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**GENDER ISSUES IN CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

**A thesis submitted to Middlesex University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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**December 2002**

## ABSTRACT

Academic interest in the field of child sexual abuse remained consistently high during the latter part of the twentieth century. The research undertaken at this time demonstrated the relationship between child sexual abuse and gender; that is to say that men are the primary perpetrators of the sexual victimisation of children. Given this preponderance, it is of central importance to keep the significance of gender focal. Paradoxically, it is for this very reason that gender remains significant in cases where women sexually abuse children – because they represent the minority of cases. It is this disparity which provides a basis for this work.

The purpose of this work is to examine and demonstrate that gender is significant in: the way in which an abuse experience is defined and made sense of; the process by which an individual becomes a survivor; and how abuse experiences are responded to by others. The foci of definition, interpretation, subjectivity and ambiguity led to the utilisation of symbolic interactionism as an appropriate theoretical perspective in which to ground the study and to guide the research analysis.

Designed as an exploratory study, the work combines qualitative and quantitative research methods aimed at survivors of abuse and relevant professionals (the latter drawn from both the 'therapy industry' and the criminal justice arena). In-depth interviews were carried out with survivors and analysed to examine survivors' subjective realities and interpretations of their experiences of abuse. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were used to explore the significance of gender in the responses of professionals to abuse experiences. The issues that arise from this work have profound implications for the way in which the significance of gender in child sexual abuse can be thought about and understood.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my Director of Studies, Professor Tony Vass, without whom I don't know where this thesis would be. He has patiently helped and advised me throughout the duration of this PhD, and his insights and contributions to my work have been invaluable. My heartfelt thanks goes to my second supervisor, Jenny Pearce, who came through for me in a time of need and over-saw the excruciating final phase of the work. I must extend my thanks to Middlesex University for offering me the opportunity to carry out this work through their studentship programme. Not only did this give me the financial means to do the PhD, it meant that I had been given a vote of confidence in the work that I had chosen to do. For this I am very grateful.

I would like to sincerely thank all of those people who participated in this study for their time and honesty. This thanks goes particularly to the survivors who gave great emotional energy to help with this work. Without them, this thesis would not exist.

I have had a great deal of friends and family who have been very supportive and enthusiastic throughout my doing this work. Particular thanks must be extended to those colleagues, friends and family members who helped me in various ways in getting the thesis to this point. My love and thanks go to Ciro Genovese for his absolute support and for just being there for me during the isolating time that a PhD is. Finally I want to thank my dad, who passed away before I finished writing this thesis, for instilling in me the traits needed to complete a doctorate.

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## PREFACE

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER IN CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

This thesis is about gender and child sexual abuse. The concept of gender is considered highly significant within the study of child sexual abuse; such emphasis being heavily grounded in feminist analyses of sexual violence. In what has often been described as the 'second wave of feminism' (Itzin, 2000), various feminist writers (e.g. Armstrong, 1978; Rush, 1980; Herman, 1981; Ward, 1984) brought to light the widespread social problem of the sexual assault of children. Kelly (2000: xi), however, is quick to point out that this was "a process of re-discovery" rather than a period of absolute discovery. She argues that child welfare organisations and feminists had long been aware of the sexual victimisation of children.

The feminist analysis of child sexual abuse centres around male power. Itzin (2000) argues that child protection policy and practice will ultimately fail (i.e. in stopping the abusers abusing) unless it addresses child sexual abuse as an issue grounded within men's violence. Indeed, Kelly (1988) developed a continuum of men's sexually abusive behaviours against women, ranging from oppressive acts to rape and other forms of sexual violence, and she later argued that the continuum can incorporate the sexual abuse of children (Kelly et al, 2000). Given the base tenets of feminist analyses are power relations of male domination and female subordination, it is unsurprising that there is a wealth of literature pertaining to the gendered nature of child sexual abuse.

Macleod and Saraga (1988: 23) assert that “a recognition of gender [is] a centrally important feature of child sexual abuse: the gender of the perpetrator rather than the victim”. Other researchers, too, have highlighted the significance of gender in studying child sexual abuse, pointing to the preponderance of male perpetrators<sup>1</sup> and reasons for this difference (Finkelhor, 1979, 1984; Russell, 1984; Driver and Droisen, 1989; Cox, 2000). Perhaps the most comprehensive study of female perpetrators to date is that by Saradjian (1996: xiii), and she emphasises that “it is extremely unlikely that as many women as men will be found to be perpetrators of child sexual abuse” because of different socialisation processes.

The significance of gender has been used to question men’s sexual access to children as a necessary part of an effective policy response to sexual abuse (Macleod and Saraga, 1988). It can be argued that gender is the biggest risk indicator to child sexual abuse based on what past research has shown. So much so that Pringle (1993: 253) suggests that “the case for total non-use of males [in foster care] is a powerful one”.

The arguments, both theoretically and evidentially, for remaining mindful of the significance of gender in perpetrating child sexual abuse are compelling and persuasive. Indeed, concerns arise when the significance is questioned or turned on its head. Armstrong (2000) discusses the backlash against women where mothers are blamed and held responsible for their male partners abuse of their children, hence the concept ‘failure to protect’. Armstrong cites cases of women losing custody of children to a sexually abusive father because the mothers failed to protect the children from him. Naming such women as child sex abusers is more than inappropriate; it is dangerous. It fails to identify the actual perpetrator, placing children’s safety at direct risk.

Notwithstanding these direct dangers, it is of concern that non-abusing mothers are labelled as perpetrators since this deflects from the task of appropriately recognising, monitoring and treating genuine female perpetrators. Kelly (1996) argues that there is a need for feminists to take account of those women who do sexually abuse children otherwise the issue will be taken up by other professionals and the media. The implication being that such agencies will ignore the significance gender has and wholly dismiss the gendered nature of sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup>

The contention, then, behind writing about women as sexual abusers is that the concept of gender becomes irrelevant. By this I mean that it fails to be a meaningful consideration in understanding issues in child sexual abuse – and this is inaccurate. Gender is essential in the study of child sexual abuse for two reasons: First, men do represent the majority of sexual abusers of women and children. It is men's sexual violence that is a social problem, not women's. This thesis does not attempt to argue otherwise. Second, because men are known to be and seen to be sexual abusers, this has ramifications for those who are sexually abused by women. The significance of gender in such cases is paramount. It is this angle with which the thesis is concerned.

The purpose of this work is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of gender in child sexual abuse. More specifically, this thesis will examine and demonstrate that gender is significant in:

- How the abuse experience is defined by survivors and professionals;
- How someone becomes an abuse survivor (the process by which a person adopts the identity of an abuse survivor);
- How abuse experiences are made sense of through interactions with others. This is not confined to the way in which a survivor makes sense of their own experience but encompasses how others (such as criminal justice professionals and therapists) make sense of abuse experiences they encounter;
- And how professionals respond to experiences they have defined as abuse.

Since the significance of gender in child sexual abuse is entrenched within feminist analysis, it is important to recognise the contribution of this analysis to keeping the issue of gender focal. Some feminist writers (e.g. Kelly, 1991; 1996) have spoken of a shift away from the silence surrounding sexual abuse by women towards an analysis accounting for such abuse. This shift does not mean a less gendered approach to child sexual abuse; rather it encompasses the inclusion of women as abusers and what this abuse means. Kelly (1991: 44) argues that “the meanings of abuse relate to gender” and uses her other work (Kelly et al, 1991) to demonstrate how central gender is to the ways in which particular events are experienced and understood.

It is from this standpoint that the examination of the significance of gender stems. That is, the process by which events are understood and meanings of abuse are derived. And, moreover, the influence of gender on this process. Since the thesis is concerned with understanding the process in which events are experienced, defined and meaning attached, symbolic interactionism was considered an appropriate theoretical framework within which to place this study. Symbolic interactionism will be used as the perspective in which the study is grounded, to guide the analysis of the research data and to explain facets within the context of this work.

The thesis is divided into eight chapters covering generally the background relevant to the study, the research findings and the outcomes of the findings. Chapter One provides an overview of current knowledge about child sexual abuse in terms of prevalence, theoretical perspectives and the nature of sexual abuse. The latter involves exploring aspects of child sexual abuse including: the child's relationship to the perpetrator; the age of the child; and the impact of the abuse. The chapter concludes by considering the significance of gender in what can be termed the historical neglect of the sexual victimisation of children, and re-emphasises the need for gender to remain a central feature in spite of – and indeed because of – the inclusion of women as perpetrators.

Chapter Two introduces the deconstruction of gender and sets into context the examination of masculinity and femininity. It explains the reasons behind gender being of central importance to the thesis and examines the relationships between gender, sexuality and violence. These relationships illustrate the significance of gender in child sexual abuse through considering why men are primarily the perpetrators of child sexual abuse. The discussion draws on the fact that while most physical and sexual violence is perpetrated by men, inequalities in power relations can also account for the sexual abuse of children by women. The chapter concludes with an overview of some major texts in terms of examining the under-recognition of boys as survivors and women as perpetrators.

Chapter Three is divided into three key sections. The first considers the scope of the research and the specific areas upon which the research will focus. This section comprises of a specialised literature review to highlight why these areas have been chosen for inclusion in the research. The second section of the chapter focuses on the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism and it's

relevance and applicability to the research. This section will initially discuss the interactionist approach by introducing it as a framework, reviewing some key interactionist work and formulating my understanding and use of the core ideas contained within it. The latter half of the section will illustrate how the core ideas of symbolic interactionism will be used to guide the analysis of the collected data. The third section of Chapter Three discusses the methodologies of the research, outlining the particularities of who took part in the study and the mechanics of how the data were collected and analysed.

A discussion of methodological concerns formulates much of Chapter Four, focusing on potential difficulties and limitations encountered by the research. This discussion concentrates on aspects such as interviewer effects and memory distortion, both of which are likely to have had an impact on the research. The merits involved in incorporating a qualitative method (as opposed to a more statistical analysis of data) are discussed, demonstrating how the nature of the research necessitates such an approach. The latter section of the chapter illustrates the issues involved in carrying out sensitive research and points to specifics within this project that represented ethical dilemmas, outlining the tactics employed to counteract such dilemmas.

The next three chapters of the thesis involve the dissemination of research findings and is clearly separated into research on survivors, service providers and the criminal justice system. Chapter Five involves the examination of survivors' subjective realities and interpretations of their experiences of abuse. Some aspects of the chapter comprise of quantitative data, such as the child's relationship to the perpetrator, and as such provides some comparative information in terms of the significance of gender in child sexual abuse. The bulk of the chapter draws on findings from the research to examine how symbolic interactionism is used as a tool for exploring the four predominant themes contained in Chapter Five. This includes: the way in which a survivor reconstructs events surrounding the abuse experience and self-defines these events; the process by which a person becomes an abuse survivor; the process of becoming an abuse survivor being a life-long journey; and the ambiguity involved in the concept of harmfulness. All four themes relate explicitly, but not exclusively, to the significance of gender within the analysis, although the connections are drawn out within the analysis.

The focus of Chapter Six is on the responses of service providers to child sexual abuse and the significance of gender in these responses. The chapter comprises of data drawn from both professionals in the 'therapy industry' as well as from abuse survivors. This was because it is apparent that binary explanations exist: the professionals' response is valid as it is understood or interpreted by the survivor. That is, the professionals and the survivors are in a binary relationship and to understand aspects of this relationship, both sides need to be considered. The core ideas of symbolic interactionism are apparent once again in the analyses of the data, particularly in terms of the symbolic and social interactions that influence and guide responses. The chapter explores how these professionals make sense of and respond to abuse experiences, and the significance of gender in this process. It also considers how a response in itself can be a social interaction which forms part of an individual's process of self-definition and identity formation. In this sense, Chapter Six is strongly linked with the previous chapter on survivors' experiences.

Chapter Seven draws on the research findings to consider the significance of gender in child sexual abuse within the context of criminal justice. Symbolic interactionism is again used throughout to guide the analysis of the data. The chapter focuses on the ambiguity and subjectivity of defining child sexual abuse perpetrated by women as criminal. That is, what constitutes sexual abuse by a woman and how she is given the identity of sex offender by others. The chapter explores how gender is significant in defining the abuse experience by criminal justice professionals, and how such professionals make sense of and respond to abuse experiences.

Finally, Chapter Eight draws together the salient points of the research and considers the implications of the study. It provides some suggestions for further research and discusses the advancement of theory, practice and policy in relation to this study.

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<sup>1</sup> The terminology used throughout this thesis with regard to labelling people who had either experienced sexual abuse as children or had sexually abused children was problematic. Labelling the latter included such terms as 'abuser', 'perpetrator' and 'offender'. I tended to use the term 'perpetrator' throughout the text as this is indicative of committing a violent or sexual crime. However, with hindsight, the term 'perpetrator' can appear to hold some symbolic reference to the act of penetration and therefore suggest male intrusion rather than female. In respect of the terms 'abuser' and 'offender', I was unsure as to their adequate conveyance of the sexual nature of the

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offences. This dilemma has piqued my interest for re-evaluating the terms that we use and to consider our current usage in terms of gender neutrality as, although I did use 'perpetrator', I wonder if it was the right choice. I used the term 'abuser' whenever pre-fixed with 'sex' or 'sexual' as this is how we commonly see the phrase in other literature. In respect of labelling people who had been abused, the term 'victim' is often used in academic literature and yet such a label excludes certain aspects potentially involved in the interaction. Firstly, to be a 'victim' implies someone remaining in a powerless position, completely opposed to the situation. This may not be, and indeed was shown not to be, the case with all respondents in this research. Secondly, 'victim' can be a very disempowering term and suggests that abused people do not move away from this powerless position. After some deliberation, I decided to use the term 'survivor' as it did not carry the same implications.

<sup>2</sup> I would have grave doubts that particular agencies would approach and address the issue of female perpetrators in an appropriate fashion. Historically, Social Services has tended to be woman-blaming, holding women responsible for their own and their children's experience of abuse (see, for instance, Radford and Stanko, 1996). Similarly, in the face of backlash, men's rights groups refute the significance of gender in terms of male power, arguing instead that the system is biased against men. From such groups come the proponents of Parental Alienation Syndrome and False Memory Syndrome; concepts frequently used by abusive and violent men in contact or custody disputes.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?**

#### **A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

##### **Introduction**

The objective of this chapter is to explore the field of 'child sexual abuse' in order to gauge the extent of our knowledge in this area. By outlining various aspects of previous research and the issues other researchers have raised, it may be possible to highlight some of the questions posed by past research and to tackle some of the controversies involved within this area.

This thesis cannot accommodate an entire overview of the research carried out on child sexual abuse to date, nor would that be a useful or productive strategy to undertake. To provide a theoretical grounding as a context for this investigation, this chapter will focus on examining the key aspects of child sexual abuse that have considered gender within the analysis.

##### **Research on the prevalence of the sexual abuse of children**

It is necessary to attribute a section in this thesis to the discussion of the prevalence of child sexual abuse so that we might get an understanding of the enormity of the problem. Before launching into such a discussion, however, a brief word about definition is required. Establishing prevalence rates means having a clear definition of what is meant by child sexual abuse. Researchers investigating the prevalence of sexual abuse will take account of and clarify their particular definition used. Indeed discrepancies in prevalence rates can often be accounted for on the basis of different

research definitions of child sexual abuse. I will discuss this further on in this section. In terms of this research study, I should make clear that I am not working to any one definition. A predominant aspect to this work surrounds the process by which survivors and professionals define the experience of child sexual abuse. As such, an objective definition purported by myself is inappropriate. It is the case, however, that any sexually abusive act recorded by either participants in this research or by existing literature will be contained under the umbrella of child sexual abuse. I will at times use more specific terminology such as intra-familial abuse (that perpetrated by a family member) and extra-familial abuse (that perpetrated by a non-family member). Other differences in terminology (the reader will note that I have used the term 'incest' for instance) will be used simply in line with the terminology of that particular researcher.

A number of studies have attempted to establish the prevalence rate of child sexual abuse as documented within this chapter, yet as Bolen, Russell and Scannapieco (2000) note, there is little agreement around estimates. As a result of the range of prevalence estimates currently available, we can be selective about choosing which information best suits our interests (Bolen, Russell and Scannapieco, 2000). Such selection would clearly have implications for a number of arenas including, policy, law enforcement and child protection. Taking gender into account in establishing prevalence rates further adds to this selective process, for instance by using the comparatively low estimates of female perpetration to ignore its occurrence. This is just one difficulty within a discussion on the prevalence rate of female perpetration; additionally there remains the fact that it has not been until recently that we have even conceived of the idea of woman as sexual predator. Hence very few earlier studies incorporate the prevalence of female perpetrators.<sup>1</sup> I have set out a number of studies focusing on prevalence of child sexual abuse. The purpose of which is to provide some understanding of the extent of the problem, and is limited in providing a detailed methodological critique of the particular studies. Suffice to say that various prevalence studies have been critiqued in this way (see, for example, Kelly, 1988).

Finkelhor (1979) conducted an exploratory study using surveys and interviews aimed at college students to examine the sexual victimisation of children. He found that 19.2% of the women in the study and 8.6% of the men had been sexually victimised as children. In a subsequent study, Finkelhor (1984) interviewed a sample of parents from Boston to determine the exposure they may have had to child sexual abuse. He found

that 15% of the women and 6% of the men reported that they had themselves been sexually abused. A substantial number of the participants knew of the sexual abuse of a child, relative or friend; in fact overall 47% had some personal knowledge of sexual abuse, be it to themselves or somebody within their social network.

Russell's (1984) San Francisco survey was the first study that was specifically designed to assess the prevalence of sexual abuse on the basis of a random sample of the population. Using a narrower definition than had been previously used in this type of study, Russell found that 38% of her sample of women had reported at least one experience of incestuous and/or extra-familial sexual abuse before reaching the age of eighteen; 28% before the age of fourteen. When the definition was broadened to include non-contact experiences such as flashing, the figure increased to 54% prior to age eighteen and 48% prior to age fourteen.

Kelly (1988), carrying out a study using in-depth interviews with sixty women, found that 72% had experienced some form of sexual abuse before the age of sixteen, including rape, flashing and incest, with 45% of the women stating that this occurred before they were twelve years old.

Sariola and Uutela (1994) surveyed a random sample of fifteen year olds at a comprehensive school in Finland in order to establish the prevalence and context of child sexual abuse. 18% of the girls and 7% of the boys reported sexual experiences with a person who was at least five years older than themselves at the time of the incident. However, this did include any voluntary sexual experiences. Once these were excluded, the study indicated that 6-8% of girls and 1-3% of boys reported experiences which the authors felt could be classified as sexual abuse.

Research carried out by Lopez et al (1995) aimed to determine the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Spain and its long and short-term effects. Using a self-reporting questionnaire and interviews on a representative sample of Spanish society, they found the prevalence of sexual abuse to be 22% for girls and 15% for boys prior to the age of seventeen. The same year, Ghate and Spencer (1995) conducted a national survey of the general population in Britain and found that of 127 participants, 20% of women and 9% of men,<sup>2</sup> had experienced some form of unwanted sexual abuse. These experiences ranged from flashing to unwanted fondling to violent sexual assault.

A number of researchers have also attempted to establish the number of female perpetrators of sexual abuse in relation to male perpetrators, however most of these

researchers have used the figures to illustrate the comparatively lower rate of female perpetration rather than actually indicating what the figures mean in their own right. Finkelhor (1979: 88) discusses the 1% prevalence rate of father-daughter incest, arguing that:

"One percent may seem to be a small figure, but if it is an accurate estimate, it means that approximately three-quarters of a million women eighteen and over in the general population have had such an experience, and that another 16,000 cases are added each year from among the group of girls aged five to seventeen".

So once a small percentage is translated to an actual number the picture appears to be somewhat different. If Finkelhor is able to do this as a way of demonstrating the number of incest cases, surely the same technique is applicable in determining the scale of the problem with regards to female sex abusers. This is precisely what Dr Fred Mathews did when speaking at a conference in 1991 (cited in Jennings, 1993: 242), basing his assertions on statistics indicating that 'only' 10% of child sex abusers are female;

"...if one in seven Canadian men and one in four women were sexually abused as a child, as a study has indicated, that works out to be about five million people. Ten percent of that figure would mean *500,000 Canadians have been abused by girls or women*; one percent would mean about 50,000. I don't know about you, but that doesn't seem like a minor number." (original italics)

Prevalence rates for female perpetration of sexual abuse vary quite dramatically. Russell (1984) tabulated percentages of female perpetrators derived from a number of studies, demonstrating the range to be from 0 to 60% with the bulk of self-report cases indicating that under 27% of abused boys were victimised by women and less than 10% of abused girls were victimised by women.

Before moving to a discussion on the various methodological and conceptual problems involved in attempting to establish the prevalence of child sexual abuse, it would be relevant to consider the question sometimes raised within this area, namely whether the occurrence of child sexual abuse is rising? This is an almost impossible question to answer due to the nature of the crime and the changes in society's perceptions of it. Finkelhor (1986) has helpfully illustrated many prevalence studies in table form showing that overall there does not appear to be any significant change. His table displays that as far back as 1929, Hamilton found prevalence rates of 20% for

girls and 22% for boys; the famous 1953 Kinsey study on sexual behaviour found a prevalence rate of 24% for girls; and Landis (1956) offered prevalence rates of 30% and 35% for men and women respectively. Two of the highest prevalence findings seem to have come from mid- to late-eighties studies, namely Wyatt (1985) with a prevalence rate of 62% (cited in Finkelhor 1986) and Kelly (1988) indicating a prevalence rate of 72%. It has been suggested that the occurrence of sexual abuse has risen, primarily as a result of the ever increasing single parent families and a generally higher tolerance of sexually violent films and a wider and more acceptable use of pornographic materials. Others argue that the actual prevalence of sexual abuse has not risen, instead we hear far more about it due to a changed sexual climate, allowing more people to talk of earlier sexual experiences more openly (Renvoize, 1993).

One of the difficulties inherent in attempting to establish prevalence rates of child sexual abuse concerns the actual definition of sexual abuse which may be used in the studies. To illustrate this point we can consider the definitions used by a number of different researchers within their studies. Finkelhor (1979) included childhood incidents whereby if the child was hugged or kissed in a sexual way then it was deemed sexual abuse. He acknowledges that some people may argue with this definition, particularly with regards to establishing whether the experience was sexual; Finkelhor accepted the experience as sexual if the respondent stated it as such.

Painter (1986), in her discussion on victimisation surveys, states that the most important aspect within defining the abusive acts was whether the experiences involved actual physical contact between perpetrator and survivor, or non-contact acts such as exhibitionism. It was noted previously that Russell (1984) offered two prevalence rates; one based on a narrow definition of sexual abuse and the other on a broader definition of sexually abusive behaviours. As a result of this the victimisation rate rose considerably. Painter uses Badgley's (1984) study to further illustrate this point; 28% of the survey had experienced some form of "contact-victimisation" but when non-contact acts were included such as exposure the victimisation rate rose to 42%.

Similarly, it has been noted that age will make a difference to the rates of sexual victimisation and Finkelhor (1979: 55) explicitly states that "the definition of victimisation also requires an age range". Salter (1992) discusses studies which discard adolescents as both perpetrators and as survivors thereby showing far lower prevalence rates (e.g. the stipulation that a perpetrator must be over sixteen and at least five years

older than the survivor, hence any interactions such as a fourteen year old molesting a five year old would be discounted from the overall prevalence rate). Finkelhor (1979) took account of this disparity by including three separate age categories into his study. This covered experiences between a child twelve years and under with an adult eighteen years and over; experiences between a child twelve years and under with a person under eighteen but at least five years older than the child; and experiences between an adolescent aged thirteen to sixteen with an adult at least ten years older than the adolescent. By using these categories most interactions could be accounted for.

One difficulty which is encountered in research projects when using participants is the issue of non-representative samples if researchers are aiming to generalise their results.<sup>3</sup> Attempting to establish the prevalence of sexual abuse often becomes problematic due to the varying backgrounds from which researchers often pull their sample. The participants who were surveyed for Finkelhor's (1979) study were all college students. As Finkelhor saw college students as being overall more middle class and more psychologically healthy and thereby perhaps less likely to have been sexually victimised, he acknowledged that his prevalence rate may have been artificially low.

Another difficulty inherent in any research study on prevalence with regard to representing the general population is the fact that many studies use adult survivors and look at their experiences as children. Since such cases of abuse occurred some years prior to many research studies, they may not be directly applicable to the experiences of today's children (Finkelhor, 1984).

The issue of response rates can affect the reporting of sexual abuse and will therefore affect any given prevalence rate. Finkelhor (1986) suggests two contradictory hypotheses for how response rates may affect reporting. The first refers to the idea that sexual abuse survivors will not openly discuss their experiences with a researcher due to embarrassment or because they may be distrustful towards others as a result of their traumatic experience, therefore the research ends up with low response rates leading to artificially low prevalence rates. The second hypothesis, which opposes the first, refers to the possibility that sexual abuse survivors purposefully offer their experiences to the researcher as they may be looking for an opportunity to confide their history to a concerned and/or interested party. By the same token people who have not been sexually abused do not bother to respond to the survey request as they have no

experiences to discuss. Hence while the response rate remains low again, the prevalence rate may be artificially high.

Ghate and Spencer (1995) supported Finkelhor's first hypothesis when they considered the reasons for non-response in their research. They found that many reasons did appear to be related to either the general belief that matters concerning sexual experiences are too private to discuss with interviewers or that there were specific experiences that appeared to be too traumatic for people to discuss.<sup>4</sup>

Another area which appears to have an impact on the rate of prevalence reported by people is the method of data collection. Different methodologies may explain differences in the findings of research studies. Russell (1984) argues that women may be more opposed to disclosing their more taboo sexual experiences in a self-administered questionnaire in a classroom situation, as Finkelhor (1979) required them to do, than disclosing this information in face-to-face interviews with interviewers who built up a rapport with them.

Finkelhor (1986) compared a number of research studies which have made use of different methodologies to establish prevalence for sexual abuse among women. Overall he found there was some evidence for a relationship between the method of data collection and prevalence rates, namely that self-administered questionnaires and telephone interviews tended to yield significantly lower prevalence rates than face-to-face interviews. However he does acknowledge that there is no one method which has been shown to be superior in obtaining answers for all types of questions.

An issue which may be considered as a difficulty in establishing the prevalence of sexual victimisation relates to the ongoing current debate of distorted memories of childhood sexual abuse in adult survivors, often called "false memory syndrome" (FMS). This could potentially have an effect on prevalence rates if the accounts are inaccurate. A number of doctors at The Royal College Of Psychiatrists have suggested that any memory of child sexual abuse which is recovered through the use of hypnosis, dream interpretation or regression therapy should be discounted (Carroll, 1998). If samples are drawn from clinical settings, this new suggestion may account for artificially high prevalence rates among these groups.

## **Research on the theoretical approaches to child sexual abuse**

Explanations surrounding child sexual abuse have long been forthcoming, and are apparent in much of the literature to date in the field. Broadly speaking, there are five major theoretical approaches that will be discussed in this section: biological, psychological, family dysfunction, feminist and Finkelhor's multi-factor model. The objective in doing so is to generally review the research to date and to consider the explanatory power of such approaches, particularly within the context of gender significance.

### *The Biological Approach*

The biological theory draws on the differences between men and women to explain the preponderance of sexual abuse. Specifically, the approach focuses upon the biology of sex differences and, as such, proponents of the approach argue that all men have the innate potential to rape a woman (Sampson, 1994). This potential is suggested to be a result of biological evolution or male hormones. I will consider both of these possibilities in turn.

Sampson (1994) writes about biological evolution in a clear and concise way. He shows how this approach seeks to explain the occurrence of rape, but that it could be expanded to include child sexual abuse. It is argued that in the wild the "successful" male is the one who impregnates many females. The act of rape is seen as a mating strategy carried out because the male does not possess the characteristics which show him as being able to care for and support the mother and the off-spring. Therefore these particular males are unable to obtain a mate so they have to rape in order to have any chance of reproduction. Thus, according to this view, rape is principally about reproduction. What is unclear is whether this objective to reproduce derives from social rules or from an innate biological need.<sup>5</sup>

There is some support for the biological evolution hypothesis. Firstly, we know from the research which has been carried out on the phenomenon of rape that most women who are raped tend to be between eighteen and thirty-five: the peak ages of reproduction.<sup>6</sup> We also know from past research that most rapists are poor, ill-educated and tend not to be successful (Sampson, 1994), therefore they may be less likely to attract a mate as the theory argues. The flipside to this argument is that it may be the

poor, uneducated rapists who get caught, prosecuted and convicted of rape, thus resulting in a distorted depiction of reality with regard to men who rape.

Some support for this argument is derived from the idea that some men are able to gain continued reproductive access to a female partner through rape (Sampson, 1994). I refer here to the possibility that some rape survivors may feel a certain dependency on their rapist, so consenting to seeing him again, due to a sense of having been conquered; some women have even married their rapists (Russell, 1984).<sup>7</sup> The argument for this is thin in the face of contrasting explanations for the same phenomenon. Russell (1975) suggests that not only do women experience a sense of having been conquered, but the men who rape them form the opinion of rape as a conquest, thus continuing the act of rape as a means of maintaining the position of conqueror. This is wholly in line with feminist explanations and appears to have more veracity than the view that rape is about continued reproductive access.

The arguments put forward in support of this theory are in themselves limited and demonstrate little credibility. Further to this, there are other criticisms of the biological view in relation to its emphasis on reproduction. One such area that challenges this theory is the concept of male rape. If, as the theory proposes, rape is linked to the inherent need to reproduce then men and boys would not be objects of victimisation which, as a number of researchers (e.g. McMullen, 1990; Mendel, 1995) have shown, occurs far more frequently than one may imagine.

Another difficulty with this theory is linked to the knowledge we have on the levels of violence often used during and after the act of rape by the rapist. Russell (1984) states that out of every ten female murder victims in the United States one is killed during rape or another sexual assault. Brownmiller (1975) estimates that around 400 rape-murders are committed in the United States every year. Given that crime statistics tend to generally rise over the years, it seems feasible to assume that this estimate is currently far higher.

We are further reminded of the work carried out by Diana Scully and her associate Joseph Marolla (1990) on convicted rapists;

"I wanted to take my anger and frustration out on a stranger, to be in control, to do what I wanted to do. I wanted to use and abuse someone as I felt used and abused. I was killing my girl-friend. During the rapes and murders, I would think about my girlfriend. I hated the victims because they probably messed men over. I hated women because they

were deceitful and I was getting revenge for what happened to me."  
(Scully, 1990: 141)

"I have never felt that much anger before. If she had resisted, I would have killed her... The rape was for revenge. I didn't have an orgasm. She was there to get my hostile feelings off on." (Scully, 1990: 139)

It would seem highly improbable on the basis of these comments that such rapists commit the act as a means of reproduction.

A further limitation of the biological evolution hypothesis comes as a result of research (cited in Sampson, 1994) carried out on rape and the sexual acts involved, showing that many of the acts commonly committed by rapists such as oral sex and buggery, would not result in impregnation. Furthermore, it is thought that only about half of all rapists ejaculate thus also not resulting in impregnation.

Leaving aside the biological evolution hypothesis, the biological approach also endeavours to explain male aggression from the premise that it is due to hormonal differences. It has for some time been argued that a link exists between the male hormone testosterone and the act of aggression. This argument appears to have derived from the question of why males are in general more aggressive than females, and why they are more likely to engage in antisocial and criminal activities.

Archer (1991) has cited a number of studies carried out which have shown a positive correlation between levels of plasma testosterone and violent behaviour. Amongst these include Rada, Laws and Kellner (1976) who found that their experimental group of sex offenders (made up of child molesters and violent rapists) showed higher levels of plasma testosterone than their control group of less violent rapists; Dabbs et al (1987) found a positive relationship between testosterone and aggression in their sample of prison inmates. Finkelhor (1986) cites a study carried out by Berlin and Coyle (1981) who reported elevated testosterone levels in a substantial number of paedophiles seen at John Hopkins Hospital.

Turner (1994) mentions a major problem with the studies on hormones and aggression with regard to the difficulties in identifying a cause-and-effect relationship between the two. As has been indicated in the studies previously mentioned, one might ascertain that higher levels of testosterone can lead to higher levels of aggression. However it can be argued that the act of aggression may affect hormone levels, therefore it is unclear which is the cause and which the effect.

Another limitation of the theory brings us back to the predominant issue of this thesis: hormonal findings do not explain why children are arousing for paedophiles (Finkelhor, 1986). It doesn't explain why some men with higher testosterone levels become involved in inter-male violence, why some perpetrate domestic violence, why others take part in the act of rape and why some abuse children. This represents a wide range of aggressive behaviours and cannot all be solely attributable to the single factor of hormonal influence.

### *The Psychological Approach*

The psychological approach tends to explore the various individual aspects of perpetrators as a means of explaining their offending behaviour. The reason for this is that usually, when psychology is associated with sex abusers, it is in a professional context whereby evaluations on convicted offenders are in process. The purpose of such evaluations is to provide the courts, prison or psychiatric services with an assessment or profile of the offender for classification and treatment.

Based on the psychological literature it would appear that the question posed by psychologists is "what caused this offender to commit their crime?" whereby the attempted answer tends to focus on individual motives which may subsequently be fitted into a particular typology.

Waldby et al (1989) discuss the existence of an "incestuous personality" which refers to a series of fixed personality traits within perpetrators to explain their actions. This comprises of comparative studies of incest offenders with other types of sex offenders, and comparisons between incestuous and non-incestuous fathers. Some of the comparisons which Gebhardt et al (1965) looked at in order to generate a personality profile of perpetrators included demographic data and behavioural traits such as masturbatory habits, marriages, homosexual experiences, fantasies and criminal activities (cited in Sanderson, 1990). From these comparisons, various characteristics have emerged which appear to be typical of incestuous fathers.

Clearly the difficulty with focusing solely on the concept of an "incestuous personality" is that it does not take into account other types of sexual offending. Steven Wolf, director and founder of a project working with perpetrators of sexual abuse in Seattle, USA, states that clinical experience suggests that those men who are

categorised as 'incest offenders' also often abuse other children (Willis, 1993); thereby omitting vital parts of the overall picture.

Most of the psychological literature on child sexual abuse refers to the two types of sexual abuser proposed by Groth (1979); the fixated offender and the regressive offender. Groth suggested that the fixated offender's primary sexual orientation is towards children; this orientation may have been conditioned from childhood (Sanderson, 1990) due to an abnormal psychological developmental process (Waldby et al, 1989). A regressed offender is considered not to have a primary sexual interest in children, but at times of stress they develop a higher sexual arousal for children (Willis, 1993); in other words they regress into childhood sexuality.

According to both Sanderson (1990) and Waldby et al (1989), it is the notion of 'regression under stress' which offers a current understanding and significance of perpetrators with 'incestuous personalities'. They consider that perpetrators are socially introverted, over-invested in family, suffering from feelings of masculine inadequacy, and are driven to commit the sexually abusive acts when under financial, emotional or physical stress. These stresses either exacerbate existing inadequacies or disorientate him from normal impulse control, thus the abuse occurs.

There clearly have been attempts to categorise sex offenders. However most of the classifications have been produced with regard to male perpetrators. The psychological approach is one which has attempted to draw up various typologies in response to the growing interest in female perpetrators. McCarty (1986) studied a sample of 26 sexually abusive mothers and established a typology which differentiates between the independent offender, the co-offender and the accomplice. Faller (1987) developed a typology for classifying sexual abuse based on her research of forty women who sexually abused children. She identified five case types; poly-incestuous abuse, single-parent abuse, psychotic abusers, adolescent perpetrators and non-custodial abusers. Matthews et al (1989) identified teacher\lover, male-coerced, predisposed offenders and psychologically disturbed offenders in their study involving 16 women.

Saradjian (1996) writes that the research to date has revolved around identifying the factors that are thought to contribute to the aetiology of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Her criticism of this research is that there has been an absence of any control groups – a feature necessary in understanding how women who sexually abuse children differ from other women. As a result, Saradjian (1996) included a

comparison group in her sample. She distinguishes between "typical" and "atypical" female perpetrators of sexual abuse; "typical" perpetrators were classified as women who initially target pre-pubescent children, women who initially target adolescent children and women who are initially coerced by men; "atypical" perpetrators were classified as women who co-offend (as equal partners), women who coerce men to offend and psychotic offenders.

All of these classifications were developed in the face of limited available information on female perpetrators. They have provided much needed understanding around the characteristics significant for women who sexually abuse and contribute to possible explanations of the phenomenon. Identified contributing factors have implications for risk assessment, risk management and other treatment issues. This is not to say that a compilation of typologies are problem-free. They should be further researched in order to ascertain their validity and reliability and cross-referenced to determine their suitability. Nevertheless, until a generic model is developed to encompass female-perpetrated sexual abuse which will provide a tool with which to treat offenders, a classification system is highly useful for identifying risk factors in potential and known abusers and provides a standpoint from which to work with abusive women.

Another theory within the psychological approach has often been termed the 'cycle of abuse' theory, referring to the concept of abuse having a repetitive, cycle-like pattern. Finkelhor (1986), in his discussion on the need for the Multi-factor Model, questions the concept many people hold regarding survivors turning into perpetrators. He cites a number of studies which have been carried out indicating that many perpetrators were themselves survivors of abuse. The difficulty, however, with these studies is that the findings cannot be generalised to all perpetrators as the research tends to be carried out on incarcerated child sex abusers. It can be supposed that this group of perpetrators may consist of those who are particularly violent or very obvious in their offending, and as such they were caught, convicted and imprisoned. As we know, these types of perpetrators tend to constitute only a small portion of all child sex abusers (e.g. Scully, 1990).

Finkelhor (1986) argues that by fixating on this simple explanation of the 'cycle of abuse', we are posing certain risks to the field of sex offending. Finkelhor outlines three of these risks:

1) This theory does not explain why some perpetrators were never abused in childhood and yet they themselves still abuse, nor why so many survivors of child sexual abuse do not go on to abuse.

2) With regard to the prevention of child sexual abuse, this theory breeds cynicism in people due to its emphasis on childhood experiences which we are unable to change.

3) Perhaps the greatest risk is the effect this theory may have on survivors of child sexual abuse, particularly on male survivors. It is proposed that some survivors may believe that they will inevitably become perpetrators, so the fear of this occurring may even have some self-fulfilling prophecy for people to become perpetrators who would not otherwise have done so.

Kelly (1996) and Kelly et al (2000) also challenge the 'cycle of abuse' concept both evidentially and consequently for survivors of abuse. The former relates to the gendered distribution of sexual victimisation and offending: girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse yet men are primarily the perpetrators of sexual abuse. As such, the theory fails to take account of the significance of gender in attempting to explain child sexual abuse.

The 'cycle of abuse' theory further has detrimental consequences for survivors of abuse, and because of the gendered distribution, these consequences apply particularly to women. Kelly et al (2000) write that it is becoming ever more common for women and men who are survivors of abuse to be distrusted around children, assumptions being made that they will inevitably abuse children themselves. They also cite Area Child Protection Committee guidelines which contain a risk factor to abusing one's own children being that the abuser has been abused themselves. Again, given the gendered distribution of sexual victimisation and offending, Kelly et al (2000) assert that this is particularly unfair to mothers since men are primarily the sexual abusers of children.

Despite such criticisms, there may be some scope for tentatively accepting the base tenets of the theory in so far as what it can offer to stopping perpetrators abusing. Itzin (2000) suggests that social learning can be applied based upon the premise that what is learned behaviour can be unlearned. This would be the basis of re-education sex offender treatment programmes. Indeed, in my own work with domestic violence perpetrators, psycho-educational methods of drawing on perpetrators own experiences

of powerlessness and victimisation can be highly effective in them addressing their behaviour.

### *The Family Dysfunction Approach*

In contrast to the issues raised within the psychological approach, this theory does not focus on the individual perpetrator and the individual pathology is not the prime concern. Rather it concentrates on the concept of the family unit being dysfunctional and how every member of the family somehow contributes to the sexual abuse. Finkelhor (1979) suggests three main ways in which the family context can encourage the act of intra-familial sexual abuse;

1. Social isolation- this refers to families who do not have social interaction outside of the family. Consequently, sexual attachments that would normally develop with people outside of the family exist within the family instead. Social isolation creates a climate whereby deviance is freer to emerge due to a lack of social interaction and therefore appropriate models so that incestuous behaviour may become accepted as normal. Finkelhor (1979) suggests that this tolerance of incest can be passed down through generations relatively unchanging. Kempe and Kempe (1984: 49) appear to support this idea with their research finding that “most fathers who are incestuously involved with their daughters have inverted personalities and who tend to be socially isolated”.

2. Role confusion- this refers to the suggestion that a father acts towards his daughter as he would towards his wife. Mothers appear to be unwilling or unable to fulfil her parental functions, for example they may be ill, uncomfortable with the responsibilities of motherhood or still dominated by their own families. They tend to be in unhappy marriages where the sex is unpleasant or non-existent. It is thought that in these cases, the daughter may take on the household duties and responsibilities, and that sex is the natural extension of this. Herman (1981: 79) further supports this, writing that in her study:

“None of the fathers adapted to their wives’ disabilities by assuming a maternal role in the family. Rather, they reacted to their wives’ illnesses as if they themselves were deprived of mothering. As the family providers, they felt they had the right to be nurtured and served at home, if not by their wives, then by their daughters”.

3. Milieu of abandonment- this seems to relate primarily to fathers who are absent from the home for extended periods of time and it is on their return that the incest will take place. It is thought that the daughters accept the abuse as it is a kind of attention and affection that is otherwise unavailable to them. This theory also suggests that the incest continues due to the daughter's fear that the father will leave again and not return.

While the family dysfunction approach provides a widely accepted explanation of child sexual abuse among professional workers and many of its central ideas are current in social work practice (Freel, 1995) and widely adopted by statutory agencies (Sanderson, 1990), it is not without its criticisms. One difficulty with the approach is that it can only attempt to explain incest and intra-familial abuse by ignoring all extra-familial abuse which Sanderson (1990) suggests may account for two-thirds of child sexual abuse. So given this, the theory is too narrow to take account of sexual abuse as a whole.

Other limitations arise as a result of notions fundamental to this approach. As this model regards incest merely as a symptom of poor family relationships, then the emphasis is placed upon restoring these relationships. Thus with the focus on the family's interpersonal relationships, the effects of the abuse are minimised and the needs of the child are put secondary to those of the family unit. In many cases the sexual abuse is regarded as being of less importance as the goal is to keep the family together.

Perhaps the most widely acknowledged criticism of the family dysfunction approach is due to the concept that the cause of incest is rooted in the dynamics of inter-family relationships and therefore the responsibility is placed equally on each family member. The implications of this is that the perpetrator is not held entirely accountable for the abuse and hence does not have to work on their offending behaviour. Instead the parents may have couple\marital therapy so the mother can also address her behaviour, for example issues around satisfying her partner sexually or not working outside the home. The danger of this is twofold: First, we can observe the inappropriate blaming of the 'collusive' mother for not protecting the child from the father. In their research into the child protection system, Farmer and Owen (2000) demonstrated the existence of a significant gender bias at every stage of it's operation. In particular, they found that the responsibility for protecting the child was largely

down to the mother. In this regard, it is easy to see how the shift in focus in child protection case conferences can go from the sexually abusive father to some assessment of the mother. Second, perpetrators are unlikely to change their behaviour until they accept full responsibility for their actions and take steps to address these actions.

### *The Feminist Approach*

Feminism holds a certain claim in the role of bringing the issue of child sexual abuse to a head, heightening our awareness of it. In contrast to the theories discussed thus far, the feminist approach opens up the possibility for an analysis of gender. That is, while other theories may talk about men and women and child sexual abuse, the feminist approach problematises gender, bringing it to the forefront of the theory. The Preface to this thesis drew on feminist analyses to ground and place into context the significance of gender in child sexual abuse. The purpose of including the feminist approach here is to be able to consider it in greater detail, particularly in terms of its explanatory power. The Preface made clear that although women's movement activism and feminist academia in the 1970's and 80's (often termed 'second wave feminism') uncovered child sexual abuse as the widespread social problem we know it to be today, feminist awareness of the issue dates back far further.

Rush (1980: 10) cites numerous aired female 'commonality' experiences in an array of women's literature dating back to A.D. 900. These writings, be they poetry, autobiographies or other biographical works, describe the fates of young girls at the hands of men. Such writings continued in the second wave of feminism in the 1970's (Rush, 1980) to the therapeutic recovery books written by and/or for survivors that began to appear en masse in the 1980's (Armstrong, 2000). A distinction that Kelly et al (2000) make between the time periods is the extent of both research and media interest given to the issues of child sexual abuse. Certainly when I spoke in the Preface of the wealth of literature pertaining to the gendered nature of child sexual abuse, I referred quite explicitly to 'second wave' feminist writings. Consider, for instance, Susan Brownmiller's ground-breaking text on rape:

"...rape became not only a man's prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman....From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear." (Brownmiller, 1975: 14)

And Ward's (1984: 194) early work on incestuous fathers:

"...are not aberrant males. They are acting within the mainstream of masculine sexual behaviour which sees women as sexual commodities and believes men have the right to use and abuse these commodities how and whenever they can. The fact that many fathers do not behave in these ways towards their daughters...does not alter the fact that they could."

The focus, then, of this approach is on aspects which have previously been excluded from other theories, namely the questions of power and gender within child sexual abuse and the issue of laying the responsibility of the abuse with the perpetrator. Sanderson (1990) points out that the feminist approach has several structural advantages, such as the fact that it takes into account the social structuring of society and the different socialising of males and females.

One important aspect of the feminist analysis of child sexual abuse is the focus on male power within the family structure and hence the role male socialisation plays in gaining and maintaining this power inequality. In short, it is suggested that as a result of male sex-role socialisation, we can explain male motivation and proclivity to sexually abuse. This particular discussion will be covered in more detail in Chapter Two.

A vast proportion of the feminist literature concerned with child sexual abuse involves tackling the concept of the 'collusive' mother which is predominantly what the family dysfunction theory focuses on. The notion that mothers are collusive in the sexual abuse of their children is strongly refuted by feminists and has been attacked by a number of writers in the field as yet another way that women are blamed for male violence. Hooper (1987) criticises the assumption that the mother plays a role in the abuse (the concept of 'failure to protect'), an assumption which implies that, for the child to have been sexually abused at all, then the mother must have been at fault. While Herman (1981) acknowledges that incest does occur more frequently in families where the mother is absent, either literally or psychologically, she attacks the notion that this holds mothers responsible and thus constitutes an excuse for paternal incest.

Feminist analyses of child sexual abuse bring to the forefront power inequalities evident in male domination and female subordination. By challenging the notion of the 'collusive' mother, the feminist approach ensures that the focus remains on the

perpetrator. As such, the approach can explain the majority of child sexual abuse (i.e. that perpetrated by men). It can also explain cases of child sexual abuse often observed by the social work profession and deemed to be the result of family dysfunctional dynamics. Eldridge (2000) discusses various ways in which an abuser manipulates the family situation either to keep abuse hidden or dis-empower potential protectors. The former may involve the perpetrator using tactics to distance the child from, for instance, the mother by setting her up as the disciplinarian while he remains the 'fun guy'. The latter may include overt physical violence towards the mother, threats or creating emotional and/or financial dependency. In understanding some of these grooming tactics used by perpetrators, Eldridge (2000) has turned the family dysfunction approach on its head by suggesting that poor dynamics do not *cause* abuse; instead sex abusers will *create* such dynamics to enable the abuse to occur.

Continuing in a similar vein, the feminist approach can be used to understand the occurrence of male coerced female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Saradjian (1996) observes that those women who were coerced into abusing by men tended to have been subject to a process of grooming which resulted in distorted thinking and beliefs. Saradjian notes that the most common distortion in the women was their interpretation that the children's compliance to the man's manipulations was sexual desire. Such distortions would secure her compliance in the acts. As with creating dysfunctional dynamics within a family in order to abuse, a man can coerce a woman into abusing through a number of tactics including direct violence, threats of violence, ensuring dependency and any other form of controlling or manipulative behaviour.

Often authors investigating the sexual victimisation of boys and/or the abuse perpetrated by women become critics of the feminist analysis. Allen (1990), for instance, points out that due to the emphasis on sexual power of men over women within this theory, it has little or no explanation for the sexual exploitation of boys. He is not alone in this view. Hicks (2001) provides a critique of some of the major texts dealing with male survivors, pointing out that such texts are largely anti-feminist. Included in his review is Hunter (1990) who does not acknowledge the significance of male power in addressing the minimisation of female perpetrators; Gonsiorek et al (1994) who dismiss feminism as too political; and Mendel (1995) who blames feminism for under-recognising female perpetrators. Elliott (1993) argues that the reason why sexual abuse by women has remained such a taboo area as it undermines the theory that

sexual abuse is a product of male power and aggression, and is regarded as an 'anti-feminist' concept.

So, can a feminist analysis account for the sexual victimisation of children by lone female perpetrators? In the Preface, I wrote that Kelly (1996) argues that feminism can and should take account of female perpetrators. Not only in order that the significance of gender is not dismissed and issues merely become gender-neutral, but because a feminist approach and the underlying principles can incorporate female-perpetrated sexual abuse and explain its occurrence through the use of power relations. I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter. Suffice to say that feminist analysis does not represent a refutation of abuse by women, and indeed can appropriately account for why some women sexually abuse children.

### *The Multi-factor Model*

A criticism of the feminist approach was made by Sanderson (1990) who argued that the feminist theory is limited in its explanation of sexual abuse as it doesn't take psychological factors or individual motivations into consideration. These may be of value in identifying recidivism rates (Quinsey et al, 1995) and recognising effective treatment interventions. Finkelhor (1984) proposes a four-factor model of sexual abuse that draws on explanations both at a psychological level (i.e. individual factors) and at a sociological level (i.e. social, institutional and cultural factors). Finkelhor developed the model by considering previous theoretical shortcomings and reviewing all of the factors thought to contribute to sexual abuse. These factors were grouped together into four preconditions, each one having to be met in order for the abuse to occur.

Precondition I: motivation to sexually abuse.

This refers to a potential offender needing to have some motivation to abuse a child sexually. Finkelhor suggests that there are three components within this precondition: emotional congruence – by relating to a child sexually the perpetrator satisfies an emotional need (for example, arrested emotional development or the re-enacting of a childhood trauma); sexual arousal – where the child becomes the source of sexual gratification for the perpetrator; and blockage – where the perpetrator's alternative sources of sexual gratification are unavailable or less satisfying (for example, marital problems or fear of adult females).

Finkelhor stresses that only one of these components needs to be accounted for in order for the precondition to be fulfilled. For example, it has been known for sex abusers not to be sexually aroused by the child; the abuse may occur as a result of having to satisfy an emotional need to feel powerful.

Precondition II: overcoming internal inhibitors.

In order to sexually abuse a child, the perpetrator must overcome any internal inhibitions they may hold against acting on these motives (precondition I). Overcoming these inhibitions, sometimes referred to as disinhibition, is a requirement for sexual abuse. As Finkelhor (1984: 58) puts it; "...if a potential offender is inhibited by social taboos of acting, then abuse will not occur". Some of the factors involved in overcoming internal inhibitors include alcohol, psychosis and a failure of incest inhibition within family dynamics.

Precondition III: overcoming external inhibitors.

Preconditions I and II tend to refer to the perpetrator's behaviour, while preconditions III and IV account for factors outside of the perpetrator's behaviour that control whether abuse will take place and against whom. Precondition III concerns the external influences which may disinhibit a person from sexually abusing a child, and Finkelhor proposes that the most important of these external forces is the supervision which the child may be receiving from other people. The influence of a third party appears to be an important factor in creating a vulnerability to abuse.

In discussing the family dysfunction approach, it was demonstrated how the mother is often held responsible for 'allowing' the abuse to occur and the criticisms which have arisen, in particular from feminists, against this claim. Nevertheless, Finkelhor does point to a growing body of evidence showing that when mothers are incapacitated in some way (for example, they are absent from the family due to sickness or divorce; they may be emotionally alienated from child; or they may be unable to protect the child due to the abuse and/or intimidation that they themselves are suffering from the perpetrator) then children tend to be more vulnerable to abuse.

Other forms of external inhibitions can include the physical opportunities for the perpetrator and child to be alone together or the social isolation of the family whereby if

the child has very few close interactions with friends, teachers, siblings or neighbours they may be more vulnerable to abuse.<sup>8</sup>

Precondition IV: overcoming the resistance of the child.

This final precondition to abuse refers to the role in which the child plays in his/her abuse. Finkelhor makes it clear that this does not refer primarily to children who point-blank say no to a potential perpetrator or those who physically fight back, but involves many subtle aspects related to a child's individual behaviour and personality.

It is thought that perpetrators do choose particular children on the basis of whether they think the child is a good target or not. For example in a family situation, some children will be abused while others will be left alone. Finkelhor suggests that perpetrators can often sense whether the child will 'play along', whether they will keep a secret and whether they can be intimidated. In other words, children can resist abuse without actually realising that they are in fact resisting.

There are a number of factors which get in the way of a child resisting sexual abuse and Finkelhor notes that at least one of these factors are present in most abuse cases. A child who is particularly needy or unsupported tends to be more vulnerable to abuse as they may crave affection, of any type, and being unsupported may mean that they will not have anyone to tell about the abuse. This includes children who have poor relationships with their parents or who are emotionally abused by their caregivers. Children who have few friends tend to be more vulnerable to abuse as mentioned in precondition III. It is also thought that children who lack knowledge and information on sexual abuse may be more likely to be abused. For example, a child may comply to a sexual game with someone they trust as they have always been taught to "never talk to strangers" but never warned about people they know.

According to this model of sexual abuse, all four preconditions have to be fulfilled if the abuse is to take place. If only one condition is present, the abuse will not occur. In other words, having a need to feel powerful and controlling (emotional congruence) or a lack of protection by the mother (external inhibition) is not enough to explain the occurrence of sexual abuse focusing solely on this factor.

The multi-factor model is very useful as an explanatory tool within child sexual abuse by combining features from other theories. It maintains the value of considering

the role of masculinity and male socialisation in explaining child sexual abuse through its reference to social factors while drawing from the psychological literature to encompass individual motivations and factors in abusing. Both of these schools of thought have direct implications for effective treatment interventions.

Perhaps one of the most positive aspects of Finkelhor's multi-factor model is its capacity to incorporate new findings and new ideas as we learn more and more about child sexual abuse. Finkelhor explains that the model is open-ended, and that these new ideas and further knowledge can be added to the existing framework. There is no specific mention of female perpetrators within Finkelhor's original model since his focus was on the wider preponderance of male sex abusers, but considering its diversity there seems to be no reason why it should not also account for women who sexually abuse children.

### **Research into the nature of child sexual abuse**

There are a number of questions people tend to ask when talking about the sexual abuse of children, many of which have already been addressed in this chapter. There remain, however, issues regarding the nature of sexual abuse which need examining in order to provide an appropriate background for the empirical aspect of this study. As the reader will note in the following sections, much of the previous research details sexual abuse by men and highlights further the limited work that has been carried out on abuse by women.

#### *Relationship to Perpetrator*

Much of what has been written about this area attempts to dispel the myth of the "dirty old man" or the "stranger in the park" perception of the child molester. As the research has now consistently shown, the vast majority of sex abusers are known to the child. In Finkelhor's (1979) study, 70% of his male sample were either related to, or at least acquainted with, their perpetrator. Nearly half of the girls' experiences in his study were with family members, and a further third were classified as acquaintances.

Russell (1984) broke down the types of perpetrators in both incestuous abuse and extra-familial abuse, finding that the uncle was the most common perpetrator in her sample of women who had been incestuously abused, closely followed by the father. Yet, interestingly, the Russell survey showed that when all of the incestuous and extra-

familial abuse cases were combined, the majority of the offenders were not relatives; in fact under a third of the perpetrators were relatives, 11% were total strangers and 60% were known but not related to the survivor.

Renvoize (1993) collated a number of studies, finding that natural and step/cohabiting fathers commit approximately one-third to more than one-half of all child sexual abuse, though she is unsure as to which group perpetrates the greater amount. Renvoize cites Goddard and Hiller (1989) who revealed that he had found natural fathers being the most common perpetrator and that other studies have shown similar findings. However, Russell's (1984) work indicates that step-fathers are far more likely than any other relative to sexually abuse the daughter at the most 'severe' level, namely vaginal, oral or anal intercourse.

There is comparatively little known about the relationships between female perpetrators and the survivors of such abuse. This is in line with the general lack of material available on female perpetrators. Elliott (1993) provides some figures gathered from her work with survivors. Converting these figures into percentages, we see that mothers represent the majority of female perpetrators with 74% of cases involving the mother. The data were similar for both male and female survivors at 81% and 72% respectively. Intra-familial abuse was overwhelmingly more common than extra-familial abuse with 86% of cases involving a family member.

### *Age of Survivor*

There is a wide range of ages of sexual abuse survivors. Most studies and accounts of sexual victimisation have made it clear that the abuse can occur as young as a few months old to well into adult years. Finkelhor (1979) attacks the assumption that girls become more sexually vulnerable at the onset of puberty as they begin to acquire adult sexual characteristics. Finkelhor's research undermines the idea that the onset of puberty is a crucial factor in a child becoming more sexually vulnerable; his average age for girls at the time of their sexual abuse is 10.2 years while for boys it is 11.2 years. He cites a number of other studies that indicate similar mean ages, ranging from 8.7 years to 11.3 years for girls and 8.5 years to 15.4 years for boys.

Renvoize (1993) cites research carried out by Hobbs and Wynne (1989) showing a mean age of 8.8 years in 1985 and 7.4 years in 1986 for both boys and girls combined. Renvoize also cites Goddard and Hiller's (1989) hospital-based study

wherein the most common age of sexually abused children was 3-4 years – findings again which challenge the argument that pubescence is a cause of a child being sexually abused.

Age discrepancies do, of course, exist within the literature. For example, Russell (1984) shows a higher rate of vulnerability in the adolescent period which Finkelhor (1986) suggests may be due to definitions as Russell included peer aggression in her work. It is also possible that ages may not be fully accurate due to a loss or repression of memory. Children may be less likely to recall abuse below the age of three years thus accounting for the fewer numbers under the age of five being found in the literature.

Again Elliott (1993) is the only researcher to illustrate, albeit vaguely, the ages of survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Interesting, and only in line with Goddard and Hiller's (1989, cited by Renvoize, 1993) study, nearly three-quarters of survivors were abused prior to the age of five. The figures continue to decrease as the age brackets increase, although the age for abuse is more stable for boys than for girls. In other words, 83% of girls were abused under the age of five while 16% were over the age of five and 1.5% were in the 'under fifteen' bracket.<sup>9</sup> In comparison, 55% of boys were abused under the age of five, 35% were over the age of five and 10% fell into the 'under fifteen' bracket.

### *Duration of Abuse*

Similar to the discussion on the age of sexual abuse survivors, the duration of the abuse covers a wide span of time. From various accounts of survivors we know that many are abused as an isolated occurrence, some abuse occurs for a prolonged period of time ranging from weeks to months, and some sexual abuse survivors endure years of victimisation; the latter perhaps being more prevalent in cases of incestuous abuse.

Finkelhor (1979) asked his respondents about the duration of their abusive experiences and found that 60% of them reported single occurrences and that 40% reported more than one occurrence. Interestingly these 40% reported experiences lasted for more than one week. In other words, Finkelhor found that if the abuse occurred on more than one occasion, then it would also span more than a week. He found that overall the average duration for women to experience sexual victimisation was thirty-one weeks.

Mendel (1995) surveyed 124 men who were survivors of childhood sexual abuse and found that the abuse perpetrated by people who were not related to the survivor lasted for an average of 1.8 years. This figure then increased up to 5.8 years when the abuse was perpetrated by the father and 6.6 years when the perpetrator was the mother. Mendel found that the overall average duration of childhood sexual abuse lasted for six years.

### *Acts within Sexual Abuse*

The acts involved within child sexual abuse can be high in number and, according to the literature, appear to depend upon the age of the child and the relationship between the survivor and perpetrator. Most researchers in this area have found a range of sexually abusive behaviours, including vaginal, oral or anal penetration, digital penetration,<sup>10</sup> object penetration, fondling, masturbation, simulated intercourse, sexualised hugging, touching or kissing, sexual conversation, sexual mockery, sexual beating, use of pornography, exhibitionism and voyeurism.

Perhaps surprisingly, most research has indicated that the act of intercourse is not a very frequent sexual contact between child and adult. The perpetrator may justify their actions by reasoning that they 'didn't go all the way' therefore denying that any harm is afflicted. A male perpetrator may be physically too big to penetrate a young child without serious physical damage occurring. Whatever the reason, research does demonstrate a lower rate of intercourse than one might imagine.

Finkelhor (1979) reveals that just 4% of the sexual experiences reported in his study involved intercourse. The most commonly reported act was fondling or touching genitals, at 38%. Similarly Ward (1984) includes a number of accounts of father perpetrated sexual abuse and most of the acts consisted of fondling, simulated intercourse, voyeurism and sexualised talk. The accounts which did include intercourse as an act of sexual abuse tended to occur as a gradual process, often after months or years of other types of sexual abuse.

Interestingly, Russell (1984) found in her research that the most frequently occurring acts within incestuous abuse were those classified as 'serious sexual abuse' such as genital fondling or digital penetration, while the least frequent were those acts classified as 'very serious sexual abuse', namely intercourse. However in extra-familial

sexual abuse more than 50% of the abusive acts reported were of a 'very serious' nature.

### *Impact of Sexual Abuse*

This can be regarded as a contentious area within the framework of sexual abuse and is often discussed in relation to treatment models. The angle at which it will be discussed in this thesis is in relation to the general perspective of this research, namely by taking into account how the gender of the perpetrator and survivor affects the impact that the abuse may have on the survivor.

Researchers who have concentrated on the effects of sexual abuse have demonstrated the wide range of problems with which it may entail; emotional disturbance, sleep and/or eating disturbance, fears, depression, school problems, running away, hostility, aggression, disruptive behaviour, inappropriate sexual behaviour such as sexualised behaviour in young children and promiscuity in adolescents, suicide attempts and feelings such as guilt, shame and anger. These effects perhaps cover what Finkelhor (1986) might classify as initial effects. There are also more long-term effects such as substance abuse, early marriages and relationship difficulties in later life. Furthermore many of the initial effects can become long-term problems for sexual abuse survivors such as continued depression and eating difficulties.

There are clearly drawbacks in studying the impact of sexual abuse. Often these findings have been derived from a particular client group; this refers particularly to those involved in a clinical sample. Briere (1984, cited in Finkelhor, 1986) studied 'walk-in's' to a community health counselling centre to compare sexual abuse survivors with those patients who had never been abused. It is also difficult to highlight the source of the trauma in all sexual abuse survivors as often in cases of sexual abuse, children may be experiencing other forms of abuse such as severe emotional abuse. Taking into account this extra variable, it is problematic to determine the derivative of the trauma.

Research which has been carried out on the general public in order to determine their perceptions of the impact of sexual abuse depending on gender raises some interesting and worrying points. Researchers (Broussard et al, 1991; Horwell, 1996) reveal that people tend to perceive the sexual abuse perpetrated by a woman as less

abusive than that by a man and that women cause relatively little harm. Accounts from the adult survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse show that this is not the case. In fact many have described their experiences as more traumatic exactly because their perpetrator was a woman, considering it to be the final betrayal;

"It's odd that the abuse by my father was not as awful as the abuse by my mother. There's something about a mother. When you're small, she should be the first person you go to if you're hurt; the first person to cuddle you. She should clothe you, feed you and give you physical love and care, as well as emotional support. So when she's the one who abuses you, it leads to an even greater sense of despair than when your father abuses you." ('Jill' in Elliott, 1993: 138).

There are those who suggest that sex between adults and children should be permissible, arguing that children should not be denied sexual pleasure and that they should be introduced to loving sex by an experienced adult. These beliefs would appear to contradict all of the findings which show the long and short-term effects of child sexual abuse and the horrific aftermath of sexual victimisation so many children endure. Kinsey et al (1953: 121), it would seem, are ready with an explanation for this apparent inconsistency;

"If a child were not culturally conditioned, it is doubtful if it would be disturbed by sexual approaches of the sort which had been involved in these histories. It is difficult to understand why a child, except for its cultural conditioning, should be disturbed at having its genitalia touched or disturbed at seeing the genitalia of other persons, or disturbed at even more specific sexual contacts."

This view reflects later discussions in this thesis about the interpretation of sexual activities. The concept of cultural conditioning is a simplified version of the processes involved in socialisation, including such aspects as cognitive development and understanding; legal issues; and defining and re-defining a given act. The meanings that children attach to particular activities are likely to differ significantly from an adult's attached meaning of the same event. In relation to the impact of sexual abuse, it remains irrelevant whether a child defines their experience as 'abuse' or interprets it as 'sexual', as research consistently demonstrates that the vast majority of children are adversely affected by such activities. It also strikes me as relevant that for many years survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse have not been 'culturally conditioned' to be disturbed by the abuse (in line with myths that abuse by women is not harmful or it is the child misunderstanding motherly love). If it were merely a case of children being culturally

conditioned into being disturbed by 'abuse', this begs the question of why so many survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse experience such trauma and long-term effects.

### **History repeating itself: the denial of child sexual abuse**

If we examine the background and progression of the study into child sexual abuse, we begin to see the historical neglect of sexual victimisation; the consistent denial of its occurrence in our society. Many writers, particularly feminist authors (e.g. Rush, 1977 and Masson, 1984; both cited in Segal, 1996), argue that this denial derives from Freud's reluctance to acknowledge the existence of child sexual abuse, suggesting that Freud interpreted his female patients' accounts of sexual abuse as mere fantasies inextricably linked to his 'Oedipus complex', and that this had a profound effect on people's perceptions and attitudes towards the sexual abuse of children. Interestingly, as Miller (1984) points out, Freud originally recognised the traumatic impact and effects of sexual abuse on the child in later life through his many encounters with women who presented symptoms of hysteria. It was in fact several years later, when many of his female patients has repudiated his sexual abuse suggestions, that Freud altered his conceptual framework, proposing instead his 'infantile sexuality' theory which has continued to influence the psychoanalytic school of thought to this day.

As a psychoanalyst, Miller (1984) describes how she has struggled against what is often considered to be one of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis but remaining within the realm of what is reported to her by patients. A predominant premise of 'infantile sexuality' is the desire a child has for the parent. This assertion of desire must surely be a product of our own interpretative processes and the sexual meanings we attach to behaviours based on our social interactions.<sup>11</sup> Plummer (1975) talks at length about the formulation of sexual meanings and how children might learn such meanings. This links again with the assertions of Kinsey et al (1953) who attributed the damaging consequences of child sexual abuse to the cultural conditioning and attached meanings of perceived sexualised behaviour.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, many of the preconceived myths surrounding the sexual abuse of children were dispelled, almost wholly thanks to the rise of feminism which placed such social problems on the agenda. Myths around sexually victimised children representing one in a million, that the phenomenon was so

rare and its perpetrators sick in the head were shown to be inaccurate as more people began to speak out against the abuse they suffered. Many women wrote books outlining their experience of sexual victimisation, such as *Daddy's Girl* by Charlotte Vale Allen (1982) and *My Father's House* by Sylvia Fraser (1987) both describing the sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of their father.

The common notion of the Child Molester was a dirty old man hanging around by the playground. This was comforting in a sense as we could warn our children to stay away from him: 'don't talk to strangers'. This myth was dispelled as books such as those mentioned above were written and as the rush of new research on this topic came flooding in. Such work found that people were revealing sexual abuse of a different kind; we found that most people who were sexually abused knew their perpetrator, and that very often this perpetrator was the father.

Prevalence has been studied and theories formulated; the family dysfunction theory attempted to explain why fathers might abuse their daughters and concluded that mothers play a vital, though indirect, role in the abuse. This theory remained consistently neglectful of all sexual abuse cases that did not fall within the parameters of the family, particularly the typified nuclear family, resulting in the failure of accounting for the abuse of boys. Moreover, it purported the 'failure to protect' concept, blaming women for abuse they did not perpetrate. The feminist perspective, while explaining much of what had been previously missing from the field through focusing on patriarchy and oppression within society whereby men strive to keep power and domination over women and girls, at one time virtually denied the existence of sexual abuse occurring in any other gender interaction than male-perpetrator/female-survivor. It is important to note that there have been periods of awareness of child sexual abuse that seem to come and go. Cox (2000: 4) writes that "re-discovery comes in 'waves' and then is lost". She points to a historical pattern of new knowledge leading to awareness leading to avoidance (since the knowledge may be too horrible to contemplate) resulting in a failure in protection strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The historical neglect, or denial, of the sexual victimisation of children has been highlighted by various writers (e.g., Miller, 1984 and Segal, 1996), with this denial emerging because we are unwilling to acknowledge the full extent of sexual abuse. The

bulk of research to date and current literature discusses the significance of gender in child sexual abuse and points to the sexual abuse of children as an act primarily perpetrated by men. Since this is evidentially accurate, it is unsurprising that there has been little scope for exploring female-perpetrated sexual abuse, particularly when the focus is on the extent of the problem and strategies for addressing the problem in terms of child protection policies and practices. Since the occurrence of sexual abuse by women appears to be far less than that by a man, attention will – quite appropriately – be given to the latter.

Herein lies the purpose of considering the significance of gender in this study. Since men are primarily the perpetrators of child sexual abuse, this has ramifications for the minority of cases where women are the perpetrators. This under-researched area forms part of the historical neglect of child sexual abuse. This thesis is a response to that neglected area.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the work carried out on child sexual abuse originated in the United States, and therefore their application to British study must be approached with some caution though it remains relevant.

<sup>2</sup> In their original text, Ghate and Spencer presented their findings as figures rather than percentages as I have presented them in this thesis. My conversion was to maintain consistency with the other prevalence studies cited in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> This same criticism will be addressed in Chapter Four in respect of my own work.

<sup>4</sup> Ghate and Spencer (1995: 36) reported that in their study, one person who was approached to be interviewed informed them that their childhood had been “awful beyond belief” and that they did not wish to remember any of it.

<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that our biological make-up dictates a base aim of reproduction as a way of continuing the evolutionary line; indeed reproduction is biologically necessary for the ongoing existence of any given species. In terms of humans, however, it becomes difficult to divorce pure biological need from our socialisation process and is linked in with aspects regarding the construction of masculinity. For instance, it is not uncommon for men to experience a feeling of triumph upon discovering their role in impregnating a partner based on their belief of being a ‘real man’, and likewise, a failure if they are unable to reproduce. I am reminded at this point of the agony that Ben Elton (1999: 112) writes of in his book *Inconceivable*: “So now the full and terrible truth was upon me. I’m not a man. I’ve failed my sperm test!”. This demonstrates in part the importance bestowed upon reproduction and social rules.

<sup>6</sup> While it is true that these ages represent the peak ages of reproduction in women, I would also suggest that our socialisation processes carry considerable weight in terms of our perception of what is considered attractive and sexual. The media reflects and perpetuates this perception, leading me to question the authenticity of the biological claim that the reason most rape victims

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are aged 18 to 35 is due to their propensity to be impregnated. Rather, it is more likely to be due to social dominance and the perceived sexuality of women in this age group.

<sup>7</sup> The case of Colleen Stan is particularly appropriate in illustrating this point whereby she remained in contact with Cameron Hooker, her kidnapper/rapist, after she managed to escape from a seven-year ordeal as his sex slave (McGuire, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> An extreme example of this comes from a case of a family in Chorley where a tyrannical father sexually, physically and emotionally abused his wife and two daughters. In doing so he did not allow any outside interactions to the point of making his daughters leave their place of work if they seemed to be in danger of beginning a friendship with anyone. This systematic abuse continued until the daughters were in their thirties and only ceased when the father was shot dead by one of his daughters (Artley, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Elliott categorised her data into three age brackets: 'under five', 'over five' and 'under fifteen'. The latter two age brackets are virtually indistinguishable in relation to some of the middle ages as it is unclear where the categories separate.

<sup>10</sup> This involves the penetration of fingers into either the vagina or anus.

<sup>11</sup> The approach that Miller takes in challenging aspects of 'infantile sexuality' reflects much of what will form the predominant theoretical perspective of this thesis, that of symbolic interactionism, given her discussion about the role of interpretation in this context. Symbolic interactionism will be introduced as an approach within the realm of this work in Chapter Three.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **GENDERING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: MEN AS THE PRIMARY PERPETRATORS**

#### **Introduction**

The, often critical, role gender plays within the patterns of criminal behaviour has increasingly become an issue for debate and contention among those professionals and academics involved within its realm. A number of writers (Smart, 1977; Newburn and Stanko, 1994; Walklate, 1995; Heidensohn, 1996) address the subject of gender and crime focusing on a variety of issues. Two of these issues have been selected as being integral to the general theme of this research. Firstly, crime has been consistently viewed as a male-dominated activity leading to the current theories within mainstream criminology to be inherently male-orientated. The question of women and crime is unlikely to be accurately examined through traditional criminology while it is based upon male crime. This is because their behaviour is likely to be measured against a masculine norm and does not take account of differences arising from gender. I would suggest that this will have ramifications for defining female crime, explaining female crime and the treatment of female offenders. These issues will be explored by this research within the specific context of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse.

Secondly, writers within the gender and crime field appear to suggest that male dominance in criminal activity would be better understood if it were studied and analysed through the lens of gender differences as opposed to sex differences. It is my opinion that it is often difficult to isolate one from the other as the two are

interlinked to such an extent. So while much of the discussion within this chapter will be about the construction of masculinity and femininity, and the role which socialisation plays, it will also be necessary to consider much of the biological differences inherent within a discussion on gender.

It seems appropriate at this stage to focus on the principal question being asked of the research, namely why the issue of gender is of central interest and significance to the area of child sexual abuse. The answer to this question is threefold. Firstly, it is of central importance because child sex abusers are invariably male and, as such, much of the literature refers to men as the sole perpetrators. This has ramifications for victims of sexually abusive women. Secondly, it remains true that any hint of sexual abuse skewing away from the traditional paradigm of male-perpetrator/female-survivor interaction raises contention and animosity. And thirdly we return to the notion of crime being a male-dominated activity, becoming increasingly complex when the crime involves a sexual or a violent element, as with child sexual abuse.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the issue of gender differences within child sexual abuse. In particular this covers aspects such as masculinity, femininity, male sexuality and the relationship between masculinity and violence. Such aspects will inevitably lead into an examination of our perceptions of men as survivors of sexual abuse and of women as perpetrators. This will subsequently enable us to address the issue involving the general under-recognition of women as perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

### **Masculinity and femininity: what these terms mean**

It would seem that the concepts of “sex” and “sex differences” refer implicitly to our biological make-up, namely the XX chromosomes in females and the XY chromosomes in males. This then results in our male-female genitalia which is what we tend to be first attributed with upon birth. “Is it a boy or a girl?” is perhaps the most frequently asked question on the arrival of a new baby. Whether the infant is termed a boy or a girl is dependent upon whether they possess a penis or a vagina respectively, and it seems that this constitutes our sex differences. Reid and Stratta (1989) argue that the term “gender” is used to refer to all of the differences that exist between male and female bar the physical. In order to examine and interpret the concept of gender it would appear that the most

productive way is through the construction of our two societal types of gender, namely masculinity and femininity.

To return to the principal question asked of this research as mentioned previously, it was originally thought that this chapter would concentrate on the construction of masculinity given that the focus is on sexual abuse – a predominantly male-orientated crime. However this would offer too narrow a focus within this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, this research is heavily based on a re-examination of contemporary views on child sexual abuse with regard to the gender of both survivor and perpetrator, so therefore one cannot focus solely on the male role. Secondly, masculinity cannot be considered and discussed in isolation of femininity, a concept integral to this area. In other words masculinity is a relative, even meaningless, concept in the absence of femininity. It is appropriate, albeit necessary, for the deconstruction of these concepts to be concurrently explored.

When explaining ‘masculinity’ as a concept, Connell (1995) suggests that there are four main approaches in terms of defining masculinity:

- Essentialist definitions tend to choose a feature that defines the core of masculinity, such as risk-taking or aggression, and base an account of men’s lives on that. Connell (1995) suggests that the weakness in this approach is obvious – that the choice of feature to define the core of masculinity is subjective. If what different essentialists attempt to capture as the essence of masculinity is so arbitrary, can we appropriately claim this as a universal basis of masculinity?
- Positivist definitions term masculinity as what men actually are and tend to be a basis for masculinity/femininity scales in psychology. To give this approach more substance, I will first explore some of the scales produced by other authors before returning to the problems as addressed by Connell (1995) with the positivist definition. Moreover, a discussion on masculinity/femininity scales is being included here since the idea of bipolar concepts are relevant to this research. That is, the way in which femininity is viewed is central to the under-recognition of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. I will consider three sets of scales.

Perhaps the most famous study to be carried out on the area of sex differences was the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) which consisted of sixty attributes (twenty masculine, twenty feminine and twenty neutral) with a seven-point rating scale whereby people were subsequently classified as being masculine, feminine or androgynous. The masculine and feminine items were selected on the basis of what was culturally defined as gender appropriate in the United States in the early 1970's. The main benefit of the BSRI was that it allowed people to rate themselves as high in masculinity, high in femininity or high or low in both; this removed the bipolarity assumption that a person must be either masculine or feminine (Bem, 1993).

In an article on sex differences, Baucom (1976) discusses the construction of separate masculinity and femininity scales on the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) as a means of providing independent assessments of one's masculinity and femininity. He takes Bem's point that masculinity and femininity do not necessarily have to exist as bi-polars. He argues that high masculinity/low femininity and low masculinity/high femininity are viewed as our cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity respectively, while a high masculinity/high femininity person is regarded as the most psychologically healthy.

Later, Storms (1979: 1779) introduced the Sex Role Identity Scale for the reason that "there had been no widely accepted measure of sex role identity and little research on its relationships to sex role attributes and sex role stereotypes". He cites the work of both Kagan (1964) and Kohlberg (1966) in terms of using their differing theories of sex role identity. Kagan views sex role identity as the product of differences between an individual's sex role attributes and their perceptions of sex role stereotyping while Kohlberg argues that sex role identity is the cause of those differences. Tzuriel (1984: 440) also draws on Kagan's (1964) work to suggest that "traditionally, the adoption of sex roles appropriate for one's sex has been considered desirable, whereas deviations from the culturally sanctioned sex roles have been considered as maladaptive". This is a particularly interesting suggestion within the realm of this thesis as it explicitly supports the notion that women are rarely perceived as

perpetrators and boys as the abused. Even more so with the characteristics which psychologists such as Tzurriel (1984) attribute to masculinity and femininity; masculine traits being independence, self-assertion, competence and dominance while femininity has been related to traits such as nurturance, compassion and warmth.

Returning now to Connell (1995), in reviewing the positivist approach, he cited three main difficulties with its use. First, there needs to be a standpoint from which to base a description. The attributes included on all masculinity/femininity scales are themselves underpinned by assumptions about gender. In other words, to devise such a scale, one must have some understanding of what to include as masculine and feminine. Second, to compile scales which are designed to determine what men and women are requires that people already be sorted into such categories. Connell (1995: 69) suggests that this is a social attribution process “using common sense typologies of gender”. He therefore asserts that the positivist definition is based on the very attributes that should be under investigation in research on gender. Third, to define masculinity as what men are is to exclude the fundamental usage of the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in gender analysis. Connell suggests that were we to only speak of differences between men and women, we would not need the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. These terms go far beyond mere sex difference to ways in which men differ among themselves and women differ among themselves. It is these differences that require analysis and have ramifications for a number of areas. For instance, as Connell suggests, this may be applied to psychoanalytic thinking about contradictions within personality.

- Normative definitions appear to argue that masculinity is what men *ought* to be, that there is a social norm for the behaviour of men. As with the positivist approach, Connell (1995) points to the paradox produced by a normative definition of masculinity. Connell (1995:70) argues that few men actually match the norm of what men ought to be, leading to the question “what is ‘normative’ about a norm hardly anyone meets?”.

- Semiotic approaches define masculinity through a system of symbolic difference where the masculine and the feminine are contrasted, namely masculinity is defined as not-femininity. This approach identifies masculinity as the benchmark in measurement of masculinity versus femininity, and this benchmark is representative of symbolic authority. Connell (1995:70) writes that “the phallus is master signifier, and femininity is symbolically defined by lack”. The advantage to such an approach can be seen in cultural analyses of gender (e.g. Saco, 1992), but Connell also argues that it is limited in scope by not taking into account the wider system of gender relations.

The value of segregating these definitional approaches is not wholly convincing given the marked similarities between the four approaches. The positivist and normative approaches are greatly interlinked and in many ways are undifferentiated. Attempting to define what men actually are cannot be done without fully recognising the social norm for male behaviour in terms of how this influences the actual behaviour of men. Likewise, in order to understand and get a sense of the social norm, we need to have studied and interpreted the behaviour of men to reach the normative approach of masculinity. What is particularly striking is that all of the approaches appear to refer to a question of what are thought to be traditionally male and female characteristics or traits, and it does seem that this is of central importance to the overall analysis of the conceptual differences inherent in masculinity and femininity.

Around the middle of the twentieth century the research being carried out on sex differences inevitably led to the concept of a “social role” (termed also “sex role” or “gender role”) whereby a man or a woman takes on and personifies a general set of expectations which are attached to one’s sex (Connell, 1995). Our current understanding of gender leads us to believe that there are two sex roles in any cultural context; a male one and a female one. While sex differences can be seen as a product of biology, this section has argued that the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ arise through a process of socialisation. This process can be identified in the four approaches described by Connell (1995) in so far as we are not only socialised to attach a prescribed label of masculine or feminine to someone, but socialised to live up to that label, to a cultural gender stereotype. I

intend to now move on to discussing two concepts associated with child sexual abuse to varying degrees – sexuality and violence – and their link with gender.

### **Gender and sexuality**

The term “sexuality” is often used in relation to one’s sexual orientation and indeed much of the literature on male sexuality focuses on homosexuality and homophobia with respect to the construction of masculinity (e.g. Segal, 1990; May and Strikwerda, 1992). However, the scope of this study does not encompass exploring sexual orientation. Rather the examination of sexuality is confined to aspects involving sexual development, the feelings and meanings attached to sexual acts and how gender relates to this concept of sexuality. This is deemed an integral area of the research because of the sexual aspect of the research interest. It is a very specific and vital component to the underlying issues regarding gender differences, in particular when compared with other forms of child abuse.

In the previous chapter it was noted that, without exception, the literature we have to date points to the phenomenon of more men involving themselves in the sexual abuse of children. However much of this literature is without the analysis of why this may be the case, as women are (usually) not even considered as perpetrators. Consequently there does appear to be a need to explore the concept of male sexuality in order to demonstrate why men are primarily the perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

Much of the more recent work on masculinity and masculine development has derived from contemporary psychoanalysis (Glaser and Frosh, 1993). Through a psychoanalytical approach we can consider how masculinity is attained. “Masculinity”, writes Frosh (1994: 109), “constructs itself on the basis of a separation from that which the infant knows - the mother and all her feminine power”. This statement appears to explicitly refer to the famous theory so deeply rooted within the psychoanalytic approach, that of the Oedipus complex, whereby after the initial bonding of mother and infant the child has to identify with the same-sex parent. As the mother tends to qualify as the child’s first relationship (hence bonding has already occurred), Frosh (1994) suggests that identification with femininity for girl-children is relatively easy while Glaser and Frosh (1993: 32) maintain that “for boys, attaining masculinity is a desperate striving towards something unknown and unknowable: a state of difference from the mother, yet

grounded in her". So the boy needs to break away from the mother and what it is she represents; in fact as Benjamin (1988: 162) argues "the boy's repudiation of femininity is the central thread of the Oedipus complex".

The literature suggests that dependency is associated with the mother, hence the desire of the boy to detach from the mother in order to gain independence. This dependency, along with cultural socialisation of "feminine" and "masculine" qualities, affects the boy's ability to form intimate relationships, so his sexuality is something which is used as a form of mastery and as an expression of aggression and assertiveness (see Frosh, 1994; Glaser and Frosh, 1993). In addition Frosh (1994) argues that intimacy can be dangerous given the fragile boundaries of the masculine self which can be easily overwhelmed. Herman (1981: 56) has also written of this in her book on child sexual abuse;

"The common product of this developmental process is an adult male whose capacity to nurture is severely impaired, whose ability to form affectionate relationships is restricted, and whose masculine identity, since it rests upon a repudiation of his identification with the person who first cared for him is forever in doubt".

It is within the context of child sexual abuse that sexuality is explored to establish whether there exists a link between sexual socialisation and the developing tendency to sexually abuse. Frosh (1994: 115) points to the crucial aspect inherent within masculine sexual socialisation of the splitting-off of sex from intimacy, and goes on to suggest that due to a male's rejection of dependency and intimacy, sex replaces the necessary channel for the expression of emotion, going so far as to state "as sex is the only form of intimacy allowable to many men, all intimacy tends to turn into sex".

However this approach does not explain why so many men do not sexually abuse children, nor can it offer any interpretation for why a proportion of women sexually abuse children. So while the psychoanalytic theory has made a valuable contribution to explaining the roots of male sexuality, I would like to consider how the rejection of intimacy and dependency may be reinforced through other means. This means addressing the extent to which male perceptions of sex are socially constructed. To do this, I will move away from psychoanalysis and focus instead on the contributions that behavioural psychologists have made in this particular area with the use of the learning theory.

The central belief of the learning theory focuses on the importance of positively or negatively reinforcing a said behaviour, which will determine whether it will be produced again or not. It also emphasises the role of modelling and imitation as a means of learning a particular behaviour. With regard to male sexuality, Jackson (1982: 173) suggests that:

“It is easy to see why men find childlike vulnerability so appealing: having learnt to be sexually aggressive and dominant, they find it easier to play out this role with a partner who is passive, submissive and relatively powerless.”

Having learnt these particular characteristics, Jackson writes:

“Child molesters and child rapists are almost invariably men who have learnt to express their sexuality through aggression, to seek power over others and to be attracted to the vulnerable.”

She further argues that the reason “why women and children need protection from sex is because men have learnt the arts of sexual coercion and exploitation so well.” (Jackson, 1982: 173).

Earlier in the chapter, the difference between male and female gender characteristics was examined. We did not, however, consider the extent to which these characteristics are the result of different patterns of socialisation or whether they are biologically determined. Ward (1984: 81) writes that “the ideology of rape says that male sexuality is innately active, aggressive and insatiable; that female sexuality is innately passive, receptive and inhibited”. This falls in line with Hollway’s (1984: 231) image of masculine sexuality which she terms ‘male sexual drive discourse’ and describes as follows. “[Male] sexuality is directly produced by a biological drive, the function of which is to ensure reproduction of the species”. Interestingly this is parallel to the ethos of Christianity in terms of its ideological justification of sex representing the sole purpose of procreation.

There is something distasteful about both of these statements in the way that they base so much on the biology of sexuality, particularly when this is related to the sexual abuse of children. Allowing male sexuality to be seen as a biologically determined phenomenon means that we do not have to examine any of the processes which may be involved in constructing sexuality nor do we have to explore experiences which similarly may be inherent in the construction of sexuality. Accepting male sexuality as predetermined in the above way, goes beyond the notion of being distasteful. It reaches the point where it can be viewed

as potentially dangerous as it can be used to remove the responsibility from rapists and child sex abusers for their actions. Without acknowledging accountability for their actions these perpetrators will be unable to change and so their sexual offending will continue.

One difficulty I find with the 'male sexual drive discourse' concept lies within the emphasis on reproduction and relates to the argument in Chapter One on rape and biological evolution; the criticisms of that theory appear to be homogeneous to those of the 'male sexual drive discourse' and would be of little worth in repetition. Furthermore there is the limitation of this discourse whereby it fails to explain why male sexuality may be produced by a biological drive for reproduction while female sexuality is not. Nor does it offer any interpretation as to the sexual abuse of children by men as many abused children have yet to reach sexual maturity in relation to their reproductive ability.

Given the discussion thus far, it does appear inevitable that attention is now focused upon male and female socialisation with regard to sexuality, albeit without the disparaging of psychoanalytical and biological standpoints. It is a somewhat arduous task to explore the extent to which socialisation is responsible for masculine and feminine sexuality as the ideas held about sexuality are so deeply embedded within our culture, thus the influence is so abundant. Horrocks (1997: 166) illustrates the work of a nineteenth century psychiatrist Krafft-Ebbing;

"It is beyond doubt that man has livelier sexual demands than woman. Following the impulse of nature from a certain age he wants a woman. His love is sensual, his choice is limited by physical advantages. Following nature's urge, he is aggressive and tempestuous in his wooing".

Horrocks then points to particulars within the terminology of the paragraph which have often been used to describe male sexuality over the decades: 'impulse', 'nature', 'urge' and 'aggression'. Again, these words all seem to have a rather innate quality to them which suggest frightening consequences for both men and women.

It does appear that there are various aspects of society which either contribute to or reinforce the characteristics attributed to male sexuality, and it is these aspects which need to be taken into consideration when we question the extent to which the characteristics are socially constructed.

A number of researchers (e.g. Dworkin, 1989; Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1984; Russell, 1993a, 1993b) have investigated the (often) detrimental effects which pornography has appeared to have had within society, particularly in relation to “sexism, rape and other forms of violence towards women” (Russell, 1993b: 11). Russell (1993a: 121) suggests that research into rape has indicated that 25-30% of male college students would rape a woman if they would be able to get away with it. She further cites two studies which appear to offer higher probability rates than the 25-30% previously quoted. Briere and Malamuth (1983) found that 60% of their sample indicated that there was a likelihood that they would rape or use force given the right circumstances, and Goodchilds and Zellman (1984) showed that 50% of their interviewees believed that it was acceptable “for a guy to hold a girl down and force her to have sexual intercourse in instances such as when ‘she gets him sexually excited’ or ‘she says she’s going to have sex with him and then changes her mind’”. Russell (1993a: 122) also cites evidence put forward by Malamuth (1981, 1985, 1986) that male subjects’ self-reported likelihood of raping correlates with physiological measures of sexual arousal by rape depictions, leading Malamuth to conclude that “the overall pattern of the data is...consistent with contentions that many men have a proclivity to rape”. It can be argued, of course, that having the propensity to rape is hardly the same as actually carrying out the act itself but it is a necessary starting point for potential rapists. Furthermore it is interesting, albeit worrying, that many of the findings of the male propensity to rape are homogenous with the findings of adult women who have been the victim of rape or attempted rape (see Russell, 1984; Kelly, 1988).

It is disturbing that such a high proportion of men appear to have some desire to rape women, or at least find it acceptable to resort to the use of a certain degree of force, but it seems even more disturbing that there are men who then consider themselves to be deviant if they do not have an inclination to rape (Russell, 1993a). This point is illustrated by the male respondents in ‘The Hite Report’ where one man stated “I have never raped a woman, or wanted to. In this I guess I am somewhat odd” (Hite, 1981: 719). Another respondent disclosed that:

“I must admit a certain part of me would receive some sort of thrill at ripping the clothes from a woman and ravishing her. But I would probably collapse into tears of pity and weep with my victim, unlike the traditional male” (Hite, 1981: 719).

These comments seem to also illustrate the general images and stereotypes of masculinity which have previously been discussed.

Much of the work conducted on the harmful effects of pornography has questioned the content of pornographic material in order to establish a link between these attitudes and what images are portrayed in pornography, and also how this material may reinforce beliefs about women and sex. In looking at a causal model on pornography and rape, Russell (1993a) cites various studies which involve a content analysis of a range of pornographic materials; Smith (1977) studied 428 'adult only' paperbacks published between 1968-1974 and found that one-fifth of the sex episodes involved completed rape; the numbers of rapes increased with each years newly published books; 6% of the sex episodes involved incestuous rapes; 97% of the rapes resulted in orgasm for the victim; and three-quarters of these rapes resulted in multiple orgasm occurring. Malamuth and Spinner (1980, cited in Russell, 1993a) looked at *Penthouse* and *Playboy* magazines in order to determine the amount of sexual violence in cartoons and pictorials and found that by 1977 about 5% of pictorials and 10% of cartoons were sexually violent and that the sexual violence portrayed in the pictorials had increased significantly over a five-year period. Palys (1986, cited in Russell, 1993a) analysed a number of 'adult' videos and found that in general violence against women is fairly common and that rape is noted as one of the more prevalent forms of sexual violence depicted.

What studies such as these serve to illustrate is the exclusively gendered nature of pornography and it's link with men's sexual victimisation of women. In deed, Brownmiller (1975: 443) writes that "pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanise women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access". The content of pornographic materials institutionalise the concept that it is men's absolute right to have sexual access to a woman as and when, irrespective of whether she is willing. Such evidence illustrates a male ability and desire to rape, with a strong causal link observed between this act and pornographic content. Rather than continuing to investigate this relationship, I would like to move this discussion into looking at its effects on child sexual abuse.

Kelly (1992) proposes three ways in which men can use pornography in connection with sexual abuse. Firstly the perpetrators may show the pornography to children as a way of convincing them that they would enjoy the sexual acts requested of them. While there is little doubt that some perpetrators will use this method with children, I would suggest that it is only likely to succeed if one or more of the factors set out within Finkelhor's (1984) Multi-factor Model is fulfilled, namely the child's inability to avoid or resist the abuse due to various reasons such as being emotionally unsupported or being involved in a special relationship with the perpetrator (see Chapter One). In the absence of such extraneous variables it seems unlikely that a perpetrator would be able to coerce a child into participating in sexual activities without a high level of force in which case, as Finkelhor (1984: 61) states, "the factor overcoming a child's resistance had nothing to do with the child or the child's relationship with the adult. The key factor was force".

The second way in which men may use pornography in connection with sexual abuse as proposed by Kelly (1992) is in showing children child pornography in order to convince them that what they are being asked to do is 'right' and 'normal'. Kelly suggests that by being able to show a picture to the child legitimises the perpetrator's requests. In a similar vein, it can be argued that pornography can further fulfil a second function; that of legitimising and justifying the sexual abuse of children to (potential) perpetrators themselves. This can be done in one of two ways: firstly, child pornography may introduce the idea of children as sexual objects to a potential perpetrator, and secondly, the way in which the children are presented may re-affirm a perpetrator's beliefs that little harm is occurring to the child and that the primary emotion experienced by the children is enjoyment, not fear.

The third way in which pornography can be used by perpetrators is as a tool for their own arousal before abusing a child. This particular proposal put forward by Kelly seems to directly correlate with the first precondition of Finkelhor's (1984) Model, namely the sexual arousal factor. I suggest that this is primarily accomplished through the sexualising of children. Reisman (1986) found a significant number of cartoons and photographs in the magazines *Playboy*, *Penthouse* and *Hustler* which depicted children involved in a sexual association with an adult. Another way of sexualising children is to use adult

women and make them appear child-like by, for example, shaving their pubic hair off or making them appear as schoolgirls.

I would like to now propose a fourth way in which pornography may be connected with child sexual abuse, and it is a theory which draws upon much of the discussion about masculine sexuality. Brod (1992) looks at how pornography can affect male sexuality and suggests that it can be highly detrimental to men themselves with regard to alienating their own sexual needs. The argument behind this is two-fold. The men portrayed in pornographic material tend to be over-endowed, highly sexualised and always able to perform - often for an indefinite amount of time. Segal (1990: 218) argues a similar point in relation to pornography's 'fictions of manliness':

"The fictions of manliness are those of *penis size* - the bigger the better; of *erection on demand* - as often as possible; of *skilled performance* - producing female orgasm, preferably multiple."  
(original italics)

The second part of this argument put forward by Brod (1992) revolves around what he terms 'loss of subjectivity' and is strongly linked to the earlier discussion on masculinity and intimacy. Here Brod suggests that as men are encouraged to deny intimacy and emotional needs, they tend to look to sex to fulfil non-sexual needs which can lead to either an unfilled void or an increased urgency to their sexuality as a means of trying to obtain these emotional needs.

As a result of these stresses and strains on male sexuality, an increasing number of men are seeking sex therapy for complaints such as erectile dysfunction, inhibited sexual desire and premature ejaculation - conditions which Segal (1990) proposes are the exact inversions of these fictions of manliness as portrayed in pornography. In turn such sexual problems (or even the possibility of such) can lead to 'performance anxiety' in vast numbers of men which can threaten the sexual relationships they have, or want to have, with women due to feelings of inadequacy and a general denunciation to their masculinity.

In attempting to redress the feelings of inadequacy surrounding male sexuality brought on, influenced or reinforced by pornographic images of men, the propensity to sexually abuse a child may be increased given that children are (usually) powerless and sexually naive. This suggestion is supported by Finkelhor's (1984: 56) idea of 'emotional congruence' as a motivation to sexually

abuse whereby there is a “masculine requirement to be dominant and powerful in sexual relationships”.

### **Gender and violence**

As with sexuality there remains a gendered perspective on the issue of perpetrated violence, in particular the nature of the violent acts, which is embedded within the construction of masculinity and femininity and what we understand by these terms.

“Exploring the complex and subtle impact that an understanding of masculinity may provide could constitute one way of achieving one understanding of the relationship between gender and violence.” (Walklate, 1995: 96)

Walklate (1995: 95) talks of the difficulties involved in placing all violence under the same umbrella, in particular the act of sexual violence. She states that:

“Redefining rape as violence and control rather than as an act of sex [which early feminist work did], places those activities within the wider spectrum of violent acts. Yet, arguably, in so doing this kind of analysis simultaneously denies the sex-specific nature of those acts”.

This is a clear reflection of the difficulty of this chapter in attempting to segregate *sexuality* from *violence* in my discussion and exploration of gender. The purpose then of this section of the chapter is to focus on non-sexual violence and how it relates to men and women. Morgan (1989; cited in Walklate, 1995: 95) writes that:

“It is undeniable that history is a record of most women acting peaceably and of most men acting belligerently to a point where the capacity for belligerence is regarded as an essential ingredient of manhood and the proclivity for conciliation is thought largely a quality of women”.

In general, then, it seems unlikely that one would argue a position contradictory to that of males being ‘naturally’ more aggressive and physically violent. Having already discussed sex roles, gender construction and issues involving biology and differential socialisation, there is little worth in reiterating this material for this particular section. Instead it would be helpful to concentrate on the violent acts committed by men and women, and the similarities which may be entrenched within them.

Explanations about child physical abuse appear to take a very different stance to that of sexual abuse as is illustrated by Walklate (1995: 86) who writes that “empirical evidence also indicates that both men and women engage in child physical abuse but child sexual abuse is an activity dominated by men”. Parton (1985) considers the ‘disease model of parenting’ which looks to locate the abusive behaviour within the characteristics of individual parents (characteristics such as very young parents, having been physically abused themselves and personality traits); none of which focus solely on the issue of gender. Parton (1985) ultimately rejects the ‘disease model of parenting’, observing that one of its drawbacks is its failure to take account of the socio-political angle wherein the societal reaction to abuse is not considered as inclusive or problematic. However, Kempe and Kempe (1978) focus more on individual characteristics of parents and provide examples of physical abuse by both the mother and the father. They go on to say that if a parent is abusive due to background stress, as is indicated as one of the factors present in situations of child physical abuse, then it would follow that one could expect this parent to be the mother as it is usually the mother who is the primary caregiver of the child. In addition, Stern (1987) points to the concept of single parenting which could be a contributory factor to the onset of stress, and we know that single parents are more likely to be mothers than fathers. Steinmetz (1977-78; cited in McNeely and Robinson-Simpson, 1987) argues that women are more likely to physically abuse children, and furthermore throughout history women have been shown as the primary perpetrators of infanticide.

For the most part though, women are recorded as significantly less violent than men (e.g. Newburn and Stanko, 1994; Heidensohn, 1996). This is particularly well documented within the realm of work on domestic violence and street violence. Koss (1990; cited in Renzetti, 1992) reveals that in the prevalence studies which have been carried out on abuse within heterosexual relationships, it is estimated that between 25-33% experience battering. In her research involving the general public in Islington, Mooney (1993) found that one in three women had experienced abuse from their partners, with one in ten having experienced it in the last twelve months. In addition to interviewing women, Mooney also interviewed men about their use of violence which led Walklate (1995: 94) to observe that:

"The readiness with which men in this survey admitted to having used violence against their partners points again to the necessity for an understanding of women's experiences of violence which focuses on the way in which violence is deemed a legitimate expression of masculinity".

Outside of this context emerges the work carried out on lesbian battering. Hart (1985) has established that many lesbians batter for similar reasons that men batter; as a means of achieving, maintaining and demonstrating power over their partners in order to accomplish their own needs and desires. These women, like their male counterparts, have learnt that violence can be an effective way of gaining power and control over their partners. Renzetti (1992) found that a 'typical' form of abuse between lesbians did not exist, and she therefore concluded that it is not the forms that the abuse may take which is significant to understanding violent relationships, rather it is the factors which give rise to the abuse and the consequences of the abuse for both the batterers and the abused. Renzetti argues that in this way lesbian battering is no different from the abuse in heterosexual relationships. However it should be noted that in other ways there are factors unique to the abuse within a lesbian relationship, not least the issue of silent suffering due to society's amalgamated lesser acceptance of both lesbian relationships and female violence.

What seems to have become apparent from this examination of gender and violence is the fact that violence cannot be directly correlated with the concept of masculinity. There are violent acts which are unequivocally more male-dominated than others, such as domestic violence and rape. Crimes such as these more often have a male-perpetrator/female-survivor interaction than any other interaction which does require feminist analysis and a focus on masculinity, but crimes which involve same-sex violence or violence against children need further exploration as it is becoming increasingly clear that women perpetrate such offences. While violence is universal, the specifics of it may differ from culture to culture as do aspects within class, race and gender. Power and inequality also exist universally, again in different forms, suggesting that they are inexplicably linked to violence. I would argue that violence has the potential to occur when there is the presence of inequality and power relations differ from one party to another. Such power differences are undoubtedly gendered and account for the overwhelmingly male-dominated crimes such as domestic violence and rape.<sup>1</sup> This can further be

extended to the sexual victimisation of children where the majority of perpetrators are male; however working from the premise that child sexual abuse is illustrative of an act which represents significant power inequalities irrespective of the gender interaction involved, it would follow that women will also perpetrate such abuse.

### **The under-recognition of boys as survivors and women as perpetrators**

This section of the chapter is concerned with looking at the links between the issues involved in the construction of gender as examined above, and how this is integral to the phenomenon of child sexual abuse. Societal images of masculinity and femininity are challenged through the reversal of traditional roles in relation to perpetrator and survivor gender, as is the mainstream philosophy surrounding the general ethos and understanding of child sexual abuse. Given the historical assumption that sexual abuse is solely perpetrated by a man to a girl, we need to examine why there is this lack of recognition for alternative interactions. The key strand within this under-recognition appears to relate directly to the construction of gender and then in turn to the myths which sustain the attitudes held about sexual abuse.

#### *Boys as Survivors*

A number of writers have examined issues surrounding the sexual victimisation of boys. My aim in this section is to review some of these major texts in terms of the under-recognition of male victims. This exploration will go some way towards explaining one aspect of the historical denial of child sexual abuse set out in the previous chapter. Without minimising the range and severity of issues intrinsic to the sexual abuse of girls, it is necessary to focus on some of the issues involved in the sexual abuse of boys which arise because of the expectations of masculinity discussed throughout this chapter and which compound the damaging effects of child sexual abuse.

Finkelhor (1984) proposed two reasons to attempt to explain why such scant attention has been devoted to male sexual victimisation. Firstly he argues that it was as a result of the women's movement that work was originally carried out on sexual abuse in general, and that it was after awareness of the social problem of rape against women had been raised that people began to take an interest in the sexual abuse of children. Due to the fact that the work revolved

around male violence towards women and girls, boys tended to be neglected from this paradigm. Secondly, most of the information professionals were receiving about sexual abuse appeared to typify one particular theory; the family dysfunction theory. This quickly began to represent the 'classic' approach to explaining child sexual abuse. As this model focuses exclusively on the father's involvement with his daughter as the result of marital disharmony, the approach applies solely to females and therefore, at a time when sexual abuse was gaining deserved attention, it did not allow for the consideration of boys as survivors.

This early oversight led to a general under-recognition of boys as sexual abuse survivors, and much of this is intrinsically linked to the concept of masculinity (Grubman-Black, 1990; Hunter, 1990; Lew, 1990; Gonsiorek et al, 1994; Etherington, 1995; Mendel, 1995). This concept has been examined throughout this chapter and I intend to continue drawing upon it to illustrate the problem of recognising male sexual victimisation. Mendel (1995: 4) suggests a number of ways in which the construction of masculinity has hindered the recognition of boys as survivors of sexual abuse. Male socialisation is seen as powerful, active and competent as opposed to passive, helpless and victimised. It would appear that as a result of "societal (mis)conceptions of masculinity,...males are more readily recognised as victimisers than as victims". This theme is echoed by Finkelhor (1984) who argues that one reason why boys are less likely to report their victimisation experiences is because they have grown up with the 'male ethic of self-reliance' ("big boys don't cry" and "fight your own battles") within the general masculine ethos. As Finkelhor (1984: 156) states "when experiences are never talked about, they cannot get reported" and thus will not be recognised.

Mendel's second suggestion lies within the idea that a male survivor is likely to act in a particular way in order to avoid seeing himself as a helpless victim. As a result of male socialisation, it is arguable that a male survivor will act aggressively or perpetrate abusive acts upon others in order to avoid falling into the 'victim' role.

Other authors concur with this suggestion. Lew (1990) proposes that one difficulty faced by male survivors is the confusion between abuse and power, and that this may lead to a survivor setting himself up as a perpetrator. He argues that one way for a survivor to avoid the role of the victim is to achieve power through perpetrating sexual abuse. Etherington (1995) devotes a chapter of her book to

discussing aspects of male socialisation in a bid to understand how patriarchy contributes to the under-recognition of male sexual victimisation. She suggests that the values and norms adopted by males through their socialisation process are reflected in male survivors' responses to their abuse. In other words, because of the pressure on males to conform to stereotypes (e.g. strong, tough, dominant), they must reject the 'victim' role – either by remaining silent and 'coping' or by identifying with the perpetrator and engaging in sexually abusive behaviours themselves.

Earlier in the chapter we examined aspects of male sexuality and how they may relate to child sexual abuse. It should be clear to see how these same aspects do not allow us to perceive boys as survivors. Beliefs about boys being always eager and ready to engage in sexual activity mean that much male sexual interaction will not be construed as abusive, this being particularly true of sexual interactions with female partners. In fact it can feasibly be argued that not only are these interactions perceived as non-abusive, but sexual interaction with older females is often considered to be desirable, even enviable, within society. In his research into the media - or cinematic - representation of boys as survivors of abuse, Trivelpiece (1990) discusses a number of films which depict sexual interactions between boys and older women as desirable or humorous. Similarly, note the difference between the representation of woman-boy and man-girl sexual interactions in newspapers; an article entitled 'My Affair With Nurse, By Boy Of 12' (Young, 1996) describes a sexual relationship between a twenty-eight year old woman and a twelve-year old boy. The woman was termed a "temptress" and the act itself "a torrid affair". It is difficult to imagine man-girl sexual interactions portrayed in the same light. Not only do these representations add to the existing societal attitudes about boys as survivors; they also affect the way in which boys see their own victimisation: "I lost my virginity with a neighbourhood lady when I was seven" (Nyman and Svensson, 1997: 15).

Gonsiorek et al (1994) also cite media representations as giving rise to the failure of identifying male victimisation. They draw upon the media as one source of cultural gender stereotyping which contribute to this under-recognition. Gonsiorek et al (1994), in exploring other sources leading to the under-recognition of male victimisation, discuss the role of victim support services and mental health professionals, and how they can silence a male's disclosure of sexual abuse.

Indeed, in a more therapy-orientated text, Hunter (1990) focuses quite exclusively on the role of therapists in terms of under-recognising males as victims. Hunter suggests that male victims may not be identified as such because the therapist does not 'allow' them to disclose (i.e. if the therapist does not bring up the topic, the message conveyed may be that such a topic is not permitted). He also suggests that a therapist's lack of awareness may be a contributory factor to the abuse not being disclosed or only discussed on a superficial level. Quite pertinent to this thesis is Hunter's (1990) suggestion that a therapist's definition of abuse may not encompass the experience of the client. So while the experience may be discussed, the label of abuse may never be attached. In symbolic interactionist terms, this would be explained through the premise that an individual will act towards something depending on the meaning it has for them (Blumer, 1969).

The unwillingness of such areas in society to acknowledge male sexual victimisation will have a direct impact upon a male's perception of his abusive experience and his willingness to report the abuse. His perception and willingness to disclose will be impacted differently depending upon the gender of his perpetrator. For boys who have been abused by women, there is a high likelihood that they will not identify it as abuse since this contradicts societal expectations of masculinity. Given that sexual interaction with older females tends to be glamourised by society, this can cause great anxiety to boys who find the experience traumatic and distressing. For boys who have been abused by men, there emerges the issue of homophobia. Mendel (1995) suggests that, due to homophobic attitudes within society, a male survivor may not disclose his abuse for fear of being seen as homosexual. Finkelhor (1984) also proposes that under-reporting may be due to the possible stigma of homosexuality. He suggests that for many boys being sexually abused by a man can raise doubts about their own masculinity, particularly as, Dimock (1988, cited in Mendel, 1995) suggests, there is an additional fear that they may have been chosen on the basis that they appeared to be gay. Additionally Grubman-Black (1990) writes that issues of sexuality and homophobia are key problems in sexually abused boys' processes of healing. He cites the confusion of having been chosen and sexually engaged by a man, particularly in the many cases of boys enjoying the attention and/or pleasure that arose from the abuse.

In sum, this section has focused quite exclusively on the reasons for the under-recognition of the sexual victimisation of males. It has pointed to the importance of male socialisation, the construction of masculinity and the effects of patriarchy as factors inherent in silencing the victims of sexual abuse. Not 'allowing' males to disclose and not 'hearing' their experiences of abuse has understandably led to Hunter (1990) terming them 'the neglected victims of sexual abuse'.

### *Women as Perpetrators*

"Recognition of sexual molestation in a child is dependent upon the individual's inherent willingness to entertain the possibility that the condition may exist." (Sgroi, 1975, cited in Mendel, 1995: 14)

Even more so than the under-recognition of boys as survivors comes the firmly misplaced belief that women do not sexually abuse children. Groth (1979) was one of the first researchers to suggest that the number of females who sexually abuse might not be as small as cases are indicating. He offers three main reasons in support of his view: (i) women may be more able to disguise inappropriate sexual contact through activities such as bathing and dressing the child; (ii) it has become apparent that abuse by women is more likely to be incestuous by nature and intra-familial abuse is in general less likely to be reported; (iii) it is more likely that boys are the target of female-perpetrated sexual abuse and, as was discussed previously, boys are less likely to disclose the abuse.

The reasons that Groth (1979) proposes have been discussed in some depth as a means of determining their possible validity. Researchers who have involved themselves in such deliberations have used these reasons to further support arguments on the extent of male preponderance within child sexual abuse. They state that, due to the lack of evidence from clinical studies and self-report surveys which appear to fail to support the possible explanations for the under-estimation of the number of female perpetrators, these explanations appear to illustrate that despite ample opportunities for women to abuse, very few appear to do so (for a full discussion see Russell and Finkelhor, 1984; Finkelhor and Russell, 1984).

As in the previous sub-section, the under-recognition of women as perpetrators appears to be grounded within the process of socialisation. Heidensohn (1996) offers a duality with regard to women and criminality in that

they are seen as either wicked or saintly, whores or mothers. This explicitly implies an idealisation of motherhood wherein mothers represent all goodness and can do no evil. Lew (1990) suggests that this may be due to a cultural stereotype that mothers are more trusted than fathers. These conceptions are intrinsically linked to perceptions of child sexual abuse, particularly to who is the victimiser and who is the victimised. This view is reflected in Welldon's (1988) work where she asserts that the failure to recognise women as sexual abusers may in part be a result of society's glorification of motherhood and its refusal to consider that it may have a dark side. This is of course not the case, as studies into female perpetration have revealed that often, if not overwhelmingly, it is the mother who is the perpetrator (see, for example, Elliott, 1993; Etherington, 1995).

Perceptions of sexuality play a vital role in our non-acceptance of women as sex abusers. Women are socialised to be less sexually aggressive and tend not to act as the initiators of sexual relations. They are also discouraged in promiscuity more than men, and expected to be less sexually aroused by external stimuli. Women are also apparently devoid of the sexual urges which are allegedly so rampant in men; rape is often blamed on men's uncontrollable sexual urges, particularly in the case of date rape where the woman is frequently seen as having led the man on to the point where he was 'unable' to stop his actions. Such views as these can result in the supposition that "abuse – particularly sexual abuse – does not fit the cultural construction of femininity" (Mendel, 1995: 27).

One theory that many people question with regard to the notion of female perpetrators is related to the physical and sexual capability of a woman. Finkelhor (1979) attacks the popular opinion that women are incapable of rape, not only due to their physical strength and size, but also because in order for participation in sexual intercourse it is necessary for the male to have an erect penis. It has been hypothesised that as a result of these uncontrollable factors a woman is deemed incapable of rape, and by extension, sexual abuse. However, as both Groth (1979) and Sarrall and Masters (1982) have indicated in their work on male sexual victimisation, erections can be forced in circumstances of fear, terror or coercion. Furthermore, as was highlighted in Chapter One, few perpetrators – male or female – have full sexual intercourse with children. Many sexually abusive activities concern masturbatory acts in which a woman can participate as easily as a man (Finkelhor, 1979; 1984). In addition to this, women sexually abuse girls as

well as boys which suggests that perpetrating sexual abuse does not necessitate the presence of an erect penis.

Elliott (1993) also condemns the notion that women are unable to sexually abuse due to their female anatomy (i.e. the lack of an erect penis) which resounds an argument used to question how women are physically able to sexually abuse a child. This draws again on the fact that sexual intercourse does not have to occur for sexual interaction to be termed sexual abuse. In fact, Gonsiorek et al (1994) make an interesting point along these lines. They propose making the reasonable assumption that perpetrators act consistently with sex role stereotypes – reasonable in so far as perpetrators tend to be quite conventional in these stereotypes. Given this assumption, Gonsiorek et al suggest that it would follow that female perpetrators would abuse in a more ‘female’ manner (i.e. less goal-directed, violent or overtly genital focused). In other words, the acts used by female perpetrators may be qualitatively different and more subtle than those used by men. As illustrated later in the thesis in discussing my research findings, the sort of acts that Gonsiorek et al suggest (i.e. caressing, fondling, seductiveness) will be far less likely to be picked up on, reported or labelled as sexual abuse than the more overt activities of a male perpetrator. The nature of sexually abusive acts and defining sexual abuse forms a substantial aspect of this thesis as a result of the empirical research.

The non-acceptance of women as sexual abusers also appears to be embedded within the feminist analysis of child sexual abuse. As was illustrated in Chapter One, it was feminists in this area who first put the abuse of women and children on the political and professional agenda. As a result, this analysis failed initially to take account of the sexual abuse perpetrated by women.

At the beginning of this section I examined a number of reasons proposed by Groth (1979) as to why female-perpetrated sexual abuse might be so hidden. These were counter-argued by other researchers in this area, David Finkelhor and Diana Russell. They explored and disputed views that child sexual abuse was anything but a male-oriented crime, concluding that:

“Every theory of child molestation must explain not just why adults become sexually interested in children, but why that explanation applies primarily to males and not females” (Russell and Finkelhor, 1984: 228).

Allen (1990) suggests that, as a result of this analysis, no other explanations regarding sexual abuse were considered. Although Finkelhor (1986) did shift his theoretical stance from strong feminist to a multi-factor model which allowed for a more comprehensive theory of child sexual abuse, his perspective in relation to gender appeared to remain the same.

Kasl (1990: 259) discusses the various political dangers and controversies entrenched within the feminist analysis of child sexual abuse. Given the basic tenets of the theory, she writes of being informed that “we should not be talking about female perpetrators because it lets men ‘off the hook’ and they will use the information to obscure the extent of male-perpetrated sexual abuse”. It is not simply a question of the feminist theory being challenged, but of work on female-perpetration undermining the more prevalent problem of male-perpetrated sexual abuse. *All* evidence indicates that male perpetrators far outnumber female perpetrators and we should not lose sight of the importance of feminist explanations. Indeed male dominance, patriarchal society and differential socialisation explains a great deal about child sexual abuse. However, Allen (1990) argues that significant difficulties arise with accepting feminist perspectives as the only viable explanation for sexual abuse, and that this is where we fail to recognise women as sexual abusers.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has been concerned with how masculinity and femininity are constructed, and how these concepts relate to aspects of sexuality, violence, and the central theme of child sexual abuse. Whilst an analysis of gender provides coherent explanations for why men are the primary perpetrators of sexual and violent offences, it similarly illustrates why women tend not to be perceived as perpetrators. There are prescribed gender roles which we fulfil within society, and deviation from these roles can result in threats or challenges in what we consider to be ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. In the context of this work the risks involved in rigidly maintaining preordained gender roles and concepts of masculinity and femininity, means that societal beliefs do not include recognising males as survivors and, particularly, females as perpetrators as it defies conventional views of gender.

The chapter has argued that the process of socialisation is an integral aspect in the under-recognition of males as survivors and females as perpetrators. Attention has been drawn to key texts which cite reasons for this under-recognition, and these reasons are shown to be grounded within the socialisation process. Many of these reasons (e.g. media representation and female anatomy) will be revisited later in the thesis in the application of symbolic interactionism to the analyses of data.

In sum, the general theme of this chapter (i.e. deconstructing masculinity and femininity) is directly relevant to studying the significance of gender in child sexual abuse for two reasons. First, men are the primary perpetrators of sexual abuse and this fact appears to be embedded within the construction of masculinity and femininity. Second, the gender roles and stereotypes that arise from the construction of masculinity and femininity can obscure the recognition of boys as survivors and women as perpetrators. As such, gender becomes a significant factor in identifying the existence of sexual victimisation and the way in which it is responded to.

I move now to Chapter Three which will open with a detailed exploration of the specific areas within child sexual abuse where the significance of gender can be observed.

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<sup>1</sup> Male to female power differences exist not only through physical strength but through patriarchal belief systems. These beliefs are supported and reinforced by the messages men receive from various external forces including upbringing, media, religion, institutions and other such aspects of society. This will also explain the extremely low incidence rates of 'battered husband syndrome', a suggestion put forward by Steinmetz (1977-78; cited in McNeely and Robinson-Simpson, 1987); and the similarly low incidence rates for male rape by females.

## CHAPTER III

### SCOPE, PERSPECTIVE AND METHOD

#### **Introduction**

The background to this thesis has been outlined in the preceding two chapters. It is the function of this chapter to explore the specifics of this particular research: *what* the research consists of; *why* it has been deemed necessary to undertake; and *how* the research will be conducted. The first part of the chapter will explore the scope of the work to be undertaken. The overall purpose of the thesis will be considered in terms of the specific areas on which the research will focus. Theoretical perspectives, whilst constituting an aspect of the scope of the research, forms the second part of this chapter and is an exploration of an appropriate framework with which to examine the issues arising from the empirical research. The last part of the chapter will focus on the specific methodology of the study.

#### **Scope of the research**

To examine the significance of gender in child sexual abuse, it is necessary to first gain a greater understanding of the related areas within the field that have been identified as relevant to this study. These areas are: attitudes; survivors' experiences of abuse; service providers' responses; reporting abuse; and criminal justice responses. This section of the chapter will provide an overview of past research into these specific arenas of gender and child sexual abuse, highlighting the reasons for their inclusion in the study. The following section will outline how the empirical evidence obtained is analysed using symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective to demonstrate the significance of gender in how events are experienced and understood.

*Attitudes to Gender and Child Sexual Abuse*

Attitudes towards gender and child sexual abuse form part of understanding how an individual will make sense of an abuse experience, be they a survivor or professional, and will impact upon how the individual defines the experience. Research focusing quite specifically on attitudes towards gender and child sexual abuse has been carried out in the past. Finkelhor (1984) found that people consider a sexual interaction with a female perpetrator to be less abusive than that with a male perpetrator. Broussard et al (1991) found that their sample of undergraduate students, when asked about their perceptions of child sexual abuse, indicated that the sexual interaction of a male survivor and female perpetrator was the interaction least representative of sexual abuse. These students also perceived male survivors who had been sexually abused by a female as experiencing less harm than any other interactional pattern.<sup>1</sup> Similar results were found by Fischer (1990, cited by Jennings, 1993) whose subjects were themselves survivors. My own previous research highlighted an overall tendency for people to perceive sexual abuse perpetrated by a man as more serious than that perpetrated by a woman (Horwell, 1996). Paradoxically, Ainscough and Toon (1993) suggested that children who had been sexually abused by their mother may feel that they have suffered the greatest betrayal of all as mothers are seen to protect and care for their young. This is a theory supported by Jennings (1993) and Elliott (1996; cited in Hunter, 1996: 42) who states that “motherhood is sacred territory...the thought of the mother as sexually deviant is utterly terrifying and strikes at the heart of everything we respect and cherish.”

Attitudes and beliefs held about child sexual abuse and gender are significant because of the implications they carry. The aforementioned perceptions are inextricably linked to aspects such as the reporting of the abuse, the support available to the survivor and the legal consequences of the abuse for the perpetrator: the precise areas being examined within this research. In support of this argument, and indeed the overall cogency of this research, Broussard et al (1991: 269) suggest that “public attitudes concerning child sexual abuse can significantly affect the reporting, prosecution and provision of clinical services in cases involving child molestation.”

In the sub-sections that follow, I focus on four areas in which gender can be seen to have an impact on child sexual abuse. The purpose of this is to review the differences according to gender in what has been shown by previous research about child sexual abuse. I consider this important since this study is designed to highlight the effect and significance of gender on factors involved in the abuse experience.

### *Gender and Survivors' Experiences*

Since research began into child sexual abuse, female survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse have been encouraged to talk and express their feelings about their experiences. Countless books and self-help guides have been written outlining the experiences of female survivors. In recent years we have started to learn more about the experiences of male survivors of sexual abuse perpetrated by men as awareness about this has grown. We have very little information on the experiences of survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse because only a few studies have looked at this particular interaction in any real detail.

Finkelhor (1984) presents findings which indicate that the sexual abuse of boys is more likely to come from outside of the family than is the case for girls. Etherington's (1995) research found that more than half of her sample of adult male survivors reported having been abused by someone outside the home. However, researchers such as Pierce and Pierce (1985), Vander May (1988) and Faller (1987) indicate that the father is the most frequently cited perpetrator of boys. Russell (1984) found that the majority of perpetrators, in her research into the sexual abuse of girls, were known but unrelated to the child.

Similarly, research findings appear to be contradictory when considering the age of abused children. Finkelhor (1984) cites the work carried out by the American Humane Association in 1981 showing that boys tend to be significantly younger than their female counterparts when the abuse takes place. However, earlier research carried out by Finkelhor (1979) found that the median age of boys was 11.2 whereas for girls it was 10.2, and other studies have supported this finding (see Chapter One). Looking at the data collected by Etherington (1995) it appears that the age of boys abused by men is significantly higher than the age of boys abused by women, with the mother-son abuse predominantly occurring when the son was a baby.

There do appear to be consistent differences surrounding the type of abuse reported by males and females. Pierce and Pierce (1985) found that the male survivors in their study were more likely to experience 'contact' victimisation as opposed to 'non-contact' victimisation (i.e. masturbation rather than exposure), and they were also more likely to experience threats of, or actual use of, force. Dube and Hebert (1988) studied children seen at a paediatric hospital for alleged child abuse and reported that while there were far fewer male survivors seen, these boys were more frequently subjected to "very serious sexual abuse". This finding is supported by Gordon (1990) who found that boys were more likely to be subjected to attempted or actual intercourse than girls – an act that tends to be considered 'most serious' in nature by numerous research studies.

Along similar lines in terms of the nature of abuse, differences exist concerning the role of violence perpetrated in conjunction with the sexual abuse. Matthews (cited by Hunter, 1996) suggests that women rarely use excessive force or violence when they sexually abuse children and that they make far fewer threats as a means of keeping the children quiet. Kitahara (1989) supports the former point in her work on incest and the Japanese culture. She infers the lack of violence in mother-son incest cases by contrasting them with father-daughter incest, describing the latter as "cases...much like the ones in the U.S. Typically, the father forces his daughter to have intercourse, often quite violently" (Kitahara, 1989: 449).

Other differences which have been highlighted by researchers occur within the family background in that boys tend to come from poorer families and also seem to be the victims of physical abuse more than girls (Finkelhor, 1984). The American Humane Association (1981, cited in Finkelhor, 1984) found that when a girl is sexually abused by a parent the majority of the time she will be the only reported child. Alternatively, when a boy is abused, the majority of the time there will be another survivor, usually a sister. Finkelhor (1984) suggests that one of the ways a boy is identified as having been abused may be due to the sister reporting her own abuse or such abuse is discovered. It is therefore in the course of a subsequent investigation that the boy as a victim is revealed (i.e. as a consequence of girls disclosure). In cases where a lone boy is being abused it may be that the abuse is less likely to be discovered due to the reluctance of boys to disclose being sexually abused.

One finding drawn from Gordon's (1990) research highlighted the point that boys seem to be more likely to experience an isolated incident of abuse compared to girls. I suggest that this is consistent with the finding that boys tend to be abused by people outside the home for two main reasons. Firstly, if a child is abused by someone outside the home that person has to have an opportunity – a period of time alone with the child – in order to carry out the abuse. On the whole these 'opportunities' occur far less than when the perpetrator lives with the child. Furthermore once the perpetrator takes their opportunity the child may work very hard at not being alone with that person again, thus the occasion does not re-occur. Secondly, boys tend to be given more freedom in general than girls in terms of staying out later and choosing their own activities (Gordon, 1990). Therefore not only does this increase the likelihood of extra-familial abuse but abuse by strangers is more likely to be a one-off as a similar occasion is unlikely to arise again.

This overview of past research pertaining to the different factors involved in sexual abuse in relation to gender has provided a background to the quantitative data that will emerge in this study. On their own, such quantitative aspects do not amount to much in the face of this study's overall purpose; that is, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of gender in child sexual abuse. Aspects such as those highlighted in this sub-section and those gleaned from the quantitative data in this research, do, however, have significance in understanding how an event is experienced and interpreted. Factors such as the child's relationship to their abuser and the sexual acts perpetrated will influence the way in which the survivor makes sense of, and defines, the abuse experience.

#### *Gender and Service Providers' Responses*

Much of the work around child sexual abuse has been as a result of the women's movement in the 1960's and 70's, and the provision of services are no exception. The first Rape Crisis Centre (RCC) to open in England was in 1976 (Gillespie, 1994; Foley, 1996) in response to the growing number of women reporting rape and seeking help. The central focus of RCCs is male violence to women and Foley (1996) provides us with an exposition of how campaigning was fundamental to their work. These campaigns strove to heighten awareness about many of the issues to do with rape, including challenging the orthodoxy of blaming women and

excusing men for rape and seeking changes in the way that professionals dealt with rape survivors. The first RCC was set up by a group of women who had been trying to break the silence and the myths surrounding rape; it was run by and for women (London Rape Crisis Centre, 1984). Today RCCs tend to operate in a similar fashion as specifically feminist organisations, although according to Gillespie (1994) they are not necessarily homogenous, with each organisation retaining autonomy.

As awareness about sexual violence of women and girls grew, so did the services available to them. By 1989 there were over fifty-five RCCs offering services to females who had been raped or sexually abused (Gillespie, 1994). This was a service that was crucially needed for these women; as more women came forward the more awareness grew, and the more awareness grew the more women that came forward. Rape and sexual abuse was finally getting the attention it needed and survivors were breaking the silence and getting the voice they had not had. The feminist theory of rape and sexual abuse became an intrinsic part of the work and support offered to survivors. These survivors were bound by an important commonality: they were females who had been raped or sexually abused by men.

This work is needed as much today as it was then, with services being under-funded, under-resourced and facing an ever-increasing demand by service users (Gillespie, 1994). A further difficulty now is the contention over what to do with those who do not “fit” into the ethos of the RCC and other feminist-based organisations; those who do not “fit” into, and indeed contradict, feminist thinking on rape and sexual abuse. I refer here to those not fitting as a result of their gender. Chapter Two examined the impact of sexual abuse on boys and its link with masculinity; one of the many things discussed in that section was the isolation boys and men feel following the experience of sexual victimisation. Much of this isolation runs concurrent with the provisions available to male survivors. The research which has looked into this area, albeit scarce, focuses primarily on the male rape of adult men and tends to debate the extent to which RCCs have assisted male rape survivors. While this is important to bear in mind during this section, the principle is applicable to male survivors of sexual abuse also.

Rape Crisis Centres have been criticised as being extremely unhelpful organisations to male survivors (Gillespie, 1996). Richie McMullen (1990) talks of his experiences in attempting to get help from RCC after he was raped where he found an unhelpful, indeed hostile, response. He describes subsequently contacting an RCC to determine where they might refer a man who had been raped or sexually abused and was told that their first reference would be a particular gay organisation. This raises concerns about the services available to male survivors given that this type of organisation would not be suitable for heterosexual men as it may well serve to reinforce homosexual fears, as discussed in Chapter Two. Another male rape survivor describes how he was treated when he turned to the RCC for assistance: "they refused to help because I was a man" (Sampson, 1991: 17).

Given that RCCs are women-only organisations and most members of the Rape Crisis Federation appear to favour this approach (South Cumbria Rape and Abuse Service, 1998), this indicates a clear gap in the services that are being provided, namely to male survivors. It was this lack of provisions which led Richie McMullen in 1988 to set up Survivors, a male-centred rape crisis group. Today Survivors is perhaps the most established of any male rape survivor group, having earned itself a positive reputation and taking hundreds of calls each year from male survivors. And yet even with this recent service provision there still appears to be contention over RCCs working with male clients. Michael King (1990: 1345) argues that "...there is a great need for the specialised rape services already catering for women to include men as well". Similarly Martin Dockrell, the co-founder of Survivors, discusses the respect he feels for the decision of RCCs to remain a women-only organisation but simultaneously believes that they should help men as well (Sampson, 1991). There does seem to be a stark contradiction in what these men are suggesting. It seems to me that it is because these organisations are women-only, that so many women feel able to turn to them. It would certainly appear that this must play some part. It is argued, and supported by many female survivors, that women do feel safer, more assured and more empowered in an all-female setting rather than a mixed one. In order to respect a female-only organisation, it seems that one would have to understand that a large part of its strength comes precisely because it is a female-only organisation. A more positive

view of this issue would be that of Richie McMullen (1990) who suggests that male survivor groups need to learn from RCCs in terms of the development of caring services and responses and then apply this knowledge and expertise to support male survivors.

There are a number of other issues involved in the debate over the inclusion of male survivors in women-only organisations. One main concern is about the ongoing difficulty of funding. The distinct lack of funds within this field was mentioned earlier in this section and regardless of any feminist ethos, there would be monetary problems with extending services to male clients as some funders have a female priority. So not only may there be a difficulty about not having sufficient provision, but there is also the fear of provision being cut with the inclusion of males (see also Gillespie, 1994). As Gillespie (1996: 156) points out "It is unrealistic to expect RCCs, already overstretched and underfunded, to offer counselling on masculinity to gay and heterosexual men who have been sexually assaulted."

In 1998 the South Cumbria Rape and Abuse Service (SCRAS) sent out questionnaires to groups in the UK working with survivors of rape and sexual abuse. They wanted to establish the number of groups offering a service to men and women and to examine how groups felt about including men. They had a wide range of responses about the issues raised; some groups were very enthusiastic about the research while others condemned it. One of the more surprising and telling findings was that about one-third of the Rape Crisis Federation (RCF) groups who responded indicated that they would welcome a change in the RCF policy of female-only services. Another interesting finding was that nearly 60% of the non-RCF groups stated that they were not part of the RCF because of the RCFs women-only policy. Despite this however, it does not look likely that the Federation is set to change all it has worked towards: "...our primary responsibility is, and will always remain, to our member groups and women survivors who support our aims and objectives" (Rape Crisis Federation, 1998).

One major argument concerning having a women-only organisation which does not include men is the attitude that 'if men want the service, let them do it themselves', advice which McMullen and Dockrell had little choice but to take. Several respondents in the SCRAS questionnaire intimated such attitudes:

“...it seems that important movements of support for women, initiated with few resources, little money, but lots of enthusiasm and conviction, are now, in the 90’s being asked to change, in order to provide a service/services for men....Basically I am writing to say what’s been said for a long, long time. Why aren’t men doing this work?” (SCRAS, 1998:1)

“...why try to lobby the Federation which has finally been set up as a voice for women- a voice which has been hard won after 30 years of struggle...Where were your male survivors and clients then?” (SCRAS, 1998:2)

These thoughts and beliefs are not surprising given the years of hard work and struggles of feminists so that women and girls could speak more openly about sexual violence and so that the issues surrounding it would begin to be publicly addressed. Nevertheless, should this be a just cause for ignoring or minimising the plight of so many male survivors? Is this not a replica of the treatment women received? And given the expertise of those working with survivors of sexual violence, is this not an ideal stance with which to incorporate work with male survivors? This latter question is perhaps, in practical terms, a more difficult one to answer as it is dependent upon a range of factors. Some of these have already been discussed such as the issue of funding and the premise that women-only structures can be particularly empowering and “safer” for the female clients.

Given the potential for a diversity of issues involved in child sexual abuse as a result of the gender effect, it is necessary to examine what exactly is being offered currently to survivors, whether their needs are being met and who or what is being overlooked within this field. Just as thirty years ago when organisations were being set up in response to female survivors of rape and sexual abuse whereby awareness was growing and their needs became public, we are experiencing a similar cry now.

### *Gender and Reporting Child Sexual Abuse*

Exploring the nature of reporting trends of crime has been a focus for criminological research for some time, for instance see the Home Office’s British Crime Survey. There are particular crimes which are considered to be vastly under-reported due to the nature of the crime. Domestic violence is one such crime

whereby until relatively recently it was considered a private matter within an intimate relationship. Radford and Stanko (1991, cited by Walklate, 1995: 89) quoted Sir Kenneth Newman as naming domestic violence and stray dogs as “rubbish” work for the police. Professional attitudes such as these and the general public attitude of ‘why doesn’t she leave?’ (much more frequently asked than ‘why does he abuse?’ which is a more constructive question) does not offer a very conducive environment in which to report domestic violence. Rape is another crime which infrequently gets reported, and similar to domestic violence, this under-reporting may partially be due to the blame laid on the survivor. To report a rape means to go through a long and tiring judicial process – if it gets this far – where every aspect of the survivor’s life is scrutinised. They are likely to be disbelieved, mocked, have the experience minimised or be accused of provocation. The rape of men is even less likely to be reported than the rape of women as a result of their gender. Male rape survivors not only face many of the issues which female survivors face such as self-blame, shame, fear and helplessness but they face the additional trauma caused by society’s vision of masculinity; they should not have been overpowered, particularly sexually, and having been so detracts from their perceived masculinity.

There are numerous reasons why a child will not report being sexually abused. Many reasons are the same as for the under-reporting of other ‘hidden’ crimes including blaming the self, threats from the perpetrator and fear of stigma of being victimised. Other motivations to avoid reporting may come from the fact that the abused person is a child and therefore is particularly vulnerable, for example because of the position of trust or authority the perpetrator holds. Incidentally the perpetrator will always be in this position given the power dynamics that exist between adult and child. Some studies have looked at the differing reporting strategies maintained within the various gender interactions, and it is findings such as these that are particularly relevant to this research project.

Finkelhor (1979) found that the overwhelming majority of survivors in his study, 63% of girls and 73% of boys, had never reported the abuse, even to close family members. Apart from the reasons suggested previously, Finkelhor also highlights the fact that children rarely get the practice or encouragement to discuss sexual matters. This may of course be linked to the era in which these people

would have been abused, however based on later research by Etherington (1995), the average time it took for disclosure to occur was twenty-eight years. Gordon (1990) found comparatively similar reporting levels *vis a vis* female versus male disclosure to Finkelhor (1979) although the overall rates of both were much higher than in Finkelhor's (1979) research; Gordon found that 53% of boys disclosed the abuse and 68% of girls disclosed.

The aim of this part of the research is to establish reporting levels of each gender interaction, namely male-perpetrator/female-survivor, male-perpetrator/male-survivor, female-perpetrator/male-survivor and female-perpetrator/female-survivor. Based on past and more current research on reporting child sexual abuse it seems that the level of disclosure has risen, particularly for survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse. I suggest that this may be in part due to our increased awareness of sexual abuse and our willingness to listen and talk about the issues surrounding it. The level of disclosure of female-perpetrated sexual abuse needs to be established and then analysed to consider reasons for possible low disclosure rates. Low disclosure rates are expected at this stage given the different issues which may surround this phenomenon, issues which have been discussed throughout the first three chapters of this thesis.

### *Gender and Criminal Justice Responses*

The purpose of this section is to define specifically what my research is aiming to uncover in terms of the legal consequences for child sex abusers. The data collected will be analysed to demonstrate how gender is significant in criminal justice professionals' definitions of sexual abuse and the extent to which such behaviour by women is seen as criminal. Thinking behind this particular aspect of the study comes, in part, from previous research findings on sex and sentencing in that findings in this area tend to point to female offenders experiencing very different treatment than their male counterparts at all stages of the legal process. This study seeks to explore the possible differences in treatment by focusing upon the process involved in professionals making sense of an abuse experience.

Heidensohn (1968: 160) has drawn researchers' attention to "...an obscure and largely ignored area of human behaviour, namely deviance in women" and since this time a number of feminist researchers have examined issues pertinent to

'women and crime', 'gender and criminal justice' and 'sex and sentencing'. A number of researchers in this field (for instance, Eaton, 1986; Allen, 1987; Lloyd, 1995) make some reference to the 'chivalry', or 'leniency' theory, whereby women get lighter sentences, and the 'doubly deviant' theory whereby women are treated more harshly by the courts as they have not only broken the law but they are seen to have gone against societal expectations of femininity. Eaton (1986) examines the 'chivalry' theory at length, offering a selection of studies which have, over time, looked into the court proceedings of male and female offenders. She cites studies which indicate a clear difference in court treatment in that women are treated more leniently, or paternalistically, although Eaton argues that this is not necessarily beneficial. If women are treated paternalistically (more like children than adults) then, like juveniles, women are less likely to have a jury trial which means that the probability of their obtaining a conviction is higher as it is thought that juries are less inclined to deliver convictions than are judges.

Lloyd (1995) supports the existence of the 'chivalry' theory. However, she suggests that it is unlikely to be extended to those women who do not conform to their gender stereotypes. So the 'chivalry' notion is particularly unlikely to apply to women who commit violent or sexual crimes as, due to the very nature of the crime, they have offended against what society understands femininity to be about. Writing on how violent women are treated by the courts, Lloyd (1995) suggests that violence and aggression are viewed as essentially masculine rather than just law-breaking and that, therefore, a court's perception of a violent woman is that she is unnatural, thus not conforming to her gendered 'norm'. Nagel and Weitzman (1971, cited in Eaton, 1986: 23) found a similar situation when they compared cases of assault and larceny where they suggested that the harsher responses to the assault cases were due to "...the unwomanly nature of such [a] crime." However if we consider the crime with which this thesis is concerned, we find a very different way of dealing with female perpetrators. Both Allen (1990) and Ramsey-Klawnsnik (1990, cited in Mendel, 1995: 26) point to examples of judges who threw out cases of child sexual abuse despite overwhelming evidence of the abuse occurring; the judge's reasoning being in one case that "women don't do those kinds of things...Besides, the children need their mother" (from Allen, 1990). On the basis of past research, as discussed here, it seems reasonable to suggest that women tried

for sexually abusing a child will be treated far differently than their male counterparts. Sexual crimes directed against children are considered to be the most abhorrent of crimes; if the perpetrator is a woman it would follow that attitudes would reflect either the view that a woman wouldn't, or couldn't, sexually abuse a child or the view that she must be evil and therefore punished appropriately.

So why might this difference exist? In the preceding chapters I have discussed the concept of women as sexual abusers and why it is that they are less likely to be perceived as such. The core of the argument revolved around the assumption that women are viewed as sexually passive beings whose primary traits include the caring and nurturance of children. Thus to deviate from this role, and hence deviate from the perception of women, would result in disbelief and denial (chivalry theory) or incredulity and horror (doubly deviant theory). In essence it comes down to a question of images, not only the image of what a woman is supposed to be like or what her role is supposed to be, but the image constructed of the sexual abuser. This image derives from our concept of gender stereotypes and I suggest that it is these stereotypes which influence our perceptions of the perpetrator. Eaton (1983, cited in Wilczynski, 1997) suggests that gender stereotypes can become more relevant if the crime is more unusual or serious in nature. On this basis it would appear that it is these stereotypes, and hence images, that play a lead role in the differential treatment of male and female sexual abusers in the criminal justice system.

An additional thematic consideration comes from work comparing those who abuse female children and those who abuse male children. Pierce and Pierce (1985) looked at the treatment of men abusing boys and girls, and found that perpetrators who had abused homosexually were more likely to receive harsher sentencing than those who abused heterosexually. The former were more likely to receive custodial sentences and to be judged as mentally ill. Pierce and Pierce explain this discrepancy by arguing that society is more likely to blame the perpetrator when he abuses a boy, but when the abuse involves a girl there is a tendency to remove some proportion of the blame from the perpetrator and place it with the 'seductive' female child.<sup>2</sup>

Wilczynski (1997) examined the response of the criminal justice system to men and women who had killed their children, in accordance with the view that

men are normal and bad, while women are abnormal and mad. In the analysis of the images constructed of the offenders, Wilczynski found that filicidal women were predominantly viewed as either 'sad' (i.e. women who had acted irrationally as a result of their difficult circumstances) or as 'mad' (i.e. mentally disturbed). These women were seen as not responsible for what they had done and were seen as needing help in order to come to terms with what they had done. Conversely, filicidal men were usually viewed as 'bad'. Their killings were seen as less surprising and they were viewed as being more in need of punishment than treatment. Along similar lines my previous research (Horwell, 1996) on attitudes towards female sexual abusers showed that people were far more likely to feel sorry for women than for men who sexually abuse children. This links into the idea of the images of criminal women but it also offers an insight into the consideration of how these perpetrators are subsequently treated by the criminal justice system. Do these attitudes have an impact on the type and length of sentence imposed by the courts?

The only other study to date, which has looked at the legal consequences experienced by male and female sex abusers, is an American study carried out by Allen (1991). Contrary to much of the previous research discussed in this section, Allen found that, with two exceptions, the legal consequences were very similar for male and female perpetrators. The two exceptions involved the removal of the children from the home and the prescribing of medication. Both consequences were far more likely (either singly or together) for female perpetrators than for male perpetrators. The latter consequence – prescription of medication – supports the findings of Wilczynski (1997) in relation to the 'mad vs. bad' hypothesis.

Much of the work carried out and written about male and female offenders, indeed about criminal justice in general, focuses on the 'punishment' model and the 'treatment' model of criminal sentencing. Worrall (1990), in her book 'Offending Women', suggests that people make sense of criminal women by either perceiving them as not really criminal – as before, supporting the chivalry theory – or as not really women meaning that their crime goes against them even more – illustrating the doubly deviant theory again. The research on women and crime tends to highlight the stark contrast with men receiving the punishment model while women are labelled as 'mad' or 'abnormal', thus receiving the treatment model. Allen

(1987) found that while psychiatric disposals were rare in general, women were twice as likely to be dealt with through psychiatric means within the criminal justice process. Similarly Wilczynski (1997: 423) found that filicidal women were much more likely to be dealt with using treatment-orientated methods; she comments that female sentences:

“involve less overt forms of control - the *internal* intervention of psychiatry and social work rather than the *external* intervention of prison walls or a maximum security mental hospital thought more appropriate for men” (original italics).

The social construction of women as ‘mad’ and men as ‘bad’ is not a novel concept nor is it confined to those who commit serious crimes. Societal attitudes are such that women are regarded as somewhat unstable due to their hormones. Pre-Menstrual Syndrome has been used to defend women for violent crimes as well as crimes of a less serious nature. Wilczynski (1997) considers in her article the concept of the medicalisation of women’s behaviour and how a significant body of feminist literature has pointed to the dangers of doing this. Using this argument I would suggest that this is applicable to the question of how we view female perpetrators in that by medicalising the behaviour of women who sexually abuse we are removing the responsibility of their crime from them thus having an impact on their ability to be treated. Furthermore, we are avoiding the causes and motives of the female perpetrator leading us to have a diminished understanding of the full dynamics involved in child sexual abuse.

While there has been a considerable body of research carried out on the area of gender and criminal justice, no research has examined the significance of gender in how criminal justice professionals make sense of, and respond to, child sexual abuse. It is deemed to be highly relevant to this research study given the link between attitudes about child sexual abuse and the ascribed gender effect.

### **Theoretical perspective**

A firm starting point of this inquiry is with the formulation of a theoretical perspective in which to ground the study in order to be able to analyse, understand and make sense of the data collected. The first task of this section is to provide a broad discussion of the suitably identified theoretical approach – symbolic

interactionism – in terms of its background and key concepts. I will demonstrate the relevance of applying interactionism to the study of gender and child sexual abuse by drawing on previous interactionist accounts and by identifying how the key concepts of interactionism relate to this study. The second task is to provide a more detailed account of how symbolic interactionism can provide a framework for thinking about data collected by the empirical research.

### *Applying Symbolic Interactionism as a Framework*

The roots of symbolic interactionism have frequently been traced to the work of Mead and Dewey (Plummer, 1975; Charon, 1998), both considered to be integral to the pioneering of interactionism. Two concepts of symbolic interactionism can be found in Mead's (1934) work. The notion of the 'self' is that it is a social object that arises from our interactions. Charon (1998) explains that a person will come to see themselves as an object in the environment through their interaction with others. Indeed, Mead (1934) argues that it is not possible to imagine how a 'self' could arise outside of social interaction, since the self is formed by the action of others towards the individual. Mead continues to explain the self by distinguishing between two parts: the 'I' and the 'me'. It seems that Mead regards the 'I' as the part of the self that is non-controlled – action that could be considered impulsive or unpredictable – while the 'me' is the more central part of the self and is our ongoing interaction in the world (Charon, 1998). This understanding can be developed further to incorporate the role of social interaction in creating the self. Theologian Michael Nevin (1992) talks about the 'I' as subject and the 'me' as object. The 'I' constantly turns the self into 'me' to examine it and to know it. In other words, to study the self (to understand the self), it must be the 'me' (object) not the 'I' (subject) even though the self is one.

Take, for example, the narratives provided by the survivors in this research. In telling me their stories, the survivors spoke about the self as 'me', the social object, rather than a subjective 'I'. In order for them to tell their story, they had to objectify the self since "subject precisely as subject cannot know itself" (Nevin, 1992: 40). We are the subject in the present moment; when that moment passes, thought occurs and the self becomes the object. In other words, I can "*experience*

myself as a subject as well as *know* myself as an object” (Nevin, 1992: 41; original emphasis). For the survivors, it was the ‘I’ making sense of the ‘me’.

A central component to this thesis concerns the processes involved in our social and symbolic interactions, and the way in which these interactions allow us to make sense of our world. It is as a result of such interactions that we can understand the notion of the ‘self’. Our experienced interactions enable us to talk about the ‘me’ – the social object – because any interaction we encounter moves us from the immediate present of the ‘I’ to the past ‘me’. The empirical data will illustrate the process of turning the ‘I’ into the ‘me’ by identifying a spectrum of social and symbolic interactions encountered by the survivor. Such interactions may include, for instance, the response to disclosure, an abusive act and a consequence of the abuse for the survivor, to name a few. Hence, understanding the notion of ‘self’ is a necessary part of this work.

A second central concept of symbolic interactionism is that of ‘role’. This refers to an individual taking the role of other – an activity that exists in every social situation (Charon, 1998). It is an attempt to see the world from someone else’s perspective and then acting accordingly. Charon writes that Mead (1934) considered that the other could be as wide as society and that it is important for individuals to take the role of society, internalise it and then control themselves accordingly. Through role taking – that is, by understanding the perspectives of others – we begin to recognise the existence of interpretation and meaning of acts, objects and events. Thus, the notion of ‘roles’ is a necessary part of our every day social interactions and our construction of a social world.

How does the notion of ‘role’ inform this thesis? As the researcher, through role-taking, I am attempting to construct a social reality involving the experience of childhood sexual abuse. In order to construct this social reality, it is necessary to understand the perspectives of others. By hearing the stories being told by research participants, their social worlds become accessible and I can begin to identify notions of interpretation and meaning of events.

The question remains, however, to what extent can we accurately role-take? This in itself is a rather subjective question. Generally speaking, it is unlikely that we are ever able to fully understand another’s experience of the world, and in attempting to do so, we each bring with us a set of assumptions, beliefs and

attitudes that will inform that experience. This is where interpretation plays a part. That is, we will interpret another's experience on the basis of what it means to us in order to make sense of it. In this research, human beings will take on a variety of 'roles' (e.g. victim of abuse) as well as fulfilling the notion of 'role-taking'. The former refers to the role they adopt, are attributed or give to others while the latter refers to the extent to which others' perspectives can be understood. In particular, the individuals in this research may take on roles depicting gender stereotypes. For instance, the role of a sexually abused boy who 'should' enjoy being initiated into sex or the role of a sexually abusive mother whose actions 'cannot' be harmful. In this sense, the notion of 'role' can be utilised twofold to inform this thesis.

Mead's work had considerable influence on the work of later sociologists, and particularly on one of his own students, Herbert Blumer (Charon, 1998). Blumer (1969: 2) outlines the three assumptions of symbolic interactionism. The first assumption is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them. The second is that the meaning of these things arises from the social interaction that a person has with others around them. And the third assumption of interactionism is that these meanings are considered and adapted through an interpretative process by the person when dealing with the things that they encounter.

This offers us some historical background to symbolic interactionism. However, in order for this perspective to have some element of tangible reference to my work, it is necessary to consider the application and implications of interactionism to the research area concerned. As such, I will now identify and discuss four common themes contained within symbolic interactionism by drawing on the work of four interactionists which further incorporates the two central concepts discussed above.

Plummer (1975) utilised the symbolic interactionist approach in his study of male homosexuality where he focused on the sexual stigmatisation of this sexuality in terms of the "pre-constituted social world" (Plummer, 1975: 94). He drew on Blumer's (1969) assumptions as the basis for three foci of interactionism that he identified. First, Plummer spoke of the world being a subjective, symbolic reality where a person uses symbols to interpret and attach meaning to things. He argues that the same object can have different meanings for different individuals so "the

object itself does not possess ‘meaning’, but rather the meanings arise through interaction, and remain constantly negotiable” (Plummer, 1975: 12). Second, Plummer argues that the world as subjective reality is a process as opposed to remaining static. The meanings that things have for people are constantly changing and being modified through ongoing interactions. Third, Plummer emphasises the importance of others in shaping a person’s action. This he linked to the two central concepts of interactionism I have outlined above, namely ‘self’ and ‘role’.

In my research, concepts of deviance occur through analysing the significance of gender in perpetrating sexual abuse. Becker (1972), in studying deviance, writes about the ambiguities that arise in deciding who is deviant and what acts constitute deviance. He asserts that such ambiguities exist because deviance is a creation of society thereby a deviant person is one whom breaks the rules made by a given social group. In this respect, the role of others is central to defining deviance since the deviant act emerges from “the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it” (Becker, 1972: 14).

These ambiguities involved in attempting to classify and define acts of ‘deviance’ is further considered by Vass (1996). He discusses the problems inherent in defining and measuring acts of crime, arguing that an act is only deemed to be criminal if that particular behaviour is prohibited under criminal law. He goes on to say that these laws are made by ministerial politicians and then must be upheld by judges, albeit through their interpretations of those criminal acts. But even once ‘guilt’ appears to be ‘confirmed’ through the legal process, ambiguity resurfaces if an appeal is launched to overturn a decision. Though Vass’s arguments are more complicated than this short summary, the illustration serves to show that such interpretations and subsequent attached meanings are not absolute, but reflect a constantly ambiguous, changing and somewhat relative social world.

Similarly, Curry (1993; cited in Charon, 1998) studied one man in order to understand how he took on the identity of a wrestler over time. Curry demonstrated that the individual’s definition of pain and injury was central to him adopting the identity of a ‘real wrestler’. To adopt such an identity meant that his definition of pain and injury, and what they meant to him, changed. This occurred as a result of social interaction as well as interaction with the self. The self as a

social object was modified through the individual's ongoing interactions with significant others, symbols and actions.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of studies which apply the framework of interactionism, nor is it meant to provide any detailed critique of such studies. Rather, I have briefly outlined them in order to illustrate the core ideas of symbolic interactionism and how these ideas relate to this study. Broadly speaking, I have identified four core ideas contained within interactionism. Though I will list them separately, they are interlinked and generally contingent upon one another. First, symbolic interactionism is interested in individuals defining their situations and how these definitions arise. Meanings are not necessarily shared but emerge through a process of interpretation. In this study, I am interested in how survivors and professionals define an abuse experience and the significance that gender has on these definitions.

The second core idea identified here is that symbolic interactionism is interested in the nature of social interaction in the process of interpretation. Humans use symbols as part of their social interaction as well as interaction with the self and others. This study will focus on the social interactions that form the process of interpretation of individual meaning and definition. Central to this thesis is how sexual meanings are determined from our social interaction. Plummer's (1975: 32) work is of particular relevance to this aspect of the thesis. He discusses how "social meanings determine and affect our sexuality" as opposed to vice versa, and that therefore sexuality does not have meaning unless this is given through social interaction. Plummer goes on to suggest the different meanings attributed to sexual activities depend upon the social situations that surround them. In the context of this study, I am interested in the social interactions that influence the meaning and responses to child sexual abuse.

The third core idea is that the interpretative process described above is an ongoing constant one. Our interpretation of something, and the meaning we attach to it, is constantly being modified and changed through our social interaction. Thus, meanings are not absolute or fixed, but are prone to adaptation through ongoing encounters with different symbols or significant others. So events which are experienced and understood at one point in time may be understood in a very different way – and therefore defined quite differently – at another time.

This is closely linked to the fourth core idea identified in this section. Symbolic interactionism recognises the importance of this ongoing process in identity formation. Plummer (1975: 122) states that “the process of becoming is seen as a life-long activity involving the interaction of self with others”. Here Plummer is referring to how a person becomes a homosexual. In this study, I am interested in this key concept of interactionism and apply it to examining the process by which an individual adopts the identity of an abuse survivor. It is further used to explore the process by which professionals give an individual the identity of abuse survivor or abuse perpetrator.

These ideas will become clearer throughout this thesis and in the chapters that follow, I will refer to them frequently. This theoretical framework contributes towards the understanding of sexual abuse in its entirety by focusing on how it is defined, interpreted and made sense of in its own right, rather than through the definitions and interpretations derived from legal, social and moral arenas.<sup>3</sup> In the following sub-section, I will discuss in more detail the use of interactionism in guiding the data analysis of the study.

#### *Applying Interactionism to the Data Analysis*

Empirical data was, broadly speaking, gathered from survivors, professionals in the ‘therapy industry’ and professionals in the criminal justice system (for more detail, see the next section on **Method**). I drew on the core ideas of symbolic interactionism that were identified in the previous section to help inform my thinking about the data derived from the empirical research. Since these ideas are very much enmeshed within one another, I will outline how these ideas were applied by focusing on the specific areas of the research detailed in the first section of this chapter. These areas are survivors’ experiences, service providers’ responses, reporting child sexual abuse and criminal justice responses. I will begin by considering how interactionism was used to help guide the analysis of data drawn from survivors about their experiences of abuse.

While aspects of the interviews with survivors were designed to establish ‘fact’ (i.e. the age when the abuse occurred), the data collected were predominantly analysed and considered within the context of interactionism.

Interviews were transcribed and the raw transcripts read, with emerging themes noted. Since the survivors were all adults at the time of interview, they were recollecting details from some years previously in order to tell their story. As such, they were drawing on social interactions – including the interview itself – in telling their story of abuse. In his book, ‘Telling Sexual Stories’, Plummer (1995) writes that we are constantly telling stories about the world around us, our experiences and ourselves by drawing on symbols and language – our interactions with others. He writes that “story telling can be placed at the heart of our symbolic interactions” (Plummer, 1995: 20).

In making sense of the stories I was being told in the context of this research, I drew on the core ideas outlined in the previous sub-section to identify the symbols and interactions encountered by survivors. These included the relationship the survivor had with their abuser, the sexual acts involved in the abuse, responses survivors received upon disclosing the abuse, and survivors’ feelings about the abuse. In turn, identifying these symbols and social interactions provided an understanding of the processes involved in two key aspects of the research; how an individual came to define his or her experience as sexual abuse; and how an individual took on the identity of an abuse survivor.

In the first instance, the core ideas of interactionism were taken in order to understand why some survivors struggled with defining their experience as abuse and the process by which they defined their experience in interview. The symbols and social interactions encountered by individuals were identified as part of this process. For example, one participant struggled with defining his experience as sexual abuse because he maintained a penile erection. The meaning of an erection for him was that of sexual pleasure. Since the concept of sexual pleasure was contradictory to his understanding of sexual abuse, he did not define his experience as abuse for many years. His interpretation and understanding of his experience altered over time as a result of other interactions.

In terms of understanding the significance of gender, the presence of the penis emerged as an important symbol in how meaning is attached to abusive acts and the extent to which acts are defined as harmful. Interactionism is used to illustrate the ambiguity involved in defining harm in light of the symbol of penis and the meaning associated with this symbol.

In the second instance – that is the process by which an individual takes on the identity of abuse survivor – symbolic interactionism was used to make sense of how a person does or does not adopt this identity. Again, an individual's use of symbols and social interactions is integral in this process. In one story, an individual recounts how his subsequent relationships with women were characterised by unemotional sexual relations. He explained that he behaved promiscuously and treated partners as sexual objects. These interactions were explored as part of the analysis in understanding how an identity of abuse survivor can be resisted. Other symbols were identified in the analysis of data which impacted upon the individual's re-interpretation of his perceived identity and resulting in him adopting the identity of abuse survivor. Such symbols included his later social interactions with a therapist.

This latter point serves to illustrate another of the core ideas of symbolic interactionism identified in the previous sub-section as central to this analysis. That the process by which an individual comes to define a situation or adopt an identity is an ongoing, continuous process. Interactionism allows us to take account of all encounters, including the research interview. In interactionist terms, the interview would form a social interaction in itself and this is reflected in the analysis of how survivors made sense of their experiences.

Making sense of service providers' responses involved analysing data drawn from both professionals in the 'therapy industry' as well as survivors' experiences of this industry. The data drawn from professionals were largely quantitative and included aspects such as clientele gender, the types of services offered, the foci of the organisation and the nature of project-produced literature. In the first instance, comparative analysis was undertaken and differences noted. These differences are illustrated in tabular form. In the second instance – and to understand the differences – the framework of symbolic interactionism was applied to the data. More specifically, the four core ideas identified previously were drawn on again to interpret the data. For instance, once the quantitative data demonstrated the differences between the foci of organisations (i.e. whether the organisation worked specifically with abuse survivors or it had a broader client group), interactionism was used to consider both approaches. In this sense, the analysis applied the ideas of defining an experience, how identities are taken on

and the processes being ongoing, to understand how and why either approach can be appropriate.

The qualitative data were drawn largely from the survivors in the study and revolved around their experiences with seeking, or why they chose not to seek, help. The way in which symbolic interactionism is used to help understand these data is generally the same as discussed above since they are based on survivors' experiences. To recapitulate, the stories that survivors told about their experiences of seeking help were considered in terms of common themes noted (e.g. negative encounters, helpful experiences, desires for future interventions). As part of their story-telling, the survivors in this research reconstructed moments within these themes that were salient for them. Interactionism was then applied to help understand these moments. This is particularly in terms of the symbols encountered, their definitions of sexual abuse and harmfulness and the process of identity formation. In the framework of interactionism, survivors' experiences of seeking help can be partly understood through the process of self-definition (i.e. how they define their experience will influence whether they seek help and the type of help sought). Yet, conversely, this experience of seeking help will also form a social interaction in itself, thus influencing the process of self-definition.

Qualitative data also formed part of the responses of professionals in the research. These findings focused upon organisational perspective. In interpreting these qualitative data, interactionism was used to identify the symbolic and social interactions that will influence and guide one's perspective. Applying symbolic interactionism in this way provides a way of understanding the stance taken by any given organisation – that it is a socially created reality and professionals will respond to experiences based on their formed understanding.

The use of symbolic interactionism to understand and interpret the data collected about survivors' experiences incorporates the analysis of reporting child sexual abuse. Indeed analysing this aspect of the research was contingent upon the analysis of their stories as a whole. In other words, making sense of how a survivor defines their experience or whether they adopt the identity of abuse survivor directly impacts the extent of their disclosure.

This also has the converse effect. That is, the social interaction that follows a disclosure of abuse will serve as part of the process individuals undergo in

defining a situation and becoming an abuse survivor. A large part of Chapter Five is concerned with analysing this aspect of survivors' experiences of abuse. The central ideas in symbolic interactionism are highlighted again in this part of the analysis in two main ways; the importance of social interactions and the process of defining a situation. The responses to disclosures by individuals were explored as significant social interactions. This was both in terms of future disclosure – particularly to authorities – as well as ongoing encounters in how an individual defines and interprets their abuse experience. Definition, in this sense, incorporates not just whether it is understood as sexual abuse by the survivor but whether it is 'wrong'.

Finally, I shall provide some discussion on how symbolic interactionism will be used in thinking about the data drawn from criminal justice professionals. The four core ideas identified in the previous sub-section apply directly to the analysis of these data. The 'stories' told by these individuals are far less detailed than those provided by survivors. This is due to research methodology in how the data were gathered (see **Method**), and, again, there includes some quantitative analysis alongside the application of interactionism to guide analysis and understand the data.

The analysis was not concerned with exploring individual's definitions and interpretations of the significance of gender in child sexual abuse. Rather, it was concerned with building a picture of the collective (i.e. the criminal justice system) response to female-perpetrated sexual abuse – although the collective will of course be made up of individuals. To make sense of how the criminal justice system responds to female perpetrators, data on individual cases were analysed using a more positivist approach which seeks to establish 'fact' (Fielding, 1993). Quantitative data were noted surrounding the situational features of the case such as age of the child, relationship between perpetrator and child and extent of co-perpetration, as well as the facts of legal consequences in the cases. In doing so, symbolic interactionism was then used to understand the process of defining an act in terms of criminality. Symbols and social interactions were used to determine what constitutes sexual abuse by a woman and which women are given the identity of sex abuser (and indeed which women are not).

Symbolic interactionism continued to be utilised in understanding the collected quantitative data on the treatment of perpetrators in terms of the significance of perpetrator gender. The process by which a situation is defined is not just important here, but how the concept of harm is defined. An act may be defined as sexual abuse, but not necessarily as harmful. Attaching meaning to an abuse experience in terms of harmfulness can be analysed using the interpretive approach by starting with the 'facts' surrounding legal consequences and treatment of female perpetrators. That is, the research considered the response of the criminal justice system (i.e. the sentence received by a woman) and then applied interactionism to understand the process undertaken in reaching that response. This was done by considering the symbols and social interactions likely to be encountered in this process.

## **Method**

This last section of the chapter will focus on the methodology and related issues within this research study. More specifically, I intend to set into context the interpretive approach used in this work; to discuss the particulars around carrying out the empirical work itself; and to set out the mechanics of data analysis in this research.

### *The Interpretive Approach*

Fielding (1993), in discussing social research and sociology more generally, writes of a split occurring in sociological analysis between a 'positivist' tradition and an 'interpretive' tradition. The former is associated with the more explanatory, scientific approach which seeks fact to explain social events. The latter strives to explore and understand the meaning and the significance of the social world for those that live and experience it. This is a crude and brief description of the two traditions, and Fielding (1993) is quick to explain that sociology is not necessarily an 'either/or' situation; that these traditions may be intermixable. This research study draws on positivism in so much as establishing fact about certain events, but relies far more heavily on the interpretive approach for forming the substance of the work.

The reason for using an interpretive approach in this work has been identified and discussed at various points throughout this thesis thus far. To recapitulate, this research is interested in the significance that gender has on child sexual abuse. In particular, it strives to demonstrate the significance that gender has for, and the way in which meaning is attached, by those who experience or encounter child sexual abuse (incorporating both survivors and professionals). Symbolic interactionism is one of the main schools within the interpretive tradition (Fielding, 1993), and it is from this premise that the framework of interactionism is applied to this work. Using an interpretive approach is necessary in order to obtain and make sense of the data that will form this exploratory work. To understand the way in which an individual experiences their social world (in this research, within the context of child sexual abuse), one needs to ask them about such experiences. This I did and then used the framework of interactionism to guide thinking around the analysis of data. Before moving into discussing the methods employed for this task, I intend to briefly focus on one other framework which has influenced the way in which this work has progressed; feminist theory and research.

The Preface to this thesis conceptualised gender significance in child sexual abuse. This conceptualisation was heavily grounded within a feminist analysis of child sexual abuse, and feminist theory has been a consistent feature in the work thus far. But how does this link with an interpretive approach and how has notions of feminist research influenced the research study?

The concept of feminist methodology stems from, as Mies (1993: 65) puts it, “the virtual exclusion of women, of their lives, work and struggles from the bulk of research”. In the past most researchers and academics were male, and their research tends to be andro-centric, focusing not only on men as subjects of research but on male-orientated methods of collecting data. This latter point can be explained by Jupp (1989) who suggests that the more traditional research methodologies which are positivist and quantitative in nature are male-dominated, and by their own virtue can miss many of the issues which are specific to women and womens’ experiences.

Like interactionists, feminists tend to reject the positivist approach to research (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Abbott and Wallace, 1997), disputing that such an approach can allow us to understand individuals’ experiences and what these

experiences mean. Certainly feminism seeks to understand the lives and realities of those being researched (Abbott and Wallace, 1997); a standpoint not dissimilar to that of interactionists. Stanley and Wise (1983: 166) write that:

“We live in a social world with other social beings; and merely living requires that we behave in social ways. We interact with other people at all times, either physically or in our minds. It is all of these *social* actions and reactions which should properly be the concern of feminist social science.” (original italics)

Again, this reflects much of the previous section on symbolic interactionism and provides a clear link with the interpretive tradition in sociology. Moreover, the contribution and influence of feminist research to this work can be considered in terms of epistemology.

In the past, research within social science has focused more on its recognition as a ‘real science’ (Oakley, 1981), the outcome of the work being measurable aspects of social life, i.e. positivist, quantitative research. Indeed, Abbott and Wallace (1997: 289) write that “the dominant basis for truth claims is that the research was scientific”. Yet this is exactly what feminists and interactionists would attack, arguing that individual experiences can only be understood by ‘hearing’ the stories being told and acknowledging the ongoing social interactions – including that with the researcher. Chapter Four will continue with questions of epistemology in terms of truth and validity of findings.

In the context of feminism then, to what extent are the research methods employed in this research appropriate? Qualitative research methods are predominantly used in this work for reasons previously discussed. There is, however, an argument for the use of quantitative research methods within feminist research as suggested by Jayaratne (1993) whose approach to this issue is political and touches on the long-standing debate between quantitative and qualitative researchers. Jayaratne (1993: 109) proposes that the appropriate use of both qualitative and quantitative methods within social science research can assist “the feminist community in achieving its goals more effectively than the use of either qualitative or quantitative methods alone”. The use of quantitative methods are used to illustrate aspects of the research as well as to inform our understanding of peoples’ subjective experiences.

The use of interviews is strongly linked not just to interactionist research (Plummer, 2001) but to feminist research (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). Various texts from both schools have identified the role of the researcher as being a significant feature of the interaction (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Plummer, 2001), and this has, at times, been considered problematic. Mies (1993: 67), for instance, writes that even when female researchers were considering female issues they were advised to “suppress their emotions, their subjective feelings of involvement and identification with other women in order to produce ‘objective’ data”. She argues that as a result of male bias, certain areas have remained hidden or invisible, and by using positivist methods under this particular methodological principle we will be unable to explore these hidden areas. Oakley (1981: 40) points out that the conventional or ‘proper’ interview which adopts a masculine stance requires that “a sociology of feelings and emotions does not exist” and goes on to suggest that society views the intellectual or rational aspects of our experiences as being superior to those governed by emotions or sentimentality. But surely rejecting any aspect of an individual’s experience is to fail to understand and make sense of the experience as a whole! Recognising that the researcher does play a role and is involved – and that therefore this may impact upon the research findings – is a necessary part of the research process. This concept will crop up time and again throughout the remainder of the thesis.

In sum, the feminist perspective and the symbolic interactionist framework, both of which can be identified as part of the interpretive tradition, are influential to the foci of this research. Grounding this study within such an approach is wholly appropriate for the reasons discussed in this sub-section. In the subsections that follow, the methods employed to collect the data and the way in which the collected data were analysed are discussed.

#### *Participants<sup>4</sup>*

This research made use of various different groups of participants to obtain the relevant information from the appropriate sources. However, this was by no means an easy task. Researching this topic proved to be a continuous struggle. Due to its nature, that is to say hidden and removed from public discussion and view, I found myself – to use Vass’s phrase – “dealing with a moving target” (Vass, 1986). In

other words, I had to constantly review and consider means of finding and accessing respondents. This was with particular regard to accessing survivors, which I will refer to later. In the first instance fifty-four projects involved in the field of sexual abuse were contacted, of which thirteen were subsequently interviewed and thirty-seven were sent questionnaires. These projects were drawn from the 'Survivors of Sexual Abuse Directory' and were chosen because they identified themselves as agencies that worked with both male and female survivors of abuse. Those projects that were sent questionnaires were nationwide while those who were interviewed were London-based.

The survivors who were interviewed for this project consisted of male and female adult survivors of either male or female perpetrated sexual abuse, and access was obtained through a variety of means. Four participants volunteered to be involved in the study as a result of having personal, first-hand knowledge of the research; one participant came forward after having seen an advert asking for volunteers in one of the organisations which had been involved in the research; another participant was accessed through a professional in the field; four survivors contacted me after reading an article about the research in a local paper; thirteen survivors became involved in the research after seeing an advertisement in the national press, namely *The Pink Paper* and *The Big Issue*; and one survivor contacted me as the result of a 'snowball' effect whereupon she was told about the research by a survivor who had also taken part, thus giving a total of twenty-four interviews with survivors. There were an additional six survivors who contacted me after seeing the adverts but never interviewed. Two of these lost contact before appointments could be set up and a further four failed to attend their interviews. Interestingly, three of the four who failed to attend their interviews were men who had been abused by women. I managed to locate two of these men who both informed me that this process was too difficult for them and they felt unable to take part in the research.

In order to obtain information about perpetrators' experiences once they enter the criminal justice arena, it was deemed appropriate to access probation officers who dealt with sexual abuse cases, had child sex abusers as part of their case load and/or ran sex offender group programmes. As with the sexual abuse projects in the earlier stages of research, the methodology involving probation

officers was twofold. In the first instance, between two and five probation offices in all probation services in England and Wales (n=54) were sent a letter outlining the research and a structured questionnaire to fill in. The number of offices contacted was dependent upon the size of the service and whether they had listed specialist units. As a consequence of each service receiving questionnaires at different offices, the questionnaires overlapped in places resulting in them being passed to more 'appropriate' officers to answer and so reducing the overall response rate. Of the 54 probation services contacted, 42 responded giving us a response rate of 78%. Of the 166 individual letters sent out to specific offices the response rate proved to be unsurprisingly lower at 54% but taking into account the overlap of responding offices, for instance those offices within any one service who passed on the questionnaire to a more suitable office or officer such as those who deal specifically with sex offenders, this still remains a positive result.

In addition to the postal questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were carried out with London-based probation officers in seven different offices. The interviews were treated as case studies from the broader scene and the questions raised were formulated with similar objectives in mind to the questionnaires albeit focusing on aspects in far greater detail, particularly concerning the nature of the offence. The predominant difference with the interviews was that this part of the research process incorporated a comparative thread by asking probation officers about male perpetrators as well as their female counterparts. This stage resulted in 10 interviews, of which four disclosed cases involving female perpetrators.

The last group of participants who actually took part in this research were prison officials. Contact was made with all of the female establishments (n=10) in England and Wales while a stratified sample of adult male establishments (n=40) were contacted, taking account of geographical location. These prisons were sent a letter outlining the research and a questionnaire for completion. The response rate for female prisons was 40% (n=4) while that for male prisons was higher at almost 50% (n=19).

This research attempted to access one final group of participants unsuccessfully. In an attempt to enrich the data already collected, adverts were placed in the national press asking for women who have had sexual experience with individuals under 15 years of age. The term 'sexual experience' was used to

increase the likelihood of women responding to the advert, given the implicit and explicit connotations inherent in the term 'sexual abuse' which would deter people from responding. In addition to this, the term 'sexual experience' would allow the women to define their own experience, irrespective of how the research defined it. The response from this group of participants was unsurprisingly low; one woman responded to the advert. She left a message on the answer-phone without revealing her telephone number and did not make contact again.

### *Questionnaires*

Questionnaires formed one part of this research, with three separate formats being issued to the different groups of participants. All three sets of questionnaires were issued by post and respondents were required to self-complete. In formulating the questionnaires, care was taken to ensure relevance and applicability of questions and thus the data collected. The development of the three sets of questionnaires involved careful planning and followed a process not dissimilar to that described by Newell (1993). One disparity was that a pilot study was not undertaken as part of the development. This was a result of two factors: First, the questionnaires were derived from the interview format and were generally intended to illustrate further aspects raised in the interview settings. Second, I envisaged experiencing problems with obtaining data given the nature of the research and, as such, did not want to write off that data collected in a pilot investigation. Since the study in itself was of an exploratory nature, I anticipated needing to take whatever I could get to inform the research questions.

The questionnaires issued to the sexual abuse projects consisted of ten 'closed questions', although according to Newell (1993: 101) this could be disputed who defines closed questions as being "...drafted in advance, *complete with all the possible answers which could be given.*" (italics added). The questionnaire issued to these projects did not offer the respondent choices to tick, though many were only answerable by 'yes' or 'no' and the remainder were questions which only had limited answers (see Appendix 1). The motive for using this type of question came from the knowledge that the response rate for self-completion questionnaires tends to be low; in fact Newell (1993) suggests that

most do not achieve more than a 50% rate of return. So using a small number of closed questions will reduce respondents' time for completion and therefore perhaps achieve a higher response rate.

Nine of the thirty-seven organisations completed the questionnaire and sent it back with a sample of their agency literature, e.g. a pamphlet, brochure or annual report, as was requested; another nine organisations returned the completed questionnaire but did not include any response to the request for literature; two of the organisations failed to return the questionnaire and instead sent a standard information pack available to anyone who contacts them for information; and one organisation wrote back informing me of its closure. In total twenty-one organisations issued some form of reply, a response rate of 60%.

Apart from the difficulty of achieving an adequate response rate, questionnaires do not allow for any expansion of information, a point that became clear to me when carrying out the semi-structured interviews with the London-based organisations. With questionnaires the use of open-ended questions tends to create difficulties because the answers can be ambiguous and difficult to categorise (Newell, 1993), whereas with interviewing this may work to both parties' advantage, as will be seen in the following section. In support of the suitability of this research method for the objective of this part of the research, Stacey (1969) soundly advises as to the appropriate use of open and closed questions:

“closed questions should be used where alternative replies are known, are limited in number, and are clear-cut. Open-ended questions are used where the issue is complex, where relevant dimensions are not known, and where a process is being explored.”  
(cited in Newell, 1993: 103)

The second set of questionnaires, those issued to probation officers, maintained the basic format of closed questions as defined by Newell (1993). These questionnaires consisted of seven questions which, with the exception of one open question, merely required the respondent to tick box or fill in a number (see Appendix 4). The objective of making use of this type of format was to increase the response rate given respondents' general reticence in completing postal questionnaires. The open-ended question involved in this questionnaire was unavoidable as the information it was providing was a necessary part of the research. However it was not without its difficulties. The question asked “Could you briefly explain the

nature of these dealings?" which referred to the dealings that probation officers had had with female perpetrators. As a result of the ambiguity of this question, probation officers interpreted it in one of two ways: either focusing on the nature of the sexual abuse itself, or concentrating on the nature of the consequences for the perpetrator. As such this impacted upon the results in that only those questionnaires which had followed the former interpretation of "nature of dealings" could be included in the analysis of that particular question. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

The final set of questionnaires were those issued to the prison establishments (Appendix 6). These were the shortest questionnaires and were primarily concerned with drawing some form of comparison between male and female perpetrators held in custody in terms of numbers and sentence length. As this questionnaire contained only closed questions, and due to its relatively shorter length, the data supplied by them were subsequently used to further illustrate the findings drawn from the more detailed data obtained from probation.

### *Interviews*

Both semi-structured and unstructured interviews were a prominent feature of the research methodology as a means of gaining the qualitative data required by the research objectives. These types of interviews were used as it has been suggested that a more flexible approach is best suited to research which is covering new ground (Fielding, 1993) as this research is doing. Moreover, interviews as a research tool were deemed the most appropriate way of allowing individuals to construct and make sense of their stories within the realm of this research. Interviews – as opposed to questionnaires or surveys – allowed participants to tell their story in their own words. They allowed me, as the interviewer, to be flexible, follow an interesting line of inquiry and to facilitate the insights and processes of research participants. Essentially, since this is a research study based on peoples' experiences and understanding of sexual abuse, interviews were considered the most conducive method of yielding rich insights into these experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with thirteen London-based organisations which were identified as working with both male and female survivors; every one being exceptionally open to and helpful with the research.

Interviews lasted from half an hour to two hours depending on a worker's availability and the extent of information they were willing to discuss. The shorter interviews tended to remain within the parameters of the interview schedule (see Appendix 2) while the longer interviews had the inclination to stray away from the immediate questions. This often meant that not all the questions were formally asked as the participant dictated the pace and the content of the interview.

The interviews conducted with probation officers were also semi-structured (see Appendix 5). The interview schedule comprised of a clear line of questioning, and maintained a rather definitive start and end to the interview process. Fielding (1993: 136), in his explanation of semi-structured interviewing, reflects precisely how this approach worked within this research context:

“The interviewer is thus able to adapt the research instrument to the level of comprehension and articulacy of the respondent, and to handle the fact that in responding to a question, people often also provide answers to questions we were going to ask later.”

The longest and most intensive interviews that occurred as part of this research project were the unstructured interviews carried out with survivors. Not only was this field a new and sensitive area of research, but this particular stage of the research was concerned with gathering survivors' life stories (Plummer, 2001). By adopting the method of unstructured interviews, I was more able to identify key issues touched on by those being interviewed. The interviews with survivors ranged from one to three hours in duration and made use of an interview guide (see Appendix 3). The term 'guide' is indicative in showing the difference between the more formal semi-structured interview and this format: "...the second word 'guide', conveys a sense of the style of this approach, where interviewers take their own path within certain guidelines" (Fielding, 1993: 136).

Throughout the interviews I contributed very little as participants tended to cover questions I would have asked without any prompt. Probing and prompting are considered integral parts of an interview because they are key interviewing skills (Fielding, 1993), though in this research careful consideration had to be given as to what degree these methods could be used. As these techniques involve attempting to get a fuller answer, or for participants to produce an answer, I felt there was a conflict of interest in terms of respecting the fact that this is highly

sensitive research. By prompting and probing throughout the interview I felt that I could lose the trust and the relative ease of the participants. In fact several survivors stated that they had been very nervous about the interview as they had felt that, as a researcher, I would be pushy with questions; they were relieved when this was not the case and were thus more open with the information they subsequently offered. A technique often considered to be probing is use of silences. In an interview situation participants tend to want to fill the silence so they offer more information. In these interviews, this technique was used as it supplied participants with the space to discuss their experiences.

Prior to carrying out the full-scale research, it seemed appropriate given the sensitive nature of this topic and this method of data collection, to conduct pilot studies. The purpose of this was to ascertain the flexibility of the unstructured interview, the suitability of the material covered and feedback from participants concerning issues such as the wording of questions and the order in which they were asked. Just a few suggestions were put forward from the pilot studies and these were put into practice in the following interviews. One suggestion was to start the interview with specific questions. In the pilot study I began by asking 'could you tell me a bit about your experience of sexual abuse?'. This was an extremely open-ended question which led the participant to flounder somewhat. After this the interviews started with a specific question such as 'perhaps you could begin by telling me how old you were when the abuse started'. This achieved a much better result. Another suggestion was to ask about the acts perpetrated towards the end of the interview as it was likely that the participant would feel more comfortable the longer we had been talking.

A debatable issue within this arena involved the question of how to record the participants' responses. In the semi-structured interviews it seemed most apt to hand-write responses given the use of an interview schedule and the fact that since it involved interviewing professionals it would not be insensitive to take notes throughout the interview. However in the unstructured interviews with survivors it seemed inappropriate to take notes during the interview as the topic was so emotive. After much consideration I opted to tape record these interviews. There were a few participants who, for one reason or another, declined being tape recorded and in these instances process recording was made use of whereby the

interview would follow the usual format but immediately after the interview I would note down everything remembered. The obvious difficulty with this method is the validity of the material remembered which includes the relevance of the remembered material and the extent to which the material is remembered accurately.<sup>5</sup> The interviews that were tape-recorded were subsequently transcribed in order to study them more accurately and to ensure their availability for re-examination for interpretation by others (see Appendix 7).

### *Data Analysis*

The previous section of this chapter focused on the application of symbolic interactionism to guide the thinking behind the analysis of data. In this sub-section, I intend to provide an overview of the mechanistic nature of the data analysis in this study. In the first instance, I compiled summary sheets for each interview pertaining to the main investigative questions that formed the interview guides and schedules. This served two functions. First, it meant that I had to go through the detailed notes and transcripts in order to pull out the necessary information so re-familiarising myself with each interview. Second, I had a 'quick reference' to each interview and could build on the information gleaned.

Once this task was completed, I was able to collate the quantitative data. This I did by categorising the quantitative data (for an explicit discussion on coding data, see Fielding, 1993), such as age of the child, relationship to perpetrator and frequency of abuse. Then the data were placed into the categories and, where appropriate, converted into percentages. This would assist with comparability. Various aspects of the qualitative data were also categorised for this reason, such as reasons for non-disclosure by survivors. These categories were compiled by examining the interview transcripts, noting all of the given reasons and then establishing the main reasons along with a category of 'other'. Throughout the 'research findings' chapters in the thesis, these categories can be seen as they are presented in tabular form.

The bulk of the data analysis surrounded the qualitative side to the research, and this is the point at which symbolic interactionism is applied. The transcripts (or, in some cases, detailed notes) were read and re-read with themes being noted. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996: 292) write that "data

analysis in qualitative field research is an ongoing process” which quite appropriately reflects one of the core ideas of interactionism as I have discussed in the previous section. In keeping with Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias’ assertion regarding data analysis, I returned months later to review interview transcripts to see whether a particular theme developed further or if I remembered having read something I later considered to be significant. In this sense, my analysis of data was constantly being modified with ‘new’ information.

Throughout this analysis, each new theme to emerge would be questioned as to its relevance in the context of this work. Questions I might ask of the emerging themes would include the extent to which they fit with themes from other cases; if they do not fit, why not; what are the differences, the similarities? Each interview was taken and considered in its own right while, at the same time, they were analysed alongside one another in order to illustrate the main arguments that emerge from the research.

My role in this stage of the research was as the interpreter, or evaluator, of the data. By ‘evaluate’ I am not referring to the problems of representativeness, reliability and validity (see, for instance, Plummer, 2001) since I will discuss these concepts in the next chapter. Rather I refer to my evaluating the data in terms of seeking themes, connections and symbols by way of understanding the stories being told. In analysing the data, I had to think about the symbols with which the interviewees were interacting and the way in which I interpreted these. For instance, one survivor spoke of her feelings about the abuse she experienced from multiple perpetrators. The way in which she presented the separate experiences differed depending upon her relationship to each given perpetrator. Identifying these social interactions and recognising the way in which they form part of the process for the individual were integral to my role as interpreter.

Equally it was important to recognise my role as the researcher in the social interaction of the interview. Not only did I serve as a significant encounter for interviewees in how they continued to interpret their situation, but each interview was an interaction for me and, as such, provided numerous symbols with which to experience and utilise. That is, I would respond to interviewees on the basis of what meaning the interaction had for me. For instance, if an interviewee began to

cry, I would respond to that symbol by focusing on what was happening for the individual (what was their symbol that led them to cry?).

Utilising such a qualitative, or interpretive, approach to guide analysis is open to various criticisms in terms of research methodology. Quite specifically, these problems pertain to issues surrounding reliability, validity, memory accuracy and the nature of truth (for a recent, detailed discussion of these issues, see Plummer, 2001). I will consider these, and other, issues in the next chapter.

### **Conclusion**

The foci of this chapter have been on the scope of the research, the theoretical perspective in which the research is grounded and the methods of which the research makes use. The scope of the work encompasses four main areas in terms of gender and child sexual abuse; survivors' experiences, service providers' responses, reporting dynamics and criminal justice responses. An overview of previous research was detailed in order to highlight some of the differences generated in these areas according to gender. Essentially, these four areas will be explored within Chapters Five, Six and Seven, based on the empirical findings of this research.

Symbolic interactionism has been highlighted as the theoretical perspective in which the research is grounded. Four core ideas were identified and drawn from previous interactionists' work. The core ideas identified were: definition of a situation; the use of symbols and social interactions in the process of interpretation; the process of interpretation being an ongoing constant one; and the process of identity formation. These core ideas were demonstrated as being fundamental to guiding the analysis of data and to aid understanding of the empirical findings. The core ideas will recur in later chapters.

The chapter illustrated the need for an interpretive approach to this work; that it was necessary in order to understand the significance of gender in child sexual abuse and the way in which individuals make sense of their experience of sexual abuse (be they survivors or professionals). Encapsulated within the application of an interpretive approach, the chapter demonstrated the way in which feminist theory has influenced this work. This is in reference to both research method as well as the historical context to the work.

The mechanistic specifics surrounding data collection and analysis were discussed in the latter part of the chapter. It is now the purpose of the following chapter to continue this discussion, with the foci being a critique of the methods employed in this research.

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<sup>1</sup> Broussard et al suggest that this perception may be in part due to the glorification of sexual activity between adolescent boys and older women, citing such films as *The Graduate* and *Summer of '42*. They go on to say; "a belief that may consider the absence of resistance as an indication that sexual interaction between a 15-year old male and a 35-year old female is an acceptable means of providing sex education for boys." (Broussard et al, 1991: 275).

<sup>2</sup> There have been various points made in child sexual abuse literature which attribute (partial) blame to the child for his or her own victimisation. It has been suggested that children may act in a suggestive manner, are sexually provocative, do nothing to prevent the abuse from occurring and fail to report it. Ramer (1973) states that such behaviours indicate complicity in the abuse (cited in Finkelhor, 1979). Much of this may be the result of Freud's work who, as we saw in Chapter One, was responsible for the concept of 'infantile sexuality' and suggestions about children's sexual desires. There is little doubt that children can be sexual and manipulative but it is unlikely that children encourage or provoke adults into sexual activity. It could be argued that children may be conditioned into behaving sexually (as some survivors in this study reported) but is likely to occur as a result of being exposed to adult sexual behaviour. An explanation for this 'seductive child' concept comes from Finkelhor (1979) who considered the notion of victim precipitation as dependent upon a given point of view. An action of a child (such as rubbing up against someone) may be perceived as suggestive or sexual by the adult (or researcher) but not by the child. In other words, children do not share the same meanings of sexual actions with adults. Plummer (1975) indicates a similar viewpoint, stating that children may display sexual activity but that this does not mean the activity has a sexual meaning to it. He illustrates this with one of his own research responses: "at about the age of eight I was coerced by a stranger to masturbate him. My chief understanding at the time was that the stranger urinated. That is, I did not understand either the ejaculation or the sexual meaning of the encounter. It struck me as bizarre, but the sexual meanings were retrospectively imposed when I learnt about orgasms" (Plummer, 1975: 210).

<sup>3</sup> I am reminded of an unpublished paper presented by Kearney, Murphy and Rosenbaum (1993, cited by Charon, 1998) whose study involved interviewing pregnant drug users to explore how these women defined their behaviour and particularly their experience of emotions regarding their actions. They wrote "we assume that because they don't comply with expected maternal behaviour, they must not feel maternal feelings." (cited in Charon, 1998: 213). In actual fact what these researchers found was that the predominant emotion described by these women was guilt. Charon (1998: 213) praises the study in stating that "The researchers found out how people felt by asking them, not by interpreting their actions as outsiders".

<sup>4</sup> This research consisted of an ongoing struggle in accessing participants. This represented not just the predominant difficulty within the research process, but became a thematic issue for the thesis as a whole. The struggle in accessing participants will form the subject of various discussions throughout this work.

<sup>5</sup> While it was not ideal to process record some of the interviews because of the potential for misinterpretation on the part of the interviewer, I nonetheless remained faithful to the use of language and the context of survivors' experiences. This fidelity is important in terms of retaining meaning which is central to the data. With respect to the illustrative quotations of

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survivors, these were drawn from the tape-recorded interviews by way of ensuring authenticity for individuals.

## CHAPTER IV

# CONSIDERING THE METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter identified the scope of this research and outlined the methodological strategies adopted to achieve the objectives. Discussion concerning the method was limited, by and large, in that chapter to outlining the fundamentals of how the research was carried out and whom it involved. I intend now to build upon that methodological discussion by drawing on some of the deliberations involved in carrying out the research and illustrating some difficulties encountered. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to explore and examine the range of problems that this research project came across. While many research studies will encounter some of the difficulties discussed in this chapter, many of the inherent problems arise as a direct result of the subject nature of this particular research area and compound the difficulty in conducting such research. The difficulties encountered fall broadly into two categories; methodological criticisms and ethical considerations. The former will focus on such aspects as the difficulty in obtaining access to participants, the accuracy of information received and the subjectivity involved throughout much of the research process. The latter considers the various problems encountered by the researcher and the impact of researching child sexual abuse.

### **Methodological criticisms**

#### *Accessing Participants*

As Jupp (1989: 138) remarks “All social research involves gaining access to data”, and yet the difficulty in gaining access is often a prominent factor in much social

research, this study being no exception. The problem involved in gaining access to participants has been documented at various points throughout this thesis; in fact access was envisaged as a potential problem as early as the formulation of the initial research proposal. Caution was heralded at this time due to the inherent nature of the research in that it called for interviews of survivors and perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

This research is an exploratory study into the dynamics and paradigms existing between gender and sexual abuse. Researching through exploratory means was an integral part of the study given the anonymity and secrecy involved in the nature of child sexual abuse. The term ‘exploratory’ could not have been put to better use than it has been within the context of this research. Finkelhor (1979: 36), in his research on sexually abused children, defined the term ‘exploratory’ as being based on various criteria:

“...to find out whether research was possible. [And]...that instead of testing a hypothesis, the purpose of the study would be to develop them; that the research would cast a wide net over the subject matter to find out which avenues of approach were most fruitful; and that there would be less emphasis on scientific proof and more on scientific inquiry.”

These criteria are reflected throughout the nature and process of this research, and the methodology is indicative of the exploratory nature of the study. The current perspectives of child sexual abuse have meant that sections of the target population, namely female perpetrators and survivors of such abuse, are hidden in our society. This has led to two interlinked problems: firstly, that such participants are not easily identifiable – either by society or through self-definition regarding their status. Secondly, even those who are identified as being within the target population of the study, I did not have any specific place to seek them out (e.g. a specialist service provider). This meant that I had to explore a number of possibilities in order to locate participants for the study (for more detail of this process, see Chapter Three). It also meant that the survivors who participated in the study were part of a self-selected sample. I was not seeking a representative research sample for reasons cited. Had I been, the self-selecting method would have undermined that objective and been a methodological problem in itself. As

such this would result in a cautioning around extrapolating the findings of the study to the wider sphere of the target population.

The problem of gaining access to such participants is not purely a methodological issue. Access is also difficult because this is socially sensitive research which will impact upon participants at a personal level. As indicated in the following chapters, nearly 90% (n=21) of the survivors who agreed to be interviewed had sought and received some form of counselling as a result of their experience of being sexually abused. Of those who had not received counselling, one survivor did not define his experience as abuse, one experienced great anxiety and reluctance in being interviewed and one was a participant whom I knew personally. It is my opinion that the latter would have been unwilling to concede to such an interview had this not been the case.

It is doubtful that the fact that most of the survivors who took part in the research had received counselling is coincidental. As with any self-selected sample, and this is one of the primary difficulties relating to such a sample, there remains an issue about the type of person who responds to the advert. A potential participant needs to view the advert; their occupation and lifestyle need to allow them time to participate; and they will require some motivation to take part in the research - and in this case, many of the respondents clearly needed to have dealt with, to varying degrees, their sexually abusive experiences. It is probable that survivors who have not experienced some form of counselling may tell a different story with regard to their experience of abuse. We can see support for this from those few cases in this research who did not seek some form of professional support. In sum, given the nature of accessing participants and the size of the group involved, the research was designed to give specific insight rather than to generalise theory.

### *Interviewer Bias*

Interviews as a research technique can create difficulties in terms of the results which are obtained, and as Fielding (1993: 147) points out “researchers worry about the effects interviewers may have on the validity and reliability of the data”. The potential for interviewer effects has been under scrutiny for some time, and is often highlighted with the case of ‘Clever Hans’ at the turn of the twentieth century. As the story goes, ‘Clever Hans’ was a horse who was thought to be able

to calculate mathematical sums, namely adding, subtracting and some multiplication. Hans' owner would demonstrate the horse's talent by stating a given sum, the horse would tap his hoof for the correct answer and was subsequently rewarded. It was after a number of these demonstrations that it became clear that Hans was in fact responding to an external cue that his owner was inadvertently offering, be it a slight nod of the head or the beginnings of a smile. Hans had become an expert in reading these cues and would stop his hoof tapping accordingly. What this demonstrates is the difficulty that can arise when a researcher knows what s/he is looking for, as this will undoubtedly bias the data collection and/or data analysis.

Methods of data collection varied in this work and, as such, the level, or extent, of bias may also differ. I considered the potential for bias by remaining aware of where and how it may occur. I examined ways in which it may be overcome. For instance, the semi-structured interviews which were carried out with help organisations and probation officers minimised the effects of interviewer bias as there was little scope for deviation from the scheduled questions and so less opportunity for the interviewer to guide or direct the participants' answers. In the unstructured interviews with survivors, guidance had to be carefully monitored as the situation was more conducive to the interviewer inadvertently encouraging specific responses. In addition any instructions given were not standardised and if information concerning the nature of the research was given, it was because participants had explicitly asked for details. The level of information offered depended upon the queries posed by individual participants; some had a number of questions about the nature of the research, the objectives and the methods; some reserved their queries for the end of the interview; while others were not concerned with the research process at all.

In the discussion on feminist research in the previous chapter, the merits of the more traditional, or 'proper', interviewing process were considered and ultimately rejected in favour of the type of interview more commonly observed in not just feminist work (e.g. Oakley, 1979; Kelly, 1988) but in the interpretive work of interactionists (e.g. Kearney, Murphy and Rosenbaum, 1993 cited in Charon, 1998). In the tradition of interactionism, every human encounter for the actor (or interviewee) will be relevant and part of their continuing process of changing and

modifying meaning to the situation. In other words, the interviews carried out in this study do not exist in isolation, as separate to the interviewees ongoing subjective experience of attaching meaning to their situation. Rather, the interview itself will be part of that process and the interviewer will inevitably be part of the interaction. The element of personal involvement may well result in bias, but for feminists like Oakley (1981: 48) who adopted the unconventional role of an involved interviewer by way of “giving the subjective situation of women greater visibility not only in sociology, but, more importantly, in society” and for interactionists like Schmid and Jones (1991, cited in Charon, 1998) who immersed themselves in a maximum security prison through observations as well as interviews in order to study prisoners’ identity transformations, bias would be part of the subjective experience and thus impossible to avoid. Either way, it is important to consider the role of the interviewer in the interaction, and how they impact upon the interviewee’s experience and response.

Having highlighted this possible disparity between the different types of interview however, there is certainly a common thread woven amongst the unstructured and more structured approaches to interviewing; that of value ridden responses. The general theme throughout any of the interviews forming part of this research was the exploration of gender in relation to child sexual abuse. Given the depth of knowledge already accumulated on the subject by the time of interview, it is not surprising that the responses received from participants would take on particular meanings even prior to the analysis stage. The danger here is that, as the interviewer, I could have interpreted responses from participants in such a way as to suit my own objectives and research hypotheses. Furthermore, at the analysis stage, it is necessary to consider the potential of my attaching meaning to the data and taking quotations out of their appropriate context.

I am reminded of the role symbolic interactionism has played throughout this work, and how the underlying crux of interactionism is illustrated within this more reflective aspect to the research methodology. However, while it is imperative to consider the potentially hazardous aspects of the research process, maintaining this insight has been beneficial in avoiding some of these traps and given that the emphasis of this research has been ‘exploratory’, the difficulties attached to value ridden responses may have been reduced.

Another element in bias which needs to be taken into account when carrying out empirical research is the degree to which social desirability may impact upon responses and interactions in this work. It quickly became apparent to me that responding in a way which would advocate positively for their services and not expose any weaknesses was a distinct possibility by help organisations taking part in the study. This is due to the fact that they were being questioned about their agency, their methods of working and client groups to name but a few areas of interest. Most organisations had concerns with funding, and may have worried about the research findings affecting their funding particularly if the findings were unfavourable to them.

One of the issues raised about the concept of social desirability bias is that of the relationship between verbal response and actual behaviour, or perhaps more accurately, the lack of relationship between the two. This issue has been considered by various researchers (e.g. Procter, 1993; Wicker, 1969) in what can be termed the 'attitude-behaviour problem'. In perhaps one of the most frequently referred to examples of this inconsistency within attitude research literature, La Piere (1934) travelled extensively throughout the United States, visiting various restaurants and hotels with a Chinese couple in order to study the anti-Chinese sentiment at that time in the States. He found that most establishments did not show any negative attitudes by refusing service whereas in his follow-up using a questionnaire to the same establishments, he discovered that most of them answered that they would indeed refuse service to the Chinese (cited in Wicker 1969:167). What this suggests is that a verbal statement may only be **indicative** of a behaviour and not an accurate **predictor**.

In relating this problem more directly to the interviews carried out with support organisations in this research, it would suggest that the responses given by them will not necessarily determine how they actually work in practice. For instance, one project run solely by women, stated that they would work with both male and female survivors. However this assertion may have been made because they feel they should be seen to be working with both (hence the social desirability bias) whereas in reality men form a significant minority of their cases.

The same issue may have occurred in interviews of probation officers with regard to the line of questioning concerning gender and the criminal justice system. Probation officers may have given a socially desirable response regarding equal treatment and sentencing while in practice a difference may be observed.

Social desirability was undoubtedly an issue at some level in the interviews with survivors given their status as a 'vulnerable' group and that much of the discussion was of a sexual nature. This perhaps relates particularly to references about the effects of being sexually abused as this refers directly to their life as adults which they may believe is more likely to be judged than the period of time that they were abused as children. To illustrate this point, we can consider the 'cycle of abuse' theory where the abused are thought to go on to abuse. If we were to recognise any worth in this theory then we might assume that some proportion of survivors who took part in this research had gone onto abuse others, and yet social desirability, and indeed fear of the possible consequences, might prevent them from disclosing this information. In the event however, one survivor eluded indirectly to possibly being involved with 'young people' but disclosed no substance to this, and one survivor insisted on turning off the tape recorder to disclose having had thoughts about abusing a young family member. This occurred when the survivor was about 14 years of age and she admitted intimately kissing the family member, but then never acted upon this again.

Finally, with regard to the role of the interviewer, we need to consider the possible impact of the demographic characteristics of the interviewer on the respondent. This was one issue raised by Fielding (1993) who shows concern about whether the demographic characteristics of an interviewer should be matched to those of the respondent. Fielding cites various American studies examining this concept, the majority of which focus solely on the demographic of race and its subsequent impact. Fielding concludes that, particularly with characteristics including race, age, sex, social class and religion, there is an impact which needs to be addressed:

"Socially acceptable responses are particularly likely to represent convenient ways of dealing with interviewers rather than expressing the respondent's actual view. For these reasons, standardised interviews try to match interviewers to the

characteristics of the research population wherever possible.”  
(Fielding, 1993: 145)

Several salient points arise from this framework. Firstly, Fielding is referring at this time just to standardised, or structured, interviews. Does this mean that the concept of matching is only relevant in this type of interview? I would suggest that demographic characteristics also play a role in unstructured interviews, but that role may not be as significant given the nature of discussion, and thus potential affiliation, between interviewer and respondent.

Secondly, the demographics of interviewer in this research undoubtedly had some significance with regard to interviewee response yet it would be highly difficult to ascertain just what this significance may have been, on either the data or the respondents themselves. Given the nature of carrying out research for a doctoral thesis, there was little opportunity for matching interviewer to respondent in terms of both financial and time constraints. I am a young, white, middle-class, heterosexual woman with no religious convictions. What impact might I, as a research interviewer, have had on respondents? The respondents referred to here are those survivors who took part in the research as they are likely to be the ones who would have been most affected by such characteristics given that I was far more ‘matched’ with the professionals I interviewed on all examples of demographic characteristics.

One could argue that race had little or no impact upon respondents given that the vast majority of them were White British, but this begs the question of ethnocentricity. Were white participants more likely to respond to the research based on where the adverts were placed as none were placed in known Black publications such as ‘The Voice’? What extent did their knowing my rather English name and the fact this was university research impact upon those who responded? Similarly, my relatively young age and social class may have contributed towards a biasing in data collection. Most of the participants were older than me and this fact may have led them to being more inhibited with their responses depending upon how they perceived me in terms of experience and maturity. This point is reminiscent of research carried out by Allen (1991: 26) who appeared to have a particular agenda when he recruited interviewers for his research on male and female sex offenders:

“These interviewers were all women in their late 40’s, 50’s, or early 60’s. Three were grandmothers. They were deliberately selected to help make the interviewing experience as non-threatening as possible for the offenders. The feedback...indicated this strategy was very successful”.

Sexuality may have had an impact on respondents. There were a number of gay and lesbian participants in this research as one of the publications used to advertise was a gay publication. The only reason for this was that this publication had a classified section which often included adverts asking for research volunteers. However, a potential difficulty arose when one female respondent answering this advert questioned the objectives of the research, i.e. was the research trying to establish a link between childhood sexual abuse and later sexuality. While I feel certain that this woman was assured of the true objectives of the research, it is possible that other participants may have felt some reluctance in their responses if they too were concerned about such a link trying to be made. In the event, many participants expressed gratitude for the way in which the interview had taken place; many stating that they had been very nervous prior to our meeting but felt comfortable and at ease.

The third point to arise from Fieldings’ (1993) comments about matching interviewer and respondent are in reference to gender. What impact did my being female have on my interactions with respondents? This would be yet another demographic characteristic which undoubtedly yielded some affect on respondents’ interaction with me. Some researchers have noted a positive facet to female interviewers such as Allen (1991) who deliberately deployed women as interviewers to contribute to establishing a less threatening environment for interviewees; Scully (1990) who found a higher level of disclosure and greater co-operation when interviewing rapists than did her male colleague; and Fielding (1993: 145) who states: “that female interviewers may be less threatening to both female and male respondents”. Whatever my impact, in interactionist terms, demographics would have been part of the subjective experience of respondents and individualistic to each.

*Accuracy in Recalling Events*

Moving away from considerations around bias in research and towards thoughts on the epistemological status of the collected data from interviews with survivors. The dialogue entered with the interviewees raises questions around memory accuracy and distortion, and it is worth exploring the stance taken with such issues, particularly in relation to ongoing debates concerning memory recall and child sexual abuse.

Memory expert Elizabeth Loftus (1993: 521) says “I do not question the commonness of childhood sexual abuse itself but ask here about how the abuse is recalled in the minds of adults” which directly questions the long-term reliability of memory in recalling such events. Studies carried out on memory have involved investigating the accuracy of event recall, and perhaps some of the more prominent ones were those carried out by Loftus and Palmer (1974). In these experiments participants watched a short film involving a car accident and were later asked various questions relating to the accident. Loftus and Palmer found there to be inaccuracies in participants’ estimates of car speed depending upon the verbs used in the questions, for instance ‘how fast was the car going when it contacted the other car?’ elicited significantly lower estimates of speed than when ‘contacted’ was replaced with ‘crashed’ or ‘smashed’. Similarly after participants had been asked ‘how fast was the car going when it passed the barn?’ a number of them subsequently remembered there being a barn in the film when in fact a barn had never existed. This data led Loftus and Palmer to conclude that the phrasing of a question can influence memory recall and particular phrasing may be more likely to elicit one response over another. Such research has influenced work around the possible link between memory distortion and accurate recall of child sexual abuse histories.

Schooler, Bendiksen and Ambadar (1997) examine the debate surrounding fabricated versus recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. They methodically weigh up the evidence illustrating both sides of the debate, concluding that:

“recovered memories of both fabricated and actual events may come to be understood as different examples of the many remarkable ways in which memory can misrepresent and

obfuscate the past.” (Schooler, Bendiksen and Ambadar, 1997: 287)

In their examination of fabricated memories, much of what they consider to be relevant in memory interference is the strength of suggestions by others: “there is now a substantial body of research documenting the degree to which individuals’ memories can be distorted by the suggestions of others.” (Schooler, Bendiksen and Ambadar, 1997: 254), and they draw on Loftus’ earlier work of memory distortion.

Such work raises the question of memory accuracy in relation to the validity of this research. On one hand, theories about memory reconstruction and distortion are well documented and there is a wealth of evidence to support the assertions, not to mention their relevance in terms of implications for such fields as criminal justice and therapy. However, on the other hand, there remains a discrepancy between the emphasis placed on suggestions by others (particularly in therapy) and the focus of this chapter which is to consider the problems encountered with this research. I would argue that the notion of recovered memories is not an issue in this research. The overwhelming majority of survivors who took part in this project had not had contact with such therapists<sup>1</sup>, and those who had been in some form of therapy did not ‘recover’ their memories; they had lived with the memories of abuse since childhood.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the extent of memory recovery through therapeutic intervention and suggestion appears negligible. While I would not subscribe to the concept of ‘false memory syndrome’ within the context of these research findings, it does not necessarily mean that the interview data is simply straightforward ‘truth’.

Drawing on Denzin’s (1997) notes and observations of what he terms ‘the representational crisis’, we can see how concepts such as ‘real’ and ‘truth’ are challenged and accounted for. This debate lends support to my argument that an examination of accuracy is relevant to the epistemological considerations at this juncture of the thesis. Ultimately, it means that I am accepting survivors’ accounts as not necessarily wholly accurate, but as valid research data. I will consider this in two parts.

Firstly, in ethnographic terms Trinh (1991: 38) argues that “a statement is true if it accurately accounts for and explains events that occur in the real world. The real world, however, is a construction – a product of a set of images that

conform to prior images of what the real looks like”. So we can assume that the ‘real’ is not absolute, that there will exist different versions of the same ‘truth’ or ‘reality’. In this sense, the question about memory accuracy is somewhat of an anomaly, taking into account one’s subjective realities.

In their work involving the examination of a psychosocial case study, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) discuss the truthful recollection of traumatic events. They suggest that intersubjective dynamics will impact upon an individuals telling of an event by way of coping with a traumatic reality. The way in which individuals ‘remember’ an event remains their reality and, as such, would be a truthful version.

Trinh (1991: 164) goes on to assert that an absolute objective reality has long been challenged by feminist critics, though the challenge is “not a denial of reality and of meaning, but rather a determination to keep meaning creative, hence to challenge the fixity of realism as a style”. Here we can observe a clear link with symbolic interactionism: the premise that one’s reality is not simply subjective through the meaning it has for the individual but that this reality can be changed and modified through interaction with the self and others.

Secondly, there is the methodological concept of validity in terms of how real the collected data can be and how accurately this can be measured. Again, in the tradition of interactionism (and indeed for traditional ethnographers) survivors’ accounts remain true to them. This research was searching for the subjective and lived experience of these people by way of understanding their stories. Interactionism helped in this particular understanding of how they came to their perceptions, their realities of becoming survivors, by:

- Providing a theoretical understanding, or grounding, to what I was being told;
- Allowing research data to be included that might not otherwise have ‘fitted’ (i.e. within a more objective framework or definition);
- Exploring the individual processes involved in participants modifying their realities and definitions of experiences.

In this context, the stories that form the bulk of the research are real and absolutely valid.

*Relevance of Data*

Moving away from the question of memory accuracy then, this seems an appropriate place to consider instead the question of relevance. As we have noted, the survivors interviewed were all adults who had experienced the abuse many years prior to the research taking place; indeed in some cases the time gap may have been as much as fifty years. This surely begs the question of how significant, or relevant, can these research findings actually be today? We need to bear in mind that the sexual climate that existed 20 or 30 years ago was very different to that of today, and for this reason alone, implications drawn from these findings may be tenuous. If we consider the reasons given by survivors for not having disclosed their abuse at the time, we may find that they are specific to a particular generation or era. Some survivors even spoke of this complication themselves:

“I’m nearly 57 years old and it was a long time ago. I think nowadays there’s more publicity, people know, children may have a chance of getting help. Years ago it was never heard of.”

Therefore, attempting to explore their reasons for non-disclosure at the time and provide some suggestions for overcoming such problems may be fruitless given the time gap and the accompanying difficulties. Nevertheless, this study involved delving into new and uncharted areas, and as such, the findings are significant in their own right. In other words, the central thread of this research is the gender effect in sexual abuse, in particular the consideration of female perpetration, and as previous chapters are testament to, remains a shrouded and taboo area in the field of sexual offending.

*Data Reliability*

Another methodological consideration is that of reliability. The next three chapters present the findings of the research which, by and large, are indicative of the inclusion of qualitative research methods. I am aware that the limited involvement of quantitative data runs the risk of inviting criticism from readers, particularly around this issue of research reliability. It is very difficult to demonstrate reliability with qualitative data as there is not the support of statistical analysis nor the advantage of the objectivity that is present in quantitative data. In an effort to

counter this, I had to remain faithful to the qualitative data to provide as much consistency as possible. This involved three main facets:

- keeping to the accuracy of the respondents' stories, i.e. remaining faithful to their own words;
- ensuring that there was consistency in my recording and keeping of information, i.e. through the use of interview guides and schedules;
- remaining faithful to my analysis and interpretation of the data, i.e. not changing meanings but following the statements of respondents.

In quantitative studies, the issue of reliability can be carefully checked, crafted and, indeed one could say, manipulated. Conversely, in qualitative work it is far more difficult to present and justify in view of the fact that much of the information and interpretation come directly from a bank of raw data whose reliability depend far more on the interpretative researcher rather than any statistical analysis or other such justifications. In the face of less quantitative analysis, I have endeavoured to provide raw qualitative data for examination (see Appendix 7).

That said, the purpose of the quantitative data in this work is to support and illustrate aspects of the qualitative data, not to form the bulk of the study and the reasons for this are clear. Firstly, a quantitative approach cannot be developed to study an unknown population. Secondly, the emphasis of this work was on exploring meanings and individual interpretations of experiences which necessitate a qualitative approach. Thirdly, I wanted to apply symbolic interactionism to my understanding of certain predicaments which inevitably meant that, given the foresight of interactionism, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. What the qualitative data lack in statistical and other quantitative measures, it compensates by the more direct, personal and interpersonal meanings of abuse as understood and expressed by participants. In its own right, such data provide a more colourful, if not valid, contribution to the literature.

So while the quantitative method can provide significance for reliability of results, it does not mean that it is not susceptible to distortion and manipulation to reach those results. The qualitative approach may be low on reliability due to its very nature, but then neither method can provide an exact interpretation of what is collected, observed and analysed. Given that this research problem could not have

been explored through quantitative measures (I could not have been expected to write a thesis showing clear samples and statistical analyses of participants), the research has overcome significant obstacles in exploring new ways of investigation in this area and, through the lack of quantitative data, has illustrated the extent of secrecy involved in this area. Paradoxically, the weaker aspect of the research is arguably also the strongest.

### **Ethical considerations**

#### *Socially Sensitive Research*

Perhaps one of the greatest conceptual problems involved with carrying out research in the area of child sexual abuse is the fact that it is still considered to be a taboo issue and a sensitive research topic. It is clear from discussions surrounding social research that a great deal of it "...is controversial and raises ethical issues which need to be addressed seriously" (Hornsby-Smith, 1993: 62). The very nature of social research results in a variety of difficulties which emerge when one attempts to carry out research in this area; in fact, many of the other problems which were discussed in the preceding section of this chapter stem from the innate sensitivity involved in researching child sexual abuse. Despite the potential wealth of inherent difficulties of such research, it is important that it continues to be tackled as very often it is the research carried out on these sensitive areas which tends to address society's most pressing social issues and policy questions. Research into areas such as sexual abuse "illuminate the darker corners of society" (Lee, 1993: 2).

Before delving into this section any further, I will first consider how we define sensitive research. This will give us a greater understanding of the issues which are necessary to consider and address. Sieber and Stanley (1988, cited in Lee 1993: 3) define sensitive research as "studies which have direct implications for the participants involved in the research, or for those people who are being represented by the research". This definition would therefore encompass research which may indirectly affect an individual, not simply research which could potentially disturb individuals such as rape or AIDS research.

Contradicting Sieber and Stanley's definition, Farberow (1963, cited in Lee 1993: 3) considers sensitive research as being parallel to those "areas of life

surrounded by taboo such as matters relating to sex or death". This definition is too narrow to adequately describe sensitive research areas. However it does explain sexual abuse as being a sensitive topic. This is further illustrated by Hornsby-Smith (1993) who discusses ethical issues in the context of gaining access to participants, and states that the issue of sensitivity in social research revolves around the research being intrusive of privacy, particularly in sexual areas.

The pitfalls of researching sensitive topics encompass both conceptual problems such as cultural sensitivity (Renzetti and Lee 1993:19) involving an "awareness of different beliefs, needs and habits within varying cultures", an example of which might be Katahara's research into Japanese mothers' sexualised contact with their children (cited in Jennings 1993:245), and an awareness of the different communication levels between individuals.

The issues addressed in relation to researching sensitive topics stem primarily from my role as researcher and how that role worked in relation to the different groups of participants. It is perhaps safe to say that each of the participant groups maintained some degree of reticence about the research for various reasons, and that these form the basis of the difficulties encountered as a result of researching a sensitive area.

Researching sexual abuse organisations raised particular ethical issues distinct from those raised with researching survivors. I experienced some degree of reluctance from many, though by no means all, of these projects in terms of the extent to which they involved themselves in the research. This reluctance would undoubtedly have arisen from the nature of the research, specifically the focus on organisational structure and process, resulting in the perception that the project was under some form of scrutiny, albeit within the context of academic research. This, therefore, raises the question of the extent to which professionals involved in this stage of the research altered their responses to fit the image with which they were trying to portray, hence the discussion previously around social desirability bias.

Before embarking on the fieldwork of interviewing abuse projects, I was aware of the possibility of encountering survivors of sexual abuse in the role of professionals as it is not uncommon for such a career choice to occur. This possibility raised concerns about the approach to be taken and the potential for

deviation from the interview schedule. Broadly speaking, the interview approach and the framework for questioning would be different with a professional compared with a survivor. I needed to be aware that there may, at times, be a situation where the professional interviewed is a survivor of sexual abuse.

In these cases what extent, if any, does the approach and framework waver? In reality this meant that I had to maintain a high level of sensitivity as interviewer, both recognising these experiences but also forming particular boundaries around the framework of these research objectives. This latter point refers to the fact that, as this comprised of the first stage of the research, it was tempting to deviate from the given interview schedule, and move into asking about their own experiences of abuse. While it was important not to invalidate and disqualify their experiences as survivors, it was also necessary to allow the focus of the interview to remain on them as professionals within the given organisation.

### *Confidentiality*

It was inevitable that the issue of confidentiality would emerge as a concern when interviewing professionals, and this concern was twofold. Firstly, it was decided that for the purposes of writing this thesis, an organisation's identity would remain anonymous as it was felt there may be more to lose than benefit with regard to using names. It was not deemed necessary, irrespective of the possible implications that may emerge as a result of the research, to identify individual projects given that the framework of the research was not about evaluating singular organisations, but rather comprised of an exploration of the types of services available and how they relate to gender. Secondly, confidentiality was a concern for the professionals themselves in relation to their clients' anonymity, and this concern may have also attributed towards the general feeling of reticence in taking part in such research. Understandably, some of the professionals interviewed appeared to be worried about breaching client confidentiality by inadvertently disclosing details which they may fear would later be used as part of the final data, regardless of the fact that none of the research questions involved obtaining details about individual cases. Nevertheless, for some projects this was a concern and may have hindered the potential for building trust between interviewer and interviewee, consequently altering the climate for disclosure within the actual research framework.

There is also the issue of confidentiality in relation to the other groups of participants in this research. Throughout this research project, confidentiality was maintained for all participants, both for individuals and organisations. Survivors were given pseudonyms, irrespective of whether or not they waved anonymity, as this was thought to be a necessary and 'safe' part of the process. There are no identifying details of any survivor or perpetrator within the thesis, and as a result there are the occasional inaccuracies regarding cases in order to protect anonymity. These slight alterations were made either by myself during the data analysis process, or more commonly by the participant.

One consideration that needed to be addressed prior to the fieldwork being carried out was the issue of limitations of confidentiality, and whether there should be limitations at all. This concern emerged during the deliberation over interviewing undetected perpetrators, as it was felt that this participant group represented a minefield of ethical difficulties and issues. Other researchers have faced similar dilemmas within the realms of their research; one such researcher is Diana Scully (1990) who carried out in-depth interviews with convicted and incarcerated rapists. Scully writes of her quandary over using a sample of convicted rapists as opposed to unconvicted, knowing that by accessing the latter she would potentially obtain a wealth of information regarding men who rape, yet realising that the ethical implications for herself could be profound.

In weighing up the advantages and disadvantages, the rights and wrongs of attempting to access possible participants for this research, I had to consider the very real implications involved in maintaining confidentiality for such a group. Consequently, there was no alternative but to introduce limitations to confidentiality around current offending. In other words, the interview with a female perpetrator would focus naturally on her experience of sexually abusing a child – however she defined that – yet if she disclosed current abuse, I would be obliged to break her confidentiality having clearly outlined these limitations as part of the interview procedure. In the event no interviews with undetected perpetrators took place.

Interestingly, this dilemma over breaking perpetrator confidentiality raised a question over the previous confidentiality procedure, which was namely full and total confidentiality for all participants. With some hindsight, it is clear that there

was the potential for similar ethical issues to arise with regard to current sexual offending. This is with particular reference to the survivors who participated in the study as there would not be the same ethical concerns with the professionals, primarily because those professionals interviewed would already have in place their own confidentiality procedure. There was, however, the risk that a survivor could disclose perpetrating current abuse, and I believe that, on reflection, this possible eventuality was not catered for, irrespective of the fact that it was unlikely to occur during this research.

#### *Role of 'Researcher' vs. 'Counsellor'*

Earlier in this section the role of 'researcher' was discussed and thought to be indicative of many issues relating to difficulties in researching this area. Returning now more directly to this point, we can see that the given role of researcher may have conflicted with the role of 'counsellor' throughout the interviews with survivors of abuse. It was this group of participants who took the most risks with regard to their self-disclosure and own safety. Within the realm of this research, it was these participants whom one could deem to be the vulnerable group; the ones who specifically made this research sensitive.

The concern this raised was around the extent to which survivors may inadvertently perceive the research setting as a counselling one, resulting in feelings of being let down. This was a difficulty which I became aware of at a very early stage in this project and as such was able to monitor my approach with survivors and my responses to them. By introducing them to the research, answering any questions they had about it and informing them of my role within our sessions, it is likely that very few had expectations around what I was offering. In addition to this, I spent some time at the end of each session talking through with them how they were left feeling and what further support they might want. This latter point was around attempting to combat the potential risk of further harm to respondents based on my not being a professional counsellor.

In the past many areas have been ignored or left under-researched due to their perceived sensitivity (Lee, 1993) which suggests all the more reason why they are in need of research. It would appear that sensitive topics are involved in a double bind in that while researchers can be reluctant to study them, these are often

the areas which need researching in order to raise societal attitudes and rid the stigma surrounding them. While the sensitivity of this research study has been a problem, it has not handicapped the study to the point of not achieving the results. As long as a researcher is aware of these difficulties and can make allowances for such potential problems, one need not ignore areas which may be considered sensitive as this would be a great waste to social research and a failure to society.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered some insight into the problems encountered through carrying out this research and highlighted the limitations involved. The more salient issues surrounded the difficulties in accessing participants for the work and questions around reliability, validity and the nature of 'truth'. These issues are of central interest to the thesis as a whole; that they are not just methodological concerns, but form a substantial aspect of the analysis of data. More generally, this chapter considered the methodology which was set out in Chapter Three in relation to its weaknesses and strengths, and further illustrated the need for the chosen method in view of the ethical issues raised by the nature of the study. Having detailed the fundamentals of the research methodology and critically examined them, I move now towards considering the analysis of the work and discussing the research findings.

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to any therapist who engages in memory recovery techniques.

<sup>2</sup> While the majority of survivors in this study had received some form of therapy or counselling, none reported having done so in relation to a separate issue and subsequently having repressed memories about sexual abuse 'recovered'. Interestingly, one of the professionals I spoke to – who was herself a survivor – informed me that she had been sexually abused by her father throughout her childhood, yet blocked out all memories of the abuse until her second child was born. At this time, a comment was made to the woman about this being her second pregnancy. She refuted this, stating that this was her first child. Subsequent medical evidence showed her that she had given birth to her first child 14 years previously at the age of 16. The memories of the sexual abuse she had suffered came back to her and she remembered that the son she had given away was the result of her father's abuse.

## CHAPTER V

### ISSUES OF GENDER INTERACTION AND CHILD SEXUAL

#### ABUSE: WHAT SURVIVORS SAY

##### **Introduction**

I intend to move now to the findings of the research project. This chapter will focus on the data collected from the interviews with survivors of sexual abuse in how they experienced and understood the abuse. Chapter Six will examine the data collected from the questionnaires and interviews carried out with service providers while Chapter Seven considers the significance of gender in child sexual abuse within the context of criminal justice.

Chapter Three contained a lengthy discussion of symbolic interactionism as a conceptual framework and how this framework was used to analyse the data. In the sections that follow, I will return to the foci of interactionism to illustrate their relevance and applicability for the study of gender and child sexual abuse. An essential element to this chapter is the wealth of qualitative data gathered from survivors which offers us a detailed insight into their understanding of their experiences of sexual abuse. In sum, the experiences recounted in this chapter are the subjective realities of those interviewed. It is only through their own words that we can begin to understand their interpretations and allow survivors to attach meaning to their interpersonal relationship with their abuser.

The chapter is divided into two main parts, both made up of sub-sections exploring aspects of the research findings. Some sub-sections (such as the duration

and frequency of abuse) comprise of quantitative data, and are analysed and discussed as such. The purpose of these sub-sections is to provide some comparative information of child sexual abuse in relation to gender. It was anticipated that differences may exist between the abuse 'relationships' on the basis of gender having implications for both theory and practice. The findings that arise from these sub-sections are not analysed in isolation from the other stages of the research project; rather they will be used in tandem with findings drawn from the criminal justice aspect of the work (as depicted in Chapter Seven) by way of examining differences in cases that do and do not reach the criminal justice system.

Returning now to the foci of symbolic interactionism, this conceptual framework is used throughout much of the chapter as a way of understanding particular issues relating to gender and child sexual abuse. These issues can be captured in four predominant themes, all of which are inter-linked and can be identified through much of the chapter's content. The first theme relates to the reconstructing of events surrounding the abuse in forming memories about what occurred in the individual's experience. Symbolic interactionism is the tool that allows us to understand how a person might draw upon their social encounters with the self and others in order to (re) construct and define their abusive experience. Self-definition is at the heart of interactionism and is central not simply to the remaining themes in this chapter but to the thesis as a whole.

This leads directly and inextricably into the second theme which surrounds the process by which one becomes an abuse survivor. The impact of certain symbols cannot be detached from the process of an individual adopting the identity of an abuse survivor. This is because certain symbols may either be forgotten, and not incorporated within the identity, or remembered and used. Such symbols may include the location where the abuse took place, the spoken word of the abuser, smells and feelings associated with the abuse and acts involved in the abusive encounter. The chapter considers other symbols that have been encountered by the individual to either avoid or accept the identity. For instance, one survivor used drugs as part of the process in denying and/or resisting the identity of abuse survivor, while another spoke of sexual promiscuity which could be seen as a method of shifting the victim status away from himself and thus resisting assimilating the identity.

Continuing in the same vein, the third theme refers to the process of becoming an abuse survivor as a “life-long activity” (Plummer, 1975: 122). In other words, it is not simply the individual’s interpretation of events at the time that is important, but how ongoing interactions continuously modify their definition and/or perception of the abusive experience. For instance, one survivor spoke of the erotic attraction he had for his sexually abusive mother, yet he failed to connect this with how he defined his experience of abuse until the research interview – many years after the abuse had occurred. Another survivor described the feeling of powerlessness which featured prominently throughout her life. This affected not only how she made sense of her abuse by multiple perpetrators but her continued propensity to acquiesce in terms of power relations in adult life. This ongoing acquiescence can be seen in interactionist terms as symbolic of her process of accepting responsibility for the experienced abuse and will therefore impact upon her interpretation and (re) construction of events.

The fourth theme to emerge within this chapter relates to the concept of harmfulness, linking in the symbol of the penis and the act of penetration. Symbolic interactionism illustrates the ambiguity around the definition of harm associated only with penile penetration. This is because interactionism opens a debate surrounding the connection between meaning and symbols. In interactionist terms, an actor will be influenced by their social encounters surrounding concepts of harm and intrusiveness (using such symbols as penile penetration) in the same way the ‘audience’ is. Once the dominant discourse relating to such concepts is blown apart, we can begin to question different symbols, meanings and power dynamics.

The structure of this chapter is not set out by way of exploring each of these themes individually; rather they will be examined throughout the chapter, demonstrating the explicit role symbolic interactionism has played in the analysis of survivors’ accounts. I move now to the analysis.

### **Survivors’ experiences of sexual abuse**

In the early chapters of the thesis, I considered past work carried out in the field of child sexual abuse and gender construction. This exploration served the purpose of providing a background and context in which to ground the research findings. This section and the ones that follow explain the research findings and examine the

possibilities that may exist as a result of them. With the exception of the first and last subsection, this section will involve comparing gender interactions (e.g. male perpetrator-female survivor), of which there are thirty-seven, rather than individual survivors of which there are twenty-four. The reason for this difference is because those data questions which are to be explored in this section cannot be appropriately examined without them being part of each gender interaction. For instance, if we consider the age the child was when the abuse began, this age may – and will most likely – differ if that person was victimised by more than one perpetrator. In other words, one survivor may appear several times within each data question due to them having been abused by multiple perpetrators.

This was the situation with Jean who was sexually abused by five separate individuals. Her perpetrators consisted of four men and one woman, and the abuse spanned much of her childhood. Jean is a member of a religious order and is in her early sixties. She was introduced to the research study by another survivor who had participated in the project.

Narrative 1: Jean<sup>1</sup> (Interview: 04/02/99)

*After the birth of my sister, who was the first child, my parents were told that it would not be safe for my mother to have another one, and they desperately wanted a son. So, they tried again and I arrived. So basically my mother rejected me and we still have a very bad relationship. I also had a lot of health problems so I spent quite a lot of my younger years in hospital, and I wasn't going to school. My brother was born 2½ years after me, and the first abuse started in a place when I wasn't at school for health reasons. My mother used to ask me to go and meet him, so I was 7, no I was 8, just 8. And he would have been 4½. There is a small village in the west of Ireland; you went up and turned right and there was the school, but so that other children wouldn't make fun of me for not being at school, my mother used to say, well just meet my brother by the corner. I was going up this day and there was a guy... I mean, it was a small village so everybody knew everybody, so I knew who he was, and I knew that he lived with his mother in the courthouse accommodation and they were in charge of cleaning and caring for the courthouse. And he said to me "have you ever seen the inside of a courthouse?". And I was 7, and I said "no". So he said "would you like to?". And I said ... You know, nothing crossed my mind at all ... and I said "well yes". And that was the first time he abused me, and that was oral abuse [to him].*

*This went on ... I mean, he did say to me "if you tell anyone I'll kill you". And at the age of 7 ... I mean, kids today are much more streetwise, but then in the west of Ireland, I mean this was 53 years ago. I really believed he would, so I didn't tell anybody. I wouldn't have known how to tell it anyway. It continued, and I tried different ways to avoid it, because he was there every day. So I used to go earlier, but he was there. So I went later ... I tried all sorts of tricks, but he was always there. The abuse didn't always take place in the courthouse, it was in his*

*backyard, it was in the cinema, it was anywhere. He had keys to all those places and they were all sort of slightly off the main road, so nobody would have seen anyway. It didn't cross my mind to tell anybody. I don't think about time, and I certainly had no understanding of what was happening. I didn't see it as sinful or wrong ... Yes, I had a sense it was wrong, but it wasn't in my control. And then one day, I did manage to avoid him, and I'd got past the courthouse where he was always standing at the doorway, and I got 'Mickey' and we were coming back and he said to 'Mickey' "would you like to see inside the courthouse?". And I said "no he wouldn't", but 'Mickey' said "oh yes". So, we went in. Now the abuse at this time had been going on for some months, and it was oral and anal abuse, and he abused me in front of 'Mickey'. He probably thought 'Mickey' was too young, I don't know. But anyway, when we came home, 'Mickey' ... we used to go and wash our hands and had milk and biscuits ... and 'Mickey' was saying to me while we were washing our hands, "what was he doing to you? What was he doing to you?". And my mother sensed in his voice that there was something wrong, so she called me in and asked "what's 'Mickey' talking about?". And I said nothing, so she called 'Mickey' in, and he said something about the man. So she said to 'Mickey' "okay you go". And then she said to me "what was he doing to you?". So I just basically said that he put his thing in my mouth, and I didn't know what else to say. And my mother said "go on out and play", so I thought that was it. She didn't ask me if it had happened before, so she was only aware of that one occasion, and she didn't know about any of the various ones that had taken place. So my dad came home and we all sat down and then my mum said that the au pair girl was going to take my brother and sister for a walk, and I said that I want to go too. And she said to me "no you're not allowed out at the moment". And she said "well you know it's damp in here, so you can't go out". Well I said that I really want to go. Well, they hardly got out of the house when the priest arrived. And I had hell, fire and damnation preached at me. My father sat there and said nothing. He just said nothing. He was a very quiet, shy person, and I think he just didn't know how to handle it. My mother sat there and cried, and I can remember the priest saying how wrong it was, and I felt he was blaming me. And in church, he stopped me going to communion. And I remember him saying "if that ever happens again, you scream". I remember standing there and thinking "you don't know what it's like. You're too paralysed to scream". So I was told never to think about it again, and never ever to tell anybody about it. I was made to feel that I had let the family down, that I had changed the family, and this was a big secret that had to be kept within the family. My mother was saying "if people find out, you've let us all down". My dad said nothing, but my mother said that and the way the priest was talking. So I never even told my sister, I mean we are very close in age. She's only 14 months older than me, but I never even mentioned it to her. It stopped of course, because obviously... My parents went to see his mother, but he was still around and I suspect I wasn't the only one who was abused.*

It is noted that Jean did not tell anyone about the abuse because she suffered explicit threats from her perpetrator which she believed. Instead she tried to find ways of avoiding the man so that he was unable to abuse her. The abuse ceased when her parents eventually found out and spoke to the man's mother. Jean speaks of the negative reaction she received when the abuse was uncovered and that,

instead of getting any support around it, she felt wholly blamed and at fault. Such a reaction is likely to have had an impact on her subsequent experiences and disclosure of other abuse. Jean goes on to talk about being abused by her mother's cousin in what was an isolated incident.

*Two years later, I was 9. I was visiting my mother's uncle, and again for health reasons, I was off school because I was ill. They had a lovely farm, and I used to stay there quite a lot and my mother's first cousin, 'Jack' abused me once. Now, he was a very quiet person. He would have been late 20s, early 30s, and he wasn't married. He's out of that; he did marry and had 5 children. He seemed to have a happy marriage and he died just a few years ago. I went out to watch - it was a stud farm - I went out to watch the horses being exercised and he said to me "you can get a better view from up on top of the hill". So we went up there and he abused me there. That was a touching abuse, and I think... I don't know how far it had gone, except that my aunt came and called us in for dinner or for lunch. And I... he said "don't say anything". Now, I often wonder back, that she had told me not to go in to the exercise yard, that she kept a good eye on it, I often wonder if he had done it before. I don't know. It was something in the way she called me, and said "where have you been?". And "don't go there again", and him saying "don't say anything". But that was a one-off abuse.*

Similar to Jean's initial perpetrator, 'Jack' made some explicit warning for her not to tell anyone. As with the subsequent three perpetrators, Jean did not tell anyone about the abuse until she was an adult.

*The next one was... in a sense, my mother was the next... it was from the age of 12 until I was about 15 - 16, and it was very inappropriate touching. My parents didn't have a good sex life. In fact, I don't think they had sex after my brother was born. They had sexual problems, and my mother seemed to take it out on me, and that's when that took place. But then when I was... again, we never talked about it... I never said anything, and I was extremely uncomfortable. I started getting migraines at the age of 7, and now I look back and see why. The next one was my grandfather, my mother's father. I was 14, his wife had died and they'd had a very, very happy marriage. She had a stroke at the age of 59 and he was 59 as well, and he was devastated after her death. Now I had spent a lot of time with them as a child, because I was in hospital a lot, so I went to stay with them a lot. I also went to a special school for a while. And he never, never, never did anything until after my grandmother's death. I think he was just desperately emotionally disturbed. It took him a long, long time to come to terms with her death. The abuse was... I guess you could put it down to foreplay, is how you could describe it. He made me do things as well. And that went on for a few months, and I thought I couldn't dare tell anyone in the family. I've actually since discovered that he tried it on with my sister, but she told him to go to hell. So it just suddenly stopped. And I just think that he suddenly thought to himself "my God, what the hell am I doing?". He did get married four years later, and it was a very happy marriage, but they're both dead now. The marriage lasted ten years, then he died. But I do think that he was just very, very emotionally disturbed.*

*[That abuse went on for] about 2 – 3 months. And then it just suddenly stopped. He was in the house, and I was staying in the house on holiday, and my mother's youngest sister was still living at home. At the time, she was out of work, and I got on really well with her. She was my godmother and we were very close, but I just couldn't tell her. I think even at that age I didn't know the terminology to use.*

Jean talks of her grandfather's attempts to sexually abuse her sister and the response he received from her. I find this very curious in terms of children's resistance and victimisation. It raises questions for me about the differences in Jean and her sister's responses to their grandfather. Was Jean less able to defy her grandfather because of her previous perpetrators? Was there some other factor that contributed to Jean's inability to avoid this abuse? Finkelhor (1984) highlights the various factors that may lead to a child's lack of resistance in abusive situations. Those that seem to be applicable to Jean include such risk factors as her feeling unsupported, lacking affection and having a poor relationship with her mother. The latter factor is illustrated by not only Jean's experience of being sexually abused by her mother, but her mother's rejection of her from birth.

**[In response to the maternal abuse, Jean says that it happened several times a week and consisted of her mother touching her]:** *[It happened] in bed, yes, because she was sleeping with me, which is also, as I look back, it's also different, because she never slept with my sister. And I just had the most horrific relationship with my mother for years and years. I think she has blotted that out. We've never talked about it, and she's 82 now. And at 82, there's no way she could cope with it, and I'm not sure that I could either. But I often wonder, does she remember or doesn't she? I think it was a bit of a strain in age, because my father was 12 years older than my mother. My mother married at 19. At one moment they seemed to be in love and at another, they didn't, so I don't know. My mother was a bit odd anyway at the age of 49. In going over with my therapist, she suspects... I mean, we have no proof of this, but she suspects that my mother may have been abused by my grandfather also. And yet there was a very good relationship between my grandfather and his 4 children – my mother, her sisters and brother. But she does suspect that it may have happened, and that that was in one sense why she reacted so strongly when my brother told about what had happened, and then the priest was brought in. Because at least mine was out in the open, but hers wasn't... I don't know.*

It is interesting to note that Jean appears to find some justification for both her mother's abuse and her grandfather's, whether that is a poor sex life or emotional disturbance. Such justifications are not evident in her descriptions of her other abusive experiences with acquaintances or wider family members. Despite holding

these justifications, Jean goes on to talk about experiencing her immediate family members' abuse of her as more of a betrayal.

*It is too difficult to separate out [the effects of my different abusers]. As I worked through them in therapy, I became quite angry. I felt then quite betrayed by my grandfather and my mother – the very people who should have been protecting me, but were abusing me. While I have rationalised my grandfather, that he was going through a bad emotional stage and he was devastated by my grandmother's death. I mean, she had had a stroke a few days before she died and he looked after her and they were very close. It was a very good marriage. I still feel very, very angry with my mother and we have got no relationship. I have told my sister a little bit about them. I always thought it was ironic that my mother rejected me from birth.*

It can be observed that while Jean felt betrayed by both her mother and grandfather, she was able to attach reason to the abuse perpetrated by her grandfather and cites almost extenuating circumstances for his abuse of her. For the remainder of her narrative, Jean does not express anger towards any other of her perpetrators apart from her mother.

Jean's last abusive experience occurred towards the end of her mother's abuse of her when she was away on a residential school outing.

*And then the last abuse was when I was around 15 – 16 as well. It was a priest, and it was in boarding school... no, I had been at boarding school, I was at day school at this time, and we had these retreats. It was when I brought [the priest something] and he started putting his hand up my skirt and wanting me to kiss him and wanting me to sit on his knee and all sorts of things like that. I actually... I think it's the first time that I actually refused, because previously I hadn't done. I didn't know how to handle them, and I still didn't know how to handle him and I said "no, I wouldn't". But this went on... I suppose it was just literally gone on for a week. And I know I should have said to the other sisters in the school, this is what's happening, but I don't think they would have believed me. So, I then suppressed everything, just blotted it all out of my mind, until I was in my late 30s. I started to have nightmares about the abuse. I had really hoped that they were just nightmares, and it was ages before... well, one day I was in the cathedral, and it just suddenly struck me then about the abuse. All of this had actually happened.*

It is noted that Jean did not report this abuse because she felt that she would not have been believed. Within the broader scope of this research, this was a common reason given by survivors for non-disclosure of abuse. In terms of Jean's case, this is a reason that is not explicit in her other interactions, and I wonder if this was in part due to him being a priest and what this meant for Jean, both in terms of how she thought others would view her allegation and of her desire to be part of the

religious order. It was at this point that she chose to put her abusive experiences out of her mind until they returned as nightmares many years later.

*The nightmares were beginning to trouble me a lot, I was losing a lot of weight and I couldn't sleep. I was afraid to sleep. It got to the point where I was too terrified to go to sleep, and I suppose I started to think more about why was I frightened so much. And I suddenly... I remember that day, and it hit me out of the blue. This is reality, this really did happen, and it was only bit by bit that I began to remember the abuses. I didn't remember it all at once, nor did I at that time think of getting help. It was only 1987 and I suppose I had become disintegrated inside bit by bit, the more I realised. But I couldn't tell anybody. I mean, I had extremely good friends, but I couldn't tell anyone. I didn't know what to do and it seemed to paralyse me, and that was getting worse and worse and worse. I was in a rather high-profile job at the time and I remember thinking "if I don't do something about myself, I might have to quit this job". So among the sisters, a few of them had been in therapy for some reasons, I don't know, but they had been in and they had gone to this therapist. So, I went and we set up an initial meeting, and I remember she said to me on the phone, can you give me an idea as to why you want to see me? I said "well it's a midlife crisis". I mean, even then I couldn't acknowledge, even though I'd taken that step. And I remember, what made it easy when I spoke to her was she said "well that's natural, so you're not unusual there". And I thought, "well at least this woman has a sense of humour". And it was interesting, at that initial meeting, I said I was sexually abused as a child. But I just said things in general, and I didn't come back for 3 years.*

Jean was one of the few survivors who took part in this research to have blocked out her abusive experiences for any length of time. It is clear from this narrative that Jean's memories of abuse were recalled without therapeutic interventions and supports at least in part my rejection in the previous chapter that survivors' memories had been reconstructed through suggestions by others. Nevertheless, the concept of 'suggestion' is an interesting one and relates directly to the more detailed discussion in Chapter Four around social interaction and memory reconstruction. Jean's memories of abuse will have been affected by interaction with others at the time of the abuse as well as throughout her life. If we consider this in the context of Blumer's (1969) third postulate of symbolic interactionism, we can see how Jean's social encounters will form an integral part in her making sense of her experience.

The process of Jean becoming an abuse survivor is likely to be a life-long activity, at least in interactionist terms because of these ongoing social encounters between the self and others. I would suggest that a particularly formative interaction in this process was that which Jean has spoken about following her

disclosure as a child regarding her initial perpetrator. How she assimilated the negative response from this interaction will have remained as part of her continuing socialisation as an adult in terms of her perception of herself and how this perception influenced her perspective around her experience of abuse. The next section of narrative illustrates further Jean's interpretation of herself as an abuse survivor.

*I went on having sessions about other things. Looking at my relationship with my mother and looking at all sorts of things, and never coming back. But she said that she couldn't do it. She had to wait for me to bring it back up again. But she said, it was almost as if once you've acknowledged it, you then suppressed it all again. I also knew that I was going to have to deal with it someday, and that it was while I was dealing with a lot of little issues... because, I mean, there are a lot of little spin-offs from sexual abuse... when I was dealing with them, deep down I knew I was going to have to get to the cause, but I was putting it off. And it was only... I sort of worked on the first one, and then bit by bit the others came back. That was the one I had most of the nightmares about.*

*I think that one [was the abuse I had most of the nightmares about] because I had been told it was evil, it was bad and I had disgraced the family, and all of that. It had all sorts of implications on that. And it still does. I still have a very negative image of myself, and I'm still in therapy.*

**[In response to the effects of the abuse]:** *It gave me a real sense of guilt, enormous guilt. And everything that was ever happening, I mean every war that has taken place, it has all been my fault. It gave me a very, very low self-image. It made me hate myself, and to the point that sometimes I was ill as a child. And I've had a lot problems in my adulthood as well, I questioned that it was a punishment from God. I also, when it happened the second time, I thought that something was wrong with me. I must be giving some signals that this is okay, but I understand that a paedophile can walk into a room of 30 kids, and know exactly which ones will keep silent. And once you've done it once, that is actually the signal that you give to others who are likely to pick it up. That must have been one of us, I don't know.*

The overwhelming sense of guilt that Jean felt is striking but perhaps not uncommon in survivors of sexual abuse, particularly amongst those who have had multiple perpetrators. Jean disclosed her first abusive experience to her mother whereupon she was made to feel that she had done something wrong and felt very blamed for the experience. This undoubtedly will have had an impact on later experiences and her feelings surrounding them. We know that children have frequently been blamed for their own abuse and other survivors in this research are testament to that. On that basis, children who are abused by multiple perpetrators are more likely to be treated as suspect and having provoked the abuse in some

way. Russell (1984: 28) discusses this phenomenon of victim-blaming and suggests that it can actually lead to further victimisation through the child's internalisation of the notion that s/he must be responsible for the abuse; "guilt therefore replaces anger in her response to sexual abuse, and undermines her capacity to protect herself effectively". Jean's case is particularly illustrative of this concept.

Jean discusses further the effects of the abuse that she experienced, pointing to the numerous areas of her life that it seems to have impacted upon, for instance, her religious standing.

*[The impact on my religious life] was something that I had to deal with in therapy, and I don't think it had - I really have to say I don't know - but I still believe that I still have a patent religious life. I was very adamant from the age of 12, by which time two abuses had taken place, but I was going to enter [the sisterhood]. And I wanted to enter by the time I was 15 or 16, but my father wouldn't let me. And he said "you'd never get a medical to enter anywhere, because you have to have a medical". And the doctor said no he wouldn't give it, he couldn't in conscience. He gave me one at 18. I've no regrets whatsoever, but it was an area I had to look into. I mean, certainly being religious, men sort of don't have a lot of interaction with me. Well, we do now, but at the time I entered, we didn't, so I was in an all-female school. I was in all-female congregation and I went to an all-female college. And then my first teaching job was basically an all-female staff, and I found it very hard to relate to men. I didn't trust them, I just tried to avoid them, and I certainly would never let one get near me, I mean emotionally near me. But as time has gone on, I've changed and I have some really good male friends now. And I didn't know why I was like that. I remember that I was aware I was like that. Whether the other sisters had noticed it, I don't know, but I was aware I was like that, and I used to rationalise it. I said its because I was used to females. I wasn't aware at that stage that there was an underlying fear, but I distrusted all men.*

Jean mentions being frightened of men though not interpreting the feeling as fear until many years later. This suggests that she perceives the abuse perpetrated by her mother in quite a different way. That abuse was the more unusual not simply because the perpetrator was a woman, but the duration was significantly longer than any of the other abusive experiences and Jean reports feeling anger towards her mother which is not evident in her other interactions.

Jean continues to talk about the effects of the abusive experiences, focusing now on her relationships and physical health.

*[When I was younger] I think [the abuse] affected my relationships, because I was very much a loner. That could partly come from the fact that I was taught at home quite a lot because of the illness, but I did tend to be a loner. I also tended to be an idiot, so I was covering up my pain and at that point. It wasn't a pain of the awareness of the abuse, but it was a pain of isolation, but I was isolating*

*myself, and I can still do this, but I'm aware I do it. And then I'd do something absolutely stupid to get me into trouble or something at school, like throw a snowball at the head teacher. That's not very sensible, but that was the sort of thing I did. Did it affect my schoolwork? No, I missed a lot of schooling. My parents did have tutors in, and my parents helped because they were both well educated. When I first said that I wanted to enter at 12, my father just said no, and he didn't want to hear about it again. And then when I was more serious about it at 15, he said "well you're not going to enter until you get your 'O' levels". So that gave me an aim to work for. So my parents never had to tell me to do my homework, in fact they had to try and stop me. And then when I got my 'O' Levels, he said "well, you are still too young, wait until you get your 'A' Levels". So I worked for my 'A' Levels. I think, not at the time, but I think there are time even still when it does affect my concentration. I think it is it because I am trying to blot out. Not maybe as much now.*

*I don't know [if the depression was linked to the abuse]. I remember saying to my therapist "I don't understand this". In a sense I worked a lot through it and the issues around it. So if this had happened to me three years ago I would have understood it more than I understand it now. So she said "I think it is a combination of all things". I have had 26 surgeries in 20 years and the last one was 9 hours – stuff like that. That was just 2 years ago. She said "you have had at least 1 surgery, if not 2 or 3 a year since I have known you".*

*[The first person I told was] one of what we call the 'sister provincial' – she's in charge of all the housing in Scotland, Ireland. It was the beginning that the reality hit me that it wasn't nightmares. I was working in a mother and baby home. I was deputy matron and the one that was matron was a qualified nurse and she done psychiatric care. She noticed that I had lost weight and wasn't eating very well, so she sent for the provincial and said "look I am a bit worried about her, I think she needs...there is something going on. I don't know whether she is frightened to say it or what?". So the provincial took me out and she said "how are you?". I mean, we were friends anyway. She said "well what's going on?". I said "I have been having these terrible nightmares". She said "did anything happen to you as a child that could be coming back to now?". I remember just saying to her "well I was sexually abused, but it didn't affect me", just like that. For years I didn't believe it did. That was 10 years before I went in to therapy.*

*It was because of nightmares that I was up and not going to bed. The sister noticed that I wasn't well. She sort of said it to me, and I thought, well no I am not. But she was a bit worried so she asked.*

*[I believed I was alright]. What was very interesting in time with the nightmares. I mentioned at the age of 7, I started getting migraines and then at the time that I realised that the nightmares were a reality, that they were actually a memory of the subconscious. The migraines stopped, but I started getting terrible, terrible colon pain and was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease. Both are caused by stress. I looked at this with my therapist and [found] that I had buried this so deep down in my gut. But, on the other hand, I do my best now and if I do something or over react to something because I am frightened, then I know it. Then I can look at it and then say, well there's no reason to be like this. You are in control now. I did have a habit of handing over control to other people. In work I handed over one*

*time to the director so that he absolutely made mincemeat of me. But as my therapist said, you handed that power over to him, because the first time that he shouted at you in his office and put his finger right up to you in your face accusing you of something that you have not done and then he said "don't you tell anybody outside this office". It was a whole repetition. So I have learnt now not to hand control over to other people.*

It is noted that by the time of the interview, Jean had started to work through many of the issues surrounding her abusive experiences. Jean talks about stress and letting people control her which are indicative of her being burdened with the feeling of responsibility for the abuse she suffered. The guilt and stress that she describes appear to manifest themselves in other ways, particularly in quite tangible ways such as migraines and the physical diagnoses of illnesses. What is clear from Jean's account is that for many years, she carried feelings of guilt, responsibility and blame for her experience of sexual abuse. I would suggest that those negative feelings and perceptions were reinforced for Jean with each new abusive experience and may have further supported her decision to not disclose the latter four incidents – not simply as a child but her non-disclosure continued throughout a substantial part of her adulthood. These interviews did not explore in great detail the analysis of processes involved in adult socialisation. This was illustrated through Jean's ongoing interpreting and modifying her experience of the situation. Not only did Jean have the reinforcement of her negative perspective on the abuse she suffered, but her encounters as an adult handing over control to others will have further acted as reinforcers to her feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and self-blame.

Plummer's (1975) concept of an individual's process of identification being a life-long activity has emerged as one of the main themes in the chapter, and it is illustrative once again within Jean's narrative. She talks of her experience of therapy in relation to the growing awareness of power dynamics between herself and others, stating that she has ceased handing control over to those she encounters. Through addressing this issue, Jean modified her perception of her role in the abuse, being able to absolve herself – at least in part – of the responsibility she felt for the perpetrated abuse.

### *Defining Sexual Abuse*

According to Charon (1998), definition of the situation is one of the central concepts in the symbolic interactionist perspective and this is illustrated in the work of interactionists such as Herbert Blumer (1969), Howard Becker (1963), Erving Goffman (1961) and Ken Plummer (1975). Defining a situation arises from one's interaction with others and the self. In other words, what happens around us and how we interpret such interaction will be of significant influence in the way in which we make sense of and define a situation for ourselves.

In the context of this work, the way in which someone defines their experience of 'sexual abuse' is of central importance in understanding more about the significance of gender in child sexual abuse. In the past, research has tended to deploy a predetermined objective definition in studying aspects of sexual victimisation which of course has a great many advantages. In this work, however, the symbolic interactionist perspective has been applied to aid understanding of the issues raised and as such, it was necessary to allow individuals to interpret their situations themselves rather than attempting to describe them from an external, albeit more 'objective' perspective. As Charon (1998: 216) notes in recounting Curry's (1993) study of 'Sam', "understanding such a definition is best accomplished by asking the one who is actually doing the defining".

In brief it is the purpose of this sub-section to examine the interpretative processes of the survivors in this research, to explore their perspective and how they attach meaning to their experiences of sexual abuse. For most participants involved in this research, their experience of being abused was clear to them because they defined it as abusive and were able to recognise the issues the abuse had raised for them. However for others the definition of sexual abuse was an issue in itself.

Frank was a particularly interesting case who had been 'abused' at the age of six by two separate perpetrators; one was his eighteen-year old uncle and the other was a fourteen-year old friend of his brother. I have put 'abused' in parentheses as this is my terminology and not Frank's. Frank did not at any time consider his experience to have been abusive, instead he stated that he had enjoyed it and would subsequently seek out similar situations: "I put myself into the situations, I was not dragged into them, I was not an unwilling participant".

This is a viewpoint with which, as a researcher of child sexual abuse, I struggle. Is it possible for young children to be sexually active with a person significantly older than themselves without it being abusive, and at the very least involving an abuse of power by the older person over the child? Frank's argument about this does not differ vastly from those arguments pertained by groups of people advocating adult-child sex in that he claims that children are sexual beings and can become sexually active if encouraged to do so:

"if children are precociously sexually stimulated then they often become - they can become sexual beings...but whether children would be involved in any kind of sexual activity beyond their years I think that's less likely unless they are introduced by people who were older. Now I don't think they get introduced through activity with their peers cos there's no real sexual element in that".

We may find that there is little disagreement with Frank's comments at this point, and as we shall see further into this chapter, the consequences of being sexually abused can result in promiscuity, sexual addiction and prostitution as a result of victims' premature introduction to sexual activity and the breakdown in the relationship between love and sex.

The reluctance to term an experience as abusive was mirrored in another case but this time involving a woman who had been 'abused' by a female perpetrator. Karen had suffered abuse by two male perpetrators on separate occasions and then was abused at the age of nine by a female friend of the family. Similar to Frank, Karen did not see the experience as abusive and claims that she "loved it". However Karen does acknowledge that looking back she can see that what had happened was not right and that it was an abuse of power:

"She should have known better, she shouldn't have done that. But at the same time, there was me, with carnal knowledge at that age, advance of the norm, and I desired her".

What is particularly interesting about this statement is not only Karen's recognition that the experience was abusive though not "as abuse in the same terms as the earlier abuse" but that she may be supporting Frank's argument about the potential for children to become sexually active if they are introduced to sexual activity at a young age. And we can see from Karen's circumstances that this experience

manifested itself into a negative effect in the form of guilt: "I knew what we were doing was wrong...because I felt guilty. It was a big secret".

Three other survivors who were interviewed for this study reported difficulties with defining their experience as abusive, and the most significant aspect of this finding is that, like Karen, these survivors were all abused by women. Again if we consider the context in which this thesis is placed and the issues that were raised earlier on, this finding does suggest that our failure to see women as sexual abusers can have a critical impact on those abused by women and how they term that abuse. I would further suggest that this can have implications for the way in which these survivors come to terms with their abuse since their experience will be further compounded by their inability to name their experience.

Matthew was one such research participant. He was abused by a friend's mother when he was sixteen years old. Methodologically this presented a difficulty in that we had set the perimeters of child sexual abuse to that of being under sixteen as this is what we commonly (and legally) term the age of consent. However this is exclusive to heterosexual sex given that we are currently embroiled in debates surrounding the legal age of consent for gay men and given that there exists no legal age for lesbian sex. So the question remained, should we include this case given that Matthew was above the legal age for consensual heterosexual sex? I deemed it to be of particular interest to symbolic interactionism in terms of the meaning attached to the experience by the individual and how he became an abuse survivor *despite* being over the legal age of consent. It is precisely as a result of Matthew's age that we can attempt to dispel myths about this type of abuse in showing the damage sexual abuse by women can have on an adolescent boy. While the interview with Matthew covered various aspects of his abusive experience, at this point I will focus upon the process by which Matthew became an abuse survivor and how he adopted such an identity.

Matthew was staying with his friend because he described himself as having an unhappy home life and did not get along with his parents. During this period of time, Matthew's friend's mother initiated a sexual relationship between them which lasted for about two weeks. Matthew stated that he was shocked and that the woman had to persuade him to do the sexual acts. He did not enjoy these sexual encounters particularly as they were coupled with numerous sexual put-downs

regarding his performance and stamina. At the time of this occurring Matthew did not view it as sexual abuse; firstly because he felt that he could have left the situation if he had really wanted to, and he compared this with young children being unable to leave their homes due to abuse. However a number of statements made by Matthew run parallel with those made by other survivors of abuse. For instance, Matthew liked the affection he received from the woman as he had never had an adult displaying affection towards him but he just wanted the sex to stop. He also suggests that he could have left but chose to stay. This is homogenous with many abusive experiences of other people in that they 'choose' to remain in the situation due to the possibility that something else might be worse. (Another survivor in this study remained with her perpetrator as she was fearful of a potentially worse situation, namely being abused in care.) In this case Matthew feared being thrown out this house and being forced into what he saw as potentially worse situations.

The second reason Matthew did not term this experience sexual abuse was that he maintained an erection which led him to believe that he must have been enjoying it regardless of the fact that he knew he was not. This echoes many male survivors' fears and perceptions, and fuels their confusion about their role in the abuse and how it affected them. An erect penis is not consistent with sexual arousal, rather it is a physiological reaction and can certainly occur in the presence of fear and shock. While this is now commonly acknowledged in the male rape literature, it is less well known within society as a whole and even less so amongst adolescents.

Matthew spoke at length about the negative impact the experience had on him and his 'journey' in perceiving and accepting the experience as abuse. In allowing Matthew to talk about this 'journey', or process of becoming as Plummer (1975) might term it, it became apparent that particular interactions had been key in Matthew taking on a certain identity rather than another – and moreover, the continuing fluxes and modifications involved in this ongoing process. For instance, while Matthew told very few people about the abuse, those he did choose to tell thought it was "cool" and that he "was lucky". Such interactions are likely to have served to distance Matthew from defining his experience as abuse in light of the messages he was receiving from peers around what he 'should' be feeling (i.e. a

symbol of masculinity is to always enjoy and be willing for sex). As part of this acquired identity, Matthew spoke of separating love from sex (as his perpetrator had done) and treated his subsequent female partners in this manner.

Behaving promiscuously and relating to sexual partners in an unemotional way suggest that Matthew was motivated to interact with symbols other than the sexual abuse in order that he avoid defining himself as a 'victim' – an identity that he would not accept at that time. Instead, interacting with such alternative symbols may be indicative of an internal power struggle for Matthew in that he sought to redress his teenage feelings of powerlessness caused by his experience of abuse. Powerlessness is undoubtedly a feature in child sexual abuse situations – quite markedly in this research – and it is interesting to note how survivors respond differently to it.

Matthew also spoke of becoming involved in problematic drug use in the years following his experience of sexual abuse. This drug use may also be a symbol in his denial of the abuse and represented a means of distancing himself from being an abuse survivor. The reasoning behind this is twofold. Firstly, substance misuse can be regarded as a form of 'escapism' by alleviating (effectively or otherwise) some of the psychological pain of a traumatic event. In this way, Matthew may have managed to avoid dealing with the difficulties with which the abuse presented him. Secondly, Matthew acquired instead the identity of drug user rather than abuse survivor – an identity with which he may have felt more comfortable. I suggest the former identity being a more comfortable one by drawing on the premise that identifying oneself as a drug user does not have the same vulnerability and powerlessness associated with it that the victimisation of having been sexually abused may have. This would be particularly so for a boy abused by a woman.

In later adulthood, Matthew sought out therapy for various difficulties he was facing, not least his addictive drug use. It was during this time that he first received an alternative response to his experience, namely shock and dismay at what had happened to him. This represented Matthew's first verification that what he had experienced was indeed abuse and concurred with his own suppressed emotions concerning the experience. These later interactions are likely to have influenced Matthew in taking on a different identity to the one he had reconciled himself to previously.

At the time of our interview, Matthew reported still struggling with his definition of his situation and, as was noted with the case of Jean and in line with one of the main themes of this chapter, the process of becoming an abuse survivor is likely to be a life-long activity in interactionist terms.

The other two cases which were deemed as making an important contribution to this section were those of Charlie and Sue, both of whom had been abused by their mothers pre-pubescently. Neither of them viewed their experience as abuse and both were currently still reluctant to label it as such. In fact Sue was more comfortable terming her experience as her mother having “an unhealthy interest” in her. As with other cases discussed in this section, the effects that these experiences had on survivors are indicative of how we now might define their experience. This will be discussed in further detail in a later section. While there is nothing conclusive regarding the reasons behind the difficulties experienced by some survivors in defining their abuse, it remains a significant finding that of those cases who had difficulties, 80% had been abused by a woman.

In the following narrative, Charlie recounts why he struggled with seeing his mother’s actions as abusive despite the objectively sexually abusive nature of her behaviour. This is illustrative of the difficulty involved in applying societal standards, or definitions, of sexual abuse to individual cases in a bid to explain them.<sup>2</sup> This case also demonstrates the necessity for the application of interactionism and the exploration of individuals’ subjective realities. Charlie works as a psychologist in London and is in his late thirties.

Narrative 2: Charlie (Interview: 05/10/98)

*I think I was about 10, maybe 11. All I remember is one incident, and there may be more but that one is the one which will always come to mind. But I can never really place my age in it. Actually I might have even been younger, I don't know how to - because I started to remember it in a different way later on - I just find it difficult to place the age, so maybe, maybe 10.*

*I remembered it kind of at the time and afterwards but I kind of remembered it in a certain way. I didn't really focus on the memory too much and, you know, talking to my sister, she remembers more incidents, but with her. With me there was just the one that I can remember. Sometimes I think there's probably more but I just don't - I guess I don't really think of it. Some of it's sketchy. I'd be about 10, it's at night. The way we sort of had it set up is that I had my own bedroom and there was another large bedroom that for awhile my sister had shared the same room as my mother. I had my own room, and I can't remember*

*how [but] there's some reason why I ended up in my mother's bed. When I think about it, when I try to recreate it, sometimes I think that it was maybe thunder and lightening and I was scared. That springs to mind but it could also be - the trouble with memories for me is it's a reconstruction of memories, but it could also have been that my mother might have said she was frightened. So all I remember is that I was in bed and I kind of had that, I suppose a - oh I had quite an erotic attraction to my mother anyway which I think is probably normal at that age. I think that's probably why I hadn't considered it abuse until I actually thought about it later on.*

*So anyway I was in bed with my mother and I fell asleep. I woke up and my mother was masturbating me and then she said - she was drunk at the time [and] I only know she was drunk because she had a drink problem - and she had a boyfriend [called] Jimmy who she used to see on a regular basis. But she was calling me by his name, and saying [something] like "it's all right Jimmy, it's all right Jimmy". [she kept] using words like "it's ok" and "it's nice" or something. I don't know how long this all went on for, and then she started to use my name and sort of say "it's ok". You know I'm very aware - I really remember how I felt at the time. Then she took my hand and she put my hand on her breast and moved my hand around. I don't really know what happened after that. At some point I went through, back through to my bedroom and nothing much was - no, nothing was said. Nothing was said the following day. I can't remember the following day but I certainly don't believe anything was ever said, and I can't remember waking up the following day or seeing my mother.*

*At the time I was frozen. I mean really frozen so I couldn't move. I mean I remember because it had an impact on me for years afterwards anyway, but at the time I remember sort of like going absolutely rigid, trying not to breathe. I don't know why but just trying not to breathe as if I stopped breathing that she'd forget what she was doing or she'd stop or leave me alone or something. Just to try to not exist for that moment. [I remember] being absolutely terrified because I had, as I said, quite an erotic attraction to my mother because my mother sometimes when she was up, she'd sometimes be a state of undress and I'd try to look at her and everything. That was kind of mixed up. It was almost like there I was and there was this opportunity. I don't know if opportunity is the wrong word but something [like that]. I just felt a bit - it just set up a very strange thing [where] I was looking at my mother erotically and yet this happened and yet this was horrible. And it got really confusing and everything, you know, so I just didn't - so anyway nothing was said and that's how I felt at the time.*

It is noted that a predominant theme to arise from this account was the problematic nature surrounding definition. Charlie was one of several survivors who had difficulty, and may still struggle with, defining his sexually abusive experience. He actually talks quite early on about not seeing the experience as abusive because of this erotic attraction he had for his mother. It is not clear whether Charlie experienced guilt in terms of the attraction to his mother and her subsequent abuse of him, but it certainly suggests that this 'little boy curiosity' had an impact on how he processed and interpreted his experience. Without detracting from Charlie's

own narrative yet attempting to understand his cognitive process, it may be that he struggled with questions around his own desires or questioning his negative feelings about the abuse in light of the erotic attraction. In any case this account supports the concept that boys take on a level of responsibility for the perpetration of female sexual abuse, namely in terms of holding beliefs about enjoyment, strength and sexual prowess interwoven with perceptions of masculinity. This concept is reflected in the accounts given by other male survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse who took part in this research.

The interviewer goes on to question Charlie about the effects of the abuse on him and in his life. He talks about the abuse having impacted on his sexual relationships with women.

*Sex with women [has been an issue]. There have been a couple of situations in my life that brought up the same sort of feelings and I hadn't really connected it until later on in therapy. But they're very clearly connected to it which is - I felt very awkward around boundaries and being able to set boundaries -, so in some situations I would almost have sex with women and feel abused. I guess an example was this friend of mine who obviously had an attraction for me. This is going back [and] I think I'm more boundaried now. She had an attraction for me and she was going to come and we were going to go to some comedy I think and then she was going to stay overnight. I didn't want anything to happen but I just couldn't say to her "listen I don't find you attractive". I couldn't reject her. I just couldn't say anything to reject her so what I thought I'd do is I'd just try to avoid the situation. So I set up this really intricate thing of this friend of mine who worked in the salon where I worked com[ing] to my place late at night when [the woman] and I had got back. He'd arrive about half an hour after[wards] ostensibly to buy something from me and then it would be late and he could maybe stay and then there would be the three of us so nothing would happen and I'd avoid it that way. [however] when I got back, on the answer-machine, he cancelled. So 'Trudy' wanted to get ready for bed and she got into bed and I said I've got to do something. I was sorting shelves out and sorting my books out and I was trying to wait for her to fall asleep. I waited and it was getting really late, the lights were out and I thought maybe she [was] asleep. So I got into bed, by her side, and then I felt her hand on me and I just froze. I just froze. And we ended up having [sex]. She was more or less the active person, and I just - I mean I'm friends with her now but we haven't talked about it and I felt I hated her. I hated her so much, I felt sullied. I really just felt abused. She couldn't see that I wasn't interested. But you know I understand that that is something that she should have been able to do, but I would have liked to, as an adult and I can now, set some boundaries around sex. Saying I'm not really interested.*

*There were a few times like that in my life that I just couldn't. I just didn't want to reject the other person, and [I] just felt really just abused, just felt really choked. And I hated them, to feel their hand on me. I just didn't want - I hated them. Interestingly enough 'Trudy' in a sense helped me release some of the - actually I can't talk to 'Trudy' about sex. It just occurred to me that I also come*

*into relationships - if someone expects me to - or is quite aggressive with me then I kind of freeze. And it causes all sorts of problems like impotency problems in as much as, how can I put it? The first few times I tend to have sex it would happen with a new partner so I've never had one-night stands, can't have one-night stands. It's almost like a trust thing, I think it's trust, that makes sense to me. Then everything's ok. If I can just sort of trust the person then it's fine from then on for the rest of the relationship. Then it starts up again with a new relationship. That was happening with my current partner at the very beginning, and I really didn't know how to deal with it, knowing this kind of early stuff.*

Charlie describes the impact that his mother's abuse had on his sex life with women and points specifically to the physical sexual dysfunction of impotency. He himself recognises that this may be a response to trust issues when embarking upon new relationships. Sexual dysfunction is discussed in more detail later in the chapter as a long-term effect of childhood sexual abuse in men. Charlie's case is illustrative of those ongoing physical problems that can be experienced by male survivors.

Charlie goes on to raise an issue that is addressed later in this chapter about the difficulties in separating the negative impact experienced by survivors of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. This was a common thread throughout many survivors' accounts who had experienced other abusive behaviours. This was raised after Charlie was asked about how the abuse affected his relationship with his mother.

*It's hard for me to take something which I didn't really think of as abuse or didn't really think about. I hadn't really told anyone and it's almost like having a picture in your mind but having no feelings attached to it. I got into a lot of trouble as a kid, I don't know if it was to do with [the abuse]. I don't know if it was to do with that or the fact that my mother drank and was actually physically abusive as well.*

*Obviously I haven't done that much work around it - I haven't done enough work around it. I don't feel like I connected with my mother any more or less afterwards. I formed a dislike for my mother which didn't really change until she died, until her illness, then we kind of connected again. But I would certainly imagine that I was very scared of my mother after that. Did I lose my sexual attraction for her? At what point did I? Actually this is just occurring to me now. I mean I was fascinated by my mothers body. I feel myself almost about to laugh but I think it's because I'm a bit nervous around it. But I mean I would try to catch her body, or I would even try to sneak through and just lift up the bedclothes sometimes because sometimes her night-dress would ride up or something. The point being that I think that was part of the reason for my reaction because it was almost as if I had this fantasy that maybe my mother knew or she'd been aware of these things, and had taken the next step, the next adult step or whatever it was, and I just couldn't. I'm pretty damn sure that after*

*that there was never any of that that had happened before. It's almost like I'd felt that she'd found me out.*

It is noted that Charlie frequently refers back to his sexual fascination with his mother's body which suggests that it played a significant part in not only the difficulty he had in defining the experience, but in his on-going perception of his mother and her abuse of him. It is not clear that Charlie became angry towards his mother despite forming a dislike for her, rather it appears that he experienced a sense of guilt and a feeling of having been punished for his erotic attraction.

Charlie was one of many survivors taking part in the research who did not disclose his abuse to anyone at the time nor has ever reported it to the authorities. In fact Charlie first disclosed his abuse only a few years prior to this interview taking place.

*I don't think I told anyone until my thirties. I think maybe I made a joke about incest or something when I was maybe 20 with a couple of people, and I said "yeah I had sex with my mother" and they looked at me in a funny way. But more to kind of shock or something because I [had] quite an odd family background and, as a young person, I would use it to get attention. Very dysfunctional and quite strange, so I would use it to get attention. I'd talk about it to people in that kind of way and people just looked so shocked and they'd wonder why I wasn't shocked and why I could talk about it so easily. So in later years, I've been able to connect with what it must have actually been like to experience it all.*

*I think maybe I told my last partner, not 'Abby' but 'Virginia'. And then in therapy, I think I brought it to maybe my last therapist. I think maybe I introduced it and - it's like that thing about therapy; you tell your therapist and if the therapist doesn't run screaming out the door you kind of feel like "oh it wasn't that bad then" which is good as it sort of contains it. So I brought it up and told the therapist.*

*I think 'Virginia' was shocked [when I told her]. I didn't even tell my sister until last year. I told both my sisters last year [because] I didn't want to have it to myself. 'Suzy', my big sister, sometimes I felt she idealised my mother because she didn't live here, she lived in the states. She had her own family and part of me wanted to rub her nose in it. In a sense part of me didn't care but I wanted her to know and it really hurt her but there was no other way of doing it. Maybe I shouldn't [have] but I just felt that she had to know. She was really shocked and she was really tearful. She just didn't know what went on because this was after my father died [and] things fell apart. So 'Suzy' was in the states and she just didn't know what went on. She was ok, she had her good life and everything and so she just didn't know. And I told 'Mary', my younger sister - she's a year younger, and she was really shocked and then she told me about two times that mother had interfered with her and tried to pull her clothes down and that in bed and stuff. 'Mary' had never told me. So was it good to say that? Yeah, 'Mary' and I feel closer and there's a bit more of an honesty between us.*

*[I didn't tell anyone at the time] because [of] the sense in knowing it wasn't right. It just wasn't right. [I was] embarrassed to tell anybody and not wishing to relive that frozen-ness, just not wanting to relive that experience. And also not knowing what to do, why [to] tell anyone. That's the kind of the thing that comes up. "what good's it going to [do]?". I still say that sometimes. "what good's it going to do to feel this sort of stuff?"*

*I don't think it would have occurred to me to say [anything to anyone at the time]. I mean what would I say and who to and why would I say it. I mean what would I expect them to do? My pattern, I always call [it] my oral personality, is all about sorting myself out, looking after myself, coping myself. So for me it was just about making sure I didn't get into that situation again; avoiding it, being careful, monitoring. You know, a lot of therapists' parents were borderline [abusive] and the reason being that they become very good at anticipating what's gone on is because they're very watchful. And I was very watchful, monitoring my mother's moods and adapting myself to moving in close and moving back. Just constantly watching, anticipating and managing her moods which helps as a therapist. To answer that question [about] what would I have said and why, and what would I have expected someone to do in return? Would someone have gone up to my mum and said "don't do that"? It just seemed to me like a bizarre situation that I had to cope with, I had to deal with.*

*I would have liked to have not had my mother be physically abusive. I mean just that yelling and slamming doors and waking up at like one in the morning and switching the light on, pulling the covers off your bed, you know that sort of stuff. So you'd have to barricade the door at times. That was systematic. That was day in day out, and it was worse for my sister. So this one incident of sexual abuse fucked me up for a long time but it stopped there. I mean it had its impact but it's like - there was no-one I was going to about the rest of the stuff so if I was being sexually abused on an ongoing basis then maybe I'd have wanted to tell. [But] my grandmother had died, [my father died when I was one]; there wasn't anyone around. I don't know what I would have [done]. I don't know. I just can't think of anything. [My mother] had different boyfriends. My mother got quite promiscuous. But she had some sort of steady boyfriends. I had lots of 'uncles', you know, that's for sure.*

*This is all fairly new in coming up and I did tell 'Suzy' so this is quite fresh. I don't really think we'd be having this conversation two or three years ago. But I can now. So I suppose I would - I mean I'm looking for therapy and I'm certainly going to address it. I certainly think stuff which I've just come out with here, stuff which I hadn't really connected before, which is my sexual attraction to my mother and my sexual behaviour towards my mother, and how that played into how I interpret the situation.*

Charlie mentions many reasons for his non-disclosure such as feeling embarrassed about it and not wanting to experience those feelings again. He talks about not knowing who to go to or what they could do even if they knew. These are reflective of reasons that other survivors gave in explanation for their non-disclosure. While Charlie does not specifically connect it, I suggest that his

perception of the situation at the time would have had a significant impact on his decision to keep quiet. It is interesting to note that some of the critical elements to Charlie's account, such as the link between his erotic attraction to his mother and his defining of the encounter, only manifested themselves during this interview. This is illustrative once again of the interactionist premise that we are involved in an ongoing formative process of interpretation – on this occasion the research process itself served as the interaction with Charlie.

In addition to his difficulty in defining the experience as 'sexual abuse', Charlie raises issues about defining himself as a 'victim' and the extent to which he does not regard himself as such.

*It's still hard for me to accept that I've even been abused. I feel anger, I feel bad. I still can't quite see myself as being a victim of sexual abuse. I know I was but I still can't quite accept the label and start thinking "ah right so maybe I should be calling up Survivors" or something. I don't want to be - I don't want to think of myself as being like that, as it were. I don't want to see myself as being a victim of sexual abuse. I don't want to see myself with that label and I just don't want to see myself like that.*

*You know that's the thing; I don't try to remember and sometimes I do try to have sex to fantasies where I actually do have - and I know this sounds crazy - but where I do actually try to have sex with my mother in that situation. It's rather the wrong way of approaching it, but I just wanted to have a different outcome. I just wanted to have a different outcome where I wasn't the victim. Where, if when my mother was masturbating me and I started to respond and touch her, just to move away from just being this frozen kid. That's probably what I need to work on in therapy; to try to get another way of working my way through this which isn't just going into what is also an inappropriate fantasy. It makes me feel perhaps a bit stronger about myself, and more active [in terms of the abuse]. [But] it's not the right way of acknowledging the inherent wrongness of it; the relationship and power and everything.*

The difficulty that Charlie experiences with defining himself as a 'victim' of sexual abuse seems to go beyond a repudiation of victim status and the negative connotations that may have and rather, it seems to point more to a desire to shed the feeling of powerlessness within a sexual situation. I suggest that, were this accurate, the desire is steeped in the construction of masculinity. In other words, for a man to define his experience as sexual abuse and to see himself as having been sexually victimised by a woman, conflicts with beliefs he may hold about masculinity, creating a paradox and leading to him seeking some balance and equilibrium.<sup>3</sup>

*Age at Time of Abuse*

A number of past studies have shown that children are vulnerable to abuse at any age. Past research indicative of this finding was discussed in Chapter One and it is now clear that this research has also supported this widely accepted knowledge about child sexual abuse. As we can see from Table 1, however, female survivors fall into a wider age range than do the male survivors participating in this study. With the exception of Matthew, we can see that male survivors comprise only of the middle three age brackets regardless of perpetrator gender while female survivors abused by men span all the age brackets and females abused by women span four out of five.

TABLE 1<sup>4</sup>  
*Gender Interactions and Child's Age When Abuse Began*

	age of survivor (in years)					
	0-3	4-6	7-9	10-12	13-15	16+
male perp-female sur. (n=17)	3	2	7	2	3	-
female perp-female sur. (n=8)	2	2	1	3	-	-
male perp-male sur. (n=7)	-	2	2	3	-	-
female perp-male sur. (n=5)	-	1	2	1	-	1

These findings support Finkelhor (1979) who attacked the assumption that pubescence is a crucial factor in girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse. Furthermore this can in turn be extended to boys' vulnerability given that there is no evidence to suggest pubescence is a crucial factor, particularly as boys reach puberty later than girls tend to and, with the exception of one, none of the male survivors in this study reported the abuse commencing after the age of twelve.

In terms of male survivors these findings also support those compiled by Etherington (1995) who found that males abused by male perpetrators were significantly older than those abused by a female perpetrator (average ages being 9.5 years compared with 4 years of age). While we are unable to calculate exact mean ages for comparison due to the fact that ages in this research were placed into age brackets, we can see that males abused by males were older than males abused by females. The difference in this study is that the ages were older than

those in the Etherington study; 43% (n=3) of males abused by men were aged 10-12 while 40% (n=2) of those abused by a woman fell into the 7-9 year age bracket.

As can be seen from the table, same-sex abuse tended to be older than opposite-sex abuse. The most frequently cited age for males abused by male perpetrators was 10-12 years old (n=3). The same is true for girls abused by female perpetrators (n=3). In contrast 41% (n=7) of the female survivors abused by male perpetrators fell between the ages of seven and nine as did two out of the five boys abused by women.

Elliott (1993) found that the vast majority of both male and female survivors abused by a woman reported it occurring prior to the age of five. That finding is in marked contrast to the findings of this study which showed significantly higher ages for both males and females abused by women. It should be noted however that it is difficult to make direct comparisons as Elliott placed survivors in one of three main categories; 'under five', 'over five' and 'under fifteen'. Given that there are no definitive perimeters on these age brackets it is not clear, particularly with the over five and under fifteen categories, what ages would fall into each category. The closest comparison between this study with that of Elliott (1993) is the finding that half of the females abused by female perpetrators were aged up to six years old. Nevertheless the two studies indicate considerably different ages of those abused by females.

#### *What Was the Duration and Frequency of Abuse?*

The accounts of sexual abuse in this research indicate that there is no consistent pattern of abuse in terms of duration or frequency. Some respondents stated that they had experienced a one-off incident of abuse; others talked of how their abuse had lasted weeks, months or years. One survivor described the sexual abuse perpetrated by her father beginning before she was three years old and lasting until she was nineteen years old. This is perhaps an unusually long duration, particularly given that she had left home and married at the age of seventeen. Another survivor described an even longer duration of sexual abuse beginning when she was a baby and lasting until she was twenty-one.

This aspect of the research echoes that carried out by Finkelhor (1979) in his exploration of duration of experiences, mirroring also the great variety in the

patterns of abuse. However there are some significant differences between the two studies. While Finkelhor found that 60% of reported experiences were single occurrences, this research showed only a 14% (n=5) comparative figure. This may be explained by the fact that none of the survivors in this research were abused by a stranger, which is perhaps the most likely factor in abuse being a one-off incident. However these single occurrences cannot be explained by another suggestion of Finkelhor's which is that the child told a parent so preventing the abuse from happening again, as in this research none of the survivors who experienced a one-off incident of abuse told anybody at the time of it occurring.

TABLE 2  
*Gender Interactions and Duration of Abuse*

	duration of abuse (in months)					
	Once off	Under 6	6-12	12-36	36-60	60+
male perp-female sur. (n=15)	3	2	1	1	3	5
female perp-female sur. (n=8)	-	-	1	3	2	2
male perp-male sur. (n=7)	1	2	-	3	-	1
female perp-male sur. (n=5)	1	1	-	2	-	1

86% (n=30) of the abusive incidents occurred more than one time with 71% (n=24) of all experiences lasting more than six months, suggesting that if the abuse happens more than a one-off, it is likely to continue for a significantly long period of time. In terms of gender there are few consistent differences to draw on in this research, with the exception of the fact that female survivors appear to experience a much longer period of sexual abuse than males. 26% (n=9) of abusive incidents lasted for more than five years, and seven of these involved a female survivor. This may suggest that males are better able to stop their abuse than females, though it would seem more likely that this finding is a result of girls being much more likely to be abused by immediate family than boys are.

TABLE 3  
*Gender Interactions and Frequency of Abuse*

	frequency of abuse			
	daily	weekly	monthly	sporadically
male perp-female sur. (n=11)	2	5	2	2
female perp-female sur. (n=6)	-	4	-	2
male perp-male sur. (n=6)	-	1	1	4
female perp-male sur. (n=4)	-	2	2	-

It would appear that girls are also more likely to be abused more frequently; 52% (n=14) of all abusive incidents were experienced on either a daily basis or several times a week, and 44% (n=11) of abusive incidents experienced by girls occurred daily or several times a week. In contrast boys abused by men were most likely to experience their abuse on a sporadic basis. This research shows that more than two-thirds (n=7) of male survivors were abused either monthly or sporadically. Again this may be explained by the survivors' relationships with their perpetrator, namely intra- versus extra-familial.

#### *Relationship to Perpetrator*

In the previous section we considered how long and how often the sexual abuse occurred. One of the key elements that emerged was the relevance that relationships between survivor and perpetrator have on this and other aspects of the abuse. None of the survivors who took part in this research were abused by a stranger and the majority were abused by a family member. There is no clear explanation as to why this may be the case in this research, but it does support the now widely held hypothesis that most child sex abusers are at least acquaintances of the child. Of course this does not mean that there are not some significant differences between the relationships of perpetrator-survivor and gender.

TABLE 4  
*Gender Interactions and Relationship to Perpetrator*  
 relationship between perpetrator and survivor

	immediate family	wider family	acquaintance	stranger
male perp-female sur. (n=17)	7	6	4	-
female perp-female sur. (n=8)	7	-	1	-
male perp-male sur. (n=7)	1	1	5	-
female perp-male sur. (n=5)	2	-	3	-

Girls were overwhelmingly more likely to be abused by a member of their immediate family than were boys; immediate family comprising of parent (natural, step or adoptive) or sibling. 41% (n=7) of girls abused by men and 88% (n=7) of girls abused by women were of their immediate family, with a further six girls being abused by men in their wider family including grandfathers, uncles and cousins. In contrast to this, boys were far more likely to be targeted by people outside their family but nevertheless known to them, such as teachers and family friends. Two-thirds (n=3) of boys abused by women fell into this category and 72% (n=5) of male perpetrators who abused boys were acquaintances.

These findings suggest that there are no consistent patterns in terms of the gender of perpetrator and their relationship with the child, rather the differences arise as a result of survivor gender. In other words, we are unable to propose that male or female perpetrators are more likely to target members of their family than acquaintances. Although it is possible to suggest that female survivors are more likely to be targeted by members of their family irrespective of perpetrator gender and male survivors are more likely to be targeted by non-family members. In respect to survivor gender, these findings are similar to those of Finkelhor (1979) who, whilst he did not take account of the gender of the perpetrator, concluded that girls are abused more frequently by family members while boys tend to be targeted by acquaintances.

#### *Co-perpetration*

It has been suggested in the past that women, if they are involved in the sexual abuse of a child, do so because they are in some way coerced or forced into such

behaviour by a male accomplice. This argument has been used time and again in casting doubt on the concept of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. As the body of new research in this field grows, we become more enlightened to the fact that, actually, women do abuse on their own. Both Mathews, Matthews and Speltz (1989) and Saradjian (1996) write about a category of female perpetrators who were 'male-coerced'. While there is no doubt that men and women do abuse collectively, it would not appear to be the norm, certainly not based on the findings of this research.

One survivor who was interviewed revealed that he had been abused by both his adoptive mother and adoptive father, however even this case is unlikely to fall within the heading 'male-coerced' as it is unclear that the woman was coerced or pressured into perpetrating the abuse. Indeed according to the account given, it would appear that the mother was the initiator of the abuse. Ed talked about an occasion when his father was physically beating him and he could see his mother masturbating, urging his father to carry on beating him. It was some time after this that the mother began to come into Ed's bedroom to sexually abuse him. At first she perpetrated the acts on her own, but after a period of time his father joined her in sexually abusing Ed.

With the exception of this case all other perpetrators acted on their own, so challenging the myth that women only sexually abuse children when forced to by men.

#### *Parental Sexual Abuse and Non-abusing Parents*

As we saw in Chapter One, one of the leading theories on child sexual abuse was the family dysfunction theory which primarily came about as a result of early research indicating that much of the sexual abuse of children took place amongst family members. The principal interaction focused on by this theory was father-daughter incest, leading us to question how applicable it may be to other gender interactions. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw any firm conclusions regarding the extent to which family dysfunction theory may apply to any cases in this research without exploring more around family dynamics and perhaps involving the perpetrator, it is apparent from this research that aspects of family context could be feasibly applied by way of explaining the abuse, irrespective of

gender interaction. To illustrate this we might consider the case of Charlie who was abused once by his mother when he was sleeping in her bed. Family dysfunction approach might argue the concept of 'role confusion' given the absent father and the fact that mother and son were sharing a bed on this occasion. However regardless of whether we can apply this theory to other gender interactions, it does not detract from the original concerns about this theory discussed in Chapter One.

Half of all survivors (n=12) who took part in this research were abused by a parent, be it natural, step or adoptive. A particularly interesting finding from this has been that in all the cases (n=4) involving perpetration by a father, there was a non-abusing mother within the family setting. Conversely only half of the cases (n=3) involving perpetration by a mother featured a non-abusing father (these figures do not include two cases where both parents abused the child). This raises certain questions about the issue of gender, prevalence and reporting.

Firstly, given that this research is indicative of female-perpetrated sexual abuse occurring in the absence of the father and that the overwhelming majority of single parent families involve a mother as sole caregiver, it may follow that this purports to the current low reported prevalence rates of this specific interaction. Secondly, if perpetration by a mother occurs in the absence of a non-abusing parent more than perpetration by a father - and this research suggests it may be twice as likely - then it may be less likely to come to light given the fewer potential avenues a child might pursue, for example to the non-abusing parent. In this research two-thirds of survivors who disclosed being abused by a parent had a non-abusing parent as well. It should be noted that while these children did not disclose to their non-abusing parent, the fact that there was another caregiver may have enabled them to report the abuse to another adult.

#### *Initial and Lasting Effects of Sexual Abuse*

"I don't think there's an area of my life that it hasn't touched". This was the reply by one survivor when asked about how the abuse had affected her, and illustrates how it would be naive to suppose that a childhood trauma such as sexual abuse would not infiltrate all aspects of someone's life. With the possible exception of one case who enjoyed his sexual experience and did not define it as abuse, all the survivors in this research stated that the abuse has affected them in numerous ways.

The difficulty with displaying these findings is that they are not quantifiable because not only are the issues being examined in hindsight (all survivors are now adults) but also it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the effects of child sexual abuse from other sources of childhood trauma, namely physical and emotional abuse.

A number of survivors revealed that they had experienced physical and emotional abuse in addition to being sexually abused, and it would seem that, for many, the sexual abuse had more of an impact. Annie described the sexual abuse being grounded within the other forms of abuse perpetrated by her mother. She stated that the sexual abuse was virtually non-existent in comparison with the physical and emotional abuse but that it was the most significant for her and that, even now, the sexual abuse is the hardest to talk about.

While these survivors were able to talk at length in the interviews about the effects of their abuse, this was not always the case. Earlier in this chapter we examined how survivors defined their experience of abuse, finding a number who had difficulties recognising it as abuse. Similarly there were survivors who denied the abuse as having affected them in any way. Jean was experiencing depression and terrible nightmares in adulthood when someone finally asked her what was going on, and more specifically:

“did anything happen to you as a child that could be coming back to you now? I remember just saying to her, well I was sexually abused, but it didn’t affect me, just like that. For years I didn’t believe it did.”

The initial effects of child sexual abuse appear to be grounded within the main aspects of the child’s life as one might assume. Regardless of whether the abuse was intra- or extra-familial, it had an impact on the survivor’s home-life and relationships with family members. This might happen particularly if a family member was the perpetrator, but even if the abuse is coming from the outside, a survivor may blame the parents for ‘allowing’ it to happen or for not figuring out what was going on.

Schoolwork was highlighted as an initial effect as it was linked with a lack of concentration perhaps as a result of being woken in the night by their perpetrator. A number of survivors mentioned feeling isolated and on their own at

school, some talked about having experienced being bullied at school for being different in some way. Sophie described her experience as:

“at the time, it affected me terrible. I was scared to sleep, and it was always plaguing me because I felt that I was really being violated. I couldn’t sleep, I was always tense, and I think it affected my schooling and social behaviour...it made me very inward...I felt really isolated and very alone.”

Sex and sexuality raised issues for many survivors. The difficulty in perceiving sex and love as going together was mentioned by some, particularly in terms of feeling used for sex and this feeling emerging later in consenting sexual relationships. Ed described how he had moved into prostitution because he felt that the only thing he was good for was sex. Sally talked about how she grew up feeling as if she was ‘soiled goods’ so therefore embarking on promiscuity:

“I went through a stage of being promiscuous because I felt it doesn’t matter anyway. The choice had been taken away from me who I gave my virginity to, so what the hell, what did it matter what I do. I’m soiled anyway, I’m dirty anyway.”

Charlie talked about the difficulty in maintaining sexual relationships with women in that he felt unable to set sexual boundaries as he was not clear in himself what they should be, or even what he should want them to be. He revealed that this difficulty then led to him feeling vulnerable again, stating that “in some situations, I would almost have sex with women and feel abused”.

For several male survivors, sexual difficulties also seeped into the physical side of sex. These men talked about how they had for many years suffered, and in all cases still were suffering, from ejaculation problems. David revealed that he had been diagnosed as suffering from retrograde ejaculation which is interesting given that his abuse comprised of being masturbated by his perpetrator *but never to the point of ejaculation*. In contrast both Costas and Nick suffered from premature ejaculation. Both men felt that this dated back to their abusive experiences whereby they would try to ejaculate as quickly as possible in order that the abuse on each occasion would be over.

Relationships with others also emerged as an initial and long-term effect of sexual abuse. Nick, who was abused by a female family friend, talked of how he never had any close male friends as a result of (and more than likely, I would

suggest, reinforced) feelings of isolation and being left out at school and home. Sue discussed her difficulty with communicating to women and how this has impacted on so many other areas of her life such as seeking employment and maintaining friendships. Becky also described the way she was, and still is, with other people: "People think that I'm an attention seeker. I'm not. It's affection, I want to be liked, I want to be loved."

Numerous behavioural and health issues arose which overlap and are not necessarily exclusive to one another. These issues may be as a result of other effects, but may also contribute to further difficulties for survivors. These effects have included drug use, self-harming, eating disorders, sex addiction, suicide attempts, problems with managing anger and various other medical problems.

This particular section of the thesis seems to stand on its own in one respect; it does not necessarily comply with the central focus of the work which concerns the differences gender may invoke in the experience of child sexual abuse. I would argue that this is because the effects of sexual abuse were vividly displayed by all those to whom I talked, and there is no gender interaction that remains untouched by the profound and long-lasting effects of sexual abuse. It has been argued in the past that the abuse perpetrated by a woman is subtle or harmless, views which are supported by such research as that carried out by Broussard et al (1991). This thesis challenges that belief unequivocally, and I am reminded of what one male survivor abused by a female family friend told me: "it was my daughter's eighth birthday...and that really brought it back to me...all the innocence of an eight year old...and it makes me realise what I lost."

### *Ambiguity Within Sexual Contact*

This section is concerned with the type of sexual acts that were perpetrated against the survivors in this study. More importantly, this section will examine the problematic nature involved in trying to draw objective comparisons between the abuse perpetrated by a man and a woman, and that experienced by a boy and a girl. This examination will be placed within the framework of symbolic interactionism on the basis of three key assumptions drawn from Blumer's (1969) work. Firstly, a person will interpret a sexual act on the basis of what the act means to them. This will apply not just to those who term themselves survivors of sexual abuse, but to

the wider group of actors with whom the survivor will interact. Secondly, various symbols will be used in forming this interpretation and making sense of the sexual act. The main symbol that will be discussed in this section is the penis and its link with the concept of harmfulness. Thirdly, a person's interpretation of a sexual act is unlikely to remain static. Rather, through a process of ongoing interactions with the self, others and symbols, the interpretation of the act will be modified and adapted.

While it might appear paradoxical to do so, the initial step in exploring the ambiguity in sexual acts was to consider those acts reported by survivors in this study within an objective framework. Not only did this yield some interesting points but I thought it necessary in illustrating the problem with objective classification of acts. The categories used was drawn directly from Russell's (1984: 187) work:

*"1) very serious sexual abuse - ranging from forced penile-vaginal penetration to attempted fellatio, cunnilingus, analingus, and intercourse-not by force;*

*2) serious sexual abuse - ranging from forced digital penetration of the vagina to non-forceful attempted breast contact (unclothed) or simulated intercourse;*

*3) least serious sexual abuse - ranging from forced kissing, intentional sexual touching of the respondent's buttocks, thigh, leg, or other body part, including contact with clothed breasts or genitals, to attempts at any of the same acts without the use of force."*

54% (n=19) of the sexually abusive incidents in this research fell into the 'very serious' category. This was a higher proportion than that of Russell's survey who found that 23% of incidents of incestuous abuse and 53% of extra-familial abuse incidents fell into the 'very serious' category, particularly given that most of the abuse perpetrated in this study was intra-familial. 61% (n=14) of the abuse perpetrated by men fell into the 'very serious' category while 42% (n=5) of abuse perpetrated by women fell into the same category. This also indicates a marked difference from the Russell survey whereby none of the female sexual abuse was classified as 'very serious'. Abuse that was classified as the 'least serious' came only from female survivors, and mainly from those abused by women. 38% (n=3)

of females who were abused by women described much of their experiences as consisting of their mothers 'checking' their underwear, sanitary towels and pubescent development. My reluctance to objectively classify the incidents of abuse is illustrated most markedly by such cases.

The three female survivors who disclosed this 'checking' type of sexual abuse minimised their experiences through comparisons with 'proper' sexual abuse; their reasons for not talking about it or not attending support groups were based on their fear that people would not think it was significant, or would have heard or experienced far worse abuse. Attempting to classify abuse feeds into the perceptions held about sexual abuse, thus affecting how the survivor interprets the abuse and responds to it. In cases such as these a survivor might deny or repudiate the existence of the actions as abusive while internalising the negativity of the experience, serving to strengthen the effects of the abuse on the person and reinforcing their feelings of isolation.

One of the biggest bones of contention in terms of the ambiguity surrounding the nature of sexual contact is the issue of penetration. The Concise Oxford dictionary definition reads: "...1..find access into or through, esp. forcibly...6.(of a man) put the penis into the vagina of (a woman)." Such definitions coupled with our own stereotypes and images related to the word 'penetrate' do not allow us to see the *penetrator* as 'victim'. This is grounded within a knowledge of human anatomy whereby one of few functions of the penis is to enter the vagina. This may be to procreate, to offer intimacy and pleasure or to hurt and victimise. It is of course the latter aim which Brownmiller (1975: 14) focuses on in her analysis of rape, arguing that:

"His forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood."

Here Brownmiller is arguing that rape is what it is because of the penis, because the penis can be forced into the female body. She goes on to use the penis as an analogy for a weapon, suggesting that there is no female retaliation of this kind. So through anatomical structure, we have come to believe that it is the intrusion of the penis which is harmful and most damaging within the realm of sexual abusiveness.

It is at this point that symbolic interactionism becomes inextricably linked to this discussion by way of explaining the interpretative process we go through when defining sexual abuse and, even more importantly, harmfulness. As Blumer (1969) points out, we respond to something on the basis of the meaning that it has for us. If sexual intrusiveness requires the presence of penile penetration then we are unlikely to interpret female sexual abuse as 'abuse' nor include it within our understanding of harmful.

It is this interpretative process, then, which I would suggest can account for much of the reluctance to acknowledge sexual abuse perpetrated by women. Indeed Mathis (1972: 53) claims "what harm can be done with no penis?" which is illustrative of the meaning penetration has for him. This concept raises two main difficulties for us; firstly, the question of harmfulness for survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse; and secondly, comprehending and attaching meaning to the sexual abuse of boys by women.

In the first instance, if we interpret sexual abuse as equated to penile penetration then the potential harm suffered by survivors of female abuse is questioned. I would argue that this is far from accurate and we need only to focus again on the impact of abuse in the previous sub-section, and that in past research on survivors of female sexual abuse, to realise that the effects do not qualitatively differ (of course we are unable to measure effects in a quantitative fashion) from those experienced by survivors of male abuse.

The issue then remains concerning our interpretation of intrusion and penetration. I would argue that in discussions about sexual offending, the term 'penile penetration' offers a depiction of male-perpetrator/female-survivor as our interpretative processes do not allow us to comprehend the male as the abused party when he is penetrating a female. In attempting to classify the sexual acts perpetrated within this research, I found myself using the phrase 'sexual intercourse' for female-perpetrator/male-survivor interactions; a phrase that tends to elicit different meanings for us from that of 'penile penetration'. The former suggests a more mutual, or consenting, encounter while the latter gives more an impression of some involvement of force, or at least an element of intrusion. And coupled with the belief that males do not experience penile erections unless they

are sexually aroused (erection equating to sexual enjoyment), this invites society to question the extent to which boys can be sexually victimised by women.

So there seems to be a predetermined view that men are sexual abusers given their ability to penetrate. In the absence of the ability to penetrate, the concept of abusiveness become more ambiguous which in turn allows us to attach subjective meanings to the notion of sexual abuse. In other words, without the potential to be the penetrator – as our social interactions allow us to understand it – the concept of abuse becomes ambiguous and subjective (i.e. can it really be classified, or defined, as abuse?). Once the concept of abusiveness has become subjective, all related aspects are then interpreted as such including definition of sexually abusive behaviours, impact on the survivor, theories relating to abuse, treatment of survivor and perpetrator, and motivation to abuse.

### **Incidence and nature of reporting sexual abuse**

Whenever we refer to the ‘reporting’ of an offence it tends to revolve around the legal or authoritative aspect of reporting. Within this section of the chapter I will explore survivors’ experiences of this side of reporting child sexual abuse and also examine the ‘non-legal’ reporting, i.e. reporting to those outside of authority, to whom survivors first disclosed their experiences of abuse, the reactions to this disclosure and why many survivors did not disclose the abuse to anyone.

#### *Disclosure of Abuse and Reactions to Disclosure*

In analysing this data, it became increasingly difficult to attempt to quantify the responses of those who had disclosed their experience of sexual abuse. This was despite the fact that initially it appeared to be a quantitative answer, well depicted in a graph format. During analysis it became clear that if the data were transformed into percentages for graph comparisons, the results would be distorted given the number of survivors involved and the number of categories into which they would have to be divided. To illustrate, let us take the percentage of male survivors abused by both a man and a woman who disclosed this abuse at the time of its occurrence. The data indicated 100% disclosed this abuse. Why? When the survivors were broken down into the six categories of gender interaction, there

was only one male survivor fitting the above description. So due to the actual numbers involved the results became distorted when transformed into percentages.

Out of a total of twenty-four survivors (several having multiple perpetrators) four disclosed at the time of abuse. Two were females being abused by males, one was a female abused by another female and one was a male abused by both a man and a woman. Of these four survivors who disclosed their abuse, the overwhelming response that they received from the people to whom they chose to disclose it was disbelief. Three survivors told who they believed to be trusted adults who could help them but none of them received any help. Sally was consistently raped by her father from the age of nine to about fifteen. She describes telling a family friend about the abuse, stating that she was branded a vindictive liar:

“the only time I ever tried to get help from anybody, [I] told this friend of my mother’s but she didn’t believe me. You know my father couldn’t possibly do anything like that and I was a nasty little- I never tried to ask anyone again for help after that.”

This was a virtually identical story for Helen and her sister both of whom were sexually abused by their adoptive mother over a number of years. Like Sally, Helen also told a family friend about the abuse and received a similar response. However Helen continued trying to tell people. In the following narrative, Helen describes the abuse that she was subjected to.

#### Narrative 3: Helen<sup>5</sup>

*I was around twelve or thirteen years of age when I realised what she was doing. Until I was sixteen years old (although she has tried it since then on many occasions). It was on-going. Mainly at night when we’d (my sister and I) gone to bed, although any time of day, any excuse, such as checking we’d got our bras or knickers on properly. I can remember one of the last times that she came into the bedroom late at night and I felt her manky hands down the bedclothes. I asked her what she was doing and she said “mummy has told you, you shouldn’t lie on your tummy”, as though I was a baby in danger of cot death. I was about fourteen at that time. The nocturnal visits stopped for awhile, but started again some weeks later, only I let her know I was awake, so eventually she stopped it altogether. I also started wearing underwear underneath my pyjamas, and when I pretended to be asleep she would make a tutting annoyed sound. She is my adoptive mother.*

*[It was] mainly touching, although we were never allowed any privacy of any kind. We were not allowed to close or lock the bathroom door so either of them would wander in whenever they felt like it, and she used to stand outside the toilet door, the excuse being I was using too much loo roll. We had the square*

*Jeyes sheets and she would count how many I pulled off. When I was about fourteen years old she asked me how many sheets I had used, asked me to demonstrate how I wiped myself and then demonstrated how it should be done, on me. Although this may not be considered sexual abuse, it produced the same feelings of shame, "dirtiness", embarrassment and humiliation, all of which are tied in with the feelings of sexual abuse. Both my sister and I had to produce our soiled sanitary towels for examination to make sure we had used them properly. Sometimes we were made to turn them round (bloody side up the backside) and wear them like that. I was often called "smelly" at school. Humiliation and degradation again. When we washed our hair, we had to stand there topless in just our thick horrible school knickers. In our teens. She used to say that she was my "mummy" (no she bloody well was NOT) and it was her "job", or whatever, to "check" we had our underwear on, sanitary towels on or stockings on properly (we weren't allowed to wear tights although all the other girls were wearing them). We were well old enough to dress ourselves without the need to check on us. She also liked to "check" our hankies were stuffed up our knickers. Everyone else used tissues (up their sleeves). Again, just another excuse to get intimately close to us.*

This case illustrates the ambiguity involved in sexual contact which formed an earlier discussion in this chapter. Helen talks of experiencing an invasion of privacy by her adoptive mother in relation to the forms of abuse that took place. I would suggest that such forms of abuse were hidden, so to speak, through the pretence of mothering. Interestingly, this has been a commonly cited reason for the underestimation of female perpetrators in that women may be better able to disguise sexual contact with children by carrying out appropriately deemed tasks, such as bathing the child (Groth, 1979). While it is not evident that such forms of abuse are common in research carried out on samples of female perpetrators (i.e. convicted women), this invasion of privacy and 'checking' behaviours were disclosed by one-third of female survivors abused by women in this study.

Helen goes on to talk about how she was treated by her peers and her adoptive mother's response to that treatment.

*I hated her anyway, but it just made things worse. I had no respect for her and went out of my way not to touch her or even go near her. I used to fantasize on my way home from school that they would both be dead when I got home from school. I was also bullied at school, although no-one knew about the abuse and it was nothing to do with that...Because I had to wear very old-fashioned clothes, huge round toed shoes when the other girls wore short skirts, nice underwear and nice shoes (I had the thick grey knickers, usually with the elastic gone in the legs, so they frilled out and looked ridiculous). I came in for a lot of teasing / bullying, mainly from the boys and in the form of stone throwing and being spat at. When the old cow complained my uniform was dirty I would explain what had happened and she would say that I must have egged them on. So it was always apparently my fault. When I was ill, I wasn't. I was putting it on to get out of*

*washing up, or whatever. When I threw up in front of her, it was still my fault as I "hadn't chewed my carrots properly". So first I was lying, then it was my fault! Not sexual abuse I know, but still a form of control. I could never get physically close to friends (I'm different now, I've had help) and I was always suspicious of other people's motives. Still am to some extent.*

What Helen points to here is the concept of victim-blaming whereby her adoptive mother continues to undermine and distort Helen's reality through citing Helen's 'provocations' in experiencing particular events, be it bullying at school or throwing up at home. Similar to other survivors in the study, this level of emotional abuse is difficult to separate from the sexual abuse experienced in relation to the effects of abuse, and I would suggest, contributed to the impact that Helen goes on to talk about.

*I have nothing to do with her now, although she does try to contact me from time to time. I hang up on her if she rings. I changed my phone number two years ago and she still managed to manipulate her way through the ex-directory manager of BT and still got to talk to me. When I move again this year, I will change to another telephone company. I have had a drink problem since my late teens, but it hasn't been so bad since I dropped links with her. When I'm in a relationship, I cannot bear to be woken up from sleep and can get quite vicious if the man doesn't respect my wishes. It has not affected my sex life, but it usually has to be on my terms, when I want it. I have been married twice (first time when I was 18, second time 26). Neither lasted long, and I have had several relationships, most of which have been abusive - on the man's side. As I seem to attract abusive men, or men with mental problems, I am having a rest from them for awhile!*

*There is no specific one area it has had an impact on. Memories tend to be thrown up from any situation. Sorry I can't be more specific. It hasn't had much affect on my sex life - apart from the fact I don't like being woken up for sex, and I don't like it to be "expected" of me, just because I am in a relationship. I can be as randy as the next person, but I hate being expected to deliver the goodies, as though it is my partners "right".*

Helen talks here about two fairly common effects of sexual abuse experienced particularly by women; alcoholism and further victimisation. Such effects have been mentioned by other survivors in this study and have also been illustrated by researchers in the field. Sgroi and Sargent (1993: 27) found that the vast majority (seven out of eight) of clients who had been sexually abused by a woman experienced "relational difficulties" including short marriages and domestic violence, both of which being issues that Helen describes in her account.

Helen was in the minority of survivors in this study who disclosed their abuse to anyone. She talks about trying to tell people and the response that she received.

*We tried to tell teachers and "friends of the family", but we were never believed. We were accused of being "ungrateful" - "after all mummy and daddy have done for you, they took you from a children's home when you were stranded, and fed and clothed you..." drone drone drone. We were accused of lying "...may you be forgiven...". There was no "this is our secret". It seemed part of everyday life and although we didn't like it we were never aware that it was wrong. I only found out things like that didn't happen in other people's homes when I was treated for a drink problem in my twenties. I've had several incidents of self abuse, overdoses, cut wrist, all the usual self destructiveness, low self esteem. Anorexic sometimes.*

*I can't remember the first time we said anything about the abuse (we were subject to sexual contact when we were in the children's home prior to our adoption, although I never really felt uncomfortable about it as it was never "forced" or made me feel bad, although my sister has angry feelings about the episodes at the "home").*

*Authorities were never informed as a) we would not have been believed and b) we weren't really aware it was wrong. As the authorities were never informed no action was taken.*

*The old cow and her husband (now dead - yippee) moved to the village where the children's home was and just round the corner from my real father, and also she chose to live in the same road as my adoptive father's ex-wife and children had lived some years before. Although she tries to contact me, I ignore her. I hang the phone up or ignore answering machine messages. I don't feel I would have been believed had I attempted to report the abuse - pillar of society, member of the local church, etc etc. Wouldn't have known who to report it to.*

*I wish I had reported her to the "right people", but I didn't know it was actually "wrong" and I wouldn't have known the "right people" anyway. As we were accused of lying when we attempted to complain to various people, it didn't seem worth it anyway. We are talking about the mid-sixties to 1971. I ran away from "home" in 1971, and was brought back by the police. When I was interviewed alone by the police officer, I dried up and couldn't think of why I had actually run away. All I could manage was a mumble about not being able to wear modern, up to date clothes. The real reasons I disappeared for flew right out of my head. Perhaps had I remembered what I needed to say, I would have been removed from their "care". I can remember her asking me occasionally "do you want to go back to the children's home?" and when I said yes, she stopped asking the question. I was worried about leaving my elder sister behind, though, as she was not such a strong character as I was.*

Helen talks of the negative reaction she received from those people in not being believed, and essentially admonished for making such allegations. This is an illustration of the realisation of people's fear around disclosure as can be seen in a

later section. For Helen, not being believed was a reality and is reflective of the 25% of survivors in the female-perpetrator/female-survivor interaction who stated that they did not disclose their abuse for fear of not being believed. Similarly, Helen did not disclose to the authorities in part for the same reason, again supporting the commonly cited reason many survivors gave for non-disclosure.

Helen further speaks of not knowing that the abuse was wrong, stating that it was not until she was an adult that she realised it did not go on in other people's homes. It could be argued that, to some extent, this is contradictory with her childhood disclosure in that to report the abuse to those outside of the family suggests having some knowledge that such behaviour should not be happening. However, this is too crass a statement to make as the underlying process of Helen defining her experience as "wrong" is much more complex than this. If we consider her interactions with significant others during her life, we might gain a greater understanding of how Helen came to label the abuse as wrong, despite telling people about it in childhood.

It is clear from the feelings that Helen speaks of (i.e. shame and humiliation) that she was uncomfortable with the abuse, did not like it and wanted it to cease. Yet when she sought help by way of telling people, she received negative reactions. While such reactions did not dissipate Helen's dislike of the abuse, they gave her no reason to see the abuse as something that was abnormal or wrong. In other words, the negative reactions she experienced may have led Helen to formulate an understanding that the abuse could not actually be wrong if people were failing to challenge it. Such conflict is likely to have resulted in emotional incongruity for Helen which would have needed to be resolved. Her self-harming, eating disorder, alcoholism and suicide attempts can all be seen as tactics of resolution – strategies of moving away from the feelings created by the abuse since her experience was not validated as wrong. We might therefore assume that it was through later interactions with other symbols and significant others that Helen reformulated her understanding of the abuse. Once again, we can see how the central framework of symbolic interactionism highlights the ongoing process of adaptation and modification in Helen's shifting position of how she attaches meaning to her experience of abuse.

There were limited other cases in this study involving the disclosure of abuse, and just one case where an individual disclosed to someone in authority at the time of the abuse occurring. Reporting sexual abuse to members of authority should result in the cessation of the abuse as action will presumably be taken. This is the belief that many people maintain but was not the reality for Ed when he disclosed the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his foster parents. When Ed was sent to a psychiatrist at the age of twelve for being difficult, Ed told him about the abuse. Rather than being supported for his disclosure, Ed was not believed and told was that what he was describing were fantasies. The psychiatrist reminded him that his foster parents were ‘pillars of society’ and asked him why they would foster a child if they were going to treat them in that way. Two years of sexual abuse later, Ed told his duty social worker about the abuse during a home visit. While the social worker made a note of these allegations in his file, nothing ever came of the disclosure. Ed ran away from home a year after this.

Becky was raped and sodomised by an older cousin over a period of years. She stated that the abuse began when she was approximately six years old; her cousin was ten years her senior. Becky chose to tell her friends but could not tell anybody else due to fear and a fierce loyalty to keeping the family together. She talks of how she told her friends while the abuse was occurring, secretly hoping that someone would say something:

“I used to tell a lot of people. I never told brothers, I never told sisters, and I definitely never told my mum or dad, or teachers or anything like that. But when I told these kids, my friends, people along the way, I’d always say ‘don’t tell’ cos this was what I’d been told, you know I’m giving you a really big secret; don’t tell the fucking secret. More that you know deep down inside I was just crying, I just wanted them to tell you know. But nobody ever did.”

All of these cases involved intra-familial abuse and this can create numerous difficulties for survivors to report to anybody; Becky did not want to tear the family apart while Sally, after her initial attempt to tell, feared being taken away and put into care. These difficulties will be looked at in greater detail in a later section. What is interesting is that the disclosed abuse was perpetrated by family members, and based on other crimes such as rape and violence towards to person, it is far more likely to be reported if the crime is committed by someone unknown

or at least outside the family. Another interesting point about these cases is that none of them actually reached any legal conclusion despite the children having reported what was happening to them.

One case that cannot be pigeon-holed as the survivor reporting or not reporting the abuse is that of Jean (whose account was laid out earlier in this chapter). The first abuse was perpetrated by a man in the village where she lived, and after being quizzed by her mother about her visits to this man, Jean disclosed the abuse. The negative reaction she received was not what she was expecting. Jean's mother fetched a priest to talk to her daughter about the abuse. It was then years after the abuse had stopped that Jean told anybody about her subsequent four perpetrators.

#### *What Were the Legal Consequences?*

For the vast majority of survivors interviewed, the question of legal consequences was not an issue as so few reported the abuse to relevant authorities. In fact 83% (n=20) of survivors in this study did not tell anybody within authority. Interestingly of the four survivors who did report the abuse, only one of them, Ed, disclosed at the time of the abuse occurring. The other three who reported the abuse to authority did so many years later.

In Ed's case we know that he told a duty social worker about the abuse at the time of its' occurrence. When Ed was interviewed as part of this thesis many years after the abuse had ceased and he had left home, he stated that at no time had anything been done to help him nor had there been any legal consequences for his foster parents. Ed has very little contact with his foster parents now and while he does not hate them, he is not sure he can forgive them. Ed claimed to have little inclination in seeking some sort of legal retribution at this point in time as he feels that his foster parents are too old now. However he stated that he did locate the social worker to whom he had made the original disclosure and was informed that if he did wish to proceed further with his complaint, his file contained notes of his disclosure. Of course the one specific question this case raises is why the social worker did not follow up Ed's complaint and why nothing was done at the time about the alleged abuse.

This thesis does not have the answers to these questions. Indeed it does not appear that Ed himself has such answers. Certainly possibilities could be explored in seeking an explanation as to the social worker's failure to act. The fact that the abuse took place during the late 1970's to the mid 1980's may be concurrent with the fact that abuse was considered to be a more taboo subject then, particularly when it involved the abuse of a boy, and that the social worker did not have the same awareness and training as one might expect of a social worker today. The fact that it was an offence that had occurred some time previously was the focus of a specific debate in Chapter Four. Another possibility as to the failure to act which is a focal point of the research study as a whole is the fact that one of Ed's two perpetrators was a woman. At this stage, we are already acquainted with the issues inherent in female-perpetrated sexual abuse and the reactions of both professionals and the general public indicated by past research. Considering the time period of the abuse and the fact that the perpetrators were foster parents, and had therefore been 'approved' by social services, one could assume that this is a potential explanation as to the lack of legal consequences in this case.

The remaining three survivors who reported their abuse to the authorities had all been solely abused by a male perpetrator; two of the survivors were women and one was a man. Sophie was one such female survivor who reported her adoptive father's abuse to the authorities though not at the time of the abuse. According to Sophie, she decided to report the abuse at the age of seventeen, several years after the abuse had ceased, as her adoptive parents had just had a baby girl and she was concerned about her well-being. Sophie's decision to report her adoptive father's abuse resulted in the involvement of police and social services in the case, and he was successfully prosecuted after eventually changing his 'not guilty' plea to a 'guilty' one. At the time of the interview Sophie was unable to recall the length of the actual sentence he received but is clear that he served four years in prison. We can deduce from this that it is likely that her perpetrator received a sentence of eight years, serving half of the sentence which is commonplace.

While Sophie managed to successfully prosecute her adoptive father for the abuse he perpetrated, the response she experienced from other people can perhaps offer us an insight into why survivors of abuse may choose not to report. Sophie

describes how members of her family turned against her and blamed her for what had happened: "they were just blaming me because I got my father arrested and it was all my fault". Sophie's adoptive mother initially supported her and even made statements to the police regarding her husband's violence towards her. However she later withdrew these allegations, and instead, turned on Sophie: "she turned on me, she blamed me. If anything did happen, it must have been my fault and I must have been encouraging him to do what he had done". Sophie now has no contact with her family as a result of her reporting the abuse.

Jane describes a rather different experience in her reporting of the abuse perpetrated by her father. It was initially reported by her niece who had also been abused by the same man. Once this was disclosed Jane went to the police and reported her experience also, though this was many years after her father had stopped abusing her. At the time of the interview, Jane's father was awaiting sentence having pleaded guilty to child cruelty and gross indecency and 'not guilty' to a charge of indecent assault.

Rick was raped by a family friend who also happened to be a teacher at his school. As with Sophie and Jane, Rick did not report the abuse until many years after the event. He describes going to the police as something that he needed to do:

"it was something that I'd been thinking about for a long time...something I just felt like I needed to do...I got to a point where in my therapy that's what I was talking about, that was kind of like my next hurdle. The first one was...telling my parents and then the next one was going to the police".

Once Rick went to the police and made a statement about the abuse, his perpetrator was arrested and charged. However at a later date, these charges were dropped due to insufficient evidence. Nevertheless Rick feels very positive about his experience of reporting his abuse as he had spent years feeling concerned that this man had continued to abuse other children and he felt that a weight had been lifted from him through his disclosure.

It would be helpful at this point to consider what these particular findings mean, particularly with reference to gender and the consequences of reporting the abuse. We can see that it is only the interaction of female-survivor/male-perpetrator which resulted in any court proceedings leading to one, and in all probability two, custodial sentences. The male-survivor/male-perpetrator

interaction led to the dropping of criminal charges and male-survivor/male and female perpetrator interaction resulted in a failure to act on the part of the authorities. These findings are in concordance with the original hypotheses of this study, whereby gender plays a fundamental role in the legal consequences of child sex abusers, and support past research conducted in this area.

In an overview of past research, Chapter Three discussed the discrepancies involved in the criminal justice system with regard to sex and sentencing and the different treatment towards male offenders and female offenders. This discussion sheds little light on the findings of this particular aspect of the research as all cases involved a male perpetrator. It may be feasible to draw on some of the points raised in Chapter Two regarding gender stereotypes, and in particular the construction and beliefs surrounding femininity, as a way of explaining the experience of Ed. Based on the discussions that form the early part of this thesis, we could hypothesise that the abuse of Ed was not followed up in any way as one of his perpetrators was a woman, and would therefore not meet the social worker's image of 'sex abuser'. No doubt this may have been compounded by the fact that she was also his foster mother which may also feed into Weldon's (1988) concept of the idealisation of motherhood. However since this explanation provides a theoretical framework for just one perpetrator who was not brought to justice, we need to examine this further.

The fact that there remains a clear contrast between the gender interactions and consequences for perpetrator based on the gender of survivor suggests that the explanation may be more firmly rooted in survivor gender as opposed to perpetrator gender. Again if we draw on issues raised in Chapter Two on masculinity, we might assume that underlying beliefs about males fending for themselves and the idea that abuse does not harm males may have contributed to the difference in legal consequences for these survivors. Unfortunately it is difficult to draw any generalised conclusions from the data given the unrepresentative nature of the research sample and the limited number of survivors who did report their experience of abuse to the authorities. Drawing such conclusions was not an objective of this research given the exploratory nature of this work, so we can only use these cases as a way of scratching the surface of an under-researched area

rather than for providing a statistical analysis of the legal consequences of different gender interactions.

### *Why Did So Few Survivors Disclose Their Abuse?*

The analysis of disclosure has so far concentrated on those survivors who reported their abuse either to someone at the time of the abuse or to someone in authority during or after their experience of victimisation. As has been discussed within these two sections very few survivors reported their experience of sexual abuse and in this section we examine the reasons behind non-disclosure.

The overwhelming majority of survivors did not fit into either of the previous two categories, deciding only to disclose their abusive experience sometime later in their lives and, for most, choosing not to take it any further by reporting the occurrence to the authorities. Eleven female survivors did not tell anyone about the abuse at the time it occurred. This figure rises to twelve when we take account of the case of Jean who disclosed being abused by her first perpetrator but not by subsequent perpetrators. For the purposes of quantitative analysis Jean is included as having disclosed her abuse although potential reasons for not disclosing subsequent abuse will be discussed within this section. Of the male survivors in this study, 89% (n=8) did not disclose their abuse at the time it occurred.

It is difficult to set these findings in the context of past research because there will be a certain degree of distortion involved since other studies that have examined gender and reporting tendencies do not appear to separate out specific points of disclosure. For instance, in Chapter Three both Finkelhor (1979) and Gordon (1990) were cited as studies which had explored disclosure and gender interaction. Similar to both of these studies, the findings from this project indicate that males are more likely not to have disclosed their abuse. Furthermore the figures of non-disclosure from this study comparative to Finkelhor's (1979) study are somewhat similar: 73% (n=11) of females and 89% (n=8) of males did not disclose abuse compared with 63% of females and 73% of males respectively. However the difficulty arises from the fact that in Finkelhor's study, many of his respondents had told no-one of their abuse. In other words, his study represented the first point of disclosure for them. This was a finding that was not replicated in

this study due to the nature of the differing methodologies. Both Finkelhor and Gordon conducted large sample surveys comprising of people not specific to child sexual abuse (college students and general public respectively) while this study asked for volunteers who had been sexually abused. It is therefore not surprising that every survivor involved in this study had disclosed their abuse to someone at some point. The different methodology produces a dissimilar slant on the figures for disclosure.

TABLE 5<sup>6</sup>*Gender Interactions and Given Reasons for Not Disclosing Their Experience of Abuse*

	reasons for non-disclosure					
	fear	blame	not being believed	unawar e it was wrong	enjoyed	other
male perp-female sur. (n=5)	3	2	2	-	-	4
female perp-female sur. (n=4)	1	1	1	1	-	3
male perp-male sur. (n=4)	1	1	1	-	1	2
female perp-male sur. (n=4)	1	1	1	1	-	3

Having removed those survivors who did disclose their abuse at the time of its' occurrence and those survivors who had multiple perpetrators (given that their reasons may be more varied and therefore make this process more complicated) this left 17 survivors to investigate in terms of reasons for non-disclosure. Nearly one-half (n=4) of female survivors and a quarter (n=2) of male survivors stated that fear had been a primary factor in their decision not to disclose their abuse. Most of these female survivors were abused by men and we can see from the table that the male-perpetrator / female survivor interaction demonstrates the highest level of fear about disclosing the abuse. No clear reasons for this emerged from the research and it would therefore be interesting to explore whether male perpetrators are more likely to use explicit threats as a means of inducing such fear into their female survivors.

This fear is very real in different ways to these survivors; it may have arisen as a result of uncertainty as to what would happen if they did tell; they may have been scared for their safety; or they may not have had an explicit reason for feeling

too fearful to disclose the abuse. The simple dynamic inherent in child sexual abuse, which involves the all-powerful adult and the vulnerable child, means that fear will almost inevitably be present.

The survivor's concern that they would be blamed for the abuse was also a commonly held belief amongst those in this study and there was very little difference between any gender interaction involving this belief. Three women and two men felt that this could in part explain why they did not disclose their abuse. Again if we consider the general dynamics which exist between adult and child, perhaps we can see why children may be reluctant to place themselves in a position of being potentially 'told off', particularly when they know the abuse is not right but are unable to conceptualise the fact that the wrongdoer is the abuser and not themselves. Jean is one example of a survivor who had multiple perpetrators and after disclosing her experience with her first perpetrator, encountered the reality of being blamed for the abuse and, perhaps inevitably, turned that reality into self-blame with regard to her subsequent perpetrators: "when it happened the second time, I thought that something was wrong with me. I must be giving some signals that this is okay". Sarah was also abused by multiple perpetrators and claimed that her reaction was to blame herself, particularly when her father abused her as he blamed Sarah for what he was doing to her: "[he would say] 'you shouldn't make me do this...you're so beautiful'".

The fear of not being believed if they did tell was also a common reason for non-disclosure, with little difference between any of the gender interactions. The figures for this are identical to those previously with three females and two males claiming this as a reason for not telling of their abuse. In line with previous research carried out on female-perpetrated sexual abuse (e.g. Elliott, 1993), Millie stated that one reason she did not tell anyone was because she thought that no-one would believe her because her perpetrator was a woman. Though as we can see this thought process surrounding fears of disbelief are not exclusive to female perpetration. Sophie stated that she could not tell her mother about her father abusing her: "she wouldn't want to accept it...It is quite an accusation to make. To find a willing adult is very, very difficult". The sad fact remains that Sophie's comment is a disgraceful picture of the reality for survivors of child sexual abuse. It has been reflected in the experiences of those survivors in this study who did

disclose their abuse but to adults whom they trusted who chose not to believe them, thus allowing the abuse to continue.

A significant finding with regard to gender interaction is that of not disclosing because of being unaware at the time that what was happening was wrong. Two survivors stated that this was the reason they had not told at the time; both had been abused by a woman. This may be closely linked to a previous section on defining sexual abuse in that these survivors may not have perceived their experience as 'wrong' as they did not label it as abuse, and certainly in part because their perpetrators were women. The issues surrounding this are discussed at length within the previous section and are not worth reiterating here as they mirror one another.

Seven female survivors and five male survivors stated that they did not disclose their abuse for various 'other' reasons, including repressing the memories, just 'knowing' not to tell, loyalty and other feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment. Annie had been physically, emotionally and sexually abused by her mother but did not disclose the sexual abuse to anyone due to the fact that members of her family were aware of the other abuse and yet failed to help her in any way. Thus Annie did not see any reason in telling anyone:

"a lot of the time my other family members were there when there were things going on, if she was being really aggressive and they would ignore it...so I learned quite early on that there was no point saying anything".

She also links into the feelings of shame and supports the notion of not being believed due to the sexual nature of the abuse:

"I was mortified basically...I just felt so awful about [the sexual acts]. I just felt really ashamed and I thought it was my fault. And I felt it was easy for people to believe I'd been smacked about or been shouted at or been told I was terrible than for people to think I had been molested".

This feeling of embarrassment appears to be significant for survivors of female perpetrators according to the findings of this study, and is particularly relevant when we consider the gender effect in sexual abuse. As Chapter Two documents, sexual abuse by women is less common, less acknowledged and less talked about, leaving survivors of this crime in a more isolated position and possibly feeling

further shame and humiliation because their perpetrator was female and so did not fit society's construction of either femininity or 'child molester'. Two male survivors abused by women described their feelings of embarrassment surrounding their abuse. Jeff stated that he still does not talk about his abuse to friends but only to professionals because of these feelings. He also stated "there's always a feeling in my mind that if you really wanted to stop it, you could stop it".

It is possible that Jeff felt this way because he was male and therefore should have been able to prevent a woman from sexually abusing him. This comment may also stem from his belief that if he told friends about his abuse, they would somehow see him as wanting the sexual experience because otherwise he could have stopped it. Unfortunately both of these possibilities are common beliefs held within, and supported by, society. It is not clear what Jeff meant by this comment so it is only possible to draw inferences from his statement at this time.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a detailed analysis of survivors' accounts, drawing out themes grounded in an interactionist perspective as well as some comparative aspects in relation to gender. The comparative factors focused on examining the differences that gender might yield in experiences of child sexual abuse. Differences were most notable in the frequency and duration of abuse, the survivor-perpetrator relationship, the reporting of abuse to authorities and the reasons for not disclosing the abuse to others.

Data showed that female survivors experienced a much longer period of sexual abuse than males did, and were abused on a more frequent basis. An explanation for this is linked to the findings around survivors' relationships with their perpetrators. Female survivors were much more likely to be abused by an immediate family member than were males who tended to be abused by acquaintances. In linking the two, we can assume that an immediate family member has the means to abuse a child on a more frequent basis for a longer period of time. For these findings, the key difference is survivor gender rather than perpetrator gender.

Most of the participants in the study who disclosed their abuse to the authorities had been abused by a man. Of those who reported the abuse, **only** those cases involving a female-survivor/male perpetrator interaction proceeded to court. This concurred with the original hypothesis of the study; that gender plays a fundamental role in the legal consequences of perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

A salient finding gleaned from the reasons participants gave for not disclosing their abuse was not knowing that it was wrong. Those who cited this reason were abused by a woman. No participant abused by a man gave this reason. The process by which survivors came to see their abuse as wrong, indeed to define it as abuse, is tied in with the central framework of interactionism and is explored within the main themes of this chapter.

The themes to which I refer required a more prolonged analysis and were outlined at the onset of the chapter. Much of the discussion surrounded the difficulties observed in survivors defining their experience and how this informed their process of becoming a survivor. The discussion took account of the historical aspect in the process, recognising it as subjective rather than absolute, and how this allowed individuals to interpret and attach meaning to their situation. This involved examining the impact of particular symbols on the process of one adopting the identity of an abuse survivor. Such symbols (which included the feelings associated with the abuse and the abusive acts themselves) were used to (re) construct the identity of survivor. Other symbols (such as drug taking and promiscuity) were used to avoid adopting the identity of survivor.

The analysis took account not only of the historical aspect in the process of becoming an abuse survivor; it demonstrated how this process is ongoing and changing rather than simply static. The chapter pointed to examples of interactions survivors had with significant others (including the research interviewer) that informed their process and modified their interpretations of the abusive experience.

Symbolic interactionism illustrated the subjectivity involved in survivors defining their experience as abusive and the process by which they adopted the identity of an abuse survivor. In a similar vein, interactionism was used to demonstrate the ambiguity around the definition of harm and the specific act of penile penetration. The chapter challenged how and why male-perpetrated sexual

abuse is more likely to be considered harmful in view of the symbol of penis as, at best, intrusive and, at worst, weaponry.

These themes are strongly linked to any wider discussion on gender and child sexual abuse and, through the utilisation of symbolic interactionism, has provided a much needed understanding of the relationship between these two concepts.

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<sup>1</sup> The case studies presented in this chapter are drawn from the narrative of survivors' interviews and have had limited editing. They are not the raw transcripts but are the survivors own descriptions of their experiences. A selection of the transcripts of the original interviews can be found in Appendix 7.

<sup>2</sup> In his book *Sexually Victimized Children*, Finkelhor (1979) discusses the difficulty in defining victimisation in a research context and suggests three ways of defining sexual victimisation: consent standard, the feeling of victimisation, and the community standard. Finkelhor rejects the first way based on arguments that a child can never really consent to sexual activity with an adult due to aspects such as power, authority and different sexual meanings. The feeling of victimisation was also rejected for being "too subjective a standard" by which to define victimisation, and was dismissed by researchers because "we preferred to make our own judgments about the respondents' experiences based on the descriptions they gave us" (Finkelhor, 1979: 51). I was struck by the opposing nature of this statement in relation to my research. It is precisely this viewpoint that I have attempted to avoid in my research. Notwithstanding the value in 'objective' research, this study is contributing an aspect that other research in the field has failed to do. There are likely to be many cases of child sexual abuse (not least in this study) that do not fit the predetermined, objective criteria of 'abuse' yet by disregarding such cases and disallowing people their subjective realities, we limit our knowledge of this area. (Finkelhor decided to use the community standard method in his research to define victimisation based on its ease and objectivity).

<sup>3</sup> This discussion has piqued my curiosity about the research studies that point to overwhelmingly high numbers of convicted rapists having been sexually victimised by women. One could suppose that such men experienced powerlessness in their sexual victimisation and coupled with their beliefs and expectations around masculinity, sought to maintain power and control through sexually victimising other women (see Groth, 1979 and Burgess et al, 1987 (cited in Jennings, 1993) for such research studies).

<sup>4</sup> The tables presented in this chapter comprise of different numbers of participants due to the clarity of collected data. For instance, Table 1 and 4 include all 37 gender interactions because the participants were very clear on the age of abuse and their relationship to the perpetrator, while Table 3 comprises of 27 interactions because not all participants could remember how frequently they were abused. The total number of participants in any gender interaction is clearly labelled in each table.

<sup>5</sup> Helen was one of the survivors who answered the national advert. We were unable to meet because of geographical distance so Helen was not formally interviewed. We spoke several times on the telephone and Helen agreed to write her account for the research. Consequently, this narrative represents the letter I received from her.

<sup>6</sup> The figures displayed in this table will not calculate to 17 (i.e. the number of survivors who gave reasons for non-disclosure) as many survivors who took part in the study provided more than one

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reason, for instance they might have been both frightened of the perpetrator and feared not being believed. Thus the figures will display the number of survivors who stated any of the reasons.

## CHAPTER VI

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER IN SERVICE PROVIDERS’ RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

### **Introduction**

The data that form this chapter were drawn from professionals working in organisations which provide services for survivors of sexual abuse. This part of the research involved examining the significance of gender in how service providers responded to child sexual abuse. The response to which I refer encompasses not just what professionals said in the research, but includes the experiences of survivors in seeking professional intervention. In light of this, the chapter is divided into two broad sections; the first examines the nature of the organisations while the second part considers survivors’ experiences of service provisions.

The core ideas of interactionism identified in Chapter Three will be drawn on so as to aid understanding of both the quantitative and qualitative findings. The data that form this chapter, therefore, will be analysed within the context and core ideas of symbolic interactionism. The quantitative findings – which includes such aspects as client gender, types of services offered and project-produced literature – will be made sense of by applying the ideas of the self-defining process and the process by which someone is defined as an abuse survivor. The qualitative findings – which includes organisational perspective and survivors’ experiences of organisations – are similarly analysed using the foci of interactionism. In particular, symbols and social interactions are highlighted as essential to the processes mentioned above. While the chapter is separated into two distinct sections, the

reader will observe a clear relationship between the two. For instance, analysing why certain services may be offered is one task. The second task is analysing the significance of the offered service to a survivor's process of self-definition and identity formation. That is, in interactionist terms, the offered service becomes a symbolic interaction for the individual. This will become clearer in the analyses that follows.

## **The Organisations**

### *With Whom Does the Organisation Work?*

Chapter Three discussed the methodology of the project and, within this, the source of contact of help organisations was disclosed, namely The Survivors of Sexual Abuse Directory. As was stated, the organisations targeted were those who identified themselves as working with both male and female survivors of sexual abuse. The reason behind the exploration of this question was to compare the reality for the service users with theory and to ascertain any discrepancies between the two.

TABLE 6  
*Projects (n=39) Claiming To Work With Given Clients*

Clients			
female survivor	male survivor	female perpetrator	male perpetrator
27	25	11	12

As can be seen from the table there are few discrepancies between the clientele for whom the project claims to provide services and those with whom they actually work. This is extremely positive in that projects are providing for both men and women, particularly when we consider some of the comments made by projects:

“[the] psychological damage and effects are the same for male and female survivors”

~ project 07

“Boys in particular can feel very isolated through abuse”

~ project 12

Another project (23) stated that having “no groups for men is a problem” when assessing their client work but did not provide any reasons why this was their situation. For example, it could have been related to the funding of the project?(?). One project (07) suggested that it is very difficult for men to come forward, having experienced abuse, because they are “suppose to be macho”. This is in line with much of the content of Chapter Two with regard to the construction of masculinity. A potential solution to this difficulty was intimated by project 02, i.e. “[we] found [that] having men on staff makes a big difference in terms of getting men to come along.”

The projects which worked with female, but not male, survivors did not offer explanations as to why this may be the case. However, one project (04) which was interviewed did state that: “Many clients like the fact that it’s a male-free zone...many feel that if men want a project, let them set it up.” This reflects the attitude held by a number of projects within the Rape Crisis Federation who were not interviewed here as they are very clear on who they do and do not work with, namely with female and not male survivors. This was discussed in more detail as part of the specific research areas in Chapter Three.

These findings suggest that while many projects have male clients who use their services, there are still difficulties and issues concerning the accessibility of the services for this particular client group given the dominant ideology that proposes that men do not need help. What this research study did not explore, which in hindsight would have been useful, was the numbers of men seeking help compared with women. We can reasonably assume that the proportion of women seeking help would be significantly higher because firstly there are more women than men who are sexually victimised, and secondly because evidence implicitly suggests that women are more readily inclined to seek therapeutic or other professional assistance (see, for example, Allen, 1991 and LaFollette, 1992). If however the numbers of men and women seeking professional help are vastly different in relation to the comparative numbers of men and women who experience abuse, then we may be able to explore the factors involved in preventing men from seeking such help.

This raises two points identified and discussed in the previous chapter, and involves the application of symbolic interactionism to aid understanding around

them. First, the process by which an individual defines their abuse experience and their adopting or resisting the identity of abuse survivor is integral to whether they seek help and how this is done. An individual who does not self-define their experience as sexual abuse is unlikely to pursue such specific intervention as provided by the organisations in this research. Second, the process by which individuals, or the collective organisation (made up of individuals), defines harmfulness in terms of abuse experiences is likely to manifest itself in the reality of working with particular clients. Defining what constitutes sexual abuse as well as the concept of harm is a process undertaken by survivors and professionals alike. I will return to this in subsequent sub-sections in this chapter.

It may be that simply having projects that offer services to both male and female survivors is not enough, and that additional support mechanisms are required to make projects more accessible to male survivors. To illustrate this suggestion let us take an example from a situation involving domestic violence.

Hypothetical scenario:

Greg and Samantha have been in a relationship for eight years and have two young children. Greg has been violent and abusive to Samantha for most of this time, leaving her with not just numerous physical injuries but many emotional scars also including low self-esteem and her isolation from various friends and family members. Samantha is not only scared of trying to get some help, but she feels ashamed and at least partly to blame for Greg's violence towards her due to his emotional abuse and constant put-downs.

After suffering a beating one evening, Samantha's neighbours overhear and call the police. Greg is arrested and charged with common assault. He is convicted, placed on probation and ordered to attend a treatment programme as an attached condition to his probation order. During this time, Samantha has been trying to come to terms with what has happened. She has few support networks as she had been isolated from friends during her relationship with Greg. She continues to blame herself for many of the preceding events and now experiences additional feelings of guilt around her children losing their father.

The project at which Greg is now attending also offers support to women by making proactive contact with the perpetrators' partners. It is through

this avenue that Samantha first talks to anyone in a supportive capacity about the violence she has suffered. She begins one-to-one counselling with the women who contacted her initially and now also attends support groups where she meets many other women in similar situations.

What this hypothetical scenario demonstrates is the very real difficulty faced by battered women in their potential for accessing help. The project featured in the scenario recognises the obstacles that these women have to overcome in order for them to obtain support, and therefore practices the innovative technique of proactive contact with battered women.

Using a similar framework, we could apply such ideas to furthering our attempts at supporting male survivors of sexual abuse by examining methods of increasing men's accessibility to service provisions. For instance, the data showed that project 02 increased their intake of male clients by having more men on the staff team. This would then appear to have clear implications for policy and practice for other organisations. What is clear, however, is that we need to ensure that an appropriate balance is achieved in terms of increasing men's accessibility while also considering women's safety, be it real or perceived.

#### *Does the Project Work Solely on Child Sexual Abuse?*

This was a question posed in both interviews and questionnaires and was deemed to be central in assessing the service provisions available. The centrality arose from an assumption that the dynamics may differ in a project where the foci is child sexual abuse 'recovery' compared with projects where the foci is far more general (e.g. psychotherapy encompassing broad ranging issues).

TABLE 7

*Projects (n=39) Which Focus Solely on Child Sexual Abuse*

focus of project

sole child sexual abuse	other forms of child abuse	other forms of sexual violence	other issues
8	11	4	16

As can be observed from the table only one-fifth (n=8) of all the projects aim their work solely at child sexual abuse whereas over 40% (n=16) of the projects keep

their work more general, incorporating areas such as counselling for bereavement, divorce and other childhood issues; advice on drug use and sex education; or projects where the primary focus is on other issues such as mental health and homelessness. As it was not within the scope of this study, I have not been able to ascertain any consequences with regard to what this may mean for survivors seeking help. However at this point, it seems reasonable that there may be two arguments about projects which are not aimed solely at working with sexual abuse survivors in terms of the effects on those survivors seeking assistance. First, we could reasonably hypothesise that, by working with a range of issues and having a general focus of 'counselling', these projects would overlook the specific issues for child sexual abuse thus hindering the healing process. Project 03 talked of a problem encountered by a number of survivors stating that they have "[come] across many survivors who have told of abuse and not been believed". Given the highly sensitive nature of dealing with child sexual abuse, perhaps only those projects and individuals trained specifically in, and with access to specific resources for, child sexual abuse should work in the field. This argument is further reinforced by some survivors interviewed in this research who revealed that they believe there is a need for more specialist services. This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The second, and converse, argument to projects working in a broader, more general way is that this may be more encouraging to some survivors. Given the enormity of someone disclosing that they have been sexually abused, be it current abuse or abuse that ceased 30 years previously, many survivors may initially seek help for another problem with which they are having to cope. For instance, this could be for an eating disorder or alcohol abuse, and it may be some time later in their healing process that the sexual abuse is disclosed.

I will consider this in interactionist terms. The core ideas of symbolic interactionism identified in Chapter Three as central to its application to this research are illustrative here. The process by which an individual adopts the identity of abuse survivor is an ongoing one. Their involvement with an organisation will be a social interaction which influences their process of adopting or resisting such an identity. How they define their abuse experience is equally important; an individual may struggle with self-definition but upon interacting with

other symbols, may alter their definition. This has ramifications for appropriate interventions in their addressing the abuse.

Project 01 did not specialise in sexual abuse at all and informed me that “child sexual abuse is often not the presenting problem but emerges in counselling”. Indeed a number of survivors interviewed for this study told of how they had disclosed their own abuse only after having been in therapy for something they felt at the time was unrelated to the abuse. It may, therefore, be worth considering that the prospect of seeking out a specialised sexual abuse organisation is simply not possible for a significant proportion of sexual abuse survivors. Given their minimisation of their abuse, their unacceptance of it or their shame surrounding it, these would benefit from a agency with a broader, more generalist brief?.

#### *What Services are Provided?*

This table displays the number of projects that offer each of the different services to its users. The last category entitled ‘other’ included any project that offered one or more of the following services: befriending, drop-in, medication, home visits, outings, couple counselling, research, resource library, investigations, information and advice, play therapy, art therapy, drama therapy, literature publications, seminars and consultancy.

TABLE 8  
*Projects (n=39) Offering Given Services*  
service provisions

group-work	individual counselling	help-line	family therapy	workshops	Other
20	30	15	8	4	23

As the table clearly indicates, individual counselling is offered by more than three-quarters of the projects (n=30) and group-work is offered by just over half of the projects (n=20). A possible reason for these figures has been offered by Project 18 which stated that “we found that individual counselling is the most effective in working with survivors so we no longer do group work”. Unfortunately this comment was made on a postal questionnaire by the project and they did not offer

any more information as to how they arrived at this conclusion, i.e. whether they had carried out an evaluation of services or was it simply through informal feedback from clients? Furthermore, it is not clear from this statement exactly what is the interpretation of "effective". It could be referring to individual counselling being the method preferred by survivors, or it could be the method which counsellors perceive as helping survivors to heal, or 'effective' could be linked in some way to the project's funding situation. However, in counter-argument to this statement made by Project 18, I was informed in an interview that "there does seem to be a shortage of groups for survivors of child sexual abuse" (project 04).

Irrespective of the comments made by professionals in this research, data on the services provided by organisations are, to all intents and purposes, meaningless on their own. That is to say, there is little point in determining the availability of service provision without establishing client need and client experience. It is the interactions encountered by survivors with organisations which will be key in adding meaning to the data collected in this particular sub-section. The reason for exploring the types of services offered by agencies is central to assessing the extent to which they meet survivors' needs and therefore can assist in suggesting improvements within this area, particularly with regard to possible policy implications arising from these needs and proposed improvements. This will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

### *Is the Literature of a Gender-neutral Style?*

In a previous research study which I carried out (Horwell, 1996), I endeavoured to ascertain the way in which gender was presented within agency literature packs, or more specifically those pamphlets and leaflets sent out to potential service users. As it was carried out on such a small scale, it was thought to be a useful aspect of this research to look again at the literature currently being used by organisations, the hypothesis being that the way in which the information is displayed will have an impact on survivors reading it.

To compare the data I first had to quantify them. After reading through a selection of the material, five categories were produced. These were: 'excellent' which referred to the literature being very explicit in mentioning and highlighting all four gender interactions; 'good' whereby the literature makes some reference to

another gender interaction other than male-perpetrator/female-survivor; 'fair' whereby the literature uses gender neutral terms such as "the abuser" or "he/she" but there is nothing explicit within it; 'poor' which is where the literature is gender specific, namely assuming the perpetrator is male and the survivor is female; and 'not applicable' whereby the literature would not mention child sexual abuse due to the project's focus being more general or where the literature simply outlines the work they do rather than anything on sexual abuse as such. Once the categories had been structured each leaflet could be coded into a category.

TABLE 9

*Projects (n=30) Which Fall Into Pre-determined Categories With Respect To Gender-neutral Literature*

quality of literature in terms of gender-neutrality				
Poor	fair	good	excellent	not applicable
5	7	7	1	10

With regard to obtaining project's literature, over 75% (n=30) of the total number of projects (n=39) offered a pamphlet, leaflet or booklet for analysis. As can be seen from Table 9, just one project fell into the 'excellent' category. This project had produced a booklet on child sexual abuse and rather than simply ensuring that it was gender neutral, they were unequivocal in presenting boys as survivors and women as perpetrators in addition to the male-perpetrator/female-survivor interaction. Specifically they had produced a page of different child sexual abuse scenarios, and among these six situations, two involved male survivors and another one involved a female perpetrator.

Just over 16% (n=5) of the literature obtained was considered to be 'poor'. If we only include that literature deemed to be 'relevant', this figure rises to 25%. As already mentioned, the literature was regarded as 'poor' if it was gender specific in terms of what was presented. It was also deemed 'poor' if the services or resources written about were gender specific. To illustrate this, one project offered a mothers group (aimed at mothers coming to terms with the fact that their children had been sexually abused) and a non-abusing males group (as above but for male relatives of the project's existing female client group). The terms used

here for the groups appear to be indicative of an underlying assumption that males abuse while females do not. Another project which was considered to be 'poor' was so classified because, although they provide separate male and female information packs, there was very little difference between the two packs. For instance, the phone numbers in the men's pack were the same as those in the women's pack which primarily related to women. It is important to bear in mind that the ratings discussed in this section refer only to the gender specificity within the literature and have no reflection on the services offered or on the work carried out by the projects themselves. In fact certainly two of the projects where the literature was considered to be 'poor' were very interesting, innovative organisations with a unique way of working.

The consideration remaining is the extent to which these findings have relevance in any real terms – that is, for the survivors of abuse. I would suggest that the information included and the presentation of that information has the potential to impact greatly on survivors of sexual abuse. This suggestion is based on one of the central strands running throughout this thesis: that the unacknowledgement of other less 'traditional' gender interactions – in particular female-perpetrator/male-survivor interaction – can have a detrimental effect on the survivors of these other interactions, further isolating them and reinforcing a self-definition that their experience was not really abuse. It is certainly unlikely that gender-specific literature featuring the male-perpetrator/female survivor interaction will allay fears about not being believed by survivors of other gender interactions. These points are further supported by the research findings regarding the specific issues as reported by such survivors and detailed in the preceding chapter.

By drawing on the research data exploring reasons for non-disclosure and the impact of sexual abuse coupled with the discussion in this chapter on survivors' experiences of seeking help, we can see a relationship between such data and the information presented in agency literature. This suggests that we are unlikely to combat not only survivors own struggles against prejudice but also societal attitudes towards 'non-traditional' gender interactions if the content of agency literature is not addressed in terms of specifically focusing on female-perpetrated sexual abuse. In interactionist terms, literature produced about organisations form a symbolic interaction with the individual. This interaction, made up of symbols

including language (such as words and phrases) and service provision, is part of the process by which an individual defines their experience and adopts the identity of abuse survivor. In turn, this will then impact upon their response to the organisation.

#### *General Attitudes of the Projects in Relation to Gender and Child Sexual Abuse*

There was no way of quantifying the attitudes of the projects which were obtained from qualitative comments made in interviews or, more rarely, scribbled onto the questionnaire. The comments were diverse in nature and offered an insight into this aspect of the research and into the broader scope of this area.

Only a handful of the projects involved in this research intimated their given attitudes in relation to gender and sexual abuse, and several of those were in reference to the prevalence of female perpetrators. Three projects mentioned the extent of abuse by women with one counsellor (project 10) stating that she believes it to happen “as much as” sexual abuse perpetrated by men, while one project (01) claimed female-perpetrated sexual abuse was “very rare”. Other comments referred to the effects of abuse by women:

“[we] see the victims of female sexual abuse as more damaged or harmed as the situation is so mind-blowing and betraying.”

~project 02

“[we] see survivors of female sexual abuse as sometimes suffering more due to societal reactions.”

~project 03

An exception to either of these categories was a comment made by project 06 which stated that it saw “female perpetration as a closely guarded secret but becoming more open now. We’re seeing women more as abusers now”. This suggests that there may exist a double-edged sword in that until we are more open to discussing female perpetration, survivors are less likely to disclose such abuse, though without the disclosure people may be less willing to understand and acknowledge abuse by women. This mirrors a comment made about child sexual abuse in general by project 01 who stated that “we found that people came forward far more once child sexual abuse became known and talked about publicly”. This has particular implications for policy and will be discussed in Chapter Eight.

The attitudes discussed thus far are likely to impact on the practice and response of the organisation to survivors. Rather than just focusing on the comments made *per se*, it would be appropriate to apply theoretical knowledge to our analysis of this data. To do this, I would like to refer back to some of the approaches explored earlier in this thesis.

Given the diversity of the theories proposed to explain child sexual abuse which were explored in Chapter One, it is likely that these theoretical perspectives will be adopted by the professional community in their response to the social problem of child sexual abuse. To illustrate this, we might consider the family dysfunction approach and how professionals who adopt this approach will view and respond to abuse. The professional in this instance will see all members of the family as having some role within the abusive situation with the abuse occurring as a result of a breakdown of 'normal' family dynamics. Their goal in terms of intervention is likely to be keeping the family together, responding to the abuse by addressing the family dynamics through some form of family therapy. This may be based on the premise that it is highly unlikely that abused children will want to be removed from their family home or wish to be separated from their abusing parent, but rather they want the abuse to stop. This was certainly a point raised by a number of survivors in this research who, when asked what they would have liked to have happened in terms of the sexual abuse, stated that they just wanted it to stop:

"I'd have liked someone to have believed me - and made it stop. All I wanted was my mother to make it stop. You just can't, you've got nowhere to go, you're completely trapped in that situation. I just wanted it all to stop. I wanted a normal relationship with my dad. I wanted him to love me and cuddle me but not do that. But it was the only attention I ever got."

This was a comment made by Sally who was abused by her father; however it was a similar story with those who were abused by people outside their immediate family where the concern was just about what was happening to them. Consider, for instance, Jeff who was abused by a female family friend: "I would have just wanted it to stop, I wouldn't have cared what happened to her."

The other theoretical perspective outlined in Chapter One that may be particularly relevant for consideration in this section is the feminist approach. It is

not an accident that many organisations working with survivors of sexual abuse will adopt a pro-feminist stance given the historical background to this work. Of course this implies that organisations wholly label themselves, which is probably an inaccurate assumption. Rather it may be that some organisations, or individuals within the organisation, have been influenced by this school of thought but would not openly categorise themselves as 'pro-feminist'.

In fact such attitudes were only apparent in two of the organisations interviewed.<sup>1</sup> One project was quoted previously as saying "many feel that if men want a project, let them set it up". It is not clear that this comment reflects the given attitude of that individual or indeed that organisation, however it is a project that has all female staff, aims services solely towards women and whose literature was categorised as 'poor'. While this is, and can only be, an assumption, this suggests that the organisation has adopted a pro-feminist stance.

Similarly, another organisation claiming to work with men yet having very few male clients in reality, commented that they had never come across a case of female-perpetrated sexual abuse where the woman abused single-handedly. Rather if an abuse case did involve a female perpetrator, the case always involved a male perpetrator too. This research is not in a position to deny this organisation's experience of female-perpetrated sexual abuse if this is the reality of the cases presented to them. However it is interesting that an all-female organisation has only encountered what is essentially 'male-coerced' abuse by women while this research, and other studies examining female-perpetrated sexual abuse, have consistently demonstrated the preponderance of such abuse committed by lone women.

It is helpful to understand the stance adopted by individual organisations in their response to survivors of sexual abuse by using the framework of symbolic interactionism. Firstly we can consider this in terms of the process by which individuals make sense of abuse experiences. Individuals will continuously interact with various symbols, the self and other people in this process. One symbol, for instance, is the penis. Chapter Five contained a lengthy discussion around the meaning attached to the presence of the penis in an abuse experience. The argument is relevant at this point in professionals defining an act as harmful. Likewise, language is an important symbol in how professionals make sense of

abuse. Linked to the symbol of the penis, the term 'penetrate' tends to elicit the image of male perpetration rather than female. Professionals' use of such symbols will form part of the process by which they define an experience as sexual abuse. The role of the media is significant in providing symbols for our interactions, and language is largely part of that. Chapter Two discussed media representations of gender stereotypes and the language used in such representations. These symbolic interactions allow us to understand and define the world in which we live.

Other interactions might take place through an individual's training for employment. This will be made up of their social interactions with peers and teachers, the texts they read and the foci of a course. An individual's personal experience of sexual abuse will also serve as an interaction with the self, with the 'I' turning the self into an object of attention to know oneself ('me' being the object). This particular process provides a number of symbols and additional social interactions with which to understand and make sense of their own (that is, the trainee's) abuse experience. Their own experience of abuse, however, will continually serve to inform and influence their subsequent encounters with abuse 'stories'. Thus, in the tradition of interactionism, a perspective will not remain static; it will change as an individual interacts with new symbols or social encounters. Again, this ongoing process can be observed in the perspective of an organisation, and, more practically, in the work they undertake.

The individuals to which I refer will also form groups and take on roles. Their social interactions will then continue to inform their reality. In the context of support organisations, it is likely that a shared perspective will exist – or at least there will be a dominant perspective within which the organisation operates. Through ongoing interactions with other professionals and survivors accessing the services, a stance by which to work can be observed.

In sum, the perspective, or stance, adopted by an organisation will, in the main, reflect its own dominant socially constructed reality. Nonetheless, the way an organisation works will impact upon those accessing the services. The next section of this chapter will focus on survivors' experiences with the 'therapy industry'.

## **Survivors and organisations**

### *What Help was Sought Out by Survivors?*

At the time of the abuse taking place, none of the survivors in my research sought help from a professional organisation. Given the lack of reporting and the negative reactions experienced by those who did disclose their abuse, as was discussed in Chapter Five, this finding is hardly surprising.

Since the sexual abuse ceased to continue, almost all (n=21) of the survivors in this research have sought out some form of professional help. Of the three cases who did not seek help, all were clear on their reasons for not doing so. I will consider each in turn. The first is the case of Frank, as we will recall from Chapter Five, did not define his experience as abuse. The process by which Frank came to make sense of his experience enabled him to resist adopting the identity of abuse survivor. In light of this, Frank would not have actively engaged with therapeutic intervention. Had he done so, his self-definition may have altered and Frank would be at a different point in his process.

The second case is that of Judy. Judy was referred to a psychologist by the teacher to whom she had disclosed her abuse, however after the initial session she decided not to return. In discussing this Judy stated that she had been “put off” by the psychologist’s approach and this was primarily why she had decided to not seek further help at any other time. Here we can observe Judy having adopted the identity of abuse survivor and engaging with an intervention to address it. The social interaction she encountered in doing so was experienced negatively and this had an impact on any future interventions she might have sought. Whatever symbols with which Judy interacted – such as language, her own feelings and characteristics of the psychologist – formed part of her ‘recovery’ and prevented her from wanting to interact with further such encounters.

The third case of not seeking help was that of Sue. Having met Sue, it is not at all surprising that she has not received any support for her abuse. When we met for the interview, Sue was incredibly nervous and found it very difficult to talk about the abuse in any way. She appeared to be terrified that the abuse perpetrated by her mother would be revealed in some way. As discussed in Chapter Five, Sue tended not to term her experience as ‘abuse’ but rather as her mother having “an unhealthy interest” in her. She minimised the abuse, making statements such as “it’s

not much” and “I’m sure you’ve heard much worse”; it would seem that this perception of her own abuse does not allow her to see it as serious enough to seek help from anybody. This notion was confirmed to an extent when Sue was asked about support groups to which she replied that she could not go to them as everyone else there would have much worse stories to tell. In this case, Sue engaged with certain symbols that prevented her from seeking a therapeutic intervention. These symbols might include her definition of the abuse experience, her definition of seriousness (or harmfulness), her fantasy of a support group and her image of ‘real’ survivors.

The professional help sought by the overwhelming majority of survivors included counselling, therapy and self-help groups. One survivor talked about having had neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)<sup>2</sup> and how much it had helped him. Many survivors did not initially seek help for the sexual abuse, rather they talked about their abuse once into the therapy process. This reflects comments made previously about the benefit of having an organisation with a broader focus than child sexual abuse. Individuals may not have defined their experience as abuse, and instead be seeking help for drug use or eating disorders. The interactions with which they engage once in the therapy process will influence their definition and the adopting or resisting the identity of abuse survivor. Such a process is apparent for a number of survivors in this research. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following sub-section.

#### *What Feelings Exist Around Professional Help?*

As we saw in the previous sub-section, the overwhelming majority of survivors in this research went on to seek some form of professional support for the abuse that they had suffered. Given this high proportion it is not surprising that there exists a variety of feelings about the support they received and about the avenues for help available to them.

A number of survivors described how their counselling experiences had been very positive. For instance, Nadeen said that “every session I walk away feeling that I’ve achieved something”. Annie felt particularly positive about her experience right from the start when she disclosed the fact that the perpetrator was her mother: “the most helpful thing was that [the therapist] didn’t say anything

actually at first. She didn't say 'are you sure that happened' or sort of ask me to confirm it – she just accepted it. That was the most important thing". Often disclosing abuse by women, particularly given our general lack of awareness about female sexual abuse and the stereotypes we hold about women, can lead people to have very negative experiences of seeking professional help, as other survivors in this research have illustrated.

At a time when Nick was experiencing marriage difficulties, he decided to contact a national telephone counselling service to discuss his current issues and his feelings surrounding the abuse. After disclosing his experience of sexual abuse, the counsellor replied "you can't be worried about that - you must have enjoyed it!"

Nick is far from alone in his negative experience with counselling. In this research nearly a quarter of survivors who had received professional help (n=5) outlined having a poor experience with a professional, and 80% (n=4) of those who had a negative experience were men. David stated that he had experienced a number of negative reactions from professionals when he had tried to seek various types of help. Upon seeking medical attention for his retrograde ejaculation, David went to one doctor who was sexually abusive through masturbating him. Although David never went back to this doctor, he also did not report the man. Another doctor he went to failed to comprehend the gravity of the problem and instead asked David "why is it important that you ejaculate - it's not like you're going to be having children!" because David was gay. David stated that he was highly offended by this remark and could not believe the doctor's insensitivity. David continued to try to seek appropriate help and support for the abuse, and three months prior to our interview he watched a television programme about abuse which featured a telephone help-line number. Having called the number, David was informed that there was very little they could offer him as funding tends to go to female survivors of abuse. They gave him another number. However when David called he was told that the organisation did not work with men. He was then given a number for a gay/lesbian organisation but as he felt this was not the issue, David chose not to contact them. By the end of this David stated that he felt very let down and frustrated, and that if he had not had such a supportive partner he did not know what he would have done.

Costas described two negative experiences with therapists. The first was related to him deciding to try to bring one of his perpetrators to justice. He contacted a therapist for advice in beginning this process but she informed him that she did not want to know about it. Costas stated that he felt shocked and let down by this. His second experience occurred when he began to have counselling sessions with a gay counsellor about his abuse. Costas felt that everything was so grounded in the fact that he was gay and that the therapist failed to acknowledge issues Costas brought to their sessions that he wanted to explore, for instance Costas disclosed being particularly disturbed by dreams he was having about sex with women and his attraction to women, yet he stated that the therapist never saw this as an issue. At the time of interviewing Costas he had stopped attending these sessions and was unsure whether to continue with them.

Charlie appeared to experience a similar situation to that of Costas in terms of his desire for the therapist to acknowledge something that he felt was a significant issue. In Charlie's case he talked about the abuse perpetrated by his mother and how he, prior to the abuse, maintained a sexual attraction to his mother. He felt very strongly that this was an area that needed to be explored and felt that the therapist did not encourage, or facilitate in any way, that exploration:

"Unhelpful in that not coming back to it or not - it didn't become a recurring theme, and I kind of wanted it to be as important for him as it was for me, or it is for me...it just didn't seem to be that it was acknowledged...I certainly didn't want to be returning to it again and again myself. I didn't want it to be me, I wanted somebody to want to ask me and bring it out and talk about it."

In all these stories, we can see how the social interactions encountered by survivors formed part of their process of making sense of their abuse experience as well as how the professionals themselves understand the experiences. Hence, the professionals involved responded in a way that reflected their understanding of the abuse experience. Nick's counsellor, for instance, engaged with such symbols as discussed in Chapter Five in defining harmfulness, attached meaning to the experience and then responded based on that meaning.

In telling his story, Nick reconstructed the moment in which he encountered the response thereby demonstrating its significance in influencing his process of self-definition. How Nick went on to view himself and how he took on the identity

of abuse survivor – or how these concepts changed – are part of the ongoing stream of action he encountered since the abuse (an illustration of which was being told that he must have enjoyed the experience). These moments could similarly be identified in the other stories in trying to understand the survivor career.

Apart from the clear positive and negative experiences of seeking and receiving support for their abuse, nearly half of those survivors who obtained support in some manner discussed the difficulties in not being able to get the support they would have wanted. Sally describes her difficulty with finding a self-help group:

“Either I would leave messages and they wouldn’t call back and in the end I gave up. Or those that I did get through to weren’t running one at the moment and they’d let me know if they started one or if there was a demand or whatever, or else they were just too far away and impractical for me to get to. So I just haven’t found one basically.”

This is echoed by Karen who stated that “What’s needed is for more groups to be formed and facilitated on”. Sophie also talked about the difficulties in general of finding support, particularly because of financial restrictions and long waiting lists; “this has been a great struggle for me because I’m willing to get any support I can. But it’s just been so difficult to get hold of a decent service or whatever.”

An interesting point raised by a number of survivors linked to the theme of this research concerns the lack of specialist services in terms of different gender interactions. Rick talked about his desire to have had a specialist counsellor when he first sought support as opposed to the general psychotherapist to whom he went, and then spoke of the lack of services for men who are sexually abused: “there aren’t that many specialists around. There are no other agencies that specialise in working with men, so where are they getting referred to?” These comments came after Rick had revealed working voluntarily at Survivors. This is the organisation to which Rick is referring when he states that “there are *no other agencies* that specialise in working with men” (added italics).

Several survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse highlighted the need for resources and services specifically for such survivors. The lack of literature on female-perpetrated sexual abuse, or the under-acknowledgement of it in the general literature, was pointed out by two women who had been abused by females, stating

that this has added to the isolation felt by being a survivor of sexual abuse. A further two survivors abused by women also revealed their desire to attend groups specifically for survivors of female sexual abuse; Millie stated that she would like to attend as she imagines there are many similar issues that would arise for survivors of such abuse, and Nick felt that he would be further isolated if he attended a general support group for survivors as he thought most of them would have been abused by men but that he would be interested in going to a group specifically for female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

These qualitative findings can now be connected to and considered in relation to the earlier quantitative findings on the type of services provided by organisations. Two clear points emerge from what survivors are saying here. First, that there is a desire for group-work and difficulty has been experienced in trying to find a group. The earlier quantitative data showed that half of the organisations provided group-work. Since the research did not establish whether those organisations currently held groups or whether the offered groups were specifically for survivors, it is likely that this number is inaccurately high. This suggests that some proportion of survivors who want to address their abuse experience in a group setting are not getting their needs met.

Second, survivors have pointed to a lack of specialist services (i.e. for sexually abused men and for survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse). This connects to the discussion of the relevance of use of symbolic interactionism. Using the framework of symbolic interactionism, we can recognise the central importance of an individual's social encounters in their making sense of an abuse experience. Here we can make connections with the process by which sexual abuse and harmfulness is defined, discussed in both this and the previous chapter. Since people act towards something on the basis of what it means to them, survivors may be more likely to encounter a negative experience with non-specialist professionals.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has considered the responses of service providers to child sexual abuse and, more specifically, the significance of gender in arriving at such responses. The analysis in this chapter drew attention to the core ideas of symbolic interactionism identified in Chapter Three. To recapitulate, the core ideas are: the

defining of a situation; the use of symbolic and social interactions in the process of interpretation and attaching meaning to something; the interpretive process being ongoing and constant; and the process of identity formation. The empirical data gathered from service providers was considered within the context of symbolic interactionism and grounded in these core ideas.

The chapter showed that one-fifth of projects focused exclusively on child sexual abuse. This is positive for those individuals who have self-defined their experience as abuse and are therefore seeking a specialist service. Such services, however, may not be appropriate for individuals who struggle with self-definition and have encountered symbolic and social interactions which have led them to resisting adopting the identity of abuse survivor. For these individuals, a less specialised organisation may be more appropriate.

Half of the projects in the research asserted that they offered group-work, yet, for various reasons, this figure may be artificially high. In light of a number of survivors expressing a desire for – and a difficulty in locating – group-work, it can be supposed that current response is not meeting demand.

Symbolic interactionism was applied to aid understanding of the ethos behind individual organisations. I identified the various symbolic interactions which could be used to help understand the way in which individual organisations took on their perspective. This then helps to facilitate an understanding of how professionals respond to survivors of sexual abuse.

Of the 'relevant' literature obtained from projects, 25% was considered 'poor' while just 5% was considered 'excellent'. Project-produced literature can form a symbolic interaction with survivors of abuse. The interaction will be part of an individual's stream of action in their changing view of the abuse experience. In this sense, project-produced literature is integral in how an individual defines their experience and the extent to which they adopt the identity of abuse survivor.

The data drawn from service providers and that drawn from survivors were integrated in order to better understand the relationship between the two. Moreover, the significance of gender in service providers' responses can be observed by combining these two areas of data collection. In other words, the interaction that survivors reported having had with service providers offered two clear insights. First, it offered an insight into the professionals understanding of the

abuse. Second, an insight into how the professionals response influenced the survivor's own process of definition and identity formation.

I now move away entirely from survivors' experience of abuse and focus on another set of professionals' responses. The foci of the next chapter are around the definitions and responses to gender and child sexual abuse by criminal justice professionals.

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<sup>1</sup> It was difficult to ascertain organisations' attitudes with regard to clientele gender. This was in part due to the difficulties associated with researching attitudes in general (see, for instance, Procter, 1993 and Wicker, 1969). There may, however, have been more scope for establishing organisational beliefs and attitudes but the questionnaire format was not conducive to gathering such data. The two organisations that were clear in their 'pro-feminist' stance were both interviewed.

<sup>2</sup> Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is a therapeutic technique that was developed in the 1970's and is concerned with enabling people to communicate more effectively, undergo personal change and accelerate learning (O'Connor and Seymour, 1990). Much of what NLP entails is dealing with the human subjective experience, and is used in areas such as business, management and education as well as counselling and therapy. For further reading, see Bandler and Grinder (1979) and Lankton (1980).

## CHAPTER VII

# THE AMBIGUITY SURROUNDING GENDER, SEXUAL OFFENDING AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

### **Introduction**

Throughout this thesis the concept of gender has been explored in relation to sexual abuse, and many issues have been raised and addressed as a result. Much of this work has focused more specifically on women as sexual abusers and this focus will continue as the basis of this chapter. Many of the issues which have arisen thus far have been due to the paradoxical nature of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, bringing into question the construction of femininity and female sexuality with regard to how and why women would sexually abuse children. This final chapter outlining findings from the empirical research adds another dimension to these issues by applying symbolic interactionism as a way of helping to understand the problems encountered in recognising women as perpetrators.

The purpose, then, of this chapter is to place what is already known about female-perpetrated sexual abuse and the empirical findings of this research study into the context of interactionism. By doing this, I will further the debate started in Chapter Five about the interpretation and evolving definition of abuse. Whereas in Chapter Five I was concerned with self-definition and how individuals adopted the identity of an abuse survivor through a “process of becoming” (Plummer, 1975: 122), in this chapter I will focus much more on group definition of others’ behaviour. That is, I explore the criminal justice response (driven by interpretation and definition) to women who sexually abuse children.

The importance of including this chapter can be summed up briefly from the onset. Firstly, it provides a direct link to the discussion in Chapter Five around survivors’ processes of interpreting and defining their experience of abuse. Since

interactionism maintains that individuals “act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (Blumer, 1969: 2), it would follow that the response of others (i.e. the criminal justice system) will impact upon survivors making sense of their experience. If a woman is not perceived as a perpetrator of sexual abuse by the criminal justice system, this is likely to be a significant factor in the process of self-definition by a survivor of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. As such, I deemed it useful to include an additional angle to the debate on interpretation and definition.

Secondly, this chapter develops qualitative and some quantitative data which allows for further comparative analysis. It compares male and female perpetration, and applies more widely to other aspects of the thesis. For example, I refer to how the findings laid out in this chapter provide a comparison with the findings in Chapter Five, demonstrating the differences between cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse found in the criminal justice system and cases described by the survivors earlier in this study.

Having established a rationale, it is appropriate to set out the discussions contained within the chapter. The prevailing theme of the chapter surrounds the ambiguity and subjectivity of defining sexual abuse in terms of criminality. In other words, what it is that constitutes sexual abuse by a woman. This relates directly to one of the four predominant themes contained in Chapter Five; the ambiguity around the definition of harm associated with penile penetration. This debate from Chapter Five is relevant at this point within the context of criminality, and will form a significant part of the chapter’s analyses as a whole.

From this prevailing theme, three further themes can be drawn. The first considers the nature of female-perpetrated sexual abuse in terms of why some cases are defined as criminal and others are not. The second theme explores the legal consequences of female perpetrators, and the third theme demonstrates how unknown this particular group of offenders remain. These three themes will be examined separately, forming the last three sections of this chapter.

The research findings that form this chapter were drawn from probation offices (n=88), and to a lesser extent, prison establishments (n=23). The reason for collecting data from these particular groups is twofold. Firstly, I was interested in the consequences and treatment of female perpetrators in the criminal justice system in the context of subjective interpretation and meaning. In developing the

theme of the thesis, the emphasis of this chapter is on the contribution made by interactionism in making sense of the legal consequences of female perpetrated sexual abuse, it was wholly appropriate to obtain this data from criminal justice professionals. Secondly, what has emerged as the illustrative ambiguous nature of female sexual abuse has unequivocally demonstrated the obstacles involved in finding research subjects and collecting data from these women themselves. The obstacles that hinder this data collection, in fact, represent one of the main facets of this work. In other words, the fact that female perpetrators are not readily accessible (the reasons for which form the basis of this chapter) is a research outcome in itself.

Before exploring the findings of this stage of the research, I will detail more specifically the way in which symbolic interactionism is being used as a theoretical framework. This will become clear as I consider the four themes contained within the chapter. It should be noted that the first theme encompasses the chapter as a whole and, therefore, will not be referred to explicitly.

### **Applying interactionism to criminality**

It can be assumed that there is not, or should not be, any ambiguity in discussions about the legal nature of criminal offences.<sup>1</sup> The assumption being that the time specific definition of 'criminal' is static, and behaviour is measured and judged in accordance with that definition at that time. It would appear, however, that such an assumption is problematic. Becker (1963: 9) writes of deviance being a creation of society in that it "is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'." So an act which is considered to be deviant is considered so because of the application of societal rule making (i.e. what is right and what is wrong within any given society). In interactionist terms, an act will not be considered deviant unless it has broken the rules set out by others. An act that perhaps should be deemed 'criminal' may not necessarily be so. For instance, at the time of writing, our sexual offence laws do not allow women to be convicted of indecent exposure; in all likelihood the reasoning behind such exclusion would have been the absence of the penis, thus echoing an earlier argument of harm not occurring without the presence of the penis (Mathis, 1972). Nevertheless sexual abuse, or the legal terms of indecent assault and gross indecency, do not exclude women as

perpetrators, though through interpretation and social construction of sexuality and criminal acts, women are unlikely to be labelled child sex abusers. As Williams (1991:11) points out:

“it is essential that one never forgets that no matter how immoral, reprehensible, damaging or dangerous an act is, it is not a crime unless it is made such by the authorities of the State – the legislature and, at least through interpretation, the judges.”

If therefore such authorities do not interpret the sexual acts perpetrated by women as criminal, they will not become a matter for the criminal justice system. And what of the cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse which do result in criminal proceedings? Why were they defined as criminal? This relates to the second theme contained in this chapter and forms the section entitled ‘the nature of female perpetration in the criminal justice system’. Specifically, this theme considers how, or perhaps more accurately, why, the cases were interpreted and thus defined as criminal.

The ambiguity surrounding the criminality of female-perpetrated sexual abuse is a central thread within this thesis as such ambiguity is not only drawn from societal perceptions and expectations, but it reinforces and perpetuates these perceptions. In setting the background to this research study, Chapter Three explored the notion suggested by various researchers of a chivalry theory versus a doubly deviant theory by way of explaining the treatment experienced by women in the criminal justice system. In researching the phenomenon of female perpetrators, I would further suggest that the existence of the chivalry and doubly deviant theories are unlikely to be illustrated more prominently than in cases of women who sexually abuse children. This comes as a result of earlier discussions about societal expectations of gender and is grounded within the construction of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality is a key component within this social construction and our subsequent stereotyping of gender. Stereotypical female sexuality maintains the view of passivity in approach. As was documented in Chapter Two, women in general tend to be viewed as not having sexual urges, as not being the initiators of sexual activity and as being resistant to numerous partners. Digression from this can result in negative labelling and, while this is generally changing, beliefs and values are nonetheless deeply rooted and can be found at all levels of society.

Unsurprisingly then this labelling and gendered stereotyping remains abundantly clear within the criminal justice system, and the construction of femininity and female sexuality targets both women as 'victims' and 'offenders'. The former is illustrated particularly well by Lees (1996) in her work researching rape trials. Women as complainants in rape cases appear to be judged on a set of beliefs which society traditionally holds about women and about female sexuality. Given the problematic nature of rape trials, Lees has deemed the court case "judicial rape" whereby the woman is treated in such a way as to make her feel that she is on trial rather than the defendant. The court case is riddled with difficulties, including the suggestion that the complainant may be lying and the issue of them being asked extremely personal questions which many women state that they found as humiliating and degrading as the rape itself.

The issue which arises in all rape cases, and which is of predominant relevance to the issues raised within this thesis, is that of the perceptions held about women in general. The emphasis placed on a woman's expected reputation is highlighted by Lees (1996: 153) where she points to the summing up of a judge in a rape case where the defendant had pleaded guilty:

"She is not a promiscuous person. She is a sober, sensitive and religious young lady who will bear the mental scars for the very long time to come. Did she 'provoke the incident by the clothes she wore, the amount she had drunk, by dancing provocatively, going to the defendant's flat, being out late at night, asking the defendant back, taking drugs or soliciting'".

The implication here is that the woman lived up to the image that the criminal justice system appears to favour. The factors which were outlined by the judge in this case are those which would be taken under scrutiny in a woman who committed them. In other words a jury is more likely to convict a man for rape if the complainant measures up to the societal expectations of 'good' behaviour in a woman.

Given that women who are sexually victimised are treated in a particular way by the criminal justice system on the basis of perceptions surrounding gender role and sexuality, it would follow that women committing acts of sexual deviancy will contradict further these societal expectations and stereotypes. It is only appropriate, therefore, to explore the legal consequences of women who

sexually abuse children. This forms the third theme of the chapter and is detailed in the section relating directly to legal consequences.

Finally, there is the fourth theme which is to show, as a result of the evolving nature of the research, how difficult it is to locate these women. I refer here not simply to accessing those who escape legal detection (since this could apply to other groups of offenders) but more importantly I refer to the way in which interpretation impacts on detection at every level, producing a highly skewed representation of female perpetrators, allowing us to be privy only to a select few cases. By not defining these acts as criminal, female perpetrators remain, in every sense, unknown. This discussion is contained in the last main section of the chapter.

### **Female-perpetrated sexual abuse and criminal justice**

There is no doubt that female perpetrators of child sexual abuse are a rarity within the criminal justice system, and this is also likely to be the case outside the criminal justice arena, when compared with their male counterparts (e.g. Finkelhor, 1984). Perhaps due to the fact that very few women are convicted of sexual offending, there remains sparse research in this area. However it is questionable how helpful it is to continue to disregard female perpetrators just because it is believed that they are *comparatively rare*, and thus of limited interest. In doing this we continue to limit our knowledge about female sexual abuse and so persist in failing those victimised by this crime.

But just how prevalent are female perpetrators within the criminal justice system overall? Data collected by the Home Office show that less than 1% of female offenders convicted of an indictable offence in 1997 had a sexual offence conviction (Home Office, 1999). According to the brief references made within a limited amount of past research, female sex abusers appear to also constitute a tiny proportion of all convicted sex offenders. Eldridge (1998, cited in Spencer, 1999) suggests that approximately 3% of convicted sex offenders are female while Fisher (1994) places the figure at less than 1%. I believe it is important to bear in mind that these figures are for all convicted sex offenders, not simply those against children, and that it is likely that those women convicted of a sex offence will involve children while the corresponding figures for males will include many offences against adults.

Prevalence rates from outside of the criminal justice arena indicate a much higher proportion of females who sexually abuse children if we trawl through the literature, as illustrated in Chapter One. For instance, Russell and Finkelhor (1984) reviewed a number of self-report studies investigating child sexual abuse and found a range of percentages of female perpetrators from 4% to 60%, with an average of 16% of perpetrators being women. Similarly, Howitt (1995) reviewed past studies of prevalence, drawing our attention to proportions such as 30, 40 and 50% of perpetrators being female. Some of these figures however may be considerably high, particularly given that some of the studies were carried out on unrepresentative samples such as convicted rapists. Nonetheless these figures clearly indicate a discrepancy between the general prevalence rate of female perpetrators and those detected by the criminal justice system.

So why might this discrepancy exist? From an interactionist perspective, the answer to this question may consist of two inter-related elements. Firstly, for an abuser to reach the criminal justice system, their behaviour must be interpreted as deviant by someone. In most cases, the first person to attach some meaning to the act and respond to it in any given way is the abuse survivor. This links directly back to the discussion in Chapter Five about the process involved in adopting the identity of the abuse survivor. Depending on that process, knowledge about the abuse may never reach anyone else.

Secondly, the role of others (i.e. anyone except the abuse survivor) will have a critical impact upon an act being defined as criminal and responded to accordingly. Plummer (1975: 102) emphasises the importance of “societal reactions” to homosexuality in understanding it as a social experience. The concept of ‘reactions’ can be similarly applied to understanding the process of naming a female perpetrator as ‘deviant’ or her behaviour as ‘criminal’. My argument is that the identity of the female perpetrator is socially constructed based on the values of a group and the meaning attached to the acts. For instance, there exists an assumption that women are sexually passive beings whose primary traits include the caring and nurturing of children (e.g. Friday, 1991; Elliott, 1993). This assumption contrasts starkly with the notion of a sexually abusive woman (especially a mother). As such, defining her behaviour as criminal or deviant may be avoided as even if the abusive acts are accepted, people will respond to the acts based on the meaning the acts have for them (i.e. interpreted as harmless).

In the tradition of interactionism, we can observe the connection between meaning and symbols. Human beings will use certain symbols to inform interpretation and attach meaning. The symbol of the penis and the concept of harmfulness is directly applicable at this juncture in informing others' processes of defining female-perpetrated sexual abuse, as criminal or otherwise.

In sum, the elements discussed demonstrate the importance of social encounters in constructing the identity of the female perpetrator. We can observe how we come to interpret the act as criminal by placing it within the context of symbolic interactionism. Examination through the lens of interactionism will contribute towards an understanding of the more tangible aspects considered in this chapter such as the prevalence discrepancies surrounding female perpetration and the treatment of female perpetrators in the criminal justice system. That is, if women are not identified as perpetrators, they will not be reported and thus not incorporated into the legal system. Moreover, the importance of self-definition has been noted and this may be reflected in the treatment of female perpetrators who do enter the legal system. Such women may be subject to a more informal processing and/or differing treatment in terms of sentencing and the official offence with which they are charged.<sup>2</sup>

### **Prevalence of female perpetrators in the criminal justice system**

Although 88 probation offices responded to the questionnaire, 25 of these offices provided what I termed a 'negative' response (i.e. they gave little or no information about cases or stated that they were unable to help). Of the 63 'positive' responses, 51% (n=32) stated that they had had some dealings with female perpetrators and were able to provide information regarding the number of cases with which they had dealt.

TABLE 10

*Female-perpetrated Sexual Abuse Cases Reported By Probation Offices (n=32)*

number of cases

1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10	11+
23	6	2	-	-	1

As can be seen in the table, the overwhelming majority (n=23) of the respondents cited their overall figure at one or two cases, with a further six offices indicating having had dealings with three or four cases. Only one office stated that they had been involved in dealing with eleven or more cases though the actual figure is unconfirmed. In addition, three of the questionnaires returned were completed but with data derived from them classified as 'difficult' in terms of it not fitting into pre-determined categories. For this reason they are not included within the figures given above. These responses indicated some level of involvement with female sexual abusers. However, two responses came from an individual probation officer completing the questionnaire, and responding in terms of a previous office to the one to which the questionnaire was sent:

"There have been no cases of this type at [name of office] in the last four years. I supervised a woman convicted of indecent assault on a child in approximately 1983/84 at a previous office."

One other questionnaire was returned indicating that there had been no dealings with female sexual abusers but added a postscript stating that there was one known case but that it had not proceeded as the woman was assessed as having mental health difficulties. No other information was provided regarding the nature of the case.

The questionnaires received from prison officials mirrored in many ways those from probation. Four female prisons responded to the research and two of these establishments reported having inmates who had sexually abused children. Of these two prisons, one categorised their prevalence figure as 'one or two', while the other prison placed their prevalence figure as 'more than 11'. However, as with the data from probation, an actual figure is not known in this instance. In sharp contrast, 90% (n=17) of the male prisons that responded stated that they had inmates who had sexually abused children, and without exception all of the establishments categorised the prevalence figure as 'more than 11'. Although comparison figures were not drawn from probation professionals in terms of numbers of male perpetrators with whom they dealt, it can be assumed on the basis of the prison data and general prevalence rates of male sex abusers, that all (or almost all) of the probation offices in England and Wales will have had some dealings with male perpetrators.

The figures collated from both these sets of questionnaires (i.e. from prison and probation) appear to indicate that prevalence is indeed low. While more than half the respondents indicated having had dealings with female perpetrators, the actual numbers with which they were dealing remained consistently low, particularly with regard to probation. Moreover if we take into consideration one of the more problematic features of the research in terms of prevalence of female perpetrators within probation, we realise that these figures are not simply illustrating the current trend but may be dating back over many years. This came about as a result of a combination of both methodological and conceptual issues in that it was predicted there would be few dealings with female sexual abuse and for this reason no time boundaries were stipulated within the questionnaire. Therefore some respondents may have considered their current caseload when giving figures, while others may have raked through information for as many years back as was possible. Given we can assume that most offices will have taken the last five years into account when considering their dealings, it would follow that the prevalence rates uncovered by this research are not indicative of current numbers. Instead they can only represent the level of cases encountered by the probation service in recent years.

### **The nature of female perpetration in the criminal justice system**

The discrepancy between the currently assumed prevalence rate of female perpetrators in the public arena and the numbers of female perpetrators within the criminal justice system raises concerns about the processing of women who sexually abuse. This discrepancy is important since it suggests that differences might exist in the nature of the cases emerging from the criminal justice system compared with undetected cases never to have reached even the reporting stage of the process. Chapter Five explored characteristics apparent in cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. This data can be used in conjunction with the information gleaned from criminal justice professionals to examine any recurring differences between the two types of case (i.e. criminal justice processed and undetected). In sum, this section of the chapter is concerned with identifying the features of cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse which are formally processed through the criminal justice system. The differences between these cases and those included in Chapter Five can then be observed.

A number of the probation officers provided sparse details concerning the nature of the cases which enabled me to note the type of cases that appear to meet the criminal justice system. What these findings indicate is that the cases reported by probation are inherently different to the experiences described by many of the survivors in this research as illustrated in Chapter Five. The main differences between the two types of case can be summed up as follows:

- 1) The vast majority of women identified by the probation data were co-perpetrators compared with just one case of co-perpetration in the survivor data;
- 2) The ages of the abused children as indicated by the probation data were significantly older than the ages cited by the survivors in Chapter Five;
- 3) The women identified by the probation data were largely extra-familial perpetrators whereas more than half of the cases in Chapter Five consisted of maternal abuse.

I will now take each of these differences and discuss them in turn.

1) The most significant difference between the cases which originated from the probation research and those which were described by survivors was the level at which co-perpetration emerged as a feature of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Through analysing the probation research, I found that clear details were provided in 22 cases. It is therefore these cases that form the analysis of the nature of female-perpetrated sexual abuse within probation. Fifteen (68%) of these cases involved female perpetrators abusing in conjunction with males. So much so in fact that one probation officer wrote:

“It might interest you to know that it is unusual, in my experience, for us to deal with an individual woman who has committed a sexual offence against a child. Such offences are typically committed with a partner, almost invariably male”.

This figure of 68% does not include one questionnaire which indicated that three or four cases had been dealt with at this particular probation office, and that it was “usually in partnership with a man”. Unfortunately the statement given was not clear enough to be able to include actual numbers but it does further illustrate the suggestion that most cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse within the criminal justice system consist of co-perpetration with a male partner.

The methodological nature of this research did not allow for the inclusion of categorising female perpetrators into a predetermined typology, such as those developed by Mathews, Matthews and Speltz (1989) and Saradjian (1996).<sup>3</sup> The former typology includes a category of 'offenders who are coerced by men' while the latter offers two distinct categories of 'women who are coerced into abusing by men' and 'women who co-offend'. Given the relatively sparse descriptions of abuse cases, it is not possible to determine whether the women who sexually abused with men were coerced into offending or whether they played an equal role in the abuse. Of course there is the third option of the woman coercing the man to abuse. In her research, Saradjian (1996) found one case out of her sample of 50 where a woman had coerced her male partner into sexually abusing a 14-year old girl, though the woman did not actually sexually touch the girl. Saradjian suggests that this type of female perpetrator is likely to represent the least common form of sexual abuse by a woman. In this research there is not enough information to be able to classify any of the perpetrators into such a precise typology. However we can draw on the information obtained and make certain assertions.

Angela met her husband when she was 14 years old and he was 20 years her senior. He did not allow Angela to take contraception and, as a result, Angela had two daughters 10 months apart by the time she reached 16 years of age. Throughout her marriage Angela suffered domestic violence at the hands of her husband though details of this are not readily available. It would appear that the sexual abuse began when the daughters were five and seven years old and lasted until they reached about 15 years of age. Angela would hold her daughter down while her husband raped and sodomised her. She also performed cunnilingus and inserted objects into her daughters' vaginas. Six years prior to the year of conviction, one of the daughter's teachers expressed concerns about the child's behaviour and, while social services became involved, nothing happened. Angela was convicted of aiding and abetting and indecent assault, resulting in a seven-year custodial sentence. Her sentence was less than that of her husband as childhood factors were taken into account. Unfortunately it is not clear from probation exactly what these factors were, but we might suppose that Angela's under-age sexual intercourse and victimisation by her husband were relevant in sentencing.

Brenda co-perpetrated alongside two other women where they targeted young, vulnerable girls who had run away from home, and forced them into prostitution through holding them captive and threatening them with weapons. Brenda received an eight-year custodial sentence and was meant to attend a sex offender unit. This she failed to do as she denied the sexual elements of the offence.

The cases of both Coral and Donna involved them befriending children through their own children at school. Once these children had been drawn into the family home, they were sexually abused by the woman and her male partner. Coral received a 15 month custodial sentence and Donna received a 30 month custodial sentence. Both of these cases were provided by probation officers who were involved in the questionnaire stage of the research, thus only sparse details were provided by these officers. The other examples of cases involving co-perpetration, provided by probation, could be primarily categorised into the illustrated examples given, most involving male-female couples abusing dependent children. The exceptions to this were the cases involving lone women as part of a larger group of male sex offenders which accounted for two of the cases disclosed by probation.

Conversely, the experiences described by survivors of female sexual abuse tell a very different story with regard to the issue of co-perpetration: just one such case was disclosed, and, more significantly, *the initiator of that abuse was female*.

2) The second main category of female-perpetrated sexual abuse as illustrated by probation involved a female teacher as the perpetrator and/or the child aged 14 or 15 years old. This type of perpetrator would fall into the category labelled by Mathews, Matthews and Speltz (1989) as 'teacher/lover', or as they later called it 'intergenerationally predisposed', whereby the survivors are adolescents and not the perpetrator's own children. This type of case comprised of 23% (n=5) of cases from probation that allowed for analysis. All these cases emerged from probation officers who completed questionnaires which means that there are few details concerning them. Thus I am unable to comment on the perpetrators' backgrounds or circumstances at the time of the abuse.

This type of case is in sharp contrast to those indicated by the survivor data in Chapter Five. The survivors of female abuse in this research were significantly

younger than those who emerged from the probation data. Most survivors stated that they were between four and ten years old when the abuse began, and only one male informed me that he had been 16 when abused by his friend's mother. This case is an exception, of course, as legally the boy had passed the age of consent. One could argue, however, that the case may fall into the 'teacher/lover' category, and if so, then this represents the only such case within this category from the survivor data.

3) One final observation regarding the different nature of the cases from probation and those described by survivors, is that with the latter, *seven out of 12 female perpetrators who abused on their own were the survivors' mothers*. The only comparable case that emerged from the research on probation involved allegations that a lone mother had sexually assaulted her four year old daughter. The allegations arose through the family court welfare service as a result of the mother applying for custody of the child who was living with the father. The sexual abuse allegations, however, were not substantiated so the case was not further processed.

The only case from the probation data which involved sole intra-familial abuse was a woman convicted of sexually abusing two of her brothers, aged four and six years. She received a two-year probation order. In contrast, eight out of the 13 female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases from the survivor data involved sole intra-familial abuse, and seven of the eight cases indicated the mother as the perpetrator.

Relating this back to the second theme of the chapter, then, can it be explained why the cases drawn from the probation data came to be defined as criminal? What these findings suggest is that there is a particular type of female sexual abuser entering the criminal justice arena. This type of perpetrator appears to either abuse in conjunction with men or be an extra-familial perpetrator – often in a position of trust – who targets adolescent boys. I would suggest that both these types of abuse are more likely to be interpreted and defined as deviant behaviour compared with the sexual abuse perpetrated by *mothers acting on their own*. This draws on the discussion in Chapter Two around the idealisation of motherhood. From an interactionist perspective, a person will respond to the abuse depending upon the meaning it has for them. My argument is that sexually abusive mothers

are less likely to fit the social construction of the female perpetrator and the behaviour less likely to be interpreted as deviant. As such, these acts are not being defined as criminal.

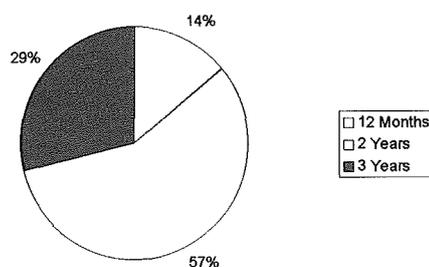
Given that this research, and past research such as that carried out by Elliott (1993), shows that most survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse are abused by mothers acting on their own, two points can be suggested. First, since lone maternal abusers are less likely to be defined as perpetrators and/or criminal, this may account for the disproportionate number of female perpetrators within probation. Second, due to the nature of the cases that are defined as criminal and therefore are known to probation, they offer a distorted picture of both the 'female crime' of sexual abuse and the types of female perpetrators.

### **The legal consequences for women who sexually abuse children**

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse may experience a number of consequences once charges have been brought against them. These include custodial sentences, probation orders, fines, community service orders and suspended sentences. The vast majority of the questionnaires received illustrated clearly the sentence passed on any given perpetrator. However there were some which did not clarify the sentencing involved. For this reason only that data which clearly demonstrates the sentence given has been included within this analysis.

TABLE 11 (pie chart)

*Probation Order Lengths for Female Perpetrators (n=21)*



Over half (n=27) of the perpetrators in this part of the research received a probation order. Twenty-one of these cases clearly indicated the length of the order, and in most of these cases (n=12) the order was placed at two years. Less

than a third (n=6) received a three-year probation order and three women (14%) were placed on probation for twelve months.

Just over one-third (n=19) of female perpetrators received a custodial sentence, which would appear to mirror the custodial sentences received by male sex offenders in 1990 at 34% (Morrison, 1994). So while these figures appear to be very similar, the statistics presented by Morrison (1994) on male sex offenders receiving probation orders suggest that the likelihood of receiving such an order is far less compared with their female counterparts at just 14%. However if we examine the data on the few male perpetrator cases which this research considered, we will find that comparatively men are far more likely to get a prison sentence: two-thirds (n=6) of the male perpetrators in this research received a custodial sentence.

TABLE 12  
*Type of Sentence Imposed On Male and Female Perpetrators*

	type of sentence				
	custodial	probation	suspended	community service	fines
Male (n=9)	6	3	-	-	-
Female (n=48)	19	27	1	1	-

It would also seem that men are more likely to be fined for their sexual offending given that Morrison (1994) demonstrates the figure being at 29% in 1990, according to Home Office statistics. This research did not uncover any women fined for their offence nor did it discover any male perpetrators being fined for their sexual offending. However, the number of male perpetrators in this research is negligible (n=9).

In considering why women might be more likely to receive a probation order we would need to take account of the earlier discussion about stereotypes and the construction of femininity. In one interview, a probation officer commented on women being more likely in general to get probation orders as women are seen as 'needing help' more than punishment, but that with serious offences women tend to get a prison sentence more quickly than men do. This

raises the question of whether sexual abuse by women is actually seen as 'serious', particularly in light of past research (such as that conducted by Broussard et al, 1991) which illustrates participants' perceptions of female sexual abuse being less harmful than any other gender interactional pattern within child sexual abuse.

Women may be more likely to get probation orders dependent upon the actual charges brought against them. In one case a woman who had sexually abused her two daughters was charged with indecent assault and gross indecency. These charges were subsequently dropped and only those unrelated to sexual elements were brought against her, namely child cruelty. When the woman was given a probation order, the supervising probation officer requested an attached condition to attend a sex offender programme which the judge refused, stating that the perpetrator was not a sex offender.

But how does one *become* a sex offender? Here I refer not to explanations of sexual offending or the study of sexual offending as an individualistic phenomenon in terms of motivation to abuse. Rather, I am concerned with the process of becoming within the subjective realities of those who encounter the 'perpetrator'. The meaning one would attach to an act is dependent upon individual interpretation as derived from social interaction. This is in part a reflection of discussions contained in Chapter Five around penile penetration and the concept of harmfulness which are inextricably linked to the ideology that women do not, or cannot, sexually abuse.

Returning to the base tenets of interactionism, a person will encounter certain symbols and engage in social interactions with significant others. From this they will attach meaning to something and then respond to it depending on that meaning. The response to which I refer may include giving someone the identity of sex offender. Thus the person becomes a sex offender in the eyes of the one doing the defining.<sup>4</sup> The symbols used in creating such an identity may include the penis, the occurrence of sadistic acts, the age of the child and the survivor-perpetrator relationship. Likewise, symbols can be used to reject attributing the identity of sex offender to individuals. To take the case noted above, the judge will have engaged with certain symbols and encounters with the self and others to reject the identity of sex offender. The symbols encountered may include the perpetrator being a mother, the acts she committed or his social

interaction with her in court. Unfortunately, the sparse details known about the case do not allow for exploration of the specific processes involved.

The length of custodial sentences also raised some interesting findings, particularly when we consider the lengths of male sex offender prison sentences compared to females. Sampson (1994) demonstrates the average length of sentence for imprisonment in relation to the offence for male perpetrators. Given that women cannot currently be charged with certain offences, namely male-oriented crimes such as rape and buggery, we will only consider those sentences for indecent assault and gross indecency. The average sentence for these combined offences was 17 months in 1989, whereas in this research the average custodial sentence for women was 34 months. This gross disparity may not actually be so great given that sentencing has tended to become harsher over the years, and if we consider once again the few male sex abusers in this research, we will see that their average custodial sentence was 29.5 months – not that much less than for their female counterparts.

The data derived from the prison establishments were inconclusive in terms of obtaining average sentence lengths for custodial sentences as the research merely asked for the minimum and maximum prison term of currently serving inmates. The shortest custodial sentence for a female perpetrator was 18 months while the longest was life. Male establishments also indicated life as their maximum sentence while their shortest sentence for a current male inmate was just three months. This contradicts the probation data in terms of lengths of custodial sentences whereby the shortest prison sentence for a male perpetrator was 15 months. However it should be noted that the prison respondents were drawing on the information of hundreds of male perpetrators to indicate the minimum sentence length so it should not therefore be surprising that these short sentences will occur from time to time. In contrast, the information obtained from female establishments was minimal so making it difficult to draw comparisons.

The table below illustrates some comparison in figures based on the cases of male and female perpetrators who received a custodial sentence and where the length of sentence was clearly indicated. The data were drawn from probation reports rather than the questionnaires from prison establishments.

TABLE 13

*Length of Prison Sentences Received by Male and Female Perpetrators*

	Length of prison sentence (in months)							
	less than 12	13-21	22-36	37-48	49-60	61-75	76-90	91+
Male (n=6)	-	2	3	-	1	-	-	-
Female (n=16)	3	4	4	2	1	-	1	1

A particularly interesting feature of the findings from probation is highlighted when the data are placed in a table. The dispersal of data illustrates that the range of sentence length is far greater for female perpetrators than for male: the former being from six months to eight years whereas the latter remains more central, ranging from 15 months to four and a half years. This finding indicates support for the chivalry versus doubly deviance theory *on both sides* given that it would appear that of women who receive a prison sentence, some are more likely to get far lighter sentences than men. However, others are more likely to get much harsher ones compared to their male counterparts who receive more stable, central sentences. In interactionist terms, this illustrates the ambiguity involved in the interpretation of symbols used which influence the punishment meted out to those defined as criminal. Since people will act towards something depending on the meaning it has for them, it should not be surprising that discrepancies in sentence lengths exist for women who sexually abuse children. That is, one individual may respond with horror, perceiving the woman to be more deviant than her male counterpart, and enforcing a longer sentence. Another may interact with certain symbols (e.g. the penis) and perceive her actions as less harmful than those of a man, imposing a more lenient sentence.

### **Locating female perpetrators**

Carrying out any research which involves studying a target population should ideally include some work specifically with that group of people. Consequently, this research endeavoured to hold in-depth interviews with undetected female perpetrators. It was originally deemed appropriate to target undetected

perpetrators as these women are likely to offer invaluable insights into their experiences of abusing through the sheer fact that they had escaped detection because they had not been reported or otherwise had any contact with criminal justice in relation to their offence. It was thought – partly as a result of other researchers' dilemmas about similar participant groups,<sup>5</sup> – that female perpetrators already in the criminal justice system were likely to demonstrate a skewed representation of perpetrators because it was probable that they would represent those who had committed particularly heinous acts of abuse or whose abusiveness also encompassed physical and emotional abuse.

However, what resulted from this attempt to target undetected female perpetrators was, unsurprisingly, very little. I say 'unsurprisingly' because attempting to access any unknown perpetrators of a sexual crime will prove very difficult. If these perpetrators are women and if we consider the various more taboo aspects of females committing such an offence, then this gives even more reason to expect little forthcoming information. That said, this study did receive one telephone call from a woman, responding to the advert, who left a message stating that she might be able to assist in the research. She would not leave a phone number and did not subsequently call back. What this might indicate is that despite numerous difficulties that will accompany an endeavour to locate such offenders, there remains a potential for accessing these individuals through this glimpse of hesitant willingness from this woman.

Much more importantly, however, than the difficulty in accessing undetected female perpetrators *per se*, is the difficulty in the detection 'process' in light of understanding more about how individuals attach meaning to situations and that any given perspective cannot necessarily be easily shared. It is this entrenched ambiguity that contributes to the particularly unrepresentative group of women identified as criminal.

This chapter has attempted to highlight some of the pertinent issues evolving from the theoretical questioning and empirical research on gender and child sexual abuse. What has been made clear throughout this chapter are the difficulties around locating female perpetrators. Not only have we seen that women who sexually abuse are disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system, but those women whose cases we have examined in this research are fundamentally different from those disclosed by the survivors in this study. It

would therefore seem accurate to suppose that those female perpetrators who can readily be located are only able to offer us a piece of this puzzle. We need to endeavour further to explore the side of female-perpetrated sexual abuse in relation to the experiences of perpetrators which is not represented by this research data.

While it is significant that half of the probation services that responded to the research have come into contact with female perpetrators, given that this type of abuse has for so long been written off as non-existent or, at best, rare, there appears to be a distinct absence of any criminal work in this field. This may reflect the distorted reality of female sexual abuse due to the particular cases that reach criminal justice.

Recognising women as sexual abusers within the context of criminal justice, however, is not the absolute answer. There are far-reaching implications around locating female perpetrators to better our understanding, provide treatment and educate others. The criminal justice system is one arena which has failed to challenge female-perpetrated sexual abuse and hence represents one way of addressing it.

One issue that arises from this research and which has direct consequences for probation concerns the way in which women, convicted of a sexual offence against a child, are dealt with once convicted. Of course this is to assume that women are convicted of a sexual offence and not something else, such as in the case described previously where a woman perpetrated sexual abuse against her daughters yet was eventually charged with cruelty – an offence devoid of sexual elements. Such cases may raise important considerations for the way in which probation officers work with these offenders bearing in mind female perpetrators may not have been charged with the sexual aspect of their crime.

Additionally there is a possibility that this disparity of treatment continues after sentencing as men may be more stringently supervised and their names more readily placed on a sex offender register compared with women.

There have for some time been concerns and questions about the 'dark figure of crime' and this research illustrates this point particularly in relation to female perpetration of sexual abuse. As long as we continue to fail to obtain official recognition (including classification and accurate recordings following court cases, and the appropriate monitoring of cases referred to community

organisations such as the probation service) it will remain a dark figure, and we will be no closer to discovering the reality and actuality of such perpetrators.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the criminal aspect of female-perpetrated sexual abuse – not from the perpetrators themselves but by considering the ‘law makers and enforcers’ whom may encounter such abuse. Becker (1963) points out that most scientific research concentrates its efforts on those considered to be deviant (i.e. those who break the rules of a social group) rather than those who make the rules and, as such, suggests that we fail to achieve a full understanding of deviant behaviour. The criminal justice system is a social world in itself, consisting of human beings engaging in social interaction in which meanings are derived for particular acts. These meanings are dynamic rather than static, changing through the interpretative processes of the professionals involved. Drawing on Plummer’s (1975: 11) “three foci of interaction”, I can utilise his concept of the importance of process in an individual’s construction of social reality alongside Becker’s (1963: 163) assertion that:

“we must see deviance...as a consequence of a process of interaction between people, some of whom in the service of their own interests make and enforce rules which catch others who, in the service of their own interests, have committed acts which are labelled as deviant”.

Or indeed labelled as not deviant. This helps to provide a greater understanding of the way in which the social world, and social reality, is constructed, and the role of subjectivity in how events are interpreted. More specifically, this refers to the problematic nature of defining sexual abuse by women as criminal and the impact of this on other issues contained within the criminal justice system (e.g. sentencing and treatment).

In this chapter, attention has been given to the process involved in defining and interpreting female-perpetrated sexual abuse, drawing on the earlier identified difficulty of perceiving such abuse as harmful. From this, four themes have been highlighted and explored as part of the research analysis. These themes, which were set out at the beginning of the chapter, derive from the four clusters of research findings discussed in this chapter. Firstly, the research found

disproportionately low prevalence rates of female perpetrators within criminal justice. The discrepancy was thought about and understood through applying the framework of symbolic interactionism: by not defining female-perpetrated sexual abuse as criminal and not attributing female perpetrators with the identity of sex offender may result in the tangible consequence of the criminal justice system being devoid of such cases.

Secondly, a very different type of female perpetrator emerged from the probation data compared with the data drawn from survivors in Chapter Five. According to the probation data, women are more likely to be co-perpetrators, more likely to abuse an older child and more likely to perpetrate extra-familial abuse. These characteristics are symbols in our ongoing interactions and can be identified within the process by which certain female perpetrators are defined as criminal and given the identity of sex offender. Symbolic interactionism was used to make sense of the discrepancy between the stories being told by survivors in this research and those by criminal justice professionals.

Thirdly, the research findings demonstrated that female perpetrators are far more likely to receive a probation order while men tended to get a custodial sentence. Those women who did receive a prison term, the span of sentence length ranged much more widely than for men. In examining this discrepancy, the chapter drew on interactionism in considering the impact of certain symbols on influencing the punishment meted out. Depending on the meaning that the act has for someone based on their interaction with various symbols (e.g. the perpetrator's relationship to the child), this will affect how they respond to the act. On this basis, symbolic interactionism provided one way of understanding this research finding.

Finally, this research highlighted the difficulty in locating female perpetrators. Since so few cases are defined as criminal and only a particular type of female perpetrator is given the identity of sex offender by others, there is a very unrepresentative group available to be studied. The result of this is that much remains unknown about female-perpetrated sexual abuse. However, the problem of locating female perpetrators permeates far beyond gaining a greater understanding of these women exclusively. It has ramifications for how we account for human behaviour generally; how individuals make sense of encounters through symbols and their interactions with others. The approach of

symbolic interactionism revolves around the innate ambiguity created by the subjective meanings attached to situations by individuals. This chapter has used symbolic interactionism to explore one aspect of human encounters: the juxtaposition of female perpetrators and the criminal justice system.

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<sup>1</sup> There is in fact a great deal of ambiguity involved in defining criminal acts as the recent controversial Saatchi gallery photograph row illustrated (Toynbee, 2001; Travis, 2001; Travis and Hopkins, 2001). The row was sparked following a raid by the Metropolitan police on the Saatchi gallery where photographs of partly nude children were on display. The controversy revolved around the 1978 Protection of Children Act which makes it a criminal offence to take or show indecent pictures of children. The difficulty arises from the fact that "the act does not define the term 'indecent' - a term which juries have notorious difficulty in defining" (Travis and Hopkins, 2001: 9). The ambiguity of defining 'indecent' stems from the concept of perceived sexual meanings we may or may not attach to, in this case, the photographs. Interestingly a week after the Saatchi raid, the MP's annual photo exhibition opened in the House of Commons. The exhibition featured photographs such as Lord Healey's *Boy In Peking* which depicts a little boy eating an ice cream with his penis hanging out of his trousers and Labour MP Jon Owen Jones' photo of a naked girl on a plastic tricycle (Travis, 2001: 1). Such controversy raises questions in my mind about the interpretative processes involved in attaching meaning to an art vs. pornography debate.

<sup>2</sup> Researchers have pointed to examples of this different treatment, for example Allen (1990: 117) cites one such judge who threw out a case of child sexual abuse despite there being overwhelming evidence of the abuse occurring; the judge's reasoning being that: "women don't do those kinds of things . . . Besides the children need their mother".

<sup>3</sup> Mathews, Matthews and Speltz (1989) devised three categories of female sex abusers based on the findings of their research: teacher/lover; predisposed; and male-coerced. The typology is indicative of various attributes involved in the offences that the women committed: the women's perceptions of their victims; the involvement of any co-offenders; and the psychological similarities and differences of the women. Saradjian (1996) allocated the women in her study to specific groups depending on the mode of perpetrated abuse, and initially based on Mathews, Matthews and Speltz's model. However, Saradjian found that the groups could not encompass all the women so they had to be discussed in separate groups. The five groups Saradjian pinpointed were: women who initially target very young children; women who initially target adolescents; women who were initially coerced into offending by men; perpetrators of ritual abuse of children; and 'atypical' perpetrators. The last group consisted of women who were co-perpetrators, psychotic offenders, women who sexually abused in a dissociated state, women who blurred sexual boundaries and a woman who had coerced a man into abusing.

<sup>4</sup> We should be mindful that defining someone as a sex offender does not mean that they will adopt the identity of the sex offender themselves. In the tradition of interactionism, we would need to explore the process by which individuals take on or reject that identity, and what symbols they used in their journey of self-definition.

<sup>5</sup> Research that comes to mind is that carried out by Diana Scully (1990) who interviewed convicted rapists in prison. She states that "an ideal research design would include interviews with a proportion of men from the potentially large group of undetected rapists who may not fit the rapist-in-prison profile". This conclusion was reached by Scully's recognition that incarcerated rapists are not representative of sexually violent men with "rapists in prison...more likely to have raped strangers, used weapons, physically injured their victims, and committed other crimes in addition to the rape. They are also likely to be poorly educated, lacking economic resources, and members of racial minorities" (Scully, 1990: 7).

## CHAPTER VIII

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

#### **Introduction**

Much theoretical and empirical work has been carried out in the ever-expanding field of child sexual abuse, and a lot of this was examined to formulate the foundation to this project in the early part of the thesis. Interest in child sexual abuse has remained relatively high over the last 30 years, and the field has posed numerous issues and problems to practitioners, researchers and policy makers as well as the very real issues experienced by those affected by sexual abuse. This thesis has provided new ways of thinking about gender and child sexual abuse through the empirical research carried out. I intend now to draw this work together and to address questions such as:

- What do these findings mean to this field?
- What can be drawn from this study?
- What implications arise from this particular work?

I will begin this final chapter by reviewing some of the more salient findings of the research before demonstrating the extent to which the thesis represents a significant contribution to our understanding of the significance of gender in child sexual abuse. This will be accomplished by outlining some of the future developments to the field with particular reference to further research, the development of theory and thoughts for policy and practice.

## **Reviewing the Research Findings**

In this section I will briefly review the main research findings and the overall arguments drawn from the findings. I intend to take each key area in which research was carried out in turn and in the order in which they appear in the text; namely, survivors' accounts, responses from professionals in the 'therapy industry' and responses from criminal justice professionals.

Accounts from survivors illustrated the significance that gender has on numerous aspects of child sexual abuse. The quantitative data focused on the differences that gender might yield in experiences of abuse. These differences were most notable in the frequency and duration of abuse, the survivor-perpetrator relationship, the reporting of abuse to authorities and the reasons for not disclosing the abuse. The research demonstrated that girls were more likely to be abused over a significantly longer period of time than boys, and girls were also more likely to be abused on a more frequent basis than boys. Girls were far more likely to be abused by immediate family members while boys tended to be victimised by acquaintances, which suggests that a determining factor in the relationship between perpetrator and survivor is likely to be based on survivor gender rather than perpetrator gender. All of the cases involving an abusive father showed there to be a non-abusive mother present in the household while only half the cases involving an abusive mother showed there to be a non-abusive father which raises questions about the potential and reality for disclosure.

The incidence of reporting the abuse at the time of it occurring was very low, though with three times as many girls than boys reporting the abuse to someone. Of those who reported the abuse to authorities, most had been abused by a man. Of those who did report the abuse, the only cases to proceed to court were those involving a female survivor and male perpetrator. Of the reasons given for non-disclosure, the most notable was 'not knowing it was wrong'. This reason was cited only by survivors abused by women.

Many of these differences were analysed using the guidance of the ideas contained within the framework of symbolic interactionism, and link to the main themes drawn out in Chapter Five. For example, the way in which an individual defines their abuse experience was one such theme. The research findings demonstrate that survivors of child sexual abuse define their experience through

what it means to them rather than how the law may necessarily define it. Of those survivors who struggled with defining their experience as 'abuse', 80% (n=4) had been targeted by a woman, suggesting that gender is significant in how an individual defines their abuse experience. Applying the framework of symbolic interactionism provided an understanding of how and why defining an experience as abuse is steeped in subjectivity. As Chapter Five demonstrated, the process of self-definition is linked to the way in which an individual takes on the identity of an abuse survivor.

Various symbols and social interactions were identified (such as the types of abusive acts, the response to disclosure and the use of drugs or promiscuous sex) which contributed to the individual's adopting or resisting the identity of abuse survivor. The research further illustrated the constant and changing nature of this process of becoming an abuse survivor by identifying other symbolic and social interactions. A key interaction identified was the role of the research interview itself. That, in interactionist terms, the interview was not conducted in isolation or outside of the interpretative process that an individual undergoes in attaching meaning to their experience.

The data surrounding the effects of child sexual abuse on survivors indicated little difference in terms of gender. This finding is strongly linked to the debate in Chapter Five on harmfulness. The debate, which centres around the symbol of the penis as the main factor in defining an act as harmful, illustrates the ambiguity involved in defining harmfulness when the symbol of the penis is not present – or indeed is present but not belonging to the perpetrator. This debate, coupled with noted effects of sexual abuse on survivors, challenges the assumption that female-perpetrated sexual abuse is harmless or less serious than that perpetrated by a man. It also provides a basis for understanding many other aspects of this research, including the struggle in self-defining an abuse experience, the avoidance of adopting the identity of abuse survivor and the reluctance to disclose their experience.

The responses of professionals in the 'therapy industry' (i.e. individuals and organisations who provide some form of advice, support, counselling or therapy for survivors of sexual abuse) to child sexual abuse was studied by focusing on both the professionals themselves and the experiences of survivors within the

industry. These data were considered concurrently to aid understanding of the significance of gender in professionals' responses.

The stance that an individual organisation adopts was understood by identifying the symbolic and social interactions that take place (e.g. an individual's personal experience of abuse and interaction with colleagues). This stance, or perspective, is likely to influence other areas of the organisation. One of the key areas was that of project-produced literature where 25% was deemed to be 'poor' and just 5% deemed 'excellent' in terms of language and gender. This finding links to the experiences of survivors in that the literature will represent a symbol with which they interact. The perspective of an organisation and the literature produced is central to how an individual subsequently defines their experience of abuse and their adopting the identity of abuse survivor.

The research demonstrates the importance of the role of professionals in the 'therapy industry'. Virtually all the survivors in this research had sought out some form of professional support which suggests that this is an important part of the healing process. Of those who did not seek out help, two-thirds (n=2) still had difficulties in terming their experiences as abuse and thus addressing it. For those who did seek help, the response of a professional formed part of an individual's process of self-definition and identity formation.

The last set of research findings comprise of the responses of criminal justice professionals and the significance that gender has on these responses. Data showed a disproportionately low prevalence rate of female perpetrators in the criminal justice system. This finding was understood through the process of definition (what constitutes sexual abuse) and avoiding giving women the identity of sex offender. The part of the work considered the symbols with which criminal justice professionals interacted and the process by which such symbols impacted upon their defining a situation and their formation of identity.

This study showed significant discrepancies in the type of female perpetrator that emerged from the probation data and that from survivors' accounts in Chapter Five. The former showed that women abusers are more likely to be co-perpetrators, to abuse older children and to be extra-familial abusers. This is indicative of a process by which particular women are defined as criminal and attributed the identity of sex offender.

The research findings demonstrated that female perpetrators are far more likely to receive a probation order while men tended to get a custodial sentence. Of those women who did receive a prison term, the span of sentence length ranged much more widely than for men; the prison sentences for women ranged from six months to eight years while for men the range was 15 months to four and a half years. Again, the role of symbols was considered important in examining this discrepancy in terms of their influencing the punishment meted out. Depending on the meaning that the abuse act has for someone based on their interaction with various symbols (e.g. the perpetrator's relationship to the child), this will affect how they respond to the act. The debate on harmfulness is relevant to this research finding since the extent to which an act is deemed harmful will form part of the interpretative process of defining abuse and giving someone the identity of sex offender. In turn, this is likely to influence the criminal justice response (i.e. the type and length of sentence).

Finally, this part of the research highlighted the difficulty in locating female perpetrators. Since so few cases are defined as criminal and only a particular type of female perpetrator is given the identity of sex offender by others, there is a very unrepresentative group available to be studied. As such, much remains unknown about female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

### **Implications for Research**

The fact that this was exploratory research suggests that there are numerous avenues for pursuing future research questions and, while the field of child sexual abuse still requires a great degree of information, it would be impossible to consider all relevant directions in this section. Therefore, I shall focus on the findings from this research which, I believe, have clear implications for further research.

One of the considerations of the study outlined in Chapter Four was around the survivors' ages at the time of interview. Given the nature of the research and the ethical implications, the study used adult survivors' experiences of abuse which led to the potential for various methodological problems. One such problem concerned the validity of this research in terms of current trends of gender and child sexual abuse. The data collected in this study are based on experiences which

occurred years prior to the research taking place, therefore such findings are likely to be indicative of a different sexual climate than that of today. To counter-act this difficulty, further research would need to take place within the context of the current sexual climate.

Since it is likely that the area of contention will be about reporting dynamics rather than the nature of the abuse, further research should focus on this. One suggestion is to interview adolescents who have been sexually victimised within, say, five years prior to the interview, though with a time lapse of the cessation of the abuse being two years. Such strict time limits would reduce the possibility of compromising sexual climates as an extraneous variable but would also eliminate respondents who are still being abused at the time of the interview. This would allow survivors some, albeit limited, recovery time.

The research itself could focus on many of the same aspects as this study, particularly in terms of exploring whether survivors told anyone, who they told, why they were or were not able to report the abuse and the reaction they received from others because these are the aspects most liable to fluctuate dependent on the attitudes and beliefs of any given sexual climate. It would be interesting to examine the reporting process of child sexual abuse in the context of the different symbols with which a child interacts. As has been previously outlined, the predominant reasons for non-disclosure in this study were fear, potential for blame and the feelings of shame, embarrassment and an unawareness that the abuse was 'wrong' (the latter demonstrated primarily by survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse). Again, it would be an interesting piece of work to establish the extent of these reasons, and the symbols from which these reasons are derived, within the context of a different sexual climate.

The dynamics of reporting child sexual abuse has long been studied to understand how such reporting might be facilitated. Finkelhor (1979) suggested that we consider reporting as a process rather than simply an outcome by considering the various points when the abuse might be disclosed by the survivor and the factors that influence whether or not the disclosure occurs. Continuing with this theme but within the context of gender, the reporting process could be studied in-depth, thus establishing the dynamics which occur at the various points and then comparing the processes of the four gender interactions. While this

concept formed a small part of this research study, it would be valuable to build upon the ideas further.

It is consistently demonstrated throughout literature on offences such as child sexual abuse and rape that reported and unreported cases are qualitatively different, and this study is no exception. My findings showed that female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases through probation were consistently different to those reported by survivors particularly in terms of co-perpetration and the perpetrator-survivor relationship. While these are concrete findings from this research, I would suggest further research is necessary to support such findings. If further research does substantiate the findings, it will provide more definitive implications for our theoretical knowledge of sexual abuse by women.

This study has consistently demonstrated the sparse information and knowledge that we currently have on female-perpetrated sexual abuse, and the relatively low incidence of related research. Much of what is written on this comes from the attempt to explain the phenomenon through theoretical perspectives or through an examination of reasons for the under-reported nature of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Such approaches fail to examine the roots of sexual abuse by women and as such do not consider the issue in its entirety.

To combat this problematic approach to studying female-perpetrated sexual abuse and to gain specific insight and understanding into the dynamics inherent in such abuse, further research needs to focus on an examination of the sexually abusive tendencies of female perpetrators. I would argue that this needs to be carried out in stages given that there would exist similar obstacles to those encountered by this research project, namely being currently unaware of the targeted population for the study. A first stage would consist of more exploratory work, interviewing a small number of female perpetrators in depth to establish the target group and refining the research questions to extract the most relevant information. This stage is necessary (and could feasibly be regarded as the pilot study) because this research would be very new and therefore not clearly defined.

This work could also be considered in its own right, rather than a first step to a bigger research project. That is, there is scope for applying the concept of life stories (Plummer, 1995; 2001) to this research group. Interpretive, unstructured interviews could be carried out with female perpetrators with the focus on the

individual processes involved in self-definition and identity formation. This in itself is likely to produce valuable insights into female perpetration.

Returning now to more positivist concepts for future research, the second stage of the bigger research study would consist of a large-scale project with female perpetrators to quantify data collected on sexually abusive tendencies; the aim being to suggest practical and policy implications from such research. These may include being able to identify women who are at higher risk of abusing as well as potentially vulnerable children.

The difficulties of such research have arisen for various writers in the field of offending (see for example Scully, 1990). The difficulty concerns whether the offending target population are convicted or undetected sex abusers. The former group are likely to be qualitatively different simply because they have been reported, prosecuted and convicted. This may mean that their abuse was more 'severe', for example being accompanied by physical violence. It may mean that these women targeted children from outside of their family which may be more likely to increase disclosure from survivors, or it may be the case that these women were more likely to have perpetrated the sexual abuse with a companion, thus again increasing the likelihood of disclosure. Therefore if the focus is on a target group of convicted female perpetrators, the data will be biased and misleading. Nevertheless, a target group of convicted perpetrators is by far the easier and more ethically acceptable group of sex abusers to research. This research study failed to reveal any undetected perpetrators which is indicative of the difficulty in accessing and researching them.

To adequately research the sexually abusive tendencies of female perpetrators, one would require information from convicted, undetected and preferably acquitted female perpetrators to represent the different characteristics of perpetrator groups. In any case, the need for research on undetected perpetrators remains high given that to date there has been no such research carried out. This is the case not only with female perpetrators but with male perpetrators due to the ethical and methodological complexities involved in this type of research.

Researching undetected perpetrators will undoubtedly be problematic, and will cause much ethical debate for the researcher(s) in terms of legal and moral obligations, not to mention the potential for false information to be provided by

such perpetrators through fear of detection. These factors would be highly relevant in any such research and would need to be dealt with and defined before proceeding with the work. One possible alternative to identifying wholly undetected perpetrators may be to focus on those who have not entered the criminal justice system yet are known to other professionals. It may be possible to access male and female perpetrators who have sought professional voluntary treatment such as therapy to help with comparative work started in this research study. A concept discussed in Chapter Seven about female perpetrators and social services suggests that these women may fall within the parameters of child protection and social services but that such cases get dropped before reaching the criminal justice arena. It would be interesting to use social services as a focus for further research in much the same way as probation was used in this study.

Finally, there is a need for more work on the professional organisations that work with survivors of child sexual abuse. The part of this research that focused on this area gave few conclusive results about the nature of the services offered and the effectiveness of such intervention with the exception of the literature findings and their implications. In-depth evaluations of individual projects are needed and should be linked with the identified needs of survivors in terms of the four gender interactions. By the same token, treatment for female perpetrators needs to be considered given that as yet there is very little in the way of group programmes designed for female perpetrators. I would suggest that it is highly likely to be inappropriate to treat women in a mixed group because given the current numbers of female perpetrators in the criminal justice system, it is probable that there would be individual women in groups of men. Furthermore, it is likely to be inappropriate and ineffective for female sex abuser programmes to adopt a generic model of offending given that such a model will be based on male sex offending. I suggest that different issues might exist for female perpetrators (compared with males) and that without adequate research on the former to identify such issues (including sexually abusive tendencies and sexual development), attempting to treat these women is likely to be ineffective and fraught with difficulty.

### **Implications for Theoretical Advancement**

Various theories have been posed over the years as an attempt to explain and explore the issues, dynamics and consequences inherent in child sexual abuse. Such theories were outlined and discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, and what became apparent was the glaring omission in respect of female perpetrators. In this section, I will focus on how the present research may enable us to move towards establishing a theoretical perspective on child sexual abuse that will encompass abuse by women, and hence be more accurate.

One of the functions of Chapter One was to present current theories of child sexual abuse to show that, while such theories may adequately explain male-perpetrated sexual abuse, they are not fully satisfactory when considering women as perpetrators, so that these approaches are rather limited with regard to the wider spectrum of child sexual abuse. I will take each of the theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter One, and consider the extent to which they are limited and the ways in which they may be adapted to address the gender issue.

The biological approach, which encompasses both the biological evolutionary argument and the hormonal argument, is solely male-orientated and by its very nature cannot include women as perpetrators as the crux of the approach explains why men are sexual victimisers and women are not as a result of their biology.

Individual psychopathy is a psychological perspective which focuses upon an individual's characteristics and often involves placing them in a series of classifications. In child sexual abuse, psychologists have tended to categorise sex abusers as either 'fixated' or 'regressed' offenders (Groth, 1979) or by focusing on incestuous offenders versus extra-familial offenders. The difficulty with these classifications in relation to this thesis is that they are based only on work conducted with male sex abusers and therefore do not encompass female perpetrators nor take into account issues that are potentially very different for female perpetrators. Researchers who have attempted to combat this difficulty by formulating classifications based only on female perpetrators (such as McCarty, 1986; Mathews, Matthews and Speltz, 1988; Saradjian, 1996) demonstrate that work has not yet been done to focus on child sexual abuse as a whole, offering a generic classification system which encompasses male and female perpetrators. It

may be that such a classification system is not possible due to contrasting issues inherent in gender differences. Or it may be that no researcher has yet amalgamated work on male and female perpetrators and until such work is carried out, we are unlikely to be able to have such a system. This research did not focus specifically on work with perpetrators so I would hesitate to suggest that a generic classification system would even be useful. However it may be that after further research in this area, such typologies could be proposed and extended which would contribute greatly to our overall understanding of the motivations and sexually abusive tendencies that develop in child sex abusers irrespective of gender.

The other psychological perspective discussed in Chapter One was the 'cycle of abuse' theory which generated varying criticisms concerning the potential risks, its implications for treatment and the supposed gender contradiction inherent in the theory. Despite these fundamental criticisms, there may be some relevance in adapting the 'cycle of abuse' concept to incorporate all gender interactions and further explain child sexual abuse as a result of this research. We know that there were no survivors from this study who went on to become perpetrators themselves so it is difficult to draw any conclusions around this *per se*. However we could theorise that survivors who do not define their experience as 'abusive' or who normalise the events may be more likely to go on to abuse others as they do not necessarily perceive themselves as being negatively affected by it. This links into a central thread of this thesis in terms of the symbolic interactionist approach and its relationship to the field of gender and child sexual abuse. It is arguable that survivors interpret their individual situations and experiences through their own definitions and for their own motivations, and thus attach a particular meaning to the experience that feels appropriate to them.

Our lack of understanding and knowledge about women who sexually abuse may make this theoretical framework particularly relevant because survivors of female perpetrators may interpret their abuse and attach meaning to it in a very different way to those victimised by male perpetrators as the latter may have fewer obstacles to overcome and more grounding for their plight within society. In other words, that survivors of male-perpetrated sexual abuse are less likely to suffer the additional effects that appear to accompany female-perpetrated sexual abuse due to society's attitudes and perceptions about this particular offence. Such a framework

may contribute towards an understanding of the research data suggesting that survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse appear to find it significantly more difficult to term their experience as 'abuse' compared with other gender interactions. In terms of the 'cycle of abuse' theory, we may therefore be able to theorise that such survivors are at a higher risk of becoming perpetrators for reasons previously laid out. This possibility, coupled with male socialisation, may suggest that males abused by women are more likely to perpetuate this 'cycle of abuse'; a theory which may go some way towards explaining the significant proportion of sex offenders and serial rapists who have been sexually abused as children by women (see Groth, 1979 and Burgess et al, 1987, both cited in Jennings, 1993).

The family dysfunction approach had various criticisms, as outlined in Chapter One, though none were based solely on gender interactions and how to take account of these. The family dysfunction approach focuses primarily on explaining the dynamics and issues inherent in incest cases, usually between father and daughter, and the individual strands within the theory reflect this school of thought. It would be difficult to take and adapt this approach to explain the occurrence of sexual abuse within any of the 'non-traditional' gender interactions given its strong emphasis on the nuclear family and the collusive mother.

An interesting difference that arose from this research with regard to applying this approach to female-perpetrated sexual abuse was that all cases involving an abusive father had a non-abusive mother while only half of the cases involving an abusive mother had a non-abusive father. This finding suggests that the family dysfunction approach cannot be neatly adopted to explain abuse by women as in a significant proportion of cases it would seem that the nuclear family, on which the approach was originally based, does not exist and that often the family unit in such abuse cases may be no more than the mother (or mother figure) and child.

As I outlined in Chapter One, the feminist approach represented a certain breakthrough regarding theorising about child sexual abuse, with the focus being on male power and dominance in a society which instigates and maintains gender inequality and patriarchy. Feminist analysis suggests that this inequality is reinforced through male sex-role socialisation where perceptions of and attitudes

towards women are negatively encouraged through various societal avenues, ranging from advertising norms to pornography to male myths. The question, therefore, is can the feminist approach be used to explain child sexual abuse in a generic sense – that is, can it explain the sexual abuse of children by women?

In child abuse, an imbalance of power exists irrespective of the adult's gender because of the physical, emotional and mental differences between adults and children. Thus, components of the feminist approach can be directly attributed to the occurrence of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. These components consist of the assertion of power and control of an adult over a child in a relationship that remains unequal with the adult maintaining dominance over the child. In the same way that this power inequality is integral to the violence and abuse of **women by men**, so is it necessary for an **adult** sexually abusing a **child**. There are likely to be various reasons and motivations behind individual cases of child sexual abuse, some unique to the specific gender interaction while others will be the same whether the perpetrator is male or female. The constant factor must be that the abusive adult is able to obtain and maintain their power over the child. While it may be accurately argued that our society implicitly colludes and encourages male dominance over females, it would seem that a different and perhaps more subtle colluding occurs with female-perpetrated sexual abuse of children since it is ignored, overlooked, even vilified to the point of it being deemed non-existent. I would suggest that this research represents a starting point in exploring how the feminist analysis of sexual violence can indeed incorporate female perpetrators by adopting salient features of the approach and making sense of them from a new stance.

A final theoretical perspective discussed in Chapter One, was Finkelhor's (1984) Multi Factor Model which suggests four preconditions necessary for sexually abusing a child. Here, I will apply particular findings from my research to the model to demonstrate the extent of the theory's significance and use in explaining child sexual abuse and gender differences.

The first precondition concerns the perpetrator's motivation to sexually abuse a child. It is difficult to explore this to any great degree given that this research did not involve examining perpetrators' experiences of sexual abuse, and

as such did not explore motivations for the abuse. Nevertheless, survivors' experiences and accounts given by probation officers may contribute to this area. One case which came through probation involved a white female who targeted an Asian adolescent girl in a public lavatory. The woman robbed the girl of her money before forcibly stripping her and subjecting her to oral sex. Even if I had had the opportunity to interview the woman, we are unlikely to know the underlying motivations. However I could suppose that, according to Finkelhor's Multi Factor Model, the woman in this case was sexually aroused by the adolescent girl or that the woman was unable to locate an alternative source of sexual gratification and hence abused the girl. Neither of these explanations is particularly satisfactory given the circumstances of the abuse and the nature of the acts involved. Therefore I would suggest that emotional incongruence may be the source of motivation in this case. That is to say that the woman was not necessarily sexually aroused by the girl but she experienced some emotional need or desire to humiliate her. The probation officer in this case suggested that racism may have played a part in the offence, and that would further support the concept of degradation as motivation. Further research and theorising is needed with female perpetrators to establish their motivations. Nevertheless, it is clear that a motivation will exist in these cases so that the first precondition can be applied to female perpetrators as well as male. This should be true even if research indicates a very different set of motivations for women so that Finkelhor's first precondition requires adaptation to encompass both male and female perpetrators.

The second precondition involves overcoming internal inhibitions by the perpetrator which may be through drug or alcohol use, mental health problems or through the perpetrator's own internal justifications of the abuse. Female perpetrators may rationalise their abusive actions by refusing to perceive them as 'abuse' based on society's own reluctance to acknowledge female sexual abuse. The female perpetrator may vindicate herself by perceiving her actions as harmless because they do not include penile penetration. As a sexually abusive mother, she may rationalise that what she is doing is her job and is for the benefit of her child (e.g. in this research where the mother becomes overly involved in her daughter's bathing habits or checking her developmental process). Similarly, Welldon (1988) recounts cases of mother-son sexual abuse where the mother justifies her actions as

being beneficial to her son, for instance by her being a responsible adult and introducing him to the act of sexual intercourse or allowing him to release himself of sexual tension by engaging in intercourse with her.

Overcoming external inhibitions represents the third precondition of this model and refers to environmental factors that may be attributed to the occurrence of abuse. Finkelhor suggests factors such as the mother's absence or inability to protect the child, familial social isolation and a general lack of supervision of the child. As with the other preconditions, this one appears to be tailored to encompass male perpetrators. However there is no reason why female perpetrators cannot be readily included in this precondition. This research demonstrated the preponderance of abuse in single parent families where all cases involving an abusive father had a present non-abusive mother while only half of the cases involving an abusive mother had a present non-abusive father. This finding indicates that the victimised children in the latter cases had a reduced support system and that the abusive mothers were more able to overcome any external inhibitions in the form of a present non-abusive partner. There is also the additional factor in cases of female perpetrators in that women are more likely to be placed in trust roles with children and that children are more susceptible to being placed in an intimate situation with a woman as a result of society's perception of women. For instance women have opportunities to be alone with a child through activities such as baby-sitting, bathing and bedtimes.

The fourth precondition concerns the perpetrator overcoming a child's resistance to abuse. This precondition focuses on the child's role within the abusive situation and implies that perpetrator gender is irrelevant. Specifically this precondition is likely to be highly relevant in terms of female sexual abuse because of our societal denial of female perpetrators. Finkelhor (1984: 61) suggests that "children's ability to resist or avoid abuse may be undercut because they are young, are naive, or *lack information*" (author's italics). While he was primarily referring to information about male perpetrators, I suggest that this statement is highly pertinent to the issue of abuse by women and links in with much of the following section on practise implications of raising children's awareness of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Children are likely not to be conditioned into being wary

of women as potential perpetrators and therefore may be less likely to be resistant to such abuse.

Here I have applied some limited details drawn from this research to the Multi-factor Model to explore its relevance to female abusers. While it appears to encompass this group of perpetrators, further work is needed to focus more explicitly on fitting women into the pre-conditions laid out by Finkelhor – or indeed to identify other pre-conditions that may exist.

Symbolic interactionism is another theoretical stance that can be applied to child sexual abuse and has been a central strand throughout this thesis. Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical approach in its own right which I have applied to make sense of this research topic. It is not being used as an alternative theoretical approach to explain why sexual abuse occurs; rather its application within the scope of this work is to provide an appropriate perspective with which to explore the issues raised through drawing together the fields of gender and child sexual abuse. Utilising an approach which revolves around subjectivity, definition, social interaction and self-attached meanings has added significant insights to this area. Symbolic interactionism has highlighted the difficulties encountered by the continued use of societal perceptions of gender and legal definitions of sexual abuse. It has allowed us a more useful way of understanding the real world since 'reality' is not an objective phenomenon. True objectivity would state that Matthew was not sexually abused as he was over the legal age of consent. His exclusion would have greatly hampered the acquisition of knowledge and insight into gender, definition of abuse and the impact of experience.

Symbolic interactionism can also be intertwined with the psychoanalytic assumptions of childhood sexuality where subjective definition represents an integral part. Such assumptions suggest that children are sexual beings and this approach outlines a developmental process of sexuality and sexual awareness (see Glaser and Frosh, 1993). The question has thus been raised about the perceived reluctance or passivity of the child in a sexual abuse situation. I wrote in Chapter Five about the case of Frank, which could be seen as an illustration of psychoanalytic assumptions, particularly with regard to his active participation and sexual curiosity. To disregard the subjective definition would be to lose vital components of sexual interactions.

Some attention should also be given to considering the role of the child within the sexual abuse 'relationship'. Social interaction, by its very name, suggests some involvement of each participant. In child sexual abuse, the involvement of the child may range from actively reluctant to actively receptive, though this is likely to be the cause of debate between objective and subjective definition in itself. One role that the child can be deemed to have played is that of 'seductor' (Glaser and Frosh, 1993). For instance, this could be applied to children who do not get affection otherwise, and therefore sexually arouse an adult to receive 'affection'. Alternatively, this concept could be applied to the manipulative strategies utilised by children who have something (i.e. material) to gain. This begs the question of power and the assumption held that children lack any power in sexual abuse scenarios. Consider Nabokov's 'Lolita' who is presented as the all-powerful participant in her social interaction with Humbert Humbert. This perception of power emanates from her use of game-playing revolving around her 'abuse' of his desire for her.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it is a matter of interpretation as to who abused whom and, in this sense, is a metaphor of 'games people play' (see Berne, 1964).

Interactionism is a theory that may not only allow us to 'make sense' of the behaviour of perpetrators and the experiences of survivors, but it may also offer insights into how to change perpetrator behaviour. Charon (1998: 221) writes that:

"the point of the symbolic interactionists seems to be that human beings are not easily manipulated, altered, predictable. I realised that the perspective may aid *my understanding of human complexity* but not necessarily suggest how to successfully change or manipulate others." (original italics)

I disagree with Charon on this point and suggest that symbolic interactionism can help us to understand how we might successfully change others. If we understand the meanings that people attach to a given behaviour, it is possible that we could address their method of attaching meaning and help them to re-consider their interpretative process. Take, for instance, the denial and minimisation of the perpetration of sexual abuse where a woman is sexually abusing her child yet refuses to acknowledge the full extent of her actions by justifying them through an interpretative process of 'it was more like misplaced affection - not like the abuse I suffered from my uncle'.

We can see how the woman might be drawing on her knowledge, which is perhaps based on her own experience of abuse, of what sexual abuse constitutes and what she knows about sex abusers. A significant aspect to this is a theme drawn from Chapter Five, namely exploring the process by which one becomes an abuse survivor or not. It would be interesting to identify the various symbolic and social interactions that influenced this process, and how they might be drawn on in the process of change.

In this particular case, by addressing her attached meaning to her perpetration of abuse, challenging this meaning, exploring the process by which it came about, and re-educating her in terms of effects, empathy, societal perceptions and gender construction, she may be in a better position to accept responsibility for these actions and to subsequently change her behaviour.

Finally, I explored in Chapter Two the extent of work carried out to investigate gender differences, socialisation and sexuality. While this work remains thorough, and offers us much in the way of explaining the probable wider preponderance of male-perpetrated sexual abuse and reasons for society's non-acceptance of female perpetrators, this research has indicated that there is a need for further theoretical analysis of female sexuality. Such analysis may enable us to answer questions such as, 'is there a 'normal' pattern for sexual development in women?', 'what factors might interrupt or distort this process?', 'what might be the consequences of such interruption or distortion?', 'has female sexuality changed over time?', and 'is there a secret or more taboo aspect to female sexuality?'. In raising and considering theoretical questions such as these, we may increase our understanding of sexually abusive tendencies in women and the motivations that underpin female-perpetrated sexual abuse. In turn, this may lead to a theoretical perspective of child sexual abuse based on paradigms within female sexuality.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

In his chapter 'Writing About Social Research', Gilbert (1993) discusses the use of social research in influencing policy and explains how individual research findings contribute to the overall policy process. There is no reason why the findings from

this particular study may not also be used to influence policy and to have implications for the practitioner.<sup>2</sup>

A significant portion of this thesis has been devoted to exploring the concept of penetration and the perceived penetrator. Such a discussion should have some implications for the reform of sex offence legalities. If a woman forces, coerces or in some other way has unwanted sexual intercourse with a child, it should be deemed rape and should carry the same penalties as it would for a male perpetrator. This would need to be further addressed in cases where the abused was a girl and as such penile penetration could not take place. Currently this would be termed indecent assault, but should be brought into line with the penetrative acts of abuse to acknowledge the long-lasting and damaging effects of such abuse and to eliminate gender differentiation.

The implications for practice arising from this research are far-reaching and impact upon statutory bodies such as probation and social services, as well as other professional arenas including education, research and therapeutic interventions. The research element has been discussed in a previous section so this will not be repeated. Instead I will focus on some of the other areas in turn, considering how such areas might be affected by this work.

The impact on education could potentially occur at various different levels, over and beyond our set educational process, though I will focus here on the education of children. One of the recurring difficulties with child sexual abuse is its taboo nature which will undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on the rate of disclosure by survivors. This is more so with male survivors and survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse as this study has revealed. We also know from these research findings that there is a particular propensity for survivors of female perpetrators not to disclose through shame, embarrassment and the inability to perceive the abuse as 'wrong'. By maintaining childrens' awareness of sexual abuse by women at a low level, we are unlikely to see a change in disclosure rates. It is therefore imperative that an avenue is opened so that children can recognise and openly acknowledge the abuse they are suffering without the negative feelings associated with their perpetrator being a woman. Given that it is unlikely that we will eradicate the negative feelings experienced by survivors of sexual abuse

regardless of gender, we should at least aim to reduce the double impact on those abused by females solely because the perpetrator is female.

Among a variety of other topics including bullying, drug abuse and sex education, sexual abuse is now discussed in schools. This is a result of many years of research indicating that a greater awareness is necessary for children as a means of protecting them and encouraging them to be able to disclose safely. However, what this input currently appears to lack is any real recognition of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, which results in not only a limited arena for children to disclose, but a further isolation of these children and thus enhancing the detrimental effects on them. This lack of specific education about sexual abuse by women may also contribute towards lowering a child's avoidance of such abuse. This suggestion builds upon an argument posed by Russell (1984: 268) who stated:

“Also contributing is a lack of education about the danger of sexual abuse. Many children are educated to be alert to the danger of overly friendly strangers, but few are advised to be wary about adults they know. This incomplete education lowers their resistance, especially when they are not warned specifically that it is sexual abuse about which they need to be concerned.”

This is reflective of the end of Chapter One where I discussed the ‘journey’ taken with child sexual abuse, showing that at one time the dominant belief was that ‘child molesters’ were strangers. As Russell (1984) demonstrates, maintaining this belief can be dangerous to the child as it potentially lowers his/her resistance to such abuse. One could argue the same for female-perpetrated sexual abuse in that by not recognising or acknowledging this type of abuse, we are failing to raise children's awareness of its occurrence and thus we perpetuate a child's lowered resistance to this abuse.

Based on the findings of this research, it is apparent that survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse would have found it helpful if such abuse was discussed and recognised. This suggests that educating more widely would be a positive step towards raising awareness of this type of abuse. This suggestion has clear practice implications for education in schools, for Personal and Social Education (PSE) classes and for the possible inclusion of this information in the school curriculum. Another practical step may be to attempt to target children through literature, be it children's books aimed at younger children, young adult

fiction or through factual texts. Such books would have the objective of raising awareness of female perpetrators in general and would focus on increasing disclosure from survivors of such abuse.

Educating children on female-perpetrated sexual abuse is a clear necessity that has arisen as a result of this research. However, there is little value in raising awareness unless the professionals involved are also provided with the appropriate training themselves. Such professionals would include teachers, who will often represent the first port of call for children wishing to disclose their abuse. Consequently they would need to offer an appropriate and sensitive response as well as being able to provide adequate resources and ongoing help for the child. This calls for additional training for teachers as part of their existing ongoing training during inset days to raise their awareness of child sexual abuse and gender and demonstrate how to give suitable messages and responses to children about sexual abuse.

Another group of professionals deemed to need increased awareness of female-perpetrated sexual abuse are those therapists and counsellors who are likely to come into contact with children and/or adults who are survivors of such abuse. This research indicated that a substantial proportion of survivors had experienced negative responses when they sought help from professionals - though these negative experiences were not limited to those abused by women, but were often experienced by men. This suggests that not only do we need to consider the needs and issues specific to survivors of female perpetrators, but we need to continue to address the shortage of services for male survivors irrespective of the gender of their perpetrator.

By the same token, the literature produced by professional organisations needs to be addressed. One implication that arose from this research was based on the fact that very few professional leaflets and pamphlets aimed at abuse survivors were explicit in acknowledging women as perpetrators. It is likely that this omission will perpetuate the feelings of isolation and a non-recognition of female perpetrators by the general public, and I suggest that an inclusion of such abuse is necessary as an attempt to break this ongoing cycle and provide survivors with the support and information to assist them in their recovery process.

In addition to this, there are various other professional arenas that require a greater understanding and knowledge base from which to work, e.g. those who may potentially work with survivors and perpetrators of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, including police officers, social workers, probation officers and judges. It is clear from this, and other, research that there exists a low level of comprehension of the role of women as perpetrators and this impinges on those who are victimised. This suggests that, as was discussed previously in relation to teachers, there is a need for more extensive training for other professionals in an attempt to increase reporting rates, to produce effective responses to survivors and perpetrators, and to develop interagency work to address the less acknowledged side of child sexual abuse.

Finally, this research has indicated that there is much that can be done to work with both those who have been sexually victimised by women and those women who perpetrate such abuse. It is clear that there are no specific groups that cater for survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse despite such survivors indicating their desire for these groups. I suggest that further research in this area is a necessity to establish this need from survivors, and to carry out a more in-depth study to examine the specific issues inherent in female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Once such work has been conducted, it may be appropriate for organisations to seek funding to set up specific groups for survivors of sexual abuse by women.

While it is likely that offender programmes for female perpetrators would be a necessary part of their treatment process, this research did not explore the area. However this research did demonstrate the difficulties that may be present in attempting to pursue this option. These difficulties revolve primarily around the fact that there are so few women in the criminal justice system who have been convicted of a sexual offence. The Sex Offender Treatment Programmes currently run for men tend to be for those who voluntarily choose to take part and/or for men who are convicted of a sexual crime. This research showed that female perpetrators are likely not to be convicted of a sexual crime, hence they may not be eligible for a group programme. Given that we know that women sexually abuse children but are much less likely to be reported than their male counterparts, we first need to increase the reporting and conviction rate of these women before trying to establish treatment programmes for them. This is implicitly linked with the

earlier practice implications for raising awareness and providing specialist training for professionals in this field.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis forms the written experience of a journey examining the phenomenon of child sexual abuse. It has considered the theoretical framework in which child sexual abuse has been placed and explored, and in doing so, it has identified the disparities and gaps which currently exist within the given perspectives. The scope of the work not only involved the exploration of child sexual abuse, but also placed it in the arena of gender, thus investigating the relationship between the two. This involved a further examination of the construction of gender, outlining the virtually consistent failure to address the inclusion of women as perpetrators of sexual abuse. The written commentary of this research moved towards considering specifically how male and female survivors defined their experiences, the service provisions available to such survivors, and the criminal justice responses to male and female perpetrators of sexual abuse.

This thesis has been an excursion into what we know about child sexual abuse and an attempt to re-locate it from a new perspective. The study is a descriptive and qualitative account, and while it may lack the substance of a more quantitative approach, its qualitative nature gives an alternative through a rich perspective and outcomes in what we define as gender and its relationship to child sexual abuse.

Despite the flaws that have been presented and discussed, this work provides a further understanding of the subject. In theoretical terms, it challenges the established notions and shifts our attention to hidden and neglected aspects. In policy terms, it raises questions about the delivery of services and how best to deal with individuals (men or women) who are found to be the perpetrators of sexual abuse. Simultaneously, the work also raises serious questions about how we identify, assess and assist survivors of such abuse. Given that there are female perpetrators – as this thesis has claimed – yet that abuse is regarded as largely non-existent (and where such abuse is located, it is mainly ridiculed), it begs the question of how we find individuals who have been subjected to this sort of abuse and how we encourage them to come into public view. This explicitly suggests that

there is much consideration to be had in relation to perceptions, values, expectations, formal rules (i.e. law) and other policy matters.

If my thesis contains a grain of truth (i.e. if one can believe the subjects) then it is not just men who are capable of perpetrating child sexual abuse. Women have and are continuing to abuse in this way. In those terms, I believe that my thesis raises serious theoretical concerns about the limitations of existing literature and, in my view, suggests that much of what has been written may have to be re-evaluated in the face of new findings.

During the course of carrying out this research, the scope of the work constantly changed and altered. The problematic nature and the unknown aspects of the research together resulted in both limitation and augmentation in scope. Trying to investigate the complexities in gender and child sexual abuse proved to be a constant struggle to excavate information and findings due to the shrouded secrecy of female sexuality. This secrecy and taboo nature resulted in extremely practical social and physical barriers.

Yet despite the barriers encountered by this research, I have maintained determination and zest for finding out what lies behind the relationship between gender and child sexual abuse. That is not to say that I have managed to eradicate these barriers as that would be impossible; rather I have managed to scratch the surface and to provide an analysis of the social encounters observed in this work. I believe that these social encounters and accompanying material have provided information which is new, useful and relevant to our quest for knowledge about the significance of gender in child sexual abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov (1955) wrote *Lolita* from the perspective of Humbert Humbert, and it is therefore difficult to ignore the subjective slant placed on their relationship and on her role in particular.

<sup>2</sup> For example, this research may have implications for our current sex offending laws which demonstrate clear inequalities with respect to gender differences. In an article carried by *The Guardian* (Wintour, 2000: 1), various reforms for our current laws were outlined in an attempt to end certain aspects of sexual discrimination, discrimination against gays, and to address the low conviction rate of rapists. Some of the anomalies in relation to the sex offence laws, identified in the article, were highly relevant to this research study as they focused on those anomalies arising as a result of gender difference in offenders. For instance, suggested reforms need to address the fact that men and women receive different sentences for consensual sexual intercourse with under-age children and the fact that indecent exposure is an offence for men though not for women.

## **Appendices and Bibliography**

**Appendix One:**

**Questionnaire For Sexual Abuse Organisations**

**Name of Organisation:**

- 1) Do you work with female survivors?**
  
- 2) Do you work with male survivors?**
  
- 3) Do you work with children?**
  
- 4) Do you work with female perpetrators?**
  
- 5) Do you work with male perpetrators?**
  
- 6) Does your work solely involve child sexual abuse?**
  
- 7) If no, what other areas do you aim your work at?**  
(For example: rape crisis, general counselling.)
  
- 8) How long has the project been operating for?**
  
- 9) What services are offered?**
  
- 10) How are you funded?**

**Comments:**

**Appendix Two:**

**Structured Interview with Sexual Abuse Organisations**

**1) Name of organisation**

**2) Location of organisation**

**3) How long has the project been in operation?**

**4) What is the size of the organisation?**

*e.g. number of paid workers  
number of volunteers  
sole agency or part of a 'chain'*

**5) What are the hours of opening?**

**6) Who is the project aimed at? Who do you work with?**

*e.g. men/women  
only survivors of csa or other groups of people (i.e.  
perpetrators, rape victims)  
children/adults*

**7) Is there a general typology of people who access this project?**

*e.g. women abused by fathers  
people who had repressed their memories  
incest or extrafamilial abuse  
male survivors*

**8) What services are offered by the project?**

*e.g. telephone helpline  
one-to-one counselling  
groupwork  
legal advice  
home visits  
training*

**9) What are the times and days of the services?****10) Can you explain any more about the services you offer, in particular the counselling and groupwork?**

*e.g. are there assessments involved?  
is there a set number of sessions people are offered?  
what is the programme for groupwork?  
who runs the groups?*

**11) Is there supervision available for workers and/or volunteers? How is this run?****12) What training is involved for workers and/or volunteers?****13) How is the project funded?****14) Is funding a problem? Has it ever been a problem?****15) Do you work closely with any other projects? In what capacity?****16) Is there a particular criteria which needs to be fulfilled by people in order to access the project?****17) Where would you refer someone to if they did not fit the criteria for this project?**

**18) What would you typically send out to someone who phoned up for information?**

**19) Could you explain the general beliefs around the way in which this project is structured? Why do you work with the people you work with?**

**20) If you had access to more funding, what (if anything) would you change about the project?**

**21) Could you comment at all on the attitudes held by yourself and of the organisation towards the following sexual interactions in terms of the way in which you may work with the survivors of such abuse:**

**a) girls who were sexually abused by men**

**b) boys who were sexually abused by men**

**c) girls who were sexually abused by women**

**d) boys who were sexually abused by women**

## Appendix Three:

### Interview Guide with Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

#### **I. Experience of Sexual Abuse**

your age at the start of abuse  
the duration of the abuse  
the frequency of the abuse  
what was your relationship to the abuser  
what were the acts involved  
what were you told by the abuser  
what was your reaction to the [1st] incident  
how did it affect your relationship with the abuser  
how did it affect other relationships for you  
did it affect your school life, i.e. friends, work, bullying, etc.  
what area of your life would you say it had the greatest impact on

#### **II. Reporting the Sexual Abuse**

did you tell anyone about the abuse  
if yes, what was their reaction  
if no, why didn't you tell  
when did you first tell anyone about the abuse  
were the authorities ever informed  
was any action ever taken against the abuser  
what happened to the abuser (are you in contact with the abuser)  
how do you feel now having\having not reported the abuse  
what would you have liked to have seen happen  
what action do you think should be taken against child sex abusers

#### **III. Support Services Involved in Sexual Abuse**

what help\support did you get at the time of the abuse  
what support have you received since then  
when did you first seek support  
when did you first get support  
where did you get the help\support from  
did you get one-to-one counselling  
*how would you say the counsellor helped*  
*did they say anything particularly useful*  
*did they say anything particularly unhelpful*  
did you attend any support groups  
*were they helpful*  
did you\do you feel let down about the professional help you received  
what would you liked to have received\been offered

**Appendix Four:**

**Questionnaire for Probation Officers**

1) Has your office ever had dealings with cases involving women sexually abusing children?

**Yes. Go to next question.**

**No. Go to question 4.**

2) How many cases of this kind has your office has dealings with?

1-2

7-8

3-4

9-10

5-6

11+

3) Could you briefly explain the nature of these dealings?

4) Have you, or any other probation officer in your office, written or been involved in the writing of a pre-sentence report for a woman involved in the sexual abuse of a child?

**Yes. Go to next question.**

**No. Go to question 7.**

5) How many pre-sentence reports have been written on such cases?

1-2

7-8

3-4

9-10

5-6

11+

6) We are interested in what became of these cases. If possible could you specify the sentencing outcome of the case(s).

**custodial sentence**

number of offenders.....

specify exact sentence(s).....

length of sentence(s).....

**community punishment/supervision**

number of offenders.....

specify exact sentence(s).....

length of sentence(s).....

**other sentence or order**

number of offenders.....

specify exact sentence(s).....

length of sentence(s).....

**acquittal**

number of offenders.....

**outcome not known**

number of offenders.....

7) Have you, or any other probation officer in your office, ever supervised a woman involved in the sexual abuse of a child?

**Yes. Could you state the type and length of sentence involved.**

**No.**

Thank you for your co-operation and assistance.

**Appendix Five:**

**Interview Schedule with Probation Officers**

**I. Circumstances Surrounding The Abuse**

1) What was the abuser's relationship to the child(ren)?

parent  
step-parent  
parent's partner  
grandparent  
aunt/uncle  
sibling  
cousin  
family friend  
teacher  
baby-sitter  
other carer  
other

2) What was the age of the child?

0-3 years  
4-7 years  
8-11 years  
12-15 years

3) What was the duration of the abuse?

once off  
1-8 weeks  
2-5 month period  
6-9 month period  
10-12 month period  
13-18 month period  
19-24 month period  
2-3 year period  
3-4 year period  
4-5 year period  
more than 5 years

4) How often did the abuse occur?

daily  
several times a week  
several times a month  
sporadically

5) What acts were involved in the abuse?

kissing  
fondling  
abuser masturbating self  
abuser masturbating child  
child to masturbate abuser  
oral sex to abuser  
oral sex to child  
vaginal penetration  
anal penetration  
object penetration  
attempted penetration  
other

6) Did the abuser co-perpetrate or abuse alone?

co-perpetrate  
sole abuse

7) Was alcohol or drug misuse flagged up as a contributory factor to the abuse within the court proceedings?

8) How did the abuse come to light?

child told trusted adult:  
*parent*  
*teacher*  
*other family member*  
*friend of family*  
*baby-sitter*  
*other*  
child told peer  
abuser confessed  
abuser was 'caught'  
somebody guessed

9) Was remorse apparent?

10) Does the abuser have children of his/her own?

## II. Legal Consequences Of The Abuse

11) What sentence did they receive?

victim compensation  
fine  
community service  
suspended sentence  
probation order  
psychiatric disposal  
prison sentence  
other

length of sentence:

12) Were there any conditions attached to the sentence?

13) What evidence was used by the prosecution in the case?

14) What was the abuser's plea?

guilty  
not guilty

15) What was the defence used?

mitigating circumstances  
diminished responsibility  
psychiatric pleas

16) What were the reasons for the sentence given, based on:

a) judge's comments

b) your opinion

17) Have any other agencies been involved **at any time** with this case?

### **III. Professional Opinions of Probation Officers**

Check: Have you ever worked with a female child sex abuser?

If **yes**, go to page 6

If **no**, continue with the following questions.

18) Why do you think you have not worked with a woman who sexually abused a child?

19) How long have you worked with child sex abusers?

20) The majority of probation officers I have spoken with have not worked with female sex abusers. Why do you think I am not finding women as abusers within probation?

21) Where, within the system, might they be found, and why?

22) In your professional opinion, does gender have an effect on sentencing? Relate this to any cases you have knowledge of involving child sexual abuse.

**Ask these questions if the PO has worked with both male and female sex abusers.**

23) How long have you been working with sex abusers?

24) In that time, how many men have you seen?

25) In that time, how many women have you seen?

26) In your professional opinion, could you offer an explanation for why the figures above show:

\*roughly equal numbers of men and women

\*more men than women

\*more women than men

\*delete as appropriate

27) Currently literature indicates that there are two schools of thought around the sentencing of women in the CJS; that we are more lenient when dealing with women than with men, or that we view women as 'doubly deviant' and treat them more harshly. In your experience, do either of these stances ring true in any way?

**(Remember that I'm aiming to find out whether this is particularly true with regards to women and csa so more probing may be required.)**

28) To what degree do you think gender plays a role in the sentencing and treatment of sex abusers? Please illustrate with appropriate examples of cases.

**Appendix Six:**

**Questionnaire for Prison Officials**

1) Have you any inmates at present who have been convicted of a sexual offence against a child?

**Yes. Please complete all questions.**

**No. Please go to question 5.**

2) How many inmates have there been in the last three years?

1-2

7-8

3-4

9-10

5-6

11+

3) Could you indicate the length of sentence administered by the court in each case? If this is not possible to do, could you please simply indicate:

the minimum sentence administered \_\_\_\_\_

the maximum sentence administered \_\_\_\_\_

4) Was a pre-sentence report written by the Probation Service in any of these cases?

**In all of the cases.**

**In most of the cases. Please give a number.**

**In some of the cases. Please give a number.**

**In none of the cases.**

5) As a matter of interest, have you ever had any inmates who may not have been formally convicted of a sexual offence against a child but it later transpired through some informal network that they may have had such a background?

**Yes**

**No**

**Thank you for your co-operation and assistance**

**Appendix Seven:**  
**Sample Transcripts**

Transcription of the interview with Sally

12/11/98

**I: Could you start by telling me a little about the abuse, maybe when it started?**

S: Yes. I was nine when it started, and I was abused by my father. Um, I had a pretty rotten childhood anyway cos my mother didn't want me at all, so I had no back up whatsoever. I was very very rejected, very very alone. I'm the eldest of two girls, though my sister wasn't abused, probably because she would have screamed to the rooftops if anyone had gone near her, whereas I was very timid and easily intimidated. Um, my mother was a very very heavy drinker and I think that might have had a lot to do with it. I can remember when it started I was in bed recovering from the flu or something and I can remember my father coming into the room and saying 'mummy drinks too much wine' and then he raped me basically. Um, the abuse continued whenever he got the opportunity until I was about 15 and I managed to stop it simply by keeping out of his way.

**I: How did you do that, how did you keep out of his way?**

S: Well, by just trying to make sure I was never alone with him, or being out with friends which was very difficult as he made it very difficult for me to go out because he was very possessive and very jealous of any friendships I had. Um, he took me out of school early so I lost the chance for a good education, got me a job, escorted me to work, met me at lunchtime and escorted me home again. He was really that possessive. Yeah so you know I had a very difficult time. Um, in having friends, in having a normal life at all really. Um, the abuse usually involved full penetration, um, not always. Sometimes he would not because I would plead with him not to. Um, and sometimes he would just masturbate in front of me. Unfortunately that didn't always happen...it was very painful. I wanted to tell people; he threatened me at first that if I did no one would play with me, no one would speak to me, nobody would care. Um, and I got the good old- I thought I'd be put away. My mother was always threatening to put me into care anyway and I thought- that was just a thought that terrified me anyway.

**I: Had your mother threatened that from a very early age?**

S: Yes, she had. So you know that was a frightening thing. I don't really know, I was just totally frightened of my father. He had a violent temper.

**I: Was he physically abusive as well as sexually?**

S: Occasionally yes but not regularly. But he used to throw violent tempers over the slightest little thing, and he'd throw things at me and sometimes knock me down, knock me off my chair that sort of thing, but he didn't actually beat me up of anything. But he was absolutely terrifying. Um, he started using contraception when I was about 12 or 13 because I had learned the facts of life and I was frightened of getting pregnant and he hadn't even thought about it. And I think one of the worst things to me was he was a caretaker to a church at the time and he used to actually abuse me inside of the church which was something that I find even worse in a way. And my mother used to force me to go into the church with him to help him clean it cos she didn't know what was going on and she just thought I was being lazy by not wanting to go. um, my mother found out when I was seventeen because my father confessed to her what he'd been doing. Made a grand confession.

**I: What made him do that?**

S: Yes, because a friend of hers had come home and found her daughter in bed with the father, and there was a big scandal about it and she just went on to my father about how disgusting it was and that sort of thing, and I suppose my father must have felt guilty or something as he then confessed that he had done the same thing with me. Um, her reaction was to blame me and I had no choice but to leave home as it must have been my fault, I must have encouraged him. And she said she was going to leave home and take my sister with her which would have left me alone with him and I know he would have done it again if I was in that situation so I had to leave home, and I didn't really have anywhere to go. I mean we're talking about years ago, um, in those days things were not so easy, there were no places to go basically. I had a boyfriend that I'd been pressurised by my mother into going out with as she wanted to get rid of me and I became dependent on him and got me a room and paid the rent and I ended up in a early marriage which was a big mistake, but I literally had no choice cos I didn't earn enough to support myself. The wages were very low for teenagers in those days, worse than now, comparatively. I mean a summer dress would take a weeks wages, no nearly two weeks wages then. Yeah, cos um, it was a long time ago. I mean I'm nearly 57 years old and it was a long time ago. Um, I thought I was the only person in the world it had happened to, I think that it quite common amongst survivors. I think nowadays, you know, there's more publicity, people know, children may have a chance of getting help. Years ago it was never heard of.

**I: What about your sister...did she get the same er treatment from your mother?**

S: No, no, my mother loved my sister.

**I: Do you know why...what her reasons were?**

S: I don't know exactly what it is. I know my sister was a very docile, placid baby that never did anything wrong. I was a screamer that demanded attention all of the

time. But basically my mother never wanted children at all, um, but she wouldn't come out and say so, I mean it wasn't done in those days. But I was born in the war and my father went away to war and I suppose that was difficult for her as well. We were living with my grandmother, my father came home when I was three and a half and I didn't really know him...one big frightening stranger to me. Um, course he immediately wanted another baby. She was so convinced she was going to have a boy; she wanted a son if she was going to have any children. And I can remember she bought absolutely everything down to the toothbrush in blue. I can remember this big circular tray with absolutely everything on it, baby's hairbrush, everything was in blue. All the clothes, the carrycot, everything was in blue. And when my sister was born she wouldn't look at her for 2 or 3 days, wouldn't hold her, wouldn't see her and then I think she felt sort of guilty about it and went the other way. Sort of a strange situation but...so I was in the situation which I think psychologists call parenting, in that I took over the mother's role in the family because she was drunk anyway-

**I: Right from an early age?**

S: Right from an early age, I think she started drinking when I was about 4 or 5, something like that. Oh, no I would have been five; it was just after my sister was born, when she started hitting the bottle. And I just sort of had to take over everything really. After work I was expected to virtually run the house. And um, I never got any thanks for it, just criticism that I was never doing anything right. But my sister was never expected to lift a finger even when she was in her teens. My mother was a complete slave to her. She'd crawl under- on the floors to pick up her things, do her washing. She'd get steak when the rest of us got sausages, you know.

**I: Was it something...were you ever able to talk to your mother about her treatment to you, did you ever, I don't know, ask her why am I treated so differently to-**

S: No, no, she never encouraged any talk very much. If I ever tried to cuddle her, she'd push me away. Any physical love was sappy. Um, you know, I couldn't talk to her really. I did talk to her a bit more in later years. She was- she turned to me when my father died; that was seven years ago, she died last Christmas, and I did have a good relationship with her for those last seven years, probably for her needs really but..it was good for me to actually have a mother for seven years. And we did talk a little bit, not a lot about that because I think she felt bad about it. I don't think she did realise how badly she did treat me. I wrote her a letter once when I desperately needed some help because I was very very ill and I asked her to come and look after the kids for me, and she wouldn't- she said she wouldn't leave the dog. And I said bring the dog with you and who knows lots of lame excuses, and I just lost it and I wrote her a stinking letter and told her exactly what I thought of everything she had done. And she was very very shocked but I think it made her think. But um, I felt when I was a child that I had a label on me saying abuse me because other men started trying to abuse me, um,

**I: After the abuse-**

S: After the abuse had started with my father, yeah. Um, there were several instances of abuse sort of one off occasions by different men. There were near rape occasions but I managed to escape but...there was once when I was about, only about 10 I suppose, walking home from brownies with the girl next door when, pretty much a teenager, somebody about 19 dragged me behind some bushes and I think he might have done but I screamed and he ran off.

**I: Was it somebody that you know?**

S: Oh no a complete stranger. There were things like gasmen. I remember crawling out on the roof once to escape the gasman because my mother had left me alone in the house when the gasman called.

**I: How old were you then?**

S: About 11. And he pushed me on the settee and tried to take my clothes off but I managed to push him off and climb out of the window and I was terrified of heights. Uh, I got dragged down an alley by a gang of boys when I was about 15. And that probably would have ended up as a gang rape if the local cinema manager hadn't overheard my screaming and they ran off. I even nearly got done by an ambulance driver. I think that's what this illusion was more than anything. Again I was about 15 and we had a lodger, an older lady, and she was taken ill and my parents were like oh I could go in the ambulance with her and this was late at night, they couldn't be bothered. So they sent me in the ambulance to the hospital, and this was about one o'clock in the morning and I ended up with no means of getting home whatsoever, because they hadn't bothered to think how I was going to get home, and I was completely stranded and the hospital said there's an ambulance that's going by your way that can drop you off, they were going off duty or something and um, the ambulance stopped. I know the one in the back said something to the driver but I didn't take much notice and they'd blacked the windows out. And it stopped in a side street and this guy started sexually assaulting me and of course there was nobody around, I was absolutely terrified and I thought I've got to get out of this, and I turned round and talked my way out of it by agreeing to meet him the next day. I mean I had lots of frightening situations I mean like my first father-in-law cornered me and tried it. My friend next door her father tried it with me. I seem to think, you know, there must be something about me that makes men do this you know.

**I: Was that the thought that stayed with you for-**

S: It stayed with me for a very long time. I don't even know when I stopped thinking like that. I seemed to sort of attract men. I mean whether- when I was about 10 there was a bloke who worked on the church who enticed me into the church for something, I was like all young children; easily enticed, and he asked me for sex and I- he asked me how old I was and when he realised I was young, I think he felt himself that he would just masturbate himself in front of me. He locked me in the toilet, but um, I don't know, maybe men could just sense there

was something different about me or what but I don't know. It was horrible, I felt that they could, I felt that I was labelled. I felt very different to other children. I never fitted in, I was always the one that nobody wanted to speak to, nobody wanted to pick for their team. Um, I was always the odd one out wherever I went.

**I: Why do you think...yeah, why do you think that was the case? Why did you feel that you were the odd one out?**

S: I honestly don't know. I suppose cos I had that experience I felt that I was different from all the other children.

**I: That the abuse made you different.**

S: That the abuse made me different, yes, plus the fact that my parents were obviously weren't the same as other people's parents. They never went to open days at school, they never did anything. They went to my sister's but they never went to any of mine, and I was always the only one whose parents were never there, I was the only one dressed in clothes much worse than any of the other children. All this sort of thing, I was always the odd one out. And I just couldn't do right. I mean I was brought up in Worthing on the south coast, I don't remember much about my early education but we moved to London when I was about 10 and I was put in a school in Hackney, now I was hated by the other children because I went straight to the top of the class because the standard of education in Worthing was a lot better than it was in Hackney. Um, so I was hated because I was considered to be cleverer than the other children, but then when I went to secondary education I went into the grammar school because of the problems I had with my father and other problems at home I didn't do very well, and then I was disliked by all the others because I wasn't doing well you see, either way I couldn't seem to fit in with anybody.

**I: And that's a horrible feeling to have as a child, isn't it? The not fitting in, mean obviously aside from the abuse, but I mean just the feeling of not being the same as others is really quite traumatic for a child.**

S: Mmm, the isolation. I did feel isolated as a child and it didn't help that my mother discouraged friendships because she considered our family as better than everybody else's and we couldn't play with this child or that child because they were common. So it was very very difficult for me to make friends, and my father of course when I got into sexual maturity didn't allow friendships with boys. You know if a boy actually braved him enough to actually call for me he'd get accused of having sex with me immediately..There's not many people would stick around to listen to that so...

**I: How frequent was the abuse by your father?**

S: Very often. It was very frequent, several times a week, maybe once a week, whenever he could get the opportunity you see, if mum was out or unconscious, you know. As I got older it got less frequent because I could keep out of his way more, but um it was very very difficult to do that you know.

**I: What sort of thoughts did you have at the time, what sort of, um, what did you think about it at the time?**

S: I was terrified of it cos it was painful for one thing, I realised that it wasn't normal but I didn't quite know in what way, I just didn't really understand it at first, I just didn't. I mean I can't remember much more of what I thought as it was too long ago. It was just something I was terrified of and tried to avoid really. Yes, it's just one of those experiences that you know. I suppose I probably blotted a lot of the memories out I would have thought, quite glad really that I don't remember all of it at all.

**I: Did you, you never spoke to your sister about it?**

S: No not until she was grown up and I still don't know to this day whether she believes it or not. I once tried to tell a family friend what was happening but I was branded a malicious liar.

**I: This is when the abuse was actually occurring?**

S: Yeah. It's the only time I ever tried to get help from anybody, told this friend of my mother's but she didn't believe me. You know my father couldn't possibly do anything like that and I was a nasty little- I never tried to ask anyone again for help after that.

**I: When did you first tell anybody, apart from the family friend?**

S: It was when I started having serious relationships with men, I always felt they ought to know.

**I: And how did they respond to that?**

S: Oh, it varied. Some of them were you know I want to punch his lights out sort of thing. Others felt you know it wasn't quite very nice, it depends on who it was really. I always made it the excuse, I mean I've been married 3 times, I always pick wrong ones. I think that happens. I know my second husband used it as an excuse for everything. If he considered I wasn't doing something the way he wanted, you'd get it thrown in your face 'oh you're doing this or that because of what happened to you'. My present husband hasn't- he knows but he hasn't really made much comment. I don't really know why he feels cos he's one of these people who won't say what he feels anyway. I don't think it bothers him all that much. Another effect it has on you it makes you very protective of your own children.

**I: How many have you got?**

S: 6, well 7 actually. I adopted one sometime ago.

**I: And are they aware of the abuse?**

S: I don't know if they all know. My eldest 2 know, my youngest one knows. I think probably they all do as they've probably told each other even if I haven't told them all individually. But it's not really been talked about very much with the children because I don't think they really want to know to be quite honest.

**I: No, painful things.**

S: Yes, and I didn't really want them to destroy their relationship with their grandfather because he, um, in the last sort of ten years or so of his life he was blind, diabetic, bedridden, in terrible pain, um, so they weren't in any danger from him and it seemed a pity to sort of spoil their relationship with him. Underneath it all he was very fond of children but...I think he actually loved me but he had a twisted way of actually showing it. The only way I found that I could cope, cos when I left home I was very angry very bitter, I didn't want anything to do with my parents, it was just absolutely eating me up and I came to the conclusion that it was going to ruin my life if I carried on feeling like that and it was up to me to sort of sort my feelings out. You know I couldn't just go on feeling like that, I'd destroy myself. And the only way I could cope with that was to find excuses for him. I read psychology books for three years; I had to just find excuses. Whether they were the right ones or not was irrelevant but I had to find excuses for why they behaved the way they did.

**I: What sort of things did you come up with?**

S: Well I looked at my mother's childhood and I'd find excuses from that. And my father had a childhood from hell. He was orphaned when he was very young during the First World War, brought up with people who didn't want him. He had a very bad time I know that, um, and then of course going through the war he had some very very bad experiences. So I suppose it was easy enough to find excuses.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

S: Dreadful predicament.

**I: So your other option was seeing them as evil-**

S: Dreadful villains or thinking that there must be something evil about me to have attracted it.

**I: Did you go through a period of time of thinking, of blaming yourself?**

S: No I don't think I ever really blamed myself for it, but I did feel very ashamed and dirty and I did feel good because there's an area I don't know how, I don't really know any other survivors, I only know 2 and neither of them have been able to talk intimately because they aren't able to cope with it. They are not ready to talk about it very much. I know that they have been abused and who by but I don't know any more than that because they aren't ready to talk about it. Not as far on

the road to recovery as I am. So I don't really know, uh, much about this area but I- the one thing that is the hardest for me to talk about and the hardest to come to terms with is the fact that abuse can make you sexually aroused, and that is what makes you feel so dreadfully guilty.

**I: Because you're worried that you've actually enjoyed it.**

S: Mmm, yeah. And however much you try to tell yourself that it was just a physiological response and you weren't responsible for it, it doesn't help that much. You know I keep telling myself that but I still feel dirty about it.

**I: Still, even now?**

S: Even now, yes. It's the one area I haven't been able to come to terms with yet. I'm hoping that I will be able to but that is the hardest bit of all. I can't help feeling guilty about- I mean it's had a nasty effect on me. When I was young- it's difficult to explain to somebody like you because you've been brought up in a totally different sexual climate. But when I was young you just didn't have sex before marriage, you know, if you did the consequences were awful. I mean girls- I saw girls you know breaking their hearts because they had no option but to give their babies over for adoption. Abortion was illegal; if they got caught they were virtually ostracized. There were very few parents that were supportive, I mean most of them just hid it, sent the child away to relatives, had the baby adopted, you completely- your life was completely and utterly ruined. Uh, it was that sort of sexual climate, you just didn't have sex outside marriage. You know you were dirty and contaminated if you didn't go to the alter a virgin. And I just felt I'm already soiled, cos you were you were soiled goods, that's what they used to call girls who had sex before marriage, soiled goods. And no man would want soiled goods. And I felt I was soiled goods, there fore I felt it didn't matter. I went through a stage of being promiscuous because I felt it doesn't matter anyway. The choice had been taken away from me who I gave my virginity to, so what the hell, what did it matter what I do. I'm soiled anyway, I'm dirty anyway. And I went through a stage of that. And I think, you know, I was looking for love not sex.

**I: Yeah, I imagine so.**

S: I was looking for love. But you know it didn't matter if it was that cos I'd got nothing to lose; I'd already lost it.

**I: What point was that?**

S: When I was in my teens and every time a relationship broke up, every time one of my long-term relationships broke up, I'd go through a stage of being promiscuous. Until I found someone else that I would stay with for a few years. Always did it. Wouldn't do it now, I'm too old. (laughing) they don't queue up at the door at my age. In one way that's a relief. I mean I'm quite ambivalent about it now because part of me like any woman wants still to be sexually desirable and the other part of me thinks thank god I'm not so desirable you know get it off the back. Um, I'm a little bit torn in two about it.

**I: Did you, thinking about other areas that it affected, did it affect your view of men in particular?**

S: Um, when I was young strangely enough no, I always was the eternal optimist, there was always the knight in shining armour that would be around the corner and it was- I just had one abuser after another basically in one way or another, they all took advantage of me or abused me mentally or physically. Um, now I've got a rather cynical view of men, now I think I'm- no I try not to be too hard on them but I am not impressed with the species. I think mainly because they think they're so damn superior and they're not. Although I will accept every man I meet as an individual and I like to sort of judge them in that sense, 'oh you're a man, you're this and that' but in general I haven't got a very high opinion of them, no. I've had some very full on relationships and most of mine have been an absolute disaster, probably because I need too much, I need things they can't give me and I also tend to pick the wrong sort. My first husband was running around with other women all of the time and he could be violent occasionally. He was a mummy's boy-

**I: Oh really.**

S: My second husband was an alcoholic and he was very violent.

**I: The fact that he was an alcoholic, did you know that before you married him?**

S: No. I didn't.

**I: Ok. I was going to say, it's just interesting in terms of your mother-**

S: I didn't realise, I knew that he had something wrong but he told be he had a nervous illness, I didn't realise it was alcoholism cos he hid it very very well. He used to drink vodka which doesn't smell, he was also addicted to valium tablets which I...I didn't stay with him very long. I was only married to him for a couple of years because he was so violent, um, my present husband is- I think I was attracted to him because he was so quiet and docile and gentle. But uh, which he is, but he's a complete child. He just can't take responsibility for anything whatsoever, I have to do absolutely everything. Oh yeah, he'll do the housework to please mummy but...I've accepted him that way and at least he doesn't beat me up. I've just got to accept that I've got to be his mother more than his wife basically. You know I suppose I was always looking for the sort of relationship where I could be on equal terms with a man but either they wanted to dominate me or they were complete children, and I don't want to be dominated to that extent. I mean my second husband was you know, I'd virtually have to ask his permission to draw the curtains, you know. I just couldn't live like that. I remember when I broke up with him, I can remember that day, the way- I was going out and it was cold weather and I was on my way somewhere and I stopped to look in a shop window at these lovely warm tights and thought ooh I wish I could wear them and all of a sudden 'I can I can, I'm allowed to. He's gone'. Cos he would not let me wear what I wanted.

**I: That really is total domination.**

S: Oh yes and because he was physically violent I used to shiver... The only good thing that came out of that marriage was my youngest daughter who's now 18.

**I: Yeah, yeah. Does she still see her father?**

S: Very very occasionally but then he's been so nasty to her, I mean he'll not see her for years and then he'll be violent, threatened to blind her once, got a paint can 'give me some money or I'll blind the child' not a nice person so...

**I: He doesn't sound it. Did you have trouble getting out of that marriage?**

S: Not really no. But I think he - I think it was on the cards that he would have abused her; in fact I'm not entirely sure he didn't but um I know he used to walk around the flat with nothing on and this was when she was about 10 when he would have her for weekends. He used to show her dirty videos and make suggestive remarks, wanting to bath her that sort of thing. I got her right out of there; I defied the court and said that she didn't want to see him again. But I was in contempt of court for years but I thought you just dare take me to court because if you do you're going to be sorry. Because there's no way they're going to let her see him again. And I mean she didn't see him again until her grandmother was dying and she said she wanted to see her grandmother. She had to brave seeing him and I had to go with her at first, but she eventually felt brave enough to go to her grandmother you know without me but by then she was old enough to knee him in the bollocks. She's tall my daughter, big girl. (laughing) she actually felt confident enough to protect herself, she would you know. That was a bit you know. I think he would have done had she stayed around. Very very difficult. You know when it's happened to you, you can see it.

**I: You can see the same things, a pattern emerges. Although the things you've mentioned anyway that in itself I would see as abusive. You know a ten year old showing her dirty videos and walking around naked, that in itself-**

S: Well it's a form of abuse isn't it? I mean I don't know if it went any further, I don't know, because if it did she won't say. But she doesn't seem to be, you know she's a very stable girl, um, I think she'll do well in life and she's a happy very confident person. So I don't think anything very serious could have happened. I doubt very much that it did considering the emotional wreck that I took out of that marriage at 13 months old, having nightmares, screaming, terrified of all men even her big brother, um, and that was just witnessing his violence to me and didn't speak til she was 3 years old. The doctor said it was emotional trauma, and I've had very hard job to bring her up into the stable person she is, so I don't really think that...

**I: Sounds like you've done a very good job.**

S: Well I've tried, but she's a very headstrong girl, very stubborn.

**I: It is shocking the effects of domestic violence on children. I think people often don't realise that even if they're not in the same room they can still hear-**

S: Well she usually was in the same room, she was nearly knocked out of my arms once, so I thought I've got to get out of this but it was difficult to get out- well it wasn't difficult to get out when it happened it was difficult for me to make the effort because he virtually had broken me. But my other 16 year old son had a lot of problems and I failed him because I was in such a state myself I didn't spot his problems and he tried to commit suicide and he was in intensive care and my husband forbade me to see him. I didn't take any notice of that, mind you, and he said he hoped that the bastard died and he was completely out of order in so many ways and it was just one big big bust up that day and he walked out to stay with mummy for a few days which he often did if we had a big row and I just couldn't cope any more and I virtually- had a terrible time the rest of that day but I called my oldest daughter and was like can you come and help. My two oldest supported me and I went and stayed with them for a few days and they wouldn't let him in the house. The house luckily was still in my name so I went straight to a solicitor and just wouldn't have him back. There were a couple of nasty scenes but. I managed to cope with that. I had to do it, for Michele's sake I had to do it.

**I: Ok. What other areas do you think your sexual abuse affected? How did it effect you?**

S: I've spent, I've realised recently, I've spent my whole life and I don't know if it's just because of the sexual abuse or due to the rejection by my mother or a mixture of both, but- it's difficult for me to separate you know what caused what- but I've spent my whole life trying to please everybody so that somebody might like me. I've got this desperate need to be approved of and liked by people, and I'll do almost anything for anybody to achieve that aim. It's you know, I've come to that conclusion. To the extent where I'll let myself be exploited left right and centre. I don't know if that was caused by the sexual abuse or I don't know what. I sometimes think my mother did me more harm- sometimes I think her abuse was worse in a way because although whatever horrible my father's abuse of me was at least he did give me some affection. The only affection I got other than that was my grandmother was very affectionate towards me but I was parted from her when I was 3 so I only saw her very very occasionally after that.

**I: Was that maternal or paternal?**

S: Maternal. The father's were dead and as for the ones who adopted him, she died when I was 5 so I never really- and they live right up in the north of England so you know I didn't really have a relationship much with them. My maternal grandfather was very cold and removed, my gran wasn't she was very warm. She died when I was 13, I still miss her now but I hadn't seen her for quite a few years.

But I sometimes think that the love she gave me when I was a toddler was the only thing that's kept me sane.

**I: Really?**

S: I think so, yeah. She was the only one who gave me normal love and affection even if it was only for a brief time.

**I: That was a love you knew was ok, that you'd experienced it-**

S: I'd experienced that love, yeah, but I was looking for the same kind of love from my mother and I didn't get it. But um, yes it has had a big effect on me but I- because I was such an odd one out and always so isolated and never wanted in any area I was in, any place I was in, any people I was with that I have this great need to prove myself as somebody worthy of other people's approval. It's very very difficult. I don't know if I'll ever be able to change, I mean I've made some strides but...my counsellor's told me that I've spent my life caring for other people's needs and never caring for my own, and she's probably right. But I am trying to do more of that now; I'm taking more for myself out of life now.

**I: Good, yeah. Did you ever report your father's abuse at any point?**

S: No, no. When I got old enough to realise he'd be taken to prison, what would happen to me, you know, when I got sort of old enough to realise what crime he'd committed. I mean he- at first as I say he threatened me that nobody wanted to play with me. Then when I realised that that wasn't necessarily true he told me that I would be put in prison if it came out. And I was too young to know that that wasn't true. And by the time I was old enough to realise that it would be him that would be put in prison, what could I do about it? I had nowhere to go, I mean my mother wouldn't look after me if he- if I reported it and he was taken away. I'd have ended up in care, which was a big bogeyman to me because she wouldn't have cared. There's no way she would have looked after me, and I proved that when she found out later on and she blamed me. I was right, I mean threats to go to a children's home, and you know now and I know now that I probably would have been abused there. I didn't know that then of course but...but yes, it obviously has affected my life, but it's difficult to know what I would have been like if it hadn't happened.

**I: Oh absolutely, yeah.**

S: I mean I know I lost a lot of education opportunities and I think that if I'd had those my life might have been different, I might have met totally different kind of people and had a much more satisfying life, I feel that I would have done...

**I: It's a lot of ifs, isn't it?**

S: It's a lot of ifs and having, having said that I'm not that dissatisfied with my life as it is now but...it's probably as good as it's going to get.

**I: When did you first seek any, any help, any counselling or any-**

S: Only a few months ago.

**I: Oh really?**

S: I think I- I'd often thought about it before but somehow I just couldn't do it while my parents were alive. I just couldn't. And when my dad died- I thought I could do it when my dad died, but I couldn't. Um, mainly because it involved my mum as well and I was starting to build a good relationship with her and somehow if I'd gone into it then it would have spoiled it. So I couldn't do anything until she died. So I went a couple of months after she died and I thought well I, I should do something. I didn't quite know exactly what was wrong with my life but I knew there was something wrong with it. So I decided to seek help then.

**I: And did you erm when you went to counselling and er what were you presenting 'I was sexually abused as a child' or was it something different?**

S: No that's what I did present with. Yes, that I was having problems in my life at the time and it was sort of a mixture of both. Those problems have been resolved to some extent now but a few months ago I was having quite a lot of problems and it was that as well. I felt that if I went into counselling I might be able to cope with those problems better cos I didn't know you know how much my behaviour was affecting me and I wanted to find that out.

**I: And how um- what reaction did you get when you first talked about it...to your counsellor? Is it the same one-?**

S: Yes, it's the same one.

**I: So you've only had the one?**

S: Yes.

**I: Ok. And what reaction did you get when you first started talking about it?**

S: At first when I was talking to him I found him very cold, very remote. Um, he isn't, he's very good at listening but I wanted something- I think I was disappointed to some extent because I wanted someone more warm and friendly than he presented himself to be, he's very very professional you see. Um and I would have preferred it to be more relaxed and friendly, and at times I just felt I couldn't go on with it because I felt that I was talking to a bloody android you know it was...and I got around to sort of getting it across to him that I did need some more warmth and he did get a bit better and it got better for a while and then it got bad again. It's really gone up and down in that way. Sometimes I feel that he isn't close enough for me to talk to him properly, er other times he, he's fine. There are times when I just can't talk to him and it's like trying to swing through treacle trying to talk to him sometimes. It's absolutely impossible. And at other times I can talk to him quite easily, and I think, I mean it depends a lot on how I

see him and how he is you know. It's very very difficult, and I've always felt you know under pressure if he asks me a question I always feel that I have to answer it, and perhaps that's wrong because I don't have to answer it. But I've felt that I have to do what he wants, and that's the wrong attitude and I know it's the wrong attitude but it's what I've always been like you see, always been motivated to try to please the other person and do what they want.

**I: Mmm, that's what I was just thinking.**

S: Yeah, that's right. And I'm sort of coming round to realise this now, but it's still sort of difficult to change the way I am.

**I: Oh absolutely yeah. One thing that's interesting is that it's a man, isn't it?**

S: It's a man, hmm-mm.

**I: Did you a choose him because he was a man?**

S: I was asked if I had any objections talking to a man, which I don't, um, in most areas it hasn't been a problem and I thought that if it does become a problem that's something I ought to sort out not run away from.

**I: That's very brave.**

S: Talking to- opting to talk to a woman only is the easy way out, because if I've got problems talking to a man about it then I've got to sort those problems. But mostly I'm handling it.

**I: Well that's great, very admirable.**

S: Well not really, I mean it's for my own benefit in the long run.

**I: Yeah that's true, but it's great that you see that as well you know. Um, have you ever been to any erm self-help groups?**

S: I wanted to but I couldn't find any.

**I: Really?**

S: Mmm. I made a few phone calls but nobody seemed to have one.

**I: Really?**

S: Yes, I'd have very much have liked to. In fact he suggested it in the very early days of counselling and he gave me a few addresses but I haven't come up with anything.

**I: Hmm. What, what did you get? Just sort of dead numbers or ...**

S: Well either I would leave messages and they wouldn't call back and in the end I gave up. Or those that I did get through to weren't running one at the moment and they'd let me know if they started one or if there was a demand or whatever or else they were just too far away and impractical for me to get to. So I just haven't found one basically. Um, there is a group in Enfield who I hoped would be running one but they said no. So far I haven't had any luck with that.

**I: What were you hoping to get from the group?**

S: Mutual support I suppose. Um, difficult to know what I'd get from it until it happens.

**I: Yes, yes.**

S: But um I think it is good because you can help each other, talk to each other and it is that added bit to counselling and I think it might have been helpful both for me and for other people you know just more experience and support of each other. But it hasn't happened. I spent yesterday evening talking to another survivor who's a man that's recently come into my life..he's a friend of the family sort of thing, I haven't known him very long and he actually I don't know whether he knew I'd been abused or not because he knows my daughter, my daughters, but he hinted that he was having problems and he needed someone to talk to and he hinted that something had happened in his childhood. So I said ok you need to talk we'll go somewhere and have a chat, and it turned out that he had a- he's 47 years old and he's never been able to tell anyone ever that he'd been abused as a child. And I could tell that he wanted to say something like that so I told him that I had been abused [lost some dialogue due to tape change]

I felt it was a big step for him to actually be able to admit it and I'm hoping that he'll actually be able to go on from there but he wouldn't seek help, no way you know would he do that, his timing isn't right right now. But the fact that he's been able to admit it happened is a hell of a big step for him and I really hope he can make progress from there.

**I: Yeah, it must be the first, the first hurdle to get over is telling that first person...and then, that's one reason I was asking about reactions and so on cos your first reaction from your family friend when you were 14 was um-**

S: Negative.

**I: Very negative and you know put you off. So that first reaction can really determine-**

S: That's right. He said I could only have told someone who'd been there, that's what he said. That's why he needed to know that I'd had similar sort-of experiences before he could actually say it. Um, so I had to say it first because I had a feeling that that was what he wanted to say.

**I: Right.**

S: So I, I, I said it first and then he felt able that he could actually admit it. I mean there's not much I can do except be there for him if he wants to talk but you know...but I feel very privileged that I was the person that he told. I just hope that he does go on and that one day he does seek help. But at the moment he's in the state that I was in. I mean 10 years ago I would have said the same as him 'well I can do it myself, I don't need help, I can sort it out myself' um, and I did go quite a long way in sorting it out myself.

**I: So how did you do that? What process did you sort of go down?**

S: Oh...well I've always been interested in psychology, um, there was no formal process but I've always done a lot of self, you know, self exploratory thinking, you know, and trying to work out my own motives and- not in the way they get you to do in counselling which can be quite difficult. But um in my own way I did, I sort feelings out...I mean I can't say to Berne 'I've sorted this out or I'm trying to sort that out' because he'll say 'what exactly do you mean by that?' sometimes I could sock him one cos he wants to know every tiny little detail and it drives me nuts. He wants to make me angry you see, he really wants to make me angry, he wants me to be angry and I can't be angry unless I am angry. And I think he does those things deliberately to make me angry sometimes and it just doesn't work.

**I: Do you say that to him?**

S: I told him he did, he denied it but I know, I know I'm right. I said to him 'I think you're just...' 'oh no...' so I asked him directly 'do you say things to try and make me angry?' 'not that I'm aware of' so what can you do? And then a couple of weeks later I said to him 'I know you denied it but I know you do that' and he didn't say anything.

**I: Looking back, back to the time when you were being abused, um, what would you have liked to have seen happen in terms of being helped in some way?**

S: I'd have liked someone to have believed me....and made it stop. All I wanted was my mother to make it stop. You just can't, you've got nowhere to go, you're completely trapped in that situation. I just wanted it all to stop. I wanted a normal relationship with my dad. I wanted him to love me and cuddle me but not do that. But it was the only attention I ever got.

**I: Yeah, yeah.....at the time were you quite sure that the same things were happening with your sister?**

S: Well when it started she was very young, there's five years between us. Um, no it wasn't happening with my sister.

**I: Right.**

S: For a start she used to wet the bed all the time and I don't think he-...I mean she was disturbed, but she was disturbed because she felt that my father loved me and not her, not realising what was going on. Cos he didn't pay her much attention at all, and I think my mother tried to over compensate by giving her a lot more. She-my sister was very jealous of me cos she felt that my father loved me more than her, and she did absolutely anything to get me into trouble, anything to try and get my father to be annoyed with me. She'd do anything at all to come between us. But he wouldn't have dared touch her cos she'd have shouted to the rooftops, she wouldn't have thought of the consequences. I'm the type of person who thinks if I do this, this and this are going to happen. And I think about it and decide if I'm going to do it, in most cases most people do it without a thought. The only exception I've got to that is if the old plunge in without thought is if it's to protect somebody else. Like for instance if I saw someone being mugged I wouldn't give it a thought, I'd just go. I'd just plunge in and face the consequences later. But with anything else I tend to think what would happen, if it's a big thing for me to do.

**I: Yeah. Do you- have you ever wondered whether your mother knew about the abuse while it was actually happening?**

S: I've often wondered but I know she didn't.

**I: You know she didn't?**

S: Mmm, I used to wonder sometimes, but mostly I thought no she definitely didn't know, if she'd had done she'd have put me away straight away, if she'd have known.

**I: You mean she'd have blamed you?**

S: Oh absolutely, she would have blamed me definitely. If she'd have found out she would have definitely blamed me. I wouldn't have been in that house 5 minutes.

**I: Were you aware of that at the time, did you think-**

S: Oh yes I knew, I knew I'd be sent away..if it happened. Oh there were times I wanted to tell her but I was too terrified to tell her as well. I doubt she'd have believed me anyway but if she had done, everything was always blamed on me why should that be any different? I mean even my sister's bedwetting was blamed on me.

**I: That's something.**

S: Oh yeah, I got blamed for that too, because she took my sister to a child psychologist to find out why she wet the bed and the psychologist said she's doing it because she's jealous of her sister, so therefore it was my fault.

**I: What area of your life- I've asked you about how it impacted different areas- could you say an area that it had the biggest impact on?**

S: Hmm. I think the area I've told you about has, that's been a big impact because it's affected the whole of my life, trying to please others and it's had an impact on my sexuality in the sense that I did want it and I didn't worry about sleeping around, and the fact that I could keep, you know, going for sex thinking it was love. And I think probably it was the cause of a lot of that, and the fact that I think it has contributed to me making a lot of bad relationships, certainly didn't have a decent role model as a father, um, I was sort of grateful to any man who paid me some attention. Cos my mother as well, I mean she always told me that I was horrible, I was ugly, that no man would ever want me, I had a dreadful personality as well, I'd never be wanted, and never get married, and never have children cos I was so horrible no man could ever possibly live with me. And that was dinned into me from the time I was 18 months old...um, and I believed it. When, when I was in my teens I really believed I was some horrible person that nobody would ever have. And that of course was reinforced by the fact that the other children didn't like me and didn't want to know me and..other teenagers used to laugh at me because my mother always made sure I was dressed virtually in rags, um, or in very unsuitable clothing so I always got laughed at. Um, they never bought me much in the way of clothing, it was usually hand-me-downs and stuff, I mean I. it wasn't the fact that it was second hand it was just totally unsuitable. Like the time I was sent to the school dance in a dress that belonged to my mother's friend who was enormously fat and all she did was shorten the hem and I had to belt it in, I mean can you imagine what it looked like. Oh yeah, anything she could cover me with it didn't really matter you know, um so of course I believed I was not as good as everybody else. And you know, so you know if a man paid me attention I read it that it was my last possible chance you know in the world you know.

**I: Yeah, I see how that could work. Did your counsellor say anything particularly helpful, that's stuck in your mind?**

S: Not really, he- not really no. He, he just very into me getting to sort my feelings out. Um, he doesn't often say things that are particularly helpful, but once or twice he has. Mainly it was in the area of my sexual relationship with my present husband and he's made a few helpful suggestions but as far as the abuse is concerned he's not really said a lot about that. He's just always wanting me to describe my feelings about absolutely everything which is extremely difficult to do. I mean I end up totally confused, I do most of my thinking away from the counselling. I mean he may have given me food for thought and I think about it during the week, and maybe go back with something but while I'm actually there I'm sometimes completely screwed up. He, he, he can be very unnerving, he can sit there and watch me and watch every movement I make and often I feel like a specimen under a microscope, and I told him so because sometimes he's sort of staring at me and he'll say 'well you were sitting like this just now and now you're sitting like that this way. What does that mean?' or you're doing this. And I can't cope with that, I really can't cope with that.

**I: For you, it's not what you want analysed.**

S: No I don't. I mean he'll analyse my body language and even if he doesn't say anything I'm aware a lot of the time that he's actually doing that and it tends to inhibit me. It really does. Um, if only he'd be a little more relaxed, and if he does have to observe me he'd do it unobtrusively it would help. And I have told him this but..

**I: And how's he taken that?**

S: Oh, he, he, you never know how he takes anything, I mean he's one of these people who, I mean they're trained to aren't they. I could stand there and abuse him and he wouldn't say a word because- he'd probably be quite glad actually. I mean the only time I told him I was angry with him he said 'I'm glad you've said that' {laugh}

**I: I suppose he wants you to be.**

S: Yeah he wants me to be, he wants me to be. But sometimes I feel like just getting up and shaking him and saying 'for god's sake will you react' you know, because I mean, and I feel obliged to him because he's giving his time to me, I don't, I know I give a lot, sometimes too much, but I don't receive things very easily. I don't, sometimes I think he's giving me his time, he's committed himself to me for however long it takes and the least I can do is co-operate. I tend to be like that and..sometimes it's very hard to co-operate. I just wish he could be a little more informal because I don't react well to formal situations. I mean if you had been very cold and formal I could never have spoken to you, um, you know I just couldn't. And I think he's very professional but I think he tries too hard to be professional. And it's very very difficult.

**I: And is that something you've told him as well?**

S: Well more or less, yeah. I mean but he is what he is I suppose.

**I: I guess it's quite difficult, I mean if that's his demeanour then it's very difficult to change that.**

S: Yeah. I mean if he was able to laugh sometimes, I mean I know the work we're doing is serious but you can sometimes have a laugh but the only time he's ever done anything approaching humour it's usually very very heavy sarcasm and I'm never sure whether he's making a joke or putting me down. You know, I'm never sure you know. I've only, I think I've only twice seen him behave what I consider natural. And if there's one thing that really gets on his nerves it's public transport, and if- he comes by public transport- and if he gets a bit late, I've known him come in really annoyed and have a go about it. To me that's great because he's behaving naturally but he, then he gets worried in case it's affected my session. It hasn't, only to the good really because I'd rather talk to a human being. I feel he leaves Verna at the doorstep and comes in and puts a mask on, or whoever's there isn't him and I don't like that, I don't like that.

**I: No, no. I guess it doesn't feel like you're actually interacting.**

S: No. So it's a bit difficult. But some, but some weeks it's fine. Some weeks it goes really well and he's ok but it's very very difficult to.. But I, overall though it's helped.

**I: Ok, just- the last question I have anyhow is actually more of a general one, ah, I was just wondering what your view is on um, on what should happen to child sex abusers in general.**

S: Ooh. That's a difficult one, a very difficult one. I do not think they should be released into the community, I don't think they should. I don't mean to say that they should be banged up in a hostile environment forever and ever and ever. But I do really think they should be kept away from the public and if that means keeping them in prison for life then I think they should be. But not necessarily in a nasty environment prison. But I don't really think they can be cured, but then everyone's different. You can't sort of judge everyone in general, there may be people who could be released but um certainly those who have done it to a lot of children and it's sort of a habit, I mean people like my father probably could be released because they're the people who keep it in the family, they have problems of their own, they wouldn't dream of hurting anyone else's child and I don't think my father would have done um, for abusers like that probably some kind of psychological help would be enough but the other kind who seem to have you know make it a way of life you know enjoy it and don't even see anything wrong in it I think should be locked away for life quite honestly. But uh, you know, but uh that's not a revengeful thing, I'm not the sort of person to get revenge but I think society should be protected against those kind of things. But they're not all bad.

**I: Ok, thank you.**

End of interview

Transcription of the interview with Annie

26/03/99

**I: Okay, can you just start by telling me a bit about the abuse, how old you were when it started?**

A: Well, it's a bit difficult to say because there was a wide pattern of abuse really, that had been going on as long as I can remember, like being really small. I can't remember a time when some sort of abuse wasn't going on. There's just me and my mum so I can't remember a time from the time that I was remembering anything to the time I left home and beyond really, that there wasn't something going on all the time, so it kind of fitted into that. Even now my memory of it isn't great. I think a lot of the time I didn't understand a lot of what was going on. I think it was between the ages of 11 and 12, but it was a time I started developing. Up until then... my mum's not very right. She's not a particularly stable character, but she's a lot better now than she was. But she was very depressed from the time that I was a child. She would hardly ever get out of bed; she didn't work.

**I: Where was your dad?**

A: They split...well, my mum kind of kicked him out before I was born, so he just totally disappeared out of the scene, and he's still disappeared off the scene.

**I: You've never had contact with him?**

A: No, not at all. My mum was very depressed as a teenager. She was quite violent as a teenager. I have a younger uncle and an older uncle and they both talk about how weird she was. So I think that my family kind of stayed away from her; she's quite a scary person a lot of the time. So I was kind of living with that really. She was unwell. I was kind of looking after her from quite a young age, being aware that she couldn't look after herself. She lives in quite a strange world, everything's all upside down, like the smallest thing had the biggest significance to her, and really enormous things had no significance. So there was all of that going on all of the time to me.

**I: Was she violent to you?**

A: Yeah, well she wasn't violent to anybody else I'm aware of. It was only me. She was always very aggressive. I could do the smallest thing and she'd like fly into a rage. You know how some people when they're angry and they go from 0 to 10, but there's actually like 1 – 9 in the middle, but my mum goes from 0 to 10 with no warning. Like one minute she'd be fine, then I could say something or look at her the wrong way and I never knew what was wrong about it, and she'd be furious. And I could never figure out what it was that I had done. But I was always supposed to know – she would always act as if I knew, and I was just being really obtuse by not admitting I knew what the problem was. So I just kind of... like even to this day I never know where I stand with her a lot of the time. I have to be really careful and not look at her the wrong way; don't say the wrong thing because it just sparks something off.

**I: Even now? What would she do now?**

A: Well, she doesn't do it so much now, but she does get very angry very quickly, and immediately starts being quite vicious really. She finds the smallest thing that really upsets people and really digs... she can find your most hidden weakness really, and make it enormous. So that was kind of going on all of the time then. I wasn't particularly an early developer, but I think I must have been about somewhere between the ages of 10... I was probably around 11 actually, and I didn't have any friends. Well, I had like one or two friends, but I wasn't like a girlie girl. I was just too isolated to spend a lot of time with girls, so I was kind of like developing in a vacuum.

**I: Did you have any siblings?**

A: No, and my mum had spent lots of time when I was quite young telling me all men were bastards; they were going to do nothing but be evil; I had to be careful not to speak to men. And when I was quite young – I was definitely under the age of 10 – she had told me to be careful of men because I was going to get abused by them. And she was quite graphic in the way she described it. And it wasn't for years that I realised what she meant, and I remember at the time telling friends of mine who told their parents. And their parents were really shocked that anybody would say anything like that to a child. I mean, she described how a man was going to get an erection and what he was going to do with it. It didn't mean anything to me at all; it was all like someone talking to me in Greek. So I had no idea what she meant. So I just told other people, and other people obviously realised that was a bit weird. So I had already had all of that going on. My mum had quite a lot of relationships that seemed to come from nowhere – I'd come home and there'd be some man there. And there never seemed to be any build-up to it – she never seemed to know these men for any period of time. So she was always saying that they were all complete bastards, and I could never figure out why she was always going out with them.

**I: So there was a bit of conflict there?**

A: Yeah, and then I started developing. And I think the first thing that I... I don't know... I really loved my mum. I could remember a lot of the time saying that I really loved my mum, up to the time I was about 11, and then I never said it again after that. And I think, well what happened, what changed? And my first memory is... I must have been about 11 and I just started developing and I just started wearing a bra. And my gran, who is a real jumble sale queen, bought me all of these bras from a jumble sale that had been worn by millions of girls. And I was just meant to put them all on and see which one fitted, because they all fitted, because there was like nothing there – they were all flat-chest bras. And I remember being in my bedroom, and it's still the room in the house where my mum lives now – that would be my bedroom if I was still there. My mum was sitting on the bed and she was quite an invasive person with everything. I never had anything that she didn't have first. She never bought me like a toy. She always had to play with it until she was bored with it and then I would get it, and then it might be months down the line, not for a few days. If I ever had like a bag, she would use

the bag – then when I got it, it was when it was all scabby and horrible. So it was like everything of mine – it was like if I ever had clothes she had to see me in them before I could wear them anywhere. I couldn't have anything to myself. I remember being in my room and she said to me that she wants to check that I was developing properly, and I felt really awkward about it because my mum is one of those people who would wander about the house with no clothes on. I used to really hate it; it used to feel really invasive to me. And I would always like lock the toilet door and she'd always have the door open – all this kind of stuff. And I remember thinking that I felt really uncomfortable about it, so I had to take off my shirt, and she was kind of like touching my breasts, and I felt terrible. And I thought this is not right; I don't know anybody else who's done this. I had a couple of girl friends at that time who were at the same stage, and my experience with them and their families was that their families said nothing about it. They just didn't tell them anything about anything. Their mum just bought them a bra one day and that was the total of the conversation. But my mum was really into it, and I was like just really uncomfortable. And it was about that time that I was developing all over and she wanted me to take off my knickers so that she could see if I was developing normally, and I wouldn't do it. And I made a joke out of it, and I was like, no I don't want to, I don't want to. And she sort of started laughing about it, and then it stopped there. And I sort of went out but I felt terrible; I felt like quite shaky afterwards, because my mum had never done anything like that before, and I'd always been quite reserved, like physically anyway. I wasn't running around the house with no clothes on or in my underwear; I would always be dressed. My family was all the same – it was just my mum who was different. And I remember being out and seeing one of my... well, she was like a cousin... you know when your parents have friends, and they're your aunt, but they're not, that kind of thing. This girl who was kind of like my cousin, my mum had told her about it, and my friend was really shocked about it, but to her it was a big joke. And I was thinking, God that was awful – why did you tell her? So that was the first thing that I could remember.

**I: Had you not told anybody then?**

A: No, I didn't tell anybody about anything that happened because there was no point. There was all of the violence that was going on and the shouting. My mum once told me when I was about 7 that she was never going to talk to me again and then stormed off, and we were in the town, and I actually thought she really meant it. And I was following her and I was thinking, who's going to look after me; who's going to take me to school? And I remember that really vividly – who's going to feed me; am I going to have to go and live with my granddad, because there'd be no one to look after me? And she didn't speak to me for hours and hours. It was only when she calmed down, that I thought that she had changed her mind. It never occurred to me that she didn't mean it; I thought she meant it and changed her mind, rather than just said it. And a lot of the time, my other family members were there when there were things going on; if she was being really aggressive, and they would ignore it. And they ignored her being aggressive with them, so I learned quite early on that there was no point saying anything.

**I: Because you weren't going to get any help or...?**

A: Yeah, and like quite often my gran and her... my gran and granddad are separated, but not divorced. My gran and her partner and my granddad would say to me, like even when I was very small – like 6 or 7 – well you know what your mum's like; just ignore it and don't do anything to upset her. And I always thought it was me, that it was my fault that these things were happening. So I never said anything anyway, like even when she used to hit me, and there was not a week that went by that some form of violence wasn't going on. And there just never seemed to be any point telling people. Like one time she hit me in the face with her hairbrush when I was about 5, and I had this big red welt on my face, and I was ordered not to tell anybody how this had happened. But it was really obvious and it really hurt. And I was living at that time with my mum and my granddad and my youngest uncle, and they all knew what happened, but nobody said anything. So I didn't see any point in saying anything at all, so I didn't tell anybody about that. It just was... to me it was so horrible, I didn't want to say anything.

**I: Prior to that, had anything else sexual occurred?**

A: Not physically. There was just a lot of talk about how horrible men were and just a lot of invasive talk, like my mum going on obsessively about me starting my periods and developing. You know when you're that age, you just don't want to talk about it; you just want to be left alone. And it was more than all of my friends' parents had done. Mum was always going on about it. And it just seemed to be...it was like 'you will tell me won't you?' And it was just like I didn't want to have anything to do with it really at all.

**I: You don't really when it first happens, do you?**

A: No, well it really didn't mean anything to me. And then after that there were just sort of things... it's quite difficult really, I mean I have definite memories of things that happened, but it's quite difficult to describe them. There were a couple of times, around the time I was about 10 I used to sleep with my mum quite a lot because I was afraid of the dark. And after the age of ten I stopped doing it altogether; just one day I stopped doing it.

**I: On your choosing?**

A: Well, I just remember that I didn't do it anymore. And now, the thought of doing that really scares the life out of me, and even like having to share the same room with her I wouldn't want to do. And I remember one time my grandparents had come to stay, and they were sleeping in my mum's bed and my mum was sleeping in the bed with me, and I wasn't very happy about it. I remember that much – not being happy about it – I must have been about 11. When I was little I used to sleep in the same bed as my mum and we'd like be in the spoons position, and I used to wear like a like a T-shirt in bed and my mum had nothing on. I remember that, because she never wore anything in bed. I remember she'd put her hand up between my thighs and then there was some terrible commotion. I don't

really remember what happened after that, but I remember thinking I don't like this very much. And then my mum was out of the bed and then I had to go and have a bath, but it was never explained to me why I had to have a bath.

**I: She made you go and have a bath?**

A: Yeah, but it was like 3 in the morning – it was the middle of the night. It wasn't like early in the evening or anything. And she was going on and on and on about me being clean, and I remember thinking, what was that about? But it seems very vague to me now, but I definitely remember it happened. And what I do remember is after that, that whenever I slept I always had books at the end of the bed to keep spiders from getting in the bed. But I did that a lot more, and I put them all around me; I was like weighted down by books and toys, and I had this terrible fear of something getting in the bed to get me. And after that, I always slept with the back of my night dress pulled up between my legs like a nappy, and I did that for years and years until I left home. And I never kind of thought about it until the last 5 years, it didn't mean anything to me really. And there were just incidences like that. What I do remember is I was frightened to be in the house, I was frightened to go in the bathroom – I always locked the door, I never slept properly after that.

**I: Did you ever think about what might happen or not?**

A: How do you mean?

**I: Were you actually frightened about something specific or you're not quite clear what your fear was?**

A: I was frightened of my mum coming in. That's what I was frightened of. I mean I've been frightened of her beforehand, because if she was angry and she was downstairs and I was upstairs, I could tell by the sound of her feet on the stairs that she was angry. And I used to pretend to be asleep, so that she'd burst into my room being angry about something, that I would be asleep and that she wouldn't do anything, but that kind of never worked. So I was frightened of her anyway. But after sort of that incident of her being in the bed with me, I was just frightened full stop. And I would lock the door whenever I went to the toilet or whenever I was in the bathroom. I didn't want to be in the bathroom. I never took my clothes off in front of her again and I never got undressed in front of her again. I didn't want her to see me in my underwear again and I didn't want her in my room. She quite often came in, like really early in the morning when I was asleep. And she'd knock on the door and then she'd come straight in, so it wasn't like I could keep her out. The bathroom was behind the wall of my bedroom, so the head of my bed was up against the wall. So if she was in the bathroom, I couldn't sleep; I couldn't like shut my eyes; I couldn't move and I'd just lie there, because I was waiting for her to come in. And I went on holiday with her when I was a teenager, and we had to share the same room, so I couldn't sleep for a week. I just laid there awake the whole time, because I was frightened that she would like come in. I wouldn't hold her hand after that ever. I didn't want her to touch me after that; I still don't like her to kiss me. Just last year on my birthday, we went out into London for the day. We went to the cinema and we had to sit next to each other and I couldn't watch

the film I was so worried about being sat next to her. If I could have sat at the other end of the cinema without it causing an argument, I would have done it, but I couldn't. I didn't want to walk next to her. When I'm with her, it's like I can't turn my back on her. I wouldn't be in my pyjamas in the same room as her. I can't sleep if she stays at my house and I can't sleep if I'm at her house.

**I: Did it ever go any further than the hand between your thighs and her touching your breasts that time?**

A: It's difficult, because I think a lot of it I kind of squished out of my mind. I mean, I do... well, I just remember like lots of touching going on. Like I remember a lot of time I'd be, if I was in the kitchen, and I had kind of got up and come downstairs in my night dress, if I turned my back on her, she'd often pinch my bottom. But I didn't like it and she knew I didn't like it, because I made a really big deal of it. I was like, stop it, stop it. And nobody else in my family did that, but she always did that to me. It was like the more I told her to stop, the more she did it and the more funny she found it. And I'd be like, get off, leave me alone. And then she'd get angry because I was being stroppy.

**I: Did it make you feel uncomfortable?**

A: Yeah, it got to the point where I wouldn't actually turn my back on her, or I would pull my night dress right down when I bent over, so there was... there was a lot of that. Other than that... I mean, it's difficult to say really. I mean, I have sort of vague memories, but they're so vague it's taken such a long time to like recall those ones, the rest of them seem quite vague. I mean, I do actually have... all these numerous boyfriends, most of whom were married or really bizarre guys, and she had one bizarre boyfriend, who she really detested, I mean she hated him, and I just don't know why she went out with him. I have memories of things that happened with him that weren't right, and she must have known about them. He would take me swimming every weekend, and I wasn't allowed to not go; I couldn't say no to going. My mum couldn't go, and nobody else could go, only me and him. And I couldn't go with anybody else, but if on Saturday I wanted to go with someone else and not him, that was not allowed.

**I: Why was that?**

A: Well, I don't know. It was never explained; it was just not allowed, and I wasn't allowed to ask. And one time I was allowed to take one of my friends, and she came and he was very angry the whole time that I had gone with anybody other than him, but he'd come. And when we went together, I wasn't allowed to talk to anybody. I had to spend the whole time with him, and I remember thinking that was really strange, because he didn't actually know me at all, and it happened quite quickly on. And we went on holiday with him and nobody else was allowed to talk to me, and he was very mean to me. He was often very rude and swore at me a lot, and my mum did nothing – she never stopped him doing that. Anybody else, like a member of my family sort of had a cross word to say to me, she'd go berserk. And I remember him trying to teach me to swim, and that was kind of a lot of hands-on stuff, and I remember he would never let me go when I was in the

pool. He always had his arms around me; he was always holding onto me. He was always trying to get me to float. It was very kind of bizarre to me. I mean, I think about it and I feel very uneasy about it, and I don't know why I feel uneasy about it, but I do. It just felt not right to me then, and it seemed very strange to me that my mum, even at that time, that my mum would let me go with him, because she didn't even like him and she didn't want to spend any time with him. She was always going on about what a beast he was, only I was allowed to go swimming with him. And if I said I don't want to go, that was a really big deal... why don't you want to go?? And I sometimes think that it kind of took the pressure off her. If he did things with me, then he wouldn't do things with her – that's what I think; that's what I feel.

**I: What are the areas of your life do you think all that affected, being abused by your mother?**

A: Well, all of them really. I think when I was about 15 I had a nervous breakdown. I mean, it's only in the last couple of years, since I've had another one, that I realised that I've had one before. By the time I was about 16 I was just a nervous wreck really. I couldn't have any friends; I couldn't relate to people; I just felt like an alien compared to everyone else. I was worried about everything; I had terrible anxiety. I just couldn't relax; I couldn't do anything. I couldn't eat; I couldn't sleep. I was frightened of everybody; I thought everybody hated me and I thought I was just the worst person in the world. I thought I was responsible for everybody's problems, because my mum told me I was quite often. She'd say that I made everybody in my family totally miserable – quite often about things to do with her. If there'd been a big family row, it was nearly always about something that she had done, but it was my fault, that it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been there or said something. So, when I look at it now, I lived in complete fear of her. I was so, so terrified of her that I couldn't do anything. I didn't do anything that other girls did; I didn't have any girl friends. I didn't do any experimenting of clothes or makeup. I didn't have any boyfriends; I never went out anywhere; I stayed in the whole time – I never went out of the house.

**I: Why was that?**

A: I wasn't allowed to go out basically.

**I: Were you allowed to have friends?**

A: I was. I mean, when I say I wasn't allowed to go out, I wasn't actually locked indoors; it was just made known that it wasn't acceptable. If I wore... the times that I wore makeup or tried to wear like sort of girlie clothes, it was either looked down upon as like, look at all those vacuous women doing that, or it was like I looked like a tart. So I was going to invite the attention of men. I remember there was a time when skirts with splits up the side were really fashionable, and I wasn't allowed to wear them, even though everybody I knew was wearing them, because dirty old men were going to come after me if I did. And it was just that I knew that it was not acceptable. The times that I had stayed out, even half an hour late, I would come home and the police would be at the house. She'd called the police

out. One time, I went out with my friend's parents and I came home and there was a police car in the drive and I knew that she had called the police, and my friend's parents made a joke of it, not realising that it was real. I got in there and two police were there. My mum was so angry, they left and I thought she was going to kill me, and she'd hit me a lot at that point. And she like sort of hit me with things, and she would like start and I thought she would never stop. And my granddad came round because she had phoned him, and it was only him coming into the house that stopped her like attacking me. So I was just kind of... there was no point doing anything, because that's what that anger was going to bring about. And when I was about 17 or 18 I once left the house without saying goodbye on the way to school and she rang the school and made me come home, but without explaining. When I got home, she had smashed my bedroom and there was this massive ? about what a terrible person I was, and how I'd upset everybody and I treated everybody like shit. That's why I had no friends and I was so upset I didn't say anything; I just wanted to get out of the house. When I tried to leave the house, there was this enormous argument in the passageway between our house and our neighbour's house, and she was like pulling my... I had long hair... and she was pulling my hair. She pulled a chunk of my hair out; she punched me in the face, nearly grabbed my jaw. My neighbours came out and she told them to all fuck off. She was dragging me back up the stairs by my hair back into the house. And then she like told me I could move out if I didn't like it, and she would help me and I could go today. And I ended it by apologising that I was a terrible person, then it was all forgotten and then it was a joke. And then it was like wasn't that funny what really happened? And then she told my uncle about it. And years later he said he told me how horrified he was, that she actually thought it was quite funny and that I thought it was funny, and that I had realised it was a joke and she hadn't meant to lose control like that. So I just kind of knew there was no point in disagreeing with her, because she's the sort of person, if you disagree with her you're... well, no a better way of putting it is if you don't agree, you are trying to disagree. Does that make sense? So you can't win. If you agreed with her she'd say, well you're only agreeing with me because of... so I couldn't win either way. I couldn't agree or disagree. So I never did anything because there was no point. There was no point going out, no point having friends, no point trying to do anything. And also as well, because I knew she'd be so invasive, anything I had she always wanted. So I couldn't have any friendships without her being intimately involved in them. I would never have taken a boy home because I was worried about what she would say or do. I didn't have any makeup because she always took it, so there was no point in having anything.

**I: What about as you've gotten older, what areas of your life has it affected?**

A: Well, I left home at 18 when I went to live abroad, then I came back when I was 19 and then I moved to Brighton. And initially, things got a lot better for me. I felt a lot happier in myself; I made friends. I had a lot of suicidal thoughts, but I stopped having them for quite a long time. I was able to sleep; I felt a lot better about myself. I'd have intermittent bouts of terrible depression, but they were actually quite frequent. I mean, when I say intermittent, it's like one a week instead of every day. And that probably went on for about 4 or 5 years, and usually a couple of times a year there'd be some big blow-up with my mum, where

I'd end up being plunged... I mean I couldn't see her without terrible fear for a couple of weeks beforehand, like building up to seeing her. Then I'd see her and it would be a disaster, and then there'd be weeks of me trying to recover, I just couldn't do anything for myself at all. But generally it seemed to get better. I think that's because I was physically away from her.

**I: Why did you still see her?**

A: Because I thought it was my fault basically. I thought that...

**I: You were still thinking that?**

A: Yeah, I mean I thought if I could just... and I did many times say to her, the reason I'm miserable is I'm just a miserable person; it's nothing to do with me. When I was 25 I wrote this long letter apologising for being such a terrible daughter and trying to sort it all out, and that made me feel better for a little while, because I thought I was doing something about it. But I just thought it was me. I just thought I was a terrible person. I mean, I knew something wasn't right with her, but I thought it was my fault. And she'd often said to me that it was my fault anyway.

**I: Okay, when did you first tell anyone about the sexual side of this abuse?**

A: Not until this year, because about two years ago I had the other nervous breakdown. It was more severe because I was an adult, and it got to the point where I couldn't do anything. I was like having a permanent anxiety attack. I couldn't go out of the house.

**I: Where did that arise from, do you know?**

A: It took about three years to come on, but I was working... I'm a nurse, and I worked at one place for a while and I worked with a woman who was really nice. She was really supportive. And then I moved jobs and I started to work for a woman who reminded me a lot of my mum, like being very rude and aggressive all the time, and I think it started then. And I just noticed over a period of about three years, I stopped having friends, I stopped going out. One thing that struck me immediately is I realised that I hadn't done my accounting for a whole year, when I was very assiduous about that. Just small things, and then it got worse and worse to the point where I couldn't actually do anything. All the things, like I was involved in a lot of projects at work and I had to stop doing them because I physically couldn't do them – I felt nearly sick just at the thought of doing them. It's like my whole life just fell apart really, and all I could do was go to work, and small problems became enormous. And I stopped sleeping altogether, and I'd go home from work and I'd just be panicking about what had happened the day before, then I'd go back to work still panicking about it. I mean, I can't really describe it in a way that probably makes it understandable to someone else. But it was like I was in a permanent state of anxiety, to the point where I thought I was going to go mad and I thought something terrible was going to happen if I didn't get some help. And up to that point some of my friends knew that I had a bad

relationship with my mum, but they didn't really know why. And I often downplayed it; I would often talk about terrible instances and I would like joke about them, as if they were funny, when actually they weren't, because I didn't know how to tell anybody about it, because I didn't think they'd believe me. I thought they would just think, oh she's being dramatic.

**I: Why don't you think they'd believe you?**

A: I don't know why. I think because... the strange thing is if other people had told me about similar events, I thought they were terrible – I'd think, oh that's awful. But I just thought because it was me, that they weren't bad. I think it's because I thought I was a terrible person; that it didn't make any difference.

**I: Because you've been told this before?**

A: Yeah, I know I obviously brought it on myself, you know, I deserved all these things to happen to me. And eventually it got to the point where I was so disabled by depression, I thought I was going to die at one point – I just couldn't get any worse. And I thought it would be better if I was dead because one, no one would care if I was dead; everybody would be pleased, but I would stop suffering. And I eventually went to my GP, and I just kind of went on and on, and she just said, well you have depression, and I was so relieved. And I thought, oh thank God there's something wrong with me and I'm not crazy, and she said to me, you will get better. And to me, that was the most important thing anyone had ever said to me, that I would get better. She didn't say anything else; that was all she said – you can get better. And I thought, oh thank God, I'm going to get better. Then I started going to counselling and I've been going ever since really, for about two years. I saw one person for about 6 weeks, and I've been seeing a woman ever since then. I talk to her a lot about the violence that went on and all the kind of other things that went on for quite a long time. But I just couldn't talk to her about any of the sexual things because I was so mortified about them. I was so embarrassed; I was so ashamed about them. And I could allude to it, kind of in a vague way. I often felt quite frustrated that she didn't realise what I was talking about. I would start like these little fish, and I would hope that she would grab them, but she never did. Then eventually she said to me, I feel like you're trying to tell me something but I don't know what it is. But it took me ages to say anything.

**I: Why was it so difficult do you think to talk about the sexual things?**

A: Because I was mortified basically. I don't know, I just felt so awful about them. I just felt really ashamed, and I thought it was my fault. And I felt it was easy for people to believe that I'd been smacked about or been shouted at, or been told I was terrible than for people to think that I had been molested. And also because I didn't look like someone who'd been abused. You know, outwardly I was quite successful... I'm like a professional person; I own my own home, you know I always seem to be the life and soul of the party, but a lot of the time I was really miserable. All the time I'd be happy and joking and I was always taking on other peoples' problems and giving the advice, although a lot of the time I felt shit

myself. And I didn't think that she would be interested and I didn't think she'd believe me.

**I: Did she?**

A: Yeah and I was... I don't know why I was surprised when she did, but she didn't like question it at all. And I think because I couldn't say... I mean, a friend of mine was molested by her stepfather for six years, and because she could remember definitely; she could remember dates and times, but to me it seemed a lot more vague, and I thought because it was vague that it wasn't important. And also because people that know me now didn't know me then, and it was like they just have me to believe. And I was kind of frightened that if I told them, they might actually at some point ask somebody in my family about it, and my family would deny it and that would be it. It was like, if someone else denied it, the fact that I said it happened wouldn't make any difference.

**I: You think they would believe the other person?**

A: Yeah.

**I: Have you ever brought it up with anybody in your family or your mother?**

A: No, not at all. I mean like the violence in my family I did bring up with one of my uncles because he's about six years younger than my mum and he had experienced it from her. And he lives abroad, and I went to visit him and his wife and we just started talking about my mum, and he started talking about loads of experiences that I had had. And then he started talking about things that he knew had happened to me, and that he felt bad that he had done nothing about it, but he didn't know what to do. And that kind of changed my whole idea about what had been going on, and then I realised that all of my family actually knew and it was just like a conspiracy of silence really. And I still feel like they're all colluding, that it's easier for them to collude with my mum than to accept what they know, because my mum is so... I think they fear her reaction more than they fear my depression. And I remember once saying to my counsellor that it's easier for me to believe that they didn't see anything, rather than for me to believe that they saw it and did nothing about it. Sometimes I want to ask them, did you think I was a normal child?... because when I look back, I wasn't a normal child at all. I was miserable all the time; I was uncommunicative; I was aggressive a lot of the time; I had no friends; I had no boyfriends at all. And I think, did they really think that was normal?... because they never asked me, why haven't you got any boyfriends; and why aren't you going out with your friends? It's just like completely non-conversation and to me it's unbearable to think that they saw it and did nothing, and thought, I just don't want to go there; I don't want to ask what the problem is.

**I: Are you angry about that?**

A: It's quite difficult because I think a lot of the time I find it quite difficult to feel anything. I think I've squashed it down so far that I don't feel a lot of things.

Yeah to some members of my family. I'm not angry towards my youngest uncle because I think he was on the receiving end of it as much as I was, and he was not in a position to say anything; and a couple of times he did say things and he was told by my grandparents to just leave it alone because it would create more problems. I'm angry with my gran because I think that she colluded with my mum, and there were several instances... there were several massive rows in my family that occurred between my mum and my gran over something to do with me, when my mum was really violent to me and my gran observed it and just ignored it – and I'm angry about that, because later on down the line she talked about it in a way that made me feel that I was responsible for it. If only I hadn't said this; if only I hadn't done that, it would not have happened, but the truth is it would have happened anyway. With my granddad, it's a bit more difficult to be angry with him because I think he's kind of... he's a bit of an emotional cripple really. It's easier for him to give me ten pounds than it is for him to talk about feelings. And when I was little, he used to take me out every weekend. He'd take me to the zoo and he spoiled me. I think it was because he didn't know what else to do, and I kind of feel like he didn't know what to do, so that's what he did. Sometimes I think, I wish you hadn't done that; I wish you'd said to my mum don't hit her, because it's wrong – you shouldn't hit her; don't shout at her; don't tell her she's a horrible person. Just a couple of years ago I took my mum and my granddad out at Christmas; we went out to dinner and a row occurred between... well, my mum had a row with me; I didn't have a row with her. But she got very angry and she called me a fucking bully in this restaurant really loudly. And everybody turned round, and all I'd done was offer her a glass of wine, and said that I had taken her out and that I was going to pay for it, so I didn't care if it cost like £10 a glass. But she said, I don't want it; don't be such a fucking bully. And my granddad just looked at the floor the whole time. And I was so upset that I couldn't... I was shaking for the whole rest of the meal, and even talking about it makes me feel really shaky. And I thought... you know, I felt awful because I know it made him feel awkward, but he said nothing. I mean, it was like it's easier for him to look at the floor rather than say, oh calm down – she's only offering you a glass of wine. It's like he didn't want to bring that on himself; he didn't want her anger on himself. He'd rather it was just on me.

**I: Okay, yeah I want to come back to that, but I just want to ask about the counselling. Is that the only counselling you've had then?**

A: Yeah.

**I: Okay, and no other therapy or...?**

A: No, not at all.

**I: Have you ever attended any support groups?**

A: No, I haven't and the reason I haven't is because I kind of... and I think though logically I know it's not true, it's like my feeling is that everybody else's abuse is worse than mine. And I don't want to go there because I'd feel a real fraud, because everybody else would be talking about things... you know, lots of... you

know, it going on for long periods of time, or lots and lots of events, or more than one person, or you know, it just being worse than mine, and I would feel terrible about going. And I don't know... using that whole group really.

**I: Do you still feel that... are you talking about the sexual side of it?**

A: Yeah.

**I: Right, okay. And you still feel that now?**

A: Yeah, though I know it's illogical, that's still in my mind; I still feel that, yeah.

**I: What would you have liked to have happened at the time that the abuse occurred, when you were a child?**

A: I would have liked someone in my family to have stopped it actually. I would have liked someone in my family to say to me that... I wanted them to ask me what was wrong or ask me if I was happy, because they never asked me if I was happy, they never asked me if everything was all right or if anything was wrong. And I think what I would really have liked is after terrible events for them to come back and say they knew it was terrible, that they were sorry, but they never did. And they were only ever referred to again as a joke, or something that was really small. And one example of that – when I was about 12 I went to stay with my gran, and my gran had a savings account for me, and she'd amassed quite a lot of money – about 180 quid... it was quite a long time ago. And she gave the book to me and she transferred the account to the town where I lived rather than the town where she lived. And she told me not to tell my mum about it, because my mum would spend all the money. And I felt so awful about this secret that I got home and I told my mum. And the reason I told her is because I didn't think she would spend all my money, but I knew that if she found out about it, she would go wild. So I told my mum about it and she went wild. She phoned up my gran immediately I got home... well no, I had to phone my gran and say to her that she was never going to see me again. And my mum was standing about as far away as you are screaming abuse down the phone, to the point where I couldn't actually hear what my gran was saying, because my mum was screaming so loudly. She took the phone from me and slammed it down, then she started having a go at me like, why would she say that; what have you been telling her about me? And then she said, well she's a horrible woman; she's evil. And then she started going on about these terrible things that she had done to my mum when she was little and how my mum had been really ill because of her... and 'you never have to go there again if you don't want to... I'm never going to let you go and see her again; she's a horrible woman.' And then she took the bankbook and took control of the account, and I never saw the money, and that's because she did spend it – she spent all my money, which is not the point, but she spent it. And when I asked her where it was, it was a big problem. It was like - you've already spent it... I've spent it on you. I never knew what she spent it on. But whenever that was referred... my gran wrote to me after saying 'I never meant for this to be this big argument,' or 'I didn't realise it was going to cause...'. And it was like the whole theme through the letter was if you'd said nothing, this would not have happened, or look what type of row

you've caused. And to this day, it's never been mentioned again – only in terms of 'that little argument we had,' when in actual fact it was an enormous argument; it was huge. My mum and gran didn't speak for six months, but now it's like the tiniest thing, like someone spilled a cup of tea, rather than... I felt terrible about it. So what I wanted was for people to say that was judgemental and I'm really sorry that happened, and I'm sorry that I put you in that position, that that never happened. And now I don't want them to say anything. They could say they're sorry to me until they're blue in the face and it wouldn't make any difference, and that's why I don't talk to my mum about it – because I don't care to, to be honest, because nothing she could say could make it any better. And my fear is that she would deny it.

**I: And why do you fear that?**

A: Because that's what she did previously.

**I: And how does it make you feel when she denies it?**

A: In a way, it kind of makes me feel like it didn't happen. When I was very depressed, what I actually felt was that actually I was fine; there was nothing wrong with my life, nothing terrible had happened to me, I was just overreacting. So whenever she denies anything, that's how I feel. But the point is I know it's not true, but it still makes me feel that way. So I don't want to get into a position where I'm going to feel that way. I think now my mum knows the cat is out... proverbially, when I was first diagnosed with depression as an adult, I told her. I don't know why... I didn't want to tell her, but I did. And I think it was because I wanted her to sweat about it; I wanted her to think why is my daughter depressed; what's happened to her? And initially she thought it was about work, and then one day I told her it wasn't about work, but I didn't tell her what it was about. And now when I have conversations, it's very much along the lines of 'how are you feeling? Are you feeling better after...?' She said to me 'if there's anything you want to talk to me about, you can always talk to me.' And I thought that's a bloody joke, because I can't. And one time she asked me if it was anything to do with her, and I said no. Not because that was true, but because I didn't want to go there.

**I: You didn't want to discuss it?**

A: No, and actually I want her to figure it out – it's kind of like I want her to sweat as much as I've sweated. But a lot of time I didn't know where I was with her; I didn't know what was going on in her mind. It was like now I want her to feel the same.

**I: Did the counsellor ever say anything that was particularly helpful for you? I'm thinking more along the lines of when you disclosed the sexual abuse.**

A: Yeah, I mean first of all, the most helpful thing was that she didn't say anything actually at first. She didn't say, are you sure that happened, or sort of ask me to confirm it – she just accepted it. That was the most important thing. And then she

said it was unacceptable, which I kind of knew it was, but I didn't feel that. I mean, that was the main thing really – her saying to me that it was unacceptable and that it shouldn't have happened: that my mum shouldn't have done that, and that it was my mum's choice to do that, and that she made a very bad choice, and that she could have chosen to not do that, and that there are lots of other parents that choose not to do that.

**I: Did she ever say anything that was actually quite unhelpful?**

A: No, she's never said anything to me that's been unhelpful actually.

**I: Have you told any friends or anybody else about the sexual abuse?**

A: Yes, once when I was about 20. I was with two friends of mine, and I said my mum abused me when I was a child, and that was it, and I never said any more about it. And that was it, and that's what I was referring to... I don't think that's what they got from it, but that's what I was referring to.

**I: You think they could have interpreted that as physical or emotional abuse?**

A: Yeah, but no... I mean, I've never anybody about any of the abuse actually, apart from in the vaguest terms – that I would say, my mum was very aggressive, she was very unstable, she was depressed. But I've never said to anybody that I was depressed. I didn't want anybody to think that I was unstable; I didn't want people to think I was crazy. And my biggest fear was that if I told people about it, they'd all be going, oh Annie's a bit unstable... we've got to be careful... we've got to pussyfoot around her... or I wish you'd never told me that. I didn't want to burden those people anyway. And to me, there never seemed a right time... I mean, there never seemed to be enough time. I kind of felt like I had to tell everybody everything that happened, from the first thing I can remember to the last thing that happened, and it took me such a long time to do that with my counsellor. And I thought, nobody's got two years... who's got two years to listen to me going on? Nobody. It didn't occur to me that I could just say to someone, I was abused as a child...and they would actually know what that meant. I mean, it's only recently that I... when I first was diagnosed with depression I told four people at work, the four people I trusted the most. I didn't tell them why I was depressed, but I told them I was depressed. Simply that if I called in sick, they would know why I was sick, rather than me saying I have diarrhoea or something infectious, they would know. I didn't tell anybody else at all. It took me a long time to tell my friends, and it's only recently that I told someone else that I was depressed and I just said that, and they were really upset about it – they were like, oh God, I didn't know. And I was really amazed that they would actually have any response to it, with me saying such a small amount about it. But it's been very difficult for me to tell anybody really.

**I: And so in detail, the therapist is the only person you've really told?**

A: Yeah

**I: Okay, only one other question that I was going to ask, which was back on the effects that it had on you and I just wanted to know if... because what we're talking about is sexual abuse... whether that had any impact in terms of sexual relations, sexuality, attitude to sex, etc?**

A: Yeah, in terms that I haven't had any basically. I have not had any long-term relationships at all. I've had four sexual partners and they've all been over very, very quickly – started quickly, over quickly. The last one, it was over quickly because the amount of time we were together in the same country was very small, and that was the only one that was even vaguely rewarding to me. The others were all unrewarding me or... well, I felt quite used really. I felt like I was just a load of body parts rather than a person. I mean, I've never questioned my own sexuality. I've had quite a lot of difficulty expressing myself sexually with myself or anybody else, mainly because my mum is such an... it's like my mum, until last year, has been like a little demon floating around my head. She's with me wherever I go, so she's with me in my own house. And I couldn't have any sexual experiences on my own, without her being there, and that made me uncomfortable. In fact, all of my... you know, I've seen them, I really fancy them, and like when I'm sort of walking around I think, oh I really fancy him. But like when it comes to like masturbating it would always be that my mum would come into my head and then I would have to stop. And then I was worried about conditions... I once saw this documentary about a man who had... his sexual fantasies were all about abusing people, and then he actually went on and did it. And I was so worried about conditioning my brain to respond to things that I didn't like, that that's what I would end up doing, that I would end up abusing someone. So I didn't want to do it. And it's taken me a long, long time to get that out of my head. I could never relax at all in any kind of sexual sense with a man.

**I: Because your mum...**

A: Because my mum was in my head the whole time. I didn't mind doing things to people, but I couldn't bear to be touched... I mean, it was physically uncomfortable. Even when I really liked them, I just couldn't bear it. It was just awful to me, and I couldn't relax. And I think it's because I associated any kind of sexual response with being abused. The two were so interlinked that I couldn't associate it with anything else. And it's been... and I think I've stayed away from it because of that, the fear of that really. The fear of one) being overwhelmed, because my mum was so overwhelming in my life that I never wanted anything like that again, and two) because I kind of figured that that's what... I think in my mind, it's only recently that I realised this, that I've stayed away from all... every time I'm with a man and there's any hint that he might be even vaguely interested in me, I'm full of fear. Because I kind of feel that that's where it's going and I don't want to go there. And the last relationship I had was someone that I really liked and that I actually knew beforehand, and it felt a lot... previously to that my relationships with men have been either like where I or they or both of us have been drunk at a party. Or where when I was living abroad, I met a man and he showed an interest in me and I was so grateful that any man would show an interest in me, I completely threw all of my defence mechanisms out the window and ended up being assaulted by him. So they weren't good experiences. My last

one with a man I actually met, and he liked me and I liked him, but even when we did sleep together, I couldn't relax because that was in my mind the whole time, and it kind of soured... I kind of carried all of that information over and it poisoned the whole experience for me. And the whole time that we were together, I was trying to get him to tell me that he really liked me, rather than I was just a sum total of body parts that he wanted to use because there was nobody else available. And I think he didn't understand what I was saying – I think he was there the whole time thinking, what are you talking about? And I was like, no I really need to know that you like me, that I'm not just a... that I didn't throw myself at you, that I wasn't the only one available. And like now, I'm just trying to get that out of my mind so much and it's been very difficult, and I didn't even know it was going on for a long time. It just occurred to me that that was normal for me and that I was just mixed up in the mind. I never thought that that had been put in my head, that I had been made to think that way, I mean, to the point where I can't take my clothes off in front of anybody, unless I'm at the gym or something and it's totally non-sexual there. But I mean, I think if I was with a man, it's like I'm a lights-off person... it's like I felt totally disgusted with myself, really disgusted with my body that I like I didn't want anybody else to have any sort of communication with it at all. And the way I feel when I'm with a man is the same way that I feel when I'm in my mum's house – actually like frightened, I don't want anybody near me, I don't want anybody to touch me. Even if in my mind I feel differently about it... if I'm with a man and I think, yes I really like him and I really want to be with you and just be in the moment... it feels like a little voice in my head saying... you know, not like hearing voices, but a little voice in my ear saying, you know what they're all after, and you're really disgusting, and they don't really care about you, and you've got no right to have this.

**I: Okay, I'm going to just stop it here.**

A: Okay.

End of Interview

Transcription of the interview with Jeff

26/11/98

**I: Well to begin with, thank you very much for contacting me and agreeing to be interviewed and, again, thank you for agreeing to have it tape recorded. Um I guess to begin with, I mean start wherever you feel most comfortable, but if we could start with maybe how old you were at the time-**

J: Uh I was between the ages of 8 and 10, or 8 and 9 and a half. For about 18 months...um...I was the third of four children, I was a difficult one to er sleep at night and stuff like that, and er..my mum got a job working for the American embassy which meant she had to work nights so my father was also working nights...so I was babysat, or stayed over at uh one of my mum's friend's house, woman called Ruth, who within a few weeks started...things, you know...and it just went on from there.

**I: Were you the only one out of your, was it brothers or sisters?**

J: Brothers.

**I: Were you the only one out of the four of you to stay at this woman's house?**

J: Yes, yeah.

**I: What happened to the others?**

J: Uh, well my oldest brother was 17 at the time so he you know looked after the younger other two, no problems. But I was always seen as the problem like, you know nightmares and things like that, bit of a mummy's boy. So Ruth very kindly offered to er put me up for four or five nights a week.

**I: Did um did you tell your mum about-**

J: No.

**I: Do you remember why not, what were your thoughts around that?**

J: Well it was drilled into me that...that what I was doing was wrong but it was wrong because I wanted to do it. Um, so I felt very guilty, it was also a big secret you know....

**I: What sort of things did Ruth tell you, what sort of things did she say to you to keep you quiet or whatever?**

J: Well there were things like if I didn't behave myself then my mum and dad would have me staying round at Ruth's permanently, you know, which was a terrible thought, really bad. Uh, she said my mum would be disgusted with me for wanting to do these things, which I never wanted to do in the first place. Um,

things like that, just little pressures all the time, you know permanent drip, drip, drip of atrisions.

**I: Did it go on everytime you went round to hers?**

J: Just about.

**I: So it was happening several times a week then?**

J: Yeah. [long pause] sorry, I'm not the most responsive, I find it a difficult subject to talk about.

**I: I'm not surprised at all, I think it's a very difficult subject to talk about. It really is. When did you first tell anyone about it?**

J: Uh, about..four years ago. I was being seen by a psychiatrist in Devon, that's where I was living at the time, and uh I can't even remember what sparked it off but something started me thinking about it, and I started thinking more and more about it, and I just didn't feel I could tell anyone, um, so I attempted to commit suicide, slashing through my veins and all that sort of thing and when I came out of the actual hospital and went back to the mental hospital Robert, who was the doctor, spent a couple of hours with me and eventually it all came tumbling out. His advice at the time was to not to go into any kind of psychoanalyst or anything like that

**I: Oh really, how come?**

J: He thought it was better that, because it had been buried for 25 years to leave it buried you know. And at the time cos I was having a lot of other problems I couldn't face up to it anyway, I felt terribly vulnerable about loads of things, my parents had just died, going through a divorce, I'd just lost my job, you know it's all sort of- there was so much going on I just didn't want to face the other problem, um, I turned to alcohol in a big way, uh, very severe alcoholic for about 3 years but uh since I started attending chase farm I've been going to uh the EADAT, you know the East Anti Drug-Alcohol Team, whatever, and I've managed to stay pretty much, pretty much sober which has meant the problems have come back cos the buffer zone has disappeared you know. Uh, there's other drugs so I'm on quite heavy medication now, but it doesn't really help. I think the only way to really help is to turn and face the whole thing and you know have the courage to- see intellectually I know I was not at fault, I know that totally, emotionally. I still feel everything she told me you know....so it's going to be a difficult process.

**I: Yeah it will be. I mean you know you've actually now started to talk about it which is the first step.**

J: That's a big first step.

**I: It's a huge first step.**

J: Yeah I talked to my nurse at the hospital about it and she's the one who's setting up the child abuse and that sort of thing, she's very good. Um, so I know it's going to be a hard couple of months but I think it will be a worthwhile couple of months at the end of it you know.

**I: Yeah, once you start working through it...so apart from the psychiatrist and the nurse, you haven't actually talked to- gotten any other help?**

J: No

**I: Around it at all?**

J: No.

**I: Now, this is a really difficult question as I know it's very difficult to separate from other issues in life but could you say what areas of your life that the abuse affected the most?**

J: I think it affected my self-confidence, um, I always put on an impression of being a very confident person but I guess I was very unconfident, um, it gave me very low self-esteem, you know I didn't think I was worth loving and all that sort of thing, uh, and to a degree it's affected my sexual relations with women. I've been fortunate cos there's very few women that have wanted me to do the things that Ruth wanted me to do so that's you know not too bad.

**I: When you talk about um lack of confidence and low self-esteem was that when you- at that time or is this as you got older?**

J: As I was growing up.

**I: What about at the time, anything else, or other relationships, or any issues that affected you then?**

J: I became a lot more withdrawn um I didn't talk very much or whatever. They just put it down to me as being a moody child you know. In those days people just didn't- it didn't happen you know.

**I: Did you ever fear you wouldn't be believed?**

J: Yeah I did.

**I: You did.**

J: She was an adult and I was a child, and again you're talking about the 60's now, I know it was all flower power and all that but when you're sort of like 9 years old, it didn't really have any affect on you at all. It was still the same structure of discipline, schools and all that sort of stuff, um, and I didn't know anyone I could

trust enough to tell, to trust that I'd be believed, and not only that I'd be believed but that something would actually be done. Cos it's one thing to say look this is what's happening, it's quite another for someone to actually take action.

**I: What, what did you want to see happen? What would you have liked to happen at the time?**

J: I would have wanted to see- I would have just wanted it to stop, I wouldn't have cared what happened to her, I was- I think I was too young to comprehend the context of justice, you know as sort of an absolute and things like that. Um, I just would have wanted her to stop.. And to never come near me again you know.

**I: Did you ever object to going to Ruth's?**

J: I used to kick up a fuss um..particularly towards the end uh..because she was getting very..carried away. But it, again it comes down to the fact that I was just a kid and you know kids didn't have an opinion in those days.

**I: Why, why did it actually stop?**

J: Because my mum stopped working for the embassy so there was no reason for baby sitting to continue.

**I: Did it actually stop when you stopped staying there?**

J: Absolutely yeah.

**I: And after that did you see Ruth again? Did she come round?**

J: Oh she used to come round as a family friend, you know give me kisses and all that, you know her favourite little boy and all that kind of crap. It never occurred again afterwards. She used to occasionally say things like you know don't forget our little secret and that sort of stuff, but I was just so relieved it was over...and by the time I think I was actually old enough to have told my parents it was too late, it happened, it was a past event you know.

**I: Did you think about telling your parents right up to the time when you left home?**

J: I did until I was about 17, 18. I did start thinking that maybe I should you know say something but then..it's a hard enough subject to broach with a professional, to broach with your parents is just..unbelievable you know.

**I: Did they stay friends with Ruth?**

J: Yeah for a couple of years. I mean she moved away, I don't know where you know. I must have been about 11 or 12, and she just stopped coming round.

**I: Did she, did she have children of her own?**

J: No she didn't have children of her own.

**I: Did she live on her own?**

J: She lived on her own.

**I: When you were at school did the abuse ever affect schoolwork or bullying or anything else about school?**

J: Uh I went from being near or top of the class to the lower third. Um, I was fortunate that the abuse, bullying that's not a bad phrase to use, I was fortunate that it stopped about a year before my 11 plus and I was able to pass the 11 plus and go to grammar school you know. But I did spend two years with a constant school report saying could do better, can't understand you know blah, blah, blah, no effort being made.

**I: And what about um what about the issue that made um came into adulthood that you feel may have been a reflection of the abuse?**

J: Uh, I know it might sound strange but I get on far better with women than I do with men, I mean I've got a lot of men friends but I actually get on better with women.

**I: Why do you think that is?**

J: I don't know. I mean it should be the complete reverse..to my way of thinking you know. But it isn't and..just one of those bizarre things that the human mind does you know.

**I: Yeah.**

J: It made me very protective of my children as well, very attuned to any..difficulties you know.

**I: I bet it did. How many have you got?**

J: 3.

**I: Are they grown up now?**

J: No, they're 15, 12 and 8.

**I: You mentioned a divorce, do you still see them?**

J: I'll see them about once a fortnight, I travel up to Devon and spend Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday.

**I: Oh so they're still in-**

J: Still in Devon, yeah.

**I: And did you ever talk to your wife about the abuse?**

J: Um, when I made the suicide attempt

**I: Which is when you were married?**

J: When I was married yes. Um, we discussed it in very general terms..she was also of the opinion to bury it you know. I think because I, I had so many other problems at the time and uh, we were getting close to separating and all that sort of thing...just, just wasn't an issue I wanted to bring up, you know.

**I: And you never feel you're in a position where you're, maybe you-**

J: Well I'm getting such good support from the day hospital I attend 5 days a week. Um, and because I'm not drinking the medication's actually working now. So there are times when I feel pretty good. And I feel strong enough to go through with it whereas 6 months ago I wouldn't have been able to. I, I just wouldn't have been strong enough.

**I: What, what do you feel changed in these 6 months?**

J: Well cos I've got a more structured day, being at the day hospital I do a lot of occupational therapy and that sort of thing, it's given me a reason to get up in the mornings, given me, it's given me back a lot of self-confidence. You know I've started writing poetry and doing art, all the things I never did you know. Erm and, as I say the medication has been upped and seems to be doing it's job. So you know I feel, I feel that if I don't do it now then I'll never do it. And if I don't do it I'll regret it for the rest of my life. Yeah.

**I: And at any time while you've been growing up, since the abuse, you never told any friends or girlfriends-**

J: No, no.

**I: Not at all? Did you ever want to?**

J: Um no I didn't. Feelings of embarrassment and humiliation and things like that were you know just too- I find it easier to talk to professionals than I do to a friend, cos there's always a feeling in my mind that if you really wanted to stop it you could stop it, you know.

**I: Really? You were worried a friend might think that?**

J: Yeah.

**I: Right ok.**

J: And I didn't stop it so..

**I: How do you feel about that, I mean in terms of do you think that er not even yourself so much but that children in general can stop the abuse if they wanted to?**

J: I think that they can nowadays. I think people are so attuned to it um, that they're in a much better position than they were 30 years ago. I think people like yourself by doing what you're doing would have been unthinkable 30 years ago.

**I: Yeah, people are starting to talk about this now.**

J: Yeah. And I think teachers and other professionals are more attuned to the danger side now.

**I: Um,...I've completely forgotten what I was going to say.**

J: That happens to me all the time!

**I: Yeah me too actually. Um, oh it's completely gone. Mmm, I just wanted to ask you something around any, any feelings in terms of you being abused as a boy by a woman, I'm wondering I mean I know you wouldn't know what it was like to be a girl abused by a man, but the pressures you felt to not say anything do you think that was anything to do with the fact that you were a boy being abused by a woman?**

J: I think it played a large part because um..women were not suppose to be capable of abuse anyway and boys have, I'm not sure if it's right to say stronger egos than girls um I can't think of a phrase to sum it up. Boys are suppose to not cry and you know...

**I: What do you think, um, what do you think should happen to child sexual abusers in general?**

J: I think they should be imprisoned.

**I: You do?**

J: Yeah.

**I: Across the board, male and female?**

J: Yes. I think it's the worst form of abuse you can do. The effect that it has on someone's life, for the rest of their life you know. I'm not in favour of them being put into prison for the rest of their life, I think that's a bit extreme. I think they should never be allowed to be in a situation you know where they're capable of doing it again.

**I: Mmm. How um, just on that last point, how, how might you control for that? Cos I'm just thinking of your situation which is just a family friend babysitting you, how might you control so that they would never be in that situation again?**

J: God knows. I really don't know. It's a very difficult one to answer.

**I: It is, isn't it?**

J: Yeah. You can't stop people having friends, and some of those friends are going to have children. Uh, I suppose name and shame wouldn't come amiss, you know.

**I: And um, can I ask you something about um any of the details of what she actually did. Do you feel able to give any of those details, in terms of any of the acts that she perpetrated?**

J: Well her main thing was oral sex.

**I: Is that you to her?**

J: Yes. And...it seemed to go on forever. I think today she'd be known as a great believer in multiple orgasms...I don't suppose there was a phrase back in the 60's. Um, particularly when she was having her period [long pause]. She liked to wee on me as well. Which in a way of getting me locked up I suppose. [long pause] yeah, I mean there are other things but I don't remember...I don't feel up to going through them right now.

**I: Um, and did it ever lead to full intercourse?**

J: No. No I wasn't capable, nine and a half.

**I: Um, were you are now in terms of receiving help, what are you hoping to get, what are you hoping to be able to receive in terms of support or help?**

J: Well what I'm hoping to get is my self esteem back,...some of the confidence I've lost and the strength to lead a normal life, you know. There are things that worry me and I- there's this thing about people who have been abused who turn into abusers um, not that I've ever felt like that but at the back of my mind there's a kind of you know maybe if one day I was in the position maybe I would, and you know I hate to think of myself as..that.

**I: It's an awful, it's an awful thing that people assume and you do get this cycle of abuse idea and I do just think it's awful, that just because- you know there's as many things you've already been through and this is just another. Did you, did you ever um you mentioned you had children as well and feeling over protective around them, did any um, when they were younger did any feelings of um of, of the things you felt when you were younger um overline at all?**

J: No, no, no. I was always um, very strong for them, uh, funny thing is that it was my daughter's 8th birthday a week ago and that really brought it back to me, you know 8 years old and all that sort of thing, all the innocence of an 8 year old, and they're still innocent even by today's standards.

**I: And you can see that innocence.**

J: Yeah and it makes me realise what I lost.

**I: Do, um, do any other family members know, I mean do your brothers know?**

J: No.

**I: Is it something you would ever tell them?**

J: I might do when I come to terms with it. Um, some of them you know have an understanding of mental illness and a couple of them don't, um, might go some way towards explaining my previous performance during the last 5 years. Just baffled them.

**I: Right, in terms of-**

J: Mental illness.

**I: Ok.**

J: Cos until 5 years ago I was perfectly normal, well thought I was perfectly normal even though I knew deep down I wasn't.

**I: What started the 5 years off?**

J: Losing my job. It was a horrific time. I'd worked there for 20 years, built the company up and everything else, it ended in real you know acrimonious departure. Then my father died, and my mother died about 8 months later. Um, then the marriage got into difficulties mainly because of the fact that I was spending so much time in hospital, there was just too much pressure on my wife to run the house you know do her job and do everything else.

**I: When you say spent too much time in hospital, is that your parents or-**

J: No that's a mental.

**I: Right ok.**

J: Yeah I spent about 4 months in one year um in various hospitals.

**I: And where, where did you seek help for the abuse in that time frame?**

J: I was getting more and more gloomy and withdrawn, and about 3 years ago- I think it was about 3 years ago- and they decided to put me in a valium cocoon, right, where I was being pumped full of valium all day. Um, nothing seemed to actually loosen me up sufficiently to actually get to the what was going on and all this sort of stuff. Um, but it had the effect to actually uh heighten my feelings of worthlessness and feeling dirty and all that sort of thing, and I just wanted to end it all so as I say I cut through several major arteries...I was very lucky.

**I: Um, when you say you look back and feel dirty is that in relation to the abuse that happened as a child?**

J: Hm-mmm.

**I: How did, how did being abused affect your view or how do you think it affected your view of sex in general...as you were growing up and-?**

J: Um, I think it's left me in the position where...I know it sounds ridiculous but I prefer dominant women you know. Um, my wife was very- knew what she wanted you know. Had what she wanted and that sort of thing. And other sexual partners- other successful sexual partners- have always been of that type. I think it's because that's what I expect, to be used rather than shared.

**I: Is that how you always felt?**

J: Yeah. Although I'm changing recently cos I have a new partner and uh I'm finding that a much more relaxed atmosphere, there's no pressure on me or anything like that. So that's one- that's also one of the reasons why I'm feeling stronger.

**I: Does she know about the abuse?**

J: Um, no not really. Funnily enough we talked about it yesterday cos she was saying how she had been fostered out when she was a child and it wasn't a very pleasant experience and all that sort of thing, and said I was coming up here today. And she said why was I doing that and I said oh well you know child sexual abuse and she was very interested but I said I didn't want to talk about it at the time, I'd rather wait until the moment feels right for me. But I am determined to tell her..which I didn't do with my first wife.

**I: From what you've said it sounds as if she'd be very supportive.**

J: Yeah, I think she will be, yeah. She's had her own problems.

**I: And often that makes somebody understand someone else much more.**

J: Mmm, that's right.

**I: Um, do you remember the first time it ever happened, the first time the abuse happened?**

J: Not really no, because it was a sort of, it was a gradual process.

**I: What do you mean by a gradual process?**

J: Well I think, she had a two bedroom flat uh, and I started sleeping in my own bed but then she said it was very cold in the room so come and sleep in the bed with her. Um, and it just progressed over the space of about..4-6 weeks, before she's you know she'd, she'd do small little things which I didn't find unacceptable. Um, but then she just escalated, out of all control. So the first actual..you know it's very difficult to say when the first, the first one occurred you know.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

J: Cos it's all merged into a kind of...gradual progression.

**I: Did you used to, did she treat you quite specially, you know when you came over at the beginning?**

J: Oh yeah.

**I: What kind of things did she do?**

J: Oh she used to buy me toys and things like that, cook whatever I wanted, you know.

**I: At the beginning did you actually like going there?**

J: I did. I did like Ruth. I'd known her for, well, since I was a baby I suppose. I mean she was a friend of my mother's and all that sort of thing, uh, so it wasn't as if I was going into a, an unknown relationship or anything like that. I always called her auntie Ruth although she wasn't an auntie but a family friend.

**I: Is there anything you'd like to add cos I'm done with my questions so is there anything else?**

J: Um[pause] well I'm glad she's dead.

**I: She is dead now?**

J: Yeah.

**I: How did you find that out?**

J: From my mother. She got told by, she was written to by one of Ruth's friends.

**I: How long ago was that?**

J: Uh, about 3 years ago.

**I: Right. Were you glad at the time?**

J: I felt quite satisfaction, you know. She won't do it to anybody else again, although I suppose by that time she must have been about 60, 70. No other than that I've got nothing to add at all.

End of interview

Transcription of the interview with Frank (atypical example) 21/1/99**I: If we could just carry on then, who was this person?**

F: The one that I'm speaking of at the moment is my uncle, my mother's brother, younger brother and when I was in Scotland I- I was actually staying in my hometown- and I usually go and see various people and I went to see him and when I was with him I asked him if he had any information about who my father was. Now whether in fact he did and didn't want to say I don't know but he said he didn't, he said he didn't, which is possible.

**I: Your mother never told you?**

F: I never- my mother was a lovely person. And I...she'd had a pretty hard time bringing us up and working and she was really a very feminine woman, and when I realised as an adult that she probably from the time she'd had me until she died which was about 50 years, had never had any sexual activity in her life. Things like- this is my thoughts and my ways are very small you know so I'm not going to make her life any more uncomfortable. She came to visit regularly in London and so on, knew my partner, I mean that was not a problem. She felt very guilty about it at the time, my not being married and not having children for example.

**I: Ok. Let's look at some of the sexual abuse experiences. Um, can you tell me a little bit about the first time you remember-?**

F: Ok. The first that I remember I can actually visualise the room, I can see the way that the bed was lying. It was one of those curious things, people would never have beds going in, the foot of the bed going to the foot of the door because that was the association with the body being taken out of the room. So beds never faced the door, and I remember quite vividly being in a, in a bed, in a single bed uh, I don't quite understand why I was on my own because there certainly wasn't a lot of space but I recall very vividly Angus was his name um, he was the one, maybe he was, he was really not much older than my eldest brother at that point-

**I: This is the uncle-**

F: The uncle. And uh he came into my bed and got me to masturbate him. Now I didn't have any negative vibes to that activity for sure uh and it happened maybe only twice. It was certainly not a regular occurrence by any stretch of the imagination. But around the same time um my eldest brother had a friend, friend, friend, and he was just a bit older than them so, I mean they were in the age of uh in relation to me, were already in the age of masturbating and so on, so there was- I was too innocent uh sexually for that.

**I: What age are we talking about here?**

F: We're talking about, I was about 6 at the time.

**I: Ok. And the others?**

F: And the others were 13, 14. My uncle was perhaps 17, 18 that sort of age. And but the friend of my brothers he was younger, he was maybe 13 or 14. A big lad, and um and he was quite fascinating and uh on one occasion I remember and this is the association with the swimming pool uh because in fact uh he on one occasion got me to go into a cubicle with him and then that was again the masturbation thing. And subsequently, again not on- just a few occasions- I went to his home um, they lived very near us and they had a hut, and of course this hut was a fascinating place for us children, uh and I certainly went to see him um, curiously enough...I called, you know that very early age and on a subsequent occasion when I was in my teens, being quite fascinated by the idea of...I knew, somehow I knew about Edinbrough, and I knew that in Edinbrough there were places such as Rose Street which were very famous for prostitution. And somehow quite early on in my life I'd heard about this. I recall talking about that with this fellow and I don't quite know what was in my mind but it seemed that it was alright to be doing this with me if he did other things.

**I: Right. Uh-huh.**

F: And I recall when I was about 14 or 15, I'll come back to the other in a moment, when there used to be...those travelling salesmen would come round, and this particular one I'm thinking about was an Indian, and he would...come to the house, I mean everyone in my house was very friendly so we would talk to him and on one occasion when he came I was alone. And he asked if he could use the lavatory which he did. And then he uh started to get me excited ok? I was about 14 or 15, 15. And then he actually penetrated me and on that occasion I recall that same thing that I had after because he lived in Edinborough you know, could have come from Rose Street (laughs). And I'm not quite sure what was going on in my mind, it was if, it was almost as if it was alright doing that with me as long as they did it with women or particularly with prostitutes. More than that I cannot say. Ok, so back to the earlier time. Um, so there were relatively few incidents, incidences. I remember on occasion my second brother, it was a Saturday morning and quite what was behind all that I have no idea because nothing had ever happened before or since with him. But he did in fact come, we came in, we were playing, I could only ever have been 7 or something like that. We were playing and he decided he wanted to put on my mother's suspender belt and then lay on top of me. That was, there was nothing more than that. And never repeated the episode. So those, and then the instances that I was speaking of you know for example um anything about from- I don't recall during those young years being ever forced into any kind of situation or...and but I certainly from that point on was always, always on the lookout and I mentioned in the swimming bath I would endlessly stand in the showers hoping to get someone, someone would become excited and so on. Hearing stories about things, you know for example an American or Canadian tailor would be in the swimming pool you know, things of this kind which er, and that I must have been about 12, 12 or around that age. Things going on that I wanted to find out about. And certainly this activity of going to swimming pools and going endlessly up and down the cubicles, endlessly, or looking into cubicles and so on and that sort of thing was a, a great activity.

**I: Ok. Going back to when you first sort of time it happened um what was your reaction, what was your initial reaction?**

F: You see these were not strangers, these were members of the family. I certainly didn't speak of it.

**I: Why not? Why didn't you tell your mother for example?**

F: Now you remind me of something subsequently. The other uncle, the one I mentioned that came into my bed when I was a teenager, ok his name was Philip. So there were two uncles, one was Angus and the other was Philip. And uh, I remember as a teenager a dispute of some kind at home, and my uncle called me a sissy and my aunt became very, very stern. My aunt-

**I: His wife?**

F: No because neither of them were married. Both living with my grandparents, but this was after my grandparents were dead, that's my mother and my aunt and my uncle and me and maybe one of my other brothers or maybe just the four of us. And he called me a sissy, but my aunt at the table was extremely stern and very firmly put him in his place. The message that I got was that...he had already blotted his copy book in that direction somehow, I didn't know how and there was never any mention again. So um my reactions to it, I do not know why- I was fascinated, there was no doubt at all and I think in the way of secret things with no-one in bedrooms and so on, I have no...nothing was done to me. I was not in any way in pain or discomfort in any way at all of that kind.

**I: Were you touched?**

F: I don't recall being touched. I simply was used to masturbate him.

**I: And was that actually to ejaculation or not, can you remember?**

F: I have no...I have no clear picture of it, not with him. I couldn't say.

**I: Ok.**

F: But certainly the friend of my brother's definitely. Yeah I definitely know that.

**I: Right, ok.**

F: But with him I couldn't say.

**I: Would you remember- with your brother's friend then do you remember um..your reaction to that in terms of-**

F: Oh I was fascinated by the size of his penis and the fact that- I think that I had maybe....I don't recall but certainly...found myself in the situation of seeing him

masturbate. Now whether he was doing that in order to attract- aaahh. I'm just thinking now about the layout, the cubicle that he was in was just next door to the, a little bit round from the lavatory. So I was coming out of the lavatory and I sort of saw him and he then invited me in. I don't think my brother had any idea- there was no collusion there of any kind. It was just he was known to me but he was not a friend of mine, I mean he was too old for that.

**I: And what happened that day?**

F: I masturbated him, and then on subsequent, a couple of occasions, I went to his home, not into his home but into the hut which was quite a comfortable place just outside which he and his brother used as a sort of den.

**I: Yeah, ok. And this is around the age of 6 or 7.**

F: I was, yeah, yeah.

**I: Right. Ok, ok. What did um, now long did that go on for? Because you mentioned another incident with another boy-**

F: Yes these were, this was- oh those two incidents with the uncle Angus and with this other boy frank, they were of relatively short duration. A couple of occasions one with the uncle and three, or conceivably more, with frank. But obviously I was too young to be seen to be around you know to be an acceptable person to, you know a person might be why is that little boy here sort of thing, so that definitely was not sort of an ongoing involvement.

**I: Mmm ok. And then when was the next- when did something happen after that?**

F: Well with the incident I mentioned that happened with my second brother um, I was about 8 at the time but again I had no idea what he was doing or why he was doing this, he was obviously simulating having some kind of sexual contact but I mean it was just a matter of dressing up-

**I: There was no actual sex involved?**

F: Oh no, no. I don't even know if he would have been able to at that time, he couldn't have been that much older than me cos he was, let's see if I was 8, he was only 10.

**I: Right ok. And after that occasion?**

F: Well hmm. After that...we're speaking about things like the swimming pool, that would be the...the place- the focus of my interest in- and it certainly was an ongoing- it was every time I went, it wasn't- and so I would spend a great deal of time looking you know to see if there was anyone like the first fellow.

**I: Right, yes I see.**

F: Because this had obviously excited me and I was interested to see if the possibility of that continuing. I don't recall- I remember thinking things like, maybe when I was a little bit older, I remember this was just at the beginning of the war and we had some soldiers who were stationed and I remember one occasion being sort of gob smacked at two fellows. One of them was blond and had been in one of the lavatories and had masturbated and had left all the semen, which I thought was very curious, in the lavatory. And so then one goes round hoping to see something of this kind or to have the opportunity to be involved. I was not- I tended then to be...the looker rather than the abused if you may. People did not actually take advantage of me. I was looking for them in the hope that I might be invited in or see something.

**I: Ok. So what areas of your life do you think that the abuse affected? What impact may it have had?**

F: The chief...retrospectively, effect that they had, was in fact making me sexually aware, very aware, at a very early age. So that I tended to spend a lot of time, you know for example in cinemas, which would be- every time I would go to the cinema. Or every time I would go to a place that there was a public toilet then I would be there. Um, or sitting in the cinema in the proximity of someone. But again this was not um things like- there was not much of that going on in a small town. But I remember very vividly going, from quite early on, going to public toilets or going into- this fascination I often think that there's some kind of drug associated with urine which um sort of stimulated sexual excitement. Um, things at school um..very odd little things like going to the boys room and just standing and talking about things and showing off and so on. But not- no abuse. I recall one occasion Frank, another Frank, um me trying to get him in the dark, uh putting hands in one another's pockets. I was much more interested than he was, he would play along with it but he was- or another great enough- one occasion, a lad just a little bit younger than me, coming into our home and going into the bathroom. And uh but he was not in the least bit interested. But not at all. So that- but there was no sort of stigma associated with that. You know whatever these activities were they didn't seem to- people didn't seem to get into any kind of finger pointing or you know. I was not uh..I was- although I was shy I suppose I was always quite a confident child. And also I was bright you know and, and quite popular, so I was not excluded from things you know certain things I was not madly keen on so I didn't get involved in, but I was not excluded because I was a sissy in that sense, I didn't feel anything of that kind.

**I: No, no. When did you first tell anyone about the abuse?**

F: I'm sorry?

**I: When did you first tell anyone about these early instances? You never mentioned-?**

F: No.

**I: You never told your mother as a child?**

F: No, no. This, this was not a thing that had bothered me.

**I: You've never considered it abusive at all?**

F: Oh no. Oh not at all.

**I: Why not? What are your reasons?**

F: I suppose....yes, a first time on this one (laughs). Um, I suppose this was to some extent [went along with] being different. This was part of being a sissy meant that I would be involved in things of this kind, nothing said. And so it was not something one talked about. And also since I was not- I didn't feel- I put myself into the situations, I was not dragged into them, I was not an unwilling participant. So consequently I, I, I put what guilt there was-

**I: And was there guilt?**

F: No I'm just saying that if, if- but as a catholic...

**I: Right ok.**

F: Mm-mmm. Um but not at that early age but certainly as I got older yes, yes, oh yes. Um,

**I: What did that guilt revolve around?**

F: What did that guilt revolve around? (laughs) like going to confession and telling the priest that I've masturbated and the stupid man saying 'every time you masturbate that's the equivalent of a pint of blood', nonsense.

**I: Ok, so it's guilt actually around-**

F: The guilt around it was a sin and either- and so not to say anything of- and also it was a time that matters sexual were not discussed. I mean my grandmother would not have the 'news of the world' in her house. They would not talk about people having children, the word pregnant would never be used. Anything of that kind. So any matters sexual were totally taboo. So I had this message that was made very clear to me and that I was doing something that was obviously not right, but uh there was no harm in what I was doing- harm to me that I conceded. And I think that it was part of the, the secret side of one's young life, you know I don't think- secrets keep decompartmentalising things. I think that we all play different roles, that's something I've become very, very aware of in my aging life, you know that we all play different parts at different times. And so this um getting involved thing, I knew perfectly well that it was not quite what I should be doing so it was not to be talked about because..(laughs). Other people could be involved in it if there was any kind of retribution that was going with it.

**I: Ok. So you didn't tell because you didn't see anything wrong with it?**

F: I didn't tell because I think to some extent it was my secret. That's what I think more.

**I: So you would have been telling on yourself?**

F: I would have been telling on myself and I would have been implicating other people, uh, and so I decided it was not appropriate to speak about it.

**I: Ok. Today what's your view of um Angus and the other one?**

F: Oh I feel quite sorry for them. Um he died when he was quite young. And he was very nice, very intelligent fellow. Um, I have no feelings of er...disgust or inappropriateness, no, it's just- I feel just one of those things that happened amongst young people and I know people who have [unclear] do tend to be more sexually excited. And so. I'd like to- no I'd just er- we were quite- we all lived in the same house and he was not- he was a bit older than the three of us and so you know he was mixing with people of his own age group. Um, but he was not...no he was, because of his condition he had never able to go ahead with his education or work and so he died as a young man. I don't have any negative thoughts about him other than just feeling as though that was his life.

**I: And you don't see him as a child abuser?**

F: Oh no, no (laughs) not at all. No. No.

**I: Ok. Um, I want to ask you about any subsequent support or help at all which is going to be difficult because obviously without I mean you don't perceive what happened to you as abusive I presume, did you ever seek out any help-**

F: On this account?

**I: Um yeah, no- not as a child um, at any time during your life.**

F: Not seeking help, no. But I was for ten years involved in the aids scene, I was granted with not ever getting anything. And so I played quite an active part in that, and because, because I was doing two jobs and I was really you know willing to take on rather heavy stuff, we had a lot of support mechanisms. And one of mine was uh a person who is still a very close friend, is a German, Jewish, lesbian nun, Catholic, ok?

**I: Right.**

F: And she ran the family support. And we- I was in fact doing a great deal, there was nothing around at the time and we had to respond to everything. I was almost in a daily one-to-one session with her, almost. On the phone and maybe once a

fortnight we would have a session. And in the course of this some of this came up. But not because some of the earlier things in connection with my- when you're in the counselling situation, buttons will be pressed and maybe something will come up, and I, I am not a person who tries in this kind of situation- I tell you exactly what I felt, I don't try to conceal anything. I try to be as honest as I can. And so in that kind of situation with Eva um things would come up, but I wouldn't- I was not actually in so doing asking for her help to deal with problems that I perceived these years on from my childhood, not at all. That's the only- and we have you know been in contact with other people, it has been spoken about but as adults, not- and just speaking about the, the incidents cos it is the whole area of children is one that I'm very concerned about. Um, particular young, young appropriate mechanisms to help young lesbian and gay kids, and I think that's vitally important. And so you know I tend to be quite open about the needs for help of that kind and to be addressing it, organisations such as the Kennedy trust and things like that so that people are aware and involved with parents and friends of lesbians and gays. Uh so I, I like to think that sometimes when I would say something it would be not because I wanted support or help in it but simply to draw a, a- make people aware that you know children could be at a very early age involved in sexual activities, that sort of thing. We're not just talking about age of 16 or 18 but we're talking about kids who are of a very early age, who are- who do need to be protected or helped. So I prefer to do things in my own life but not with a view to getting support but just drawing the attention to the fact that these things do happen.

**I: So just to clarify then, have you ever felt in your life since the age of 6 that you needed to speak with someone about what happened or to get some sort of counselling around it? [pause...c apparently shakes his head] no? Ok. Ok um, I just want to ask you a little bit off what- just coming from uh I guess your view that you know you don't feel that you were abused at all, um, that is a very personal thing for you and your experience, um, and whether you'd have a very similar reaction you know to a similar sort of situation um between a six year old and an eighteen year old.**

F: Could you just phrase that again?

**I: Yep. Sorry**

F: No, no it's just that I wanted time to think as well.

**I: Right. Um the perception of your experience as non-abusive would you have a similar perception to people in, in situations such as sexual attraction between six year old and an eighteen year old or would it differ accordingly?**

F: You're speaking of me with people of that age or people of that age in general with others?

**I: Yes, the latter one.**

F: The latter one.

**I: Yeah. And your views in particular I'm just interested in um those views.**

F: I can't just deal with the second, I have to deal with both.

**I: Yeah ok then do both.**

F: See in asking that question you immediately filled me with some anxiety. The anxiety was in connection with an incidence in London. Not that many years ago. In one of the department stores. And I was in the loo, and this lad of 11,12 tried to get me to go into a cubicle with him and I was horrified. On a variety of levels, I'm not just saying- I wasn't sexually interested in the boy anyway but I was quite disturbed, but I shall tell you honestly that um there was an occasion, oh this is now 15 years ago, although it is astonishing, it is astonishing- maybe I'm just a little aware of what's going on. This is all- I go every week to Ealing, music, etc. And I at times drop into the loo. Now this is not a habit for me, this is something that's very much in the past for me. But curiously enough because I started to singing again, it has touched on something for me. And a few weeks ago a similar situation- a few weeks ago, a few months now- and again I was horrified that this boy would be so- and nice lad, not a- a boy of perhaps..14, and no way would I but the point was that I was just aware that this and he was the one who was actually uh interacting and encouraging me, not me, him. Now these are very isolated incidences of course, um, but I. there is a, a, a kind of- what also came into my mind was another occasion, and I repeat these are not of weekly occurrences, and I did in fact pick up this lad again and he was an exceedingly nice lad and I thought he was about 17. This is maybe 15 years ago. I, I could- he was so [click of tongue]. He came into the flat and had his clothes off [clicked fingers]. So proactively it was untrue. Only at the end of it did he tell me he was 15, I would never have known. Never.

**I: And where was that?**

F: This was actually in my flat.

**I: Oh it was in your flat? Oh right.**

F: He was you know very, very uh sexually aware. There was not a great deal that happened to be quite honest but the point was it was only at the end he said 'this is the first time I've ever been with anyone' and I would never have believed it.

**I: Did you ever see him again?**

F: No, no. I would say there was a certain- what am I saying?- when you're in that kind of situation with youngsters, danger is there. I mean just out in big letters. I, mmm, I don't know what to do with kids- I mean I- you can't just sort of start talking to them, I don't know what to say. Because always at the back of my mind will be 'is he on the game?'. Which of course is quite possible. And what is he up to, what is going on here? Because I mean the whole sexual side of it whether I found them attractive or not would- but in fact I don't. I'm not interested in children. I'm interested in um attractive young men up to a point, but not

something that preoccupies me I'm not- no it's not true. I'm not really interested in young men at this point in my life at all. But earlier on I would have been titillated but I don't wish to have associations with them. It's not part of my..of the picture of myself at this time.

**I: Do you see children as sexual beings?**

F: I think one has...what's in my mind now is if children are precociously sexually stimulated then they often become- they can become sexual beings. But I don't think of little ones who have not been introduced to any sexual activity as being- you see one of the thoughts in my mind as you ask that was Liz Taylor. And there was a film once called 'Butterfield 8' and she was with a psychiatrist, she was a very disturbed adult and she was with this psychiatrist whom she'd also fallen in love with. And she, she described how as a child her father or her stepfather I'm not quite sure which, had got her into a sexual situation. As I recall I think she was saying that she, he used to sit, he used to get her to sit on his knee and obviously he would be sexually stimulated and she screamed and said 'and I liked it'. And this was a frightening thing, I was an adult at the time I saw that. So I think children if they are introduced then like the Lolita thing and the millions of instances, the instances I've made myself, children do become sexually, and my own feelings, do become sexually active.

**I: Mmm. Ok. But it takes that introducing?**

F: Yes I don't think that children- I don't think in the- I mean we are sexual beings, I don't want to deny that but uh whether children would be involved in any kind of sexual activity beyond their years uh I think that's less likely unless they are introduced by people who were older. Now I don't think they get introduced through activity with their peers cos there's no real sexual element in that. It's only when it becomes an object and the object has to be someone who is older with someone who is younger.

**I: So the experience with your brother and the suspender belt um would that be an introducing to, to sex or not? Say the, sorry, say the previous experience hadn't happened.**

F: No I don't think so. I think it was just rather silly.

**I: Ok. So that's more of a peer-**

F: Peer, yeah. Just playing or something.

**I: Right ok. And what about-**

F: Plus the fact that I could never understand why he- if he could put the suspender on me, but for him to put the suspender on, I thought that was rather silly. But you know.

**I: Right, yeah, ok, ok. So what about if you, if you read an article or you see something on TV cos you know we have, it happens a lot. And um you see something about uh some adult sexually abusing a child. What is your reaction to that?**

F: Now when you say a child, um,..what age?

**I: Um I don't know, let's go with a 6, 7 year old.**

F: And are you speaking about boys or girls?

**I: Does it make a difference?**

F: I don't know. I'm just asking.

**I: Ok. Let's do both. So you read one article about a boy child and one about a girl child.**

F: Why did I say that? Um what I'm thinking about in connection with- I totally abhor any kind of abuse of children. However I know that the vast majority, what's the figure, 85%, of abuse of children take place within their own home. And, and the whole mesh of emotional way around this is, I find exceedingly difficult. Usually we're speaking of girls who are abused. When it comes to boys..my feeling is that...I think sometimes with boys there's a precocity which maybe a result of other factors. Looking, I'm thinking now of myself, looking for other, looking for father figures or something of that kind. And...how does one then distinguish between children who are proactive in sexual activity with older...I just feel a bit that...

#### **Tape change**

Oh there's no question at all in my mind that the abuse of little girls is something that cannot in any sense be condoned. I mean that's absolutely terrible. Um, with boys I feel sometimes there's an element of..mischief and play. I don't know whether there's a justification for thinking that..or for compensation. But I think there's, there is an element of um boys looking for the father, that sort of thing. And uh that, or the kind of warmth, intimacy that one would expect to have with a father and having the sexual contact is that kind of closeness.

**I: Do you think that's-**

F: I'm not sure, I'm just, I'm just giving you the thoughts that come into my head.

**I: Is that- do you think that's what happened with you? Was it something about a father figure?**

F: I have to think, I feel that was, I was actually looking for that kind of intimacy.

**I: Ok.**

F: So the...that lack..in my very tender years, I think that would be pretty fair. Now whether it would have happened if the father had been there, I don't know. And to what extent you know environment or nature or nurture. I don't know about um.

**I: Ok. I don't have any further questions. Did you want to add anything to what you've said in any way?**

F: The only thing that I have- I think you know, I'm just thinking of my partner there. We've been together for 53 years. Um and the, the Clinton business came up and I very gently said that I...I feel very often that people get into sexual situations..where there's a kind of madness that comes in. And whilst not condoning, I think we just have to remember that I would not like to have all the situations that I have been in in my life broadcast. Or know the people who it's about. And it, it, it, there is this- I don't know, call it something again which I didn't understand an Italian verse- and we met and came back to the flat and I'm one of these people I have to like a person to you know. And it became quite obvious to me that it was not going to go anywhere, and the man almost screamed he said 'but I'm excited. I cannot- I have to come. I have to.' and this was something that was beyond my understanding. And but and so there is mad- there's an element of madness I think and depending on circumstances and so on uh that it's not always...a clear cut kind of situation that it's wrong. We, we might know on one level that it's wrong but other factors come into play and for some people they, they're beyond control in a sense.

**I: What do you mean other people and beyond control?**

F: That once they are sexually excited or when they are sexually stimulated some people it seems are not able- once they're in that fantastic kind of situation that they have to go through with it. That- and whatever the situation is if for example if, if, if it was a- gosh what am I thinking about now? I'm thinking about Edinburgh- um a chap I saw on one occasion who was trying to get this old woman who was a prostitute, she must have been in her 70's, she was trying- he was trying to get her to masturbate him. Why, why? But it didn't matter who the object of it was, if an old woman in her 70's, a dirty old woman, but the- he was at this point he just had to do something.

**I: Mmm. But not himself.**

F: But not himself.

Long pause

**I: Ok?**

F: Yes, yes, fine. Ok.

**I: Right, ok.**

End of interview

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