therefore the bases on which workers in this study made decisions were at best misinformed, and at worst highly prejudiced. So while abuse is seen as serious and a crime, there is clearly ample room for workers to negotiate the extent to which this applies to particular circumstances. The view that incest is somehow a special case can be seen in the preferred intervention of workers. Incarceration of offenders is not a generally or consistently preferred option ((Ringwault and Earp, 1988; Eisenberg et al., 1987; Dietz and Craft, 1985). In fact most workers see therapy as the appropriate response (Kelley, 1990).

According to Wallis's (1992) survey, the Victorian community also agrees that CSA is serious (93%), but only 63% believe that it is always criminal. They see seriousness as depending on the nature of abuse, with penetration being seen as serious by 85% of respondents, but genital fondling on one occasion seen as serious by only 67%, rising to 77% if it occurred more than once. There is also no consensus on what should happen to offenders. 30% of Wallis's respondents suggested they would attempt to deal with intra-familial abuse privately, at least initially, and only 39% that they would eventually report to the authorities. Only 47% believed a report would be made when the *husband* abused the child.

Similarly, a large proportion of Martin and Pitman's (1987) sample (about one half) would not report to authorities, and one third would seek help from an alternative source, such as a minister of religion. What was considered appropriate action depended on whether the victim was inside the family: Only 51% of Victorians believed an intra-familial offender should go to gaol, compared to 71% for extra-familial offenders; conversely 41% believed counseling was the appropriate response for intra-familial offenders and 24% for extra-familial offenders. Wallis concluded that :

> These attitudes appear to reflect an element of empathy with the offenders and a perceived need for assistance rather than punishment (Wallis, 1992, p.46).

Martin and Pitman's (1987) respondents were even more likely to recommend counselling, with 72% believing this was the appropriate action, compared to just under 50% who thought gaol was warranted and 26% who opted for a 'mental hospital'.

3. Causes of abuse

Most studies do not ask workers directly what they think caused the abuse, though beliefs about this are reflected in the attribution of responsibility and the preferred consequences. Kelley (1990) asked her respondents to attribute responsibility to the 'victim', 'offender', 'mother', 'society' or 'other'; Only 7.7% chose society or other, suggesting that workers saw responsibility for the abuse as residing with individuals or relationships. However Reidy and Hochstadt (1993) concluded that workers were more likely to include other factors as partly responsible when they were more experienced in the area of sexual abuse. A number of studies indicate that a

view that the mother was partly or equally responsible has consequences for the kind of intervention deemed appropriate, including whether the child should be removed or the offender sent to gaol (Kelley, 1990; Ringwault and Earp, 1988). Since intervention is intended not just as punishment, but also to ensure future safety, it can be assumed that the kinds of interventions workers deem appropriate may allow some insight to their views about factors which may cause further abuse. The belief in therapy as opposed to incarceration, the considerations which determine offender or victim removal from home, the beliefs about offender access to victims, all suggest that for a large proportion of workers studied, the cause of incest is seen as psychological and relationship issues. The high number of people who predicted that victims would go on to be offenders also indicates a belief that previous victimisation is a cause of abuse (Kelley, 1990).

Wallis's (1992) community survey suggests that the causes of abuse are widely seen to rest with social and psychological factors. 53% of respondents saw 'mental illness' as the cause, while 29% saw the victim's behaviour as part of the cause. She summarised the community attitude:

> Overall … the community typically believes that offenders may not be
> entirely responsible for their actions and that their behaviour is often a
> response to some other problem …(Wallis, 1992, p.33).

The responses of the women in my research could be seen as arising from and embedded in such beliefs. Views of their husbands as 'damaged' led them to advocate for support not punishment, and the ideology of the family encouraged the conclusion that such support should come from them as their wives. Clearly women in this project considered the causes of the abuse in deciding what action was required. Assigning the 'cause' of the abuse to the marriage, the child, the man's past, men's sexual needs, the nature of the relationship, all influenced the extent to which he could be seen as 'an abuser', the child

as 'a victim', and the behaviour as damaging. The prevalence of the attitudes and beliefs outlined above suggests that it should not be surprising that women shared these views. On the contrary, their ability to embrace alternative views is perhaps more worthy of reflection.

5.4 Summary

The meaning attributed to their child's experience could not be assumed. Women's responses and understandings were not peculiar to them, but were embedded in a set of social beliefs about child sexual abuse, particularly father-child incest. These reinforced feelings of self-blame and even victim-blame, and served to remove responsibility from the offender. Rather than encouraging women to enact the role of *protective mother*, these meanings constrained them in resolving the contradictory needs of their families.

Chapter 6

The Legacy of Trauma and Loss

In attributing meaning to their children's abuse the women were influenced by their own experiences (both in childhood and as adults) and by their practical and discursive consciousness in relation to sexual abuse. The latter has been dealt with at length in the preceding discussion. In this chapter I will explore aspects of the women's past and present experiences and the way in which these informed their responses. In doing so I will use the concepts of "attachment" and "trauma" to differentiate between those whose traumatic experiences strengthened their capacity to support their children, and those for whom it was severely weakened.

The international evidence presented in chapter 1 and confirmed in this research, is that women with their own history of CSA do not respond uniformly to their children's abuse. In particular, a woman's history of CSA *per se* neither directly causes her child's abuse nor negatively impacts on her response after disclosure (Gomes-Schwarz et al., 1990; Leifer et al., 1993; Deblinger et al., 1994; Hiebert-Murphy, 1998). However, the impact of the maternal history remains of interest, given that for particular women in this research there were distinguishable differences in their responses which were directly related to their abuse experiences. I suggest that the meaning women attributed to their own abuse was central to their response to their children's abuse, and by extension, the solutions available to them in their marriages. The responses of Women 5, 6 and 9 would be characterised in the literature as 'unsupportive'. This involved minimising their children's experience and underestimating the impact on them,'. This contrasted with Women 1, 3, 4 and 8 who were vigilant in detecting a negative impact on their children and were active in seeking assistance in their recovery. The

argument I present in explaining the differences between these women rests on four main assumptions:[82]

- abuse constitutes a trauma and may have a negative impact even if not acknowledged by the victim

- victims' attribution of meaning may be influenced by aspects of the abuse and the context in which it occurs which renders it "ambiguously traumatic"

- some physiological, cognitive and behavioural impacts of the abuse may further confuse the attribution of meaning since they encourage self-blame and minimisation

- women's responses to incest are not influenced by childhood experiences alone, but are mediated by the current conditions of their lives, including the nature of their attachment to their husbands and feelings of loss and trauma associated with disclosure.

6.1 Women's Personal Experiences of Sexual Abuse

...When things are tough you sort of dig deep, you know and find some sort of strength. And for people who have been abused or whatever, sometimes it's just not there (Woman 4).

Seven of the ten women in this research disclosed their own history of childhood sexual abuse, and this was a central determinant of the meaning they attributed to their child's experience. While all women drew on their own abuse experiences to make sense of what had happened to their children, they were not uniform in their responses. The *fact* of their own abuse was less important than the *meaning* they attributed to it, together with the *on-going effects* of that abuse in their lives. It was these issues which most differentiated the women. When they were clear that their own

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[82] Appendix 5 provides a series of case studies which detail how individual women's responses could be understood in terms of trauma and attachment.

experience had been abusive and had had a negative impact on their lives, they tended to see the same for their children. Conversely if they did not see their own experience as abusive, or had not perceived a lasting impact, they struggled to understand their children's experiences as negative and abusive.

The women's experience of abuse was a very powerful and painful one for them to discuss and many had never talked about it prior to the disclosure of their child's abuse. However all seven raised the issue themselves in the interview. Their own childhood abuse connected with their responses to their children in different ways. For example, one woman highlighted how acknowledging the reality of her child's experience required her to reconsider her own abuse.

> **Woman 4**: Facing up to the fact that Vicki was being abused, meant that I had to face the fact that I had been abused, and that was very difficult.

For four women (Women 1, 3, 4 and 8), perceiving a negative impact of their own abuse on themselves, led them to see the negative impact on their children:

> **Woman 3**: .... I was interfered with as a child too.... That's why I know that the children must get it clear. Because if that is the cause for me, (of) any problem that I might have (sexually), I would hate for them in this enlightened day to not have help, because I think it can be quite detrimental to relationships.

> **Woman 4**: ... I can see ... what it has done to my life... in so many ways, like ... self esteem, everything. ... It just screws your whole life .... I think if she gets help it is going to enable her to live a full life, a normal healthy life.

The more women believed their child to be 'damaged' the less likely they were to maintain the marriage, particularly if these consequences were seen as current, ongoing and likely to effect the child's future. Believing that their own abuse had had a lasting effect led them to be more aware of the possibility of this in their children. Conversely, seeing no lasting impact on themselves made
them less likely to attribute a negative outcome for their own children.[83]
Women 5, 6 and 9 believed that their own abuse experiences had not had an

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[83] Utilising personal experience to make sense of their child's abuse was not limited to those who had been victimised themselves, which suggests that this process is not a particular psychological pathology which arises as a consequence of abuse. Rather, women utilise whatever means are available to them to make sense of the disclosure.   Woman 2 had no direct experience of abuse, but did have a sister who was abducted and raped as a child. With little else available to

impact on them, and two of them even struggled to perceive it as abuse. It was only much later, when someone else defined their children's experience as abuse, that they began to reconsider and to re-label their own experience for what it was. Their comments reveal the underlying tacit knowledge which informed their response: for an experience to be abusive it must be experienced at the time as an assault, and as unpleasant.

> **Woman 5**: ... I don't hate my brother. I still don't know - don't call it abuse, you know. Because abuse, how can it be abuse when it was nice, you know - (a) pleasant experience. How can it be abuse?

> **Woman 9**: I didn't think about it as abuse .... I just thought it was just brothers and sisters.

As discussed extensively in chapter 3, time was a crucial factor in women's decision-making. The way in which they constructed the impact of abuse on their own lives and those of their children, was not static but evolved over time. For example, several years after disclosure Woman 5 began for the first time to see her own childhood experience as abuse. This represented a profound shift in her views and led to significant reconsideration about her child's experiences. On reflection, she explains the connection between her own abuse and her understanding of her child:

> **Woman 5**: ... To me, I was abused .... I wasn't hurt when I was abused, she wasn't hurt when she was abused. She thought it was a pleasant experience, I thought it was a pleasant experience. She must feel the same way I do.

Her understanding of her child's and her own abuse began to influence each other in a recursive way. As she began to rethink her own experience - to see it as abuse, and to identify an impact on her life - so she began to reconsider her child's experience, which in turn led to further reflection on herself. This is apparent in the following quotes, where she is discussing her changing views and her concerns for her daughter:

> **Woman 5**: …. I mean I used to be the town bike. I'd go into bed with anybody, and I'd get myself into these predicaments when I was younger, and I wouldn't know how to get out of them. And I'd say oh well, it was my own fault for getting into it...

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her, she contrasted the impact on her sister with that on her daughter, and concluded that her own child was unaffected by the abuse:

Woman 2: (in relation to her sister) ... That had a really big impact on her, extremely so .... She wouldn't have anything to do with guys or anything ....

(in contrast to her daughter) .... I don't think it has affected Vicki now. I mean I see the way she is with her boyfriend and she is really happy now. I just don't think so.

(*and in relation to her daughter*).... I'm very concerned about Vicki growing up and being the town bike, and not having the morals. I just hope that I stepped in in time, whereas my mum never stepped in .... And that's because I know what it does to me now, you know.

6.1.1 The Negative Impacts of CSA on the Women's Lives

Despite some women denying an impact, the last two decades has seen a wealth of research interest in the ongoing effects of sexual abuse on victims' lives, and the negative consequences are now well documented (Herman, 1981; Russell, 1983, 1986; Briere and Runtz, 1988; Finkelhor, 1990; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans and Herbison, 1993, 1994).[84] The literature highlights a range of immediate and long-term effects of abuse including difficulties in relationships with children and partners in adulthood; impaired mental health; problems in sexual development and sexual dysfunction; negative self-esteem; depression, suicidal and self damaging tendencies; and a history of re-victimisation (Russell, 1984, 1986; Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Schuerman, 1987; Finkelhor, 1990; Salter, 1995; Banyard, 1997; Zuravin and Fontanella, 1999). More specifically, a history of CSA has been linked to later mental health problems, with victims more likely to be diagnosed with an affective disorder, personality disorder, to suffer phobias and to abuse alcohol or drugs (Mullen et al., 1993; Salter, 1995; Epstein, Saunders, Kilpatrik and Resnik, 1998). One of the most significant problems arising from childhood abuse, is the risk of further victimisation in adolescence and adulthood (Browne and Finkelhor, 1985; Russell, 1986; Flemming, Mullen, Sibthorpe and Bammer, 1999; Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, Waizenhoffer and Kolpin, 1999).[85] Mullen et al.,

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[84] Depending on the severity of abuse, marked by whether or not intercourse occurred, victims are between 5 and 16 times more likely to require psychiatric hospitalisation than women never abused; 3 times more likely to suffer an eating disorder; 2 to 5 times more likely to suffer anxiety or depression; and 20 to 70 times more likely to have attempted suicide (Mullen, et al 1993). It has been argued that the psychiatric system inadequately considers previous histories of CSA (Carmen, Reker and Mills, 1984; Salter, 1988; Herman, 1992; Meyer, Muenzenmaier, Cancienne, and Struening, 1996) and that some symptoms, such as particular perceptual disturbances may be directly attributable to abuse (Ellenson, 1985; 1986). The clinical and research evidence for the connection between childhood abuse and self-harming behaviours such as mutilation, starving, purging and substance abuse is also well established (Salter, 1995; van der Kolk, 1996; Briere, 1996). CSA has been associated with relationship difficulties in adulthood with partners and children (Alexander et al., 1998), including negatively impacting on women's parenting behaviours and perceptions of themselves as mothers (Cole and Woolger, 1989; Cole, Woolger, Power and Smith, 1992; Banyard, 1997). Even after other negative family of origin experiences such as neglect, physical abuse and poor parent-child relationships were controlled for, Banyard (1997) found that a history of CSA was implicated in parenting difficulties, though others have failed to account for any independent effects of CSA on parenting (Zuravin and Fontanella, 1999).
[85] Russell (1986) found that incest victims were almost twice as likely to report an experience of rape or attempted rape by someone outside the family after the age of 14, compared to a non-victim control group; they were three times more

(1994) who analysed the range of disadvantages of childhood in their study looking at the long-term effects of abuse, found that the experience of *sexual* abuse was statistically significant in a number of areas of women's intimate relationships and had an effect beyond that of other childhood maltreatment. This included a higher incidence of marital difficulties. While there is evidence that support from a parenting partner is beneficial in mediating the effects of abuse on women's parenting[86], (Cole et al., 1992) it appears that many CSA victims do not find this support in their adult relationships (Russell, 1986; Varia, Abidin and Dass, 1996).[87]

These negative effects are not universal, and the impact of abuse can be mediated by the nature of the abuse, particularly whether or not intercourse occurred; the presence of supportive adults at the time of abuse, disclosure and in adult life; the actions of and relationship to the abuser; the way in which it is handled after disclosure; and the presence or absence of support. However, the volume of evidence is that CSA can cause lasting negative effects on victims, particularly when they maintain perceptions of self-blame and when coupled with a history of neglect or other abuse.[88]

Whether or not women in this research who had a history of CSA acknowledged a negative impact on their lives, the range of detrimental effects noted in the literature was apparent for all of them. So too, were the mediating effects of supportive relationships. These effects could be briefly summarised:

- Woman 1's life was characterised by exploitation and sexual revictimisation. Sexually abused by her father, she described how she was "on a trail of devastation after he molested me". After adolescent promiscuity she suffered sexual difficulties as an adult, felt insecure in

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likely to be raped by their husbands, and more than twice as likely to be beaten by husbands; and they were twice as likely to suffer an unwanted sexual advance from someone in authority or to be asked to pose for pornography.

[86] This is not surprising given Boulton's (1983) finding that maternal identity is always contingent on partner support.

[87] While just as likely to marry as non-victims, women who had been sexually abused as children were more likely to be separated, and to rate aspects of their marriages negatively. They were three to six times more likely to claim "no meaningful communication with their partner on a more intimate level", with those whose abuse involved intercourse most likely to say this. They were three times more likely to see their partners as controlling and uncaring, and to be dissatisfied with their sex-life. They were also three times more likely to consider that their partners negative attitudes caused sexual problems for them. As well as generally unsatisfying marriages, survivors of sexual abuse are also at increased risk of suffering rape or violence at the hands of their husbands (Russell, 1986; Mullen et al., 1993, 1994).

[88] See for example: Adams-Tucker, 1982; Russell, 1986; Conte and Berliner, 1988; Wyatt and Mickey, 1988; Gilgun, 1990; Finkelhor, 1990; Salter, 1995; Coffey, Leitenberg, Henning, Turner and Bennett, 1996; Lynskey and Fergusson, 1997; Ullman, 1997; Schaaf and McCanne, 1998; Tremblay, Hebert and Piche, 1999; Fondaraco, Holt and Powell, 1999; Fleming et al., 1999.

any relationship with a man and was physically abused and sexually degraded by two husbands. The support of an older woman who took her 'under her wing' appears to have been significant in mediating the effects of these abusive experiences.

- Woman 3 was fortunate enough to have strong family support and the negative impact of her abuse appears to have been limited to her poor self-image and sexual difficulties. In contrast to every other woman, she was married to the same man for thirty years and did not suffer on-going victimisation or violence. However she was subject to his jealousy and demands for her attention, and eventually discovered that he had been abusing her children for nearly twenty years without her knowledge.

- Woman 4 was sexually abused by her father at the age of about five and both witnessed and suffered his physical violence throughout her childhood. Her relationship difficulties and re-victimisation are evident in her having two children in two unsatisfactory marriages and being subject to violence and control by the man who abused her daughter. Her supportive relationship with her mother (and later her therapist) appeared to have protected her from some of the interpersonal effects of CSA.

- Woman 5 was sexually abused by an older brother and suffered on-going sexual re-victimisation throughout her life, including an attempted rape at age 11 or 12, a rape on her 21st birthday, and frequent propositions for sex. Her internalisation of self-blame was evident in her belief that, "I got myself into that fix ... I got to get myself out". She exhibited a sense of powerlessness and despair, commenting that she had no set goals in life because they could never be achieved anyway.

She had considered suicide on a number of occasions. Woman 5 had no parental support to mediate the damage of her experiences, witnessing severe violence at home, and neither being believed nor protected in relation to her own abuse.

- Woman 6's life was also a tale of violence, abandonment and sexual exploitation. She went from one abusive relationship to another and bore four children in three relationships. Even at the point of interview she disclosed that she planned to go on a "holiday" with eight men to provide them with sex for no more than her "expenses". Woman 6 married early to leave home and like many victims of abuse had her first child at an early age (Russell, 1986). She attempted suicide on at least one occasion and suffered loneliness and isolation, describing her counsellor as the only person she could confide in.

- Woman 8 was abused by an older brother at the age of eight, an experience which she remembers as extremely traumatic. Her sexual problems took the form of fear of boys and sex, rather than promiscuity. However, she too, had her first child at an early age (17) and went on to have five children, one possible outcome of abuse (Russell, 1986). She also became suicidal, but was saved by a close and supportive relationship with a female friend.

- Woman 9 was abused by a male relative from the age of five and then later by two brothers. Disclosure was not possible because of the large number of children and the lack of intimacy in her family. She characterised her childhood as neglectful, commenting tearfully that: " I am one of twelve children and I can never, ever remember my Mum and Dad ever telling me that they loved me ..." While there was no

evidence of on-going sexual trauma, she was degraded by her first husband's affairs and dominated by her second. She had no intervening supportive relationships.

These findings all suggest that the significance of women's own abuse lies in contrasting the actual impact it had on their lives, with the extent to which this was acknowledged.

6.1.2 The Unacknowledged Conditions of Women's Lives

The body of research on the potential negative effects of CSA is consistent with my findings and yet, not all victims readily associate their CSA with their ongoing difficulties.[89] In Giddens' (1979) terms they remain the *unacknowledged conditions* of the women's actions. This is explained by Herman (1992), who warns that the impact of abuse may be so profound that it is seen by others, and by the victim herself, as part of her character.[90] The absence of victims identifying direct effects of childhood abuse should not be taken to automatically mean that there *were* no effects. While women's

subjective assessments are important as the 'voice' of their experiences, lack of familiarity with the impact of abuse and the complexity of the connection between abuse, other childhood experiences and subsequent problems means that victims may underestimate the impact.[91]

Further, international research demonstrates that victims are not alone in this misconception, since the range of potential effects of abuse is also not widely known by professionals in the health and welfare field nor by the general community (Eisenberg et al., 1985; Russell, 1986; Kelley, 1990; Hooper, 1992).[92] The Australian evidence presented in chapter 5 suggests

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[89] Even those women who acknowledged an impact of their own abuse only recognised some of these. Many of the consequences, such as child-bearing at a young age, or general relationship problems were not related by the women, to their own abuse.
[90] This was clearly the case in this research, where women frequently viewed their children's behavioural problems as part of their personality, or assumed a developmental explanation, such as adolescence.
[91] On the other hand however, the presence of effects of CSA should not be assumed to constitute the full identity of any of the women in this research, all of whom acted with agency in aspects of their lives, and who would not have identified with the label of 'victim'.
[92] For example, only half of Russell's (1986) sample believed their experience of abuse had had 'great' or 'some' effects on their lives and half believed it had 'little' or 'no effect', despite her finding that they were nearly twice as likely to be revictimised. This was particularly apparent in relation to those abused by siblings, where 28% reported that they suffered "no effect at all". However she found a correlation between sibling abuse and certain negative

that the tacit knowledge represented in the general community and by contact with health and welfare professionals reinforces women's own misconceptions (Martin and Pitman, 1987; Humphreys, 1990; Wallis, 1992; Breckenridge and Baldry, 1997; Breckenridge and Laing, 1999).

The importance of attaining a balanced perception of one's negative childhood experiences is highlighted by the literature on the transgenerational transmission of maltreatment. In looking at patterns of attachment in so-called "normal" (non-abusive) mothers and their infants, Main and Goldwyn (1984) found that women repeated patterns of rejection of their own children if they held a distorted view of their childhood experiences. That is, if they idealised *their* rejecting parent, provided inconsistent or "incoherent" accounts of their childhood and/or had difficulty remembering specific experiences, they were more likely to treat their children in rejecting ways. Distortion was evident, for example, in women who claimed a close and satisfying relationship with their mothers but who, when asked to give examples of that relationship, related tales which were inconsistent with that view. [93]

Building on these findings, Egeland and Susman-Stilman (1996) compared two groups of women with a childhood history of maltreatment. One group broke the cycle of abuse, the other maltreated their own children. They found that the women who idealised their abusive childhoods or used "escape" means (such as drugs, alcohol or attempting suicide) were more likely to repeat the abuse. In contrast, those who broke the abuse cycle maintained a realistic view of their experiences and appeared to have integrated both positive and negative aspects of these into their self-perception. In reviewing these and other studies Morton and Browne (1998) noted that women who successfully broke the cycle were aware of how negative childhood experiences could impede their own parenting, had undergone therapy, and were more likely to have experienced other supportive relationships in childhood and as adults.

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outcomes for women, similar to other incest victims, including re-victimising experiences. Few women related their prostitution, drug dependence and history of re-victimisation to their childhood abuse, despite evidence to the contrary.
[93] They gave the example of a women who, despite claiming a "good" relationship, was unable to tell her mother when she had broken her hand, because she believed her mother would have been angry (Main and Glodwyn, 1984, p.,212).

A perception that one's *sexual* abuse had not had an impact may also be connected to more negative outcome. Varia et al (1996) found that those who minimised their CSA experiences were more likely to be negatively affected than those who acknowledged it as abuse. Those who had been abused in ways comparable to others in their research, but who were less likely to define it as such, were less well adjusted on a range of variables including having lower self esteem, being less tolerant, and more suspicious of others.

The mechanism identified by Main and Goldwyn (1984) and Egeland and Susman-Stilman (1996) as important in assisting (or alternatively, hindering) women in breaking the transgenerational cycle of rejection and physical abuse may also, I suggest, operate incases of incest. The three women in this research who minimised the impact of their own abuse experiences came from families where they suffered multiple forms of abuse or neglect. While they did not idealise their childhoods in relation to their parents, (in fact they reported neglectful, dismissive and abusive experiences) two of them (Women 5 and 6) appeared to be detached from the emotional impact of these painful events. They related stories in nonchalant and matter-of-fact ways, suggesting a lack of coherence between affect and content.[94] Even more noticeable, none of these three women provided congruent narratives of their *sexual* abuse or their relationships with their *abusers*. For example:

- Woman 6 maintained a cynical affect and claimed no impact despite substantial evidence to the contrary

- Woman 9 said the sibling abuse she suffered was "just brothers and sisters" and yet finally acknowledged that it was abusive, and

- Woman 5 described her abuse as consensual and "nice" when her description of one incident testifies to the violent and invasive nature of the abuse, at least on some occasions:

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[94] Important differences exist between the subjects in Egeland and Susman-Stilman's research cited earlier, and the women interviewed for this project. First, they were investigating women who had been physically maltreated and who then abused (or did not abuse) their own children. In my research the women were sexually abused and it was their partners' abusive actions which brought them to the attention of the authorities. It was their response to this abuse which led to them being seen as protective or supportive. However since other forms of maltreatment occurred in the childhoods of some women, and parental neglect and physical abuse have been identified as risk factors for sexual abuse (Mullen et al., 1994), similar mechanisms may be seen to operate.

> **Woman 5**: ... my brother had me pinned down in the bedroom one day ... and he had his finger in my vagina and I was singing out (to my mother).... And she said, "Be quiet. You're making far too much noise" .... So he just kept on doing it, and I was just – you know, he didn't rape me or anything – but I was just sort of told to be quiet ....

In contrast, the other four women who maintained congruent accounts of the impact of their own CSA on their lives, did not minimise their children's abuse experiences. As discussed, the recognition of the impact of their own abuse equipped them to comprehend the impact on their children.

It appears then, that it is the coherence of women's accounts of their childhoods rather than the experience of abuse *per se*, which is important in influencing their attribution of meaning to their children's abuse. This begs the question however, of why some women attained a coherent account and others did not. Based on the experiences of the women in this research, I hypothesise that the differences in meaning attribution may be understood by looking at the traumatic impact of abuse over the course of women's lives, together with those conditions which assisted or hindered them in overcoming the negative impacts and integrating an understanding of them into their own parenting behaviours.

6.2 The Meaning Context of CSA:
Explorations of Trauma and Attachment

The dilemma for practitioners and theorists is how to make sense of the range of effects of abuse on the one hand, and victims' lack of acknowledgment of these on the other.   In particular what are the range of factors, issues and influences which may lead women to attribute a particular meaning to their own abuse and to that of their child? Two theoretical concepts are useful in understanding these.[95] First, the 'Trauma paradigm' sheds light on the physiological and psychological responses to immature sexual experiences (Summit, 1983; Finkelhor and Browne, 1985; Herman, 1992; Salter, 1995; van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth, 1996). Second, Attachment theory assists to locate the sexual abuse within a child's more

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[95] Explanations of the impact of trauma are complex and it is unlikely that a singular process or theory accounts for the range of impacts noted. Rather, an integration of a range of theories is required (Finkelhor, 1990; Crittenden, 1997).

general experience of intimacy and connection within the family context (Bowlby, 1988; Alexander and Anderson, 1997).

These ideas suggest that CSA may impact on memory and psychosocial development in ways which may make the abuse experience devoid of a coherent narrative. It may also lead to behaviours which may not be recognised as consequences of the abuse and which are therefore seen as qualities of the child (and later, the adult). Further, the trauma paradigm and attachment theory assist in highlighting the centrality of cognitive and relationship issues in attributing meaning to abuse experiences. Together I call these the 'meaning context' and suggest that they may render CSA ambiguously traumatic.

The meaning context is not simply an extension to the trauma of abuse - the trauma is embedded within it and it is integral to the subjective experience and generation of meaning. Failing to incorporate the meaning context leads to a dislocation of experience from the broader forces which shape understanding. From the experiences of the women in this research and the evidence in the literature, I suggest that the meaning context includes:

- the physiological responses to trauma which may interfere with affect regulation, memory processing and the development of a coherent narrative of experience

- cognitive and developmental consequences which may impact on psycho-social development, self-concepts and intimate relationships

- the interactional and relationship contexts of the abuse, including the process of victimisation and the relationship with the abuser

- the familial context, in particular attachment experiences and the presence or absence of support

- tacit knowledge about abuse[96]

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[96] The nature of the abuse (including whether intercourse occurred, access to support, presence or absence of violence, duration, and age of onset) has been found to be important in mediating impact on victims. However, I will not focus on this since it has been discussed extensively in the literature. See for example, Mullen et al 1993, 1994; Trickett, Reiffman, Horowitz and Putnam, 1997; Alexander et al., 1998. Rather, I will continue to attend to these aspects of the meaning context which may mediate impact in different ways to abuse characteristics.

6.2.1 The Trauma of Child Sexual Abuse

My argument rests on the understanding that child sexual abuse represents a trauma, even if not immediately recognised as such by the victim. A trauma is described as an event which is outside the ordinary range of experience, which engenders helplessness or terror, and where the usual responses of 'fight' or 'flight' are not available (Herman, 1992; Monahon, 1993; Matsakis, 1996). However, CSA is a unique trauma since as Herman (1992) has noted, far from being 'extraordinary' sexual assault of children and women are common events. It can be defined as a trauma nonetheless because the definition includes "…developmentally inappropriate sexual experiences without threatened or actual violence or injury" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). That is, an event need not be specifically defined as "traumatic" by the young victim at the time.

Since not all experiences of childhood abuse are perceived as such by the victim, differentiating between what is abusive and what is not is not always straight forward. This is particularly so when the victim and offender are peers. In this discussion I will adopt the definition offered by Russell (1986) in her study of incest. She defined an incestuous experience as *abuse* if:

- the offender was more than five years older than the victim, regardless of whether the victim believed it was a negative experience

- the offender was less than five years older, but the experience was unwanted

- it caused the victim distress at the time or subsequently

- or it caused longer term effects.

The definition allows for the victim's perception that it was not negative or even traumatic, but takes a stand beyond the victim's view by recognising that in the case of intrafamilial child sexual abuse the experience is complicated by a range of factors. Based on Russell's definition the experience of all seven women in this research could be defined as 'abuse', despite their subjective views.[97]

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[97] Woman 6 suffered lasting negative effects; Woman 5's brother was ten years older than her; Woman 9 suffered ongoing distress and negative impact, and subsequently defined her experience as abuse. The other four women all defined their experiences as abuse at the time.

6.2.2. Trauma Theory: Memory and physiological arousal

The physiological consequences of trauma which the trauma theorists have identified, may be one element which impacts on meaning attribution.[98] Trauma theory focuses on the psychobiological changes which occur after trauma, and the impact these have on general functioning. Of particular interest is the fragmentation of the normally integrated functions of emotion, cognition, memory and physiological arousal (van der Kolk, 1996(a); Figley, 1995; Herman, 1992). These have implications for the way in which victims of trauma may fail to develop a coherent narrative of their experiences, may have amnesia for events or feelings associated with trauma, and may continue to suffer the effects of trauma long after the event.

The physiological changes which occur for people as a result of the arousal present during traumatic events has consequences for managing subsequent memory and affect, and impacts on the way in which the traumatic memories are encoded and retrieved.[99] Van der Kolk (1996; 1999) cites research demonstrating that victims of trauma experience altered brain functioning when recalling the traumata. By observing brain scans of people in the process of recalling traumatic events it has been established that during trauma and subsequent memories, victims' limbic system is aroused while their Broca's area (concerned with language) and left hemisphere is de-activated. This means that they respond as though the trauma is recurring, are unable to translate experience into language, and cannot access functions which assist with problem-solving, symbolic representation, and categorising of events. Trauma theorists argue that this

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[98] Trauma theory is based on the recognition that when exposed to a significantly traumatic event, humans respond in characteristic ways, and exhibit symptoms which have historically been misinterpreted and have led to pathologising of the victim (van der Kolk, 1999). The 'shell shock' and 'war neurosis' described in veterans of twentieth century wars are probably the most commonly known of examples of trauma responses. However, the conceptualisation of the impact of trauma, began in the late nineteenth century with attempts to understand female "hysteria". Both Janet and Freud concluded that hysteria was caused by psychological trauma, and through a careful reconstruction of the stories his patients told, Freud offered 'premature sexual experience' as the aetiology of hysteria. He later abandoned this theory in favour of the notion of fantasy (Herman, 1992). Though trauma theory had its genesis with understanding women's experiences of child sexual abuse, the connection between recognisable symptoms and a history of CSA was lost for most of the twentieth century. It was not until Burgess and Holstrom (1974) identified the similarities of response between rape victims and war veterans that the issue of sexual assault as trauma was again emphasised (Summit, 1983; Herman, 1992). The similarity of responses with Holocaust survivors and victims of catastrophe, disaster and rape, led to the recognition of a cluster of symptoms as being characteristic of responses to trauma. In 1980 this resulted in the inclusion of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a diagnosis in the 3rd edition of The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, (DSM III) (van der Kolk, Weisaeth and van der Hart, 1996).

[99] The disruption to normal memory processes, for example, is evident in the presence of intrusive, traumatic dreams which can even occur in stages of sleep when people do not usually dream, and include accurate aspects of the trauma.

accounts for the lack of a coherent narrative in victims' descriptions of traumatic events, since physiologically, the experience is not available to language.

Three interconnected symptoms of "hyperarousal", "intrusion" and "constriction" are subsumed under the diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Herman, 1992). Of particular interest in this discussion is the notion of *constriction* which is seen as an adaptation to the state of hyperarousal and intrusion of memories and affect associated with the trauma.[100] There are many forms of constriction including a sense of detachment, inaction or 'numbing', and a distorted sense of time and reality (van der Kolk, 1996; Matsakis, 1996). [101]

One method of numbing and reducing affect is the process of *dissociation*. Salter (1995, p.235) identifies five types of dissociation. These are the separation between self and:

- the body (out of body experiences, lack of sensation)

- the present (flashbacks, disengaging)

- the past (amnesia)

- emotions or affect (numbing, detachment)

- former identities (fugue states and dissociative identity disorder).

It was dissociation which Egeland and Susman-Stilman (1996) suggested may be the mechanism which prevents victims of physical abuse from developing a coherent understanding of their experiences and which leaves them at risk of repeating the abuse

 with their own children. Dissociation may be one outcome of CSA which impacted on the attribution of meaning for some women in this research, since there is evidence of dissociation in both the content of the stories they

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[100] *Hyperarousal* refers to the state of physiological and psychological arousal, where victims remain in perpetual vigilance for signs of threat, and in readiness for the 'flight' or 'fight' response. This arousal may be to either general stimuli unrelated to the trauma, or to specific 'triggers' which might include smells, sensations, people, locations, or situations reminiscent of the event. These triggers result in 'flash backs', or a re-experiencing of the trauma and/or the feelings associated with it. *Intrusion* refers to the uncontrolled recurrence of memories, feelings and thoughts associated with the trauma. They may include those which arise from specific triggers, or occur spontaneously (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 1996(a)).

[101] It is beyond the scope of this discussion to describe in detail the psychobiological aspects of traumatic responses. For detailed discussion, see van der Kolk et al. (1996) chapters 9 and 10, and Crittenden, (1997).

told, and in the way in which they related these experiences in the interview.[102]

Despite its usefulness in understanding dissociation, trauma theory has its limitations when applied to CSA. Though there are a range of criticisms of trauma theory which are beyond the scope of this thesis, one of the limitations is worth noting.[103] The application of the ideas appears to be most appropriate to a single event or one which is recognised as unambiguously traumatic such as war, earthquake or even stranger rape (Herman, 1992; Salter, 1995). In light of the experiences of the women in this research, it appears that trauma theory's limitation rests on a basic error; the failure to account for the ambiguity of experience, be that of family life or the ambiguous nature of much CSA. While violent, obviously invasive and traumatic assault to children occurs, the methods favoured by child sex offenders, the familial context of the abuse, and a culture of minimisation may render much CSA ambiguously traumatic.

The use of the word 'trauma' and the accompanying comparisons to war and Holocaust have obscured the very real differences which exist between traumatic events. The difference between being a prisoner of war and sexually abused as a child are immense, but even apparently 'like' experiences may be profoundly different.[104] The response of women to rape,

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[102] For example, Women 4 had only partial memory of her abuse until her daughter was abused; Woman 5 described laughing hysterically after an attempted rape in childhood; Woman 6 explained how she would leave her body when involved in exploitative sex; Woman 9 frequently appeared to dissociate in the interview, losing track of the conversation when talking of her abuse, and remembering only scant detail.

[103] Feminists have been rightly critical of psychological theories which locate in women's psychopathology, problems which are a consequence of the conditions of women's lives. For example the "battered women's syndrome" identified by Lenore Walker (1979) was initially welcomed as a means of explaining how women become entrapped in violent relationships and resort to killing their tormentor in self defence. It was successfully used in the United States in defending women accused of killing violent husbands. While the original *syndrome* was based on the reality of women's entrapment and the impossibility of escape, it came to represent a psychological description of the woman, rather than the conditions in which she was living. Trauma theory has been met with similar concern, and the accompanying debate of whether particular behaviours fit the psychiatric diagnosis of PTSD, brings women and their experiences into the medical realm, where the presence or absence of 'symptoms' determines how women are defined.

[104] Feminists have been among those who have expressed concerns about trauma theory. It has been argued that the consequences of recognising that seemingly bizarre behaviours may constitute a normal response to trauma, has been a mixed blessing for survivors of CSA. Importantly, it has normalised and depathologised women's experiences, and as Haaken (1996, p.1078) notes, has 'debunked' the myth of women's hysteria. However the focus on victim's responses to trauma can dislocate the trauma itself from the social dynamics in which it occurs. Even Herman (1992) who has sought to combine trauma theory with feminism, has been criticised as reductionist in her analysis. As Haaken (1996, p. 1080) has noted: "Emotional trauma is not reducible to physical impact or sensory overload. It involves the subjective experience of being implicated in a destructive experience, including – in the case of incest - guilt over having violated a powerful taboo."
She argues that Herman misrepresents the nature of captivity in family life, where the dynamics of oppression are more complex than in say, a prisoner-warden relationship. As she notes, Herman's representation "… does not readily allow

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for example, may be more similar to war veterans as Burgess and Holstrom (1974) suggested, than to the response of a child who has suffered prolonged abuse from a relative she also experienced as loving and affectionate. To adequately account for the differences it is necessary to understand

 all aspects of the experience, not just the physiological and psychological response. To date, the trauma theorists have not adequately included these in articulating victim responses. Those theorists who use the metaphor of CSA as trauma have been more helpful in redressing this imbalance.

6.2.3 Trauma as Metaphor: Cognitive and developmental   consequences.

The sexual assault field has a rich history of ideas and obviously I cannot attempt to integrate them all here. Rather, I pursue the argument that some of the impacts of CSA (in this case cognitive and developmental) may be the very reasons why women fail to recognise the abusive nature of their experiences. While trauma theorists have focused on the affective realm, CSA theorists have employed the idea of abuse as trauma, but attended more to the cognitive realm.   Thus they focus on the relationship between victim and offender and the resulting self-blame, guilt and minimisation. They recognise that childhood sexual abuse is a unique trauma which can be confusingly ambiguous and that relationship and context issues may determine some of the effects of abuse, particularly re-victimisation experiences (Summit, 1983; Finkelhor and Browne, 1985; Russell, 1986; Finkelhor, 1978, 1988, 1990; Salter, 1995).[105]

The commonality between the CSA theorists is their maintenance of the offender as central in understanding the causes and outcomes of child sexual abuse. They are interested in the process of victimisation and the way this leads to the child's internalisation of the offender's thinking, or as Salter (1995) put it, "the offender's footprints in the heads of survivors". They do not limit themselves to the psycho-biological responses to trauma but extend their understanding to include the relationship with the offender, the response of others, the familial context of the abuse, the developmental stage

exploration of the conflictual or ambiguous aspects of feminine subjugation within the family" (Haaken, 1996, p.1081). As I argue later, it also does not assist in understanding this attachment when, as is the case in much intrafamilial abuse, it is the *context* in which abuse occurs rather than the *by-product*.
[105] While I group them together here, they do not belong to a particular 'school' or represent a specific theory. They are associated only in the way in which they share the notion of abuse as trauma, and seek to locate victim responses in relationship and social terms.

of the child, and the broader 'culture of minimisation' which exists in relation to sexual abuse (Summit, 1983). Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) discussion of what they call the 'traumagenic dynamics' of CSA are useful in conceptualising how the specific trauma of CSA may impact on victims. I extend their ideas to consider how these may impact on attribution of meaning. [106]

Traumagenic dynamics are seen to shape the child's interactions during and subsequent to the abuse and to have the long-term
consequences which have already been discussed – the disruption to sense of self, problems with intimacy, sexual difficulties, substance abuse, depression and so on. While each of these dynamics may occur in other traumatic events, only in CSA do they *all* occur. They

are the process by which the following are conveyed to and internalised by the child: *Traumatic sexualization* (the shaping of the child's sexuality in 'developmentally inappropriate' and 'interpersonally dysfunctional' ways), *betrayal* (the child's eventual awareness that someone on whom they rely has harmed them), *powerlessness* (the undermining of the child's ability to have her own wishes, needs and will determine her experiences), and *stigmatisation* ('feelings of badness, shame and guilt'). Finkelhor and Browne believe that these dynamics create trauma by not only effecting the child's immediate response but by impeding development throughout adolescence and into adulthood. These impacts may also, I argue, lead to confusion on the child's (and later, the adult's) part about the abusive nature of the experience. Of particular interest in this discussion are the impacts of traumatic sexualisation and stigmatisation.

Traumatic sexualisation
A child's sexuality can be traumatically altered in a variety of ways which can impact on the generation of meaning. The different methods favoured by offenders have differential impacts on the way and extent to which a child is sexualised. For example, a child who is groomed into participation and who is physically aroused may experience a different kind of sexualisation (and

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[106] Crittenden's (1997) "Dynamic-Maturation approach" is also an attempt to provide a more complex and "integrative" theory of responses to trauma.

derive a different meaning about their experience) from one who is expected to remain passive. [107] [108]

The development of misconceptions about their sexual selves, or attributing particular emotional associations to sex can impact on how a woman views her own abuse, and later, that of her children. Holding a view of sex as a commodity or as a currency for relationships, for example, may make it difficult for a woman to identify the power differential that exists between adults and children and lead her to misconstrue responsibility for sexual activity. Since, as I argued in chapter 5, recognition of the power difference is integral to defining the behaviour as 'abuse', this may lead her to conclude that the experience was not abuse.[109]

Traumatic stigmatisation
Stigmatisation refers to the internalised sense of guilt and self-blame. Finkelhor and Browne argue that it is this which leads victims to the frequently observed pattern of belonging to marginalised and stigmatised groups in society. They may for example, be involved in drugs, criminal behaviour, prostitution and other dangerous or stigmatised activities which Russell (1986) argues leaves them at further risk of victimisation. Stigmatisation arises from and perpetuates feelings of worthlessness and shame and a sense of being different from others. The cognitive and developmental consequences of CSA (such as particular self-concepts related to sex or stigmatising behaviours) may therefore mitigate against a woman holding her abuser as responsible, since these outcomes may lead victims to internalise self-blame.

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[107] For example, by being rewarded for sexually inappropriate behaviour with affection, gifts or special privileges, the child may learn that to have her needs met, she needs to utilise developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviours. This was evident for both Women 5 and 6 whose sense of identity as associated with being sexually pleasing to men.
[108] In conceptualising re-victimisation, Russell (1986) explains how traumatic sexualisation may lead women to become alienated from their own sexuality. She acknowledges that several of the behavioural outcomes of this, such as sexual preoccupation and compulsive masturbation may place victims at risk during childhood. The longer term outcome for women may be prostitution, or as was the case for several in this research, other forms of sexual exploitation by men since sex becomes a 'commodity' which can be readily exchanged for 'money, favours or rewards'. She points out that being sexually 'promiscuous' puts women at further risk of rape, since their sexual behaviour signifies them as 'bad' women and their rights to say no to sex are taken from them. The word 'promiscuous' carries assumptions about what is an appropriate level of sexual activity on the part of women. In this discussion I am not suggesting that women should not have multiple partners. Rather, as Russell uses it and as I intend, it refers to the kind of indiscriminate sexual activity which the women themselves frequently saw as unsatisfying and exploitative, including multiple partners in unsafe circumstances.
[109] Woman 6 for example, developed a sense of her own self worth as being tied to her ability to satisfy men sexually. Her husband's rejection of her in favour of her daughter assisted in casting her daughter as her sexual competitor. Furthermore, her daughter's own sexualised behaviour (itself probably a consequence of being groomed to equate sex with affection) meant that she saw the child as complicit in her own abuse.

6.2.4. Interactional and Relationship Contexts of Trauma.

Two related contexts which impact on the meaning of CSA by encouraging the internalisation of self-blame emerge from the previous discussion. These are the process of victimisation and the relationship with the offender. These have implications for how the child assigns responsibility, the traumagenic dynamics which emerge as a consequence of the abuse, and the extent to which the abuse is experienced as 'traumatic'.

1. The process of victimisation

Intrafamilial child sexual assault is rarely an *event*, but is usually a *relationship* (Wyre, 1997), since children are most at risk from abuse by people known to them and trusted by them. The establishment and maintenance of the incestuous relationship requires either force, manipulation or both, but each method of control may have different implications for the victim's attribution of meaning.

A common dynamic which may render the experience of abuse ambiguously traumatic, involves the offender 'grooming' the child into a sexual relationship. Sex offenders have provided invaluable information about the way in which they target children and groom them for sexual activity (Conte Wolf and Smith, 1989; Briggs, Hawkins and Williams, 1994; Salter, 1995; Wyre, 1997). The victimisation process aims to make children apparently willing participants in sexual activity, but in reality it is carefully orchestrated by the offender. The process usually involves targeting a particular child who seems vulnerable to the offender's attentions; developing a close, intimate and trusting relationship where the child experiences the offender as attentive, caring and interested; and de-sensitising the child to touch, at first non-sexual and eventually sexual. By the time the child is aware of what is happening she feels responsible, confused and entrapped by her concern for the offender, or her own compliance.

Children who are deprived, neglected or in any other way estranged from their parents are at most risk, though seductive offenders do not limit their attentions to these children (Conte, Wolf and Smith, 1989; Berliner and Conte, 1990). The impact on the victim of being groomed exacerbates the usual confusion and self-blame, since the child sees herself to have been entirely complicit or even as responsible (Wyre, 1997). Rather than a severely traumatic event, aspects of the abuse, particularly in the early stages

may have seemed pleasant and comforting for the victim. Her body may have responded with arousal, the affection and attention may have been welcomed, and she may share the offender's distorted views of the relationship (Salter, 1995; Wyre, 1997). This process has been called the 'internalising of the offender's thinking' and includes the following beliefs; that it was the victim's fault, that the child wanted sex, that it was her responsibility to stop it, that the offender couldn't help it, that it is best to just 'forget it and get on with things' (Salter, 1995, pp.214-215).

2. The complications of peer and sibling abuse
The experience of peer or sibling abuse may be even more ambiguously traumatic than adult abuse of children. While there is increasing awareness that inappropriate sexual activity between children or adolescents can constitute abuse, there remains a reluctance to see this as anything other than 'child's play'. In fact there is substantial evidence from offenders themselves that sexually exploitative behaviour frequently becomes established in adolescence (Canavan, Meyer and Higgs, 1992; Salter, 1995; Maddock and Larson, 1995; Wyre, 1998; Pithers, Gray, Busconi and Houchens, 1998).

If abuse by similar-age peers is just beginning to be recognised, then abuse by siblings is even less understood. It is an issue worth pursuing in detail since two of the three women who minimised their abuse experiences were victims of sibling incest. The history of professional attitudes to sibling incest suggests that it has traditionally been seen as less harmful than adult-child abuse, and that it is more likely to be seen as 'mutual' rather than abusive (Russell, 1986). There are genuine dilemmas involved in distinguishing between sexualised behaviour or normal sexual curiosity by children, and sexually exploitative behaviour, but the assumption of no harm has restricted investigation. Canavan et al. (1992) in reviewing the research evidence, argue that the taboo against sibling incest is not as powerful as against other forms of incest. The professional community's perception has traditionally been that it is not necessarily problematic, and may represent children's natural, sexual curiosity. They summarised the research findings as to whether sibling incest was harmful:

> In summary, prevailing notions suggest that *if* the experience occurs between young age-mates, *if* there is no betrayal of trust between the children, *if* it is a result of natural curiosity and experimentation, and *if* children are not traumatized by disapproving adults who discover their activity, the experience *can be* just another part of growing up .... (Canavan et al., 1992, p.131).

The research practice has been to utilise an age difference of more than five years between victim and abuser, as the distinguishing feature of abuse (Russell, 1983); a practice which is continued by some current researchers who adopt their methodology from previous research (for example, Faller, 1989b; Varia et al., 1996; Alexander et al., 1998). This has meant that the extent and impact of peer abuse and particularly of sibling incest, has traditionally been under-recognised.

The assumption that less than a five year age gap between siblings somehow intrinsically met the criteria for non-coercive and harmless activity was contested by Russell (1986). She provided ground breaking evidence of the potential harm of sibling abuse. She analysed the accounts of women abused by brothers who were less than five years older than themselves, and whose experience would therefore have been discounted in other research. Her findings challenged what she called "the myth of mutuality". Russell (p. 273) concedes that sibling sexual activity *can* be non-abusive when it is "… mutually desired and enjoyable - or at least neutral - and when it occurs between peers". However she found that one of the reasons why others had discounted the experience as *not* harmful, could be one dimension of what made it exploitative - the special connection between siblings. She noted that sisters in her sample usually felt protective toward their brothers and were reluctant to get them in trouble or risk the relationship, particularly when they had been close. This was also complicated by the victim experiencing pleasure or when innocent play escalated into more explicit sexual activity. As Russell summarised the issue:

> ...Experiencing sexual pleasure in no way mitigates the abusive nature of the interaction in non-peer relationships. And in peer relationships, the sex may start out to be consensual and mutual but become abusive .... There may be more self-blame or sense of betrayal when a mutually enjoyable intimacy is taken as permission to engage in a much more intimate act .... (Russell, 1986, p. 279).

Despite their sense of self-blame, Russell found that victims of sibling abuse were more likely to be subject to physical force and invasive forms of abuse,

and were just as likely to suffer negative effects and distress.   In summary, it is worth quoting Russell at length:

> Although it was more common for victims of brother-sister incestuous abuse than other incest victims to report an ambivalent or positive response to the sexual encounter at some stage of the relationship, these feelings were almost always overwhelmed by more substantial negative reactions .... In addition ... even if we take the absence of reported trauma at face value and assume that denial or repression did not occur, this would not make their brothers' behaviour toward these victims nonabusive .... So strong is the myth of mutuality that many victims themselves internalize the discounting of their experiences, particularly if their brothers did not use force, if they did not forcefully resist the abuse at the time, if they still continued to care about their brothers, or if they did not consider it abuse when it occurred (Russell, 1986, p. 284, 292).

Russell's conclusions contextualise the sibling incest experience and shed light on the experience of the two women in my research who were abused by brothers, but who did not define it as abuse. The nature of the sibling relationship, the confusion of a loving bond and/or physical arousal may mean that the abuse remains ambiguously traumatic.

6.2.5 The Attachment Context: Familial conditions of abuse

The *familial context* of abuse may combine with the interactional and relationship issues, to assist in making it ambiguously traumatic.[110] Since CSA frequently coincides with violence and neglect, for some victims of sexual abuse it may not be recognised as the most traumatic of their experiences. To reiterate, the "affection" and attentiveness shown by a seductive offender may be the child's only experience of "care" and intimacy in a context where they are either physically abused or emotionally neglected. Not only are these children prime targets for such offenders but the nature of their family life makes the abuse experience confusingly ambiguous.

Intrafamilial sexual abuse can be characterised by another element which further confuses the victim's response. The offender usually has ready

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[110] The family context is central to a range of issues associated with incest. Familial characteristics not only increase or decrease the risk of abuse in the first place, with the presence of substance abuse and other forms of child maltreatment risk factors for CSA (Mullen et al., 1993) but it has also been argued that it influences the long-term outcomes, the patterns of interaction in survivors' families of origin and the different meanings associated with abuse (Alexander and Anderson, 1997).

access to the victim who is then exposed to repeated trauma in a situation of captivity. The nature of captivity need not include being physically restrained or imprisoned. The ready and on-going access of the abuser to the victim is facilitated by living in

close proximity and by the dynamics of accommodation and secrecy (Summit, 1983). Herman (1992) argues that it is the experience of captivity which leads many victims to minimise their abuse since their captor may represent the only human connection available, and victims may come to identify with their tormentor and his beliefs.[111] However it does not require complete psychological enslavement in the manner described by Herman to lead to minimisation, since this has been observed as a common psychological process for children subject to trauma (Monahon, 1993; Salter, 1992; Pynoos, Steinberg, and Goenjian, 1996), and as demonstrated, minimisation is congruent with prevailing constructions of child sexual abuse.

6.2.6 Tacit Knowledge about Sexual Abuse

The final element of the meaning context is the broader social context, and the dominant attitudes toward sexual abuse. The kinds of attitudes discussed in the preceding chapter, characterising what Summit (1983) called a 'culture of minimisation', also mitigate against a child perceiving the events as abusive or traumatic. The tacit knowledge dictates that offenders are not responsible for their behaviour, that abuse may not be damaging and more recently, that childhood memories are not necessarily reliable.

When abuse is recognised as having occurred, the tacit knowledge assumes it will be experienced as negative and invasive.[112] The practical knowledge appears to provide the meta-context for the attribution of meaning to

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[111] These processes were clearly evident in this research, in the circumstances of Woman 4's daughter. She had been convinced by her stepfather that he was being ordered by a store security guard to have sex with her, rather than report her to the police for shoplifting. He claimed photographs had to be provided to ensure the punishment was carried out, and to ensure her ongoing 'safety'. He thus became both her tormentor and her saviour, and it is not surprising that after the discovery of the photographs, she continued to go to him, despite her mother's best attempts to protect her.

[112] The implication of this was illustrated by Briggs, Hawkins, and Williams (1994) who interviewed convicted sex offenders in prison in South Australia, about their own childhood victimisation. They found that while most of them did not report a history of child sexual "abuse", when carefully questioned they did reveal a history of sexual "experience" as children, many of them with women. In the context of largely deprived childhoods they did not define these as abuse but as enjoyable and non-damaging. Such beliefs are widely recognised as a significant part of the 'offender thinking' which allows the abuser to overcome any internal inhibitions to offending (Wyre, 1997; Salter, 1995; Finkelhor, 1984), but their genesis is easily identifiable in the dominant cultural assumption that a boy having sex with an older woman should be considered 'fortunate', rather than 'abused' (Briggs et al., 1994).

particular experiences. If the conditions of abuse involve a family context where a child feels unloved and an offender who secures her cooperation through affection and attention, then a victim's sense of enjoying the physical sensations together with the tacit knowledge, confuses the extent to which she defines it as abuse. This does not mean however, that the traumatic responses of a developmentally inappropriate sexual experience will not have impacted on the child. She may experience a traumatised sexual development, problems in trust, intimacy, or in affect regulation. However the connection of these with the meaning context may make the impact of the abuse unacknowledged and effects are likely to be interpreted as her 'personality' (Herman, 1992; Salter, 1995). This in turn leaves the adult woman more vulnerable to minimising her own children's abuse.

6.3 Attachment and Trauma

Along with the trauma paradigm already discussed, Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) has been used to conceptualise the family context in CSA and helps explain two aspects explored in this chapter: the differential meanings of abuse identified in this research, and the transgenerational transmission of abuse. While most frequently applied to physical maltreatment, there is an emerging interest in understanding how the impact of child sexual abuse may be mediated by attachment experiences and the way in which these may provide a mechanism for the transmission of abuse, or alternatively for breaking the cycle (Alexander, 1992; Egeland and Stilman-Susman, 1996; Alexander and Anderson, 1997; Egeland, 1997; Alexander et al, 1998; Morton and Browne, 1998; Liem and Boudewyn, 1999).

Attachment theory grew out of Bowlby's interest in the effects on young children of separation from their mothers. Disaffected with psychoanalytic explanations of the mother-infant bond and its focus on fantasy (Holmes, 1993), Bowlby sought to "... give proper weight to the powerful effects, at all ages, of real life events" (Bowlby, 1988, p.,30).[113] While attachment theory has in the past attracted strong criticism by feminists as idealising of

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[113] While he and others have written extensively on attachment theory, only a brief explanation will be offered here. Good overviews of his work and its development by others are provided in Bowlby (19880, Holmes (1993) and Morton and Browne (1998).

the maternal bond, blaming of mothers, confining of women to the maternal role, and ignorant of the social conditions of mothering, recent developments have seen a re-ignition of interest by feminists and others (Holmes, 1993; Flaskas, 1999).[114] In particular, the theory's attention to both the internal world and the reality of lived experience, together with the importance of relationship in human development, makes it consistent with feminist interests.

Applying attachment theory to CSA is not new. The early mother-blaming literature often drew on notions of poor mother-child attachment to explain incest, and in 1980 Bennett conducted PhD research into non-offending mothers' attachment styles. However, as demonstrated in chapter 1, this early incest literature described women's attachments to their mothers or partners in blaming and pathological terms such as "weak" and "infantile". In contrast, Bowlby (1988) exhibits a warmth and compassion for the human need for attachment which is altogether absent in the early incest analyses. He is at pains to point out that seeking care is neither regressive nor weak, but together with giving care, is a feature of emotional well-being. The more recent applications of attachment theory have attempted to avoid the pitfalls of their predecessors. They acknowledge women's capacities to overcome childhood adversities, as well as the way in which these impact on them. They also make use of the range of theories discussed in this chapter to explore the complexity of responses to incest.

Attachment theory holds that infants are genetically predisposed to attach to care-givers to ensure their survival and that these attachment behaviours form at around six months of age. For healthy physical and psychological development children need to both explore their environment, but maintain close proximity to a care-giver for protection. Attachment behaviours are elicited when the child is alarmed or in need.[115] The response of the care-

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[114] Bowlby has acknowledged a number of feminist concerns and has extended the original notion of attachment from that of "maternal deprivation" to acknowledge the importance of attachment with a consistent care-giver, not limited to the mother (Bowlby, 1988).

[115] Three attachment styles were identified by Ainsworth and colleagues in their "strange situation" experiments. These are now the standard method for assessing attachment and involve separating infants from mothers then noting their reunion behaviour (Bowlby, 1988). The three categories identified were *secure* , where children seek the attachment figure on reunion are easily soothed and comforted, and parents respond promptly and sensitively to the child's distress; *insecure* (avoidant) where the child shows little distress on separation and avoids the care-giver on reunion. Parents are characterised as angry, rejecting and intrusive; and *insecure* (anxious/ambivalent) where the child shows a great deal of distress, but in response to the parent's withdrawal, lack of involvement or inconsistency, behaves in ambivalent ways. In studies of maltreated children, whose parent may exhibit frightened or frightening behaviour, a fourth category of *insecure* (disorganised/disoriented) has been suggested This elicits a contradictory response on the part of the child, such as proximity seeking as well as avoidance, dazed expression and apprehension toward the parent

giver to the child's distress forms the basis for the attachment behaviour (Bowlby, 1988).   Secure attachment is seen as arising from a care-giver's sensitive and consistent response to a child's signals. However, the result of inappropriate parental response is not *no* attachment, but *insecure* attachment (Morton and Browne, 1998). Categorising attachment has dominated much of the literature, but of greater interest to this thesis is the role that attachment plays in childhood and adult relationships, the impact of maltreatment on attachment behaviours, and the way in which the theory may explain aspects of the ambiguity of abuse.

The attachment style developed in childhood is seen to be enduring and predictive of adult relationships. This is explained by the concept of "internal working models" of self-in-relationships. These models arise from the child's interactions with others, and reflect how she is treated and the sense she develops of herself. According to attachment theory, these determine the child's (and adult's) view of herself as deserving of care and attention and of others as trustworthy or untrustworthy, reliable or rejecting and so on.

However, securely attached children are seen as more flexible in the extent to which they 'up-date' their models depending on experiences. In contrast, the models of insecurely attached children appear to persist even when they are no longer treated in the way which elicited the model in the first place (Bowlby, 1988). "Restorative" attachment experiences in childhood or later life, changes in the attachment figure, or therapy which brings into consciousness and challenges the internal working model, are all mechanisms for changing insecure attachment behaviours.[116] The concept of the internal working model goes some way to explaining the process by which the experience of traumatic betrayal or powerlessness described by Finkelhor and Browne (1985) become generalised to other relationships. The persistence of the internal working model also means that parents' attachment behaviours are

 repeated with their own children and in their relationships with partners (Main and Goldwyn, 1984; Bowlby, 1988). Without a restorative attachment experience, insecure attachment behaviours remain unconscious

(Alexander, 1992; Alexander, Anderson, Brand, Schaeffer, Grelling and Kretz, 1998; Morton and Browne, 1998; Shapiro and Levendosky, 1999).

[116] In adulthood the four attachment styles translate as secure, dismissing (comparable to
.avoidant children), preoccupied (resistant) and fearful (disorganised).

and unexamined, a necessary precursor to resolving associated difficulties (Bowlby, 1988). This is supported by the evidence in this research, that those from deprived childhoods who also had other experiences of nurturing and attachment later in life were more able to integrate a coherent sense of the damage of their childhood experiences, than those who did not have the benefit of such relationships. [117]

International research has hypothesised that a lack of resolution of these issues may be a mechanism by which child maltreatment is transmitted across generations, since women who "dissociated" (cognitively and/or affectively) from the memories of their own negative experiences are more likely to repeat them (Main and Goldwyn, 1984; Egeland and Susman-Stillman, 1996). I have suggested that women who dissociated in relation to their own CSA, or for the reasons outlined in this chapter did not develop a congruent narrative of their experiences, were also more likely to be at risk of responding in minimising ways to their children's abuse.

Dissociation can therefore be accounted for as both a trauma response and as a result of insecure attachment. Both the trauma paradigm and Attachment theory conceptualise dissociation as a self-protection mechanism against overwhelming affect. Bowlby (1988) argued that dissociation from affect or memory of events may occur in three kinds of circumstances. All of them involve a confusing ambiguity of experience and require minimising on the part of the child: When parents (or attachment figures) do not want children to remember; when parents have treated children in ways that the child cannot bear to remember; or where the child feels unbearably guilty or ashamed. Alexander et al., (1998) also hypothesised that female CSA survivors minimising childhood distress did so in order to avoid rejection from their attachment figure.

The conditions identified by Bowlby were present for the women in my research who minimised their own abuse and/or dissociated from the negative affect. In all cases the offenders denied the abuse, or that it constituted abuse, so that the women's own memories were discredited. In the context of pervasive neglect, two of them had their attachment to their brothers exploited which must have been extremely painful to acknowledge.

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[117] For example, Woman 1 was cared for by an older woman who helped her leave her violent husband; Woman 4 maintained a close relationship with her own mother and had supportive psychotherapy; Woman 8 had a close female friend who she credited with having kept her from suicide. In contrast, Woman 5, 6 and 9 had no such relationships and remained isolated, abused and deprived of support.

Further, because of the similar age and complications of sibling abuse, they carried significant responsibility and guilt about what had happened.

6.3.1 Transgenerational Relevance of Trauma and Attachment

The issue of transgenerational transmission is more complex in sexual abuse than in physical maltreatment because as discussed earlier, the woman with the CSA or insecure attachment history is not the offender. However some authors have sought to explain transgenerational aspects of sexual abuse using Attachment theory.[118] Alexander and Anderson (1997) attempt to deal with the differences between sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment by using Finkelhor's (1984) oft-cited 'four preconditions' for sexual abuse. Finkelhor argued that for sexual abuse to occur four conditions have to coincide:

1. an abuser has to be motivated to abuse

2. he needs to overcome his own internal inhibitions to offending

3. he has to overcome external inhibitors (such as protective parents)

4. he must overcome the child's resistance.

Alexander and Anderson (1997) suggested that failed attachment may be particularly relevant to incest, since the preconditions for abuse would be readily available in insecure patterns of attachment. They hypothesise that an insecure attachment in the offender could lead to reduced impulse control. Dissociation, a common outcome of CSA, together with insecure attachment could decrease a mother's responsiveness, vigilance and therefore, protectiveness.[119] And an insecurely attached child may not have "an organised strategy for accessing the parents if abuse should begin" (p.350). As Alexander (1992) concluded, even if sexual abuse is not transgenerational, the evidence is that patterns of attachment are, and these may form risk factors for abuse.

I suggest that there is another mechanism by which the women's abuse and attachment history may be relevant to their child's abuse. It may make

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[118] See for example, Alexander (1992), Alexander and Anderson (1997), Alexander et al., (1998), Shapiro and Levendosky (1999), Liem and Boudewyn (1999), Friedrich (2000).
[119] Egeland and Susman-Stillman (1996) hypothesised that dissociation was more likely to result in transgenerational abuse. In their research they found that women who broke the cycle of physical abuse had normal scores on the Dissociative Experience Scale (DES) while those who repeated the abuse had high scores similar to people experiencing PTSD.

women vulnerable to an offender's targeting and grooming behaviours. Russell states:

> Clinical accounts indicate that sexual offenders who do not know about a child's previous victimization may be experts at picking up cues of vulnerability, such as low self-image or a strong but unsatisfied need for affection, approval and attention (Russell, 1986, p.171).

The number of previously victimised women whose partners appeared to have a sexual preference for their children (three of the seven), and who gained the women's confidence by being attentive to their children (four), suggests that offenders may have picked up
on the woman's vulnerability from an early stage of the relationship and may have specifically targeted their children (Salter, 1995; Wyre, 1997).[120] The women's history of abuse, especially the unacknowledged impact, made some women vulnerable to particular kinds of grooming or domination.[121] While this cannot be seen as a singular *cause* of the abuse of their children, it was one of the conditions exploited by the men in ensuring the preconditions of abuse were met.

6.4 The Current Conditions of Women's Lives: The Problem of the Wounded Helper

To this point I have limited my discussion to the impact of *childhood* experiences on attribution of meaning. The transgenerational literature overviewed in chapter 1 indicates that in determining maternal responses to incest, it is also necessary to understand the *current* circumstances of the women's lives. In these I include the experience of the process of disclosure, adult losses and the nature of their relationship with their husbands.[122]   Attachment theory and the trauma paradigm and are also useful in exploring these.

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[120] Whether this a conscious act on the part of offenders is the subject of debate. It is likely that some offenders do so intentionally and others unconsciously.

[121] For example Woman 1's traumatic sexualisation made her vulnerable to a man who made her feel god about herself sexually. Coupled with her internalised belief that her father abused her because he was sexually frustrated, her 'good' sexual relationship with her husband led her to believe that her own children were safe.

[122] Aspects of their current conditions have been discussed at length in chapter 3, including their experience of violence and intimidation in their marriages, and the extent to which they felt 'in charge' of the solutions available to them. These are not discussed in detail here, other than in case examples.

6.4.1 Secondary Trauma

The traumatic impacts of CSA may occur not just for those directly subject to the trauma - the primary victims - but also for those close to the victim. Hearing of, or witnessing the trauma of a close associate or family member is recognised as a trauma itself. The concept has been framed in different ways, but in essence involves a recognition that those closely associated with victims can suffer their own "secondary traumatic stress" response, with symptoms which may be almost identical to those suffered by primary victims (Figley, 1995; Yassen, 1995).[123] Inadequate attention has been focussed on the experience of secondary trauma and the impact this has on family relationships with the primary victim (Figley, 1995; Manion, McIntyre, Firestone, Legenzinska, Ensom and Wells, 1996). This is curious given the evidence that the recovery of the primary victim is so closely connected to the level of support available from family and friends. [124]

The concept of secondary trauma has been applied to the position of all those in intimate relations with victims including family members and therapists; that is, those who are required to witness the victim's experience with compassion, empathy and sensitivity (Figley, 1995). Indeed Figley argues that the more connected, empathic and sensitive the helper is, the more likely that she will experience her own traumatic response. He argues that this is:

> .... a natural consequence of caring between two people, one of whom
> has been initially traumatized and the other of whom is affected by the
> first's traumatic experiences. These effects are ... a natural by-product
> of caring for traumatized people (Figley, 1995, p.11).

It has been argued that mothers of victims of sexual abuse, particularly father-child abuse, are unique amongst secondary victims because of the extensive nature of the losses associated with the disclosure and its aftermath (Hooper,1992).[125] The intimate relationship with the offender; the disruption

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[123] It has been conceptualised as 'secondary victims' (Remer and Elliot, 1988 a), 1988 b)), as 'secondary traumatisation' (Manion et al, 1996), as 'associated victims' (Pauer, 1998), as 'compassion fatigue' (Figley, 1995), and as 'vicarious traumatisation' (McCann and Pearlman, 1990).

[124] For simplicity I will use the term 'secondary trauma' or 'secondary victim', but this should not be taken as meaning 'secondary' in the sense of less severe or important. On the contrary, like the cancerous growth which may be described as developing 'secondary' tumours, it is meant to denote a depth of impact which is related to the original, but which extends beyond it and has its own consequences.

[125] Hooper (1992) warns however that conceptualising mothers only as *secondary* victims, fails to appreciate that in some circumstances, the abuse of her child, may constitute a *primary* trauma for the woman. The high level of physical violence suffered at the hands of their husbands by the participants in her research, suggested that the abuse may have represented one way in which the man attempted to maintain control over the woman herself - a correlation which is

and threat to family life which the disclosure brings; the extent of support she is required to give to the child; the self-blame associated with not having protected the child; and the consequent shattering of a woman's sense of herself as a mother and wife; all of these differentiate her from other secondary victims. Adding support to this argument, Manion et al (1996) found that even when the offender was from outside the family, mothers were more likely than fathers to suffer severe secondary trauma. They were found to experience significantly more intrusion, avoidance, and distress symptoms and to have a lowered satisfaction in their parenting role. The researchers concluded that this was related to the practice of mother-blame which increased women's sense of failure and helplessness. Further complicating the issue, mothers with their own history of CSA have been found to be at increased risk of developing PTSD when their children are also abused (Timmons-Mitchell, Chandler-Holtz and Semple, 1997).

While mothers as a group may be more at risk of secondary stress or what Figley (1995) calls 'compassion fatigue', personal attributes and circumstances may further exacerbate a woman's vulnerability. Figley argues that being empathic increases risk, as does a previous experience of trauma, particularly if this is 'unresolved', and that witnessing the trauma experienced by children may be 'especially provocative'. Therefore two groups of mothers may be most at risk. Those who are most connected to their children's suffering and aware of the on-going impact, and those who have not resolved their own abuse history. The findings of this research confirm that a close connection and empathy with their children did put women at risk of experiencing severe secondary trauma, particularly when they had their own history of abuse.[126]

A further risk factor identified by Figley is prolonged exposure to the victim's trauma and an ongoing responsibility for the well-being of the victim. The women interviewed in this research suffered significant and on-going losses as a consequence of their children's abuse and as described in chapter 4, carried responsibility for the support and well-being of their

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supported in the research literature (Dietz and Craft, 1980; Deblinger, et al., 1993). She also found that women experienced their child's abuse as degrading and threatening to themselves and their own sexual identity, and that it therefore constituted a primary trauma for them.

[126] In relation to the carer's own history of trauma Figley (1995, p.16) warns that, "There is a danger of ...overgeneralizing his/her experiences and methods of coping to the victim and overpromoting those methods". This was a process clearly evident in the women interviewed for this research. Of the seven who acknowledged their own history of abuse, all of them expected and/or identified similarities in their own coping and impact, and that of their children. For some, this acted as a severe constraint to hearing their child's experience.

families. All were thrown into crisis by the disclosure and subsequent events; all were responsible for the care of their children and had to make choices between their husband and child; all suffered loss of jobs, homes, family members or friends as a result of the abuse; and several experienced intrusive thoughts and memories. The concept of secondary trauma is therefore highly relevant in understanding women's responses.[127]

6.4.2 Cognitive and Behavioural Consequences of Disclosure

Dempster (1993) has also focussed on women's experience of the events surrounding disclosure, in order to conceptualise their responses. Her utilisation of Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) traumagenic dynamics to explain the emotional impact of the abuse on the women and their subsequent behaviours, is consistent with the argument I have put forward in this chapter. "Stigmatisation" is evident in the shame and guilt which women feel as their sense of

themselves as mothers is damaged by the knowledge of the abuse. "Powerlessness" refers to their inability to have control over past and current events, including the invasion of their privacy, fears of what may happen to their children and partners, and the inability to influence the response of others. "Betrayal", argues Dempster, exists for all mothers whether or not the offender is a partner and often results in a loss of confidence in their own judgement and capacities. Finally, "traumatic sexualisation" could lead to a woman's own sexual response being inhibited, and particularly for those women with their own CSA, to a traumatic reliving of their childhood experiences. Dempster goes on to argue that these traumatic dynamics may inhibit women in responding effectively to their children unless they are adequately supported.

6.4.3. Adult Experiences of Loss and Attachment

Issues of loss have been discussed at length in this thesis. I have already suggested that the women's grief was exacerbated by being disenfranchised and that losses could be experienced as a trauma. A brief discussion of the women's losses through the lens of attachment theory is also warranted,

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[127] For example, Woman 10 had no history of abuse but became extremely depressed and immobilised by her grief and the trauma of witnessing her child's abuse. Other women, such as 1,3,4 and 8, who were abused, suffered intently because they were painfully aware of the negative impact of abuse and identified with their children's suffering.

since this highlights the importance of the current loss as well as the way in which responses may be connected to early attachment experiences. Since attachment behaviours are only activated at times of threat or stress, attachment difficulties can exacerbate the process of mourning the loss of a partner (Bowlby, 1980). To understand a woman's response to the losses associated with the disclosure of incest, it is necessary to look at the meaning of the *current* loss, not just the internal working model within which the loss is processed.

There is evidence that the marital attachment relationship is more complex than the adult-infant one (Sperling and Berman, 1994). Since marital relationships need to be more reciprocal than that between parent and child, the meaning of events and therefore activation of attachment behaviours appears to be related to both the internal working model and the interactions with the spouse. There is also evidence that women exhibit different attachment behaviours with different partners, suggesting a high interactional component to the behaviours elicited. Berman, Marcus and Berman (1994) in an overview of the research on marital attachment behaviours, concluded that an experience of a marriage as positive and maintaining positive memories of a partner were likely to elicit strong attachment behaviours, even if the current relationship was not positive. These might include feelings of "worry, pain, and tension; angry protest ... and a restless seeking for the missing person" (Holmes, 1993, p.,89).

An exploration of adult losses and attachment is useful in conceptualising the responses of those women who did not disclose a history of childhood abuse or neglect. All three initially attempted to maintain their marriages and one continued to do so in the long-term. While the possibility remains that they may have been abused in childhood and minimised or dissociated from these experiences, if their reports are taken at face value, their experiences of adult loss may be sufficient to explain their strong attachment to their husbands and to the family ideal. Two of them had husbands die suddenly, two had migrated and were without supportive family in this country, all were in second (or third) marriages and were strongly connected to their current husbands. While early attachment experiences may be relevant and may explain why they and others struggled with the resolution of the losses associated with the abuse, research on adult attachment suggests that aspects of the marital relationship may have beeen just as important.

Secure childhood attachments may have assisted some women in overcoming the impacts of their own abuse (like Women 3 and 4), while for others restorative experiences in adulthood seemed to assist them in overcoming their childhood deprivations (Women 1 and 8). However, the experience of those women who did not report a history of abuse suggests that secure childhood attachments were not sufficient to ensure women would respond primarily as "supportive mothers". A history of overwhelming loss in adulthood and a significant attachment to their current husband made women vulnerable to dilemmas associated with competing family interests.

6.5 Breaking the Cycle

I began this chapter by asking how women's traumatic experiences strengthened or diminished their capacities to support their children. In summary, these can be listed as follows:

Aspects of experience which assisted women in responding to their children	Aspects of experience which hindered women in responding to their children
• Positive attachment experiences as children, with parents or other adults • Restorative attachment experiences as adults • Lack of ambiguity in CSA experience, or assistance in understanding it • Defining an experience as abuse • Recognising a negative impact of abuse experiences	• Insecure attachment experiences in childhood, especially when coupled with neglect or maltreatment • Absence of restorative attachment experiences • Ambiguity in abuse due to context, nature of abuse or relationship with offender • Dissociative response to abuse and other maltreatment • On-going abusive relationships and experiences which do not redress the lessons of childhood re trust, powerlessness, etc. • Adult experiences of overwhelming loss, coupled with attachment to the husband

These support Krezlewetz and Piotrowski's (1998) findings that far from being inevitably detrimental, women's childhood experiences of abuse may

strengthen their ability to respond to their children. For women in this research it is clear that a coherent account of their CSA helped them challenge some of the practical consciousness, especially about the impact of abuse. Even if unaware of all the detrimental effects, they carried a deep knowledge of the negative nature of their experience. In contrast, those women without a history of abuse had little to gauge the effects on their children. If they managed to hide these effects, or if they did not accord with the women's assumptions about what were likely impacts, then they used other available comparisons (Woman 2) or struggled to comprehend (Women 7 and 10). Unlike the women above, they were not equipped to challenge aspects of the tacit knowledge which minimised the impacts of sexual abuse.

Even when suffering a severe secondary traumatic stress response, those women who maintained a congruent account of their own history of abuse were better able to respond to their children's needs. While their empathy with their child heightened their distress, it also appeared to assist them in continuing to pursue their children's interests. In contrast, other non-abused women who suffered secondary trauma (such as Woman 10) tended to be more overwhelmed by the grief associated with the losses.

6.6 Summary

In this chapter I have explored the link between a woman's own abuse and the subsequent victimisation of her child. I have argued that childhood sexual abuse constitutes a trauma, even if not defined as such by the victim at the time and that the responses to trauma may have a profound impact on all aspects of a victims life, including their intimate relationships. I have utilised ideas from the "Trauma paradigm" (Trauma theory and child sexual assault theorists) and Attachment theory in defining the range of traumatic responses experienced by victims. I have demonstrated that the nature of child sexual abuse may constitute an *ambiguous trauma* which further complicates victims' responses, including the attribution of responsibility. I have suggested that those women who experienced sexual abuse within the context of an insecure attachment with their parents, accompanied by pervasive neglect or other abuse, and who did not have the benefit of

supportive relationships later in their lives were more likely to experience their own sexual abuse as ambiguously traumatic. That is, they tended to define their sexual abuse as not abusive or not negatively impacting on them, and yet continued to exhibit symptoms of a traumatic impact of their developmentally inappropriate sexual activity. This in turn, I suggest, contributed to their "incoherent" account of their childhood traumas (Main and Goldwyn, 1984) and to their repeating less supportive responses to their children's abuse.

I have also argued that women are at risk of experiencing their child's abuse as a secondary trauma, and that the consequences of this may be profound for both woman and child. Central to this chapter has been the argument that psychological outcomes of abuse can only be understood when located within what I called the *meaning context*. That is, that the women's responses were embedded in a set of social beliefs about child sexual abuse (particularly paternal incest), their own abuse experiences, and the nature of their family relationships. These sometimes contradictory and competing discourses on CSA could reinforce feelings of self-blame and even victim-blame, all of which serve to remove responsibility from the offender.

Chapter 7

Conclusion and Implications

Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated that the women's responses to incest, particularly the decisions they made about the future of their marriages, were complex and variable. The most notable characteristic was the extent to which aspects of their lives were full of paradox: the co-existence of agency with constraint, the dialectics of family life, the acknowledged and unacknowledged conditions of their actions. These challenged polarised views of the women as 'protective' versus 'collusive', 'believing' versus 'denying', 'powerful' versus 'weak', 'choosing' the man or the child, and of their families as 'patriarchal' and 'pathological'. An adequate account of their lives and decisions entailed abandoning such polarisations and required the observer to understand the way in which individual experience interacted with social discourse and institution, to assist a woman in arriving at the unique meaning of the events in her life. It was this meaning which then influenced her toward her decisions.

This thesis contributed to the emerging research based on women's subjective experiences. It affirmed a number of findings of previous feminist research, including challenging the notion of collusion, exploring the impact of the abuse and aftermath on women's lives, and highlighting their agency and competency. Its unique contribution rested on the exploration of the meaning of events for the women, the impact of their own abuse, and the way in which traumatic experiences and social context interconnected. The following summary of conclusions and implications focuses on the unique aspects of my findings.

7.1 Major Conclusions

1. Women's responses cannot be understood within a single theoretical paradigm. Any theory must account for their experiences in their family (past and present) and the impact of these experiences on their lives; but significantly these individual experiences must be socially located. One of the mistakes of the collusion theorists is that they failed to contextualise women's responses and therefore relied on psychological interpretations which themselves arose from a particular social and historical context, with all the attendant biases. In this thesis I have utilised a range of lenses to make sense of their responses, including the "trauma paradigm", attachment theory, feminism, and structuration theory. None of these alone are sufficient, and each illuminates only part of the picture.

2. Only when individual and social factors are taken into account can the process of meaning-making be understood. Of particular importance is the meaning of *family* within contemporary Australia, and the diverse meanings associated with *sexual abuse*. These meanings, which could not be assumed, were drawn in part from women's practical consciousness, and were therefore not readily available for their own interrogation. However as Giddens' (1979) ideas predicted, women were not passive 'dupes' in this meaning-making process. They contributed to these meanings and to the maintenance of the institutions which so bound them. This is because experiences (including of their families and of sexual exploitation) were not inevitably interpreted as 'good' or 'bad'. They were complex, full of contradiction and arose from the intimate interplay of the material and social conditions of their lives.

3. Situating women's responses within their network of relationships, their lived experiences, and the 'knowledges' they use to 'go on' (Giddens, 1979), means that women's unique and individual meanings need to be explored and understood. Of central importance were meanings associated with the family (marriage and motherhood) and child sexual abuse. These challenged the idea of motherhood as natural and the inevitability of the maternal response. In doing so they also challenged the implicit message in feminist maternalism, that in the *right* conditions women will respond inevitably as mothers.

4. This project highlighted the importance of time involved in women's responses, and challenged labelling of women which is usually determined by their initial response, or what I called 'attempted solution'. When time is featured the women's accumulated losses, grief, trauma and on-going adjustment become visible. This highlighted the inadequacy of the term 'crisis' to represent women's experience, and provided a framework for exploring their responses as connected to trauma.

5. Finally, I explored the transgenerational theories of incest and suggested that it was not women's experience of abuse per se which determined their responses to their children, but the extent to which they developed a congruent understanding of these experiences.

There are many implications of these conclusions for social work practice,[128] but I will limit myself to three questions. What are the implications of:

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[128] Social work practice is a broad term and incorporates policy, clinical and community development activities, to name a few. In this discussion I will focus primarily on issues associated with direct casework practice, including the provision of child protection interventions and therapy or counselling.

- the construction of 'non-offending mothers' as *women*, rather than as *mothers*, and recognising the importance of their family relationships
- recognising issues of time, grief and trauma
- attending to the practical and discursive consciousness which formed part of the unacknowledged conditions of women's actions.

7.2 Challenging the Construction of Women as Mothers

The greatest dilemma for social work practice arising from this thesis stems from recognising that women's citizenship, with all that entails, is not derived only from motherhood. Much of social work intervention in women's lives has been based on perceptions of the interests of their children which have subsumed women's own interests, needs or rights (Hutchison, 1992; Krane, 1994). The challenge arising from this thesis is to ensure children's protection without sacrificing the balance of women's rights and responsibilities.

Feminists wishing to argue against mother-blaming in cases of incest, myself among them, frequently have had to resort to the needs of the child to justify supporting women: The importance of maternal support for a child's recovery is highlighted, and provides a pragmatic reason for engaging women (Hooper, 1992; Humphreys, 1992; Miller and Dwyer, 1997). And therein lies the dilemma. Social workers are often required to ensure protection of the child and therefore, as Julia Krane (1994) recognised, need women to respond primarily as 'mother protectors'. However, too frequently efforts at engaging them entail paying only lip-

service to their own needs and interests, neglecting aspects of these which may be at odds with their maternal role and obligations.

The position I adopt in this discussion involves recognising the need to *engage* women in protection rather than demanding it or taking it for granted. While in practical terms this may often concur with the feminist maternalists' calls for assistance for mothers, a very different ethos underlies it. It entails a recognition that even with support, women may not respond inevitably as mothers and that this does not diminish them as women. This requires avoiding either denigrating or idealising women as mothers. Women's citizenship rights bring with them obligations, and clearly I do not argue that women should be relieved of their responsibility (as *adults*) to support and protect children. However, like Krane (1994) I note with concern, the tendency to expect women to protect, while offending men are left free of such responsibility. Women's citizenship responsibilities can be met without demanding that they only behave as "mothers".

If one constructs of them as *women* who have agency and yet will also be constrained, the relationship between the social worker and woman becomes one of negotiation rather than demand, of collaboration rather than control. It requires us to recognise that treating them as women rather than mothers may paradoxically allow them to better support their children, but will not inevitably do so; and that a collaborative relationship may mean negotiation of appropriate solutions rather than imposition of particular arrangements.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, the issue which has most alienated women from potential supports, has been the nature of their on-going relationship with their husbands. It is this decision which has cast them as 'protective' or 'non-protective', 'supportive' or 'non-supportive', as 'good' or 'bad' mothers. And it was the issue which the women in this research identified as the most difficult for them, whatever the final decision. Because of the assumption that protective responses to incest require choosing between husband and child, social work interventions have been based on convincing the woman to give him up, or if necessary demanding that she do so (Krane, 1994). And yet none of the women in this research felt in control of their lives, nor able to meet the challenges of their parenting until they had made these decisions for themselves.

Respecting women's rights to choose their relationships requires a paradigm shift for social workers. Protection of a child may not require the woman abandon the marriage completely or immediately, but rather, include an exploration of the *conditions* required to protect. For the women in this research, final decisions about their marriages could not be made until the impact of the abuse, the needs of the children, the damage to the marriage, the man's willingness to change, the women's on-going experience of her husband and children were all explored; and these required access to their husbands. The fact that eight women originally saw their family's future as involving the ongoing marriage, but only two remained committed to this over the long-term, demonstrates that women do negotiate and evaluate their choices, and are capable of deciding against their husbands if necessary.

Not constructing women as mothers means recognising three main points: First, women's multiplicity of interests; second, that protection in each circumstance needs to be determined and negotiated; and third, that this may require challenging firmly held beliefs about what constitutes good mothering. The evidence from this research was that women wished to support their children, and while none thought it was acceptable to allow the child to be abused, all struggled for some period over the implications for their families, themselves and their parenting of abandoning the marriage too quickly. A collaborative relationship in which women are encouraged to assist their children in full recognition of the implications for themselves, does not mean social workers cannot hold strong opinions or

challenge women's views - indeed the capacity to do this respectfully was valued by the women.[129] Rather it entails understanding the meaning of events for the woman and assisting her in considering the implications of her choices. This must be done in full recognition of the consequences of decisions for the woman and her children, and the impact of grief and trauma in her life.

The current organisation of sexual assault services in Victoria does not readily facilitate this process. There are no specialist sexual assault services which routinely see women in the context of all family members, despite the

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[129] In my clinical practice, which has been greatly influenced by this research, I advocate a direct approach to dealing with the dilemmas associated with my social work role in child protection. I am clear with the woman about my interests (first, the protection and healing of the child, and second the healing of all family members). However I reassure her of her importance in achieving that since the best interests of children are usually with the support of their mothers. Our relationship is therefore based on my need to have her assist me in helping her family recover from what has happened. I assure her that I am going to be clear with her about what I think and why, but am interested in how she sees things differently. Most importantly I reassure her that I have no preference about her long-term relationship with her husband, so long as we can negotiate her children's safety. I go to great lengths to reassure her that I do not blame her for what happened, and actively seize on evidence of connection and concern for her child.

obvious importance of 'family' in women's lives and decisions. In many cases even child protection workers may have no direct contact with offenders, because of the requirement that police conduct interviews. Offender treatment services are also fragmented from others which treat victims and non-offending family members. This means that there can be no systematic and co-ordinated assistance for women in negotiating their marriages, and the lack of support in doing so further

stigmatises women who may be struggling with these issues.[130] Further, this research suggests that clinical interventions which help women feel competent in assisting their children's recovery may facilitate women responding in supportive ways to their victimised children. Services which exclude or marginalise mothers from children's treatment risk further undermining this relationship.

There is a growing recognition that the separation between victim and offender treatment services has had unforseen negative consequences, as well as the many positive. It has deprived therapists of valuable experience of how offenders operate which can be useful in working with their victims (Salter, 1996; Wyre, 1998), and conversely prevented offenders' therapists from accessing the real impact of the abuse on victims (Miller, 1997; Welfare, 1997). While there is a continuing need for separate and distinct services, this research underlines the importance of family relationships in women's responses to incest, and the need for services which can assist them directly in addressing these issues with their partners and children.

The deserved criticisms of the family systems literature and the family re-unification programmes which still rely on a system of shared parental responsibility for incest, both of which I outlined in chapter 1, left family approaches to incest treatment in

disfavour, particularly with feminist practitioners and scholars. However we may have been guilty of 'throwing the baby out with the bath-water'.[131] Just as feminist's understanding of the institution of the family has evolved from initial rejection to current attempts at transformation, the healthy feminist debates within the family therapy field have demonstrated that feminist-informed family approaches are possible, even if they involve dilemmas (Hare-Mustin, 1989; Goldner, 1988; McGoldrick, Anderson and Walsh, 1989; Taggart, 1989; Goldner, Penn, Scheinberg and Walker, 1990; Luepnitz, 1990; James and MacKinnon, 1990; Patterson and Trathen, 1994; ; Flaskas, 1995; Sanders, 1998).

The importance of attachment experiences in the transgenerational transmission of abuse also provides a powerful argument for the use of family approaches to incest treatment. Bowlby (1988) argued extensively that family therapy was an important context for assessment and treatment of attachment problems. Not only because adult's reports of their relationships may not be reliable due to the difficulties in providing a coherent narrative of their attachments, but because the family is such a primary locale of both suffering and healing.

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[130] There are two exceptions: the first is the agency where subjects for this research were recruited. However as noted in chapter 2, this is not specifically a sexual assault service, and receives no funding to work with this population. The second is an organisation which sees adolescent offenders and other family members, but does not see adult offenders.
[131] In Victoria, the government-commissioned enquiry known as the Hewitt Report (1986), which looked at child protection and treatment models in CSA, rightfully criticised the contemporary family approaches to incest treatment. There has been no significant public debate since that report.

Some feminist authors continue to critique family therapy as an inappropriate intervention after incest (Hooper, 1992; Lloyd, 1996; Dempster, 1996) and yet their analyses do not consider the

rich contribution of feminist theory and practice to the family therapy field. For example, Dempster (1996) maintains that family systems is inevitably a negative approach to sexual abuse, however, she fails to acknowledge the critiques of the application of Systems theory to incest which arose from within the family therapy community's own ranks, or the literature which attends to these criticisms (Carter, Papp, Silverstein and Walters, 1986; James and MacKinnon, 1990; Durrant and White, 1990; Scheinberg, 1992). The family therapy field continues to offer ideas and practices in relation to responding to incest, which are cognisant of the criticisms by Dempster and others (Friedrich, 1995; Dwyer and Miller, 1996; Miller and Dwyer, 1997; Foote, 1999a). If feminist social workers take seriously the dialectics of family life and women's agency in decision-making, then it is time to re-visit the debate about family-focussed services rather than to leave this to those who blame women or aim only at family re-unification.

7.3 The Implications of Time, Grief and Trauma.

In some ways the importance of time, grief and trauma to women's responses may seem obvious. In most circumstances deciding the future of a marriage would be seen to be a process of trial and negotiation, to involve sadness and loss, and to require a sense of agency in resolution. But after

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the discovery of incest, women are frequently denied the luxury of this process. Child protection issues become paramount, and they are expected to respond in the best interests of the child, usually evidenced by separation from their partner (Hooper, 1992; Krane, 1994). Women's actions, which may be only *initial* responses, became reified as representative of the women themselves. They are therefore cast as 'protective' or 'non-protective' depending on whether they choose to stay with the man or separate; categorised as 'believing' or 'dis-believing', even if their belief is 'fluid' (Humphreys, 1990), or if they believe some aspects but remain unsure of others.

Such fixed categorisations of women have been shown to influence the responses of the child protection and other services involved, and to result in an antagonistic or judgemental relationship between the women and intervening services (Dietz and Craft, 1980; Hooper, 1992; Breckenridge and Bereen, 1992; Krane, 1994; Breckenridge and Baldry, 1997), and yet this may negatively impact on the women's ability to respond effectively to their children.

A) Time

The lack of attention to their prior experiences of their family relationships, particularly with their partner and the abused child, means that women are asked to respond to a disclosure of abuse as though prior relationships did not exist. Their accumulated meaning of their family experiences is

assumed to be irrelevant. In these circumstances, as I have argued elsewhere:

> (The woman) is expected to be immediately close to and supportive of the child, and rejecting of the man. Suddenly she is expected to reconcile what may be incomprehensibly conflicting images of a man she thought she knew (Dwyer and Miller, 1996, p.140).

Failing to understand the importance of time and process in attributing meaning, and the losses associated with particular meanings, has meant that women's responses have traditionally been misinterpreted as 'collusion' or 'weakness' rather than as an expression of grief, confusion or attachment to their families' interests. Yet women's losses after incest are incremental and the implications of each attempted solution may exacerbate earlier losses.

B) Grief

As I argued in chapter 3, when grief is disenfranchised women's actions are not recognised and honoured as a response to loss. Doka (1998) has noted that feelings of guilt, shame and anger may lead people to neglect their own experience of loss, as did several of those in this research, who could not understand their grief over the loss of a man who had betrayed them and their children in such a fundamental way. When these self-perceptions are reinforced by those with whom they interact, the resolution of their grief may become further complicated.

A lack of recognition of women's losses does not affect only those who remain with their husbands.[132] Ironically, those who respond by distancing themselves from the offender, and could therefore

be seen as 'protective' and 'supportive' are deemed to not require protective intervention or assistance. The emotional, financial and other costs of leaving their husbands reverberate in women's lives for years afterward, but few services are geared to manage these long-term consequences (Humphreys, 1990). As Doka (1998) asserts, "Grief is not a time-bound process that ends in detachment". The resolution of grief takes time and is a developmental process whereby strong feelings associated with the loss may recur throughout the life cycle. It may be prolonged, it may be complex and it may entail the resolution of contradictory or ambivalent feelings; a process which can be confusing for both the women and those around them (Dwyer and Miller, 1996).

The disenfranchised nature of a woman's grief further complicates this process. It also provides a paradox since the feelings associated with the losses are intensified, but the usual supports are absent (Doka, 1998). This was evidenced by the extent to which women in this research felt unable to confide in friends and family and leaned heavily on formal agencies in securing the support crucial for their survival and adjustment. As

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[132] The extent to which families are seen to require 'protective intervention', is dependent on the early responses of women to 'disclosure'. The practice in the state of Victoria where each of these women lived, is if women act 'protectively' and leave their husbands, they are deemed to not require intervention. This means that services, geared to responding to the crisis of disclosure do not provide the long-term support which the women require after abuse.

Humphreys (1990) and Hooper (1992) demonstrated before me, this is not only in provision of practical aid, information and assistance but also in the emotional support and nurturance which makes it possible for them to sustain themselves. Support services need to be available for the long-term, not just the *initial* crisis period, since crises are ongoing and recurring. If women's actions were understood as 'attempted solutions' and processes, rather than as decisions which characterise the women themselves, and as rooted in grief rather than weakness or collusion, then workers may avoid further alienation of the women from their children, and be better positioned to support them.

C) Trauma

Recognising that the process of discovery and attempting solutions constitute ongoing crises, begins to provide a framework for both the women and workers to understand their responses. Yet the conceptualisation of disclosure as 'crisis', while helpful in normalising the confusion and fluidity of women's responses, does not adequately encapsulate the process women in this research went through. It speaks to neither the time involved in the discovery process, the extent of their losses, nor the depth of their trauma. Failing to understand the extent to which the abuse disrupts their lives means that women are expected to respond as 'protective mothers' at the time when their own resources are most limited. As one woman in this research put it, "At the time you need to be at your strongest as a mother, as a parent, you are at your weakest."

Given the level of distress and on-going disturbance suffered by women in this research, routine assessment of trauma symptoms may be indicated for all women, in order to mobilise appropriate supports. Without adequate appreciation of their trauma, women's own needs may be completely mismatched with those of their children (Remer and Elliot, 1988 b)) and the impact this has on their ability to respond helpfully may be completely misunderstood. Identifying these processes as traumatic

begins to capture the monumental dimensions of the task we set women when we expect them to be supportive and believing.

The implications of recognising trauma are two-fold. It highlights women's secondary trauma and the impact this has on their responses to their children, but also the impact of previous trauma which may or may not be acknowledged by the woman. The consequences of secondary trauma may be profound, not just because of the impact on a woman's capacity to mobilise her resources but also because of the subsequent loss of self-esteem in parenting. As I argued in chapter 4, a woman's sense of achievement and worth in her parenting was one factor which influenced her identity as a 'mother' and her construction of herself as 'mother' was one of the issues which influenced the decisions about the future of the marriage. If women are to be encouraged or assisted in supporting their children, then their sense of confidence in their parenting needs to be enhanced, not undermined by a failure to support them through their significant trauma, or worse, by alienating attitudes and mother-blaming practices.

Characteristic responses to secondary trauma which I described in chapter 6 included over-identifying with the child victim and promoting one's own solutions to the problems, particularly for those with unresolved childhood trauma of their own (Figley, 1995). A woman's hyper-vigilance, her response to the intrusive thoughts and memories, and the consequent avoidant behaviour which could include constriction of emotions, thoughts and actions may render her unable to recognise or attend to the child's ongoing distress. The *child's* wellbeing may therefore be enhanced by

recognising the *woman's* trauma response. Remer and Elliot (1988, a), p.386) summarise it simply:

> It is crucial to the victims to take the feelings of the secondary victims into account and to focus on their recovery as well as that of the victims. Otherwise the victim recovery process and adjustment may be impaired by the secondary victim's withdrawal of support.

While this is a victim-focussed argument it should be emphasised that women require support not only because this will better enhance their capacity to *mother*, but because they have been afflicted by a trauma which has caused them pain and distress. Much of their pain comes from that of their children, but much also comes from their own childhood hurts, the losses associated with discovery, the damage to their sense of themselves, and the irreversible turmoil to their lives. So long as we construct women only as mothers, we will fail to adequately recognise the multi-layered and far-reaching dimensions of their trauma, and paradoxically will not maximise their capacities to assist their children.

The impact of the woman's own childhood abuse may be equally profound, though as I demonstrated, women do not respond in uniform ways. The meaning of their own abuse and the extent of the unacknowledged impact appear to be the most important issues. In either case, understanding a woman's previous victimisation becomes central in understanding her response. However social workers need to be wary of either assuming that a woman has been abused or assuming the impact of any abuse on her response to her child. At the most basic level it is necessary to be aware of the variety of meanings which can be attributed to what professionals may

define as 'sexual abuse', and to assist a woman in attributing meaning which attends to her children's interests. The evidence is that an exploration of her childhood experience should include her early attachment experiences, not just a history of abuse.

The evidence from this thesis was that belief that their child had been abused was insufficient to assist in women in resolving their dilemmas; it was the meaning of events which was paramount. Assisting women in the attribution of meaning goes beyond merely providing more and more information, and in some circumstances overloading the woman with indiscriminate detail may exacerbate her difficulties. If women are severely traumatised the provision of more detail or ongoing 'education' about what constitutes abuse may trigger more avoidant responses and further jeopardise their helpfulness to their child. Rather than attempting to convince women, social workers may develop more collaborative relationships by *listening* and exploring their unique meanings. This does not mean that myths cannot be challenged, but that this can be done through adopting a stance of respectful curiosity, rather than forced re-education. For example, a discussion about why she does not define her own experience as abuse informs both parties about the constraints which exist for her in understanding her child's experience, and opens up discussion on the similarities and differences between her own and her child's abuse. It also allows some of the foundational beliefs and knowledges to begin to be articulated and challenged.

7.4 Challenging Practical Consciousness

I utilised Giddens' structuration theory to account for the paradox of women's agency and the constraints of social knowledge and institutions. The major implications of this are two fold. First, it requires exploration of the tacit knowledge about sexual abuse and the family, and to locate the women's beliefs and understandings within the broader community response rather than in their individual or collective psychopathology. Second, it highlights their agency in contributing to the maintenance and development of these knowledges and institutions, and in doing so offers possibilities for challenging and re-negotiating these.

The basis of much of the practical consciousness about sexual abuse which informed the women's actions originated with Freudian analysis of incest, which could itself not be separated from the gender and other biases of the time.[133] The disbelief, minimisation and blaming of the child were all aspects of Freud's contribution to social knowledge about sexual abuse. Giddens (in 1993) described how such scholarly endeavour may contribute to discursive consciousness. However over time it tends to eventually become dislocated from its source and recede into practical consciousness; that knowledge which just 'is'. This is the case with Freud's conceptualisation of incest. As was evident in the attitude surveys in chapter 5, everyone 'knows' that children's allegations about abuse are

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[133] The Freudian influence on our understanding of sexual abuse was discussed in chapter one. For example, the commentary which accompanied Kaufman et al.'s (1954) derision of women for not believing their daughters' disclosure, demonstrates the basis of such disbelief in Freudianism, and the pervasiveness of disbelief, even among professionals. A Dr. E. Pavenstedt commented :
"Most of us have been trained to scepticism toward claims of young girls who maintain that they have been seduced by their fathers, since we recognise the strength and reality value such fantasies can assume, particularly in the adolescent. The authors unfortunately say little about the evidence on which they base their impression that incest actually occurred."

often fantasy, that girls seduce men, and that incest is not as harmful as stranger rape, but few would know the genesis of these ideas.[134] However because the boundary between practical and discursive consciousness is permeable, this knowledge can be challenged. Young (1997) indicates that articulating the basis of practical knowledge brings it into the discursive realm, enabling it to be reassessed and finally to challenge and change social practices and beliefs. Giddens (in 1993) indicates that an exploration of the everyday, the minutiae of life, is the best way of locating practical consciousness. In this case, assisting women to articulate the taken-for-granted (that knowledge which is so obvious that it goes without notice) allows it to be brought into the discursive realm and challenged.

However the responsibility for change does not rest with individual women. Effective social work practice requires action at all levels of knowledge generation and maintenance. As the community and professional attitudes surveys demonstrated, this knowledge must be challenged at a more fundamental level. Feminists have already demonstrated the gender biases which

 underlie much of the knowledge about incest, and as a result the discursive knowledge is currently in a state of review. Competing theories, values and beliefs are being broadly debated. This is occurring firstly at the level of professional discourse, but also more generally as the issue receives attention through the media and public policy. As a consequence the tacit knowledge and the values underlying it are also being challenged. Finally,

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[134] These knowledges are also encouraged by the scepticism about childhood memories of abuse which has occurred in relation to the recovered memory debate. Some workers' at times over-zealous attachment to the uncritical acceptance

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recognising the social location of meaning requires challenging psychological theories which do not adequately attend to this dimension of experience. The differential impact and meaning of abuse can only be understood with reference to the centrality of the meaning context.

Not all children are equally affected by sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1990; Mullen et al., 1994). As discussed in chapter 6, these differential effects have been found to be related to the age and gender of the child, the familial conditions preceding and following the abuse, the level of support available, and the nature of the abuse to name a few. These constitute the social and material conditions which exist for the child surrounding the abusive event(s). They include: characteristics of the child (such as developmental stage, gender, the presence of particular vulnerabilities); the conditions of the abuse (including the nature of abuse, how the process of victimisation occurs, the relationship with the abuser and how he/she overcame the child's inhibitions);
the familial conditions (including the presence or absence of a supportive family environment preceding and following the abuse, the presence of other deprivations).

These all influence how the abuse is experienced and the meaning attributed to it. However they do not take place in a vacuum. They exist alongside broader social discourses which give meaning to experience, in particular, the tacit knowledge about sexual abuse, the family, motherhood, and male and female sexuality. These form a web of knowledge in which meaning is

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of all allegations as true, has not helped in rebutting and contextualising the false memories claims.

constructed. The knowledges brought to bear in constructing meaning associated with abuse include:

Knowledge of sexual abuse: This includes that abuse will be experienced as negative and exploitative, that the child will be unwilling, and that it cannot occur among peers. Experiences which do not fit this perception may not be defined as abuse.

Knowledge of families: The ideology dictates the family as the place of safety and healing. This means that children are vulnerable to interpreting experiences within the family as aspects of love and intimacy. Maintenance of the family is primary, even if it does not meet the ideal.

Motherhood: Expectations of mothers as all-knowing and protective assume that women will know what is happening to children, act to protect them, and respond in a way which maximises healing. Deviations from this may be experienced by children as a failure on the part of the mother and/or themselves.

Male and female sexuality and development: Children are seen to be paradoxically sexually alluring and curious, but unable to have sexual feelings. Males are frequently portrayed as victims to their own sexual desires, and females as responsible for arousing men and meeting these desires.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Research

A number of implications for future research arise from this thesis:

- All participants for this project came from a clinical population. The extent to which the findings hold for other "non-offending mothers" is

worthy of investigation.

- The impact of trauma on women's lives – both childhood events and the trauma of their child's abuse – requires further investigation. To date, much of the trauma literature has limited itself to the impact of trauma on primary victims, and yet I have demonstrated that the support from victims' mothers may be impeded by their experiences of trauma. Systematic investigation of trauma symptoms (long and short-term) in mothers of abuse victims would allow for targeting of resources to those women most in need of support.

- The issue of women's own abuse and its impact on their support of their children requires further investigation. The centrality of this issue in either assisting or hindering women to break the cycle of abuse recommends it as deserving of attention in larger scale, quantitative studies.

- Given the long-term nature of disruption to the lives of women and children, longitudinal studies are required which focus on factors which assist and impede adjustment. My findings suggested that even long-term trauma consequences may be subject to change. However investigation into clinical methods and social policies which may maximise recovery is required.

- This research focussed on mothers and paternal incest, because of the centrality of that issue in previous literature. However it may be that these findings are also relevant to non-offending family members other than mothers. In particular, clinical experience would suggest that the position of non-offending parents in cases of sibling incest may be very

similar. Given findings about the ambiguity of the sibling incest trauma and the more recent acknowledgment of such relationships as abusive, this is an area worthy of further research. In particular, how do parents assign meaning to sibling incest and what responses are most likely to maximise recovery for victims and young offenders.

- The impact of women's own CSA, in particular the unacknowledged consequences, implies many questions about male victims; in particular, the relationship between CSA and later offending. While this area is already attracting research, this project highlights the need to understand unacknowledged impacts of abuse and its potential links to offending.

7.6 Conclusion

I have argued throughout this thesis that the responses of all of the women, and the complex meanings they attributed to their own and their children's experiences, can only be understood when socially located. That is, theories of abuse, why it happens, who is to blame, how it effects children are all socially derived and reinforced through social experience. The ideology of the family remains powerful in contemporary Australia, and the women shared the values and beliefs associated with this, however inappropriate to their own needs. The meanings finally attributed by the women represented the integration of their personal experiences with their 'tacit knowledge' about the family and incest; a knowledge which was full of contradiction and which discouraged the women from holding the man responsible and the child as in need of support and protection. But these were subject to change and negotiation as the women sought to protect the

interests of their families and to maintain their personal agency. The challenge for social work is to work collaboratively with women in both of these aims, without sacrificing the child's interests.

8. Case studies

These case studies explore the impact of women's childhood experiences of CSA, utilising the theoretical lenses used in Chapter 6; the concepts of trauma and attachment. Those women who minimised their abuse are discussed first (Women 5, 6 and 9), followed by those did not (Women 1, 3, 4 and 8). The experience of a non-abused woman is then used as a negative case example. Because of the detail of the case studies, some of the quotes by women which are used in this discussion also appear in the text of the thesis.

Woman   5's   Story

Woman 5, who was first sexually abused by at least one older brother, over a number of years before puberty, suffered on-going victimisation throughout most of her life. She was a victim of attempted rape at school at age 11 or 12; and was raped again on her 21st birthday. She also suffered frequent unwanted sexual advances throughout adolescence and adulthood, commenting wryly that by current definitions, she would have been raped over 100 times. Her explanation at the time was that she was 'the town bike'. There is substantial evidence that Woman 5 suffered a complex response to the trauma of her own abuse (Herman, 1992), a response which resonated throughout her intimate relationships both as a child and an adult. While these can be assumed from the many negative and re-victimising experiences which occurred again and again throughout her life, there is also evidence of an acute traumatic response at the time of her abuse.

While she had initially constructed her incestuous relationship with her brother as consensual, the facts speak otherwise. He was approximately ten years older than her, and while it is unclear when the abuse began, it was occurring by the time she was eight years old. Although she said that at times she enjoyed it, the example she chose illustrating another issue, demonstrates otherwise:

> ....my brother had me pinned down in the bedroom one day ... and
>
> he had his finger in my vagina, and I was singing out , 'Mum! Harry
>
> is doing this to me'. And she said, 'Be quiet, you're making far too
>
> much noise'. But it was because we had visitors .... So he just kept
>
> on doing it, and I was just - you know, *he didn't rape me or*
>
> *anything* - but I was just sort of told to be quiet ....

This story was told, not to illustrate the force of his abuse - indeed she minimises what was actually digital rape - but to demonstrate her mother's dismissal of her call for help. From this she learned to put up with it, and to take responsibility, or in her own words; "I got myself into that fix ... I got to get myself out". As Russell (1986) suggests, the presence of physical pleasure during some aspects of the abuse, fuelled her guilt and sense of responsibility, and further confused what was clearly an abusive relationship.

Woman 5's story demonstrates an early traumatic sexualisation as described by Finkelhor and Browne (1985), the consequences of which not only left her vulnerable to other abuse, but left her deeply scarred. Her description of an early attempted rape may also demonstrate evidence of dissociation, as she distances herself from the events and seems to shut down her emotions.

Despite the sense of severity of the events, she describes "giggling" after the assault:

> I nearly got raped by a couple of school kids. I was about 11 or 12
>
> years old and I came giggling home, and I thought it was a big joke,
>
> because I had been abused by my brother. My brother met me half
>
> way up the driveway and he said, 'Look, this is serious business ....
>
> Go to your room and I'll go and tell Mum'. And Mum told him ...
>
> that I'd deserved it, and I probably asked for it ... and she brushed it
>
> off ....

Most evident in her description of her life, is the long-term, chronic difficulties which Russell (1986), Finkelhor (1990), Mullen et al, (1993, 1996), Salter (1995), Herman (1992), van der Kolk (1996) and others have described as a common sequalae of CSA - her sexualised behaviour, risk taking, and an internalisation of offender thinking in relation to her own and later, her child's experience. Her sexualised behaviour continually placed her at risk of further victimisation. For example, unable to turn down men's requests for sex, but afraid of the stigma of prostitution, she would give sexual favours for free. Like Russell's (1986) respondents though, she had never previously associated this with her abuse. She also exhibited a sense of powerlessness and acquiescence to her fate (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985):

> I have no set goals in life ... because nothing ever works anyway ....
>
> I can't even plan a whole day you know. I can plan one thing to
>
> happen in a day and that's about it.

However her behaviour is most consistent with what Herman (1992) called the 'complex' traumatic response; the long-term, internalised consequences of the abuse which she and others came to define simply as her personality. The most marked and damaging of the consequences, however, was the constriction of affect which she demonstrated throughout the interview despite the description of the terrible events of her life and her children's lives; and the impact this had on her relationships with her children. She had no difficulty recalling traumatic events, but they were retold without the associated feelings (Herman, 1992; Salter, 1995). As she described occasions when her daughter was abused, the disclosure, and the intervention of police and child protection authorities, her affect remained constrained. While the words bespoke emotion, the delivery was ironic in valence. Several times she noted, dismissively, that she had no feelings, that she must have been 'numb', that she was only just beginning to know what feelings were. These suggest a chronic emotional numbing consistent with the trauma of her early abuse. This interfered with her capacity to feel connected to her children; she described a sense of alienation from them, as though she was going through the motions. However an emerging understanding of the impact of the abuse on her life, had led to a new sense of connection with her children and her role as a mother:

> ...I never realised that I've got - me? feelings? - I'm just the
>
> cleaning lady .... First I was just going through the motions but now
>
> I'm being a Mum ....

This emerging meaning was evident in her decision to confront her brother, to challenge his statement that the abuse was merely child's play, and in her beginning to attribute some of her negative experiences to the abuse.

> I think that is one way it has mucked up my life, because not knowing what a relationship is like ...even now I have trouble with relationships .... But even as a kid. Growing up and not having friends at school ....

Woman 5 had no parental support to mediate the impact of the CSA. She witnessed severe domestic violence in her home and was neither believed nor supported when she tried to get help for her own abuse. It is not surprising that in these conditions the physical comfort and attention shown by her brother was welcomed at times and enjoyable, and that the usual guilt and confusion of early traumatic sexualisation should result in her failing to define the experience as abuse.

Woman 5's circumstances are further complicated by the fact that as well as her prior abuse, she was also subject to violence and control at the hands of her husband. In this sense she was not only dealing with her past trauma but was also dealing with current, primary victimisation. She described a relationship with her husband which is reminiscent of Herman's (1992) description of a captive victim. She was forever attuned to his wishes, careful that neither she nor the children upset him. This dominated the lives of herself and her children:

Well I fear him a lot. Every day I pray that he won't get angry.

And one of the kids at meal-times says her prayers. She says,

'Please God, don't let Daddy get angry'.

However the violence and intimidation were interspersed with affection and charm, which kept her connected (Herman, 1992). Isolated from friends and estranged from family, she identified with him as the one person who would 'always be there'. The importance of the seduction in the cycle of violence is apparent:

Now he is sort of apologising .... I feel like a wedge, you know I

feel like I just get drawn in all the time .... I don't know why I let

him get away with it. (Laughs) Because he's nice, and when he's

nice he's bearable. He's more than bearable, I love the man. And I

hate loving him. I hate myself for that you know.

The violence, intimidation and control were obviously significant in Woman 5's response, but it would be inaccurate to say that she was dominated by fear. She is quite clear about this herself. Understanding her behaviour requires understanding her own abuse and the way in which it filtered her child's experience and her intimate relationships; the nature of her relationship with her husband; and the ideal of 'the family' which existed in stark contrast to her own childhood experience and in which she still placed her dreams:

... I don't think it's normal what I'm doing. All my feelings for

John just shouldn't be. And it's not necessarily a fear - I mean, I

am scared of him at times - but that's not what's holding me. I just

think I'm incredibly loyal .... Married is married for life ....

The unfortunate and unacknowledged consequence for Woman 5 and for her daughter was that the management of her own abuse set up a template for the management of her daughter's abuse which was bound to be problematic, and not in the child's best interests. Her beliefs about herself and her abuse resonated in her response to her daughter in every way, including how she understood the abuse and how she responded to it. She described a disturbing event when her husband forcefully, digitally penetrated her daughter. While she expressed disapproval at her husband's behaviour and was clear that it was not acceptable, the tone of this conversation was remarkable for its minimisation. It was as though we were talking about a naughty boy, who did something when he should have known better. As the conversation goes on, it is obvious that her perception of her child's abuse is always being filtered through the memories of her own; the same emotional dissociation, the same confusion as to the meaning of abuse and the same minimisation:

> I'd send her in to wake John up ... and he didn't like to be woken
>
> up, so he stuck his finger up her vagina, you know. Jab! And she
>
> came out very upset .... And the time before that even, I think the
>
> first one, I was laying in bed and she came dancing into the room ....
>
> and she was practically screaming ... 'Mum, Daddy's hurt me' ....
>
> And I went into the lounge and I really laid into him .... And I said,
>
> 'Look, that is something you just don't do to little girls' ....

Interviewer: Did you see that as abuse at the time; I mean, as sexual abuse or as something else?

Woman 5: I don't know. I never really thought about it you know. I mean I was raped on my 21st birthday and I never realised until I was twenty-eight. I just sort of, I don't really know.

Similarly, the perception that her own abuse had not been damaging made her unable to see the consequences for her child. Despite the sadism and obvious pain of the example above, she said that she had not really thought of it as damaging because she believed that her husband was 'always gentle with her'. This description is so clearly a replication of her own experience with her brother, that just as thirty years earlier she had survived by minimising, numbing out her feelings and blaming herself, so she maintained the belief that her husband had been 'gentle' with her daughter. This was entirely inconsistent with the evidence of the digital rape, but this belief encouraged her to be oblivious to any impact on the child.

Not only did she respond to her child's abuse as to her own, but she had great difficulty perceiving her child as separate from herself. This went beyond Figley's (1995) description of a secondary traumatic response where previously traumatised helpers over-identify with the victim and insist on their resolution as the most appropriate, though that was certainly part of it. In her case it was as though her child's experience of abuse so awakened her own childhood memories, that she was not sure where she ended and her

child began. Several times she noted that abusing her child was abusing her, but unlike some other women, this was not in the sense of strongly empathising with her child's feelings. Rather it was an inability to contemplate her feelings, other than through her own experiences and internalised cognitive distortions. With offenders this is usually called a lack of 'victim empathy' (Welfare, 1997). In Woman 5 it suggests the internalisation of the offender's thinking to the extent that she could not differentiate her daughter's needs from her own; but also the consequences of thirty years of numbing feelings and lack of interpersonal connection:

> ... I felt like, you know, if he's done it to her, he's done it to me.
>
> You know what I mean - she's an extension of me. And it's me that
>
> he did this to ....

Just as she had learned to accommodate to her abuse, so her daughter learned to do the same. Disclosure of abuse and resolution of the trauma associated with it requires a safe context (Herman, 1992), and neither she nor her daughter were safe. After finding tissues which smelled "familiar" (of semen) and coming across her daughter sitting on her stepfather in a "suspicious way", she asked her whether there was anything she "should be worried about". While at the time Woman 5 took comfort from the fact that the child had reassured her nothing was wrong and even after the disclosure would willingly kiss her stepfather goodbye, she later understood that her daughter's response was characteristic of abused children.

Despite this litany of missed opportunities, and the likelihood that her child continued to be abused after the disclosure, Woman 5 provides powerful evidence of the inadequacy of the term 'collusion'. To 'collude' is to have a

'secret agreement' or to 'conspire' (Shorter Oxford, 1993). She did not condone the abuse of her child nor believe it was acceptable; rather she reacted in the way she had dealt with her own trauma. This was an involuntary response learned over thirty years of being abused and witnessing violence. She dissociated, numbed her feelings, minimised the details and the impact, and sought to maintain her 'family'. Moreover, as those thirty years of minimisation and self-blame were challenged, so she began to challenge her beliefs about her child's experience.

Just as her response to her own abuse constrained her in dealing with her daughter's, so a traumatic memory of witnessing violence against her mother provided the impetus for her to finally escape her marriage. In a follow up phone call several months after the interview she explained that her husband had continued to visit and to be aggressive and intimidating to her. After one such instance she had a vivid flashback of seeing her father grabbing her mother by the throat and remembered the fear that her mother would be killed. This memory enabled her to put herself in her children's shoes and she immediately decided to end her relationship. At the time of the phone call it had been three months since her last contact with him; the longest she had ever been able to sustain.

Woman 6's Story
Of all the women interviewed, I remember Woman 6 as the most isolated and unfulfilled. She appeared to have lost both her husband and her daughter and her only 'intimacy' came from her relationship with her therapist. Her life story was a tale of violence, sexual exploitation and abandonment, told with a cynicism and emotional distancing that belied the intensity of the impact of these events on herself and her children. She indicated she was sexually abused and that belief and support from her family were not forthcoming. Though the age, duration and details of the

abuse are not discussed in the interview, the description of her childhood, the symptoms she exhibits, and some of her beliefs about children and sexuality imply that it was probably early in her life, and may well have been extensive. These are however, only inferred and for this analysis I will confine my discussion to what is known from the interview. She went from one abusive relationship to another and bore four children in three marriages. While she satisfies some aspects of a PTSD criteria, including constriction of affect, dissociation, loss of a sense of future and a loss of existential faith, her traumatic response is much more complex than this. The consequences for her are not only the long-term impact of emotional numbing, but like Woman 5, the impact on her life is most apparent in the damage to her sense of herself, her traumatic sexualisation and the distorted beliefs about intimacy and relationships.

Woman 6's childhood was marked by physical punishment and a lack of emotional warmth and tenderness which, gauging by the range of emotional and relationship difficulty she experienced, appeared to have resulted in attachment problems. She described a strict, religious upbringing on a farm, where she was expected to feed the cows before school and to take responsibility for younger siblings. The issue of responsibility was one which continually resonated for her and it was the issue which she found most difficult after her daughter's disclosure. This is apparent in the following extract where she is speaking of her childhood in the past tense, but slips into the present on the issue of responsibility:

> One thing out of place and you got belted with a charlie strap that
>
> hung on the back of the kitchen chairs. And you ended up with

bruises around your legs, and if you spent too long in the bath you'd

get the strap across the back .... Being the eldest I was responsible for

everything the younger ones did. If they broke anything I got into

trouble. I was looking after them; if they got into mischief, I was

responsible. I was supposed to be looking after them. *And I'm just*

so sick of being responsible, with trying to be responsible. It was just

so constant ....

She married early to leave home and like many victims, had her first child at a young age, in her case at 19. Her husband had frequent affairs and eventually left her because his girlfriend was pregnant. She immediately became involved with another man whom she also married and two and a half years later, soon after the birth of her second child, he also left her. She described the conception of their child as a 'miracle' because they rarely had sex due to his disinterest, which she assumed meant she wasn't 'good enough in bed'. Her daughter later disclosed that he had sexually abused her too, a suggestion Woman 6 found fanciful. Five months after this marriage ended, she began a relationship with the current man who eventually abused her daughter.

For many reasons, Woman 6's sense of self was closely associated with sex; the absence of tenderness in her childhood and her sexual abuse, led her to equate 'sex' with 'caring' (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985), and her perceived failure as a sexual partner in her marriages meant that her self worth was dependent on her sexual performance. It's impact on her sexual identity and

her self esteem resonated throughout her relationship, and a theme of being 'useless in bed' was a constant one for her.

Though the experiences of abandonment and abuse in these relationships were clearly painful and damaging to her self-esteem, Woman 6 maintained a facade of emotional detachment; she spoke in a nonchalant, self-deprecating way throughout most of the interview. The words may have described emotional aspects, like "horrific", but the affect was generally absent. The only time her emotional affect was congruent with what she was saying was when she was acknowledging, in response to questioning, that her husband was her only support. She wept as she talked about how he was the "...only one that really seemed to care about me", and again later, as I underlined the loss of his help with her disabled son. However she quickly moved on to a story which illustrated her isolation, and the way in which 'sex' and 'caring', were synonymous, however exploitative:

> **Interviewer**: Well he is the only person you've been close to during that time? .... You felt you had a connection with (him)? [*Woman 6 cries*.] I'm sorry, this is really painful isn't it?

> [*She immediately reverts to the cynical, nonchalant attitude*]

> **Woman 6**: I have a friend. I have a friend from the factory where I was working 12 months ago, who rings me constantly to see how I am. Tells me he loves me. I told him to tell his wife that. And he's

sort of hinted that if he'd been single at the same time as I'd been single, I should have married - oh he said something like, 'You should have married me'. I said, 'You never asked me'. All he was interested in was taking me to bed. Which is fine if I can get my jeans for nothing .... He works in a place where they make jeans. If he's going to give me a pair of jeans I'll go to bed with him, that's fine. I've got two pairs of jeans now.

This was not the only exploitative sexual relationship she was involved in. She had also planned to go on a week-end 'holiday' with eight men to provide them with sex. Just as Woman 5 had been unwilling to charge for sexual favours because she did not want to be seen as a prostitute, so Woman 6 intended providing sex for no more than her 'expenses'. She was clear that this was not something she enjoyed, but that she felt so sexually inadequate from the rejection by all three husbands, that being desired by other men allowed her some sense of sexual worth. However this was not without psychological costs to her, and she had to dissociate to survive the sexual relations with other men:

I was going away with eight guys .... Even something else that I've got planned for a couple of weeks. It's something that I'm going to do, but it'll be me, like in, it'll be my body, but it won't be me ....

Finally the impact of her attachment and intimacy problems are evident in her social isolation and lack of intimate connections. She described herself

as having no friends and in the absence of anyone else, the only person she could talk to was her counsellor. She commented wistfully that:

> I'd like to have a girlfriend that I could ring up and say, 'Hey, how
>
> about we go down to Sizzler's for lunch', or we'll grab our kids and
>
> go to MacDonald's for tea.

The connection between her own childhood and adult victimisation and her response to her daughter's abuse is a complex one. Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) *traumagenic dynamics* model provides some enlightenment, since it helps conceptualise her sexualised behaviour and her sense of guilt and worthlessness. As they observed:

> Sexually victimized children typically have misconceptions about
>
> sex and sexual relations as a result of things offenders may have
>
> said and done. One common confusion concerns the role of sex in
>
> affectionate relationships. If child victims traded sex for affection
>
> from the abuser over a period of time, this may become their view
>
> of the normal way to give and obtain affection (Finkelhor and
>
> Browne1985, p.534).

For Woman 6 this traumatic sexualisation emerges in the interplay of her childhood abuse, her ongoing adult victimisation and then resonated in her relationship with her daughter. While Woman 6's response to her child's abuse was far from optimal for the child's recovery, neither could it be described as 'collusion'. She became suspicious that her daughter and husband were involved in a sexual relationship because of his constant

attention to the child (then 12 years old) and a feeling that she was being excluded from their relationship. Her response to these suspicions was to confront her daughter, who denied it. When the disclosure finally came, she also confronted her husband, who initially denied the abuse. She believed her daughter, though she constructed the abuse as an 'affair'; that is, that her daughter was equally responsible and had flirted with her husband. It appears that her daughter did behave in sexualised ways with her stepfather, possibly a legacy of her previous abuse by Woman 6's second husband and the grooming by her third. But despite seeing her child as equally responsible, at no time did she condone the abuse.

Traumatic sexualisation, as the consequence of childhood abuse was therefore exhibited by both mother and daughter and became part of the dynamics of their own relationship. Seeing her daughter as a sexual competitor and the way in which sex is equated with affection and self worth, make sense in the context of her brutal childhood and the sexual rejection by her husbands. In these circumstances it is easy to see why she experienced her daughter's disclosure as a sexual threat to herself, since it was evidence, yet again, that she had not been able to satisfy a man.

Woman 6's own account locates her trauma with the sexual rejection of her by her husbands. After disclosure, when the police became involved, she again contemplated suicide, but had no immediate access to medication to overdose. There is evidence that she dissociated during some aspects of the disclosure process, which further supports the extent of the trauma for her. She talks of being 'numb' and of actively forgetting events ("I think there are some things you just try and block out"). The disclosure and its

aftermath required her to be 'responsible' for everyone else's interests and resonated with the most painful of her childhood experiences - having to be responsible for her siblings. This is clear in the following description of the events after disclosure:

> I wanted to run away .... I don't know. Everything was just getting
>
> too much .... I just felt like I couldn't cope and I just wanted to get
>
> out of the whole thing. Let every body else sort it out. I'm sick of
>
> being the one that everyone lands on ....

The other traumagenic dynamics observed by Finkelhor and Browne - betrayal, stigmatisation and powerlessness - were all apparent in her responses, but these remain the unacknowledged conditions of her actions. Which of these were due to the physical and emotional abuse and which to the sexual abuse are impossible to delineate. The consequence was that she saw herself as responsible for the negative experiences in her life, and dealt with this by seeking assurance in any way available. Since this usually involved exploitative sex, her worthlessness was continually reinforced. She coped with this in turn by dissociating through numbing of feelings, constricting of affect, or even leaving her body.

As with Woman 5, the constriction of affect had its impact in her intimate relationships. There appears to have been little emotional connection to her daughter and at an early age she left her for long periods with her own parents. This only ceased when they threatened to take legal action to keep the child. At one point in the interview she joked that perhaps she should have had an abortion in the first place.

There are other ways in which her own childhood experiences impacted on her relationship with her daughter. This was apparent in what appears to have been an early internalisation of offender thinking, particularly in relation to her understanding of childhood sexuality. It seems that she internalised from an early age, that children were responsible for men's sexual behaviour and were capable of consenting to sexual activity. For example, she discussed how her daughter had disclosed several years earlier, that her stepfather (her second husband) had sexually abused her. Woman 6 did not believe this, partly because of his disinterest in sex, and partly because his own father had died in gaol after he sexually abused his daughters. She believed this would be an inhibitor to her husband ever offending. At the time of the disclosure, her daughter, then aged eight, was exhibiting sexualised behaviour, including rubbing up against her uncle in the pool, and trying to pull his bathers off. Woman 6 interpreted this as 'flirtatious'. When asked what sense she made of the child's disclosure, she replied that she'd made it up. When pushed that the child was only eight, and at what age would she accept that she could not have made it up, she replied, "Maybe six". This defies common sense and suggests an internalisation of a belief in children's sexual knowledge and responsibility which is often apparent in offenders. It may be indicative of her own early sexualisation. In this distorted thinking, if children are responsible for being sexually provocative, then both she and her daughter are responsible for their own abuse. Holding herself to blame for her abuse, and therefore her daughter, meant that she was unable to offer her the support and belief she required. Inevitably, and in a replay of her own path to motherhood, the

relationship broke down, her daughter moved out of home, and was soon pregnant.

<u>Woman 9's Story: Self-blame and the family ideal</u>

On a simple reading of the circumstances, Woman 9 is probably the one who would be most likely to be labeled 'collusive', since she knew about the abuse and that it had continued. However I will argue that such labels disguise more than they reveal, and in Woman 9's case, there is much to be gained from looking beyond the obvious. In fact, being labeled as collusive, and having no-one attempt to understand her position, pushed her further into her husband's arms, and prevented authorities from assisting her to help her daughters. Once again, central to understanding her response, is the need to understand her own abuse.

Six years prior to the interview, her three daughters had disclosed that their stepfather was abusing them. Woman 9 confronted him, he repented, and promised it would never happen again. Contrary to the claim that women in these circumstances prefer to keep the secret, they told a friend and her husband, who was also their minister. She believed the abuse had stopped until twelve months later, she learned that it was still continuing, though not as frequently. Again she angrily confronted him and he promised to stop. A year later the children disclosed to the authorities. In the interview she states several times that she knew about it and did nothing. It is not clear from the discussion whether she means that confronting her husband and telling her minister was ineffectual (as was clearly revealed subsequently), or whether she suspected it was still happening, and did nothing. What is clear, is that she did not approve of it. In fact she angrily confronted him and insisted on

it stopping. As further evidence against collusion, she was also adamant that his imprisonment was a just consequence for his crimes:

> ....It went to court and he got gaol .... That was hard, but I
> felt that was his punishment, and that is what he had to do
> ....

What explanations are there for her early responses, other than 'collusion'? The hint lies in her answer to a question about whether she trusted him:

> ... I just thought, if I forget about it, well then, life will go on
> and I won't have to deal with it.

'Forgetting about it' sounds like a callous and disinterested act on her part, but was in reality a well-practiced coping strategy from her early sexual trauma. She was abused by a relative for a number of years from the age of five, and by two brothers from about ten to twelve. Her brothers were one and two years older than her, and the abuse occurred whenever she was alone. She coped by 'forgetting' about it. In her own words, "I forgot about it and got on with my life". Similar to the other women already discussed, she believed that she had not been affected by her own abuse, despite evidence to the contrary. In fact, until the child protection authorities named her children's experience as abuse, she had never thought about her brothers as 'abusing' her. Like so many other victims of sibling incest, including Woman 5, she had internalised the belief that it was child's play (Russell, 1986). Her confusion was no doubt exacerbated by the small age difference between herself and her brothers, but her experience still meets Russell's (1986) definition of 'abuse' because Woman 9 herself subsequently defined

it as such. However this did not occur until her children's abuse became public, and the authorities were involved:

> When all this started to come out, I just thought, 'Well, this is what they did to me' .... I just ... knew exactly what happened to me, you know. I mean, even though my brothers were around the same age as me, it was still abuse.

Of the three women discussed in this section, Woman 9's symptoms most closely correspond to a PTSD response. She certainly suffered the risk factors: her abuse began at a young age, continued for a long period of time, and was perpetrated by people she trusted. Disclosure was also not possible, since there was lack of support and intimacy in her family context. There is evidence of intrusion, avoidance and of emotional numbing in response to her own and her children's abuse. It seems likely from her descriptions that the disclosure of her children's abuse acted as a trigger for memories of her own abuse, memories which she was well-practiced at avoiding, as is evident in this confused discussion of her own abuse.

> I remember. I don't remember .... I don't think it affects me. I mean I still think about it .... Not very often. I have thought about it more in the last twelve months than I have ever thought about it before.

Her behaviour is characteristic of two of the kinds of dissociation defined by Salter (1995) - the separation between self and the past (her amnesia to the events), and the separation between self and emotion (her attempts at numbing and detachment). Put simply, she tried to forget her own abuse,

and was largely successful in doing so since she could not remember many details. However she maintained memories of the abuse circumstances in ways not apparent even to herself. Throughout the interview, and the years of responding to her children's abuse, the situation about which she exhibited most emotion, and the experience she found most distressing, was the one that closely approximated the abuse: feeling alone. For example, note the description of the circumstances of her abuse, and then the emotional valence of loneliness:

> ...I mean, my brothers, that was like every time Mum and
> Dad went out or we were here by ourselves ....

> (When her first husband left her) I hated it .... I just hated
> being be myself. Just hated it.

> (And after the disclosure, as she fought the child protection
> authorities) For the girls life just went on. I mean I was here
> by myself ... And I just felt so lonely (tearful) ...Community
> Services didn't make it any easier for me because ... they
> made me feel like I was the only woman in the world that
> wanted to support their husband ....

References to being alone and unsupported occur throughout the interview, as do the comments about forgetting and trying to forget. There was evidence of this dissociation in the interview. The only point at which she became confused was during a discussion about her own abuse, when she broke mid-sentence, and asked, "What were we talking about". She

remained very reluctant to talk about her abuse, and the scant details gained were given in brief, one line answers to specific questions.

Like the other women already discussed, Woman 9 also experienced other complex consequences of her abuse, which are consistent with the effects described by Herman (1992), Salter (1995) and Varia et al., (1996). There was no evidence of the ongoing sexual trauma so obvious in the lives of Women 5 and 6, but she did experience re-victimisation during her childhood and then as an adult was degraded and abandoned by her first husband. Her response of 'forgetting', rather than sexualising her behaviour may account for some of this difference. Her first husband had frequent, unconcealed affairs throughout their thirteen year history together, and finally left her for another woman when she had two year old twins and a new baby. These far from ideal conditions in which to mother, perhaps together with her earlier experiences, proved detrimental to her relationship with the children (Alexander et al., 1998; Banyard, 1997). By her own admission they did not have a close or confiding relationship, and her apparent inability to assure their protection, meant that the children remained unwilling to talk to their mother about aspects of the abuse or their feelings about it. This left her alienated from them, and her only support and intimacy came inevitably, from her husband. It also meant that she was uninformed about the impact on their lives, of the abuse they had suffered.

Woman 9's experience of family life in childhood was far from the close, loving evocation inherent in the ideology. It was marked by a lack of love and affection. Russell (1986) noted that adult survivors of incest are more likely to be in 'traditional' marriages, where roles and responsibilities are

related to gender. Her attachment to the ideal of the traditional family lay in the stark contrast with her experience. The desire to provide a family life for herself and her remaining daughter was powerfully embedded in her own experience of neglect:

> I am one of twelve children (crying) and I can never, ever remember my Mum and Dad ever telling me that they loved me .... I wasn't very close to my Mum. I was closer to my Dad than my Mum, but then I wasn't very close to him either. That, to me, is really sad. That I didn't have a relationship with Mum and Dad that I would have liked to have had.

Canavan et al., (1992) have argued that sibling abuse is sometimes a replacement for emotional nurturance in children deprived of affection and love. As I argued earlier, childhood abuse is often ambiguously traumatic. The power of her grief at feeling unloved and alone, together with the abuse by her uncle, may have made her a ready victim for her brothers' attentions and affections, and further confused her experience of whether it was abusive. Her childhood neglect and abuse also made her vulnerable to a strong attachment to the man who showed her love and affection. To be with someone she believed loved her and needed her was not something she could give up lightly. Indeed she battled the authorities to ensure she could see him. Her relationship with her husband is typical of those described by Varia et al., (1996). They noted that women who minimised their own abuse were likely to strongly attached to their husbands and to take responsibility for conflict. Woman 9 described somewhat reluctantly, a relationship with her husband prior to disclosure which was far from the ideal. She carried the

burden of home responsibilities, there was little effective communication between them, and he assumed a controlling stance in relation to her life:

> ...he had his life. I mean he could go out .... He would go away for the weekend with his mates and things like that and if I wanted to do it I wasn't - I was allowed to do it, but he wasn't happy.

She remained committed to the ideal and travelled to the country regularly to visit him when he was finally imprisoned. This involved a journey by train of several hours. Woman 9's idealisation of family life is reminiscent of Hooper's (1992) conclusion that women who idealised their childhood, despite evidence to the contrary, were more likely to struggle with the losses associated with their child's abuse, since this meant acknowledging the loss of the idealised childhood as well. The emotional desert of her childhood, and the experiences of abuse, led to the idealisation of the family dream. The family life with her husband therefore became the ideal and the losses associated with giving up that dream would have been immense. No matter that the reality of family life with her second husband was far from the ideal; at least he needed her, and she could maintain belief in the ideology by accommodating to the conflict and lowering her expectations (Varia et al., 1996).

Connected to this is the level of self-blame held by Woman 9. While she eventually came to hold her brothers responsible for her own abuse, for nearly forty years she had believed that she was equally responsible. This internalising of responsibility was then applied to the abuse of her children.

Despite all his betrayal, she still held herself more to blame than her husband. This extract shows the level of responsibility:

.... He used to pick Sally up from school, and the girls would go with him and that is when it would happen. He would touch them and that .... It was just sometimes I couldn't be bothered going and so I used to send them, and now I regret that .... (sighs)

Interviewer: When you say that it's really kind of like, maybe, it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't ...

Woman 9: Well I do. I feel if I had gone and picked her up from school and not made them go, it wouldn't have happened.

Interviewer: So does that mean you blame yourself somehow?

Woman 9: I do blame myself ....
Oh I blame him, but I also blame myself because I should have done something about it. I should have protected them better than what I did.

Once again then, the childhood experience of abuse and deprivation, a sense of self-blame and minimisation, together with an adult life of sexual humiliation and further victimisation provided the template for a woman's response to her child's abuse.

**8.1 "I know what it's done to me":
Acknowledging the Impact of Abuse**

Four other women shared a childhood history of sexual abuse, but their responses differed from the three women above, in that they believed their child's experience was abusive and damaging. However, there were also many similarities to these women, and it is not easy to mark a clear delineation between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" responses. The feature which most distinguished them was their clear perception that their childhood experience constituted 'abuse', and a recognition that it had been damaging in their lives. This enabled them to be clearer about their child's abuse, but conversely it also threw them into intense crisis after disclosure. The meaning of the abuse could not be minimised, and offered no protection from the depth of their child's suffering. In a very different way from the three women above, they were more likely to suffer their own intense secondary trauma. By Hooper's (1992) definition, Women 5, 6 and 9 were also secondary victims, but this was reflected in their continuing the same responses as they had to their own trauma - the dissociation, numbing, constriction of affect, internalising of blame, and minimisation. In contrast Women 1, 3, 4 and 8, aware of the devastation of abuse, identified strongly with their children's suffering, and experienced their own severe secondary traumatic response as a consequence. The explanation lies in the meaning they attributed to their own abuse, and the traumatic response they experienced at the time and subsequently.

Woman 1's Story

Like those in the previous section, Woman 1's life is a tale of brutality and exploitation, and like them, the negative impact is obvious: childhood sexual abuse, adolescent promiscuity, and violence throughout her life. She experienced intrusive thoughts and memories of her sexual abuse, particularly during sex, and responded by numbing and dissociation. However her response to her child's disclosure was characterised by overwhelming grief, rage against her husband, and a battle to protect her children, against all odds. How was she able to respond so differently from the women already discussed? Quite simply, because throughout her life she remained convinced that her childhood experience was abusive, and was aware of its negative impact. That is not to say that she did not experience self blame and confusion, but within this she maintained a strong sense of her father's betrayal in abusing her, and knew that her adolescent promiscuity was tied in some inexplicable way, to that abuse.

Woman 1's mother, who physically abused her until she started hitting back in early adolescence, was a 'gambler' and a 'drinker' and the children were frequently left to their own resources, with their basic needs unmet. Her father was little help, and when her mother finally left, he sexually abused her on one occasion. She made sense of the abuse by believing that it had happened because her mother was unavailable. It was clearly a traumatic experience for her and in her own words, she was "...on a trail of devastation after he molested me". She followed the pattern of early pregnancy identified by Russell (1986) and Mullen et al (1994), and had her first baby at 17, and another soon after. The traumatic impact of her abuse was obvious throughout her life; she experienced sexual difficulties, felt insecure in any relationship with a man, found herself used and exploited over and over

again, was beaten by two husbands, and sexually abused and degraded by them (Russell, 1986). Like the other women, the dream of a stable and secure 'family life' contributed to her attachment to the marriages, and the internalisation of her own worthlessness meant that she demanded little from the men in her life (Coffey et al, 1996; Varia et al., 1996).

Unlike Women 5, 6 and 9 her emotional constriction was not generalised to all relationships, and with her children she was able to experience a connection which sustained her through many difficulties. They provided her only positive focus, and like many of the young, unmarried mothers in McMahon's (199?) study of motherhood, maternity became the vehicle for a kind of 'moral transformation'. The interests of her child became her over-riding interest; her goal was to provide the mothering she believed she had never had. While she was willing to accept violence toward herself, the men were always on notice that she would not tolerate her children being hurt. This came from her conviction that her mother's unavailability had been at the root of her own abuse. Unlike Woman 5 who only came to acknowledge her mother as unprotective, years after her daughter's abuse, Woman 1 was always burdened by the belief that her mother had failed her. Even when the echoes of her sexual abuse resonated throughout her relationships with men, through violence and exploitation, motherhood provided her with meaning in her life. She explains:

> The only thing I know that I felt good about, and the only thing that kept me going is that I loved my kids. And I used to do a lot for them, and do the best I could for them, you know.

The realisation of the impact of her own abuse, was limited to her sexual difficulties, and was not enough to protect her from the further victimisation which Russell (1986) identified as an unacknowledged sequelae of childhood incest. Part of the tragedy of Woman 1's story is that these two aspects of her abuse which she recognised as damaging in her life - the sexual difficulties, and the lack of caring from an adult - were the basis for her relationship with the man who was to abuse her daughter. Her second husband initially attracted her through his playfulness and attention to her two daughters, and he was able to 'get her confidence sexually'. She was no longer a sexual failure, and her children were cared for. The relationship soon became dominated by violence toward her, but despite this, she maintained a belief that the children were safe.

While she did not make this connection herself, it was apparent from our discussion that one way of ensuring the protection of her own children, was to be sexually available to her husband's desires. This meant that she submitted to sexual practices which she found distasteful, and which eventually resulted in infection and illness. The level of violence, and the cycle of domination and seduction discussed by Herman (1992), is obvious in this example, which she described in vivid detail.

> I was getting to a stage that I was threatening to kill him. And I sad 'You ever touch me again, you bastard'. And I picked up the kettle and I hung on to the kettle and I said, 'You'll wear this'. And with that he come at me again, and I went to put the kettle down and he bloody well drove the kettle over to the sink; and then he tried to get it out of my hands. And I was terrified to let go, because he was going to

bloody do something. I thought he was going to throw it at me, and I was terrified. He kept crushing the kettle against the bloody sink, and I wouldn't let go, so he tipped it - and my hand just shredded down. Boiling water. Second and third degree burns. And I had one baby on the breast, (another) was on the bottle. And we waited a whole week. We stayed with him a whole week .... and he drove me to the doctors to get wet dressings put on it every day. And he was sort of like our knight in shining armor ....

Woman 1 managed to leave her husband after this incident with the help of an elderly friend. However she missed 'the security' and intended to reunite, until her daughter disclosed the years of sexual abuse, and she determined to end the marriage. Her response would be described as 'appropriate', 'supportive' and 'protective', as indeed it was. Her daughter's clear disclosure, and their close relationship, assisted her in her belief. However there is evidence that she had not previously responded to what could be seen as evidence of inappropriate sexualisation of the children, but unlike Woman 9, this does not appear to be a dissociative or avoiding response. There were a number of incidents which she identified on reflection, as evidence of abuse. At the time however, she had been swayed by her husband's explanations, and by her own confused sense of what was sexually appropriate between adults and children:

Little things that since I have been on my own, that some of the things that he has told me don't add up. I am awake and I can see that these are not normal things and they do worry me .... Just little things like, he told me one time that the kids

> jumping up and down on his abdomen gives him an erection
>
> ....   He used to get our son   under the shower and
> continually talk about his penis all the time. You know,
> 'You are going to have a big one when you grow up'. And
> all this filth that used to come out of his mouth.....

On one occasion he called out to her, to come and see what their 18 month old daughter was doing. He was laying on the bed naked, laughing and enjoying it, while she was playing with his testicles.

> ... when he seen my reaction he got angry - 'Get the fucking
> little bitch off' .... And for six weeks after that, that little
> baby ... continually went up and touched him there all the
> time. And that just sent me cold. And I ended up doing my
> 'nana, and things were really bad ... between us. He doesn't
> know right from wrong.   But then sometimes I have a
> bloody battle, unless I talk to people, that this is not
> acceptable.

Her response to the behaviour was neither tolerant nor collusive - she was clear it was not acceptable, and given the level of extreme violence, risked her own safety by letting her husband know this. However she did not associate it with the possibility of sexual abuse. This can be explained partly by the capacity of her husband to impose his reality, but also by her confused sense of sexual norms, a problem frequently associated with traumatic sexualisation (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985).[135]   She was   not

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[135] Given her uncertainty about what constituted sexual behaviour, it may be that she was victimised more than the one incident involving intercourse, but may not have labelled other behaviour as 'abuse'.

assisted toward suspecting abuse by a social context which does not acknowledge grooming behaviours and which minimises abuse which is non-penetrative or non-coercive.

After the disclosure Woman 1 was thrown into turmoil. Her empathy with her daughter, and her acknowledgment of the pain abuse had caused in her own life, left her vulnerable to a severe secondary traumatic stress response. There is substantial evidence that she has suffered what Figley (1995) calls secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD) in relation to her child's disclosure. Her case demonstrates how a woman can be similtaneously a primary and secondary victim, since her response to her child's abuse was directly related to, and influenced by, her own abuse. Several years down the track, she still suffered intrusive thoughts, and found herself constantly ruminating about it. She kept asking her daughter more and more questions to try to understand the abuse, even when this was beyond what the child could cope with. The level of intrusion was evident not only in the content of our discussion, but also in the process; in her pressured speech, and the way in which discussion of her own or her daughter's abuse, constantly intertwined. She suffered sleep disturbance, feelings of shame and grief, and became hyper-vigilant about her children's safety. She was no longer able to work, and worst of all for her, felt she had failed at the most meaningful aspect of her life - her role as a mother. She constantly identified with the problems which her daughter experienced, and as Figley (1995) warns, like many helpers who have their own unresolved history of trauma, she sometimes had difficulty in not imposing her own resolution onto her daughter. Thus the cost of empathising with her daughter was the reminder

of her own abuse, and the challenge to her sense of herself as a 'good mother'; the very thing which had helped her survive years of victimisation.

Woman 3's Story:

Woman 3 is different from all of the other women who were abused, in two ways. She did not experience a lifetime of re-victimisation, and her family of origin were extremely supportive and loving. While little is known about the details of her sexual abuse, the offender was not an immediate family member, and it does not appear to have been ongoing. These are all factors which mediate the impact of CSA and in her case appear to have contributed to the relative stability of her life. She was married to the same man for thirty years, had a loving relationship with her children, and a close connection with her parents. There are some signs that the stability had its costs, but the connection between any marriage difficulties and her abuse, remains impossible to differentiate. Her marriage was clearly a very traditional one, even for her generation, and family members later commented that she had 'spoiled' her husband. This raises the possibility that her attachment to the traditional family form may have been beyond even the expectations of her generation, and may have been connected to her abuse, as Russell (1986) found. Despite her view that the marriage was a good one, there is evidence that her husband was demanding of her attention and jealous of their children. The marriage did also not provide a safe context in which to resolve sexual difficulties, which she attributed to her childhood abuse. There is evidence of some unacknowledged consequences of her abuse, such as being overly worried by her weight, and a tendency to always dismiss her own needs, but the connection between these and her abuse are unclear.

Her response to her children's abuse could best be described as one of shock and grief, and fits Humphrey's (1990) description of disclosure as crisis. The detail of the disclosure is burned into her memory, and seven months afterward, she could remember every word and movement:

> …And I was shopping and I came home and Vicki was at the end of the passage and I thought, 'Goodness, she's come home early.' I said, 'What are you doing home' ... and I could see that she had been crying, and I said, 'What's wrong, what's the problem'. She handed me a note at the kitchen table, so I sat down and I opened it and I read it. And I just couldn't - it wasn't that I didn't believe her - I just couldn't believe what I was reading... It was just a numbness. And I knew she wouldn't have been telling lies because it was too descriptive, and I'd honestly never thought anything along those lines....
>
> And so he sat at the table, he put on his glasses to read it ... and I had expected him to deny it and say, 'Look that's a load of waffle'. And I don't know whether I wanted him to say it, but I really expected him to.... When he just sort of read on, and read on. And I knew the letter because I had read it a couple of times when Vicki gave it to me. And I knew that he must have been past the times when I would have expected him to say, 'Well this isn't right' - and he read on and he got to the end of it. And he said, 'Well I can't deny any of that' ...I thought, 'My goodness!' Because that's the

> last thing I expected him to say.... And anyway from that
> point I just didn't feel right with John...

The vivid nature of her recall and her feelings of numbness pay testament to the degree to which she experienced the disclosure as traumatic. However unlike other women discussed in this section, these feelings did not continue beyond the first few weeks, and are consistent with a normal response to crisis, rather than an ongoing traumatic response.[136] While she struggled with her dual loyalties to her husband and children, she saw her ultimate responsibility as protecting her children's interests. She does not appear to have suffered ongoing secondary stress, though that is not to say that she did not experience enormous grief and loss as a result of the abuse of her children.

In many ways Woman 3 demonstrates the inadequacy of the transgenerational theories of abuse. She was clear that her own experience had been negative, and had effected her in negative ways. She was therefore clear that her husband's behaviour was abusive, and was able to identify ongoing negative impacts for her children. While there may have been unacknowledged consequences of her own experience, these were not of the range suffered by the other women, and underline the mediating effects of appropriate support at the time. The abuse of her children came as a complete shock to her, and while the traditional nature of the marriage may

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[136] One reason for the limited information on which to base this analysis was due to Woman 3's tendency to continually shift focus from herself to her children's needs. Despite several comments that her own needs were not important, she cried throughout the interview and was obviously deeply impacted by the disclosure process. She appeared at times to be unable to describe her own feelings, apart from expressing them through her tears. She often apologised for crying, commenting that she did not know why she did, but that she cried uncontrollably whatever the emotion, good or bad. At the level of speculation this may suggest affect dysregulation which occurred subsequent to trauma but this was not pursued in the interview.

have enabled her husband more control in the family, and assisted him in his behaviour, this is as likely to be connected with the gendered nature of family relationships, as it is with any impact of her own abuse. Her attachment to her belief about the interests of her 'family', and her role in taking care of those interests, meant that she did struggle with the competing interests of individuals, as discussed in chapter 4. However there is no evidence that this was a greater issue for her than it was for the non-abused women who also were attached to their husbands and the ideal of the family.

Woman 4's Story

The connection between past and present, and between primary and secondary victimisation are the issues which most preoccupied Woman 4 in our discussion. She had a sense that these were intricately intertwined, but struggled to articulate exactly how. She provided her own elegant summary to the connection:

> ....it's got an awful lot to do with ... dealing with my past
> relationship with my father. All this stuff comes together.
> It's like a Pandora's box.

Woman 4 was a primary victim of abuse in several ways. She was sexually abuse by her father at about the age of five, and both witnessed and experienced his physical violence throughout her childhood. She had two children in two unsatisfactory relationships, and before meeting her husband, had determined to live alone. However he actively pursued and eventually seduced her, partly through her desire to provide her children with a father. He eventually became physically violent to both herself and her daughter, which ensured that she was kept in line. While she resisted his control in all

sorts of ways, she was also aware that her childhood had groomed her for the role of victim of violence:

> I always said what I wanted to say. It never stopped me, but I learned along the way that there was a certain look in the eye, and I knew then that if I wanted to not be hit, that I had to stop. Sometimes I couldn't, sometimes I just couldn't and then I'd, you know, be hit or whatever, and that is what it was like ...
>
> You tend to, unfortunately, bring your own childhood experiences into your family .... I felt, even though I knew it was wrong, I felt, you know, comfortable with it because that was how I was brought up ....

She left him at one point because of the violence to her daughter, then after they reunited became suspicious of sexual abuse. The process of discovery of her daughter's abuse, can only be described as psychological torture. Her husband went to great lengths to allay and then directly challenge her suspicions. To summarise, these included adopting a position of disgusted disapproval whenever child abuse was mentioned in the media; flatly denying any suspicious behaviour to the point where he would tell her she imagined it or was mistaken; threatening to leave if she made such outrageous suggestions again; claiming that he was just following her wishes and trying to have a close relationship with the child; and telling her she was mad, to the point where she believed it herself and sought help from a psychiatrist. Her daughter also denied the abuse, but Woman 4 continued to struggle with her sense that something was happening:

Vicki kept denying it, but in the end (the suspicions) got so bad that I confronted John. I said, 'I think that there is something going on between you and Vicki'. He said to me, 'How could you even suspect that there is anything going on' .... He gave me this big speech. 'You must be crazy if you think I would do anything like that. You know what I think of people who do things like that .... If you ever say that again, that's it. I'm going'.

This process of suspicion and denial continued for three years, with Woman 4 searching for evidence. Her experience represents two competing traumas. The first is the current turmoil of needing to confirm her suspicions to prove she is not going mad, alongside the fear that if she is correct she will have to leave the marriage. The second is the suspicion of her daughter's abuse, and the way in which it triggers feelings associated with her own sexual abuse. She always had a 'nagging' knowledge that 'something' had happened when she was a child, but she had successfully dissociated and blocked this from conscious memory. She therefore had no real memory of her sexual abuse until her child's was discovered, at which point she 'remembered' her own abuse. The feelings triggered by the suspicions, and the subsequent fear of having them confirmed, therefore competed with the testing of her sense of reality and the fear that she was going mad. She describes the contradictory pulls she experienced:

I was completely spun out. I just did not want to change my life .... It was just so hard. I had this gut feeling that was getting worse and worse, stronger and stronger and stronger. And this feeling that I didn't want it to be true, because I just

wanted to stay in the marriage - because that meant to me, you know, security. So yes, I was like this private detective, hunting around all the time for evidence, something that would prove to me that it was true. But not wanting to find out. It was so hard.

In some ways Woman 4 is similar to the three women discussed in section 1 above. She had been abused but had not acknowledged this. Like Woman 9, her child's abuse triggered memories of her own abuse, which she had carefully kept at bay for thirty years, and evoked the same feelings of fear and loneliness. However unlike Woman 9 who worked hard at 'forgetting', Woman 4 continued to seek more evidence of her child's abuse, despite the discomfort and confusion the search evoked. As she explained it:

Facing up to the fact that Vicki was being abused meant that I had to face the fact that I had been abused, and that was very difficult.

How can this difference between these two women be explained?   To understand it we need to consider the extent and nature of the damage of their own abuse, the mediating influences of positive family support, the extent to which emotional disengagement impacted on intimate relationships, and the effect on their maternal identity and relationships with their children. While Woman 4 clearly suffered a complex response to the traumas of her own childhood, this did not pervade every aspect of her life, and there were several factors which differentiate her from Woman 9. The dissociation in connection to her own abuse did not extend to all her intimate relationships, and she was able to enjoy friendships, and a close and

supportive relationship with her own mother, despite her childhood violence. Like Woman 1, she also discovered a new identity in the role of mother, and saw her primary interest as her children. The traumagenic dynamics which remained most damaging to her ongoing relationships (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985), were the ones around the violence, rather than the sexual abuse. She describes the attachment to her abuser, the internalisation of his world view, and the helplessness of being a victim of violence, as described by Herman (1992). Notably, while she tolerated her husband's violence to her daughter for some time before she eventually left him, this contrasts with her response to the sexual abuse. In that case, she went to the police and made her husband leave, as soon as she discovered proof. While admitting only a partial memory of her own sexual abuse, she never, like Women 5, 6 or 9, entertained the belief that it was harmless to her. In contrast, she carried a deep knowledge of its impact, a belief that she had remained emotionally stuck at the age at which she was abused. When the memory of the abuse surfaced, this knowledge came as part of that memory.

Woman 4 is also different from these other women in the extent to which she suffered from a secondary traumatic stress response. Like Woman 1, she suffered severe and ongoing STSD (Figley, 1995), but in her case this was complicated by the primary victimisation inherent in three years of denying her suspicions. This meant she was initially relieved to find the photograph which proved her suspicions, since her sanity was confirmed. However she had to constrict all other feelings associated with the abuse, to allow her to take the action required. A year down the track, she was still afflicted with intrusive memories and thoughts of the abuse, and severe feelings of guilt for not having saved her daughter sooner. Like Woman 1,

her daughter's mere presence was enough to trigger thoughts and anxieties and she would constantly question her and encourage her to press charges. She became hyper-vigilant about the risks of abuse, and suffered a loss of faith in men in general:

> I really needed to talk to people, so much .... I just couldn't keep a lid on anything, I just had to let it out ... to somehow get someone to understand how you're feeling ....
>
> In the first year or so afterward, I hated men. I would walk down the street and I'd be thinking, you are probably abusing a child ....

To allow her to respond effectively to her daughter, Woman 4 had to constrict all feelings associated with her husband. However she was unable to maintain this, and once she saw him in court, this triggered her old feelings and fears learned through the decades of violence, firstly with her father and then with him. At the time of interview, one day after her divorce was finalised, she acknowledged that she had coped by numbing out, that this was no longer working for her, and that "It still feels like there's a lot I have to deal with".

Woman 4's response suggests Salter's (1995) hypothesis, that women respond to their children in the same way as they responded to their own abuse, is only partly correct. She predicted that if they dissociated at their own abuse, and kept it a secret, so they would with their children. On the contrary, Woman 4 responded quite differently to her own, except when examined on two criteria; the belief about whether it constituted abuse, and the belief that it was harmful. It was these two factors which encouraged her

to respond in a supportive and protective way to her daughter. Of all the women, she had more reason than others to be confused by her daughter's response: she was fifteen at the time of disclosure, had denied the abuse was occurring, and after disclosure, continued to break a court intervention order to have sex with her stepfather. While Woman 4 initially held her daughter to be equally culpable, she was swayed on the day she discovered the photograph, by a policeman who reminded her of the age difference, and her husband's responsibility for the abuse. She managed to understand the child's response as a consequence of the trauma of her abuse, and to continue to hold her husband responsible, despite her daughter's behaviour. Her own experience of being mind-controlled by him, together with her belief that one consequence of her own abuse had been her involvement in unhealthy relationships, meant that she was able to understand her daughter's behaviour as a traumatic response. She therefore responded in the knowledge that the behaviour constituted abuse, and that it was harmful.

Woman 8's Story

Woman 8 was abused by her fifteen year old brother from the age of five. Unlike Women 9 and 5 who did not see their brothers' abuse as damaging due, in part, to the ambiguous nature of the trauma, she remembers every detail of the abuse which she experienced as extremely traumatic and as negatively impacting on her. The acknowledgment of her own abuse allowed her to empathise with some aspects of her children's experience, particularly in acknowledging that it was abusive and harmful; but her empathy made her vulnerable to experiencing a severe secondary traumatic stress, and to the feelings of helplessness, fear and self-blame evoked by the memories of her own abuse.

Like the other women in this section, Woman 8 was aware of certain impacts of her abuse on her life - particularly her fear of boys and sex. However, unlike many of them, she did not become trapped in multiple exploitative relationships, and appeared to make discerning choices. She became pregnant at seventeen, but chose to end that relationship because she did not think the father would be a good long-term provider for herself or her son. In fact she chose her husband, partly because he was so attentive and affectionate to her child.

There were, however, aspects of her life which may have constituted unacknowledged impacts of her abuse, including her teenage pregnancy, the large number of children (five before she was thirty), and unwanted sexual propositions (Russell, 1986). Most constraining for her was the impact of her sense of betrayal and stigmatisation, apparent, according to Finkelhor and Browne (1985, p.535) in the "...intense need to regain trust and security", the "extreme dependency and clinging" behaviour, and the "desperate search for a redeeming relationship". Woman 8 carried a strong view of herself as powerless, evidenced by her lack of confidence in parenting, and her dependence on a man in her life:

> ...At the first beginning I thought, 'How am I going to cope.
> I can't handle this, not having a man around' .... I was
> thinking, 'Oh God, I can't do this .... I need someone, I need
> someone'.

Unlike those women who did not identify with a sense of damage to their children, Woman 8 was overwhelmed by the force of her identification with

her children's suffering. She suffered a severe secondary traumatic stress response (Figley, 1995), and her first reaction was wanting to kill herself. This was complicated by the fact that one daughter had already previously been sexually abused by two other men, her brother-in-law and a family friend. The abuse by her husband therefore turned her attention to her children, and herself as their mother, and made her query why they should be victimised again and again:

> I didn't want to kill him, I wanted to kill myself. I went in
> my bathroom ...(crying)... I just wanted to kill myself. I just
> can't understand why all my kids were being picked on. I
> couldn't understand what my kids had done to deserve
> animals like that. They have wrecked my kids lives ....

These resulted in deep guilt and self-blame in relation to her children's abuse, and an internalised anger which overwhelmed her resources, and made her further doubt her ability to take care of her children alone. It was only when her husband was sentenced to prison that she discovered that she could survive well on her own. The extent of her secondary trauma was evident in the intrusive thoughts, the loss of trust in men, her protective hyper-vigilance, self blame, sleeplessness, weight loss and disruption in her capacity to work. Three years after disclosure she still suffered symptoms of secondary trauma:

> I can't let them go out onto the street. I am just too scared to
> let them go anywhere .... I can't listen to people talk about
> sexual abuse. I have to leave the room .... It hurts. Like shit,
> don't talk about it. I can feel water building up and I have to
> go.

Despite the time lapse since disclosure, it was overwhelming for her to speak of what had happened to her children, as was most evident when asked to talk about details of the abuse.:

> **Interviewer**: Do you know what the nature of the abuse was, what he did?
>
> **Woman 8**: Oh yeah, there was a lot of it.
>
> **Interviewer**: Is it possible to tell me, not in detail. But did it involve penetration, or was it touching them?
>
> **Woman 8**: .... it was oral (*very tearful*)
> **Interviewer**: It doesn't matter
> [*Woman 8 holds up one finger, still crying, and unable to say the words*]
> Interviewer: Digital?
> **Woman 8**: Digital. Anal. There were six (charges) all together.

Though Woman 8 was very connected to and dependent on her husband before his imprisonment, unlike Women 5, 6 and 9, she did not idealise the relationship. Though she believed they had had a 'good marriage', she became increasingly aware of his selfishness and irresponsibility, and gained greater confidence in her own capacities. She was without significant family support, but had a girlfriend who was present for part of the interview, whom she attributed with saving her from committing suicide.

Woman 8's response to her children's abuse was not one of un-waivering belief and support. While her knowledge of her own abuse enabled her to be sensitive to potential damage to her own children, other comparisons with her own experience led her to respond in less helpful ways. For example she gauged whether they were harmed, by whether they exhibited the same symptoms she had shown - fear of the opposite sex. She did not appear to be aware of other impacts which may have placed her children at further risk, or prevented them from disclosing. She therefore could not understand why her children could not have disclosed earlier, since they were adolescents during much of the abuse. She also experienced confusion over responsibility, which hinted at some of the unresolved issues in relation to her own abuse. So, for example, while she was clear that her husband's behaviour was abusive, she struggled with whether he was merely re-enacting his own abuse, or whether he could be held responsible - was he 'sick' or 'bad'?

As for all of the women interviewed, Woman 8's childhood abuse was also not the only context of decision-making. As discussed in chapter 4, the ideology of the family was a powerful factor in her response, in particular her construction of marriage as the foundation for family life, and the expectation that partners support each other through good and bad. Her response can only be understood by attending to all the factors which converged at the point of disclosure, and in the weeks, months and years that followed.

Woman 10's Story

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Woman 10 is discussed here as a negative case comparison to those above. I have chosen her because she was not abused as a child, but suffered a severe secondary traumatic stress disorder, and yet her response was quite different to Women 1 and 4 above. She presented as the most depressed of all the women, and was overwhelmed by grief and self-blame. Throughout the interview she spoke in a barely audible whisper, and at times seemed to experience physical pain at the memories she was discussing. She had caught her husband abusing her daughter, after she awoke in the middle of the night and went to check on a noise. The extent of the trauma this spelled for her is evident in her answer to the question, "What was that like for you?" She replied simply, "The most devastating thing that had ever happened".

Her husband's abuse came as a complete shock to her, and in that instant she had to readjust her entire belief system about her husband, child, herself and her family life. She initially attempted to get her husband to leave, but when he refused to do so she agreed her could stay while she decided whether she could 'live with it'. The centrality of the family ideal is obvious in her story, and underlines that whatever the role of abuse in women's connection to the ideology of the family, it's power goes beyond abuse and is situated at the heart of the dominant discourse on marriage and the family.

> **Interviewer**: What do you think was really hard for you at that point? What made it most difficult (to have him leave)?

> **Woman 10**: Fear of losing a family life. Fear of losing what I thought was going to be until death do us part.

She suffered a severe STSD in response to witnessing her daughter's abuse, and then in the days that followed as she found out more and more about what had happened. Her symptoms read like a resume of DSM IV. She had intrusive thoughts, and found herself ruminating constantly about how come she didn't know, why did it happen, and why hadn't she made him leave. She suffered a complete loss of faith in not only men, but in the world as a safe place. She was unable to work for seven months, began to drink copious amounts of alcohol to keep her feelings at bay, and became deeply depressed. The following summary of some of our discussion provides just a flavour of this:

Interviewer: So what was that period like for you?

Woman 10: Agony ... It was a nightmare.

Interviewer: Were you depressed?

Woman 10: Depressed? That's an understatement.

[Talks slowly and painfully]

I've lost faith in life, lost faith in people. I lost everything except for my love for these children. I just see things as terrible, because now I know the extent that this happens .... It makes me think it's not worth living .... But if it wasn't for my children, I know it's selfish of me, I would very freely choose to end it. It's yuk ....

.... I think I've come to the conclusion that most males are very capable of child molestation, given the circumstances. I do, I honestly do .... The whole male species is revolting to me. I think basically they are genetically bad .... they are the ones that start wars, they are the ones that rape, they are the ones that abuse, they are the ones that hit ... they are the ones responsible for every damn, single, shit act in the world….

The interview took place one year after the discovery, and seven months after she had finally insisted her husband leave when it became obvious her daughter was still at risk. While the abuse was a huge part of her ongoing pain, her strongest feeling was one of self-loathing. She could not understand why she had allowed her husband to stay.

> **Woman 10**: All I know is, I should have made him go immediately

There is no doubt that her response to her daughter's abuse was based on a range of factors. She had no family support, since her family were overseas or not available. Her only close friend had her own difficulties and she did not feel able to burden her. Woman 10 had also experienced the loss of her first marriage and had had a very difficult time on her own. She was committed to her husband and happy in her marriage until the abuse was discovered, and was thrown into complete crisis. Despite her self-blame, she had in fact tried to get him to leave, but he had refused. She was constrained from getting the police to evict him because her other daughter did not know what had happened. She knew that her husband had been raped himself as a child and in an effort to understand how and why he had

abused her daughter, she saw this as a possible reason and one which might limit his culpability. Her husband had been, and remained even after she made him leave, extremely dependent on her, and her children appeared to be fond of and connected to him. Woman 10 was everyone's support, but had support from no-one. All of these factors, together with the experience of overwhelming trauma associated with the abuse, meant that she needed time to gather her resources, answer the questions she needed to answer, and to take charge of the situation. Her connection with and love for her children did not protect her from being overwhelmed by the task before her; in contrast, this very connection and sense of empathy compounded her pain and her experience of the abuse as traumatic. The depth of her trauma meant that she was not well equipped to make decisions which would be difficult in any circumstances, and which shattered her sense of competency and belief in the world as she knew it. For other women, their own abuse was a major influence on their response, but they too were influenced by the kinds of issues which effected Woman 10. Her case demonstrates that it is not the transgenerational theory of abuse which best accounts for women's responses, but the depth of the trauma they experience, and the meaning the events hold for them.

8.2 'Collision' not 'Collusion'

The experiences of these women, demonstrate that 'collusion' is an inappropriate and inadequate description of the complex responses which occurred when their own childhood experiences collided with their children's abuse. This is despite the persistence of collusion theories in the

literature (Joyce, 1997).   The transgenerational theories of abuse inadequately explain the complexity of connections between a woman's childhood abuse and that of her child. There is no evidence that a history of childhood abuse *caused* the abuse of their children in this research. In all cases, the *cause* was the men's determined and sustained attempts at imposing their sexual wishes on the child. One of the conditions they exploited in doing this, was the impact of the women's own abuse.

Neither did the women re-enact their own abuse, in an attempt to *resolve* it. Rather they attempted the same, and in some cases inadequate and unhelpful resolutions, built on the distorted lessons from their childhood experiences. They did not sexually reject their husbands, but were sexually rejected by them. They suffered the sexual humiliation of their husband's infidelity, first with other women, and then the abuse of their children.   And none believed it was acceptable to abuse children.

However rejecting the transgenerational theories as a cause of abuse does not mean that their childhood experiences are irrelevant. The focus needs to shift from *cause* to *effect*; that is, to understanding the impact their abuse had on their responses to their children during the disclosure process. The real connection between the two lay in the ongoing, yet unacknowledged impact of the abuse on their lives. Women who did not define their experiences as abuse were not free from the impact of those experiences. On the contrary, they suffered in disturbing and enduring ways, but did not relate this to their CSA. And the meaning they ascribed to their own experiences provided the template for the meaning they ascribed to their child's. This meant that they were unlikely to see their children as harmed, or their husbands as entirely

responsible. Paradoxically, they were still as likely as the other women who did perceive themselves to have been damaged by their abuse, to suffer a range of negative impacts, including an extensive history of re-victimisation.

For these women the devastation of their childhood and the stark contrast between this and the ideal of the family made them more vulnerable to the prescriptions of the familial ideology, which were so apparent in their constructions of marriage. Yet, as they so clearly demonstrated, meanings are capable of change. Woman 5 moved from not believing she had been abused herself, to recognising the devastating impact on her life, and as she did so, to understanding her daughter's experience in a new way. Woman 6 began to consider the cost to herself, of her sexual exploitation by men. Woman 9 came to know, for the first time, that her childhood experience was 'abuse', though she was not yet aware of its impact on her life. The message from the tragic example of their lives, is that the effects of abuse can be long-lasting and severe; but also that they can be challenged in ways which open up new possibilities for the women and for their relationships with their children.

Salter (1995) hypothesises from her clinical experience that women may respond as they did to their own abuse, and utilising the same defense strategies. The defenses which she lists include amnesia to the disclosure and their own abuse, fear of disclosure, not seeing the behaviour as abuse, and denying the impact. She summarises:

> If she dissociated during her own abuse, she may dissociate
>
> upon evidence of her child's. If she did not report her own,
>
> she may equate reporting with public shame and be furious

with her child for reporting. If she insisted that her own abuse was not abuse and that her perpetrator was not really a sex offender, she may mislabel and rationalize her child's abuse. If she denied the impact of her own abuse she may follow suit one generation later. All of these are counterproductive to her child's well-being .... (Salter, 1995, p.233).

However Salter claims no empirical evidence for these clinical observations. Her hypothesis is partially supported by this research but it suggests that the most important determinant of their response will be the extent to which they see their experience as abuse, and the acknowledged and unacknowledged impact it has on their lives. Those who most minimised their experiences despite evidence to the contrary, were those who were least well equipped to assist their children. Conversely those who were aware of the impact were at greater risk of suffering severe a secondary traumatic response, as their empathy with their children resonated with their win experiences and could at times overwhelm their resources.

8.3 Summary

In this chapter I have explored the link between a woman's own abuse and the subsequent victimisation of her child. I have argued that childhood sexual abuse constitutes a trauma, even if not defined as such by the victim at the time, and that the responses to trauma may have a profound impact on all aspects of a victims life, including their intimate relationships. I have

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utilised ideas from the trauma paradigm (trauma theory and child sexual assault theorists) in defining the range of traumatic responses experienced by victims. I have demonstrated that the nature of child sexual abuse may constitute an ambiguous trauma for children which further complicates their response, including the attribution of responsibility. I have also argued that women are at risk of experiencing their child's abuse as a secondary trauma, and that the consequences of this may be profound for both woman and child. Central to this chapter has been the argument that psychological outcomes of abuse can only be understood when located within what I called the *meaning context*. That is, that the women's responses, however much related to their own abuse or relationship within their families, were embedded in a set of social beliefs about child sexual abuse, particularly father-child incest. These sometimes contradictory and competing discourses on CSA reinforced feelings of self-blame and even victim-blame, all of which served to remove responsibility from the offender. This effected women's understanding about their own abuse and about their child's, and rather than encouraging them to enact the role of the protective lioness, constrained them in resolving the contradictory needs of their families. I offered Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) traumagenic dynamics model of abuse, together with Russell's (1986) conceptualisation of re-victimisation, as an alternative to the transgenerational theories of abuse, arguing that the abuse of her child constituted a re-victimisation of the woman herself. Finally, I explored women's individual experiences in a series of case studies to demonstrate that their own abuse provided an unacknowledged condition of their actions.

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