Survivor's Narratives of Early Childhood Sexualized Violence

By

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Abstract

This thesis adopts a Critical Feminist Research methodology to reveal how young children (6 years old and under) resist, respond to and heal from sexualized violence. Using memoirs that include first-person narratives as the data set, I utilized reflexive thematic analysis to sort the data into the following themes; “Resistance”; “Survival Techniques”; and “Healing”. Additionally, themes of narrative theory and response-based practice were utilized to collect and sort data. Ultimately, this thesis reveals a disparity between the highlighted academic literature and the selected memoirs. More specifically, the academic literature sparsely included first-person narratives, largely utilized third party evaluators and promoted a single story of damage. Whereas, the selected memoirs revealed multiple stories of resistance, healing, survival, pride, and determination. This thesis argues that the current state of psychology’s academic literature contributes to victim blaming, rape culture and structural violence. Based on this thesis, I recommend that psychology researchers shift their focus away from the damage narrative and towards a narrative of dignity.

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Acknowledgements

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Chapter one: Introduction and Context

This thesis adopts a Critical Feminist Research methodology to reveal how young children (6 years old and under) resist, respond to and heal from sexualized violence. Using memoirs that include first-person narratives as the data set, I utilized reflexive thematic analysis to sort the data into themes. Utilizing narrative theory and a response-based practice lens, this document reveals a disparity between the academic literature in the literature review and the selected memoirs. Ultimately, my research argues that the current state of psychology's academic literature contributes to victim blaming, rape culture and structural violence; while neglecting survivors' narratives of resistance, survival and healing.

1.1 Rationale

Research conducted on childhood survivors of sexualized violence has long focussed on the adverse effects that persist over the lifespan; the literature often presents the many ways that survivors will struggle after experiencing sexual abuse. Based on my review of the literature, early childhood survivors of sexualized violence are continuously pathologized, with great attention given to their medical needs or symptomatology following abuse. For example, I found that researchers emphasize Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), low emotion-regulation capacity, depression, anxiety, and insecure attachment (Amédée et al., 2019; Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Ensink et al., 2017; Hébert et al., 2013; Langevin et al., 2015; Tejada & Linder, 2020). However, symptomizing and pathologizing CSA survivors can be problematic, as not all survivors identify with these symptoms, thus omitting a considerable detail of survivors' experiences (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013). Additionally, these pathologizing practices can contribute to victim blaming, rape culture, and ultimately enact structural violence (Fast & Richardson, 2019; Reynolds, 2020).

Child sexual abuse is a chronically under-reported event due to the nature of the violence, the child's level of vulnerability, the perpetrator's influence and abuse of power, and the societal climate; this thesis connects the current state of research to the societal climate (Matthews et al., 2016). Additionally, there may be legal implications that restrict survivors from sharing their stories publicly, for example disclosures in research can compromise trial proceedings or survivors' testimonies (Alaggia et al., 2017). As a result, there is a lack of research regarding sexualized violence survivors, particularly research pertaining to young survivors (0-6 years old) of sexualized violence. Tejada and Linder (2018) assert that while there is an abundance of research regarding the impacts of CSA on school-aged children (6-12), little research regarding preschool-aged (0-6) children is available. Furthermore, research conducted on young survivors often utilizes the perspectives of third-party evaluators, such as parents, counsellors, and teachers. Third party evaluators were commonly tasked with assessing the behaviour of children who were sexually abused. These assessments often utilized adult centric methods, including checklists such as "The Child Dissociative Checklist (CDC)"; "The Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL)"; "The Child Sexual Behaviour Checklist (CSBCL)"; and "The Emotion Regulation Checklist". In some studies, children were included in the research through completion of The MacArthur Story Stem Battery and story stem tasks. These checklists serve to identify observable symptoms and ascertain whether a child has an emotional, behavioural or sexual 'problem'. Understandably, EuroWestern ethical review boards limit the participation of children in research. However, as a result of limiting children's participation combined with the mistrust of recollective memory, the opportunity to share one's own story is extremely limited for young survivors. Moreover, methods that are developed for adults to identify symptoms and problems in children should necessarily be questioned. At the very least, I believe these studies should be

supplemented with research that is produced by and for childhood survivors of sexualized violence, with an emphasis on storying more than just what Woodiwiss (2014) coined as the "damage narrative".

Overall, young survivors are underrepresented in the literature, and when they are presented in the research it is usually pertaining to their symptomology, or is dependent on the perceptions of professionals. These alarming patterns strongly suggest that there is a need to present first-person narratives in the literature, where survivors are not pathologized or medicalized and where their resistance to the violence they endured is honoured.

1.2 Researcher's Positionality

As made clear by Burman's (2017) account, research is not exempt from a damaged past, arguing that colonial and gender structures are heavily implicated in the initial and continuing research frameworks, values, and assumptions. Pence (2011) outlines the historical context of knowledge by situating child development research in the colonial practices of the 19th century, and argues that the legacy of such practices remains in our understanding of knowledge and research today. Notably, Pence suggests that the 19th century was a time where scientists believed in order to understand the mind it was necessary to study the "less advanced", including women, children and peoples from places that were viewed as uncivilized. Therefore, research and knowledge have historically placed western ideologies at the center and pushed those without white, male status to the margins.

Although my own intentions for research are situated in the desire to amplify the dignity and resistance of survivors, it is apparent that despite one's intentions, research can result in more harm than good. After noticing a severe lack of literature pertaining to survivors who experience abuse in early childhood, my research interest was developed. However, there are numerous

ethical considerations when researching a topic that is deemed as sensitive, which I will approach through a critical feminist lens.

Understanding where both research and knowledge are historically situated is an important and ongoing step in ensuring that I think critically about my own axiology and ethics of my research design. Additionally, I begin this thesis with a thorough account of my own social location as it directly interacts with my beliefs around ontology and epistemology, my values and axiology and my overall approach to research and knowledge.

Given that this project focusses on a group of peoples that have been historically misrepresented or underrepresented in research, I feel it is important to locate myself in this thesis project. In order to locate myself I feel its paramount I begin by stating that I am a white, cis-gender, able-bodied female of mixed European ancestry. Additionally, my privilege is extended through my existing and ongoing education; thus, I have considerable advantages that impact both my perspective and my life in general. I currently live on the traditional territories of the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples. I grew up on the on the unceded territories of the Quw'utsan people, which is colonially known as the Cowichan Valley. I begin by acknowledging this to bring notice to the Indigenous peoples whose land I directly benefit from and to remind myself that my privilege has been and continues to be at the expense of first peoples. Although I'm committed to deconstructing this social location in a way that challenges my being, I understand that it is an integral part of my perspective. Therefore, I intend to approach research with a great sense of humility, accountability, and reflexivity.

Additionally, I work in the Cowichan Valley as a child and youth counsellor for children and families who have experienced or witnessed violence. Working alongside children who have experienced violence continuously amplifies my motivation for this research; as a privileged

witness to their persistent and determined resistance I am reminded of how differently they are depicted in academic literature. Reynolds (2012) argues that power is always present in community work, and suggests that practitioners address power relations, rather than approaching the work from a stance of neutrality. In order to address these power relations, Reynolds suggests that practitioners contest neutrality, analyze power, attend to the intersections of privilege and oppression, witness resistance and justice doing, and work towards collective accountability. I view this research as a natural extension of my community work and a means of emphasizing survivors' dignity on a more public scale.

Hillman et al. (2020) describe the process of identifying one's social location and state that:

> …we need to go beyond reciting thin statements, statements that quickly become meaningless for ourselves and our students unless we consistently push ourselves to account for the ways in which we are deeply embedded in a complex colonial matrix of power. (p.43)

In order to move beyond simply reciting my social location, I will continuously analyze and reflect on the influence of my positionality. Within this project, I practice reflexivity, work to deconstruct my privilege and acknowledge where this may influence my understanding of the data gathered.

Tilley (2016) describes the need for researchers to consider their positioning in connection to the research context and participants. Tilley goes on to illustrate the multiple positionalities that researchers may hold; insider, outsider, or somewhere in between. Despite our own ideas of where we are positioned, research participants may have different ideas of how "inside" we are.

In the context of this project, I would consider myself as someone in between although I have some personal experience with sexualized violence, I would not directly consider myself a part of this specific community. Additionally, I find these positionalities disconcerting, as I wonder if

a researcher can ever fully be considered an insider when we hold such a position of perceived power. Positionality is not as straight forward as these terms would seem to imply and I think its pertinent to pay close attention to the multiple, interacting components that influence my positionality.

1.3 Theoretical Orientation

This section describes how I approach this research, through weaving together the emerging themes of my perspective to form a theoretical framework. I see my theoretical framework as a natural extension of my positionality as it describes how I make sense of the information I receive and what I intend to do with it. Response-based practice emphasizes the resistance, survival and dignity of survivors, which largely informed the research questions I asked. I specifically used response-based practice to ensure that my questions would elicit responses that highlighted survivors' stories of resistance, healing and survival, which I ultimately felt contributed to the dignity of survivors' stories. While, narrative theory was utilized as a supportive framework to understand the idea of multiple stories, and the importance of first-person narratives. Additionally, narrative theory informed my approach to conveying my interpretation of survivors' stories to the readers of this thesis.

1.4 Narrative Theory

Narrative theory is learner centered, meaning it is a way of transferring knowledge by helping consumers understand and formulate new ideas. Utilizing narratives allows researchers to impose external explanations and interpretations on the consumer or learner (Mertova & Webster, 2019). Denison (2016) describes narrative research as a vehicle toward cultural criticism and theoretical reflection. The author suggests that narrative research examines complexities, in contrast to research that seeks to identify a dominating truth. Practically

speaking, narrative theory has enabled me to interpret survivors' stories through the lens of resistance and within a response-based framework. Additionally, the use of narrative theory allows me to pass on my interpretation to learners, assist in the formulation of new ideas, and ultimately dismantle the dominating story of suffering surrounding survivors of sexualized violence.

Currently, research and literature regarding survivors of sexualized violence is often limited to a single story of hardship, which ultimately ignores the complexities of CSA, whereby some survivors do not identify with adverse symptoms and go on to live ordinary lives (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013). Academic accounts of sexualized violence utilize a narrative of damage to justify the importance of their research (Woodiwiss, 2014). However, Woodiwiss argues that CSA is wrong regardless of physiological symptoms or damage. Reynolds (2020) argues that an activist-informed approach to suffering centers around witnessing, where practitioners "situate personal suffering in its sociopolitical context and resist the individualisation and medicalisation of suffering" (p.347).

In congruence with the process of witnessing over pathologizing, Huang Hoon et al. (2018) highlight the work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) and her talk on the danger of a single story. This refers to the idea that "as humans we get caught up in one narrative about the world and therefore fail to appreciate the full complexity of the people and the phenomena that surround us" (p. 98). This is a concept that should necessarily be applied to the story of sexualized violence and survivors of this phenomena. In addition to perpetuating a single story, I root my study within the concern that third-party evaluators are the favoured authors of the narrative surrounding survivors of sexualized violence. Woodiwiss (2014) shares a similar concern and suggests that survivors of violence would be better able to tell their own stories,

which may or may not include accounts of psychological damage or symptoms. Narrative theory is proposed as a framing tool for this study, whereby themes of storying are weaved throughout the document.

1.5 Response-Based Framework

This study also pulls inspiration from response-based practices. Richardson and Wade (2010) describe response-based approaches as the belief that survivors of violence resist violence and oppression, overtly and/or covertly. The authors also note that engaging survivors in conversations that both elucidate and honour their resistance is an effective way of addressing a variety of concerns. Reynolds (2020) suggests that there are two necessary assumptions for witnessing resistance: (1) people's behaviour makes sense and; (2) people are trying to be safe. Reynolds (2020) furthers this argument by stating that "these assumptions invite [us] to resist diagnosing persons' behaviour and responses as symptoms of trauma" (p.358). Wade (1997) suggests that alongside stories of violence and oppression, a parallel story of persistent and strong-willed resistance exists but is overlooked due to its often-subtle nature. Within this study, I will address how academic literature and research often perpetuates discourses that largely fail to acknowledge or account for these parallel stories of resistance and survivors' responses to violence. I will specifically highlight first-person narratives that explore experiences of sexualized violence and will be looking for accounts that go beyond the damage narrative with the intent of adding parallel stories of resistance to the existing literature.

Chapter two: Literature Review

Scholarly, and peer-reviewed studies of qualitative, quantitative, or combined methods were included in this review if they fulfilled most or all of the following criteria:

- Published in Canada
- Published in the last 15 years
- Studied survivors of child sexual abuse
- Included specific data on children six and under

Studies were identified using a systematic search of electronic libraries, including Google Scholar, and the University of Victoria's McPherson Library database. Keywords included: "child sexual abuse", "preschool children", "survivors of abuse", "survivors' stories", and "development." Additional searches included: "impacts of abuse", "child sexualized violence", "first-person narratives", and "CSA". These terms were searched in combination with one another to yield relevant results. Ultimately, 22 articles were chosen for review based on their relevance to the study; all containing some combination of the outlined criteria. Some studies outside of Canada were included if they fit all other categories of criteria; more specifically five articles outside of Canada were included. Out of the 22 articles ten were quantitative, three were mixed methods and nine were qualitative; with five of these being literature reviews. The literature comes from several different fields of study, including child and family development, child abuse and neglect, psychology, gender and sexuality studies and public health.

Interestingly, out of the 22 reviewed articles, only ten collected data directly from survivors. While only four of these articles directly utilized first-person narratives to amplify survivor voice. The articles included for first-person narratives were not solely accounts of young survivors, rather the ages that abuse took place were not specified in these studies.

There was a strong agreement in the reviewed articles that sexual abuse has negative consequences on development for children, including children in their early years. Tejada and Linder (2020) state that "overall, the research shows that children who are exposed to sexually traumatic events are likely going to experience permanent, long-term, and/or short-term effects to their development" (p. 1837). Nearly all studies reported that children will experience mental health challenges either immediately after the abuse or symptoms may develop later in life. Other outcomes of abuse that were commonly reported were dissociative symptoms (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Ensink et al., 2017; Hébert et al., 2013; Hébert et al., 2017; Tejada & Linder, 2020), and emotion regulation challenges (Amédée et al., 2019; Langevin et al., 2015; Langevin et al., 2020; Séguin-Lemire et al., 2017; Tejada & Linder, 2020). Additionally, two articles mentioned Functional Somatic Symptoms (FSSs) (Bonvanie et al., 2015; Sigurdardottir & Hallorsdottir, 2018). Despite the extensive research surrounding symptomology and damage, three of the articles included in the literature review emphasized possibilities outside of the harm narrative. These articles highlighted survivor autonomy through first-person narratives and yielded varying results from their counterparts (Burke Draucker & Martsolf, 2008; Hunter, 2010; Woodiwiss, 2014). I have highlighted the salient themes from these articles to offer a glimpse of how academic literature portrays the trajectory of sexualized violence survivors, the literature is divided into two categories; inclusive of first-person narratives or non-inclusive of first-person narratives.

2.1 Articles without First-Person Narratives

2.2 Mental Health Outcomes

All of the reviewed articles highlighted mental health consequences as an outcome of CSA. According to Paolucci et al. (2001) "the results are clear; CSA is associated with the

development of PTSD and depression, as well as with suicide, sexual promiscuity, the victim-perpetrator cycle, and poor academic performance, regardless of victim age, gender, or socioeconomic status" (p.33). Schulz (2014) argues that authors' beliefs are implied through their language and goes on to state that how and what is being said is evidently a form of power. In this regard, Paolucci et al. (2001) are exhibiting power over survivors' stories and limiting them to one possibility of deficit entrenched development and identity.

Additionally, Langevin et al. (2020) suggest that young survivors present with a plethora of problems, including behavioural, sexual, emotional, relational, physical and mental. Lindert et al. (2014) specify that PTSD, anxiety and depressive symptoms may develop at any time over the lifespan for CSA survivors, suggesting that CSA can affect one's development at any time. Although I do not deny that this outcome is a possibility, I find the definitive language problematic as it only leaves space for a single story of damage, while neglecting stories of agency or resistance.

2.2.1 Dissociation

Dissociation refers to "a complex psychological and neurophysiologically based process characterised by disruptions in, and fragmentation of, the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, body awareness and perception of the self and of the environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)" (Ensink et al., 2017, p. 117). Collin-Vézina et al. (2013) state that of the few studies that focus on preschool aged children, there were high levels of dissociation documented. The literature suggests that dissociation could be a key factor in the development of adverse CSA effects. Although Ensink and colleagues' (2017) study offers useful data for the development of intervention strategies, I notice they utilized third-party evaluators (mothers of CSA survivors) for their data collection. This was a common

occurrence in the reviewed literature and I have approached this research with curiosity around how survivors do or do not identify with the idea of dissociation, and other highlighted symptoms. Additionally, a response-based approach would question how dissociation might be a necessary act of resistance to the abuse. Reynolds (2020) describes resistance as "all of a person's or people's responses against abuses of power and oppression, and the many ways that they maintain their dignity and move towards justice" (p.353).

2.2.2 Emotion Regulation Difficulties

According to Amédée (2019) "emotion regulation competencies refer to one's ability to modulate his/her emotional response in a manner that is appropriate for the context" (p.1078). Emotion regulation difficulties were highlighted by multiple studies, each of which identified sexually abused preschoolers as more likely to experience challenges in regulating their emotions. In other words, children who have experienced CSA are more likely to exhibit externalizing or internalizing behaviours. Langevin et al. (2015) suggest that the development of one's socioemotional capacity is determined by their emotion regulation. The authors go on to argue that if this aspect of development is not targeted in preschool CSA survivors, it could lead to psychopathology. Amédée et al. (2019) go on to suggest that low emotion regulation abilities can lead to behavior problems, PTSD symptoms and peer victimization.

In a more recent study, Langevin et al. (2020) did in fact include young survivors as active participants in their study. The study compared the themes and narrative performances of sexually abused preschoolers with preschoolers who had not been sexually abused. This study concluded that sexually abused preschoolers were more likely to experience emotional dysregulation than non-abused preschoolers. Charest et al. (2018) adds that sexually abused

preschoolers showed higher levels of hyperactivation and disorganization in their stories when compared to non-abused preschoolers.

2.2.3 Functional Somatic Symptoms

Bonvanie et al. (2015) define FSS as symptoms that are not well explained by, or attributed to, an underlying pathology; including pain, stomach-aches, head-aches, nausea, vomiting, dizziness and fatigue. Sigurdottir and Halldorsdottir (2018) further argue that there is no real distinction between mind and body because the brain, nervous system, endocrine system, and immune system work in accordance with one another. Sigurdottir and Halldorsdottir demonstrate this through an in-depth case study of a CSA survivor named Anne. Anne offers a timeline of her many experiences of CSA and the physical symptoms she experienced, including chronic ear infections, mumps, ovarian cysts, loss of sight and hearing and eventually ovarian cancer. The timeline illustrates the connection between sexual abuse and one's physical health and physiology. Finn et al. (2018) share this belief and suggest that traumatic experiences in childhood are associated with somatic distress, where distress is materialized through a series of clinical symptoms. Sigurdottir and Halldorsdottir's (2018) study was unique as it was one of the only documents that amplified the voice of a survivor and offered personal insights into the need for healthcare providers to validate and connect one's lived experiences with their holistic health.

2.3 Alternative Stories: Resistance Talk

It is clear that the reviewed studies have identified a swath of negative consequences of child sexual abuse. However, Collin-Vézina et al. (2013) briefly mention alternative paths by stating "despite overwhelming evidence of deleterious outcomes of CSA, it is commonly agreed that the impact of CSA is highly variable and that a significant portion of victims do not exhibit clinical levels of symptoms" (p. 4). Additionally, Paolucci et al. (2001) illustrate definitive

language in how they describe different beliefs within the field of CSA research. The authors suggest that some researchers argue the impact of CSA has been vastly overstated while others "contend that victims of CSA experience numerous detrimental effects and disturbances" (p.18). This stance seemingly reduces the experience of sexualized violence survivors to either damaged or symptomless. This "one or the other" approach does not adequately account for the multiple stories experienced by survivors and ultimately risks misrepresenting a group of peoples.

Although these articles have identified that not all survivors experience adverse effects, the authors fail to embrace this fact as part of the narrative surrounding CSA survivors. I wonder how the continuous amplification of this single damage narrative limits survivors to a possibility of negative outcomes. It is important to note that I am not denying the potential harmful effects of CSA, I am simply wondering how we might explore multiple stories as a means of including a response-based approach in CSA research and literature. Sigurdardottir and Halldorsdottir (2018) share a similar sentiment and state that there have been minimal attempts to study the lived experiences of survivors and argue that researchers *should* focus on the lived experiences of CSA survivors to provide a more fulsome depiction of sexualized violence.

2.4 Missing Voices

A noticeable trend in the reviewed literature is the lack of survivor voice. Several studies collected data from caregivers and teachers rather than from the survivors themselves. Only one article featured survivor voice through qualitative design, however, they were solely focused on the health consequences of the participant's experiences of CSA (Sigurdardottir & Halldorsdottir, 2018). In order to illustrate this issue, I think this excerpt from Amédée and colleagues' (2019) study summarizes the general attitude the reviewed literature perpetuates toward CSA survivors; "relying on teachers' evaluation may represent a better alternative than

using children's perceptions of their own social difficulties. As such, Blanchard-Dallaire and Hébert (2014) found that sexually abused children tended to report fewer difficulties than their teachers" (p.1086).

Ultimately, this sentiment outright denies survivors the agency to decide how they have responded to violence. Gildea (2020) furthers my argument and states that "our reliance on discursive language and normalized expectations of wellness constructed predominantly by professionals who… have not had the ground ripped out from under them, cannot be expected to provide adequate structures of meaning-making to society or to survivors" (p.13). Not only does Amédée et al.'s (2019) statement take away agency from survivors, it also depicts the power dynamic, and continuous pathologization entrenched in CSA research and literature.

2.5 Literature with First-Person Narratives

Burke Draucker and Marstolf (2008) suggest that without survivors' narratives, we leave room for perpetrators to control the story; meaning that perpetrators are able to impose their own version of how the violence took place. Additionally, creating space for first-person narratives allows survivors to make sense, or meaning out of their experience. The authors go on to suggest that important messages can be sent to children experiencing abuse through survivors' stories. One participant suggested that through sharing their story they are communicating that experiences of sexualized violence does not equate to hopelessness, more specifically they stated it's "not the end of the world" (p. 1044).

Hunter (2010) highlighted survivors' narratives and categorized their stories into themes of "ongoing suffering", "silence", and "transcendence". Those that told a narrative of ongoing suffering acknowledged the challenges of abusive experiences, and accepted a victim identity. Participants that preferred a narrative of silence believed that they were not affected by the

abuse. Lastly, participants that told a narrative of transcendence told stories of overcoming challenges. Those in the transcendence category had a strong sense of self, and saw themselves as protectors, helpers, or justice seekers. Similar to Reynolds' (2020) work, this article suggests that many survivors of violence demonstrate acts of resistance, and seek justice.

Similar to my own concerns, Woodiwiss (2014) challenges the dominant narrative of harm that constructs survivors of violence as weak, passive and inevitably damaged from the abuse. Woodiwiss goes on to argue that survivors of CSA are encouraged to identify symptoms of abuse and make connections between adult experiences and childhood abuse. In congruence with Woodiwiss' work, I would suggest that encouraging survivors to medicalize their experiences only further perpetuates this single narrative of harm, and ultimately obscures survivors' agency, dignity, and resistance.

Based on the reviewed literature, I suggest a shift away from professional perspectives as the dominant narrative in sexualized violence research. Further, I suggest a shift toward first-person narratives that attend to all possibilities of sexualized violence, rather than the current emphasis on clinical symptoms. Richards (2016) suggests that first-person narratives have the potential to illuminate complexities, ambiguities and nuances of one's lived experiences. Richards goes on to state that "many people's stories may have a ghostly existence outside of the dominant discourses, unspoken and unheard" (p.235). Given the sparsity of first-person narratives of early years survivors in CSA research, I would argue that this means that there is much we have to learn about sexualized violence in early childhood.

After the preliminary search, I have identified three salient themes, namely the overwhelming symptomology talk, the lack of first-person narratives, and the non-existence of response-based approaches or multiple stories. My research aims to combat these themes through

the following research questions: 1) How do people survive and cope with early childhood sexualized violence; 2) How do children resist sexualized violence; 3) What does healing look like for survivors of sexualized violence? In order to answer these questions, I have accessed first-person narratives in the form of memoirs and autobiographies. Utilizing critical feminist research (CFR), this study aims to highlight how CSA survivors go beyond the damage narrative by revealing how survivors describe the experience of violence and how survivors enact resistance to sexualized violence.

Chapter three: Methodology

3.1 Critical Feminist Research as Methodology

The methodology I am drawn to reflects my identity as an interpretivist, critical researcher; believing in the idea of multiple realities that uniquely interact with our histories to create our understanding of the world we live in. My research questions aim to challenge the single story of survivors as damaged through a stance of witnessing survivors' narratives. My research sets out to create space for multiple stories that honour the responses and resistance of survivors. In order to achieve this stance and to honour my commitment as a critical researcher, I have utilized a Critical Feminist Research (CFR) methodology. CFR felt like a natural fit as it highlights clinical psychology's complacency in the production of knowledge that promotes the damage narrative or individualization of societal issues. CFR actively works against this complacency by shedding light on oppression and resisting the individualization of responses to such oppression (Wigginton & LaFrance, 2019). All too often, clinical psychology reinforces the idea that we need to change the person rather than change the system (Fox et al., 2009). Fox et al. (2009) state that:

> What concerns us as psychologists is that these institutions routinely use psychological knowledge and techniques to maintain an unacceptable status quo. Instead of exposing and opposing this use, however, mainstream psychology strengthens it. Its prevailing conceptions of human needs and values and its image of scientific objectivity too readily accommodate harmful institutional power. Furthermore, as a powerful institution in its own right, psychology generates its own harmful consequences that fall particularly hard on those who are oppressed and vulnerable. Instead of tinkering with the edges, thus, critical psychologists from a variety of critical traditions advocate not just minor reform

> but fundamentally different social structures more likely to lead to social justice and human wellbeing. We imagine and explore alternatives. We think psychology can do better. (p. 4)

CFR's call for psychology to do better feels like a natural fit with my own concerns around the ways in which survivors are spoken for in this professional space. LaFrance and Wigginton (2019) specifically state that "the ways in which participants are represented in research is a central concern for critical feminist scholars" (p.543). Additionally, CFR challenges researchers to create actionable research. My intent is to share knowledge that actively rejects the single story of damage and positions survivors as knowledgeable, and the expert in their own lives; ultimately, I hope this influences future researchers to do the same.

In this particular study, I center my research within the belief that language is not neutral, and that our research is an expression of politics and power. I situate my research within Coates and Wade's (2007) belief that "speech may be free but the means of making one's self heard and having one's position given credence are not equally available to all" (p. 511). I interpret this to mean that those of us with the power to make ourselves heard have a responsibility to uphold multiple truths in the discourse that we present and promote.

3.2 Selection Criteria

Over the years, my interest in this topic has introduced me to several memoirs written by CSA survivors. These memoirs proved themselves to be a rich source of information that continue to guide my work with survivors of violence. Additionally, memoirs provided an opportunity to review survivors' free recall of CSA events and mitigated the risk of researcher coercion or suggestivity; which ultimately contributes to the accuracy of this study. Therefore, it seemed a natural fit to utilize memoirs as a data source in this study. However, in order to focus

my data, I conducted a search utilizing the Goodreads website. During my search, I located 65 books under the subject "Abuse and Survival Memoirs". Initially, several books were excluded because they were identified as fiction. In order to be included in the study, the memoir had to include first-person accounts from the survivor(s), be published in English, specify that abuse began when survivors were six years old and younger, and have a primary focus on sexualized violence. Ultimately, four memoirs met the inclusion criteria and were selected for the study. Namely; *"Afraid" by Sharon McGovern; "My Sister and I" by J. Jackson Owensby; "Not Without my Sister" by Kristina Jones, Celeste Jones and Juliana Buhring; and "Never Tell: Recovering from Childhood Sexual Abuse" by Catherine McCall.*

3.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis as Research Methods

Wigginton and Lafrance (2019) suggest that there is no superior method to accompany CFR, rather the authors argue that any research can be sexist and any research can be feminist. In other words, the vessel to feminist research lies in the research process itself. With these considerations in mind, I have opted to utilize reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) methods. RTA requires researchers to practice theoretical transparency and suggests that research is co-created by researcher and data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Given the theory-driven nature of my research questions, I have utilized deductive RTA. Meaning, I have openly analyzed data through a response-based, narrative, and feminist lens while utilizing reflexivity in my analysis.

CFR and RTA fit cohesively as they both emphasize the importance of reflexive research, Wigginton and Lafrance (2019) suggest that forming reflexive research involves "…self-reflection, peer supervision, consultation with experienced researchers (e.g. supervisors), and further explorations of the literature…" (p.11). In order to exercise these suggestions, I have opted to keep a research journal where I document the research process from my perspective. My

journal addresses my own positionality in the research, or as LaFrance and Wigginton (2019) suggest, I have reflexively considered my area of interest through questioning my own question. Through adopting CFR and RTA, my goal was to research with transparency and accountability by going beyond listing my social location and instead engaging in ongoing reflections of my role in the co-creation of knowledge (LaFrance & Wigginton, 2019).

Braun and Clarke (2021) differentiate RTA by stating that:

> Reflexive approaches (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019a; Hayes, 2000) involve later theme development, with themes developed *from* codes, and conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept (Braun et al., 2014). Theme development requires considerable analytic and interpretative work on the part of the researcher. Although themes might encompass data that on the surface appears disparate, such themes unite implicit or latent meaning. Themes cannot exist separately from the researcher—they are *generated* by the researcher through data engagement mediated by all that they bring to this process (e.g. their research values, skills, experience and training). (p.39).

Braun and Clarke (2019) state that RTA is a research adventure, rather than a rigid recipe, the authors suggest that researchers should engage in research with flexibility, reflexivity, theoretical knowingness and transparency. I have adopted my RTA approach based on the model outlined by Braun and Clarke's 2006 article. In their publication, the authors list a six-step guide on producing quality reflexive thematic analysis. These recursive steps include: *familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up.*

During the familiarisation stage I read through each memoir in a limited time frame to ensure the data were still fresh throughout the entire step. As I read, I made notes in my research journal around themes I saw emerging, however, I resisted coding at this stage. After familiarising, I read each book again and generated initial codes using NVivo, based on what was interesting to me, and related to my research questions. At this stage, I intentionally read with a response-based framework in mind, and specifically looked for instances of resistance, coping or survival methods, and the ways that survivors conceptualized or 'storied' their experiences. With the use of NVivo, I generated a mind map to reveal salient themes within the data. At this point in my research, I went through and reviewed themes, allowing myself to withdraw themes that did not contain enough data or collapse similar themes into each other. Once my mind map was organized, I went through each theme and determined the aspects of data that the theme was conveying and identified the overall essence of each theme, which are presented in this thesis.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

In congruence with the University of Victoria's guidelines, I have utilized published memoirs as my data set as they are considered publicly accessible (University of Victoria Office of Research Services, n.d.). Although my data are considered public, I recognize that these authors likely did not intend for their works to be analyzed within a graduate school thesis. Therefore, I approach this work with a deep sense of humility, transparency and with an acceptance that there is risk in relaying or interpreting stories that do not belong to me. Consequently, I have included direct quotes from the selected memoirs with the intention of conveying each narrative as close to their original form as possible. I hope that if these authors

read this one day I will have done them justice through highlighting their strength, survival and resistance.

3.5 Limitations and Reliability

Braun and Clarke (2019) view qualitative research as creative, reflexive, and subjective. The authors suggest that researcher subjectivity is a resource, rather than a threat to knowledge production. From this perspective, qualitative research is contextual, interpreted, situated, and researcher generated rather than revealed.

RTA methods were chosen as a means of increasing my own accountability and transparency within the research process. This method emphasizes the co-creation of data between data source and researcher, therefore if it were to be replicated the results would likely differ substantially.

RTA methods offer flexibility around one's theoretical orientation, meaning they can be applied to multiple different theories. I specifically chose narrative theory and critical feminist research methodology to guide my research, however, someone utilizing a different theory or methodology will interpret these stories differently. Additionally, I opted for deductive RTA methods as a means of structuring my results within a response-based framework, which further specified the results I produced. Given these subjective characteristics, my research is limited to my own interpretation of the data, and would inevitably be storied differently if replication were attempted. Despite these subjective characteristics, the memoirs shared some key concepts of resistance, healing and survival which suggests there is some generalizability of the findings.

As survivors of child sexualized violence often delay reporting, their ability to accurately remember the event is something that is often challenged (Goodman et al., 2019). However, several researchers have found that emotional or traumatic memories are typically remembered

with more clarity than non-emotional events (Arntz et al., 2005; Goldfarb et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2019). Furthermore, the utilization of free recall memories of survivors, the consistency of themes within the study's findings, and the lack of motivation for profit increases the accuracy of this study. Most importantly, the choice to base my study on the survivors' accounts demonstrates the belief in survivors and the valuing of their narratives over third-party evaluators.

Lastly, given the nature of the selected memoirs it was at times unclear how old the survivors were at specific time periods. That is to say, the data presented in this thesis demonstrates the ways that survivors resist and cope with sexualized violence throughout the entire duration of abuse. This coordinates with the way that the literature review presented data of those who survived CSA throughout the lifespan.

Chapter four: Findings

4.1 Synopses

In order to adequately represent the selected memoirs, I will provide a brief synopsis of each story below. I hope that these summaries will serve to orient the data within their original formats. The authors' intentions behind sharing their stories are also described as a means of situating each narrative within their intended purpose.

My sister and I: We are Survivors. J. Jackson Owensby (2008).

This memoir is about two sisters named Deena and Starla who survived sexualized violence from infancy to adulthood. Although this book is published under the name J. Jackson Owensby, it is almost entirely first-person accounts from Deena and Starla. Owensby is the father-in-law of Deena and had previously published a book, Deena and Starla chose to share their stories with Owensby with the hope that their book would gain more readers and help to widely spread their message.

Owensby outright states that this book was not published for profit, nor was it published to be entertaining. Rather this story was written to unveil what happens when a sexually violent person has access to children; to provide readers with the reality of sexualized violence; as an outlet to release trauma; and for fellow survivors to know that they are not alone, they are not to blame and they are innocent.

Deena and Starla started being raped when they were around four and five years old by their stepdad Cliff and his teenage sons. Deena and Starla were also raped by family friends and acquaintances without protection from the adults in their lives. The violence these girls experienced was not limited to sexual; they also experienced both physical and emotional abuse during their childhood.

At the time of publishing Deena was a university student working on her degree, co-parenting her son with her ex-husband, and engaged to her partner. Starla was described as devoting her life to her two children, a high school graduate and someone who works hard to provide for her family.

Never Tell: Recovering from Childhood Sexual Abuse. Catherine McCall (2009).

Never Tell is a memoir written by woman named Catherine who experienced sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Catherine details accounts of sexualized violence from the early age of 6 years old, however, she did not remember these accounts until her memories were triggered by her mother's death at fourty years old. Prior to Catherine's flashbacks, she remembered living in fear during her childhood due to her father's mood swings, and psychological abuse. While detailing the violence that Catherine endured during her childhood, this memoir also illustrates the aftermath of violent events, including how survivors are affected and how they heal. McCall's memoir specifically highlights the ways that her relationships have been affected by her dad's violent behaviour. McCall shares intimate details of her relationship with her husband and how they managed to find healing together.

McCall hopes that other couples and survivors that are struggling can learn from her experiences. McCall states that her memoir is written in solidarity with other CSA survivors, and is a testament to her commitment to truth-telling. The author shares that silence is particularly destructive for CSA survivors because without the ability to put words to their experience they miss the opportunity to create meaningful dialogue from such experiences. In turn, the general public is deprived of learning about survivors' courage, perseverance and redemption. McCall ends her memoir with a call to (loving) arms and asks readers to contribute to the safety of children, the healing of survivors, and the restoration of virtue.

Not Without My Sister: The True Story of Three Girls Violated and Betrayed by Those They Trusted. Celeste Jones, Kristina Jones and Juliana Buhring. (2008).

This memoir is written from the perspective of 3 survivors born into a religious cult named The Children of God. This group believed that anything done in love was sanctioned in the eyes of God, meaning incest and adults having sex with children was not considered a sin so long as they were 'done in love'. The authors state that the cult leader suggested that sex at any age is normal, natural and healthy. These beliefs led to many adults enacting sexualized violence against children, and encouraging sexual behaviour among children.

All three authors have left The Children of God and describe their childhoods as a time of systematic abuse where they were separated from their families and isolated from society. The authors were abused physically, mentally, emotionally and sexually from early childhood until they ultimately left the cult. The authors hope that through telling their story, readers will hear the voices of the children that The Children of God tried to silence.

Afraid. Sharon McGovern. (2008).

Afraid is a memoir about a young girl who was sexually and physically abused by her stepfather. McGovern first remembers being molested at the age of 4 and details several more instances of sexualized violence at the hands of her stepfather for a span of thirteen years. Within this memoir, McGovern shares the many ways she survived these violent acts, from running away to creating her own survival techniques.

The author shares her journey to healing from CSA, and finding justice within the process. McGovern details her experience of taking her stepfather to court and as a result protecting other children from his abuse. This memoir was written with the hope of encouraging

other survivors to come forward and pursue justice. At the time of publication, the author was pursuing a career in counselling to support other CSA survivors.

4.2 Findings

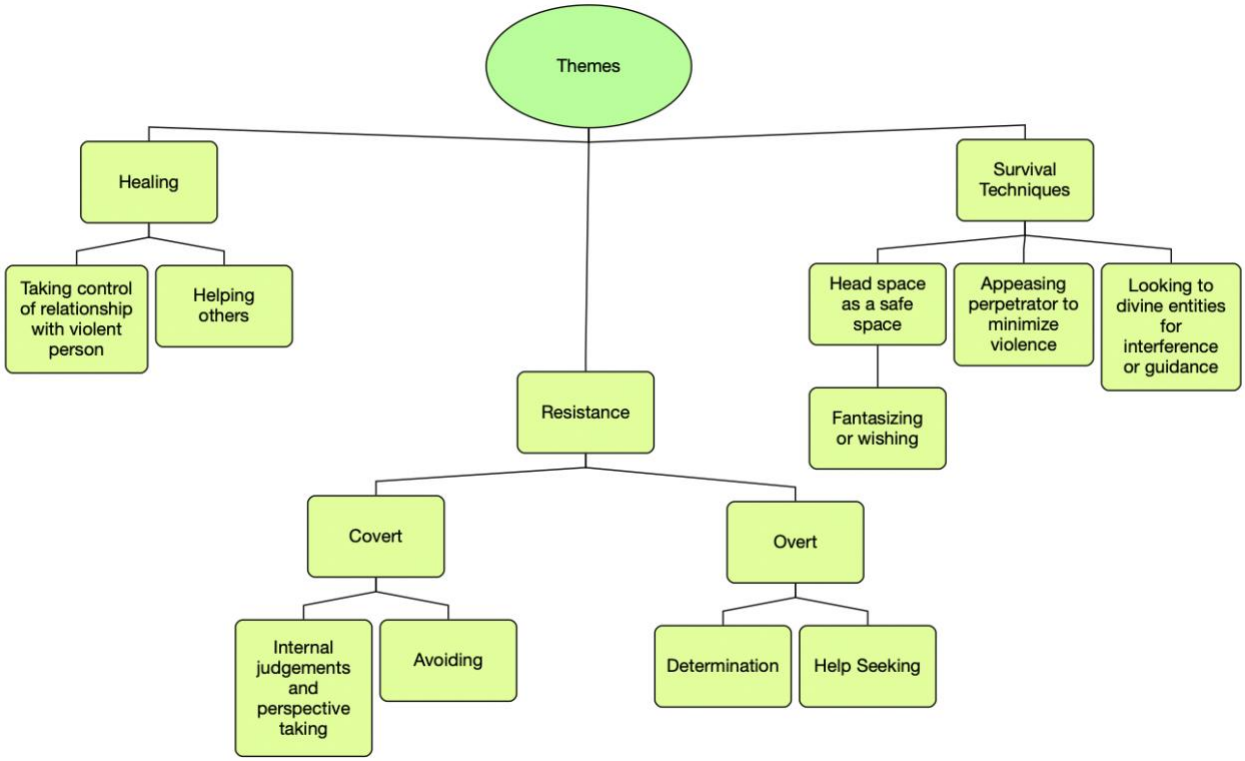
As mentioned above, the data was selected using deductive RTA, meaning the results purposefully land outside of the damage narrative. Additionally, with the use of response-based practice, the selected data was thematically sorted to represent how each author survived the abuse both during and after the abuse concluded. The survivors in this study come from various backgrounds, with some growing up in wealthy families while others grew up in poverty. Survivors' family backgrounds varied as well, including survivors from an isolated religious cult, survivors with blended families and survivors with parents who struggled with alcohol addictions. All of the survivors included in this study identified as women.

My analysis reveals that despite varied backgrounds, the survivors have some shared experiences of survival; utilizing similar strategies to resist, survive and heal. Despite abuser manipulation, most survivors described an intuitive knowing that the abuse was wrong. Even in their earliest years, the women developed a strong astuteness that informed many of their behaviours.

The selected data was sorted into three themes, namely "Resistance", "Survival Techniques", and "Healing". Within each theme exists subthemes and codes that further organize the selected data. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the main and sub themes.

Figure 1

Thematic Map



4.3 Resistance

Wade (1997) suggests that any act, whether mental or behavioural where a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence; including disrespect, or the conditions that make violent and disrespectful acts possible can be understood as resistance. In order to organize the data thematically I chose to sort authors' resistance in subthemes of overt of covert. This section discusses resistance and understands overt resistance as an outward act of resistance to violence or the violent person, whereas covert resistance describes more discrete acts of resistance.

4.3.1 Overt Resistance

The survivors in this study described several instances of overt resistance, including verbal protests, physically fighting back, making molestation difficult for abusers, and running away. Under the subtheme overt resistance, I have also included the codes "Determination" and "Help Seeking".

Verbal protests took on different forms, Catherine describes direct resistance during a molestation; ""No!... Stop it!... Get off me!... Stop it!" His hands are pinning me down. I'm wiggling and squirming, fighting him with every ounce of strength I have. "Stop it!... Leave me alone!"" (McCall, 2009, p. 43). Sharon, Celeste and Juliana share verbal protests where they tell the abuser that he's hurting them. Sharon describes screaming in protest; "I tried to scream, but I couldn't breathe – he was covering my mouth and nose" (McGovern, 2008, p.59). Sharon describes verbally protesting during a time where the abuser was attempting to rape her;

> 'No. You're not doing anything to me anymore.' I jumped up. He was momentarily shocked. I, too, was shocked by my own defiance. It felt scary, but I was also determined to stick to it. One way or another it was going to end, even if I had to die… (p.123)

Additionally, survivors described physically fighting back as an act of overt resistance. Deena shared:

> I would often try to fight [the abuser], to bite him or to punish him somehow. Sometimes, I was able to bite him. But he was a lot bigger than I was, and would beat me terribly every time that I resisted. (Owensby, 2008, p.67)

Catherine remembers a time where her father was molesting her, she wrote "he licks a little bit more and then he starts pulling my pants up, but I kick him" (McCall, 2009, p.16). Catherine details another moment of fighting back where she uses a nearby object to stab her father:

> His fork. Where is it? I'm trying to scream. I get my mouth open, but my voice won't work. He spits. Right into my mouth. And I gag and then realize my fingers have found the fork. I grab it and stab him in the back. (p.79)

The survivors shared examples where they tried to make it impossible or difficult for abusers to molest or rape them. This involved stiffening one's body, turning away, trying to wriggle free, and wearing clothes that were difficult to remove. Catherine shares an example that involves both physically fighting back and resisting rape through making it difficult for the abuser:

> I'll kill you first, I think, and don't help him one bit. I make my body stiff, but he gets my underpants off anyway. Then he tries to stick his penis in, but I twist and squirm, and smack him across the face as hard as I can. (McCall, 2009, p.78)

Kristina and Sharon both detail trying to break free from the abuser as they were being raped. Kristina said "I tried to wrestle myself out from under him" (Jones et al., 2008, p.193). Sharon recalls using clothing as a means of resisting violence, she shares: "I went upstairs and put my tightest jeans on. I thought he would have to struggle to get inside them…" (McGovern, 2008, p.93). Catherine recalls crossing her arms and making her body stiff to resist rape.

The authors all recall instances of running away to escape and resist sexualized violence. Sharon made several attempts at running away and recalls feeling safer out of the home where the abuse was taking place, she stated "I could have chosen to stay home, warm and well fed but afraid, and instead I had chosen to be cold, hungry, alone and yet without fear" (McGovern, 2008, p.110). Other survivors ran away from the abuse, without necessarily running away from home. For example, Juliana shared "I left the house. I could not breathe. I yearned for air and

light and freedom. I climbed through the window in my room, and started running through the bog, allowing my legs to carry me wherever they pleased" (Jones et al., 2008, p.335-336).

4.3.1.1 Determination. Determination was established as a subtheme because each author described a personal sense of determination to liberate oneself from the sexualized violence they experienced. According to Wade (1997):

> …any attempt to imagine or establish a life based on respect and equality, on behalf of one's self or others, including any effort to redress the harm caused by violence or other forms of oppression, represents a de facto form of resistance. (p.25)

Given Wade's above definition of de facto resistance, I felt the authors' examples of determination classified as overt resistance as they pursued personal freedom.

Determination was a characteristic that appeared to serve the survivors throughout the lifespan, whether used to evade abusive adults, imagine or establish a different life for oneself, or even to pursue legal justice. Celeste shared a promise she made to herself at an early age, "I made a resolution that I would never be physically violent towards children when I grew up, no matter what. For the first time, I understood that even children had a right to dignity and respect…" (Jones et al., 2008, p.62). Kristina also speaks of determination as a means of thinking of a better future, "it was all very well for me to put my past behind me, but I believed it was also important to break the cycle of abuse" (Jones et al., 2008, p.238). Catherine was similarly determined for her future and remembers thinking "I would never kill myself. I want to grow up, and get out of this house, and make something good of my life" (McCall, 2009, p.46). Sharon details her own determination both during violence and after the violence ended, she stated:

> I was determined he was not going to abuse me ever again… Resolutely, I pulled my arms tight round me and said, 'No.' It was the first time I had ever defied him, and I don't know where the courage came from, but the word just came out. (McGovern, 2008, p.86)

Later in life, Sharon used this same sense of courage and determination to press charges against the abuser and shares that she knew she was the only person who could stop him.

4.3.1.2 Help Seeking. Each memoir recounts instances of help seeking, including outright asking people for help, or giving clues that something was wrong. Survivors sought help from a variety of different people, including social workers, parents, other family members, police officers and friends. Starla remembers repeatedly telling people about the violence she was experiencing and stated "I kept trying to tell these people that I was getting messed with and that I was in an abusive situation" (Owensby, 2008, p.180).

Both Catherine and Kristina tried hinting at the abuse by expressing hatred toward the abuser, Kristina recalls walking past her grandmother and mumbling, "I hate that man" (Jones et al., 2008, p.164). Similarly, Catherine told her mother, "Mommy! Get up right this minute. Please. And please go downstairs and stay with Daddy. I hate him! He's bothering me! Please, promise me you'll stay with him" (McCall, 2009, p.16). Sharon illustrates indirect help seeking and states:

> Though I couldn't tell anyone, I certainly gave out plenty of clues that I was a very distressed and disturbed child. After the abuse became an established part of my life, I suddenly began to poo in strange places… I was demanding attention, silently begging those around me to look for the root cause of my problems. (McGovern, 2008, p.33)

Sharon also recalls writing morbid poetry as a means of giving off signals to someone that would listen.

4.3.2 Covert Resistance

Richardson and Wade (2010) note that victims invariably resist violence and other forms of oppression, overtly or covertly, depending on the circumstances. Within the selected data, the survivors enacted a myriad of resistances; using their judgement on the safety of the situation, covert resistance was often enacted when it was unsafe to resist overtly. The acts of covert resistance that were documented in the data included refusal to cry in front of the abuser, poking fun at the abuser, and altering one's appearance. Undoubtedly, survivors covertly resist in different ways that were not documented. Within this subtheme, I have also included two codes, namely "Avoiding"; "Internal judgements and perspective taking".

In an act of maintaining one's dignity, several survivors recalled withholding tears while in the presence of the abuser. Celeste stated "I tried not to cry. Usually I just braced myself and closed my eyes because I had my pride and did not want him to see me in tears" (Jones et al., 2008, p.51). Similarly, Juliana said "I took my punishment without crying. Something inside me refused to break down. But I did not forget" (Jones et al., 2008, p.131). Sharon described withholding tears both as a child and as an adult when forced to face the abuser in court, she stated "I felt another flashback… rising inside me, but I summoned the same resolve I had as a small girl when I would will myself not to let him see my cry" (McGovern, 2008, p.215).

Another example of covert resistance was the act of poking fun at the abuser, this was almost never done directly to the abuser, rather was done out of their presence where it would be safe. Sharon recalls several instances where she would create names with her brother or her friends that she would call the abuser; including "the nutter", "It" and "Mick the Prick" (McGovern, 2008). In similar fashion, Celeste recalls pranking some of the adult cult members, she shared:

> We decided to pull a prank, and took turns sneaking up behind a busy couple and pinching them on the bum. We thought it was hilarious when they gave a startled jump. By the time they turned around to try and catch whoever did it, we'd be long gone and giggling in the corner. (Jones et al., 2008, p.32)

Changing one's appearance served multiple purposes, such as rebellion, desexualizing oneself, and ensuring that you wouldn't be targeted. Celeste recalls throwing away clothes that revealed more of her body, like mini-skirts and short tops; these were replaced with baggy conservative clothes. Sharon also changed her appearance in an effort to desexualize herself, she stated "for me, anything to do with making myself look more grown-up or more attractive was very frightening. It was sexualising me, and I didn't want to be a sexual person" (McGovern, 2008, p.111). Sharon also learned through experience that terrible things happened to her when she made herself look nice; because of these experiences she told herself that she would no longer dress up or put in an effort to look nice. Juliana got a tattoo in an act of rebellion, she shared, "the [cult] did not endorse tattoos, but there was no official rule against it. It was my secret rebellion" (Jones et al., 2008, p.368). Similarly, Kristina recalls cutting her hair after leaving the cult in an act of desperation to look different.

4.3.2.1 Avoiding. The survivors all documented some form of skillful avoidance, such as pretending they were asleep, staying out of the house as much as possible, avoiding contact with the abuser, and hiding. Sharon summarizes her avoidance strategy by stating:

> I also tried to avoid being abused by keeping out of the house as much as possible… If I couldn't, then my aim was always to get it over with as quickly as possible. I learned how to play the game, do what he wanted, satisfy him as fast as I could. (McGovern, 2008, p.44)

Although, avoidance strategies were not always successful, the survivors documented having some victories. Starla stated:

> I tried not to get too close to him. It got to where I would just wait until my momma came home. She would get there about ten - thirty, so I would stay up until she came, and then I would sleep with her (Owensby, 2008, p.47)

Deena remembers outright hiding in a local junkyard to avoid going home, and Sharon went to school after suffering a miscarriage because she knew the abuser would be at home. Juliana pretended to be asleep, ill, or on her period to escape the abuse. Both Kristina and Sharon recall avoiding the abuser because they instinctually knew something wasn't right. Kristina stated "I was an affectionate child, but with him my instinct told me to be wary. I didn't like him and wouldn't hug him or sit on his lap" (Jones et al., 2008, p.163). Sharon remembers: "I sensed there was something wrong, and I hated it. I did everything I could to make sure I was never near enough for him to grab me" (p.17).

4.3.2.2 Internal Judgements and Perspective Taking. Internal judgements and perspective taking refers to the internal thought processes of each survivor as they endured the abuse. Often, these thoughts were connected to feelings of disgust or hatred for the abuser, intuitively knowing the abuse was wrong, or having perspectives that contradicted the manipulation they were experiencing. Celeste shared:

> there was some kind of inner spark of morality deep-seated in me that told me what was really right and what was wrong. Sex with men old enough to be my father – with anyone I didn't choose – was wrong. Their touches were uncomfortable and awkward. It was an assault on my body that I had to grin and bear. (Jones et al., 2008, p.65)

Similarly, Sharon recalled "I knew it was wrong because he only did it when mum wasn't there. I was afraid of him, and I don't know how I knew it, but I was aware that what was happening was shameful and a secret" (McGovern, 2008, p.25). Deena also had intuitive feelings about one of her abusers and stated "as far as [the abuser] went, there just seemed to be something strange and weird about him. Something strange that even at the age of three and four that I just couldn't like" (Owensby, 2008, p.10).

> Feelings of disgust and hatred were also well documented within the data. Celeste shared: I was appalled by their behaviour. They made holes in the bathroom walls so they could spy on me. They called me prudish and stuck up. I didn't care. What little natural curiosity I had about sex had turned to disgust, and I made it clear that I was not interested. (Jones et al., 2008, p.77)

Kristina also felt repulsion toward the abusive adults, she stated, "despite being indoctrinated into radical sexual beliefs, I was disgusted" (Jones et al., 2008, p.182). This quote demonstrates both feelings of disgust and an intuitive feeling of wrongness; regardless of the cult's attempt to normalize CSA, Kristina recognized their actions as violence. Catherine recalled thinking "go ahead upstairs to your wife, Dad. I hate your guts" during a molestation (McCall, 2009, p.40). This demonstrates how Catherine was still resisting covertly, without saying or doing anything that would further jeopardize her safety. Similarly, Kristina recalls a time where her thoughts contradicted that of the abuser, she stated "'stop acting like a child!' he'd shout; and I'd think, *But we are children*" (p.168).

4.4 Survival Techniques

Although this theme could have been named "responses to violence", the authors framed these skills as survival techniques, and in an attempt to keep this as close to their narrative as

possible I have opted to call this section “Survival Techniques”. The survivors framed these techniques as strategies they learned quickly, or came to them intuitively. Each strategy demonstrates a vast creativity and desire to resist the violence the survivors were experiencing. This theme is the largest of all themes within the data set, demonstrating the sheer energy that survivors devote to resisting, responding and to preserving their dignity. Survival techniques range from changing one’s hygiene practices to becoming skilled observers of one’s environment. Additionally, the subthemes in this section include “Headspace as Safe Space”; “Fantasizing or Wishing”; “Appeasing Perpetrator to Minimize Violence”; and “Looking to Divine Entities for Interference or Guidance”.

Survivors intentionally practiced poor hygiene regimes as an attempt to repel the perpetrator. Deena recalled “I started to not bathe; I didn’t want him touching me anymore” (p.108), she also remembers thinking “maybe if I smelled bad, he would leave me alone” (Owensby, 2008, p.71). Similarly, Sharon shared this thought process and stated “I stayed dirty as a way of keeping the pressure off… I had a belief that if I looked dirty and unattractive, [the abuser] would leave me alone” (McGovern, 2008, p.84).

Sharon’s memory of her survival techniques was particularly salient, she shared “I found ways to survive what was happening to me. Nobody ever taught me these strategies, they came to me instinctively and I believe they saved my life. They certainly saved my sanity…”(McGovern, 2008, p.43). Sharon also recalled:

> …when I walked out of school at the end of each day, in my mind I would create a circle around me. The circle was my protection, and I lived inside it. It was like a force field, a barrier that nobody could penetrate, and inside I was safe. If I got home and [the abuser] was there, or Mum said he was coming home that day, I’d keep the circle round me, and

> anything he did to me was to my body outside the circle: he could not get to the real me. (p.43)

The survivors became skilled observers and navigators of their environments and utilized these skills to remain prepared for incoming violence. Kristina recalled "I was always on edge attempting to pre-empt his constantly changing rules" (Jones et al., 2008, p.168). Similarly, Sharon remembers not being able to relax, she had to think on her feet and be prepared. Sharon notes distinctly familiarizing herself with her surroundings so she could better predict the abuser's actions. For example, she stated "I became an expert on every creak of the floorboards, recognising them each by their different sounds. I would lie in bed, monitoring the house" (McGovern, 2008, p.96).

4.4.1 Headspace as Safe Space

Headspace as safe space is meant to encompass the practice of retreating into one's mind for safety. Juliana summarizes this technique by stating:

> they had never been able to get into my head, the place I frequently retreated to, the hiding place I had stumbled upon as a child where no one could touch me. I secreted away the innocent child in me and kept her hidden indefinitely, safe from the beatings, the humiliation and loneliness. (Jones et al., 2008, p.379)

The survivors used this technique to block out the abuse as it was happening as well as in other unsafe moments. Kristina demonstrates this skill and stated "I closed up my mind and carried on the physical performance mechanically as he told me what a good lover I was" (Jones et al., 2008, p.180). Celeste shared "as he continued ranting, I shut down, blocking him" (p.103).

Sharon recalls mentally dividing up her body as a means of keeping her mind as a safe space, she shared:

> a major technique was mentally to divide up my body. I felt that my body was his from the waist down and that part of me simply didn't exist. The middle bit contained my heart and my soul, and they were hurting, but the top bit, from my neck upwards, was mine, and he couldn't get in there. What happened in my head was nothing to do with him, and that's where I would retreat during the abuse. (McGovern, 2008, p.44)

Catherine shared a similar form of separating herself from her body, she spoke of a molestation and recalled "he's leaving the room now. My panties are on the floor and my legs are hanging over the side of the bed. But that's okay, because panties are only clothes, and bodies are only shells" (McCall, 2009, p.181). Additionally, Sharon said:

> My mind will once again have carried me away from the torture being inflicted on my small body. Living in my imagination is how, from the age of four to seventeen, I survived the constant and brutal abuse my stepfather inflicted on me. He raped and damaged my body, but he was never able to get inside my head. (McGovern, 2008, p.1)

Sharon later stated "thank god I was able to live elsewhere in my head" (p.118).

4.4.1.1 Fantasizing or Wishing. Survivors also used their imaginations to fantasize about or wish for scenarios that would liberate them or would simply distract them from the violence. Sharon recalled:

> when I was very young, I simply used to imagine something really nice while he was molesting me. In my head I was walking down the road to the park, holding hands with either Nan or Mum, and in my other hand I had a coin to buy myself an ice cream. (McGovern, 2008, p.44-45)

Similarly, Juliana recalled “I kept a place inside my head where I could imagine anything I pleased, go on adventures, even be with my mummy and daddy again. Our teachers called it daydreaming and that was forbidden” (Jones et al., 2008, p.140).

Almost all of the survivors wished the abuser would die, some fantasized about killing the abuser themselves, and some fantasized or wished for their own death as a means of escape. Celeste specifically recalled “I started to have violent thoughts about him and wished he would die” (Jones et al., 2008, p.69). Sharon remembers a moment where she had a knife in her hand and thought about stabbing the abuser, while Deena also thought about killing an abuser.

4.4.2 Appeasing Perpetrator to Minimize Violence

The survivors learned that there were ways of keeping the perpetrator happy enough so that they wouldn’t escalate the violence. The authors also learned ways of getting the abuse over with quicker and utilized these to minimize the violence. Juliana summarizes this technique by stating:

> I knew what made the teachers tick, and I had disciplined myself into a perfection of silence. For the first time in my life, I managed to get by without a spanking. I understood that to survive, I must become a chameleon, changing to suit every environment I found myself in. If it was silence and complacency they wanted, I gave it to them with hands folded neatly in my lap; if they wanted me to sing, I sang with gusto; I danced to all their tunes. (Jones et al., 2008, p.153)

Catherine recalled obeying the abuser so that she could leave the abusive scenario quicker. Catherine also remembered needing to do whatever she could to please the abuser, and stated “the best thing to do is to hang on his every word as if they’re jewels flowing from his mouth. He likes it when I do that” (McCall, 2009, p.42). Deena recalled needing to comfort the abuser after

a molestation and said “it was the same thing, all hands, rubbing and stroking. Then he broke down crying, sobbing. I would tell him that it was okay, that he shouldn’t cry. I’d tell him that just so he would go away” (Owensby, 2008, p.41).

Celeste recalled trying to get the abuse over with quickly by pretending to have an orgasm so that the abusers would leave her alone. Celeste also stated “I would imitate the motions as I had been taught, but felt nothing but fear that if I didn’t please him he would lash out in anger” (Jones et al., 2008, p.65). Kristina also feared making the abuser angry, while reflecting on a molestation she stated “his beard was scratchy and I tried hard to stay still even when it hurt or became uncomfortable” (Jones et al., 2008, p.167).

4.4.3 Looking to Divine Entities for Interference or Guidance

Some of the survivors emphasized the importance of their faith during times where they needed support, additionally these survivors used their connection with loved ones who had passed for support. The survivors prayed to their faith base, or looked for guidance and support through their connection to dead loved ones. Catherine recalls channelling her ancestors’ strength, she wrote “my ancestors… were strong enough to get over here from Ireland and keep this family going. I can be strong, too” (McCall, 2009, p. 182). Sharon remembers feeling her mom and grandmother while testifying in court, she stated:

> as I stood there in the witness box, I really felt that Mum and Nan were up in Heaven helping me. However terrible it was going to be for me, they had let me know that they were there, rooting for me. (McGovern, 2008, p.211)

Sharon writes about praying to God as a child as young as six that the abuser would crash his truck and die. While Catherine recalls praying to God in her head, and asking him to take her to Jesus’ house, where they were kind to children.

4.5 Healing

All survivors described some sense of healing from the abuse they experienced, some referenced connecting with their child selves in their healing journey, some referenced a great deal of pride to have cultivated their current lives, despite the sexualized violence. Healing was included as a theme because it highlighted the persistence and personal victories of the survivors and starkly contrasted the damage narrative that existed in the academic literature. The two subthemes included in this section are "Helping Others" and "Taking Control of Relationship with Violent Person".

Both Sharon and Juliana noted connecting to their child selves in their healing process, Juliana wrote:

> After some time, I forgot her existence entirely. Time and years grew over the lock, until it was hard to tell there had even been a door. Eventually, she grew tired of the confines of her 'safe', and began to knock on the door. I heard the pounding every so often like a frantic beat in my pulse. A familiar voice called out to me begging for release, but I could not remember where the voice was coming from. Finally one fateful day the child broke through the door. I recognized a little piece of my identity, but it was an emaciated creature who emerged from that inner chamber. 'Why did you leave me?' her haunting eyes asked me in the mirror. 'I wanted to protect you.' 'From what?' 'From pain.' 'Then leave it.' Her answer was so simple I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before. 'I will.' And I did (Jones et al., 2008, p.380)

Juliana later stated "you may be able to forgive, but you cannot just 'forget', nor erase a lifetime of memories. Unlike a computer memory, the mind has no 'delete' button" (p.390).

Sharon recalls connecting her adult self with her inner child during her healing journey and wrote:

> I remember thinking, I have been a child all my life, but as a child I was forced to be a woman. The child is still within me, but now the trial is over, and what she said has been accepted and believed, she has grown up. The child and the woman have finally met and are now one. (McGovern, 2008, p.231)

Although Juliana writes about forgiveness in her healing, Deena shared that she feels angry, and stated that:

> for the first time — the very first time — I am comfortable with myself. Yes, I still have a lot of anger; anger at [the abuser], anger at my mother, and anger at society. But not the fiery hot, blazing rage of earlier years. For the most part, I have learned to live with it, and with the help of those around me who love me for myself; it is becoming minutely easier every day. (Owensby, 2008, p.203)

4.5.1 Helping Others

The survivors "helping others" took many different forms. Deena and Starla spoke about wanting better for their own children, and acted to protect them. While, Juliana, Kristina and Celeste used their voices publicly to bring awareness to the religious practices that threaten the welfare of children who remain living in the cult. Sharon pressed charges against the abuser to ensure he couldn't enact sexualized violence against other children. Sharon, Celeste and Catherine have trained or are currently in training as counsellors to support other children and families who have experienced abuse. Juliana, Kristina, and Celeste have formed an organization (RISE International) that aims to protect children in isolated or extremist cults from all forms of abuse or violence. As well, each of these survivors courageously shared their stories of

sexualized violence in order to spread awareness and ultimately prevent CSA from happening to other children.

4.5.2 Taking Control of Relationship with Violent Person

This theme is meant to encompass the many ways that survivors were able to take control of their relationship with the violent perpetrator in their healing journey. This included cutting people off, being emancipated, seeking legal justice, or symbolically reframing the relationship for oneself.

Both Deena and Starla sought emancipation from their mother, Deena stated, "it is extremely hard for me to identify my mother as 'Mom' or 'Mommy,' which signifies a certain amount of tenderness and love, and I'm not sure that I ever saw even the slightest sign of that from my mother" (Owensby, 2008, p.24). Kristina, Celeste, and Juliana left the cult, which was largely referred to as the "family", and as a result cut ties with those that sexually abused them. Additionally, when Celeste accepted her dad's complacency in the abusive practices of the "family", she symbolically distanced herself, she wrote, "in reality, I found that I had little in common with him anymore. I was no longer daddy's little girl" (Jones et al., 2008, p.280).

Catherine's healing journey ultimately led her to confront her father about the violence he perpetrated (McCall, 2009). When Catherine's father passed away she recalls reading a letter aloud that honoured her truth, she stated "as I bury you today, with you I bury my shame and my sense of myself as a victim" (p. 236). Sharon also confronted the abuser; in and out of court, she wrote "I'd confronted the demon, looked into his face without him knowing I was there, and this helped me banish all the power he had once held over me. My initial feelings of fear were soon replaced by strength" (McGovern, 2008, p.208).

Chapter five: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate the multiple stories of survivors that extend beyond the damage narrative. The opportunity to present first-person narratives allowed for the representation of complex, lived experiences. Ultimately, the literature review revealed several failures of CSA survivors research, including a lack of multiple stories and first-person narratives, the use of third-party evaluators, and a continuous contribution to the damage narrative. Catherine shared a similar sentiment and ended her memoir by stating:

> when survivors are prevented from articulating the words necessary to integrate their abuse, they are deprived of creating the meaningful dialogue through which the power of love dispels the power of evil, and their families are deprived of learning about courage, perseverance, redemption, and other important life lessons. (McCall, 2009, p.259)

In response to these research failures, this thesis has attempted to provide a platform that supports multiple stories that represent survivors' resistance and survival. This thesis asked three questions, namely 1) How do people survive and cope with early childhood sexualized violence; 2) How do children resist sexualized violence; 3) What does healing look like for survivors of sexualized violence? The results confirm that there are parallel stories of resistance where violence exists. Even when abuse begins at a young age, survivors resist and respond to violence with determination and persistence.

In answer to how people survive and cope with sexualized violence, the theme "Survival Techniques" was formulated. This theme revealed that survivors develop techniques through experience, or through intuition. The results demonstrate the authors' vast and creative techniques, including using their mind as a safe space, fantasizing about or wishing for better,

appeasing the perpetrator to minimize violence, and looking to divine entities for interference or guidance. In particular, these results highlighted a disparity between the academic literature and the memoirs. For example, academic literature highlighted symptoms of dissociation, whereas survivors described a phenomenon with shared characteristics of dissociation. The key difference was that survivors described this phenomenon as a survival technique; head space as safe space. Additionally, behaviours such as writing morbid poetry, and going to the bathroom in strange places were understood as help seeking from the survivors' perspective. Whereas, from a symptom perspective this behaviour would be deemed as a mental health outcome or as emotion regulation difficulties.

Another question was "how do children resist sexualized violence?". This question revealed that children invariably resist violence, even in their early years. The authors enacted instances of both overt and covert resistance. The survivors described internal judgements and perspective taking, avoiding, determination, and help seeking as means of resistance. These results contend with academic literature that too often depicts children as passive objects in abusive situations, instead the data suggests that children are active agents of determination and resistance (Fast & Richardson, 2019).

The final question asked "what does healing look like for survivors of sexualized violence?". First and foremost, the results of this study acknowledge the possibility of multiple stories, and argue that healing *is* a possibility for survivors, rather than subscribing to the single story of damage or hardship. The authors referenced connecting with their child selves, and feeling proud of themselves for cultivating their current lives. Most saliently, the survivors described healing in the form of helping others, and taking control of their relationship with the violent perpetrator. In contrast to the academic literature that cautions readers about the

undesirable consequences of early childhood sexualized violence, the memoirs highlight a sense of hope that was absent in the literature review.

As a reflexive researcher, it is important to mention that the survivors did mention some of the symptoms that were presented in the literature review; namely PTSD, depression, anxiety, and dissociation. However, the survivors' narratives didn't stop with symptomology, the narratives carried on to explore how these 'symptoms' served a purpose or the survivors discussed how they dealt with these challenges. For example, Sharon disclosed experiencing PTSD flashbacks, she shared "I taught myself to deal with them: Breathe deeply, stay calm. It will pass. It's just a memory, and it can't hurt you now" (McGovern, 2008, p.208). Catherine also framed dissociation as a strategy rather than a symptom, she wrote "I wonder if my sensitivity to the details of the room is a form of dissociation, an avenue away from my anxiety" (McCall, 2009, p.171). Seemingly, when given the space, survivors do not reduce their experience to measures of symptoms or damage.

Mertova and Webester (2019) warn against the "Hollywood Effect" within narrative theory, whereby the data is manipulated to create a satisfactory, "happy ending." My intent is not to deny adverse effects of child sexualized violence; however, my intent is to highlight resistance and encourage other researchers to shift their focus away from the damage narrative that inevitably encourages victim blaming. Nor do I suggest that researchers fetishize resistance, however; Fast and Richardson (2019) suggest that "eliciting resistance provides an antidote to victim-blaming because the victim is seen as an active agent, not a passive object, as one often finds in the literature on harmed, oppressed, and traumatized people" (p.9). Reynolds (2020) also suggests that "the language of psychology centres on descriptions of individuals' brokenness which hides the structural violence that promotes suffering" (p.350). Reynolds argues that rape

culture is a form of structural violence but it is concealed by psychological conceptualizations of trauma, also referred to in this thesis as the damage narrative. Reynolds suggests that complex analysis helps us resist the damage narrative, which ultimately reduces structural violence, or specifically rape culture in this example, to personal deficiency. Reynolds frames this process as the perfect storm of victim blaming.

Similarly, Wade (2008) questions "dysfunctional behaviour" and argues that the distinction between what's functional and what's dysfunctional or what is problematic behaviour begins to melt away when we honour and celebrate how survivors have resisted. Wade suggests that survivors can decide what is functional and shares an example of a survivor taking over one hour to walk one block home from school; this slow pace gained her a reputation of being absent minded, however, this person was delaying going home because she knew it was unsafe. Looking at this example from a pathology standpoint, one might view a survivor taking an hour to walk one block as a dysfunctional behaviour. However, a response-based standpoint invites us to view this survivor as highly skilled at keeping themselves safe, and ultimately resisting violence.

Response-based framing feels particularly relevant to the "head space as safe space" theme. The survivors utilized their minds as a safe space both during and after being molested or raped. The survivors described separating their minds from their bodies, going to distant places in their heads, staring or focussing on objects other than the abuser. If one were to assess this behaviour from a symptom perspective, they might reduce it to dissociation. However, the survivors emphasized how vital the ability to live in their head was to their survival and wellbeing. A response-based approach acknowledges this behaviour as a means of protecting oneself, rather than a dysfunctional behaviour to be fixed.

Critical Feminist Research criticizes psychology research's tendency to individualize issues and asks CFR researchers to instead problematize and analyze the larger societal issue. In this case, it's vital to recognize that child sexualized violence is structural violence and consequently should be framed accordingly in CSA research. Without first-person narratives, multiple stories and recognition of survivors' resistance we run the risk of allowing perpetrators to control the story (Burke Draucker and Marstolf, 2008). In doing so, victim blaming and rape culture are given room to run the discourse surrounding child sexualized violence.

Coates and Wade (2004) similarly suggest that in order to engage in effective and respectful prevention and intervention our discursive practices should include: the exposure of violence; making the responsibility of violence clear; elucidating and honouring victims' responses and resistance; and contesting the blaming and pathologizing of survivors. With respectful intervention and prevention in mind, this thesis intentionally positions survivors as knowledgeable, capable, and determined human beings.

5.2 Recommendations

Given how the literature review and the data differed in this thesis, I would argue that research in this field needs to uphold its responsibility for truth telling and refrain from fetishizing survivor pathology. Due to the authors capacity to thoroughly analyze their experiences, I would recommend that researchers conduct studies that include the recollective memory of childhood survivors. My thesis utilized memoirs as data, which might imply some similarities between survivors, given that they all took to writing about their experiences. Future research in this field might utilize focus group discussions, or in-depth interviews from research participants to potentially gain a more diverse understanding of survivors' experiences. Given the potential harms and benefits of doing research on this topic, future research should account for the

significant ethical considerations surrounding the inclusion of survivors' narratives. Human participation research is guided by the core principles of: 1) Respect for persons; 2) Concern for welfare; and 3) Justice (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2022). These core principles would likely be enacted differently depending on the study. For example, research on survivors' narratives should consider ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Additionally, future studies should consider the emotional and sensitive nature of this topic and might provide therapeutic supports for participants to ensure their research does not enact harm onto participants.

Coates and Wade (2007) suggest that "the question of how victims and perpetrators are represented by third parties is of crucial importance" (p.512). Thus, I recommend that frontline practitioners question the dominant discourse surrounding childhood survivors, and allow survivors to be in control of their own narrative. In doing so, I hope we can shift the overall discourse and culture around sexualized violence away from the damage narrative and toward a narrative of dignity.

5.3 Conclusion

This thesis utilized Critical Feminist Research methodology to explore the resistance of survivors of early childhood sexualized violence. With the use of first-person narratives in the form of memoirs, I used reflexive thematic analysis methods to reveal survivors' resistance. The nature of this research developed organically from a concern around the ways that young survivors were represented in academic literature. I noticed the continuous pathologizing and symptomizing of survivors' lived experiences throughout the lifespan. Additionally, it appeared that third party evaluators were the favoured data source for young survivors; meaning the

evaluation of teachers, caregivers, and mental health professionals was given more credence than that of the survivors themselves.

In response to these concerns, I chose to utilize memoirs as my data source as a means of adding in-depth narratives to the existing literature. This is rare with young survivors given their verbal capacity at the time of abuse. However, based on the research surrounding recollective memories of emotional events and utilizing a feminist lens, I felt confident that survivors of all ages should be given the platform to have their stories heard and believed. The research revealed that when given the space to do so, survivors divulge substantial accounts of resistance. The survivors in this specific data set demonstrated covert and overt resistance, extensive survival techniques, and healing practices. These themes demonstrated the persistent, creative and varied responses that young survivors enact against violence.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates the disparity between academic literature; specifically, literature that is free of first-person narratives, and survivors' lived experiences. Whereby academic accounts subscribe to a single story of damage, and survivors' narratives are filled with multiple stories of resistance, survival, determination, healing and pride. In making this distinction, this thesis argues that by maintaining this disparity our research contributes to the dangers of victim blaming, stigmatization of survivors, rape culture and structural violence. Based on this thesis, I recommend researchers shift their focus to acknowledge multiple stories, whereby survivors' narratives move to the forefront of the discourse surrounding CSA research and literature.

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