Women Survivors' Experiences of Work

by

Francis Lorraine Guenette
B.A., Thomson River University, 1999

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MASTER OF ARTS

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University of Victoria

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE

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Francis Lorraine Guenette

B.A. Thomson Rivers University, 1999

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Anne Marshall, Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies
Supervisor

Dr. Blythe Shepard, Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies
Departmental Member

Dr. Marie Hoskins
Outside Member
Dr. Anne Marshall, Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies
Supervisor

Dr. Blythe Shepard, Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies
Departmental Member

Dr. Marie Hoskins
Outside Member

ABSTRACT

The importance of work, women’s experiences of different work paths, and the
effects abuse has on a woman’s ability to work led to the question - how do women make
meaning of the ways in which they have experienced the intersection of abuse and work?
A qualitative research approach, within an overarching theoretical framework of social
constructionism, and a narrative method forms the methodological basis for this work.
Time-line drawings created by participants, concept maps, ghostwritten stories, and
themes within and across participants formed the analysis. A major meta-theme across all
participants related to the long-term effects of abuse experiences. The five women who
shared their stories spoke of many barriers in their lives. At the same time, their stories
shone with light and hope. Many of them reflected on how far they had come on their
individual journeys of recovery and all had dreams for the future.
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this Masters Thesis to the five women who agreed to participate in my research. Without the generous sharing of their stories this thesis would not have the richness and depth that I hope I have been able to convey. These women came to my home and they shared their stories – which at times were filled with pain but they did not let this stop them. They continued to talk and share until their hope and courage and strength shone through their words. Thank you Becky, Jeannie, Betty, Melanie, and Cinnamon. I am confident that each of you has triumphed:

"... out there where the final horizon becomes a drop of blood,

  a drop of life.

  Where you will carry the universe on your shoulders,

  Where the universe will bear your hope"

(Adaptation of Miguel Angel Asturias – Barefoot Meditations)
Chapter One: Introduction

Work is an important aspect of identity and can serve to facilitate one’s full inclusion in society (Savickas, 1997). The experience of work is embedded in complex layers of social, cultural, and political meaning (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, DeVoy, & DeWine, 2005). This embedded aspect of work contributes to different work experiences and outcomes related to individual histories. Women’s life and career paths differ from men’s. Statistics Canada’s (2006) current labour report relates that the participation of women in the paid work force is one of the most significant social trends in Canada in the past quarter century. In 2004, 58% of all women aged 15 and over were part of the paid work force, up from 42% in 1976. However, women’s average earnings are still substantially lower than those of men, and women make up a disproportionate share of the population with low incomes. Women are also much more likely than men to work part-time and “work”, for many women, includes volunteer community work and work in the home.

Many individual and social realities can affect women’s ability to enter the paid work force. Several authors contend that relational issues are a dominant theme for women in the ways in which they approach work situations (Crozier, 1999; Flum, 2001; Josselson, 1992; Schultheiss, 2003). If primary relationships have been disrupted by abuse experiences, it is inevitable that issues and problems within a work context will emerge (Flum, 2001). Components of physical, emotional, intellectual, and psychological well-being influence a woman’s ability to work (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003) and the ability to work becomes very important for women who are trying to rebuild their lives after experiencing various forms of abuse (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003).
Much research examines quantitative aspects related to women’s experiences of abuse; some of these will be explored in the literature review that forms Chapter Two of this thesis. What are less prevalent are the actual stories women tell about how experiences of abuse intersect with work histories and current ability to work. Immediate support for women as they leave abusive situations is very important. Yet the long-term effects of abuse create barriers that persist far past these initial supports. I believe there is a need to explore women’s experiences after these initial supports have been exhausted and they have moved somewhat down the road in their healing journeys. How are they managing now? How are they giving meaning to the intersection of their abuse experiences and their work histories in light of the fact that problems may persist for them when it comes to finding and maintaining employment? How would they go about telling these stories?

I bring to this topic a personal interest in conducting research that will make a difference for women and will allow women’s experiences to be highlighted. Women who have experienced abuse often feel silenced (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Toule, 1986). Though I agree with Riessman’s (1993) point that we cannot give voice to others, I believe that I can listen to women’s voices and through a process of co-construction I can record, interpret, and place these voices in the public forum. Through the representation of women’s stories, I can be the agent of allowing their voices to touch others and there is the potential in this touching to enact change.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the present thesis research was to employ a narrative approach to explore the several questions raised through a review of the literature on women who
have experienced abuse, and how those experiences may have intersected with their ability to work. How have women who have been in abusive situations and moved beyond them, past the initial supports offered to them, made meaning of their abuse experiences in terms of an intersection with their work histories? How are they managing with work today? Are they managing? How do they give meaning to abuse experiences in light of the way these experiences may continue to intersect with work? How would women go about telling these stories? This thesis research is also undertaken to contribute to a body of knowledge related to women survivor's experiences of work.

In November of 2005, I interviewed five women recruited for me by the Bridges for Women Society of Victoria. The narratives that these five women shared with me form the basis of this research that was undertaken employing a narrative methodology within an overarching theoretical framework of social constructionism.

Social Constructionism as a Theoretical Framework

Whiston and Rahadja (2005) write that social constructionism is a construct that fits under the broad umbrella of constructivism. What distinguishes social constructionism is its focus on societal and cultural influences, the assertion that knowledge is culturally specific, and that the construction of our views of reality are significantly influenced by language. Gergen (1999) states that language is the actual doing of life. Language is a performance, a relational ritual that we do with words and within this ritual; we find “truth”. Reality is not mirrored by our language, it is constituted; in speaking we construct that which we speak of (Edley, 2001). Blustein et al. (2005) suggest that when you claim an epistemology of social constructionism you are
saying that reality is constructed in a social and cultural context; multiple truths are linked and dependent on context, culture, and history.

Gergen’s (1999) emphasis on how we create reality through our use of language connects to narrative as a means of investigating the ways in which people make meaning of experience. Blustein et al. (2005) state that the underlying methodology of narrative is the epistemology of social constructionism with its important key assumptions: knowledge is constructed between people through social interaction and relationship; and identity is constructed and re-constructed through a relational frame. Social constructionism and narrative lend themselves to a study of the intersection of work and relationship experiences (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004).

Under the theoretical framework of social constructionism I am able to situate my chosen methodology of narrative and my subject matter; the intersection of abuse and work experiences in women’s lives. The three-fold fit of an overarching theoretical framework, a research methodology, and the focus of research is an important part of planning a sound study (Rudestam & Nelson, 1992).

Definition of Terms

Work

There are many ways to conceptualize the term work. Work may be defined as the ways people meet their needs for agency and union (Savickas, 1997), it may occupy a major life-identity role (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Peterson & Gonzales, 2000), it may be the way a person relates to society (Issacson & Brown, 2000), or work may be what one does to earn one’s keep (Tipping, 1997). Work may also be the primary way that women who have been abused rebuild their lives (Chronister & McWhirter,
2003). For the purposes of this research, I have used the participants’ “definition” of work – whatever they thought had given their life meaning and was significant to them in some way. This may have included work within the home, volunteer work, work done for personal satisfaction, or work done outside the home to make money.

Abuse

The literature review in Chapter Two examines assault by an intimate male partner and incidents of childhood abuse which could be physical, emotional, sexual, or related to neglect. I did not ask the participants to describe their abuse experience: it was enough, for the purpose of my research, that they had self-defined as having had abuse experiences. The women’s stories do refer to specific incidents of abuse and these span a spectrum of experiences. When I am using the term women survivors of abuse, I am leaving this open to the participant’s definition of what abuse entailed for her.

Assault by an intimate male partner

Many terms have been used to describe the experience women go through when an intimate male partner violently batters and abuses them. Phillips and Henderson (1997) write that often the language used to describe this situation has been a language that obscured men’s responsibility for their actions. Terms such as wife abuse, spousal abuse, marital violence, family violence, and domestic violence have all served to obscure the man as the perpetrator of the violent act. The argument has been made that such terms also serve to include female instigated violence against men and violence between female intimate partners. In reality, these terms are used predominantly to describe male violence against a female partner. Gianakos (1999) states that 95% of battery is male against female. Language is powerful and it has the ability to make visible
what we tend to take for granted. That is why I have chosen to define the violence men have perpetrated on their female partners as assault by an intimate male partner.¹

Approach Considerations

I have chosen to employ a qualitative research approach in my thesis work. Ouellette (2003) likens the process of qualitative research to landscape painting – put down what you see, use the whole canvas, and share your work with others. For Janesick (2003) the dominant image of qualitative research design is one that parallels the process of choreographing a dance. The good choreographer, as the qualitative researcher, captures the complexity of the dance by using rigorous and tested procedures and refuses to be limited by any one approach. Both are lived experiences; the choreographer embodies the dance, as the qualitative researcher becomes the instrument of research.

I am aware of the rich possibilities of this approach as well as the limitations associated with a qualitative study. I have taken a focused approach to the experience of five women. The stories these five women shared with me, in the context of a research interview, are situated in time and social context. They speak to a reality of experience that the women chose to share with me, a research interviewer, on one day in November, 2005. Time moves on and it is my hope that these five participants have moved on with their lives and their healing journeys as well. I have assumed that the women approached the telling of their experiences to me, in the context of a narrative interview, with honesty and goodwill. In keeping with a theoretical framework of social constructionism and the use of a narrative methodology, I accept and acknowledge that I was part of a co-

¹ While I may choose to define the experience of violence and abuse women have suffered at the hands of an intimate partner as “assault by an intimate male partner”—authors cited and paraphrased in the literature use many terms that I have maintained when referring to other’s work.
construction of story during the interviews of the five participants. There was no pre-determined reality that they brought to the research interview – together we constructed a reality that became true for all of us in the moment and context of the narrative research interview.

Summary of Chapter One and Overview of Thesis

Chapter One has provided a brief overview of the importance of work, women’s experiences of different work paths, and the effects abuse has on a woman’s ability to work. A gap in the literature was identified in relation to the ways in which women make meaning of the intersection of abuse and work in terms of telling their story, after they have been away from abusive situations for a period of time. I have indicated my interest in exploring this gap in the context of a commitment to doing research that will highlight women’s experiences and stimulate change. The chapter explored social constructionism as an overarching theoretical framework for this research and connects social constructionism with the research topic and methodology. I have provided a definition of the terms work, abuse, and assault by an intimate male partner – terms that appear throughout my thesis. Finally, I have discussed several approach considerations in terms of conducting qualitative research and acknowledging the co-constructed nature of using a narrative methodology.

The next chapter includes a review of the literature that pertains to work, the particular experience of women in work situations, and women and abuse, with a focus on assault by an intimate male partner, historical abuse, poverty, and health issues. The ways in which these various experiences interact and overlap is discussed. The literature
review goes on to explore how abuse can affect a woman’s ability to work. The final section examines ways to prepare women survivors for work.

Chapter Three discusses the methodology employed in this research. I present my approach to qualitative research with reference to the research question, feminist ideology, social constructionism, and narrative methodology. The process of inquiry involves self-location and a description of the participants for this study. Under the heading “Gathering the stories” I will describe several perspectives on interviewing, rounded out with my perspective on counsellor-researcher identity, and a description of the actual interview process. In the section pertaining to analysis I have included: the various ways in which I entered the relational space of the story. I also include a section on transcription and moving beyond transcription into further layers of the analysis process. Chapter Three concludes with a discussion of the soundness of my research.

In Chapter Four, the reader is invited into an experience of the participants’ stories using the ghostwriting technique. A copy of the time-line drawing created during the interview process follows each participant’s story.

Chapter Five includes my analysis and discussion of the research data. For each participant I have carried out within-participant analysis, which includes a discussion of the time-line drawing and concept map, four to six individual themes per participant, and reference to the participant’s particular epiphany of change, as demonstrated by the meaning she made of her experience through the story she told. This chapter also contains a section on across participant analysis that examines a major meta-theme and two additional themes that emerged as being important to all the participants.
The concluding chapter summarized the important themes of loss, a social constructivist approach to career, and aspects of readiness for employment. I will present the implications of my thesis work in terms of research, career counselling practice, and implication for policy makers. I also include a section on personal learning and final comments.
Chapter Two – Literature Review

Work, in all its many forms, is an important aspect of identity and can facilitate one’s full inclusion in society. Yet a question remains – though there is no doubt that work does play a central role in people’s lives, in what way (or ways) is it meaningful (or does it relate) to identity? Most women experience a different life and career path when compared to men. Their average earnings are substantially lower, women make up a disproportionate share of the population with low incomes, and women are much more likely than men to work part-time (Statistics Canada, 2006). For a number of reasons, women report lower career aspirations within a more restrictive range of choices (Issacson & Brown, 2000). Women, who have experienced abuse, encounter a number of specific life situations that often interact, overlap, and connect to create barriers to work. Experiences of assault by an intimate male partner and historical abuse combined with poverty, and current health conditions contribute to potential barriers when women seek to find and hold employment (Wells, 1994).

Chapter Two will begin with a brief consideration of work and various definitions of what work means in people’s lives. A social constructivist approach to career theory will be explored with direct reference to social cognitive career theory. These theories offer a valuable means of explaining the important role that context plays in determining how people ascribe meaning to work. The focus of the chapter will then narrow to women’s experience of work as a different path examined in the context of social cognitive career theory. Work has meaning for women from a relational and ecological perspective; this section of the chapter will also include a brief snapshot of the literature
on how these aspects are important for women in general and for women who have experienced abuse in particular.

In subsequent sections the chapter will explore how women who have experienced various forms of abuse understand and negotiate the world of work. Assault by an intimate male partner, historical experiences of abuse, poverty, and current health issues form a reality for abused women and influence how they are able to approach and experience work. Being a survivor of abuse entails the need for targeted support. Questions about the ways in which women are dealing with the long-term effects of abuse and how these experiences intersect with work, after they have left abusive relationships and moved beyond the initial support offered to them, stem from the literature.

The summary section integrates all of the above and presents the research questions that proceed from this examination of the literature related to work, women’s experiences of work, and the ways in which women that have experienced abuse negotiate the world of work.

Work: An Overview

*Meaning and Identity Issues*

Savickas (1997) writes that work is the major context in which people can meet their needs for agency and union and a forum for individual identity and social significance. He describes work as the stage upon which the self one wants to be is developed and thus shown to the world. In keeping with this view of work as a context of meaning, Carlsen (1988) writes that work carries the meaning of a person’s life. When career meaning is lacking, people tend to feel lost. This lack of meaning can outweigh the
economic considerations inherent in work. Work may occupy a major life-identity role for some and for others different roles are ascendant such as home, family, or leisure (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). There are many definitions of work but it would seem that most emphasize the central role it plays in people’s lives (Peterson & Gonzalez, 2000).

Blustein et al. (2005) describe work as being embedded in complex layers of social, cultural, and political meaning. Issacson and Brown (2000) write that whatever the motivation for work it is seldom undertaken solely to sustain life: work is the way an individual relates to society, it can provide status, recognition, affiliation; it is the means by which one participates fully in society. At the same time these authors ask the question – Is the idea of career-development a meaningful term for everyone? For some, work is a means of survival; a way out of a certain life condition and hopefully an entrance to another. For others, work does not meet affiliation needs and they may even experience alienation in the workplace (Peterson & Gonzalez, 2000), and yet people continue to work for a number of reasons. Tipping (1997) describes three major motivations for work: (a) working to earn one’s keep, (b) work as a source of identity and fulfillment, and (c) work as one’s responsibility to provide for self and others.

A social constructivist career model suggests that life-context has a strong influence on how an individual understands work and how he or she makes work choices (Peavy, 1995; Savickas, 1995; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). Career development, within this model, concerns a whole person in the ever-changing context of his or her life. Peavy describes the ways in which interactions among the factors in a person’s life influence the work choices and attitudes he or she will hold. Social Cognitive Career
Theory, explained below, takes into account the different contexts of a person’s life in terms of both individual and environmental factors and considers aspects of past events, perceived self-efficacy, and outcome expectations.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) originated in the 1990’s as an effort to understand the processes through which people develop interests, make choices, and achieve levels of education and career success (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). It grew out of Albert Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, in which he suggests that self-defeating behaviour or the cycle of behaviour brought about by issues of low-self esteem can be overcome by increasing a person’s sense of self-efficacy. Zunker (1998) states that the major goal of this approach is to find methods of defining specific mediators from which learning experiences shape and influence career behaviour and to explain how variables such as interests, abilities, and values interact and influence individual growth. Environmental influences are also included and have an impact on career outcomes. Lent et al. describe this career theory as multi-dimensional with individual, contextual, and environmental components. One’s perceived self-efficacy is affected by past performance, vicarious learning, emotions, and verbal persuasion. Perceived self-efficacy in turn affects the types of work one will approach or avoid, performance in a work situation, and the persistence one will have in a given situation. This approach to conceptualizing career focuses on establishing a goal, taking action, and attaining a level of performance, which determines the direction of future career behaviour (Zunker, 1998). By linking personal attributes, environmental factors, and overt behaviours, this career theory illustrates how these factors interact through complex reciprocal processes –
personal agency and choice are fundamental when making career choices and finding a particular meaning in a career choice.

The following section will briefly discuss women’s experience of work and the ways in which this differs from men’s. SCCT can be applied quite effectively to women’s experience of career. This section will also include a discussion of the relational aspects of work.

Women and Work

According to a special Daily Report (Statistics Canada, March 7, 2006) on women and employment, women are playing stronger roles in the workplace and their profile is rising in many professional fields. The report found that the increased participation of women in the paid work force has been one of the most significant social trends in Canada in the past quarter century. However, this report still shows a substantial gap between the sexes in many key employment areas. The average earnings of employed women is still substantially lower than those of men, women make up a disproportionate share of the population with low incomes, and women are much more likely than men to work part-time.

The Daily Report for Friday, May 5, 2006 (Statistics Canada) states that, 58% of all women aged 15 and over are currently part of the paid work force. The special Daily Report on women and employment (Statistics Canada, March 7, 2006) found dramatic increases in the employment levels of women with very young children. In 2004, 65% of all women with children under the age of three were employed and 70% of women whose youngest child was between the ages of three and five worked for pay. The share of female lone parents with jobs rose in 2004 to 68% from below 50% in 1976.
The Daily Report (Statistics Canada, March 7, 2006) also found that women are much more likely than men to work part-time. In 2004, 27% of the total female workforce was part-time employees, which is double the rate of men. Women currently account for 70% of the part-time workforce. The majority of employed women continue to work in occupations in which women have traditionally been concentrated. In 2004, two-thirds of all employed women were working in teaching, nursing, and related health occupations, clerical or other administration positions, and sales and service occupations. There has been virtually no change in the proportion of women employed in these traditionally female-dominated occupations over the past decade.

In terms of earning, The Daily Report (Statistics Canada, March 7, 2006) reports average earnings of employed women as substantially lower than those of men, even when women are employed full-time. Women earn 71% of what their male counterparts earn and this gap has not changed substantially in the past decade. Women make up a disproportionate share of the population in Canada with low incomes as measured by Statistics Canada low income cut-off. Families headed by female lone parents have relatively high rates of low income. In 2003, 38% of all families headed by lone-parent mothers had incomes that fell below the low-income cut off figure. This is the case of only 13% of lone parented families headed by men and only 7% of two-parent families.

*Women's Differing Work Paths*

Career choice and career development unfolds in particular ways for women, options and opportunities are influenced by a social context that includes the need to balance work and family, deal with career interruptions, and a diverse career pattern (Schreiber, 1998). Ideas about what women can and cannot do over their life spans are
formed early in life (Philips & Imhoff, 1997) and early restricted choices can lead to a restricted career path later (Mott, 1998).

Women continue to experience lower career aspirations with a more restrictive range of choice (Isaacson & Brown, 2000). As early as 1984, Astin was pointing out that formative experiences of socialization led women to different career choices. Gottfredson’s (1994) writings contend that people make certain choices and eliminate others based on sex-role identity. Zunker (1998) states that barriers to a full-range of career choices remain for women and these are based on sex-role stereotyping. It is still difficult for women to give priority to work outside the home if this is their wish. The need to balance work roles with family, children, and spouses needs and traditional sex-role expectations are still an issue for many women.

Gilligan (1982) points out that many career theories and ideas about work are based on male experiences that define maturity as separation and individuation. Women’s lives are characterized by interaction and personal relationship and attachment is vital to women’s development. In the next section the application of Social Cognitive Career Theory to women’s experience helps reconcile the various opinions on career theory. The following section on relationship speaks directly to Gilligan’s points on the intersection of relationships and work for women.

Applying Social Constructionist Career Theory to Women

Lent et al. (2000) describe Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as providing an important theoretical perspective from which to view women’s situations in terms of work. An emphasis on cognitive/person variables such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals, as well as environmental variables that include family, friends,
financial conditions, and the larger societal context, allows this theory to be especially useful when examining how career unfolds for women.

Chronister and McWhirter (2003) have applied the SCCT model specifically to women who have been the target of domestic violence. Learning experiences were limited; opportunities to succeed in education and career related activities were low; and fear, anxiety, and depression influenced self-efficacy and future expectations. In the face of harassment in the workplace by abusers, absenteeism, impaired work performance, and lack of advancement, it was not hard to understand why women held negative outcome expectations.

Relational Issues

Cook, Heppner, and O’Brien (2002) describe an ecological perspective on career and the dynamic relationship between a person and the environment. Individual, contextual, and interactional factors shape career development. This view holds promise for understanding the issues that women face in the world of work. Women receive pervasive messages over their life span about the imperative to care for others and they value and focus on relationships and connection (Josselson, 1992). It is important that any perspective on women’s experiences of work and career examine how women have responded to these messages and whether or not their choices have been limited. Betz (2002) provides an important caution when she states that we should never assume all women are alike – not all women are relationally oriented and not all women are willing to value career over family. The ecological perspective also looks at the multiple roles and demands women face in terms of household and childcare responsibilities, the lack of
affordable childcare options, and the challenges faced by women when work environments are not reflective of women’s needs (Cook et al.).

Schultheiss (2003) writes that the relational aspects of career development have been devalued in many career theories in favour of autonomy, but relationship and connection is central to human growth. A relational approach begins with an in-depth look at the role of relationships in one’s life – how those relationships are perceived and how they have influenced one’s career development. Flum (2001) describes the development of agency as a dominant approach in Western cultures over the last 200 years. A separate and independent sense of self has been stressed at the expense of relational aspects.

Flum (2001) examined career exploration and development through the lens of Josselson’s (1992) relational space model and highlighted the ways in which past abuse experiences influence what one can bring to a work situation in the present. Experiences of abuse may have interfered with early attachment so that healthy career exploration never takes place. Eye-to-eye validation that people need in order to know they exist and have value in other’s eyes may never have happened or may not have happened in key relationships. Women may not have been able to idealize and identify with important role models in order to develop relationally based parts of their identity. Emotional connection leads to a sense of empowerment and mutuality with others – if experiences of abuse interfere with mutuality, one does not have this to bring to the work environment. This type of connection with others is an important aspect of work success. Many needs are met in the arena of work and if this arena is one that women with abuse histories cannot enter then their adult identity development is threatened.
Townsend and McWhirter (2005) suggest that the goal of human development does not center on independency and self-sufficiency. Connectedness is a protective agent for problem prevention; if connections are lost then self-alienation, loneliness, lack of meaning, and eventually serious health implications occur. These authors also observed that connectedness is often seen as a central organizing principle and a critical theme for women.

Blustein et al. (2004) write that when we approach career and work from a relational point of view we gain an advantage in understanding how people comprehend, construct, and act in relation to the challenges and opportunities of their work experience. Work is embedded in a social context and it is not possible to untangle work issues from relational barriers and supports.

Blustein et al. (2005) reviewed a group of studies carried out by Fassinger and colleagues between 1997 and 2004. These studies, of prominent and successful women, revolved around achievement and work experience. Relational interconnectedness was an influential factor in an emerging profile for successful woman. If relationships and being connected are influential for women who are prominent and successful how much more are these types of relationships necessary for women who struggle? One can only imagine how a primary spousal relationship characterized by violence and abuse can devastate a woman’s ability to work.
Women and Abuse Issues

The Experience of Abuse

In Canada, an estimated 4.2 billion is spent annually on social services, education, criminal justice, labour and employment programs, health and medical services to deal with issues of violence against women (Assessing Violence against Women, 2002). Humphreys and Lee (1999) state that domestic violence is a form of psychological trauma likened to war trauma, with one major difference: this battery is personal and deliberate, inflicted by an intimate partner. Morrow, Hankivsky, and Varcoe (2004) write that women survivors are often dependent on social welfare to re-establish their lives and yet government spending, in Canada, on support in the area of violence against women has diminished substantially. A woman in a domestic violence situation is fifteen times more likely to report some form of childhood abuse than a woman who is not (Avery, Hutchinson, & Whitaker, 2002). According to Statistics Canada (2006) a disproportionate share of the population in Canada with low incomes, as measured by Statistics Canada’s low-income cut-off (LICO), are women. In 2003, 31% of unattached women aged 16 and over lived in poverty, when poverty was defined as being under the LICO. Many of the direct and indirect effects of abuse center on a woman’s physical and mental health status. A diagnosis of a mental or physical health problem is three times more likely for women who have experienced domestic violence (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003).

The following sections will provide more detail on how assault by an intimate male partner affects women and the ways in which it links to childhood experiences of abuse, poverty and health issues.
Assault by an intimate male partner.

Violence against women is one of the most pervasive human rights issue in the world today (Schmidt, 1995) and the Center for Disease Control in the United States lists abusive behaviour between intimate partners as a major public health concern (Woods, 2000). Of the women encountered in any health care setting, one in every ten women involved in an intimate heterosexual relationship is a victim of abuse by a male partner (Humphreys & Lee, 1999). This situation is echoed by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (2000) - they recognize the serious social and health implications, as well as associated financial costs, surrounding violence against women. Bringing this reality even closer to home, they report BC as having the highest rates of violence against women in Canada.

Belknap (1999) writes that the decision to leave a situation of domestic violence is complex and includes moral conflict. Most women will leave when the violence escalates above an established level or when children are threatened. Some women experience difficulties leaving situations of domestic violence due to fear of the ways in which legal issues surrounding custody of children will be resolved (Bala, et al., 1998). Access can be an entry point to further harassment by the abuser. One study found that 38% of women reported negative ongoing contact and harassment by former abusive partners due to access issues (Wells, 1994).

Historical abuse.

“A link between domestic violence and child abuse has been suggested in a growing body of research” (Avery et al., 2002, p.80). Many women who are currently in, or have been, in situations of domestic violence have abuse histories that include
childhood neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Assessing Violence against Women, 2002; Astin, Ogland-Hand, Coleman, & Foy, 1995; Gianakos, 1999; Humphreys & Lee, 1999; Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Sleutel, 1998; Wells, 1994).

Azmaira, Kemmelmeier, and Peterson (2001) in their study that looked at predictors of adult sexual abuse, write that childhood trauma increases the risk for violence later in life. These researchers state that their data is consistent with a specificity model of trauma in which child sexual abuse places women on a unique developmental trajectory that results in sexual revictimization over time. Even less severe incidents, involving only one perpetrator is enough to activate this trajectory.

Issues of poverty.

Families headed by female lone parents have relatively high rates of low income. In 2003, 38% of all families headed by lone-parent mothers had incomes, which fell below the low income cut-offs provided by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). In Canada the poverty entry rate for women who started 1993 as part of a couple and ended single was ten times higher than for women who remained part of a couple (Lochhead & Scott, 2000). Women are vulnerable to poverty due to the dependence they have on a partner’s income. This type of financial dependency makes it extremely difficult for women to leave abusive relationships (Gianakos, 1999).

There is a serious lack of supportive housing for women who have been victims of domestic violence (Reitsma-Street, Schofield, Lund, & Kasting, 2001). Due to the low income housing made available to women, many report witnessing violence that results in high levels of fear and discomfort (Humphreys & Lee, 1999). When adequate housing is
not available, women will inevitably face a difficult challenge around not going back to an abusive situation.

*Health issues.*

One-third of the women surveyed in a number of domestic violence shelter studies reported chronic health conditions: 61% indicated physical health problems, and 51% had sustained long-term physical injury as a result of abuse (Raphael & Tolman, 1997). A diagnosis of PTSD for women who have experienced domestic violence and/or childhood abuse is two to three times higher than for women in the general population (Raphael & Tolman, 1997). Women diagnosed with PTSD are at a greater risk for the occurrence of chronic medical conditions (Ullman & Brecklin, 2003). The debilitating effects of PTSD have led to a call in the United States to extend the application of the Americans with Disabilities Act to women who have experienced PTSD due to domestic violence (Lloyd, 1997).

*Effects of Abuse on Work*

*How barriers unfold.*

Chronister and McWhirter (2003) point out that little attention has been paid to the long-term effects of domestic violence on employability. Work site harassment by an abuser was reported by 75% of battered women and 54% lost their jobs because of harassment. Domestic violence limits terms and conditions of employment duration and sustainability (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003). Women who reported domestic violence were more likely to have had more jobs but a lower personal income with their socio-economic status dropping over time (Lloyd, 1997). Studies confirm that these women do seek employment but are unable to maintain it (Raphael & Tolman, 1997).
Women who have experienced histories of abuse develop personal characteristics and value systems that fit into the abuser’s rationale rather than their own (Wells, 1994). This complex set of circumstances and behaviours present multiple barriers to employment (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003). Wells has identified ten key areas that interact and influence how women approach employment.

*Self-esteem.*

Low self-esteem is a consistent finding among women who have histories of abuse (Assessing Violence against Women, 2002; Bala et al., 1998; Sleutel, 1998). Women with histories of abuse often underestimate their abilities because their self-concept has been negatively affected by abuse (Lynch, 2000). Outcome experiences for success in employment are related to high levels of self-efficacy (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003) and abuse contributes most to lowering these levels of self-efficacy (Brown, Reedy, Fountain, Johnson, & Dichiser, 2000). The battered woman is particularly vulnerable to low self-efficacy (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003) and self-efficacy expectations are crucial to employability (Gianakos, 1999).

Abuse has a devastating effect on self-identity (Sleutel, 1998). Wells (1994) writes that women often blame themselves for their abusive situations. Guilt, shame, failure, and feelings of inferiority increase as self-confidence wanes. Sustaining a healthy self-concept, under these circumstances, is almost impossible (Ibrahim & Herr, 1987). The negative self-concept and cognitive distortions that have emerged and been shaped by abuse experiences need to be addressed before women can successfully access employment opportunities (Gianakos, 1999).
Acceptance of traditional hierarchical structure.

Gianakos (1999) writes that childhood abuse influences a woman's ability to assess her current partner's potential for violent behaviour and contributes to a failure to notice a partner's excessive control needs. Adaptations made in childhood have a serious impact on a woman's physical, intellectual, and emotional development. In establishing and maintaining intimate relationships as well as work relationships. These women may lack assertiveness skills, reframing skills, and everyday living skills.

Women with a history of abuse often come from families and adult intimate relationships that have been characterized by rigid gender stereotypes around work-role attitudes (Brown et al., 2000). They may find it hard to believe that it is acceptable for them to have a job and make money (Wells, 1994). They may have experienced severe negative reactions from abusers directed at their ability to work (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003). An over dependence on men may emerge (Wells) and this can lead to irrational concerns about how male colleagues will perceive them in work situations (Gianakos, 1999).

Keeping the peace.

Wells (1994) writes that survival for many women has depended on keeping the peace at all costs. Women may attempt to control or manipulate others; they can become obsessed with maintaining a conflict free environment. They may avoid confrontation, or withdraw when personal views are challenged. All of these behaviours undermine self-esteem, assertiveness, interpersonal skill development, and the ability to remain comfortable and alert in educational or employment environments.
Stress reactions.

Psychological trauma contributes to hyper-arousal tendencies (Herman, 1997). Job interviews can create panic as women experience extreme levels of fear over appearing uneducated, being asked personal questions that are uncomfortable to answer, or having to explain problematic job histories (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003). Elevated levels of fear and anxiety can accompany job evaluation or testing situations (Gianakos, 1999). Stress related illnesses can result in time lost from work, education, or training and women often quit jobs or are fired due to their absences (Wells, 1994). Women experience poor concentration and communication problems due to stress reactions (Chronister & McWhirter). Severe stress reactions often require medication, which can create barriers to employment in and of itself (Braitman & Counts, 1995).

Silence and isolation.

Silence for many women with abuse histories has ensured survival but has also meant isolation from self and others (Wells, 1994). This silence fits Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Toule’s (1986) definition of the “silent woman” in their book, Women’s Way of Knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind. These women feel powerless and believing they have no voice, they experience great isolation. They have grown deaf and dumb to their own voice.

Phillips and Daniluk (2004) carried out a qualitative study to explore how seven adult women experienced their identity after extensive therapy to deal with childhood sexual abuse. These women reported that prior to beginning their healing process they felt different, alone, and invisible. They were unable to talk to anyone about their childhood sexual abuse. This type of social isolation has a large impact on women when
they attempt to measure their subjective thoughts about work and work satisfaction (Prigoff, 2000).

_Education disruptions._

Raphael and Tolman (1999) found rates as high as 56% of women reporting that they had missed school or training due to abuse. Research suggests the biggest problem for abused women, in terms of education and training, is their drop-out rate (Ibrahim & Herr, 1987). Many women leave training and educational opportunities due to various forms of harassment from abusive partners (Elliot & Rietsma-Street, 2003). Wells (1994) writes that disruption of education due to childhood abuse and blocked attempts to upgrade education by the actions of adult partners leads to limited job choices. This also includes feelings of alienation around education, underdeveloped study skills, devaluing what is already known, expectations of failure, and a belief in the messages received about lack of intelligence.

_Atraction to chaos._

Wells (1994) writes that many women attempt to recreate what is familiar to them in terms of chaos in their lives. This can lead to disruptive behaviours in work or educational settings, using work or school time inappropriately, and experiencing boredom or anxiety in the face of a regularly scheduled set of tasks. An attraction to chaotic living situations may result in having to leave employment and education settings.

_Powerlessness._

Abuse has robbed women of control over their lives and their bodies at a very deep level and this leads to feeling powerless (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003). Powerlessness can lead to an inability to make choices about employment options, a lack
of awareness that one can be assertive, the tendency to relinquish power and difficulties can arise with authority figures (Wells, 1994). Jobs may be left due to real or perceived incidents of harassment (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003).

Burstow (1992) states that women may cope with feelings of powerlessness through behaviours related to eating disorders, various forms of physical mutilation, through addiction, by participation in the sex trade, or any combination of the above. They may have evolved a coping strategy of simple endurance; surviving with no attempt to thrive. Women may exercise power through controlling their thoughts and feelings by blanking out, repressing memories that are too disturbing to face, or the numbing of emotions.

Sleutel (1998) writes that women can feel powerless in the face of years of family of origin abuse, subsequent years of intimate partner abuse, and a medical system that often operated with a “code of silence” in the face of their suffering. They can feel powerless in the face of a legal system that hands over access of children to the abuser when he argues that she is psychologically unstable, financially incapable, and exaggerating the abuse (Bala et al., 1998). Women can feel powerless in the face of a “system” that will spend 4.2 billion dollars annually on social services, criminal justice procedures, labour and employment programs, and medical services to pick up the pieces of their broken life but won’t provide them and their children with protection from further abuse and can’t give them access to adequate, safe housing (Assessing Violence against Women, 2002).
Personal boundary issues.

Gianakas (1999) writes that women, who have unresolved issues resulting from abuse, may behave inappropriately with male supervisors in work situations. "Boundaries are, in essence, your personal limits on what feels good, right, and comfortable to you with a particular person in a particular situation" (Rosenbloom & Williams, 1999, p.192). This relates to Wells (1994) statement that women who have abuse histories may need to create extreme boundaries in order to protect themselves or they may lack healthy boundaries. Interpersonal conflicts with co-workers and supervisors can emerge in training and work settings (Prigoff, 2000) because of this inability to have healthy boundaries. When women lack boundaries, they become vulnerable to more abuse. They cannot screen out the emotions of others and they tend to make inappropriate disclosures. Lacking boundaries themselves, they are unable to respect the boundaries of others. These women will need help to develop interpersonal and assertiveness skills (Ibrahim & Herr, 1987) and to have those skills nurtured (Avery et al., 2002) if they are to cope and survive in workplace settings.

Addictions.

Many studies indicate links between domestic violence, childhood abuse and substance misuse (Bala et al., 1998; Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Reitsma-Street et al., 2001; Ullman & Brecklen, 2003; Wells, 1994). Wells states that many women have learned to cope and mask the pain they experience as a result of years of abuse through addiction. Substance abuse for women is viewed as self-medication to cope with overwhelming pain (Chilcoat & Breslau, 1998). Najavits (2002) points out that associated emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD often came first and then
addiction becomes the way to cope. The number of women who die from addiction issues is four times higher than women who die from breast cancer (Blumenthal, 1998) and women have been judged harshly throughout history and continue to be today for being addicted (Najavits, 2002).

Women experience difficulty accessing treatment due to the pressures around obtaining child-care, lack of funds, and transportation problems (Schober & Annis, 1996). Wells (1994) writes that as a result of addiction, women miss work and school, they experience an inability to concentrate and deal with issues of physical weakness, and they develop health problems. A life style associated with addiction is often counter to one that emphasizes work values. Abuse of drugs and alcohol may find its way into the work or school day. Financial worries interfere with the ability to perform. Women may have to steal or act in other illegal and dangerous ways in order to support addictions.

_A Qualitative Research Study_

The findings from a recent qualitative research study by Hall (2000), serve to illustrate and support many of the above points. Hall interviewed 20 urban, low-income women who had suffered multiple forms of childhood abuse and were in recovery treatment due to substance abuse. She analyzed the women’s stories as they related to learning and work difficulties and found four domains of interest.

1) School had been problematic for these women because abuse in the home environment had compromised school as a source of learning and as an arena of peer socialization. School actually became a place of social ostracism for some, while for others it was a place to escape the abuse but, unfortunately, this did not ensure that learning took place.
2) The women in Hall’s (2000) study appeared to lack adult skills related to relationship competency, money management, life planning, and parenting. Having to do adult tasks as a child gave some the illusion that they had mastered these skills though it turned out they were still carrying out these tasks as a child would.

3) Many women experienced problems around academic and health literacy. The ability to read and do math was often lacking and these women experienced large gaps in their knowledge of basic health information, especially information related to their sexual health.

4) Problems around alcohol and drug addiction led to difficulty in obtaining and maintaining work and led many women into illicit and dangerous work. Selling drugs to maintain addiction, work in the sex trade to finance drug addiction, periods of incarceration for crimes related to drug use were the reality for some of the women.

There were tangible barriers to success in the job market for these women. Hall (2000) found certain specific behaviours to be very problematic in employment situations. Many of the women reported issues around anger and the wish to act violently against others. The usually accepted levels of gender oppression in many worksites became problematic for these women. Lack of adulthood socialization and emotional obstacles, such as depression, and difficulty trusting others created employment barriers. A current male partner’s opposition to a woman’s success, violence, and the need to avoid situations that could trigger substance relapse, also created barriers.

Preparing Women Survivors for Work

Employment is essential to allow women to independently support and provide for themselves and their children (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003). Employment is
related to reduced rates of domestic violence because it enables women to leave and to remain out of abusive relationships (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003). Access to education opportunities and job experience is the best long-term route out of the poverty (Lochhead & Scott, 2000). Simply learning skills is not enough for this population of women. Employment programs must deal with the whole person (Wells, 1994). Women need opportunities to learn about themselves, the world of work, and to gain an appreciation of the particular options that they have in respect to work (Gianakos, 1999). “Understanding how the context of abusive relationships has influenced and coerced a woman’s decision-making is necessary to assist women to make healthy and life preserving choices” (Belknap, 1999, p.407).

Elliot and Reitsma-Street (2003) write that it makes no sense to pressure vulnerable women to take the first low paying job that presents itself without addressing the significant stresses and barriers to employment women faces. The attitude that any job is a good job just recycles women through low wage, low skill jobs. Not addressing the underlying problems these women face actually places them at greater risk for violence and abuse. Programs for women with abuse histories must address two major objectives: assessment tools need to be in place to adequately assess the barriers a woman faces, and the program must work with the woman to overcome these barriers through mentoring, job retention skills, and follow-up (Elliot & Reitsma-Street). Hall (2000) found that helping women to find work revolved around specific needs: 1) anger management training, 2) addiction treatment and services, 3) mentors with whom women could discuss their actual experiences of abuse with and be understand, 4) programs that
address the gaps in academic learning and, 5) employers who would understand the challenges these women face in terms of being in a work environment.

The literature has raised a number of questions for me. I am left pondering the fact that women’s identity is threatened on a number of fronts due to abuse. For women who have experienced violence within the home it is almost as though a situation of double jeopardy exists – any identity a woman may have embraced related to home and the role of a homemaker would be destroyed by assault at the hands of an intimate male partner. She becomes, in reality, what Issacson and Brown (2000) describe as a displaced homemaker. Identity that was focused on home is now, due to circumstances beyond her control, destroyed. She must work, outside the home, to survive. This sudden and unplanned for event hardly seems to fit the definition of work as a carrier of meaning and as Tipping (1997) writes, a source of identity and fulfillment. For these women, it will be a long journey to being able to see “meaning” in the work they do to survive. At the same time, the very issues that have driven women from the home create barriers to participation in the world of work.

It seems that a number of factors confound the barriers that women who have survived abuse face in terms of their ability to work. Although it is difficult to separate the effects of abuse from other factors in a woman’s life, the literature appears to be clear on the following point: an overwhelming set of circumstances is set in motion for women who have experienced abuse. They face the need to enter the world of work in order to put their lives, and often the lives of their children, back together.

Immediate support is very important for women as they move out of abusive relationships. Transition houses and counselling programs serve a necessary function. Yet
the barriers that abuse creates are long-term. Issues such as poverty, mental and physical
health, custody of children, and lowered self-esteem continue to plague women long after
they emerge from abusive relationships. I believe there is a need to explore women’s
experiences after they have accessed the initial supports and are attempting to move on
with their lives. This exploration will allow a clearer picture of how women are coping
with the longer-term effects of abuse to emerge.

Summary of Chapter Two

Chapter Two began with a brief examination of the meaning that work has in
people’s lives. Various authors have written that work is a social activity (Savickas,
1997), a carrier of meaning (Carlsen, 1988), a way for the individual to relate to society
(Isaacson & Brown, 2000). At the same time, a question is raised in relation to career-
meaning: is this concept of meaning relevant for all people (Isaacson & Brown, 2000).
Work may indeed be embedded in complex layers of social, cultural, and political
meaning (Blustein et al., 2005) but I am left wondering if these explanations and
definitions contribute to an understanding of the meaning of work in the lives of women
who have survived abuse.

From a brief and general focus on work, the chapter moved to a discussion of
women’s unique career paths. A social constructivist career theory approach and social
cognitive career theory help to focus attention on the fact that context is very important in
terms of how an individual approaches a work situation. Past experiences and current
self-efficacy issues dictate one’s choices. This is a very useful approach to understanding
the complex issues women face as they embark on what is often a different career path.
from what men experience. In examining how external factors affect women, the relational aspects of work are very important for women.

This chapter has also examined abuse and how the issues of assault by an intimate male partner, historical abuse, poverty, and health issues interact and seriously affect a women’s ability to find and maintain employment. Programs that support women’s movement past these various barriers need to address specific issues related to the impact of abuse and skill development. Programs that move women into low paying jobs without addressing the underlying factors that block their ability to work, serve no one’s long term interest, especially that of the women involved.

The literature has raised questions, in my mind, about the ways in which women that have abuse histories, have been able to move out of abusive situations, past the initial supports offered to them, are now managing the world of work. Are they managing? How are they experiencing the many ways in which work may be meaningful in one’s life? How are they giving meaning to their past abuse experiences in light of the ways these experiences may continue to intersect with their ability to work? How would they go about telling those particular stories? The following chapter on methodology will explore the ways in which I have designed a research study in an attempt to find answers to these questions.
Chapter Three - Methodology

The foregoing review of the literature led me to ask the question – how do women narrate and make meaning of the ways in which they have experienced the intersection of abuse and work. The choice of this topic area and subsequent questions arose out of my practicum work at the Bridges for Women Society\(^2\). In 2004, I did a five month practicum at Bridges that involved one-on-one counselling and various work shops. As part of my practicum experience at Bridges, I read many research articles on the topic of women, abuse issues, and how these relate to employment. This research brought me to a point of curiosity about how women might make meaning of these experiences if given a chance to tell their stories.

I carried out my research using a qualitative approach within an overarching theoretical framework of social constructionism. With a commitment to feminist ideology, a narrative methodology was employed. I approached my participants with an understanding of how storytelling affects both the participant and the researcher and can become an ongoing part of a healing process when handled with care and sensitivity.

Chapter Three starts with a description of research design, which includes a discussion of the research question and focus, a brief description of my commitment to a feminist ideology and how that has guided my work, social constructionism, and narrative methodology. I will then outline my process of inquiry with sections on self-location, a description of my participants and the recruitment process. Within the next section entitled, Gathering the Stories, I will discuss my preparation for conducting the interviews from a social constructionist, feminist, narrative, and sensitive topic perspective. This section also includes reflections on my counsellor-researcher identity.

\(^2\) For a brief description of the Bridges program please refer to Appendix A
and how I felt this influenced the research. From there I will outline the interview process with sections on getting started, the emergent nature of qualitative research, the time-line activity, co-constructing the process, and forming relationships. Within the Analysis section I will cover entering into the relational space of the story, which includes the necessity of analysis within thesis research, writing as an integral part of this process, ghostwriting - the particular form of writing I undertook, taking the standpoint of a storyteller and what that entails, as well as getting comfortable with ghostwriting and my own standpoint. I then discuss the process of transcription in some detail and moving beyond transcription, I describe my layered process of analysis. A section on the soundness of my research work is followed by the chapter summary.

Qualitative Approach

Research Question and Focus

Since my research question is about individual meaning ascribed to experience, a qualitative research approach was appropriate for my thesis work. I collected data using a general question and only a small number of women were asked to participate in this research – Creswell (2005) writes that general questions and a small numbers of participants characterize qualitative research. Rudestam and Nelson (1992) suggest that research should be planned in such a way that there would be a fit between the focus of the research, the methodology, and the overarching theoretical framework. Though often assumed, this three-fold fit is not always expressed or clearly delineated. The focus of my research has been individual women who have self-identified as having an abuse history and expressed the fact that they have a story to tell around how this abuse history and experience had intersected with their ability to work – when work was defined broadly as
those activities that give meaning in one’s life. I drew on Mary Baird Carlsen’s (1988) writing around meaning-making and career. The loss of career is tied to concrete issues of survival but it also connected to questions of self-worth and self-identity. Questions of economic survival are intertwined with questions of personal loss of meaning. “When I am using the term career I am not thinking just of a job – I am thinking of a guiding image or a concept of a personal path, a personal significance, a personal continuity and meaning in the order of things” (Carlsen, p.186). The specific methodology I chose to explore this focus was narrative inquiry.

_Feminist Ideology_

I have approached my thesis work with a commitment to carrying out research that reflects a feminist ideology. This ideology puts women at the center of inquiry and analysis, the research reflects women’s experiences, and the research is meant to benefit and empower women in some way (Barata, Hunjan, & Leggatt, 2005). As I applied feminist ideology to my research, I realized my commitment, within a feminist ethic, to engage in social change and take a proactive stance toward eradicating oppression (Feminist Therapy Institute, 2000). For the purposes of this research, I do not seek to ground myself in any particular definition of feminism. I agree with the approach of Unger and Crawford (1996) when they write that all perspectives on feminism share two important themes; they place a high value on women, seeing women worthy of study in their own right, and there is the recognition that there is a need for social change if women are to lead secure and satisfying lives.
Social Constructionism

My research question goes directly to the nature of meaning in a relational sense. I have found a theoretical orientation in Gergen’s (1999) definition of the central assumptions of social constructionism:

1. For any state of affairs, there are a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations possible.

2. Language and all forms of representation gain their meaning from the ways in which they are used within relationships.

3. As we describe and explain we fashion what is to come – we create the reality.

4. Reflection on our forms of understanding is vital for our future well-being.

Social constructionism argues that the psychological concepts that underlie behaviour and experiences are not processes hidden in the brain or mind but the product of certain cultural discourses (Liebrucks, 2001). This concept fits women’s experiences of abuse and how this is linked to work experiences as well as being rooted in cultural discourses.

Social constructionism assumes an approach to career and work that is relational. Blustein et al., (2004) argue that this point of view leads to a particular leverage in understanding how people comprehend, construct, and act in relation to the challenges and opportunities of their working experience. Relationship and relational frameworks are woven through stories constructed about career and the work process.

Narrative Methodology

An inclusive vision of career and work, one that is embedded in complex layers of social, cultural and political meaning (Blustein et al., 2005), was important in my approach to this research and fit with my understanding and desire to use narrative
methodology to explore this reality. Narrative methodology honours and allows the unique voice and story of each participant to emerge. Richmond (2002) writes that narrative inquiry seeks to collect data to describe lives and to give voice to a participant at a particular time, in a particular place. The process suits stories of change and narrative provides a means for participants to critically reflect on earlier or current perspectives in order to construct or reconstruct meaning.

In their description of narrative, Blustein et al. (2005) highlights the explanatory nature of this type of research and its capacity to deepen and understand a participant’s lived experience. In narrative methodology, the researcher purposefully selects participants who will shed light on the topic in question. Blustein et al. (2005) writes that, “Narrative analyses are particularly informative to the psychology of work for individuals who have been outside of the mainstream of career development discourse” (p. 359). Career narratives in particular have the ability to identify aspects of the social realm that have enabled or constrained individuals (Cohen, Duberly, & Mallon, 2004).

Narrative not only fit with the research focus but also with my personal ontology in terms of believing that we are storied beings who live and make meaning of our lives through story. Josselson, Lieblich, and MacAdams (2003) write that narrative inquiry is capable of creating a description of a historical or personal event that is rich and multilayered. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as being able to focus on experience as socially lived; to represent life as the participants experience it; to attend to human qualities and what it means to live a life; and to produce texts as narrative that will be accessible to readers and will hopefully move and touch readers.
Cottle (2002) suggests a story is like an actual piece of the other, of her or his very self. When we open ourselves to hear the stories of others, we touch the self of the other, and in this process, we connect with our own stories. This personal connecting aspect of narrative inquiry was important to me as a researcher. The story that I asked women to share with me had the potential to be emotionally charged and because of this, I sought a method of inquiry that could also be part of a healing process. Storytelling has the possibility of being healing in many ways – when people tell their stories, processes of change can be triggered and this can actually enhance a curative process for people (Rosenthal, 2003). Mattingly and Lawlor (2000) emphasize this point when they write that telling your story is like recovering the self. I believe that each time a story is told this process has the potential to lead to different levels of understanding and insight.

Chase (2005) writes that the stories a participant tells, within a narrative interview, are the empirical material that the researcher uses to understand how this participant has created meaning out the events of her life. On the one hand the interviewer must be prepared with an interview question that is broad enough to invite the story the researcher thinks will shed light on the specific area of research, but at the same time this is a risky endeavour – stories have a way of taking on a life of their own and going places neither the participant nor the researcher expect.

Jean Clandinin (2004) speaks of narrative as a vantage point from which we can view experience, our own and others. She describes narrative as both a phenomenon and a method: the story is the phenomenon and the narrative inquiry the method. Researchers undertake a narrative approach because they wish to focus on experience as socially lived, they wish to represent life, as the participant knows it, they want to attend to human
qualities and what it means to live a life, and finally they wish to compose texts as narratives that will make them more accessible to readers. This process suited stories of personal change participants told me and it became a valuable means by which participants could reflect on earlier or current perspectives and construct or reconstruct meaning. Further aspects of narrative inquiry are raised and discussed throughout this chapter in terms of the selection of participants, research procedures, and analysis strategies.

Process of Inquiry

*Self-location*

My attraction to the topic of women, abuse, and work issues is an interesting self-location process that is both connected to where I have journeyed in my life but in many ways represents a new path. I have always had a commitment to feminism and working for social change. However, until working at Bridges, I did not have a focus on women who had experienced abuse that intersected with their ability to work. I have not personally experienced any of the types of abuse my participants described and I have not struggled to get or hold a job, though I have not had a particularly long job history. I have been a part or full-time post-secondary student for most of my adult life. My experience of work was that people came and asked me if I wanted to do certain jobs. This happened to me repeatedly in my life. I did not actually go to a “real” job interview until I applied for a part-time job at Women Sexual Assault Center (WSAC) after finishing a ten month practicum there. I was applying for a position I had already been doing for several months with people I knew well – so this was not a typical interview situation. These
issues became clear to me when I did a work timeline drawing similar to the ones I asked my participants to do.

I have had the financial freedom in my life to choose jobs and stay or go as I wanted. Work has been for me what Carlsen (1988) describes as a carrier of meaning in that I have had the luxury of deciding how I will negotiate work and take meaning from it. In choosing this topic for my thesis research, I knew that I was probably living a different reality than the women I would interview. For these women work is a financial necessity and not just a carrier of meaning. They have not enjoyed the freedom or the privilege that I have. I was constantly aware of this as I asked them to tell me their stories, as I listened, and then later as I worked to create ghostwritten stories from their words. They have lived in worlds I have not and experienced levels of trauma I have not. Nevertheless, I believe that my practicum experiences at Bridges and at WSAC, as well as an additional eight months working at WSAC as a part-time crisis counsellor, has created a base of practical knowledge and experience that has contributed to my ability to hear and process my participants’ stories. I have been able to hear and understand, from many perspectives, what they have gone through and the implications of their experiences in terms of their struggles to find and maintain employment.

Participants

The participants for my research were five women, recruited for me by the Bridges for Women’s Society of Victoria. The criteria for recruitment involved women having completed the Bridges program and, after being told that the research involved abuse and how that intersects with work, a belief that they had a valuable story to share

3 Please see Appendix B for a copy of the letter from Bridges confirming their willingness to recruit participants for this research
on that intersection. The recruited women were aware that participation would involve an in-depth, audio-taped interview and that they would receive $30.00 to cover their time and possible travel or childcare costs.

Bridges provided me with the names and contact information for seven women. All were contacted; however, scheduling difficulties prevented two from participating, resulting in a final sample of five. I contacted these women by telephone and established an interview time. I wondered about where to hold the interviews and decided, in the end, to ask the participants if they would be comfortable coming to my home. Given the topic, asking them to come to the university seemed inappropriate and perhaps intimidating. I was also concerned that going into their homes might not be comfortable for them or for me. My self-reflexive field note journal records some of my thoughts at the time of deciding on where to hold the interviews.

Field notes: Having the interviews in my own home is certainly a comfortable thing for me. I can create a nice atmosphere with grounding stones on the table, flowers, the small fountain in the background. I can offer coffee or tea. It is private and I know the taping quality will be good. This is my comfort zone and that should contribute to my comfort conducting the interview – but would they have felt better in their own homes? All chose my home when given the choice but if I had gone to them would it have changed things in terms of the stories I will get? I won’t ever know now. I did hope that coming to my home might be a bit of a levelling tool – inviting them into my home means getting on a more even footing with them but that may be presumptuous of me – I have no idea what their homes are like. Maybe coming here is just intimidating.

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4 Please see Appendix C for recruitment letter and/or phone script
5 All field notes will appear in italics
As chance or serendipity would have it, I had worked with two of the participants when I was doing my counselling practicum at Bridges and a third participant was a client from my time working as a counsellor at WSAC. I realized this when reviewing the participant contact information provided to me by Bridges. The recruitment process was not an easy one due to illness and changes in staffing at Bridges and I did not want to ask this very busy community agency to attempt to recruit more participants for me. I made the decision to bring up the issues that a past relationship might create, for myself and for these three women, when they arrived for the interview. I assumed that they recognized my name as I had recognized theirs, which proved to be true. In all three cases, the women spoke of feeling that our previous connection helped rather than hindered their feelings of safety and trust. It was necessary to explain to these women in more detail that they were in a different context with me as I was with them – they were now research participants not clients, and I was a researcher and not a counsellor. It is easier to say than to enact such things, as my self-reflexive field note journal reflects.

Field notes: This participant and I have a history. I know and have a context for much of what she is saying and she feels comfortable with me. I'm not sure I was able to move out of a counsellor role in her eyes, even though we spoke of the differences between a research interview and counselling before we started. And was this a bad thing? I just don't know. I don't know if it affected the stories she told me.

Field notes: Today's interview was with another participant that I have had past contact with. It obviously created a different context. I knew that she takes a long time to speak and really struggles at times to find the words for what she wants to express – I was prepared for that. I knew I would introduce the drawing activity early and then use
that throughout the interview to generate discussion. I was unsure with my first participant if it was helpful to have a previous counselling relationship but I know it is helpful with this participant. My previous work with this participant really helped her trust me and open up – I could see that.

As I reflect on the interviews with these three women, I agree with their initial impression that our past relationship was a plus not a negative. Individual counselling with two of these women did create a context I did not have with the other participants. This in turn contributed a background context to the questions I asked in those two interviews and what I brought to the analysis of those women’s stories. I needed to be extra scrupulous going through the transcripts and the subsequent stories that emerged for the women I had previous relationships with, to be very positive that whatever was in the story related to what had been shared in the interview context and was not something that arose in individual counselling or a workshop context.

Gathering the Stories

The following section will describe some important issues in terms of interviewing in the context of social constructionism, a feminist ideology, using a narrative methodology, and undertaking to explore a sensitive subject area. It became clear to me early in the process of writing this chapter that it would not be enough to describe how I carried out the interviews – I would need to articulate the theoretical underpinnings of my choices. I would need to describe why I chose to do things the way I did them.
The Social Constructionist Interview

Gubrium and Koro-Ljunberg (2005) describe the social constructionist interview in which both the researcher and the participant are part of a process of creating the borders of an inter-relational space. This type of interview privileges the reality of the social and explores texts and language as they function within the social realm. The way in which I approached the interviews with my participants needed to be in line with my theoretical perspective. This involved an epistemological coherence that forms an important aspect of the trustworthiness of my research work. From the perspective of social constructionism, I shared the interview space equally with my participants but power in the interview situation was not always distributed equally. I provided the overall structure to the interview, I guided the conversation, and I shaped the final analysis. Clearly, I had more power, but my participants also exercised agency throughout our interviews. They controlled their stories and the contexts they used to frame their reality.

Interviewing from a Feminist Perspective

Kezar (2003) links a commitment to a feminist research ideology and a narrative approach to research inquiry in the process of the research interview. A feminist research ideology puts women and their experience at the forefront of the research process and narrative inquiry allows freedom of expression in terms of telling one’s story. These approaches combine to provide a valuable forum for exploring the complex processes that have shaped a women’s construction of identity. I recognized from the beginning, that the interviewing process would be both collaborative and relational. From Kezar’s perspective, a feminist approach to interviewing brings to the process of narrative: (a) an inherently relational climate of mutual trust, (b) reflexivity in terms of having to think
through one’s own assumptions, (c) an egalitarian mindset, (d) empathy and the ethic of care. I agree with much of this perspective but have had to question the egalitarian mindset. Perhaps, for the purpose of my research, a partnership mindset might better capture what I experienced.

Riessman (1993) states that feminists emphasize giving voice to those who have been voiceless. “I share the goal but am more cautious. We cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret” (p. 8). I realized, reflecting on Riessman’s words, that I could not change the reality that I was in a privileged position in relation to the women I asked to tell me their stories. I could not give those women a voice but I could and am telling their stories and interpreting their voices within this endeavour. I am giving voice to the stories – not to the women - and that is an important point.

Women’s experiences are framed in a gendered context but at the same time, no two women’s experiences are identical. Reinhartz and Chase (2003) explain that women researchers have been concerned about the ways in which gender affects the interview process and the ways in which the interview may influence the researcher. I had personal reactions to what I heard in the stories of my participants and these reactions served as valuable sources of insight into the ways in which I was interpreting the participants’ stories. Being aware of my position as a researcher, who would enter into their lives for a very short period, meant that I did not feel it was ethical to imply some type of bond with participants simply because we were all women. I agreed with Reinhartz and Chase (2003) when they state that there is a difference between establishing rapport (which is essential) and intense bonding. Making use of listening skills can create rapport far more effectively than promises of future support and friendship.
Narrative Interviewing

Enosh and Buchbinder (2005) contend that the narrative interview is both relational and interactional. The what (the context) and the how (the way in which the meaning of the context is constructed) are intertwined, and both are crucial elements of the process. In my research interviews I worked to achieve what these authors describe as narrative as self-observation, in which the participant moves to a position of interest in remembering and telling her story in a self-reflective manner. The interview serves to meet the needs and goals of the participant and the researcher. I was also aware of Enosh and Buchbinder’s view that whenever the content of the interview threatens the participant’s reality, she or he will exercise her or his power, which is considerable, to frame the context of the story and actions in a certain way. I became aware that there were gaps between what I assumed a participant would tell me and what she chose to reveal as her reality in the interview situation.

Important considerations guide the way in which a narrative interview is conducted. Clinchy (2003) writes that people do not just have experiences – they construct these experiences based on their own implicit epistemological premises. Clinchy calls for an “epistolary voice” – one that does not assert or announce but explores and engages. As a research interviewer, I experienced the temptation to jump too quickly into thinking that I knew what the participant was saying. I needed to exercise caution at those crucial junctions in the interview process where my interpretations could possibly derail the participant’s process. I had varying degrees of success with this endeavor, which only became clear to me during the analysis stage of my research.
The choice to use a narrative interview methodology involves a careful examination of how the act of storytelling affects both participant and researcher. Cottle (2002), in his article, *On Narratives and the Sense of Self*, writes that by opening ourselves to hear the story, "We are stirred by another’s words and possibly enlightened by them as well. . . ." (p. 536). Cottle goes on to explain that as we listen to the other we begin to experience the call that stories make upon us. It is almost automatic and maybe even instinctive to respond to the story of another – this is not a process of reason alone. We do this so we ourselves will have a story and thus be alive.

*The Sensitive Topic Interview*

My interview process involved asking women about a potentially sensitive and emotionally charged topic – their stories of seeking and holding work and how that has intersected with their own history of abuse. In her article, *The Healing Effects of Storytelling: On the conditions of curative storytelling in the context of research and counseling*, Gabriele Rosenthal (2003), writes that telling one’s story has the potential to carry a tremendous psychological implication for the story teller. Processes of change may be triggered in the story teller and the way we as researchers carry out the conversation has the potential to support this change. The telling of the story, even in the form of a research interview, can further a curative process for a participant.

Mattingly and Lawlor, (2000) write that the telling of one’s story can mean the recovery of the very self. Though this seems somewhat overstated and perhaps unrealistic, narrative has had widespread application in the ethnographies of healthcare for the very reason that if can lead to an integration and understanding of life experience.
When I asked participants to speak about the intersection of work and abuse, they often related traumatic events in their lives. This may have been due to their own boundary issues or to the nature of a narrative interview – asking for a story entails elements of chance, for the interviewer and the participant. Neither may fully understand what will be part of that story. At these times, I attempted to assure the women that I recognized their suffering. “A considerable balancing act is required between supporting narratives about a traumatizing life phase and simultaneously holding back so that the narrators do not unexpectedly delve too deeply into their sufferings and in the talk or thereafter find themselves overwhelmed by traumatic memories” (Rosenthal, 2003, p. 917). I attempted, when possible, to guide the conversation in ways that would support the participant through moments of anxiety or pain, but at the same time would not open up certain areas to more exploration. For example, a participant shared her struggle to give up a lifelong addiction to marijuana use and then spoke of a current life situation that was quite stressful and how she finds herself thinking, “Maybe just one joint might help.” I made a choice to guide the conversation in the direction of allowing her to explore her resources through a very simple question – “What does that other voice say to you at those times, that voice that represents how hard you have worked to get to this place of not using marijuana anymore? In this way, she began to speak of her strength and moved away from the current distress in her life that had the potential to become quite emotional in the telling.

_Counsellor-Researcher Identity_

How I heard the women’s stories and how I contributed to guiding the conversation, speaks directly to issues that developed for me as a counsellor doing
research throughout the interview process. I think this issue deserves attention. I have trained to be a counsellor. I have had extensive practicum experiences and a position as a counsellor working with women who have experienced sexualized violence and abuse. I have trained in a specialized environment of working with women and trauma – both single incident adult-onset trauma and complex trauma that often spans a lifetime. I brought this training to my research context. However, being a researcher and being a counsellor are two very different roles. I found, in my self-reflexive field journal, that I often needed to explore and work with the issues this brought up for me.

Field notes: (after Becky’s interview) I’m just not sure if I was doing a research interview. I am filled with self-doubt. I know there is a difference between counselling and a research interview but sometimes, in the moment of the interview, I feel my counsellor identity emerge and my researcher identity is less clear.

Field notes: (prior to 2nd interview) – I’m going to make it clear from the start that I may take some notes while she is talking and I want to feel more comfortable this time around referring to my notes on probes and follow-up questions. I wasn’t comfortable doing that last time and I think I fell too easily into a counselling mode where I focus on the client. Today I am a researcher conducting a research interview – I am not a counsellor. It is just so hard for me to discern the difference in the moments of the interview.

The reality of doing a qualitative and narrative interview that is open-ended in terms of what might come up further complicates this dilemma. Initially I felt unsettled when an interview would end and the participant would leave after having shared so much of what was painful and difficult in her life. As a counsellor, asking for and
receiving these types of stories is in the context of the fact that I will then be with this
person in the weeks to come, as they deem appropriate, to deal with these issues. As a
researcher, I felt I took their stories and said goodbye. All the safeguards were built in
and most of the women had access to counselling or knew how to access counselling. We
had discussions outlining the differences between research and counselling and I made it
clear that though I might use language or probe in ways that seemed like a counselling
session, it was not. I also noted in my field notes, after all the interviews, comments that
the participants made that indicated they found the whole process quite helpful. Two of
them had booked counselling sessions for the day after our interview and asked to be able
to take a copy of their timeline with them to discuss in counselling. Others reflected on
how the process really clarified certain issues for them or how they were able to see how
far they had come.

I had problems, at times, moving from what was natural for me as a counsellor to
what I thought a researcher should do. In reflection, I view the process of clearly defining
these two roles as a one that is both developmental and experiential. When I think back
on the interviewing process, I feel confident with the decisions I made in the moment.
When participants expressed doubts, I helped them to articulate their resources and focus
on their progress – this was not strictly within the boundaries of the research but was
what I felt to be an ethical choice at the time. I would not necessarily make those same
choices in future research endeavours.

I was also aware that researcher self-disclosure could affect the interview process
– some personal information might serve to put the participant at ease and help her to tell
her story. It was a challenge to decide what and how much to tell in the context of these
types of research interviews and I was aware that perhaps, in my attempt to put a participant at ease with my self-disclosure, I might in fact create a situation where she felt constrained. In one interview, a participant began to speak of her home town and, as it turned out, I was very familiar with this town. I felt obliged to tell the participant this. Another time a participant expressed her desire to move on with a certain career dream that had not been supported by others and I shared a personal story of my own journey. I am unsure, even now, if these were good ideas or not. I wonder if my sharing hindered or facilitated the telling of a story that related to my research question.

The advantage of being a counsellor and having specialized training and experience, is that I never felt unprepared for the stories that my participant shared and I never felt that, ethically, they were moving into areas we could not handle together. I know this confidence can be a double-edged sword. I could have probed in directions that others without this experience would not have gone. This was not as much of an issue with a narrative methodology in which I actively sought to be nondirective, letting the story unfold in the manner in which the participant felt it needed to be told. In subsequent research, using other methodologies, I will be very aware of the issues related to counsellor and research identity and roles.

The Interview Process

Getting started.

When each of the five participants arrived at my home for the scheduled interview, I offered her coffee or tea and showed her where we would be working together for the next hour or so. I spent about ten to fifteen minutes reading the consent form with the participants, building in time for questions. I explained that I was going to
ask for just one piece of demographic information, which was her age. I also explained
that I would like to be able to contact her for input on analysis and established consent
and a means of accomplishing that. When we had gone through the consent form, I gave
the participant the $30.00 honorarium and assured her, once again, that if at any time
during the interview she decided she had reconsidered being part of this research the
money was hers to keep, no questions asked. After the participant signed the consent
form, I offered her a chance to have input on what pseudonym she would like to be
known by in the final writing of my thesis – all but one participant agreed to let me
decide.

*Emergent nature of qualitative research.*

My experience of proceeding through the research interviews was illustrative of
the emergent nature of qualitative research and the need to make decisions in the field as
one goes. Before beginning to interview the participants, I had a research question in
mind – how did experiences of abuse intersect with work history and how would women
make meaning of this as they told me their stories? While setting up the first interview by
telephone, the actual wording of the interview question emerged. My self-reflexive field
journal indicates my confusion at the time about what I saw as a change in my overall
research question, which was in fact an evolution of my interview question. My research
question and focus remained the same.

*Field notes: As I prepare for the first interview I realize that my research question
is undergoing a somewhat subtle change – I do not want to concentrate on how abuse
affected the participant’s ability to work as much as I want to be more open to an organic
approach to hearing the woman’s story – my question now is – when you heard me say

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6 Please see Appendix D for a copy of the consent form
that this research was about work and your experience of abuse and I asked if you thought you might have a story to tell about that – what did you start to think about? What came up for you? This wording occurred quite naturally in answer to this participant’s query on the telephone as to what I would be asking her.

After the first interview, listening to the tape and reflecting, I realized that this participant shared many stories of experiences that gave her life meaning that were not within a very strict definition of work – just as I wanted – but this did not occur until well into the interview when I took the time to explain how I was defining work. This prompted the following entry in my self-reflexive field journal:

Field notes: I want to get the broader definition of work out a lot earlier in the next interview. I think, reflecting on the first interview, that this is an important piece of information for the participants and will enrich the detail and scope of their stories.

I began the rest of the interviews, which all ranged in time from sixty to ninety minutes, by explaining to participants that I am looking at work in a very broad sense. I spoke a bit about how work is what carries meaning in our lives and they should not feel constrained to speak of only times when they left the home to engage in paid work. I then asked each participant, “When you heard me say, on the telephone, that my research is about abuse and how that has intersected with work and I asked if you had a story around that – what did you start to think about?” This broad question proved to be a very useful way to open the door to the participants’ stories.

Time-line activity.

Part of my research process, introduced at various times, depending on the narrative flow of the participant’s story, was a time-line drawing activity. I asked
participants to create some type of visual representation of their work history, including important life events along the way. I showed participants examples of various ways this could be done – a linear example with peaks and valleys on a line, a spiral, and a road map type of drawing. I gave participants the option of drawing quietly or talking as they worked on the time-line.

Initially, I was not sure when I would introduce and use the time-line drawing activity and when my first participant started right from the beginning of the interview sharing and telling me “her story” I did not want to interrupt the flow. That left me wondering about whether it had been introduced at the right time and how I would handle this for the next interview. The following entries in my self-reflexive field journal indicate how this process emerged.

Field notes: (after the second interview) Giving the broader definition of work from the start really worked and introducing the time-line activity when I did worked well to consolidate what she had told me and for her to see how far she had come. I need to just trust that I will know when is the right time with each woman, within the context of her process, to introduce the drawing activity.

Field notes: This last session was quite different. I had to make the decision to introduce the drawing of the time-line almost immediately and then use the activity to structure the entire interview. I am amazed how the interview process evolved over the course of the five interviews.

The time-line activity not only provided important data, but also proved to elicit many details of the women’s story and proved to be a touch-point throughout the
interview. Both the participant and I would refer back to the drawing to situate events in
time and further elaborate on various aspects of the participant’s story.

Throughout the interview, I used a method, described by Mattingly and Lawlor
(2000) to elicit a depth of detail to the narrative. I would ask participants if they could
give me a specific example of when they had felt, or thought, or did something they had
just referred to. This was often enough to prompt a participant to tell a richly detailed
story. At other times, I would probe with questions such as: Can you say more about that,
can you tell me more about this time or this event?

Co-constructing the process.

The narrative research process is one of shaping the researcher as the instrument
of research: the researcher as the medium for discovery and interpretation of meaning
(Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003). This approach to research has allowed me, as
researcher, to immerse myself in a particular phenomenon and reflect on who I am and
how that influences what I am able to see. There is a realization that one can never get an
undistorted view or even a view that anyone else would have seen. The heart of this work
is how the researcher asks questions before, during, after, and at all points of the process:
questions of the participants, of the stories told, and of themselves as researchers.

“Narrative research at its best is always a voyage of discovery” (Josselson et al., p.6).

My field notes reflect my uncertainty around this idea of having my participants
tell me stories and my role in co-constructing the stories.

Field notes: I’m afraid I won’t get my participants to tell a story that is
significant. But what is significant – any story is powerful. I really believe this. I worry
they won’t say anything new or revealing about abuse and work – but, so what? I need to just trust in the process.

Field notes: My only fear is that I am not getting stories that shed light on the research question – all of a sudden I can’t remember what the question was supposed to be.

Field notes: This interview today was very different. I felt I had to do more talking and more eliciting of detail but my impression is that Betty really told a lot of stories. I have much more of a sense of co-constructing with Betty’s interview than I had with Jeannie or Becky.

Field notes: Today was my last interview and I really had the sense of working through a process with Cinnamon. Did a story that answers my research question get told? I don’t know – but I know I heard Cinnamon’s story.

Acknowledging relationship.

I cannot deny that I entered into a relationship with these women. Some I had previous relationships with, some I met for the first and only time at the interview. When I reflect on passages from my field notes, I realize how important it became to me to give something back.

Field notes: I can’t help but reflect on my reactions and input on the fact that Betty spoke of wanting to counsel and the way people warned her that she couldn’t handle that type of work and her disappointment at how the door was slammed in her face. I talked a bit about not closing doors and my philosophy of counselling – the wounded healer. Was this a helpful thing for Betty to hear or does it just set her up for failure? Is this about me or is it about being in a relationship with these women who are
sitting across from me and telling me their hopes and dreams? All I know is that I said what I said from the heart in the moment and if it is true that I am the instrument of narrative research then what else could I do?

Field notes: I was able to photocopy Melanie’s beautiful and colourful drawing for her so she could take it with her and I know this had great meaning for her. She shared with me that she enjoyed the opportunity to get perspective through the interview on her journey with work and the impact of abuse on work. I feel good to hear those words because I want the women who choose to share their stories with me to feel that there is something in it for them – beyond the $30.00. They are giving so much it just seems they should get something out of this for themselves.

Field notes: At the end of the interview I offered to make Cinnamon a copy of her drawing – she said no. But a bit later, as we talked, she reconsidered. She was telling me about going to see her counsellor the next day and she decided that she would like to share the drawing with her. It felt good to be able to provide something so concrete from our time together.

Analysis

Entering the Relational Space of the Story

I am in debt to Frank (2000) for this particular wording of the analysis process. Frank writes of the ethical and intellectual responsibility to enter into relationship with the stories we hear. I have thought of my analysis as an entering into the relational space created between the participant and myself as we co-constructed the reality that the interview became. My process of entering this relational space entailed working amidst several layers of interpretation – field notes taken throughout the process, the actual tape
recorded interview, the transcript, the time line drawing, a concept map of major themes, and the ghostwritten story I created for each of my participants.

*Necessity of analysis.*

As a graduate student, I was aware that analyzing the stories of my participants is an integral part of a thesis research process. “Qualitative researchers never assume to know more than informants do, and, at the same time, we never assume informants’ words can simply speak for themselves” (Daiute & Fine, 2003, p. 64). In respect to analysis, Rosenwald (2003) contends that the interpretations we make are never true or false: we go about creating an argument to see a story in a certain light. Interpretation need not be right or wrong – only plausible. I have striven for coherence, consistency, comprehensiveness and simplicity and have chosen to detail my research process in such a way that the concept of “truth” does not enter into the equation. Jerome Bruner (1986, cited in Rosenwald) points out that in the area of narrative we need only ask if the story fits with a perspective we can imagine or feel is right.

*Writing as integral.*

I gained important insight from Laurel Richardson’s (2003) article, *Writing: A method of inquiry.* Writing is a way of finding out about yourself and your topic, a way of knowing, a method of discovering and analysis. In this approach, writing is actually a research practice in and of itself. As Richardson describes, we actually word-the-world into being by what we write. I find these words very powerful. I write to find something out, I write to learn. Most of us were taught that we do not begin to write until we know what we want to say but we cannot find out what we need to say until we start to write. With this in mind, writing was part of all stages of my research process.
**Ghostwriting.**

Carl Rhodes (2000) also guided my analysis, in an article that describes a process called ghostwriting. Rhodes writes that the researcher is in the finished text of research writing but often not in an explicit way. “As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them” (p. 513). The texts we write construct rather than discover the world. Rhodes provides a definition of ghostwriting: “... a practice where a researcher engages with a research participant and, as a result, creates a new text that both tells a story of that participant and implies the involvement of the researcher” (p. 514). The researcher produces a text that represents the experience and ideas of the person interviewed, but the researcher’s ghost is embedded in the story as well.

When I set out to write the ghostwritten stories, I knew I was involved in a social construction, a presentation or performance of a particular point of view. I staged the performance of the text and the vehicle for that performance was my writing. In the ghostwriting method, it is assumed that the interview process was a dialogue with the voices of the researcher and the participant becoming mixed. “This assumes that interview participants do not have a fully formed vision of their own histories to draw on freely and to call up and recount in a way independent of their subsequent experience, the context of the research, or their relationship with the researcher” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 516). This was an important point in terms of how I understood the nature of the story the participant and I co-created. The participant was not in possession of a “truth” that I only needed to probe about to find. The truth was in the process of being created as we spoke.

I began my process of ghostwriting immediately following the interview when I started to craft the participant’s story in an autobiographical format. This was
accomplished through creating a concept map as I listened to the audio-taped interview, reviewing the written transcript, and working back and forth between these layers of representation. I began to rewrite the story from an interview conversation to that of a first person narrative that proceeded through time in a coherent fashion.

In my initial choice of this method of analysis, I was guided by several undefined yet persistent wishes. As I worked through my analysis these became clear to me. I wanted to allow the reader to experience the participant's story and I wanted this experience to be framed by a context of how I understood the story. Choosing a narrative methodology relates to my belief in the power of story to touch and effect change and I wanted the reader to be able to experience a story – not just isolated bits and pieces, but a whole story from beginning to end. I wanted to create a storied text that would touch readers in the way I was touched when these women shared their stories with me. I wanted to give primacy to what the participant thought was important. I believe I have accomplished these goals by going beyond the actual words of the transcript to the nuances created by listening repeatedly to the participant’s voice, referring to my field notes of that voice, being guided by my concept map, and articulating what I felt was meant as well as what was actually said.

With ghostwriting, I am able to acknowledge from the beginning that I am in the finished story as the ghost writer. The stories I created are predominantly in the actual words of the participants taken from their written transcripts but at the same time, they are my creations as well. I have added connections and literary devices to make the story flow and I have arranged the story pieces in a way that made sense to me.
Ghostwriting is quite different than creating a participant sketch. I entered into the story in a first person manner. I took on the voice of the participant and took on her story. For the sake of clarity, at times I used my own words to extrapolate from what the participant was saying. When I did this, I was trying to be as true to the sense of what the participant related to me as I could — the story was not only in her transcribed words but also in everything we created together that day in the interview.

_Standpoint of storyteller._

Drawing on the work of Frank (2000) and his standpoint of storyteller, he describes narrative in the following way:

1. Narrative analysis locates structures that storytellers rely on but are not fully aware of as they speak.

2. Stories, as acts of telling, are relationships. One person may be doing the talking but stories are told not only to the listener but also with the listener in mind.

3. In terms of a difficult story, the telling can provide valuable distance from whatever is threatening.

4. Stories are more than data for analysis.

5. To tell a story is to call others into a relationship.

Frank (2000) then goes on to write in more detail about the standpoint of the storyteller, which was very helpful for me as I realized I had heard stories and I had become a storyteller as well, with my own unique standpoint. To take a standpoint is a political and ethical act of self-reflection. This requires knowledge of how fate and your choices have positioned you in the world. Standpoint reflects both your experience and your membership in a certain community. No one can opt out of having a standpoint — one’s
standpoint is only more or less reflected upon. Your standpoint shapes the form of your work. Frank asks the question – what has shaped you for the work you choose?

Frank (2000) describes the need to understand what is happening when stories are told. People tell stories to remind others what we all share and what is different. They offer those who have not had a particular experience the chance to have a glimpse into a life that may be informed by different values, meanings, relationships, and commitments. Others can witness what this life actually looks and feels like through the story. If the invitation is accepted then you open yourself to see life differently than you have in the past.

A story shows how people live different forms of life within the same social world. Frank (2000) uses the analogy of a gestalt drawing with a foreground and background figure – I cannot teach the readers how to see the other image – they must discover that for themselves, but once the reader does see both image, he or she will always be able to move back and forth between the two. If my analysis helps the reader make this leap – to seeing both the foreground and background image of the story – then I have more than accomplished my goal. Along with Frank, I questioned whether this could happen without a first hand experience of the story. My challenge was how to give the reader this first hand experience in a manner in which this movement could happen. For me this has involved ghostwriting as the means to allow the words of the story to touch the reader.

*Comfort with ghostwriting and standpoint.*

The road to feeling comfortable with creating and sharing the ghostwritten stories of the five participants in my research study has been a long one. It is a risk to move
beyond the “official” transcript, beyond the participants’ actual words, though we as researchers do this all the time. We do not often do it in such a transparent and obvious way. I am making it clear that I have created these stories. Although I have used the participant’s own words, at times I have extrapolated from what they said to what I feel they meant and I have employed certain literary devices of ordering, metaphor, and analogy to knit the story together. My ghost is firmly in place within the stories. I want to gift the reader with an experience of the story I heard. I believe that one of the most powerful aspects of qualitative research in general, and narrative methodology in particular, is the power to reach out and touch the reader with a story.

_Transcription_

I struggled through the decision to send the interview tapes out to be transcribed. It was always my desire, and what I considered a commitment to “good” research, to do the transcription myself. Ultimately, my decision related to the time involved for verbatim transcription of over seven hours of recorded conversation.

In relation to the transcription, initially I fell easily into the trap of saying – I will carry out a verbatim transcript and thinking that this was enough explanation. Having personally done verbatim transcription and having seen how others have done it, I realize there is more going on than meets the eye. It became clear to me that I would need to make my decisions and choices about transcription clear and transparent and in alignment with my overarching theory of social constructionism. Transcription is not a benign process enacted simply by putting on the earphones and starting to type. Transcription is a level of analysis and I was allowing someone else to do this part of my thesis work. This process turned out to be an interesting learning curve for me and an exercise in trust.
I had to hand over the voices to someone else and as it turned out this person became a valuable research assistant on my project. The transcriber was able to provide essential feedback on the ghostwritten stories – after all, she had heard the voices of the participants at least as many times as I had. Our work together became a type of collaboration and I am very grateful for her efforts on my behalf.

I provided the transcriber with a clear set of protocol instructions:

1. Separate the interviewer – myself – (I) from the participant’s (P) speech with a break in the text and use the I and P as symbols to identify each.

2. At times I may call the participant by her real name or she may refer to herself by name – when this happens could you either just put in a blank line or insert the pseudonym marked on the tape case.

3. The participant may allude to people by name – use first initials for the people they mention.

4. If there are parts you can’t hear use ///// (and indicate how much has been missed after the // - i.e. approx. 5 words missing).

5. I don’t need every ah and hmmm etc. to be written in but if there are significant pauses or indications of emotion (i.e. laughing, crying, significant pause etc) please indicate in brackets.

6. With the exception of ahs and hmmms as indicated please make the transcription as verbatim as possible – everything said should be transcribed.

7. In agreeing to transcribe these tapes, you are entering into an agreement of confidentiality with both the participants and with myself, as the researcher. At no time will you divulge any personal information about the research participants or anything
they have referred to in the interviews. If by some chance, you are aware of the identity of the participant because of some part of their story you are bound to keep their identity confidential.

Lapadat & Lindsay (1999) state that transcription is an integral process for qualitative research but little attention is paid to the methodological and theoretical issues involved in transcription. Transcription is full of theory – when we make a decision about transcription, we are making our own assumptions and theoretical stances clear. Every decision made at this stage has implications for future analysis. We seldom seem to go beyond stating – “the interview was transcribed verbatim”. There is the assumption that the transcription process is transparent. Recording and transcription are important parts of methodology and raise many important questions – to audio or video tape, to make use of digital recording technology, or to record at all? Will you transcribe? If so, will you do a verbatim transcript? What do you mean by verbatim? What type of coding will be used? How do you organize the transcribed page? How do you reconcile the need for efficiency with accuracy? What paralinguistic and nonverbal information should you include and why? What conventions will you employ to symbolize and present the data? These critical decisions, their implications and outcomes, are rarely reported.

The goal of transcription is usually to transform data in a way that preserves the possibility for different analysis interpretations. Bloom (1993) writes of lean transcriptions that allow rich interpretations. Kvale (1996) contends that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the conversational event that has unfolded through the process of social interaction and what a researcher chooses to transcribe. The process is
interpretive, it is a selection process and there as many ways to select as there are researchers doing the selection.

Mishler (1991) states that transcription is fundamentally interpretive and does not simply re-present what happened. Kvale (1996) suggests that one needs to ask — what is the useful transcription process for one’s particular research purpose? It is important to reflect on and acknowledge that the interview itself is socially constructed — a co-constructed conversation in a specific context and the transcript is another layer of construction. As a text it is partial, limited, geographically, socially, culturally, historically, racially, and gendered in its location.

There is a fundamental paradox in all of this — the story is both less and more with each subsequent layer of construction. I did not abandon the idea of transcription because I realized it was a construction, but I did become far more self-aware about what I was using as part of my analysis. I realized the need to subject the transcript to a process of trustworthiness just as I would with all aspects of my methodology.

Moving Beyond Transcription.

When the transcription was complete, I listened through the tape one more time with the written transcription in front of me and filled in any missing words, phrases, or nuances that I remembered from the interview or had noted in my field notes. I then created a concept map of what I was hearing. Concept mapping is a useful methodological approach to understanding the concepts people use to understand and interpret their world. It is a broad term for a wide range of techniques that are intended to delineate underlying knowledge structures (Goodyear, Lichtneberg, Tracey, Claiborn, & Wampold, 2005).
Then I began to construct the ghostwritten story. Working between the field notes, the transcript, the time-line, and the concept map I was able to ghostwrite the participant's story. When the ghostwritten story was complete, I sent a copy to the transcriber and participants received a copy of their story by mail. I asked the transcriber to recall what she had heard as she listened to the tapes and to reflect on whether the ghostwritten story "rang true" for her. For the participants I included a handwritten note asking them to read the story and let me know if they were comfortable with the way in which I had ghostwritten their story.

Working with the ghostwritten story and the transcripts, as well as all the other layers of data generated, I undertook a brief analysis of the time-line drawings and the concept-maps. I then followed a framework for discerning the way in which the participant had found meaning in her story, described by Frank (1993) in an article entitled, *The rhetoric of self-change: Illness experiences as narrative*. Frank describes four types of epiphany experiences narrators might reveal in their stories: (a) the self is discovered as what she has always been, (b) the self is discovered to be what she might become, (c) the self is seen to be an accumulation of all she has experienced, and (d) the reluctant Phoenix who is not yet ready to discover change in herself.

An exploration of the themes within each participant's story followed. These themes often emerged in a very organic way through the analysis process. I drew on Boyatzis' (1998) description of the way that themes form patterns of information that allow for interpretation of the phenomenon under consideration. The final stage of my analysis was looking for areas of similarity and interest across participants and tying these back to important themes in the literature.
Soundness of the Work

While acknowledging the positivist tradition of reliability and validity that guides quantitative research, the qualitative paradigm requires a new way of conceptualizing these important aspects of research. Richardson (2003) invites readers to view the soundness of a qualitative research study using the metaphor of a crystal. Crystals suggest growth, change, and a many sided object that reflects the external and the internal at the same time. What we see depends on our angle of viewing. Riessman (1993) offers another important insight in terms of trustworthiness. "Validation, the process through which we make claims for the trustworthiness of our interpretations, is the critical issue. ‘Trustworthiness’ not ‘truth’ is a key semantic difference: The latter assumes an objective reality, whereas the former moves the process in the social world." (p. 65).

To add to the soundness of my research I have worked from a number of different sides of the crystal. Involving the transcriber in a process of reviewing the ghostwritten stories for her sense of the “truth” of them, as well as initiating a process whereby each of the participants could read and reflect on the ghostwritten story and provide feedback. This invitation is an important aspect of soundness.

Another aspect of soundness is the attempt I have made throughout my research work to link my overarching theoretical framework of social constructionism with all aspects and parts of my research endeavour. I have linked social constructionism to my topic, to my research methodology, to my interviewing and analysis process. It is also linked to soundness. I have also employed a number of analysis methods that form complex and richly textured layers of data: the concept maps, analysis of the time-line drawings, the ghostwritten stories, taking the standpoint of a storyteller, and a thematic
analysis. I believe approaching the data from so many directions adds to the soundness of my research.

Aquinaldo (2004) describes a means of conceptualizing and assessing validity through a social constructionist lens. From a social constructionist perspective, research findings are always partial and situated. Validity consists of holding up for scrutiny research choices – first the epistemological stance, then the theoretical perspective, the methodology, and finally the specific methods employed, all in congruence with one another. This is an aspect of validity. The process of validity also demands self-reflexivity. It promotes a critical reading and re-reading of research findings through different lenses.

Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) propose that the standards of criteria to be upheld when thinking about the soundness of qualitative research include plausibility, relevance, importance of the topic chosen, which then establishes confidence in an accurate interpretation of the meaning of the data. These authors suggest: (a) reflexivity, (b) a systematic research design, (c) highlighting and explaining different interpretations and explanations, (d) creating a clear audit trail through the data and, (e) using vivid, thick, and faithful descriptions that are presented artfully, clearly and with imagination. The reader needs to be able to personally experience and understand the phenomenon in question.

Summary of Chapter Three

As the researcher, I have become aware that I am the instrument of research and it has only been through my self-reflexive process that I have been able to fully realize this important dimension of research work and analysis. I have used my experience and
imagination to fashion a match between who I am and what I have experienced as a researcher doing this research – I did this by creating metaphors, analogies, and associations. By writing, reflecting and spending time with the various layers of data created through all stages of the research process I have attempted to carry out sound qualitative research.

The next chapter will allow you, the reader, to experience the stories the five women, who agreed to participate in this research, shared with me at one moment in time, in the context of a research interview. I now place these stories, which have been in the background of this work, in the foreground. I invite you, as the reader, to move beyond the past chapters covering literature, issues of methodology and my self-reflexive process to see this new foreground – the actual stories of these five women. If you are able to enter into these stories and experience the voices of these women you will be able to move with ease between both the foreground and the background of this thesis and I will have accomplished my goal. The stories will inform how you view what has come before and the analysis that will come after. You will become the judge of both the soundness and trustworthiness of this work.
Chapter Four – The Stories

Chapter four consists of the ghostwritten stories of the five participants who took part in my thesis research. The stories appear in the order in which the interviews took place. Each woman’s time-line drawing follows her story. As described earlier, these are the participants’ stories – ghostwritten by me. I have taken on their voices, and in the first person, assembled the stories based on what the women shared with me.

Paraphrasing the words of Thomas King (2003), I invite you to take these stories – they are yours. Do with them what you will. Share them with a friend, make them a topic of discussion at your next scholarly gathering, cry over them, get angry, and maybe forget them as time goes by. But do not say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard their stories, because you have heard them now.

Becky’s Story

When I heard you say the research was about abuse and work I thought this is something that started at a very early age for me – the problems that I had with my father and the verbal abuse. It was as if my Dad took my life and put it on a certain path that I had no control over. It was a progression – it started with my Dad and then the sexual abuse with Mr. X and I guess that all sort of led up to my lowest point, the partner violence from Sam. In all that has happened to me it is almost as if that is the hardest thing to bring up and talk about. That really stripped me of everything, or everything I had left. Maybe that’s it – I didn’t know how little I had left. As strong as I might have come across, I didn’t feel that way. I thought to myself – “Wow, I’ve been through so much crap but I never had people disrespecting me in that way.” It was unnerving to be in that place. I felt I had no option – I had only myself to rely on. Now, just knowing that I
was capable of getting out of that situation, throwing myself into counselling and making sure that nothing like that would ever happen to me again was big for me. When I first got out I had no sense of self left – I was fragmented. I mean Sam did a good job – that is what men like him do. People who are so mentally unwell they have such a power – he did a good job on me.

I know I could have just come home and pretended everything was fine. I had an opportunity to go down to ______ and it really took a lot for me to just come home and deal with this. I’m not use to being around my family and to confront these issues and dig deeper into the thing with my Dad and Mr. X. and start dealing with those things has been really hard. I made the decision to come home and to phone the police and to phone Transitions and I just threw myself into getting the help I needed. And you know – it’s not just that situation of abuse, there are so many other reasons in my life for what happened to me. Nobody deserves what happened to me.

I didn’t really think that I could ever hold a job. I didn’t see myself as somebody that could be employed. It was a really foreign thought to me. That belief led me into a world of drug dealing and then prostitution. All of that is eighteen years ago now but it is still a big block in my life as far as employment goes. I’m just terrified. I’ve never had to go out and look for a job. I mean you don’t have to apply to be a prostitute and they don’t ask you to fill out a job application to be a drug dealer.

Bridges was great but I don’t think it was enough – certainly not for me. A girlfriend and I decided that we were going to chain ourselves to the door on the day of graduation. We didn’t get time to practice interviews. That is something they used to do but they’ve had to restructure their program. I know that interview practice would have
been very helpful for some of us. You’re trying to cram in a whole lot of stuff in six months and thank God for the women at Bridges – they helped me tremendously. I’m not denying that. They bring you to a point and for me that point wasn’t quite far enough. If the program was longer, I’m sure it would have included sitting down and doing an interview, having it videotaped, having a chance to get feedback and practice.

So after my time at Bridges I just don’t feel as qualified as I think I should. Ever since Bridges ended I’ve been in this stuck spot. I woke up the day after the Bridges graduation and I just felt empty. It’s the looking for work. I don’t even know what an interview is going to be like. I just have no clue. I could get in there and toss cookies, or pass out or have a huge anxiety attack. Just like when I was at the Job Fair. I went there and I was dressed nice and felt that I looked good but I couldn’t speak. Had I opened my mouth, God only knows what might have come out. Going into an office and sitting with somebody and talking about a job – that scares the living hell out of me.

School is a possibility. I did my upgrading assessment and I have to do my Grade 11 and I plan to pursue that. In all honesty, if I could just go to school full time right now I’d prefer that to work. It’s not that I don’t want to work – again it’s the looking for work and it’s funny about the upgrading assessment and being nervous about things. This is kind of dumb but I had no anxiety going into that. I just went in there with the thought either you know or it or you don’t. I aced the vocabulary and the comprehension but sort of ran out of time on the last bit. I just walked in there with no anxiety and everybody else was freaking out. I was saying to them, “What is your problem, people?” And maybe that is the way I’ve been in other aspects of my life – overconfident. I have been in situations in my life when I just had to say to myself – How am I going to get out of
this, how do I overcome this? I guess I had to believe in myself but I see it as a different, unstructured sort of belief. I’d need a course on how to get that belief transferred to where I can use it.

I think in looking for a job, people judge you almost automatically – within five seconds and people’s opinions of me are important but they can’t define me. I don’t think I have it in me to be comfortable enough to come across the way I need to. I think I’d be very intimidated and I’m afraid of my inability – this is all unfamiliar territory to me. I’m pretty comfortable just talking to people but talking to somebody who is sitting there offering me a job – I wouldn’t know what to say. I don’t have a selling point anymore.

I had a selling point when I was dealing drugs in a male-dominated business. I was doing very well. I’m not bragging but I had a whole organization going – kids working under me. I did really well in that men’s world of bikers and criminals and I enjoyed the success. But that isn’t something you can put on a resume. And it’s a scary world. When I decided to quit there was some gangs that had sort of ended up in my territory and I realized that it was no longer an option to carry on without people getting hurt. I didn’t want to be part of that. That’s what encouraged me to say – enough’s, enough. But that is my employment history for better or worse.

Actually, I have had other jobs. One time I was playing pool at a club in ________ and I had made friends with the guy who owned the club. One night he was driving me home. I had a lot of hair spray in my hair and I went to light a cigarette and I caught my hair on fire. I had to beat the flames out and in the middle of that he asked me if I wanted a job. I started at the door and I revamped the way they handled the money because some of the girls were stealing. I got into promotions and then security and I did
some waitressing. Then I went down to _____ for some renovations they were doing on a hotel and within two weeks I was assistant manager in charge of housekeeping and ordering and stuff I had never done before. I learned what I needed to – that’s the thing, I know I can. It’s the resume and going out there and looking. I’m capable, I’m a hard worker, I know that. I’m actually an over-achiever in an employment situation.

Just thinking about job possibilities falling into my lap, it’s still happening to me. I went out to _______, its this little hoody-doody store my Mom likes to shop at. There was this lady in there and she had this big poodle and that thing was trying to eat the moccasins and the Nygard shirts and I thought – Oh my God. I asked her if she would like me to take her dog around the block. So I ran around the place with her dog until she was done and I said to her. “Why don’t you give me your phone number and then if your dog needs to go for a walk I can come by maybe on a Saturday and take him out.” He was a big dog and she was just a little woman. I had to get a pen from the woman who owns the store to write down the number. She and I have a good rapport and we often joke back and forth and out of the blue she offered me a job. She offered it to me because of my personality and I was tempted – to work around those clothes all day – Wow. However, it was only two days a week and if I took it I would be cut off social assistance. I was in Bridges and it just wasn’t going to work. I will go back there with a resume. That is how I am accustomed to getting jobs.

Anyway, I’ve grown marijuana, I’ve sold drugs, I’ve prostituted and that is a large amount of my life. Because of the people that I’ve known and because of the prostitution, I didn’t see myself ever being outside of criminality. Now I have to sort of police myself
- not that I always want to talk about — “Oh, when I was a prostitute”, or, “When I was a drug dealer” — but it is part of who I am. I have to be aware of that all the time.

Well, I can tell you a story that speaks to this. I’ve been dating a guy and it has been non-sexual for just about two-months and he kept saying to me, “There’s something, isn’t there? I’m not sure, can’t put my finger on it — but there’s something.” I told him some things about myself. At other times in my life I would just tell people everything. I don’t know why. I just would. It does seem to sneak up on you if you don’t. I told him about the sexual assault therapy and that this person had done this to me and about my father – the verbal abuse and that those two things made me make decisions in my life that I wasn’t proud of. So one night, I guess about a month ago, he asked me, “Did you used to be a prostitute?” All the air went out of me — just whoosh — and I said, “All right, yes.” I don’t know how that was apparent to him. But when I think about it I see that even though I didn’t come right out and say it, in a round-about way I was trying to give him the information. I dated another guy for two years and it just ate away at me that he didn’t know. I did finally tell him and it was good – he never used it against me. So far so good with this guy. He is very kind and compassionate and has his own boundaries. But this sex thing — I mean he’s very respectful – but when he asked me just right out like that I felt so deflated and exposed. It wasn’t an option to lie but it was sad – the poor guy – he’s been waiting for sex, well, not waiting but you know, wanting – and then he finds out he is not getting sex from an ex-prostitute. How bad is that? I’ve said to him I’m not capable of having a sexual relationship with anyone right now, even someone I care for. If I was to stay non-sexual for the rest of my life I’m sure I’d be just fine. That’s how I feel right now.
I feel as though I’m an enigma – there are so many different aspects to me. I feel like I’m living a dual life sometimes. I know that I’m not but a large part of my life has been criminality, since I was fourteen and then the prostitution – most of my life has been spent in that world. If it had been spent working at MacDonald’s or going to Burger King or having a paper route it would be a completely different reality.

The abuse from my Dad is where it all started. My Dad called me a whore and a slut and said I was useless and stupid. I never had anyone to build me up and help me believe I could do anything or be anything. There was no vision or possibility. With my home life, it was just survival. Many people who have lived the lifestyle that I’ve lived – they don’t think they’re going to get to be thirty-seven. I’ve known a lot of people who didn’t make it to twenty-five. Somehow I just didn’t believe I would have to worry about all of this because I didn’t think I would be around.

I recognize now how many aspects of my life are affected by all of this. It started with my Dad and then Mr. X – and then the prostitution. With the prostitution your worth is based on how much money you can make, how well you present yourself. It turns into a confused sort of self-worth. I made choices I wouldn’t have made if Mr. X hadn’t done what he did to me and made me feel the way he did. I was already feeling pretty insecure about what was happening at home and he was a predator – he picked up on that and he manipulated me. Because of the stuff with my father I didn’t see myself as different or better or having the capacity to stand up for myself – I feel like I was set up to fail. I mean they didn’t get me – I’m still here – I don’t have track marks and I’m not HIV positive and I’m not still on the street – they didn’t win. But if I had the option of my Dad not being a drunk and cruel and if my Dad hadn’t been saying those things to me I don’t
think I would have been such an easy target for Mr. X. With any child, if they have
dijiveness in their life and encouragement and genuine love they aren’t going to be an
easy target for the Mr. X’s. When he got hold of me, my Dad had already been calling me
a whore and I was still a virgin. I started to think – I am a whore. I think that moving into
prostitution was part of that. My self-worth was gone, all I had was sex, really. Before the
prostitution, I was just promiscuous – looking for Daddy’s approval I guess.

With the prostitution – I didn’t have to be out there doing that. I didn’t do it for
drugs or alcohol. I did it to punish myself. Some girls stick needles in their arms and
some girls may make terrible, terrible decisions by getting into the wrong vehicle with ten
guys - I’ve seen a lot of awful things -- this is what I did to punish myself. It isn’t that
people haven’t extended themselves to me in a positive way through my life but I
believed in the hatred and the anger more – cause you know your Dad is supposed to be
someone you can trust and someone who is supposed to love you and Mr. X – well he
was supposed to be somebody I could trust too. And the past still affects me.

I don’t like to judge but I hate it when I hear my thirteen year old niece and her
friends talking – “Oh, Brittany Spears, she’s such a slut.” I just don’t like that sort of
terminology. I don’t like the word whore or tramp and I don’t like to hear women
categorizing other women using male choices of words. I was in a bathroom at a club and
I was doing my makeup and there were a couple of women there. They were talking –
“Oh she’s an f___ing slut” - and using the C word. I said to them, “I’ve got a real
problem with the way you’re talking. I’ve hung out with bikers who had better
conversation skills and I just wonder what you are getting at with this talk.” I had one of
them in tears. I didn’t mean to but why would you call another woman a sexual body part
or a whore. I found it very disheartening. It’s a reflection of where I’ve been. I’m an example of the damage that words like that can do. If I hadn’t had to put in so much time surviving all the mental abuse and if I hadn’t spent so much time abusing myself I wonder how different my life would have been. I would probably be walking around proudly, having a resume and being comfortable with that.

I’ve learned a lot about self-care, life-skills, and self-awareness through Bridges and Transitions. I wish these skills were taught in school. I think of all I was taught that just confused me and then I think about the things I really needed to learn. And everyday kids are just turning on Much Music where women are sexually degraded and that is what they are taking in. We need to start understanding ourselves as women and not just sexual objects – you know as whores or bitches or whatever the current lingo on TV is.

I guess I want to be able to educate other women through my own experience. My Mom was at the hospital and I was in the parking lot and there was a woman there and we start talking and someone how it just came out – she was being abused. I started giving her cards and giving people’s names and I’d do it a hundred times for that one time that it would work. I can see with other women – and this isn’t all the time – I can meet someone and I look in her eyes and I know. More than likely, I’m probably right. She’s had something bad happen to her, she’s been involved in prostitution, she’s been abused.

There is something very powerful about being with other women, like my experience at Bridges and in other places. There are girls that I’ve helped get out of situations – situations with abusive relationships – built them a fence, picked up their dogs at 7:00am. I find now that I can do those things and I don’t take it all on myself anymore. There was one girl I met in my first transition group and I’d see bruises on her
face and the thing with transition is you have women who are out and you have women that are still in or thinking of getting out – its really diverse. Thank God I was out because I think it really gave support to some women who were still in. I knocked myself out for her for two weeks. She really loved her puppies and she had moved out to a place in _______ that didn’t have a fence. I’ve done some construction and stuff so I went out there and built that fence. When she had been at the place about 3 days and I went out there to visit her and she was drugged on pills, drunk out of her mind and I called the man that owns the house. He’s AA so we got someone from AA to come out because that’s just way beyond me. I come from a long line of alcoholics but I myself don’t get it. I feel like – Holy crap – just put the dammed thing down. How bad do you want to feel? I hadn’t heard from her for awhile and she phoned me three days ago – she’s drinking Lysol and Scope and horrible things. Before stuff like that would have really brought me down but I’m at a point now where I’m not OK with it but I understand that I can’t do anything more for her but lend the support I have. One of the things I really wanted to do was get into social work and I was terrified that I wouldn’t be able to handle it. I’d sacrifice myself in some way. This has been encouraging for me – not that this poor woman is in such bad shape – but that I am able to bring myself out of it and be OK. I can say to her – Let me know when you’re ready, if I can do something for you, then you know I’m here. I can give her words of encouragement and I think its important to just tell somebody you love them regardless of mistakes that they feel they’ve made. She phoned again last night and you know she didn’t even remember talking to me but she is going to detox in _______. As far as employment that is eventually where I want to get to, whether it’s women’s rights or children’s – just to make a difference. I’ve been
counselling others – not doing a good job of it for myself. I do have the ability, I know that. I am able to give people hope and I think that is a gift.

I don’t do any formal volunteering but there are a couple of older ladies I go to see and it’s not for any other reason than me enjoying their energy. Sometimes it breaks my heart to go to the home and see these women that are so spunky and so alone. It isn’t work for me – it’s giving back. I wouldn’t want to be paid for something like that because it fills my soul in a way that money never could. I don’t think it would mean the same thing to me if I was paid to do it. It’s satisfying because I know I’m doing something that makes a difference in somebody’s life. These women deserve respect and dignity and it’s amazing what one little visit will do.

Coming out of Bridges is like a dark cloud right now for me. And it’s a question mark. I’m sure the black cloud will lift. I’m out there – stopping at my Mom’s hairdresser because I need to get my hair done and preparing myself. I did my nails – I haven’t done that in I don’t know how long. I’m hoping. I’m thirty-seven years old - I can’t not be employed. Sure I could go to school and that would be great but then I get out of school and I still have to do this “get a job thing”. I have to find out what that is all about.
Illustration 1: Becky’s Time-line Drawing
Jeannie's Story

I'm not sure where to start - you know for some reason I don't really even remember my young life – to just start talking about it – I always think – I don’t remember, I don’t remember very far back. Even right now, I don’t really remember. My parents drank a lot, but they stopped later in our lives but still . . . It sort of bothers me sometimes because people say things like, “You know, you must be blocking something”. I just remember they drank and that’s it. I try, you know, to think about it, but nothing even comes up.

So, I'll start from when I was nineteen – that's when I began to live with Barry. I had a good life. I had my son, Lionel, when I was twenty-one. Soon things started going wrong for us. It was around that time that Barry first hit me. For some reason he used to think that I was fooling around on him. You know _________ is a small place and everybody knows everybody. I didn’t know that Barry used to think I fooled around with other guys. I was shocked when later I was with Ted and he told me that Barry thought these things. I guess that sort of set me up with Ted because he thought that about me too, but I guess that comes later. I never fooled around on either of them.

Well, anyway, things were just going down and down in _____ and Lionel couldn't handle school there. School was the big reason for our move. We lived down here with Barry's sister for awhile, just to get settled in. He was going to work and everything and then, not even a year after we moved here, he ended up having these seizures and it was a brain tumour. I'd never seen anyone in my life have a seizure. Barry had to stop working. He started going out a lot. He was a bar person and I wasn’t, so I'd
always be home with my son and Barry would be out. Lionel and I spent so much of our
time together. I was always the one going to his soccer games and things.

I lived with Barry for twenty-one years – he was the only person in my life. He
was the one that always went out and made the money and I stayed home with my son.
With the brain tumour, he had to stop working and that made it bad for us. I was scared
wondering what was going to happen. I talked to the doctors about Barry and they told
me things were going to get worse because brain tumour people are hard to live with.

Well, Barry changed, a lot. He started getting mad at Lionel for little things. He
never did a lot with Lionel but now it was worse. He just never did things with us. We
had to move two or three times because he couldn’t stand the noise. We ended up in a
really small place and that was even worse – he just couldn’t seem to stand being there at
all.

Anyway – I went home to ________ for a visit and while I was there Barry
phoned me and out of the blue told me that he was leaving us for another family. I told
you he went out a lot and drank and stuff – he was pretty high on the phone when he told
me. I was in shock; I wasn’t expecting anything like that. I came back the next day and he
wasn’t there. He was gone for three days and then he just came home and I asked him –
Is it true that you are seeing this other person? He got really mad and started screaming at
me, “How do you know about that?” I just said – You’re the one who told me.

After that Barry would just come home to us like nothing was wrong. And
meanwhile he was seeing this other person. He would come home in the mornings and
leave after lunch and stay out all night and then come back the next morning – get some
sleep, change and stuff and go out again. I couldn’t handle that. I told him – You’ve got
to tell Lionel what you’re doing and move out. This was the first time in my life that I ever had to deal with something like this and it was hard. He just refused to leave.

I started packing his things and leaving them outside and telling him – You better leave. You better do something because I don’t think what you are doing now is good. It isn’t good letting Lionel see the way you are right now. I finally had to phone his aunt and uncle and ask that we all get together and talk. Barry’s always had a drug problem – like drinking and marijuana and that whole lifestyle. Whenever I would ask him about other drugs, things like cocaine, he would always say no and flip out. He’d always deny it and get so angry and we’d end up with holes in the wall because he’d get so mad. When his aunt and uncle were there, his uncle asked him if he did cocaine and he just said, “Ya, I do.” I was so upset, remembering all the times he had denied this.

We all talked together and I told Barry again that he would have to leave. I packed his stuff and put it outside and slowly he would come and take things away to this other person’s house and finally he was gone. But it seemed like with him leaving my problems were just starting. I ended up stuck with the rent. I didn’t really want to keep on living there anyway, so my son and I decided to move. I just decided to leave everything because I didn’t want anything that had been ours together. I thought – if I have to start all over again, OK, I’ll just do it the hard way.

It was really difficult at first. I didn’t know where I was going to go with Lionel still in school. I couldn’t just go and move in with somebody. I talked to a lady at __________ and she helped me. They put us into a motel and we ended up being there for six months. I felt so bad for Lionel. It was his graduation year and I didn’t even realize that it was his last year in school. I was feeling pretty bad all the time and when I
saw Lionel I would say things like – what are you going to do for work when school gets out and how it has to be something that will be done by September because you have to go back to school. He said, “No, I graduate this year – I’m done with school.” You know I was so surprised he made it to school after everything that had happened. I couldn’t believe what he was telling me. I said – I’m so sorry Lionel, I didn’t realize you were graduating. I better start doing something around here. I was so happy for him, because after everything we had both been through he was graduating. He helped me a lot but I started thinking, right then, I better get doing something here for myself. I didn’t want to depend on Lionel in that way. But it was really hard.

After the break-up with Barry I just went way down and hit rock bottom. I mean it was coming on for awhile. After he got sick we never got along. We didn’t do anything together and even though I just didn’t want to believe it was happening, everything was falling apart. Even when he was in the hospital, they wouldn’t let me visit him sometimes because he would get so angry when I would come in the room. He’d always start asking me about guys up in ______, the jealousy stuff.

So when the split up finally came I just hit the bottom like I never had before. I went into a depression. I was so ashamed of what was happening to me and I didn’t want anybody else to know about it. For some reason I didn’t want anybody to put Barry down and say he did this to me. That part was really hard for me because I had no one to talk to. I had been close to Barry’s family and I took me a long time to talk to them and tell them that we had split up. I stayed totally away from his family for probably a year or so. I didn’t phone them and I didn’t want anything to do with them just because I was so ashamed of what Barry did to me, leaving me and Lionel for this other person. Finally, I
did speak with some of them and they all said, “You will always be our sister-in-law, or
auntie or whatever.” I was so grateful because I really needed that and I missed them.

Anyway, I was depressed and I would just stay in and watch TV and think too
much and I said to myself – you can’t keep on doing this. I knew I had hit bottom. I had
stayed in my room for two or three months and lost about fifteen pounds. My son and
nephew were always saying, “OK, Mom, you gotta eat. You gotta get out of this room”. I
kept saying – No, just leave me alone. It was at that time that I found out about co-
dependence. One of my friends told me about this book on that and I got it. In my room,
just thinking and stuff, I’d grab that book and I started reading it and it helped me a lot. It
was really hard for me to see myself in that way with Barry – as co-dependent –
especially since I believed I was doing so much of what I did for Lionel’s sake. I didn’t
think I’d ever end up splitting up with the father of my son.

That book and knowing I was at the bottom sort of got me going. I saw the doctor
and ended up on pills for depression. I tried three different types and the last kind was the
strongest and it helped. The doctor was so good to me. He has helped me through so
much since I’ve moved here. First it was just dealing with moving to the city and then
with Barry’s brain tumour. And then dealing with the depression and everything. He
made sure I saw him every week. He’d make the appointment for me every week and
made sure that I kept it. If it had been up to me to phone and get the appointment and
write it down and remember it – I couldn’t have done it.

I took the pills and went to the appointments and I kept thinking – I can’t let
Lionel see my like this much longer, I better do something. I just stared picking myself
up again. When I would wake up in the morning I would think – What am I going to do
for myself today? Not for my son, or for anybody else, but for me. It was so hard to think just about myself at first. I had been thinking about Barry and Lionel for so long – I didn’t really know how to think about myself.

After Lionel and I got into BC Housing I was feeling like – Wow, I’m by myself and I can do whatever I want to do. I was learning how to do things for myself and I felt pretty happy. I was doing my volunteering at ——— and I wanted to get into the Bridges program. In the first interview they told me right out that I had to stop “my problem” if I wanted to go to Bridges and they told me how I could do that. All my life I’ve smoked pot – this is the only drug problem I’ve ever had and I didn’t think I’d ever be able to stop. Lots of times I thought – Why should I stop, I don’t have anyone to stop for. And I was thinking, then, I can do whatever I want now. But at the same time it was bothering me.

Around that time I heard about a canoe journey. It was for people with drug and alcohol problems and I thought – OK, I’m really going to challenge myself and go. So, I did. I was really happy to be going on this trip. I was able to slow down on “my problem” for the trip. I came back from the trip and it had been great and it really bothered me that I was still smoking pot at all. I had met somebody on the trip and I was going back and forth to visit him and thinking – Gee, I’ve met this nice person, I’m smoking pot and he doesn’t know I smoke and I think I better just stop this. I didn’t turn out for us but that thought stayed with me – I’m still going to try and quit. I started cutting way back and having sweats and vivid dreams and twitching. I had a headache every day. It was awful.

I just cut down to smoking once a day, in the evening. That’s when I started feeling everything changing in me. So, I decided to quit, cold turkey and I felt like I had
to do more. Sometimes I really need a push to keep going. I started phoning the drug and alcohol day program but I knew every time I phoned they would say the same thing, “Come in and we’ll do an intake.” One day I was near there and I thought — OK, I better just go in because there is no use in phoning and hearing the same thing every day. They set a date for me to do the intake and then they said, “OK, you start on Monday.” Monday — Wow — I knew I couldn’t back out then.

It’s been over a year now and I really feel like I’ve changed. It changed me. I didn’t think I could ever do it — I still can’t believe it to this day. I think to myself — Holy man, it’s been a year! I’m able to spend more time with my family now and I am getting to know my nieces and nephews. I never hung out with my family when I was smoking pot. If I went home, I wouldn’t stay with my family just because I knew I had this problem. I didn’t want them seeing me like that. It really separated me from people.

I was doing pretty good and I was happy with getting off “my problem” and doing things for myself. That’s when I got together with Ted and we were happy in the beginning. Then the next thing you know he started hitting me and doing things and saying things I never expected. I’d never experienced anything like that serious before — with abuse. I started thinking — I’m going down again and I don’t like what this person is doing to me. Ted was younger than me and he was pretty paranoid about things. He started accusing me of being with other guys and thinking all the time that somebody was after him. Then he started thinking that whoever I was fooling around with was the person after him and I was helping that guy get him. At first I thought — This is all so stupid. But then it started getting worse. I started getting scared. Ted didn’t drink or smoke dope or anything like that but one day out of the blue he hit me and I wasn’t
prepared for that. I never got hit like that in my life. Barry never hit me like that in all the time we were together. I’m not the kind of person to just take that and not say anything but he was the type to get totally mad and angry. He would say to me, “Do you want to leave?” Finally, one time, I said – Yeah. He totally flipped out on me and I thought – Oh no, what have I got myself into here? People always like to think – Oh, this won’t happen to me again but here it was, happening to me again.

When Ted kept saying to me, “Do you want to leave?” I started saying – No. I knew I had to be careful after what he did the first time I said I wanted to leave. I phoned Barry’s aunt and uncle again because Ted knows them too. They were out of town but I didn’t think I should wait. I knew I couldn’t handle what was going on and that I didn’t want to live like that. I was at the point then that I knew I had to move on. It had taken me awhile because I had been pretty scared of him and what he could do to me. I knew then though that I had to get some help from someone. I hadn’t told anybody how Ted was treating me. I know I had done that with Barry too – I didn’t want anybody to know what I was going through just because I didn’t think it was a good feeling to have other people know these things.

I still had my place in BC Housing. Through everything, I never let anything get in the way of that. One thing one of my friends told me was – just don’t let anybody move in this place with you. I told her Lionel would never allow it, anyway. So whenever Ted was hanging around I would have to say I’m not saying you have to leave but you know you can’t live here – you have to go to your home. He climbed in the balcony one day and was in my bedroom. I got home and all of a sudden he comes walking out of the
bedroom and that just scared the hell out of me. After that I started locking all my doors and windows.

I just felt like I was going down again with Ted. I felt – I’m just hitting rock bottom again, here. I knew I had to move on – we were together about five months. I ended up getting the courage to phone my nephew on Barry’s side – he lives here. I told him I was having a hard time with Ted and he just said, “Do you want me to come and pick you up?” Before I left my place I wrote a note saying – I caught the first bus, sorry I have to leave this way. I would never fool around on you and I would never help anybody go after you. I wouldn’t do that. I put it in his bag and I left. I stayed at my nephew’s house for a week and all the time Ted thought I was back in _______.

I was so glad it was over and I was out but I was also really scared. I just had this shaky feeling all the time. My family came down and they drove me to my volunteer place and everything and finally I was able to go home again. I talked to Barry’s uncle and he said to me, “You know, Jeannie, I don’t want you living like this. You shouldn’t live in fear.” I didn’t like the feeling either. He said, “We’re going to have to get you and Ted together to talk.” I was really scared and I still felt pretty shaky but I knew he was right. Barry’s uncle agreed to set up the time and place and everything and when I asked if this meeting was going to be like it was with Barry they just laughed. We all met and went for a drive and we all talked and set our boundaries and everything. I think it was hard for both of us to speak and say what we thought because of our uncle being there. And then not even two months later Ted went and jumped two stories from a building and now he is in the hospital.
I’ve gone to visit him. I can’t just turn off my feelings for him. He was in the ICU for awhile and we didn’t know if he was going to make it. His brother went to his place to pack his stuff up and he found this five-page letter Ted had written to me saying he was sorry for everything that happened between us. He ended up pulling through but he is kind of slow in the head now. I go to visit him but that’s been hard. He started thinking we were still together and he would get mad if I didn’t visit him everyday. That felt really bad because I didn’t want to feel like I was going down that road again. I didn’t want him thinking we were still together. I got right in his face and said – Ted, we are not together. Don’t you remember that we broke up two months ago, before this even happened to you? Then I asked him – Do you remember writing this letter to me? I have it right here in my bag. Then I read the whole letter to him. It was awful because then he said, “Ya, I remember now, but I was hoping you wouldn’t get that letter unless I was really gone, you know?” I was so angry, I said – Don’t ever write me a letter like that, don’t ever do that. What if something happened to you and I got a letter like that, can you imagine how I would feel? I told him to never, never do something like that again.

I’ve had to make some hard choices about visiting Ted. Sometimes he gets really angry when I’m visiting him and I start getting that feeling in me again that says I can’t live like this. I’m going down the wrong road again. The last time I just left and I didn’t go back for two weeks and he didn’t say anything about that at all. He just acted like nothing had happened. I just let him do all of the talking and I never brought up how angry he was the last time I visited. He talked about his family and stuff and I was kind of relieved because he wasn’t questioning me or anything. Ted was always really bad that way, with questioning all the time.
I was in the Bridges program when all the stuff with Ted was happening. I just knew I had to do something for me, again. I had to keep telling myself — I’m doing this for me now and nobody else. I did feel down after the break-up but I thought — I’m not going through all this again. I’m going to start doing something again for myself and getting out there and on with my life. I had to keep reminding myself that there was no one to tell me what to do and things like that. So, I started moving on with my life again. I finished Bridges and from there I got into the ________ program. I got into doing volunteer work with seniors. I like working with seniors. They appreciate what you do for them. They are just there and you listen and they listen to you. I feel they need someone.

Looking back at things and things and how you asked me if I had a story about abuse and work, I remember thinking how scary it was to think about having to go out and look after myself and make money after Barry and I broke up. It took me awhile to get used to the idea that I would have to look after myself. I remember I had such a hard time dealing with the city when I first came here. I wasn’t used to it, I had lived in small places all my life. Meeting people was hard. I never had to think about meeting people, I just knew everyone at home. Like now, I am in the ________ program. It is the first time in my life that I am in a program with all First Nations people. It’s really different. Back with Barry we knew people as a couple, that’s how I met people. When we split up I didn’t want to know those people anymore — I totally lost all the friends that we had and ended up having to make my own friends and meet people. I used to be just around people I knew all the time. And you don’t see things down here like you see at home all the time, dances and things.
I hadn’t spoken to Barry for about two years and then about a month ago he phoned me. He was asking about Lionel. Anyway, I wasn’t used to talking to Barry – it takes a long time for me to forgive, you know. At Bridges they said you have to forgive before you can move on. I don’t like that idea. One of my hardest things to do is to forgive. Especially when people have hurt me or my family. I’m really bad for that. I think I’m a good person but when somebody hurts my family, I don’t want to forgive that person. So, Barry sort of came back into my life and all of a sudden one of my nieces is phoning me and saying, “Barry phoned me and said you guys were back together again”. I told them it wasn’t true, I may be talking to him and I’m only trying for Lionel’s sake and Lionel isn’t even here and I keep thinking I have to forgive Barry. Now that he has called me I think I better do this for Lionel.

You know, another thing I don’t like is when people say you have to do things for yourself and not for someone else. I just keep thinking about my son. I don’t want Lionel hating me if something happens to his Dad. Barry still has his drinking and drug problems – so that is hard too.

I think about how I’ve stopped using pot and I didn’t think I could ever do that. This year my life has been so hard at times and I have thought – With everything I’m going through, all these problems, maybe a joint would help me to relax. Then I say to myself – No, God, no. I can’t do it. It would be like everything I put into quitting would be like for nothing. Everything that I’ve gone through – I just don’t want to go through all of that again. So, I don’t do it. But some days I just wish I could have something. I feel like anything will do – just to make this feeling or whatever it is go away for awhile. I
guess I remember my Mom when those times get bad and how she wanted us to go on the right road and that helps me go in the right direction.

I’m doing so many things I never thought I would do. I’m in school now, in the _______ program. This program is like help after you finish Bridges. It helps you get out there and explore work and everything. I found out about it when I was in Bridges. They had people come and talk about things and there was a lady from this program who came. I thought I’m going to apply for that program. They asked if I wanted to go at _________ or in the First Nations program. I said whatever comes first. I was happy when I got into the First Nations program but I haven’t been in school in twenty years so that is a challenge. The work is easy stuff but I still find it hard at times. I had to talk to the instructor yesterday and tell her how I feel and everything. She understood – we do the _________ program in the morning and then computers and English in the afternoon and it is just thinking, thinking all day. I’m really interested in the First Nations Residential Support worker program so I’m doing the English and that is why I had to do the 40 hours volunteer in the senior home too. I just keep trying to stay busy. I’m actually starting to feel good about myself again. I’m doing things for myself and no one else. I’m really challenging myself too.

I think too as I look at all of this that I am able to say I’m happy now. When I was going downhill with Ted and my friends would ask me how I was I couldn’t tell them. I said I was happy but I wasn’t. I didn’t think I would ever do some of the things I have done in my life, like Bridges, because you had to talk about things in your life and things that had happened. It wasn’t easy for me to talk in front of people about Barry or Ted. I didn’t like telling people who didn’t know them these things they did to me. I didn’t want
anybody to know who they were. Even now it is hard to talk about things that happened in the past. Sometimes I’ll mention something to someone. Lots of people will say things like, “You don’t deserve to be treated like that. Why did you live like that? Why did you let those people do those things to you?” All their questions are about why you would let yourself get into a situation like that – and it sort of turns into my fault. It is a shame but it wasn’t my shame. So, I don’t always like talking about things. So, ya, that is my story. What a road I’ve been on. It’s hard to believe that’s my life.
Betty's Story

So, you would like me to draw a time line of my work and abuse history.

Hmmm. OK. Well, when I was born the line was pretty flat. I worked on a farm when I was a kid and that was a great experience. I seemed to just sort of plod along at school though. I never really felt like I fit in. We were quite a religious family so I wasn’t allowed to go to parties and stuff like that. That made me different from the other kids. It was hard – I was bullied a lot. The worse time I got bullied was when some kids took the grate off the sewer entrance and kind of threw me in there and put the grate back on. I started crying and screaming for help and eventually someone came by, an adult, and they lifted the grate and helped me get out.

I ran away from home when I was fourteen – my life at home wasn’t very good for a whole bunch of reasons, I guess. There was abuse - my Dad – I don’t want to go into details but it was bad. Anyway - I became a homeless kid. Street life really opened my eyes. There was this group of people – street people- they called themselves the Slobbies. That was because they didn’t dress well or wash too often with facilities not being really available and stuff. They weren’t into violence – they were more about being drunken idiots. But that was when I started drinking heavily because I discovered that even though it tasted awful it made everything else OK. So, that was a really hard time for me.

When I was about eighteen I found work on a farm again and I worked there until I was about twenty-one. I really liked it – just the lifestyle, the open air and even though it was hard work it seemed really good for the soul. I was working with animals and growing things. I really enjoyed it.
After that, I got a job at a fast-food restaurant. It was OK but the boss used to
pinch my butt and stuff and I found that really disturbing. But I put up with it. Eventually
I quit. I had met my crazy husband by then and he seemed so charming. Things were OK
at first. He made me quit working any job that I found after we were together. He would
always say, “You don’t need to work, I’ll support you.”

All my friends who met him, they would say, “I don’t want to see you when
you’re with him.” They could see he was a bit of an S.O.B. But I just thought for some
reason that they were exaggerating. That it wasn’t really as bad as they thought. Well,
hindsight is 20-20 as the saying goes. My friends started drifting away and he would say,
“Oh, if you really love me, you don’t need your friends. I can be everything for you.” I
fell for that and gradually I got more and more isolated and then he’d have his friends
over and then his ex-girlfriend started coming over. They started having an affair. Even
then he wouldn’t let me go.

I was getting more and more depressed and feeling hopeless because I couldn’t
get out. I tried running away and he shot me – well – he shot at me several times and he
tried running over me with a truck once. I was saying I wanted to leave and he’d always
say to me, “Death before divorce, babe. There’s no one in my family that has ever been
divorced and I’m not going to be the first one.” Even though it was obvious things
weren’t working out between us. If I dropped a spoon or something that was enough to
set him off, he was really intense.

I got pregnant and that is when he got really weird. He started becoming more and
more physically abusive and then I started to miscarry after he beat me up. Instead of
taking me to the hospital he locked me in the back room. I ended up miscarrying by
myself in that back room and it was so horrible. He came back a few days later and he said, "God didn’t want you to be a mother, babe. You’d have been a bad mother anyway, God knew it." It was his fault it happened . . . . I know that now – it had nothing to do with God . . . and I could never have kids after that.

So, it just kept getting worse and worse and finally when I tried to leave he ended up stabbing me and leaving me in a ditch to die. Someone found me and that’s how I got away. They put me in a safe house and eventually I moved to ______. That was how I got away, finally, in the end. The day I left I can remember I was thinking, “I’ve got to get out of here even if I die trying because no matter what I do it will never be right.” But it was all really scary.

After I got away I got a job as a nanny and that was pretty good. Just being with the kids was easier for me than other jobs I’d done. Less stress, I guess. It was more fun, I got to play with the kids all day and feed them and change them and stuff like that. I guess I was really on a bit of a plateau at that point – holding my own but only just. I wasn’t really dealing with anything – just surviving. Mentally – well – it wasn’t good. I started having a real drinking problem at that time. I was just physically so weak and I couldn’t deal with everything that had happened to me. I ended up having to quit because of the pain in my arms and legs. I never could really get over some of the abuse, you know, physically.

After I left the nanny job I went into a depression. That was the start of quite a pattern of depression. I met a guy and had a relationship for a couple of years. He started having a drinking problem too, one night he got aggressive with me, and that freaked me out. I was in the hospital because I had another infection in my uterus – well – I still had a
uterus at that time. They told him I couldn’t have children and he said, “Well, if you can’t have kids, I’m not staying with you.” It was just another man being mean to me and I will always remember him for those words.

So, more depression. I got a job at a truck factory. That was the last year I worked in a paying job. I was pretty depressed and suicidal at the time. It was hard going. I was the only woman on my line so I used to get teased by the men a lot. I’d go on a break and they’d mess around with my power tools so I had to re-torque them when I came back and then my time was slower on the line. We had to keep our time up so there was a lot of pressure. It was just the feeling of more men picking on me. That didn’t feel good. I needed the job though, to pay the rent. I was still quite afraid of men at that point and I think now that it was pretty ironic to get a job like that. Maybe I was trying to be tough, to prove to myself I could be around men. It’s funny because I’m more like a marshmallow now for sure. Trying to be tough didn’t work in the end. I just started getting more and more stressed. There were a couple of guys that accepted me but I couldn’t trust any of them. And I still had the physical problems from the abuse in my back and leg. It got really hard to stand up for a whole shift and do that kind of work. I would be on Demerol for the pain and still working. I was also drinking pretty heavily then. I could sit through the afternoon and drink a forty oucer by myself which is pretty bad.

Yes, so, I had to leave that job and I ended up on the street again. I came to _ and I had to be here three months before I could apply for social assistance. I was homeless and I didn’t want to go to the shelters for help because the guys at the shelters were really intimidating. Again it was men. They all wanted a “favour”. They
would say, “I'll give you this for a favour.” and I sure knew what that meant. So I just went around collecting bottles and cans from the garbage and putting them in at the stores and I'd sleep in the park sometimes. I had a cardboard box for awhile. It was pretty scary.

I had applied for social assistance and was waiting and I ran into a friend I had known from years ago. She said, “Well, come and live with me. You'll probably be sleeping on the floor but you know it's better than the street.” She really helped me out. She is a survivor of abuse too so she understood how I felt about things. She knew a friend who had a spare bed and she contacted her and that woman was so kind. She said to me, “You stay with me until your welfare comes in and you can get your own place.” She was kind and considerate and understanding. She helped me out so much and it was amazing to me that someone would actually do that for me. I had such low self-esteem – like I was the scum of the streets. I didn’t see any future at that point at all. It was just day-to-day survival. Why would anybody let me, a stranger, live in their home? I started thinking – maybe I’m not as bad as I imagine I am. It totally amazed me. This woman, she understood the issues of poverty and homelessness. She gave me a hand up, not a hand out.

So, I was on social assistance and I got my own apartment but I was having some mental problems. Some bad ones actually. I was having flashbacks and all kinds of things. Certain times of the year it seemed to be worse than others. Well, then there was the stalking. My ex-husband stalked me for seven years. He would leave knives in the door so I would know he had found me. The last time, when I was in the apartment and he found me again, I called the police. That incident totally blew my confidence in them. The police officer said I put the knife in the door. They didn’t find any fingerprints so
they said it had to be me. I had a history of mental illness and they just assumed I was having an “episode”. It was really disheartening. I felt totally betrayed and stigmatized by my mental illness.

The stalking was really hard. I had to move all the time. Originally when I left him and I went to ______, he found me. Then I went to ______ and he found me there too. He was part of a bike gang and he had a lot of associates and they were looking for me too. He put it out that I had told the police about his drug dealing and I had never said anything to the police. It went on for seven years and then it just stopped. Maybe about five years ago. I don’t know what happened to him but it just stopped.

It was a bit better after that in some ways. I didn’t have to freak out every time I heard a bike go by in the distance. It was sort of like – Oh no, the __________ gang is in town. What if one of them sees me and recognizes me? What am I going to do then? I don’t know if I’ll ever get totally over that fear. I still jump when I hear a bike, but I didn’t have to worry all the time.

Anyway, I was in the apartment and the depression and everything was really bad. I felt scared all the time and unwanted and it didn’t seem I could get anywhere so I attempted suicide. I ended up in a psychiatric hospital and it was then that I started talking about some of the things that had happened to me. They said to me that it was partly my abuse that related to what I was going through. I hadn’t ever really dealt with it. I had just shoved it under the rug and tried to go on but it seemed to creep out every now and then. It was when I was there that they filled out the forms so I could go on disability. That was helpful for me because when I got out I could get a better place.
So, I thought things were going to be OK then. I got into a relationship with a guy but he was abusive to me so I got out of that. I felt like I couldn’t be in a relationship with any man because I couldn’t seem to pick one who wouldn’t be abusive to me. I started having a lot of nightmares. All the childhood abuse issues started to come back and I was remembering a lot of things. So, I had a major breakdown. I ended up in a group home where I had to learn to do everything again – I didn’t even know how to eat. I was totally collapsed.

From there I moved to a bridging home and now I have my own apartment again but I am still a satellite client. They give me support and it is nice to know that there is someone I can call. The friends I have now understand that I have a mental illness and some physical problems as well and that I don’t always have good days. They don’t expect so much from me, they understand. I’ve also got the medical help I need now. That has made a difference. I really didn’t believe, before, that I had a mental illness. I just thought I was being weird or something.

I still have lots of glitches and I haven’t had an official job for ten years now. I’m not up where I’d like to be yet, for sure, but when I think about the streets and the mental illness, the group home and getting my own apartment again – I have come a long way. I haven’t had a relationship for years – I guess my perception of men was pretty messed up. I kind of understand now that there are some nice men out there, not all of them are mean. I have one male friend now – he’s gay - which maybe takes some of the pressure off. I know he is genuine. We just hang out together and kid each other sometimes. He’s really helped me to understand men again.
I have done some volunteer work at a couple of places. I was an advocate at __________, helping people fill out their _______ forms but I ended up getting a bit too stressed from that. I had to juggle a lot of people and that was too hard.

Bridges was a big turning point for me. It helped me a lot and is really an amazing program. I can remember talking to them at my interview about what had happened to me in the past and one of them said, “Well, that really makes me angry – that you went through all of that. Especially all the abuse.” I thought, “Why does that make them angry?” I didn’t really get it because I hadn’t experienced the anger in myself at that point. It really seemed foreign to me – what they were saying. I just thought to myself that this was sort of strange. They asked me if I had ever pressed charges against my Dad and I just said, “No.” I didn’t get it. They were really caring at the same time as being outraged and that helped me and they gave me a different way to look at things. You know, I didn’t think that it should be any different, really. As a child, I just figured everyone was going through that kind of abuse. Then with my marriage, I just figured that’s what happens in marriage. I thought it was me not being a good wife. I never thought there was anything wrong with him. At Bridges I began, for the first time, to really start thinking that it wasn’t me.

They signed me up for some counselling with another woman and we started working on some of my childhood issues. I realized I was still afraid of my Dad even though he is _______ years-old now. I see him every now and then. Last year he moved to _________, he said to be closer to me. I felt manipulated by that. He’d like me to look after him – move in with him but I’m not going to do that. I need my own place. It was only after counselling that I was able to see him as manipulating – before I just
thought he was a caring Dad. It’s as if I have different eyes on him now, I can see things differently. He is still sarcastic and verbally abusive and I have this funny feeling like I have an obligation to him somehow even though I don’t want to be around him. I guess its sort of screwed-up thinking. I guess a part of me still wants the ideal family, the whole dream.

Bridges got me thinking of what I want to do with my life now. I had thought I would like to be a counsellor. I’ve also been to ________ (employment assistance program) and they were helping me decide and explore what I might do. They said the climate in Victoria is swamped with counsellors. I talked to my doctors about it and he thought it would be too much for me because I would take on everyone else’s problems. I felt kind of hurt by that. Maybe they’re right, I don’t know. I might check out some type of peer counselling. I still think that when my medication is stable and I’ve done my work that I would be able to handle it. I sure felt disappointed when they said, “No, you shouldn’t do it.” I started thinking, “What am I doing taking their word like they are God or something.”

The doctors tell me I have this or that. I don’t know if all the labels are helpful. They just seem like something they slap on you. To me, it just means that this person wasn’t loved or supported the way she needed to be and that is why she is like this today. My case worker at mental health told me that if I’d had a supportive family then what I suffer from today wouldn’t be so bad. I sometimes wonder what I would be like if all that stuff hadn’t happened. I think I would have been happier. I don’t know if I’d have the depression or not. I think I would have got further in my life. I originally wanted to be a veterinary assistant. I’ve always wanted to work with animals. But to do that kind of job
you have to be able to lift 100 lbs. and there is only one accredited school out West and it only takes 24 people a year. You have to be really physically fit to do a job like that and I’m not. I’ll never be again.

I’m carrying on with career exploration and finding out about life skills and things. That has been a good process. I’ve gone through a bunch of seminars and ________ (employment program) has been really supportive. I get to go back for a check-in for eighteen months. They keep up with me and that is really good. And I pop into Bridges every now and then just to say Hi. It’s a really good place that way.

Right now I’m trying to plan a dinner for women and children. It will be just for low-income women to meet together. My dream would be an ongoing soup kitchen for women and children – just women and children. Somewhere that is safe, where they can relax and enjoy a meal. That is a vision I have now. I know what the intimidation can be like at the soup kitchens, I’ve been there. All those guys just push past you and they kind of mow you over like you’re nothing and they talk rudely. I really don’t appreciate that and I don’t think women or children, especially children, should be exposed to that. I really got the idea from my experience of the soup kitchens and knowing about the help that is out there. ________ is a great guy and I love what he is doing, but there’s still all kinds of intimidation going on in the soup kitchen. It’s not their fault, the guys; they are the way they are. I just think it would be nice, especially for children, to have a safe place to go. I think mothers want to take their children to a safe place where they can have a good meal and relax and maybe just play a little bit. I would like it to be ongoing, maybe once a month. I’d really like to do it once a week but I don’t have any funders or anything at this point to help me so I’m really cracking my brain on that one. I’ve mustered a few
people together and we are going to sit down and brainstorm and see what we can come up with. I think I could write a letter to ________ and see if they would make a donation.

I am hoping that in a year or so I will be about to find another apartment, maybe one where I can have a cat. That means I have to be ready to give up the satellite support from the group home and that is a big barrier but I hope in a year I can do that. I had a cat that I smuggled into my apartment but a neighbour told my landlord so I got an eviction notice – Either get rid of the cat or you’re done. It’s been three years since I lost my cat and I still miss her. I still think about her a lot. She use to snuggle with me in bed at night and she was so funny – she use to groom my hair.

When I first heard you say that this research was about abuse and work I started thinking about my mental illness and how it seemed to stem from all the abuse. I thought – well – I haven’t had a real job in twelve years that I got paid for and that is the result of what happened to me and maybe there are other women out there that have experienced that as well. My self-confidence was just so low and I was so devastated emotionally and mentally when I finally got away from my husband. I still carry a lot of that with me today. In trying for jobs it has really affected me. I don’t have the confidence to apply for a job and when I did work at a job I couldn’t handle the stress, physically or mentally, and I would need to go on sick leave.

I hope that my story can give other women some hope that they can still have some quality of life even after being really devastated. There has just been this part of me that has always been really strong, that knows I need to survive no matter what. Maybe hearing that will help other women. You can still have your own dreams and follow them
no matter what you’ve been through. I also want to say that if you think you’ve been abused you probably have so listen to your instincts. They are very important.
Melanie’s Story

For so long it was as if the very ground of my life, the ground I stood on was the abuse – childhood sexual abuse with my grandfather, and maybe my father, I don’t know. I haven’t gone into that part. But this ground of my life was where I came from and there were so many implications – eating disorder, fear, relationship issues and problems. A strong attraction to unsafe work experiences that have served to reinforce what I believed about myself – feeling like my purpose is to be used by others – doing work that no one else wants to do, work that made me feel like the garbage I believed I was. Work that made me feel like I wasn’t participating in my own life – just standing back as it occurred and just watching it – I have been a voyeur looking in at other people’s lives and unable to access my own.

When I heard you say this interview was about abuse and work and did I think I had a story about how those two things might have come together in my life, I immediately felt this huge relief. I had a hope if I came here and talked about this I might get some clarity with this part of my life. I thought about all of the past work I’ve done trying to figure out what my life has been and feeling a lot of confusion. When I think about the question of abuse and work, in some ways I have started to perceive that my healing from the abuse is a big part of my work.

I’d like to draw the timeline as I talk, if that’s OK? The first job I ever had was delivering the _______ paper – I think I was maybe nine years old then. I remember I started this job with a lot of exuberance. It was my first job and I felt sort of grown-up or something. I also remember this was a time when other stuff was going on - the sexual abuse. Maybe going out to deliver the papers was some sort of an outlet for me – having
this little piece of something to do that was all my own. At the same time, I know it put me in an unsafe environment at times – out delivering papers all by myself.

In Grade nine, I got a job working at a place that sold baking and coffee and tea by the pound. It was a place that just felt so safe to me. It was all women working there and the smell of the baking all the time – it had a very homey atmosphere to it. I felt like I was friends with people there. But, I also remember that I started acting out really badly there. I’d get stoned at work a lot or steal money or give away stuff for free. I feel really guilty sitting here telling you I felt so safe there and it was this great homey place where I felt people were my friends and I was stealing from them. Bagging pounds of coffee and not ringing it in and then just pocketing the money. I think now that some of that acting out came from feeling as if I just didn’t have any authority or choice over anything in my life. I was at that job all through high school – three or four years. Now, I’m putting a very heavy red line here because I had a real feeling of anger beginning around this time. I remember I called in sick to work a lot and I didn’t want to go to work. I seemed to feel very angry that I would have to go to work at all.

Toward the end of high school I worked for awhile at ________ (retail chain) and then at ________ (fast food restaurant) and I hated both of those jobs. Now when I look back on this time in my life I wish so much that I could have had some encouragement and support for trying out other types of work that might have been a better fit for me. If someone could have reflected to me a belief in my value to do something different – like a camp counsellor or something along that line. So, the red anger line is pretty thick through this part of my life.
Just at the end of high school and through parts of university I worked at a Postal Outlet. I felt that this work was important in some way and it certainly had more mental demands than other jobs I had done to this point. There were a couple of owners while I was there. The second owners were ________ (nationality) men and I was really uncomfortable with them. I didn’t like the way they treated me and talked to me. It seems just like the paper route to me – staying in a situation where I didn’t feel safe. When I reflect back on this I think any woman would have felt uncomfortable with the way those two men acted but I think maybe someone else who hadn’t experienced sexual abuse in their life might have got out of the situation a lot sooner. I wasn’t able to be proactive in my life at that time.

At this time, I was also working part-time in my parent’s business. I would do paperwork, filing, and organizing things. I had a lot of control in this work. They didn’t know when I would be working or what I was doing. I liked that quite a bit. It was a home-based business so that was comfortable. I could do what I wanted and I remember liking that.

At this point I went away for the summer to ________ (summer lodge) and worked there doing room cleaning. I’ve made the line here red, because the anger is still there, but it is also green because there was this excitement about leaving home and going someplace new and it was a beautiful place. As I look at this I think that one of the major ways my abuse has affected work is in how I feel about myself and then how that translates to the type of work I have chosen and how that reinforced those feelings. The cleaning was isolated work, just going from cabin to cabin, all by myself. It was very physically demanding as well. Carrying the heavy vacuum and stuff from cabin to cabin
and the chemicals and cleaning products were not the healthiest thing to be around. I also think of what it meant for me – working around people’s dirty stuff – almost kind of being an observer. I think that is something that explains a lot of my life and it comes from the sexual abuse and never feeling like I could really participate in my own life. Going in to clean people’s rooms was like that for me. Standing on the outside of my life and looking in.

After the summer I went home and for this part of my drawing the line is quite calm and yellow. The anger seems to have abated or gone underground in some way. I was doing volunteer work in school classrooms and working with a probation and parole program. I remember feeling very drawn to the criminal stuff at that time. I think I felt that I understood how those people felt. I was going to go into Social Work at that time and this work was preparation for that. I almost wonder now, if I had gone that way before I began the healing journey, I wonder how the sexual abuse would have surfaced. I wonder if that is why I didn’t choose it then. When I look back I remember that my grades in the first Social Work course were the highest marks I was getting. I took the second course too but when it came to applying for the program – I just didn’t go through with it. I’ve drawn this in as a blue spiral just off the path because it is a path I could have taken – I wanted to take – but something held me back.

It was summer again and this time I went to ___________ (resort/lodge) and worked doing dishwashing and with staff accommodations. The dishwashing kept me around people a lot more than the last time I was working at a lodge and it wasn’t as depressing as the isolation of cabin cleaning. When I moved into doing the staff accommodations that really seemed to attract some frightening experiences to me and I
think this relates again to the after effects of trauma and my sexual abuse. There was a guy who worked at staff accommodations with me. Our job was to check staff members into their rooms and do security checks. Funny how I just found myself in that role again – looking in on other people’s lives. It reminds me of when I was in elementary school and I did bus patrol – patrolling and checking up on people. So, we went around and did security checks in people’s rooms. He found a spare room in one of the buildings that had a phone, tapped into a line and was making a bunch of calls to sex lines. The hotel found out and the police and the security people came to talk to us. I was friends with him but I didn’t know about any of that stuff. All of a sudden, I was in this position of feeling as if I was betraying him by talking to the police because we had been friends. It just all felt so creepy to me. When I look back, I don’t know if he was putting out some sort of signals that I just couldn’t see or what. Maybe he did, I just don’t know.

It was at this point in my life that I began to feel like things were starting to happen to me. Maybe it was because I had always lived at home before and now I wasn’t and I was meeting men and it all felt so unsafe to me. I was out in the world but I didn’t feel safe. Looking back, I see many situations that just weren’t safe – a lodge out in the middle of nowhere and working with all these different people. But I wasn’t aware of it not being safe at the time it was all happening. Once again, I see that I was choosing things that weren’t necessarily safe.

I came back home and I had some big plans then. I was going to fix my Dad’s drinking and make enough money to go travelling. I was working at _________ (a steak house) and that just felt sick all the time. I was a hostess and a waitress there. My whole life I had shied away from looking “female” – like dressing in a certain way, like
anything that would draw attention to me being female. Well, being a hostess, that was expected. I felt so much discomfort. My issues with eating disorders, which I really hadn't acknowledged or even begun to deal with at that time, was huge. When I was waitressing, I'd have to deal with food and talking to people, two things that were so hard for me. So, I was dealing with all of that and with my Dad's drinking.

I lived at home for awhile but then I moved out with my boyfriend, Corey. We had met and began dating in Grade nine. He is this thin pen line that runs all through here. We broke up for awhile when I went to _________ (first lodge job) but he ended up coming up there and we drove home together. I think we broke up for awhile when I was at ___________ (the second lodge job). When I came back after that summer we moved in together and then we got married. We had plans to go to _________ travelling and to teach English. I've drawn that like a green spiral just off my path because it never happened. We had our plane tickets and everything but we ended up not going. Corey's aunt took us to a Native American weekend and there were four elders there. We both heard one of the elders talking about all the earth changes and everything that was going on and we came back together later and talked and just decided that we needed to stay here. It was very powerful for us that we had each heard her speak, separately, but had each come to the same conclusions.

We had already packed up our apartment and gotten rid of everything so we decided that we would move out to _________ but first we would take some time and travel through the States for awhile. We travelling for a couple of months and it was a very meaningful time for us. I would say that those months really changed my path. We were travelling and searching. We were searching for spirituality, I guess. But we were
looking outside of ourselves. We went to _________ (American Indian site) to find out about the Native American peace pipes and talked to people there. It was on this trip that the sexual abuse resurfaced for me. I’ve read that getting married and having children are two very common times when memories of sexual abuse can resurface. I think that is one of the reasons it came up then. I think I felt a safety with Corey – he had been in my life for so long and we had made this major break from our families and I felt like putting that distance between myself and my family just gave me permission in some way to start remembering.

I have so many regrets from that time about how I handled the sexual abuse stuff with Corey. I really made him the enemy in all of it. I wish I could have allowed him to be my ally. When I look back, I think he could have done that. Maybe not perfectly – he would have had things to learn but I think he could have done it. But because of the sexual abuse I just couldn’t see that.

So, we arrived in _________ and started looking around to try to figure out where we could live. We took a trip up to _________ and it just happened that we were in the little store there when someone came in asking if anyone knew of someone interested in subletting a place for three months. It seemed like a perfect plan for us since we weren’t quite sure what we wanted to do yet. So we took the place. It was a very different way of life there and I don’t think we were prepared for that. I really had made Corey my enemy at that point and I was isolating myself from him. The cabin had these really thin walls and you had to have the fire going all the time to keep it warm. There’s no grocery store there – just a little corner store. It was all just really hard and it seemed like the first time I was really confronting what it was like to live together with Corey. We had lived
together for awhile before and travelled together but this felt very different. I didn’t want to share a bed with him at all so there was this little loft and I made my bed up there and pretty much isolated myself up there a lot of the time. It was all so confusing. We couldn’t really talk to our parents on the phone or anything — just the circumstances and the place and never having had to live like that before. Everything was really hard for us.

I ended up working at the little café for awhile. I also did some night cleaning. In the café that was like cooking, serving, and it’s just a little place so I was so visible. Everybody interacted with everybody else and I was doing this cooking and having to deal with food and people and all of that was hard for me. The night cleaning was a bit more comfortable — at least I could handle that. I didn’t work there for very long.

From there I just broke free from Corey and moved into this little trailer on this woman’s land. She let me live there for free. I remember that I just did a lot of sleeping and walking and journaling. Corey would come around sporadically — that was what I was telling him I wanted, it wasn’t really, but I really didn’t know what I wanted. This time in my life really forced some issues into the open for me. It was the first time in my life that I really started to take responsibility for myself — feeding myself and taking care of myself and all that sort of stuff. Until then my mom or Corey had always been there for me. Well, the woman whose land I lived on — she was there and she was very supportive of me. She really just took the time to be with me — we would just sit on her bed and talk. The fact that someone was just spending time with me in that way and not wanting anything from me in return — I’d never had that experience of being cared for in that way before — without some sort of price tag. I remember I felt really, really safe there. It was a place to retreat to and I stayed there almost four years. I’ve drawn that part
of my path as a purple line because that was the beginning of my healing work. It was
time of going inward for me, to listen to my own rhythms and not my parents or society
of Corey – just to listen to myself.

After that, I moved to __________ and I tried to work at a restaurant there for
awhile. That really didn’t work out for me. I seemed to always be reacting out of this
running and hiding kind of place – I just didn’t seem to have control over that urge to run
away and hide then. But through working there I got connected with this woman who was
putting together a senior’s magazine and I kind of helped with that project for a little bit
of time. I felt like I was in a healthy situation with that work – I don’t think I contributed
a whole bunch and I wasn’t clear on what I was suppose to be doing all the time but it
was an opportunity to come out of isolation and stop running and hiding.

From this time, I was on disability and working full-time, I guess, on healing
work. I have drawn this section of the path like a rainbow with many colours. This time
has been a blessing in so many ways for me. I started counselling at __________
(women’s center) and doing group work there. Then I did the ________ program – that
was great for me at the time. It was a six week program – four days a week. I did that
program twice. Through there someone connected me to someone doing an energy
balancing course given by a woman who must have been in her 70’s. She was doing the
work out of one room in the back of her house – that was just one day a week. Back
before Corey and I moved to the cabin on __________ I had done some New
Decisions therapy and I decided to take up reiki. That drastically changed a lot for me.
With all the sexual abuse stuff coming to the surface and maybe the reiki training
intensified that – I’m not sure. Anyway – I got back into reiki again at this time too. Then
I began the Bridges program. I was also able to do a bit of work in this time at a place that made organic soap. Working with the essential oils was very healing work for me. That job didn’t last though.

Corey has still been here through all of this but another relationship also came into my life at this time and that has helped me a lot. I am doing volunteer work at a hospice right now. I work on the unit just helping and sometimes I do reiki for people. This work really seems to suit me. I think with more confidence and more of an ability to handle triggering situations it would fully suit me. Sometimes my perception of experience is not necessarily rooted in reality and this is a problem. It’s the lens I look through sometimes because of my sexual abuse history. The sexual abuse happened with my grandfather, so now senior or older men, being alone with them sometimes I just get this feeling. It is just like I am a little kid again. I feel bad about that because I know that is not today’s reality speaking and it’s not appropriate. But I am feeling more confident that I can choose to be in places that don’t trigger me. The hospice feels like a safe place to me and it makes sense for me to be there so I can work at staying in the areas I feel comfortable and not going where I don’t.

As I look over the whole timeline, at my path, it seems so broken in some spots and then it seems to even out. When I was going through the Bridges program and looking at a lot of stuff I was thinking about going into Naturopathy, or counselling. I was thinking about a lot of different things. I think that this healing from the sexual abuse journey has helped me to be aware of who I am. It has been a hard journey to get to a place where I feel like I am enough and I am good. But really believing that, not just in the head, but in the heart and the gut, and being able to act from that place of belief is
such a long journey with so many, many layers. I still find myself thinking – I can’t do what I want to do.

You know, I said earlier that I chose work that reinforced all the negative things I thought about myself. Work where I would feel used, where I would feel like that was all I was good for and I just thought that was what work was. If I hadn’t had that idea maybe I could have chosen a different path with work. All along the obstacles felt too big, they always felt too big. Maybe I could have done it back then, but it would have been so hard and I don’t know if I could have been successful.

Then all the issues around money. If I hadn’t been dealing with all the sexual abuse stuff I could have just kept working somewhere and maybe done some training at one of these other paths at the same time. I mean maybe then some of these other things would have been possible.

I realize that I have had such a limit on the range of my work choices - work that I felt I could do – for so long all I thought I could do was be a waitress or clean – I didn’t feel good enough about myself to be able to try anything else. Now – I think of other options but I am sort of stuck at times with that thought – I can’t do what I want to do. I think about going over to _______ to go to school and just being alone there. I imagine how I would have to go to classes at night or in the dark all by myself and all that kind of stuff. I would have to deal with the food issues and I start thinking I’m still not strong enough or healthy enough to do that. At the same time I know there is this little seed, this element of me that knows if I could ever just get walking down that path it would work for me. I think I would be all right. It is just these leftover beliefs about myself that are
rooted in my experiences of sexual abuse as a child. Those voices have just seemed so big and loud at times in my life they have won out.

I have drawn the work of Naturopath as a red spiral off the edge of my journey, just right here. These lines that are branching off from my path in green and orange represent what might be in the future. I am thinking of the masters program in counselling and acupuncture and just keeping on with what I’m doing right now with reiki. I am open to other ideas and opportunities that may come along. I have heard that they may stop licensing acupuncturists – too many of them out there right now.

Everything that I know about myself now – from all the work at Bridges and even from different ways of knowing, like astrology, looking at different aspects of my chart – it all fits with these future paths. I have also gotten a lot of validation from people in my family and friends around these types of ideas. I know I have been developing the part of myself that can be with others in the intense situations that these types of career choices indicate – I know if I had got in to Social Work back at this point on my path I wouldn’t have had this part of myself developed. I know I still probably have a long way to go.

The work that I have done in my life has, for the most part, had such a negative meaning for me and I’m just realizing that I’m the only one who can make this change and I’m the only one who can determine what sort of work will give me the meaning that I need. Right now I know my biggest challenges are around gaining the confidence I need. As I’ve gone along my path I’ve increased my sense of being and feeling safe and that has allowed me to do so much more but I also know I still have a big piece of healing work left to do. I don’t know if that will be all that has to be done but I am prepared to work more at this. You see, I have been thinking about doing a lay counselling course – I
have heard this is a good way to get some training in counselling and I understand that through the process you also continue to do your own work. Then this fear thing keeps popping into my head. I might have to go there at night and how am I going to get there. I could borrow a vehicle from someone but then I feel dependent and I want the sense of doing this on my own. I could take a bus or a cab but I worry about it. So, that is an example of how I know I still have another piece of work to do. I know I am still sort of looking at my life through a lens of fear for my safety. That is shifting. I know I am also still dealing with issues around the eating disorder.

Having the sexual abuse surface when it did has connected me to a lot of stuff – it had to come up – I couldn’t have got to where I am now without having gone through the blackness and the searching and the healing. It was worthwhile, all of it.
Illustration 4: Melanie’s Timeline Drawing
Cinnamon’s Story

I’m going to start where it seemed everything started for me – with my mother. When I was a child, my sister and I would play games together. I was the oldest. If ever I won a game my sister would have a hissy fit and my mom would say, “You have to let her win, you’re older, she doesn’t understand.” I was only two years older than my sister. But, I’ve always tried to please my mom. I learned pretty early to stay on mom’s good side because I didn’t want to get the wooden spoon.

When I talk about my mom – well, I don’t have the best relationship with her now. Since going through Bridges I realize that a lot of what I went through – I married my mom. So a lot of what I went through with my husband goes back to my childhood with my mom. My dad was never around. He was always working. He did shift work. My mom had a lot of resentments about things.

It’s weird how things come around in a circle again and again for generations. My grandmother was old when she had my mom. Mom was older when she had me, and I’m older having my kids. My mom and my grandmother both really wanted kids – it wasn’t for lack of trying. My grandmother had a hard time and I know mom grew up with that. In the end my sister and I were both adopted. My parents never told us why – they just said they couldn’t have children and that they adopted us. We always knew. All the children I grew up with on my street were adopted and we all knew about it. All our cases had been done by the same lady and she had some extensive counselling experience in her own time. She told everyone, “Just tell them right from the start”. I have another girlfriend who was adopted and she didn’t find out until her parents died so she was in
her late twenties and it was pretty devastating for her. I’m glad this happened for me the way it did.

You know my husband, even to this day, he says he never did anything wrong. He says he never raised a hand to me and that is right – he never had to. My mom used to shout quite a bit at me when I was young, so I’ve never liked raised voices. I don’t raise my voice to my own kids. So, whenever his voice started to get into that pitch – I would immediately back down and just do whatever he wanted me to do.

I left home when I was seventeen. I quit school and didn’t do my grade 12. I had to go to night school to do that. I worked as a nanny during the day for the first couple of years. I had a place to live but I was still a bit under my mom’s thumb, even though I had left home. I was being a nanny and going to night school but I also had this other life. I was hanging out on the streets of ___________ at the same time. I went really punk rockish – I had had really long blonde hair and I cut it all off – much to the dismay of my mother – and I would wear lots of makeup and weird ripped up clothing. When I would go home to visit my mom and dad I would wear normal clothes. I would just have a shaved head, which they thought was the weirdest thing. I just needed a way out – a way to break free that was just for me and no one else in my family knew about it. Hanging out on the street was the way and it worked for awhile.

After the nanny job I started working at a ___________ and I worked there for five years. I worked in all the departments and got lots of retail experience. Then I started at the _____ store. I worked there for ten years. I started as a cashier and then just moved up to store management. I began to work longer and longer hours – at the end it was six days a week – ten hour days. When I think back I realize I took a lot of stuff on myself. I
didn’t know how to delegate, for sure. If you want something done right – do it yourself. That was my motto then. But I really got that from the owner of the store. That was his motto and that was what he always said and that was what he would do. That was the sort of example he set and that was what he expected from all his managers. I certainly wasn’t the first to have had problems.

The lady I took over for had a nervous breakdown and two other ladies at two other stores just up and quit out of the blue. After I spiraled down and had my breakdown he changed his mind about women managers and decided to put men in those positions instead. Of course that didn’t help because the men wouldn’t work that hard.

Before it all got overwhelming, I loved the job. I loved buying. I loved looking at new books. I loved the challenge of trying to figure out for each area what was going to sell and what wasn’t. It was really exciting. A bookstore in ________ might sell a book on, let’s say, Economics. A store in ________ would sell more books on gardens. It was really interesting. Also – the area of religion. ________ is more of an open minded area but in ________ only the most basic of things on religion would sell. Anything you put out there that wasn’t straight Christianity would not sell. Books on sexuality – the manager out there would find those hidden behind other books. It was great fun at times and for the most part the pressure was OK. I was good in retail; one of those friendly cashiers that can drive people crazy. I would talk to every customer and listen to their stories, just trying to get them to open up a bit. That has all changed for me know – since the abuse with Calvin.

Anyway, after I had my breakdown and everything fell apart at the store – that is when I met my future husband - Calvin. I think getting together with him was probably a
way out. I wouldn’t have to take care of myself anymore – somebody else was going to
do it. I wonder somehow now if the owner of the _____store set me up in someway for
what happened with Calvin. Or maybe it was the people pleasing thing, again. He was the
owner and I was always trying to please him and trying to make sure his store ran
smoothly. When I met Calvin I just sort of transferred that over to him and I just went on
doing the same thing. And of course that goes back to my mom again too. That is where
it all started.

I remember that my parents were proud of me when I was the manager of the
_______store – just that I could do something like that. But I also know they were
unhappy that I wasn’t married and didn’t have any children. Having a career wasn’t
enough. I should still have a husband and children. I probably best met their expectations
when I was married to Calvin with the two little kids – and I think all along my mom
knew something wasn’t right. Sort of in an off-hand manner she knew because she would
call me and she would say, “Is Calvin home?” I would say – Yes or no. If I said yes, she
would say, “OK – I’ll call back another day and talk to you.” If ever I tried to talk on the
phone with my mom when he was there he would constantly interrupt and try to take my
attention away from my mom. She knew something wasn’t right but we never talked
about it.

It’s the whole religion thing and I just hate it all now. My background and my
mom’s were very traditional. I don’t think my mom even had the framework to
understand what was going wrong for me. Voicing it would have been way beyond her
comprehension and even now, we really can’t talk a lot about what went on. They are
accepting that there was a lot wrong but there have been months when we didn’t talk at
all. She just couldn’t talk to me – my sister says it is all just too overwhelming for her. In her world there are no divorces. My mom stayed at home once she had me and my sister and that was it. That was her role. When my sister had my niece she was expected to stay home as well. I get sort of sarcastic now when I think about all of this.

Well, for the longest time when I was going through everything with Calvin, I didn’t know it was abuse. It wasn’t until I left that someone said to me, “Cinnamon, you know what? You were abused.” Lots of the time I was trying to protect the kids and for a lot of it I thought it was my duty or my job as a woman to do the sort of things he demanded. Two days after I gave birth to our second we had sex. I thought, again, it was my job. I didn’t realize it wasn’t. I didn’t realize I needed the six weeks they recommended to heal. The stitches got torn out and I had to have reconstructive surgery. That was really the start of the end but it lasted another 3 years before I could leave.

He didn’t like me to have friends and whatever friends I did have over he would – he would be very like down and sarcastic in front of them. Quite often, they would end up feeling uncomfortable enough that we would drift apart. Calvin had such control over my life. I’m still trying to get past that and it’s really hard. He had a lot of friends and they use to come over every Saturday night and they would all get drunk and he would quite often demand that I – he wanted to show off his wife. Quite often in the middle of the night I would be dragged out of bed and sort of paraded in front of them – I got to the point where I was always wearing big flannel pajamas. It was a lot of financial and emotional abuse and some physical as well. I haven’t had a new pair of glasses in ten years. He would say, “You don’t need new glasses, those are good enough.”
Calvin believed in physical discipline with the children. When I found bruises—that is when I decided it was time to leave. Obviously it wasn’t staying to a smack on the bum—he was hitting them elsewhere as well. So, that was my motivator. Then there came the day when I went to pay a bill and there was no money in the bank—nothing. He had gone to the bank first thing in the morning and just pulled all the money out. I just knew then, I can’t do this anymore. I had a friend on-line and when she realized what was happening to us she sent me the links to a Transition house and how to get help. It was about six weeks later that I actually took that information and went with it. I just didn’t know where I was going to go or how I was going to survive with two little kids.

In the first three months at the Transition houses I lost 40 pounds. From Transition house I ended up living in a hotel with the kids for a couple of months. There isn’t a lot in the way of available housing around here. From the hotel I went to second stage housing. That is just like living in a fish bowl but there is on-site counselling so that is good. You would have your own unit but there would be like six women and all their kids living there at the same time. It was this sort of U-shaped building with a back yard. The walls are really thin and anytime you’d be out in the yard everyone could see you. At night, if someone’s out there in the yard gossiping with someone else everyone can hear. It wasn’t the best of situations but it as better than where I had come from. I lived there for about five months and then BC Housing came through for me and I got in there. It’s nice, I really like it.

It’s been just over a year since I left Calvin. He now has access to the kids every second week. He had supervised visitation at first but he never hit the kids during those times so now he has access once every two weeks. It is really difficult for me to just let
them go with him. I used to pin my phone number inside my son’s jacket so if he needed to call me he could. Every time he comes home the number is gone so I guess Calvin knows about it.

I never did get back to work after I had my first son. I’m well trained in retail. I have lots of experience there both on the sales side and in management. I could get a job tomorrow but at the same time I can’t get a job tomorrow. I’m really, really afraid to go back to work. Definitely serious fear. There is a huge trust issue about being around men now. I’m not even sure I’ll be able to work in a job that has male employees. Right now I just feel – no way. I’m so avoiding the issue that I’m considering going back to school – maybe college.

There is this real issue with men but it is also very hard for me to connect with women. I can do it but it’s hard to do on a regular basis. I know I’m still in isolation in some ways and I know I’m doing it to myself, which is just awful. It’s just really, really hard to connect. It has become almost like a habit not to. Years of living that way takes a toil on you. I try to come out of it but it’s really difficult. Part of me almost feels like anything I do – Calvin is going to come and destroy it in some way. I know I’ve come so far and I know I’ve gotten out but still . . .

After I got into BC Housing, Social assistance suggested I give Bridges a try. I went through the program and I really gained a lot. But in many ways it was too early for me to be there. I was really out of touch with topics like anger management and sexual abuse and things like that. A lot of the women had some really difficult stories and it was the first time I had ever heard people talk about things like that. I could see that a lot of what they were talking about had happened to me as well. I hadn’t dealt with this stuff at
all before I got to Bridges. So I was going through Bridges and also dealing with all of this other stuff at the same time. I really learned a lot but it was hard.

I think one of the reasons I made it and got so much out of the Bridges experience was the group of women I went through with. I was really lucky because we really supported each other. At first I was quite nervous about going there with only women and being in big group of women. I'd always been led to believe that groups of women can be pretty nasty to each other. But all of us had gone through a lot and I think that created a bond between us. It was when I was at Bridges – in the first section – we did a lot of wild writing activities and a lot of stuff was coming out for me. I would send copies of those to my mom. I thought – You want to know, well, here you go. My sister says my mom hasn’t read half of the stuff – she hasn’t been able to.

I found the second half of the Bridges program sort of frustrating. I didn’t want to do interviews. I didn’t want to go out there. I didn’t want to go back to work. I don’t want to go back to work – I know I’m not ready yet. I really could see that I was limited in where I could go and what I could do. It is all about this huge trust issue right now. I mean it’s strange because I love my dad – but I don’t want to be alone in the same room with my own dad. He’s never done anything even remotely to hurt me and yet – there it is. This whole thing about men has generalized from Calvin to all men. I have two sons so I know I have to deal with this, don’t I?

I’ve gone from Bridges to ___________. They will work with me for three months and send me out on job interviews and reconfigure my resume. They really look for something that will fit for a person. They are having a bit of a hard time with me though because I am so skilled in retail and I just am not sure I can go and do that right
now. I just don’t know what it is going to take to get over this. I can go to the mall. I can go grocery shopping. What I can’t do is talk to men. If there is a male cashier and a female cashier I will go to the female even if the line is twice as long. I just don’t want any possibility of contact. It’s nothing personal – that is just the way I feel.

I’m in counselling and I really work at accepting the challenges my counsellor gives me. She’ll say, “Go here and go there”, and I do those things and then I go back and we talk about how I feel. It is slow going but it’s getting better. But going back to work – I’m just not ready. That is why I’m choosing school right now instead. I know there will be men at college too but they will be boys rather than men. I’m older and they’re not going to be looking at an older woman. They’re going to be looking at the young eighteen-somethings. I won’t feel like I’m a focus in anyway. That seems like a safe route to me right now. I’m kind of stuck between creative writing or linguistics.

But in many ways I feel like I’ve gone from one controlling environment with Calvin to another with all this pressure to work. I don’t really have a say over my own life right now and I know I’ve moved away from where I really didn’t have a say, I still feel like I don’t have a say. I have more control but I’m still not calling the shots on my life and it’s frustrating. I can work on-line and I’ve done a few creative writing stories for a few gamers. They can pay me right into my Pay Pal account and I don’t have to account to social services for every cent – I mean I don’t like that I have to work like that but you have to make the system work for you. I couldn’t make enough to actually get by with that though so, with two little kids, I’m hooked into the system for sure.

The on-line community that I have is a big help and support for me. My friend who is here in __________ tells me that I am so different on-line than in real life. It is
just easier on line because it is so anonymous. It’s safe and I can really let go. I’m in my own place and no one can get at me. I have some pretty good on-line friends. But whenever one of them says, “Hey, let’s meet for coffee”, I just back away. One of my friends has gotten a way around that. What she does is invite people over for coffee and then she invites me too. I’ll show up and there they are. She realized early that she can’t invite guys because I just freeze but if she invites some ladies it isn’t so bad. We start talking and it gets to be a way to break past where I’m stuck.

Looking at the time line I’ve drawn I see that I am really still in the process of trying to get past some of my family or origin stuff. The religion thing—I really hate it. I don’t take my kids to church. I refuse to. I don’t want them to have any part of that doctrine. I think a lot of my stuff comes from there. A lot of the way I was brought up was influenced by that. And then like I said before, things just go around and around for generations. I don’t feel like I’m a good mom. I’ve had to change a lot. I’m always questioning myself, wondering if I’m doing things right. I’ve had to change from smacking the kids because I realize that isn’t right – especially after seeing them bruised from Calvin’s discipline. I had that done to me as a child and I didn’t enjoy it. I asked myself – Why would I do this to my children? I try time outs and I have an allowance system so if they do small chores they get a bit of money. And if they fight or argue then it’s a bit of money off. I don’t think parenting is ever easy – especially when you are learning to do things differently. But some days they get really upset with me and I start to wonder again – Maybe I’m doing this all wrong. I tell them – OK, Mommy is going to take a time out. I’m going to put myself in my room for five minutes and try and figure this out. I think I am teaching them to get used to verbalizing their wants and needs.
I also see that when I was working in management I had a lot of confidence. I could attack problems and come up with solutions and stick the solution in place. Right now I find decision making really difficult. I don’t have a whole lot of confidence in myself and my abilities anymore. And yet at the same time I know I have lots of experience with things like this. I should be able to go back to that. Confidence is a huge challenge right now. Just being able to articulate properly on the job. At Bridges we worked on conflict resolution. I have started using that sort of technique with things that come up with Calvin. They taught us that whenever you run up against another person who doesn’t agree with something you’re doing or something that needs getting done you can ask for ideas and listen to the other person’s ideas and maybe come up with a compromise. I know back when I was in management I would just bowl people over – that is how we were taught to work – just get the job done. Now I really see this model as sort of – this is your idea and this is my idea, how can we mesh them? Growing up and with Calvin I just didn’t deal with conflict at all. The second it would start, I would just say – OK, OK, OK. And then back right off. Back away and go into myself and not put myself out there at all. Now that I see how it can be done and I’m practicing it scares the be-jeepers out of me to think of being on a job like that. I’m not sure how I will deal with something like that.

You know what I think? They should be teaching this stuff to kids in school. We need to learn this sort of stuff as children – not when we are adults. I know I’ve been through a lot and I have a lot of patience. I do have some strengths. I know I can survive. I’m sure hoping though that I’ve seen the worst of things. I know I have patience and maybe courage. I know that once I start something, I stick with it until I just can’t do it
anymore. I know I need to be aware of my limitations and be able to put limitations on myself. Bridges and counselling has really helped me with that piece.

The Bridges program is too short, though. It used to be a year and I was pretty upset when I found that out – that it had been cut back. The first three months of the program are so intense – we could have really used more time to cover all of that. I threatened to not graduate at all – to just keep coming back. I threatened to just keep coming in everyday as usual. But I knew I couldn’t do that – that I would have to just let go. It was a chapter in my life. I have to move on. So – I didn’t go back for almost two months – I only went back the other day. It felt really odd and it was hard.

Just before I finish I want to say that many work places have to change. People in management need to understand more about the human psyche and how things work for some people and about conflict resolution. They also need to learn about the cycles of abuse – these things happen at job sites just like in homes.
Illustration 5: Cinnamon’s Timeline Drawing
Chapter Five — Within and Across Participant Analysis and Discussion

The transcripts, the time-line drawings, the concept maps, the field notes, and the ghostwritten stories compromise the layers of data that make-up this research. I have drawn on the ghostwritten stories but also refer to the original transcripts for verbatim excerpts. 7 By their nature, the ghostwritten stories are partial. They give the reader an experience of each woman’s story. To rely only on these stories would limit my ability to analyze and discuss what the participants shared with me.

In the analysis of personal narrative, Riessman (2003) writes that the researcher does not assume objectivity; instead, he or she takes up positionality and subjectivity. The perspective of the narrator and the researcher both come into view through the process of analysis. Chase (2005) states that narrative researchers employ various analytical lenses to explore the stories of their participants. We treat narrative as a very particular type of discourse — one that is retrospective in terms of the way it gives meaning to past experiences; it includes the narrator’s unique point of view, and places the narrator in the centre of her story. Chase goes on to write that the narrative encounter is a socially situated, interactive encounter between a teller and a listener. The story is told for this particular audience in this particular setting and it is shaped in part by that interaction with the listener. I find both Reissman’s assumption that the researcher is not assuming an objective stance and Chase’s description of narrative as a socially situated encounter between a narrator and a listener, helpful starting points for analysis.

In analyzing each woman’s story I have employed a framework described by Frank (1993) in an article entitled, The rhetoric of self-change: Illness experiences as narrative. I believe that Frank’s exploration of illness narratives parallel, in many ways,
the stories that my participants told of the intersection of abuse and work in their lives, especially when these women related their suffering. I would contend that suffering could be exchanged for the word illness in Frank’s article. Frank writes that the core of any illness narrative is an epiphany of some type. The experiences that a participant relates have left a mark on her and brought her to a moment of realization. Frank describes four types of epiphany or change that a narrator may reveal in her story:

1. The narrator’s self is discovered as what she has always been.
2. The narrator’s self is discovered to be what she might become.
3. The narrator’s self is discovered to be cumulative – whatever she has become has been formed in and through what she has experienced.
4. The narrator’s self is what Frank terms a reluctant Phoenix – she claims to have experienced little or no change.

I have also identified what I see as themes within the stories of each of the five participants. These themes were identified with the research question in mind – how has abuse and work experiences intersected. Boyatzis (1998) describes themes as patterns of information that allow description and organization as well as an interpretation of the phenomenon under consideration. By carefully reading the transcript and the ghostwritten stories, I identified themes that appeared to be important, occurring throughout the women’s stories. Initially I made notes as the ideas about themes emerged, and then I went back through the transcript and the story and colour coded each to identify these themes.
Becky’s Within-Participant Analysis

“. . . I feel like I was set up . . . but they didn’t get me cause I’m still here, they didn’t win . . . but if I’d had the option of not being called a whore by my Dad, I wouldn’t have been such an easy target for Mr. X.

and so much of what has happened to me might not have happened.”

Becky’s Time-line Drawing and Concept-Map

The time-line drawing (Illustration 1) came late in Becky’s interview. She was able to tell her story in a very clear narrative fashion and I did not want to interrupt her flow by introducing the drawing activity too soon. As Becky reflected on her drawing she spoke of herself as “baby pinky” starting out in life with everything going fine and then soon after going to school things started to slide down hill for Becky; “. . . from school, everything just sort of got, you know, it was more confusing and then no dreams and just barely getting through.” The black line in her drawing changes to blue again as she begins the Bridges program and with the ending of that program she describes her current situation as “. . . this little dark cloud and a question mark cause I’m not sure where I’m going.” Becky’s drawing did not add new information to her story, though coming toward the end of the interview it did allow her to consolidate much of what she had already shared.

As I listened to Betty’s interview tape and studied her transcript, I was aware that Becky told her story in a narrative fashion. She began with her present situation of fear about finding a job and then reached back into the past to explain and find meaning in her fears. There was a touch of dramatic tension as she looked ahead to the future. I depicted
this in the concept map\(^8\) (Illustration 6) by placing Becky amidst the past, present, and future moments of her life. The past connected to the present and reached forward to the future. At the same time, Becky was discovering that the strength she would need in the future, in the form of the hope she carried, was always with her. I depicted this with lines connecting her future hope to what was rooted in her past.

*Becky's Themes*

I identified four themes within Becky’s story that relate to the ways in which her abuse experiences intersected with her ability to work: (a) a fragmented sense of self, (b) loss of opportunities, (c) a lack of “job getting skills” which is linked to a work history that contained skills Becky could not talk about or capitalize on, and (d) a desire to work for change with other women.

*A fragmented sense of self.*

Becky’s story included issues related to a lack of support to become the self she might have been and a distorted sense of self worth due to her experiences. She describes her experience of assault at the hands of an intimate male partner as being her lowest point, “When I first got out of the situation, my sense of self, there was no sense of self and I remember just describing it as ‘I fragmented’.” She had experienced extreme verbal abuse from her father, sexual abuse as a teen, then prostitution and a life of criminality, yet she had never felt disrespected in this way – this is what fractured her. I think Becky offers a valid explanation, “... it really stripped me of everything, you know, or everything that I had left, you know, because as strong as I’ve come across, you know, I don’t – I don’t feel that way.”

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\(^8\) Concept maps will follow with-in participant analysis
Becky’s loss of self began much earlier. She talked about how she never had anyone to build her up or give her a vision of what might be possible for her. Her father’s verbal abuse stripped her of her sense of self-worth. She started to believe in what he told her, and moving into a world of prostitution was part of that; “... my dad had been calling me a whore forever and I was still a virgin. I just thought – I am whore. At least in my dad’s eyes I am. That also moved me into the prostitution... I did it to punish myself. So, some girls may stick needles in their arms and some girls may make terrible, terrible decisions by getting into the wrong vehicle or getting into a vehicle with ten guys or something – this is what I did to punish myself. I didn’t care – I guess I was looking for Daddy’s approval.” During Becky’s time and work within the sex trade her sense of self-worth became skewed. “My worth was based on my sexuality – or really not even sexuality, because it didn’t seem like I even had sexuality really... I think with the prostitution thing... your worth is based on how much money you can make, how well you present yourself... there is a certain amount of self – a confused self-worth I think in that.”

Loss of opportunities.

For Becky, loss of opportunity was tied to the idea that she was living a life script that she did not have a hand in writing. Becky speaks about how her life was on a certain path she had no control over. She names the verbal abuse from her father as the starting point that made her vulnerable to sexual abuse at the hands of Mr. X. and then her slide into prostitution and criminality. She shares that she did not have to be out on the street working in the sex trade – she was not a drug addict, she did not need the money – she did it to punish herself, to live out this life script.
Living within this belief system led to missed opportunities. Becky speaks of the people she had known and the type of work she had done as blinding her to any reality outside of criminality for a large amount of her life. “Most of my life has been spent in a different world and if it had been spent working at MacDonald’s and going to Burger King and having a paper route it would be a whole different reality . . . If I hadn’t had to put so much time into surviving the mental abuse and I hadn’t put so much time into abusing myself, I wonder how much differently my life would be and I would be . . . I bet I’d be walking out proud of my resume and being comfortable with getting a job.”

Lack of recognizable job skills.

Becky struggled for a long time with the fact that she not only could not visualize herself in the world of work but she had no experience with any of the “getting a job skills” that most people begin to experience at a much younger age. She shares that she had never had to go out and get a job, or go on an interview, or sit across from someone who was judging her as capable to do a certain job; “. . . you don’t have to apply to be a prostitute and they don’t ask you to fill out a job application to be a drug dealer.” When speaking about the world of work, Becky’s story was filled with expressions of unfamiliarity, lack of vision, and fear. She speaks of not ever imagining she was someone who could be employed, how it was foreign to her. “I don’t even know what a job interview is going to be like – I just have no clue.” She is scared of going on an interview, feeling she will be intimidated and that she does not have it in her to go through this. It is all unfamiliar territory. Fear of her inability gives way to a note of hope by the end of the interview when she speaks of how she is optimistic – getting her nails and hair done,
getting out there. She knows she has to face this “get a job thing” and find out what it is all about.

As Becky shared her fear about the world of work, her inexperience with interviews, and her lack of a resume or job history she could share, I was very aware that this was just one aspect of her story. She also shared a confidence about her ability when she had been working that was in stark contrast to her fears. She had worked over the years and had actually been an overachiever; “I have acquired jobs through friends . . . I’m good with money . . . I went into promotions and I went into security and I was into waitressing and eventually I got to assistant management . . . I’m very capable and I work hard, I’m an overachiever in an employment situation . . . when I was selling drugs I was in a male dominated business and I did very well. I’m not bragging but I had kids working under me, I had a structured organization.” What Becky seemed to lack was the recognition that the job skills she acquired are transferable and she can draw on them now as she moves into different types of work.

*Working for change with other women.*

A prominent theme in Becky’s story is her desire, through her own experience, to work to educate and help other women. She is aware of the damage of words through her own experiences of verbal abuse and she goes out of her way to confront that with other women and with her thirteen year old niece and her friends. She believes that her experiences of domestic violence have made her sensitive to this issue and she wants to reach out and help. She shares her desire to work in the field of social work and how she was worried that she would not be able to handle this type of work – that somehow she would sacrifice herself in helping others. Concrete experiences with other women have
shown her that she is able to do this type of work. “I do have the ability, I know that. I am able to give people hope and I think that is a gift.”  

_Becky’s Epiphany Experiences_  

In reading through Becky’s transcript and story, I identified two depictions of how she has made meaning in terms of her self and her epiphany of change. I believe Becky found her self to be what she had always been, a person of strength and hope, and at the same time I think her epiphany is also cumulative – what she has become is due to and through where she has been and what she has experienced.  

Frank (1993) describes the self as a gestalt of foreground and background possibilities and the narrative that contains illness (and I would add suffering) shifts and sorts these possibilities. When one discovers the self to be who her or she has always been, the old self is seen to already possess the resources necessary to move forward – what was fundamental to the self was always there.  

During the interview Becky spoke of her strength – she was capable of getting out of bad situations and of getting the help she needed. Often she had no one but herself to count on. In everything she had been through, even in the darkest moments after the assault she experienced with Sam, she was able to draw on strength and hope. It seemed to me that this hope and strength in the present moments of her life were capable of moving her forward and was recognized as qualities she had always had. “I knew I was better than what my father would have had me believe... I’ve always known I am a kind person and I have stuff to contribute”. This hope is carrying her forward as she shares that she can't be thirty-seven and not have a job – she has to find out what getting a job is all about.
I was also struck by the way Becky spoke of her experiences shaping her. The verbal abuse her father heaped on her as a young girl shaped the woman she is today, who is sensitive to issues around the way women are portrayed in the world. She talks of how this is a reflection of where she has been, she is an example of the damage words can do. “I think people’s life experiences drive you toward what you feel you need to do and I feel like I need to make at least one person’s life a little easier than what mine was.” She has placed what happened to her in the wider context of a need to change the way women talk about other women. She now sees her work as that of doing something that will make a difference for women or children. Her job now is to work for meaningful change in the world. In this is way, I see Becky making meaning of her experiences in what Frank (1993) describes as a cumulative manner because this meaning is rooted in where she has been. Her experience of suffering is a cumulative moment – the necessary end of a long process.
Illustration 6: Becky's Concept Map
Jeannie’s Within-Participant Analysis

“I always think about my mom... she’s gone now... but she was always there for us and she always made us try to take the right road.”

Jeannie’s Time-line Drawing and Concept-Map

Jeannie’s time-line drawing (Illustration 2) also came toward the end of her interview. Her transcript was over thirty pages and the interview was a full ninety minutes. Jeannie told her story in a somewhat disjointed and chaotic manner. As I reviewed her transcript and listened to her audio tape, I remembered that during the actual interview I was often trying to place the various incidents she related in a time sequence. Jeannie drew a very simple line drawing with peaks and valleys representing her experiences. The drawing of the map allowed me to ask many questions of Jeannie that helped to establish a temporal sequence for the events she had related and was thus very helpful for me. I am not sure that the drawing added anything to Jeannie’s experience or yielded any new details.

Jeannie’s concept map (Illustration 7) depicts well the actual place that talk of work took up in her story – she has some dreams for the future, located in the upper right hand corner but work does not figure predominantly in Jeannie’s story. The map shows that what I heard in Jeannie’s story was many relationship issues, and how she began to talk and break her silence with the Bridges program. I am not surprised that work experiences, in a narrowly defined manner of working outside the home for money, do not form a large theme in Jeannie’s story. She chose to begin her time-line drawing at the age of nineteen when she began living with Barry and then shared that she never had to go out and work for money while they were together.
Jeannie’s Themes

In listening to and working with the many layers that constitute the data generated by Jeannie’s interview I have identified five significant themes: (a) doing things just for herself, which includes going out to work, (b) not knowing and not being heard, (c) the way in which Jeannie was silenced in the face of her abuse, (d) the influence of her mother’s words about going down the right road, and (e) questions related to being ready to see certain things. Jeannie’s themes do not relate as directly to the intersection of abuse and work, when work is considered to be outside the home for pay, as is the case for other participants, though there are links in terms of her readiness for change and the long-term affects of abuse.

Doing things just for herself.

When Jeannie first begins to recover from the shock of her break-up with Barry she talks of waking up in the morning and thinking – What am I going to do for myself today. Not for my son, or for anybody else, but for me. She speaks of not really knowing how to think about herself, she had been looking after Barry and Lionel for so long and that had constituted her work. As she begins to move on with her life, in the absence of having to do this anymore, she is amazed by the notion of being by herself and learning how to do things for herself. “I had to keep reminding myself, you know, that there was no one to tell me what to do.” The realization that she is on her own is also scary. “I was scared thinking how I would have to go out and look after myself and make money.” The realization of needing to work to support herself is an important one for Jeannie. In many ways it represents a significant step in her readiness to move forward.
Not knowing and not being heard.

As Jeannie told her story, I noticed a repeated theme related to the number of times she was caught off guard by what was happening to her and the number of times that she spoke and it seemed that she was not heard. Jeannie did not seem to be an active agent in her own life. The idea of not knowing goes back to her childhood. “You know for some reason, I don’t even remember my young life.” In respect to her relationship with Barry, Jeannie was surprised repeatedly. She was shocked when he phoned and said he was leaving her, she did not believe it was happening, she did not think she would ever split up with the father of her son. Jeannie admits to not realizing that Lionel was graduating and this caused her great concern. “You know I was so surprised he made it to school after everything that had happened. I could not believe what he was telling me. I said, I’m so sorry, son, I didn’t know you were graduating” When Jeannie enters into a relationship with Ted she is once again caught off guard. “He started hitting me and doing things and saying things I never expected.” She seemed quite surprised to find herself in another abusive situation.

Tied to this idea of not knowing is a theme of not being heard. Jeannie tells Barry to leave but he does not. Even when she packs his things and leaves them out on the steps, he still does not leave. After she leaves Ted and then visits him in the hospital, he acts as though they are still together. When she has had no contact with Barry for some time and he phones her and then tells others they are back together because they have spoken, Jeannie’s voice seems not to be heard at all when she says to family members that they are not together. In not being heard, it seems, once again, that Jeannie is not an active agent in her life.
Silence.

Jeannie is very clear on the fact that she was uncomfortable for a long time with talking about the abuse she suffered at the hands of male partners. "I was so ashamed of what was happening to me and I didn’t want anybody else to know about it . . . I didn’t want anybody to put Barry down and say he did this to me . . . I had no one to talk to." In her relationship with Ted, she realizes that she is repeating the silence she imposed on herself when she was with Barry. "I hadn’t told anybody how Ted was treating me. I know I had done that with Barry too . . . I didn’t think it was a good feeling to have other people know these things." She worried about doing a program like Bridges because she knew she would have to open up and talk about things that had happened to her. "It wasn’t easy for me to talk in front of people about Barry and Ted; I didn’t like telling people who didn’t know them these things they did to me.” Jeannie’s ability to break free from silence in the face of her abuse experiences is another indication of increasing readiness to begin to move forward.

Taking the right road.

At one point, Jeannie speaks of always remembering how her mother wanted her and her siblings to “go on the right road” and that helps her keep going on in the right direction. "I always think about my mom . . . she’s gone now . . . but she was always there for us and she always made us like try to take the right road.” This idea of moving along the right road in the right direction is a theme that emerges repeatedly as Jeannie speaks. She is either going up or down and constantly alludes to the fact that she has to get moving in the right direction. Early in Jeannie’s relationship with Barry, things “are going down and down” and that just gets worse. After the break-up, Jeannie “went way
down and hit rock bottom . . . I hit the bottom like I never had before.” Being down there at the bottom got her going. She speaks of telling herself, “I better get moving here . . . I better do something . . . I better pick myself up.” When she tells of dealing with her addiction problem, the story has a sense of motion. The canoe journey, phoning the drug and alcohol program and then going there to sign up, saying, “I knew I had to get moving and deal with my problem.” The metaphor of moving in the wrong direction is very strong when things begin to go wrong in the relationship with Ted. Jeannie says, “I’m going down again and I don’t like what this person is dong to me . . . I was at the point where I knew I had to move . . . I felt like I was going down again, hitting rock bottom again.” While speaking of her visits to Ted in the hospital this theme is revisited. “I didn’t want to feel like I was going down that road again . . . I started getting that feeling in me again that says I can’t live like this. I’m going down the wrong road again.” After the break-up with Ted, Jeannie speaks of starting to do things again for herself, starting to move on with her life again.

*Being ready to see.*

Part of what I heard in Jeannie’s story relates to what I believe she is not yet ready to see. I am reminded of the image of the Johari Window (Luft, 1969), four panes that illustrate (a) what a person reveals to others, (b) what a person knows about her or himself but is unwilling to reveal to others, (c) what others know about the person and the person does not know, (d) what no one knows. While doing the time-line drawing, Jeannie speaks, quite openly, about not remembering her childhood at all. She expresses some concern about this. Her lost childhood represents gaps in her memory and experience that limit her ability to understand and move forward. Perhaps she is not yet
ready to remember all the experiences. When speaking of her relationship with Barry, Jeannie says in all honesty – I had a good life. This in the face of the fact that she reveals how things were going wrong for her and Barry from early on, they never did anything together, he didn’t spend time with their son. Jeannie minimizes the fact that Barry had hit her and though she refers to him punching holes through the walls when asked about his drug use she claims that she had never experienced violence until she was with Ted. Yet she goes to visit Ted in the hospital and continues to visit him, even in the face of his verbal abuse and anger. Re-establishing a relationship with Barry, at his instigation, is told as though Jeannie has no choice, this is something she has to do for Lionel’s sake, and yet Barry has continued use of drugs and alcohol is recognized as a problem. It would seem that until Jeannie is ready to place some of these experiences in the context of her own choices about her life, she will continue to experience limitations in her ability to be an active agent.

*Jeannie’s Epiphany Experience*

In terms of self-change and an epiphany or moment of realization about the possibility of change in her life, I think that Jeannie has discovered her self as what she might become. Frank (1993) writes that this discovery is one of locating new resources within the self. The new self is altered and one comes to realize a new relationship with the self and with others. It is almost as if a sense of wonder is generated in realizing that this self is one the person could not have imagined before.

Jeannie shares that she lived with Barry for twenty-one years and she never imagined that she would not be with him and have to move into the world and live and look after herself. Her story relates the possibilities of doing just that. Dealing with her
drug addiction seems to be a first step. "I really feel like I’ve changed. It changed me. I
didn’t think I could ever do it". Now she is able to spend time with her family and be
with people in ways she was not before. Working through and finishing the Bridges
program opened many doors. "I’m doing so many things I never thought I would do. I’m
in school... I’m interested in the First Nations Residential Care Program... I’m really
challenging myself." Jeannie seems very aware of the fact that a world of possibilities
may lie just ahead on the road she is moving along.
Illustration 7: Jeannie’s Concept Map

- **Barry**
  - Father
  - Brain tumor for 21 years
  - Only one in my life
  - Hospital, anger, going out at the time, didn't accept he had to leave
  - Responded to family intervention to leave uncle
  - Left us for another family
  - Going down to rock bottom
  - Living in a motel for 6 months
  - Learned about co-dependence, supportive doctor, leaning on Lionel
  - Quitting pot use
  - Day program
  - Cultural canoe trip
  - Major Life Change

- **Jeannie**
  - Strong connection, commitment, care
  - No real memories before age 19
  - Parent's drunk - quit later
  - Bridges Program
  - Began to talk
  - BC Housing
  - Volunteer work

- **First Nations Program**
  - Job preparation/transition
  - Real challenge, school, 1st experience in a First Nations educational setting

- **Future dream - First Nations Residential Care Worker**
  - Volunteer hours in a senior's care facility

- **Ted's suicide attempt**
  - Didn't accept they weren't together anymore
  - Brain damage
  - Family
  - Sister's accident
  - Didn't accept mother was dead
  - Brain damage

- **Involvement with Ted**
  - 5 months
  - Extreme anger & jealousy
  - Serious abuse - wrong road
  - Strength to get out - Family intervention Uncle
Betty's Within-participant Analysis

"It was amazing to me that anyone would help me... my self-esteem was so low...

here I was, this person on the street and thinking

that I am the scum of the streets – I didn’t see any future for myself

and she came along and gave me a hand up, not a hand out."

Betty's Time-line Drawing and Concept-Map

Betty’s time-line drawing (Illustration 3) occurred about half way through the interview in a moment when she seemed to wind down somewhat in her ability to talk. Like Jeannie, she chose to draw a simple line drawing with peaks and valleys along a mid-line to depict her experiences. The drawing helped to yield many more details and recollections for Betty. As she worked, she spoke of things that had been going on in her life at significant moments and I was able to ask for many examples of her experience. In retrospect, I can see that most of the important details that related to the intersection of work and abuse experiences occurred as Betty was doing the drawing and when we had the finished drawing between us to reflect on.

I have depicted Betty, in the concept map (Illustration 8) in the lower right hand portion of the drawing and her future is quite constricted – it takes up only a small portion of the map. Her childhood experiences are in the top layer. Relationships, work experiences, and breakdowns form the middle layer. Finally, being able to access the help she needed is near the bottom with future hopes and dreams on this level as well. Showing Betty's story in this way is indicative of the way I saw her experiences of abuse as cumulative, one layer building on the other, until she found herself in the place she is
now—vulnerable and fragile, with limited options in the future in terms of her ability to work for pay and yet with her hopes and dreams intact.

Betty’s Themes

As I identified themes in Betty’s story, I realized that her themes were not discrete units. Aspects of Betty’s story merged and overlapped. A theme related to the long-range effects of abuse set Betty up to be vulnerable to other incidents of abuse, to addiction issues and to the extreme distress she has lived with most of her life. The long-range effects of abuse overlap with the other themes I identified in Betty’s story and create intersections with her work experiences: (a) low self-esteem, (b) Betty’s ability to work, and (c) lost opportunities.

Long-range effects of abuse.

Before the age of fourteen, when she ended up running away from home and living on the street, Betty had already undergone intense abuse. The abuse she experienced in the home drove her to the streets. At this point, she became vulnerable to alcohol abuse. “I started drinking heavily when I was around that age. Cause I discovered that even through it tasted awful, it made everything okay, you know.” She was vulnerable to men in the workplace and ultimately she was vulnerable to a relationship with an abusive husband. From this point, we see the classic story of assault from an intimate male partner separating the female partner from employment and friends. When Betty finally got away from this violent and abusive marriage, barely with her life, her emotional and physical health was severely compromised. She was physically weak, depressed, and starting to have a real drinking problem. She fell into a pattern of addiction and depression that made work impossible. Betty survived at least two major
breakdowns and a serious suicide attempt. She entered into other relationships with abusive men. It took her a long time to begin to find her way out of the darkness that began in her early life.

*Impact on ability to work.*

Everything that Betty has been through had an influence on her ability to work. Her physical weakness and her drinking compromised the job as a nanny that she went to after getting away from her abusive husband. She was unable to cope with a job she had in a truck factory where men harassed her. "I was still quite afraid of men at that point . . . I was trying to be tough, to prove to myself I could be around men . . . I just started getting more and more stressed . . . I still had the physical problems from the abuse in my back and legs . . . I would be on Demerol for the pain and still trying to work. I was drinking pretty heavily then." In subsequent attempts to obtain employment, Betty shared that her abuse affected her. "I don’t have the confidence to apply for a job and when I did work at a job I couldn’t handle the stress, physically or mentally, and I would need to go on sick leave."

*Low self-esteem.*

When Betty ended up homeless and living on the street after losing her job at the truck factory, she happened to run into a friend. This friend connected her with a woman who let Betty stay at her house until she could qualify for social assistance. This woman was kind and considerate and understood issues related to poverty and homelessness. Betty shared that she was amazed this woman would open her home to her in this way. She saw herself as the scum of the streets and wondered why anyone would let her live in their home. When Betty describes this woman as giving her a hand up and not a hand out
it seems her faith in humanity and goodness is redeemed. The devastation that Betty’s abuse experiences created for her self-esteem seriously impeded her ability to see herself as capable or able to work.

*Lost opportunities.*

In a particularly poignant moment of the interview, Betty speaks of what her life might have been if all that she had been through had not happened to her. “I sometimes wonder what I would be like if all that stuff hadn’t happened. I think I would be happier. I don’t know if I’d have the depression or not. I think I would have got further in my life. I wanted to be a veterinary assistant. I always wanted to work with animals . . . You have to be really physically fit to do a job like that and I’m not. I’ll never be again.”

*Betty’s Epiphany Experience*

The epiphany moment for Betty, her moment of realization, fits with Frank’s (1993) cumulative pattern. She is the sum total of everything she experienced over the course of her life – both positive and negative. It is as if her suffering has been the medium of her self for so long – it is all she has known. A lifetime of traumatic experiences has meant she is permanently on disability and unable to pursue “paying” work. She has been labelled by doctors as having mental health issues, she has physical problems, and she is vulnerable and fragile in many ways. At the same time her whole story is about moving, slowly and gradually toward the light, starting when she was able to gather the courage to leave her violent and abusive husband, gathering speed as she ran from him and tried to work and survive. When she ended up on the street and someone gave her a hand up rather than a hand out she began to see herself in a different light. Her breakdowns seemed to lead her even closer to the light – getting the medical help she
needed for her mental illness and having help to get on disability. She now has people in her life who understand her and accept her as she is. Finally, finding her way to Bridges, she has started to see that the abuse that happened to her, over the years of her life, was not her fault. Betty realizes now that work must be on her own terms due to her physical and mental health issues and she pursues volunteer work, as well as her plans to create a soup kitchen for women and children.

Betty ends her story by speaking of how what has happened over her life stems from the abuse – that is why she has mental illness issues, and that is why she has not been able to work for over twelve years. “I still carry a lot of that with me today.” She then goes on to link these experiences to why she is telling me her story in the first place. “... maybe it would give some women hope that you can still have quality of life... even after being devastated, you know... you can to follow your own dreams.”
Illustration 8: Betty's Concept Map
Melanie’s Within-Participant Analysis

"I think that one of the major ways my abuse has affected work is in how I feel about myself and then how that translates to the type of work I have chosen and how that reinforces those feelings… it explains a lot of my life and it comes from the sexual abuse and never feeling like I could really participate in my own life."

Melanie’s Time-line Drawing and Concept-Map

Melanie’s began her time-line drawing (Illustration 4) at the very beginning of the interview. She was one of the participants that I had a previous counselling relationship with and I knew, in advance, that she often struggled to find words when speaking of her experiences. I introduced the drawing activity immediately after Melanie signed the consent form, as a possibility to help her organize her thoughts and words. She readily accepted. Melanie drew and spoke for the first half of the interview and during the last half, we both had the drawing in front of us to refer to and speak about. For Melanie, the reality of her story is as much in her drawing as it is in her transcript and words. The spiral shapes, the colours, the symbols used to depict certain times of her life add a richness and depth to her spoken words. It is doubtful that Melanie could have told her story in the way she did without this type of activity to guide and organize her experiences.

I have shown Melanie, in her concept map (Illustration 9), as sitting on the ground of all that her early sexual abuse experiences created for her – she remains on this ground throughout her subsequent life experiences. Corey is depicted as a bar running alongside her whole story to indicate that he has been in her life for a long time and he did figure predominantly in her story. The map also indicates that Melanie spoke of work in many
forms – work that did not work, work that felt right, work paths not taken, healing as work, and future work possibilities. As I have spent more time with Melanie’s story and analysis I think, if I were to do her map again, I would place fear for her safety as the background of all of her experiences. This aspect of her story came very much to the foreground for me as I worked with the various layers of her data.

Melanie’s Themes

I was able to envision four themes within Melanie’s story that brought together her experiences of abuse and her work history: (a) having been defined by her abuse experiences, (b) her perceptions of being unsafe in the world of work, (c) paths not taken - opportunities lost, and (d) how healing became her work. Again, I am reminded of my reflections on Jeannie’s story and the aspects of her story she was not yet ready to see. At one time in Melanie’s life she certainly was not safe. Whether this continued to be true over the course of her work life and into her future is a question related to Melanie’s readiness to work. Melanie may continue to need support to see and challenge this perception.

Defined by abuse.

As I listened to Melanie’s taped interview, read through her transcript, studied her time-line drawing, and reflected on my field notes, an image that came strongly to my mind was that for so long, the very ground that Melanie’s stood on was the abuse. She alludes often to the many implications of her abuse experience – her lifelong eating disorder, relationship issues, questionable choices with work, and a sense of fear – the world was and is not a safe place for Melanie.
The way her abuse experiences defined her life is evident as she moves into the world of work. She is comfortable and feels safe at the coffee and tea place and yet she finds herself acting out – calling in sick, stealing, using drugs at work. At the postal outlet, she feels unsafe and does not like the way the men treat her but she is unable to be proactive and leave. When speaking of her work at the resort, she shares that, “I think that one of the major ways my abuse has affected work is in how I feel about myself and then how that translates to the type of work I have chosen and how that reinforces those feelings.” She chooses to work at cleaning, being around other people’s dirty things – she is an observer, standing on the outside of life looking in. “That explains a lot of my life and it comes from the sexual abuse and never feeling like I could really participate in my own life.” Later, working as a hostess at a steak house, issues related to her eating disorder emerge: “My whole life I had shied way from looking female, dressing in a certain way, like anything that would draw attention to me being female . . . well as a hostess that was expected. My issues with eating disorder, which I really hadn’t acknowledged or even begun to deal with at that time was huge.”

Abuse experiences also figure in Melanie’s relationship with her husband, Corey. On her first extended trip with him, away from home and family, memories of her childhood sexual abuse emerge. She shares that she made Corey the enemy as she tried to deal with these memories.

*Perceptions of being unsafe.*

Melanie defines her work life as having been guided by her strong attraction to unsafe work experiences that served to reinforce what she already felt about herself – that her purpose in life was to be used by others. Many of her work experiences are seen
through this lens – a paper route when she was nine years old becomes unsafe – out delivering papers all by herself. Working at a summer resort is defined as unsafe – a lodge out in the middle of nowhere with all these different people. At the time, she is not aware of the work being unsafe; it is only now that she sees this. “Now I see that I was choosing things that weren’t necessarily safe.” Whether or not Melanie was in any danger in any of these situations is irrelevant – this is what she perceives to have been her work experience.

*Paths not taken – opportunities lost.*

Melanie named many paths she was not able to take and many opportunities she felt she had missed. On her time-line drawing, these are depicted as small coloured spirals off to the side of her path. Going back to her time in high school she speaks of wishing that she could have had some encouragement to pursue types of work that might have suited her more – a camp counsellor perhaps. “If only someone could have reflected to me a belief in my value to do something different.” After high school, Melanie prepared to go into Social Work. Her grades were strong in this area but she did not go through with it. She reflects that even though the sexual abuse had not surfaced at that time, that may have been the subconscious reason behind her choice to not go down that path. “It is a path I could have taken – I wanted to take it – but something held me back.” Melanie shares that she feels many regrets about the opportunities she missed in terms of her relationship with her husband because of the sexual abuse issues she was dealing with. “I wish I could have allowed him to be my ally. When I look back, I think he could have done that, maybe not perfectly, not at first. He would have had things to learn but I think he could have done it.” Opportunities missed in the world of work figure largely in
Melanie’s story. “If I hadn’t had this idea that work was where I would get used and feeling like that was all I was good for . . . if I hadn’t had that idea maybe I could have chosen a different path with work.” She also reflects on how dealing with all the sexual abuse stuff meant she could not work full time and have access to the money necessary to pursue certain paths. “. . . maybe I could have just kept working somewhere and had the money to do some training – maybe then some of those other paths would have been possible.”

*Healing as her work.*

Very early in her interview Melanie makes a telling statement, “When I think about the question of abuse and work, in some ways I have started to perceive that my healing from the abuse is a big part of my work.” This became very evident as she shared her story with me. The healing work begins when she breaks free of her relationship with her husband Corey and moves alone into a small trailer on a friend’s land. “I remember I felt really, really safe there. It was a place to retreat to and I stayed there almost four years . . . it was the beginning of my healing work, a time to go inward and listen to my own rhythms.” Soon after this period, Melanie is able to qualify for disability and she begins working full-time on healing work. “This time has been a blessing in so many ways for me.” She goes into counselling and proceeds through many healing programs and experiences. Melanie’s healing work is seen as a means of connecting to so much: “I couldn’t have got to where I am now without having gone through the blackness and the searching and the healing. It was worthwhile, all of it.”
Melanie's Epiphany Experience

Melanie's moment of realization, her epiphany, is her discovery of the self she might become. Or even the multiple selves. She is very aware of the many paths she could take, although none seen strongly possible at this time. Even after many, many years and much time spent working to understand the meaning of the abuse experiences in her life, Melanie shared that she is still feeling quite stuck and the world is still a very unsafe place for her.

Melanie is currently doing volunteer work at a hospice. She is interested in doing a masters program in counselling, pursuing acupuncture, and staying open to what she is already doing with reiki. Her time-line drawing shows all the possibilities splashing out like a fountain of colour. “These lines that are branching off from my path in green and orange – they represent what might be in my future.” At the same time, she struggles to believe she is good enough. “It has been a hard journey to get to a place where I feel like I am enough, like, I am good enough . . . but like really believing that, not just in my head but in my heart and gut and then being able to act out of that belief . . . that has been such a long journey with so many layers.” Melanie still finds herself feeling she cannot do what she wants to do, that she is stuck with this thought running through her head. “All along the obstacles have felt too big, they have always felt too big.” Melanie shares that she knows she still has a long way to go and she still has a big piece of healing work to do. Her biggest challenge is gaining the confidence she feels she needs. “I am still sort of looking at my life through a lens of fear for my safety.”
Illustration 9: Melanie’s Concept Map
Cinnamon's Within-Participant Analysis

"I'm still in isolation in some ways... years of living like that takes a toll on you... part of me feels like anything I do, Calvin is going to come and destroy it in some way."

Cinnamon's Time-line Drawing and Concept-Map

Cinnamon began her time-line drawing (Illustration 5) about half-way through the interview. I introduced the drawing activity at this time because it seemed to be a natural place in the interview when Cinnamon would benefit by shifting away from talking to accessing another means of depicting her experiences. The time-line drawing allowed Cinnamon to share many more details of her actual work experiences and how these related to her abuse. In the first half of the interview, she dwelled almost exclusively on her marriage break-up, getting away and finding housing. This makes perfect sense, as these were issues that were close in time and very important before she could move on with any other aspect of her life, including work. Cinnamon's drawing shows her moving in an upward direction from her early home life as she embarks on the world of work. She then reaches a peak and seems to plunge down into a very deep valley. This represents her breakdown from overwork and her subsequent marriage. The marriage experience is depicted by a series of spiral lines. She begins to climb back up again as she leaves the marriage, finds housing, gets into the Bridges program and now looks to the future.

A theme related to Cinnamon's mother came up repeatedly as I listened to her audio tape and read her transcript. In the concept map (Illustration 10) I created for Cinnamon, I show her on a background formed by her mother and the messages she
seemed to take in while growing up. These messages and her relationship with her mother connect her to both her work and relationship experiences. I have also depicted, along the bottom and right-hand side of the map, Cinnamon’s struggle to find housing. As I have moved through the analysis of Cinnamon’s story and reflect on the map, I originally created, as with Melanie’s map, I would make a change. I would place Cinnamon’s current fear of men as the background to all her experiences in the present and her hopes for the future.

Cinnamon’s Themes

Cinnamon’s story generated four themes that connected her experiences of abuse with her experiences of work: (a) family of origin issues, (b) how these issues have influenced both work and marriage, (c) loss of confidence and belief in herself, and (d) Cinnamon’s current relationship with work.

Family of origin issues.

A dominant theme that emerged from Cinnamon’s story was her struggle to understand and deal with issues she was still carrying from her family of origin. She relates an uneasy relationship with her mother that continues to the present. Cinnamon has always tried to please her mother and this has had an impact on work and intimate relationships over her life span. Leaving home at seventeen, she still felt under her mother’s thumb and tells of acts of rebellion such as shaving her head of its long blonde hair and living a clandestine life hanging out on the streets, “... a way to break free that was just for me and no else in my family knew about it.” Cinnamon believes her mother knew something was not right in her (Cinnamon’s) marriage but they never talked about this and she makes sense of this in terms of the very traditional mindset that her
mother has and that she was raised with. “It’s the whole religious thing, you know . . . my background and my mom’s was very traditional . . . my mom wouldn’t have even had a way to get what was happening to me – talking about it would have been way beyond her comprehension . . . in her world there are no divorces – women stayed home with their kids, that was that.” These early experiences and family values created vulnerability for Cinnamon that connected, in her story, with later problems that included unhealthy choices in a work environment and an abusive marriage. These, in turn served to limit her work choices for the future, as the next section explains.

_Influence on work and relationship._

Cinnamon’s struggle to deal with issues from her early home life has had an influence, in her opinion, on her work life and her intimate relationships. Living out a script of trying to please her mother was transferred to her work life. “I was always trying to please the owner, it was his store and I was always trying to make it run smoother . . . I began to work longer and longer hours . . . I took a lot of stuff onto myself . . . it all got overwhelming, I had a breakdown, everything fell apart.” From this point of breakdown, she moved into a relationship with her future husband and shared a connection with between and her boss. “Somehow I wonder now if the owner [of the store] just set me up for what happened with Calvin . . . when I met Calvin I just sort of transferred all that over to him and just went on doing the same thing . . . that probably goes back to my mom and all the people pleasing too.” She talks about the links between what she went through in her marriage and what she went through in her childhood with her mother, “I guess you could say I married my mom.”
Cinnamon's experiences of abuse in her marriage reach out to influence what she can envision for herself now. She describes a marriage in which she was isolated— he did not like her to have friends or speak to her family on the phone or to work outside of the home. Now it is very hard for her to go out and connect with people. "I'm still in isolation in some ways... years of living like that takes a toll on you... part of me feels like anything I do, Calvin is going to come and destroy it in some way."

*Loss of confidence.*

For Cinnamon, what she has gone through is very much characterized, at this moment in her life, as what she has lost. She talks about how she used to be in a work situation. "I was one of those friendly cashiers that would drive you crazy... talking to everyone... that's all different now since the abuse." When she worked in management, she shares that she had a lot of confidence. She could attack problems and find solutions but now decision making is difficult. "I don't have much confidence in myself and my abilities anymore... confidence is a big challenge right now."

*Present relationship with work.*

Cinnamon's relationship with the world of work, in her present reality, is fraught with fear, reluctance, and distrust. She is just not ready. "I could get a job tomorrow but at the same time I can't get a job tomorrow." She is afraid to go back to work and this is linked to a distrust and fear of being around men. She speaks of using a return to school as a way to avoid this issue. "...going back to work, I'm just not ready. That is why I'm choosing school right now. I know there will be men at college too but they will be boys not men. I'm older and they're not going to be looking at an older woman... they're going to be looking at the eighteen-somethings... it seems like a safe route to me right
now.” Cinnamon shares that the pressure to get out and find work makes her feel as though she has moved from one controlling environment, her marriage to Calvin, to another. “I still feel like I don’t have a say. I have a bit more control but I’m still not calling the shots on my life and it’s frustrating.” In some ways it seems to her that she has simply exchanged Calvin’s running of her life for social services doing the same.

_Cinnamon’s Epiphany Experience_

Cinnamon’s story speaks to me of Frank’s (1993) description of the reluctant Phoenix, exhibiting little evidence of self-change in her story – no metaphors, no plan to become someone new, no radical reappraisal of the self. Her story remains quiet on these fronts and yet she is not silent. Frank writes that this process is one of continuing to work out the implications of what has occurred in one’s life.

I attribute Cinnamon’s reluctant status to the freshness of her experiences. At the time of the interview, she had been away from her abusive husband for only a little more than a year. She was still struggling to deal with issues of access between her husband and her children. She was only just beginning to grapple with what she saw as the reality of her abusive situation and the ways that was tied to her family of origin relationships and past work experiences. To name self-change seems to take a distance of time and space in which to reflect. This aspect of Cinnamon’s story also speaks to the need, for women who have been through abuse, to be ready for the services offered to them: to feel ready within themselves to move forward.

Cinnamon exhibits her need to continue working out the implications of her life when she shares, “I know I’ve been through a lot... I have some strengths and I know I
can survive. I’m sure hoping though that I’ve seen the worst . . . maybe I have
courage . . . I know that once I start something, I stick with it until I just can’t do it
anymore so I know I need to be aware of limitations.”
Illustration 10: Cinnamon's Concept Map
Illustration 11: Concept Map of Across Participant Themes

**Ability to Work**

1. **Meta-theme:**
   Long-term affects of abuse experiences
   - a. Internal feeling states: self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, identity
   - b. Lost opportunities: all the roads not taken skills, experiences, relationships all affected ability to work
   - c. Physical, mental, emotional health limitations
   - d. Silence and isolation
   - e. Loss of safety - readiness for change
   - f. Lack of adequate and affordable housing, relation to poverty

2. Bridges for Women Employment Program

3. Working for change in the world with other women and children
Across Participant Analysis

I have identified three across participant themes (Illustration 11). One is a meta-theme that acts an umbrella, under which many of the issues the women shared can be subsumed. The remaining two themes represent areas that all the participants alluded to in their stories.

1. Long-term effects of abuse, which include: (a) internal feeling states such as self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and identity, (b) lost opportunities, (c) physical, mental, and emotional health limitations, (d) silence and isolation, (e) loss of safety, and (f) lack of adequate and affordable housing, which links to issues of poverty.

2. The Bridges for Women Employment Program

3. Working for change in the world with women and children.

The long-term effects of abuse

Internal feeling states.

Mahoney (2003) writes about relationship with self as an aspect of constructivist psychotherapy. This self-relationship is not a fixed reality but one that is constantly under construction in an ongoing process. Each person engages in various activities to organize and make sense of his or her experiences in the process of constructing a relationship with self. This self-relationship is more than self-image or self-esteem – it is the essence of self-hood. It is personal identity or self-hood – a sense of one’s capacities, coherence, and general pattern of relationships. This relationship with self relates to Reber and Reber’s (2001) definition of identity as the person’s essential, continuous self.

Identity is another issue related to the meaning ascribed to work experiences. Savickas (1997) writes that work experiences form a major context in which people meet
their needs for agency, as well as creating a forum for individual identity and social significance. Experiencing the stories of these participants gave me a clear sense of the barriers these women face in terms of being able to find and maintain employment, a prerequisite for forging a work identity that is capable of providing an ongoing sense of agency. Isaacson and Brown (2000) state that work is the means of relating to society and it can provide status, recognition, and affiliation. Though work may come to serve these functions for some of these women, they did not speak of work in this way when they told their stories. Work was going to be something she had to figure out (Becky), something she had never done before but now knew she would have to do (Jeannie), something she would probably not be able to do ever again (Betty), something she could envision as many different paths but somehow felt blocked from actually going down any of those paths (Melanie), and something she had a great fear of at this time in her life (Cinnamon).

The ways in which relational aspects of self enter into the world of work is a theme for women who have experienced abuse. Schultheiss (2003) writes about the need to take an in-depth look at the role of relationship in one's life in order to determine how relationships influence one's work experiences. Townsend and McWhirter (2005) suggest that connectedness is often seen as a central organizing principle and a critical theme for women. When relationships with primary figures in one's life, such as parents, grandparents, teachers, and intimate partners have been so radically disrupted by abuse, as is the case in all of these women's stories, there will be an effect on work relations; problems will emerge with relationships and connections within the work space. Becky speaks of having to find ways to conceal her past relationships that have arisen out of
years spent within criminality. Jeannie is somewhat enmeshed in relationships that have been problematic for her. Betty has experienced so many abusive disruptions in her ability to form relationships that she is left with only a few friends who can support and understand what she has been through. Both Melanie and Cinnamon have experienced disruptions in key relationships to a degree that has seriously affected their sense of being safe in the world. All of these relational situations will have an influence on how they approach work situations and how they cope once they are in a work environment. These women’s stories indicate a need to provide access to supportive programs that emphasize social and work relating skills.

Self-esteem can be defined by the degree to which one values oneself (Reber & Reber, 2001). Schiradli (2001) relates self-esteem to a realistic (accurate and honest), appreciative (which implies positive) opinion of oneself. Rosenbloom and Williams (1999) state that positive self-esteem is the ability to think of oneself in a positive way, to feel an understanding and respect for oneself and an expectation that others will understand and respect one as well. Levels of self-esteem are linked to self-worth and self-confidence (Egan, 2002).

Rosenbloom and Williams (1999) write that abuse and trauma experiences have an effect on self-esteem and one’s basic sense of self-worth. The abuse experience can result in an unhealthy shame, which disrupts self-worth and does not serve to motivate one to change – instead it results in paralysis. The contradictory messages received in situations of abuse, especially when abuse is at the hands of someone close, result in a confused sense of one’s own worth (Burstow, 1992). Low self-esteem is the most
significant barrier to employability and the barrier that contributes the most to lower levels of self-efficacy (Brown et al., 2000).

Bandura (1995) defined self-efficacy as the belief in one’s capability to organize and execute a course of action required to manage a particular situation. This influences how one thinks, feels, and is motivated to act. People will act if they feel they have the wherewithal to be successful, to achieve a desired outcome. Employment success is related to high levels of self-efficacy (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Gianakos, 1999) and the literature indicates that abuse lowers these levels (Brown et al., 2000; Chronister & McWhirter). Ibrahim and Herr (1997) state that sustaining a healthy self-concept under the circumstances of abuse is almost impossible.

Issues of identity, self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence, and self-efficacy are related concepts. In some cases women referred to these issues directly and in other cases the evidence was there, though the women did not specifically speak the above words. Becky shared her distorted sense of self-worth due to her experiences in the sex-trade. Burstow (1992) directly relates the contradictory messages of abuse with effect on one’s self-worth. Betty talks, quite poignantly, of how she had no self-worth; she thought she was the scum of the streets. Low self-esteem is a consistent finding among women who have histories of abuse (Accessing Violence Against Women, 2002; Bala, 1998; Sleutel, 1998). Cinnamon compares her confidence levels now with how she saw herself in the past and she feels she has lost so much. Melanie described the ways in which abuse destroyed her sense of herself as capable of following certain employment paths in her life. As Bandura (1995) writes, when self-efficacy is low one will not choose paths with outcomes one does not feel capable of achieving. Jeannie did not employ terms such as
self-esteem, confidence or worth. The parts of her story that I have interpreted as “doing things just for herself” and the struggle that has been for her, speak to me of her lack of a clear sense of her own self-efficacy in the world.

Lent et al. (2003) state that Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) explains how individual, contextual, and environmental factors affect one’s perceived sense of self-efficacy. This in turn affects the type of work situations one will approach and how one will manage these work situations. When SCCT is applied directly to women’s work experiences, areas such as social supports, barriers, past experiences, and self-efficacy can be applied directly to how these experiences unfold. Chronister and McWhirter (2003) have gone one step further to apply this theory directly to women who have been the target of domestic abuse and they find that for these women learning experiences have been limited, opportunities to succeed in education and career are low, and fear, anxiety, and depression influence self-efficacy and future expectations. This literature speaks very directly to several of the participant’s experiences. Becky relates that school was very difficult for her due to abuse at home and her future expectations were quite skewed based on the negative messages of verbal abuse she took in. For Betty, school was also a problem due to childhood abuse issues and depression was a major factor in her life. Both Melanie and Cinnamon speak of fear as a major factor in their lives now.

Lost Opportunities.

Three of the women spoke of lost opportunities and paths related to work they could not travel due to their abuse experiences. Both Becky and Jeannie’s stories speak to the issue of not having the skills and experiences for going out and getting a job. Becky had many work experiences but she had never had to apply for a job or go on a job
interview and she did not have work experiences she felt she could honestly write-up on a resume. These aspects of gaining employment were stressful and depicted as a black cloud of unknowing on her time-line drawing. Chronister and McWhirter (2003) report that job interview situations can create panic for women who have experienced abuse as this may relate to having to answer personal questions that are uncomfortable or having to explain problematic job histories. This relates very clearly to Becky’s experience. She shared how her life might have been very different if she had not had the experiences she had – she would be walking out with her head held high and feeling proud of her resume.

Jeannie had simply never needed to work outside the home. Barry had always gone out and made the money and she just assumed her life would continue on that path. Women with abuse histories often come from backgrounds that are characterized by rigid gender stereotypes around work-role attitudes (Brown et al., 2000). For Jeannie this related to the fact that Barry would go out and make the money and she would be at home with Lionel. Jeannie simply never envisioned a time when she would have to look after herself, financially, and this was a scary thought for her now.

Melanie lost significant opportunities to pursue work that might have better suited her because, in her opinion, she did not receive the support to look at other options. She also relates the ways in which abuse experiences blocked educational opportunities in her story about not finishing courses in social work. Her sense of herself as “garbage” and her pattern of choosing only work that would reaffirm this belief blocked many other work experiences. She also speaks about the time involved in healing and how this has meant lost chances to sustain employment over time and save money that could have gone toward education.
Long-term physical and mental health issues.

Betty and Melanie had been able to qualify for disability and this ensured them an ongoing, somewhat higher income and a respite from the need to show they were actively looking for work. Betty spoke of serious long-term physical and mental health issues that arose from her abuse experiences. Women who have experienced domestic violence are three times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental or physical health problem (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003). Betty had not had a paying job, in twelve years; and it is unlikely, in view of her fragile state, that paid employment is part of her future. Betty’s experience is consistent with Raphael and Tolman’s (1997) research that indicates one-third of surveyed women who had experienced domestic abuse reported chronic long-term health issues. Due to her loss of physical fitness and health, Betty will never realize her life long dream of working with animals as a veterinary assistant.

Women are vulnerable to a number of psychological and mental health conditions due to domestic violence and the long-term affects of childhood abuse. Many studies indicate a link between childhood abuse, domestic violence, and addiction issues (Bala et al., 1998; Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Reitsma-Street et al., 2001; Ullman & Brecklen, 2003; Wells, 1994). This profile fits with Betty’s struggle to deal with her pain, both physical and emotional, by self-medicating with alcohol.

Melanie speaks of spending the past eight years working full-time on her own healing and though she has many dreams of what she might do in terms of work in the future she also reports feeling very stuck and unable to move on. The emotional effects of her abuse experiences still have a powerful hold on her. Melanie continues to experience
a number of stress reactions and these of themselves create further barriers to employment for her (Gianakos, 1999).

*Silence and isolation.*

I heard evidence of the silence and isolation that abuse can create for women in Jeannie, Betty, Melanie and Cinnamon’s stories. Belenky et al., (1986) describe this silencing as being powerless, isolated, and having no voice; Phillips and Daniluk (2004) write that women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse report feeling different, alone, and invisible. Silence for many women with abuse histories has ensured survival but has also meant isolation from self and others (Wells, 1994). Jeannie exhibited being voiceless when she asked Barry to leave, told people they were not back together, ended her relationship with Ted – her story indicates she was not heard. She also shared examples of isolation after Barry had left – all the friends they had they had in common, she had never had to make friends on her own. Betty’s severely abusive husband separated her from all relationships, both work and social. Cinnamon’s husband also separated her from her friends and created a long-term problem for Cinnamon in terms of trusting people and making new contacts – she is always feeling he will step in somehow and ruin things for her. Melanie’s struggle, within the actual interview, to find words to describe her experiences seemed an aspect of silencing; and her sense of being different and isolated in her experience is clear in her depiction of her various work experiences.

*Loss of a sense of being safe in the world.*

In Judith Herman’s (1997) recovery from trauma model, re-establishing a sense of being safe in the world is the first stage of recovery. She writes that the transition from this stage to the next stage of remembering what has happened and mourning losses is
gradual and occurs in fits and starts. Little by little, the person regains a sense of safety and predictability in her life and she comes to see she can count on herself and others she may still be wary and guarded but she no longer feels completely isolated or vulnerable.

A dominant theme in both Melanie and Cinnamon’s stories is their fear and the way in which they no longer feel safe in the world, including the world of work. Cinnamon’s relationships, starting with her mother and continuing to her relationships on the job and in her marriage, were characterized by her need to keep the peace. She talks about how her mother was a shouter and she learned early to do what she was told. This made her vulnerable to an employer who demanded too much and later to a husband who never had to lay a hand on her – all he had to do was raise his voice. Gianakos (1999) writes that adaptation to abusive experiences made in childhood can have serious affects on a woman’s emotional development. This relates to intimate and work relationships and may emerge as an inability to be assertive. Cinnamon’s experiences of abuse at the hands of her husband have created a disabling fear of men that is interfering in her ability to function in a work setting. Wells (1994) writes of the extreme boundaries that women may have to create in order to deal with their fears. Cinnamon is going as far as to place herself in a college situation rather than return to work because she thinks that all the men there will be younger and not interested in a woman of her age. This is perceived as a safe choice although it is not necessarily a realistic expectation.

Melanie’s loss of a sense of being safe in the world is pervasive and has become a lens through which she views all experiences, both past and present. Chronister and McWhirter (2003) describe what happens to a woman when abuse has robbed her of
control of her life and her body; she becomes quite powerless to move about in the world with confidence. Powerlessness can lead to an inability to make employment choices, a lack of the ability to be assertive, and a tendency to relinquish power (Wells, 1994). Burstow (1992) writes that feeling powerless can result in eating disorders. Melanie speaks of a life-long struggle with an eating disorder and as she speaks of all the things she might be able to do she exhibits difficulty in being able to choose a path for her future. Melanie’s story seems to fit with Herman’s (1997) notion that the movement from the stage one recovery process of safety is gradual and occurs over time.

*Issues related to housing.*

Three of the women I interviewed had gone through long waiting periods in order to obtain safe housing. Jeannie spent some time living in a motel before she could access BC Housing – a subsidized housing program available to those with low-incomes living in the Capital Regional District. Betty lived on the street as a homeless person while waiting to be able to qualify for social assistance. From there she lived in subsidized housing and after severe mental health issues she was only able to function living in a group home environment. She is now able to access supportive housing in which she lives independently in her own apartment and is supported and checked on by others. Melanie went from a Transition facility to a motel, with her two children. From the motel, she was placed in secondary housing and from there she finally qualified for BC Housing.

Low income women experience major difficulties meeting basic housing needs and there is a serious lack of supportive housing for women who have been victims of various forms of abuse (Reitsma-Street et al., 2001). Humphreys and Lee (1999) write
that a social stigma is often attached to low-income housing. Many women report witnessing violence that results in high levels of fear and discomfort. If adequate housing is not available, women face increased pressure to stay in abusive situations or to go back to them. There is also an impact, in terms of stress levels, security, and stability that can affect a woman’s ability to work (Reitsma-Street et al., 2001). Abused women consistently rate issues regarding housing, affordable childcare, and transportation as their priorities (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003), which indicates how much these issues affect them. The three women I interviewed were all very pleased with their placements in subsidized housing and viewed this as a major turning point in reconstructing their lives, though the struggle to get there was a long one.

*The Bridges for Women Employment Program*

Gianakos (1999) contends those women who have experienced abuse need opportunities to learn about themselves, the world of work, and the options they might have for their future. Wells (1994) writes that simply learning skills is not enough for this population of women. Understanding the context of their abuse and how it has influenced their decision-making is also important (Belknap, 1999). Elliot and Reitsma-Street (2003) argue against programs that pressure vulnerable women to take any job that comes along without addressing the significant stresses and barriers they women face in the world of work.

The Bridges for Women Employment Program was an experience all the participants shared and they spoke of the program as being a very positive time for them. For Becky, Bridges was great but not quite enough. “A girlfriend and I decided that we were going to chain ourselves to the door on the day of graduation.” She reflected on the
fact that the program had been cut back from nine months to six and that because of that they no longer had actual interview practice, which would have been a great benefit for her. “You’re trying to cram in a whole bunch of stuff in six months and thank God for the women at Bridges – they helped me so much. I’m sure not denying that. They bring you to a point but I guess for me that point wasn’t quite far enough.” Becky speaks of feeling very empty after the program ended. She also reflects on her experience of being with other women at Bridges and how this has been very powerful for her.

Jeannie approached the Bridges program with some trepidation because she knew a program like Bridges would require her to talk about her abuse experiences. “I didn’t think I’d ever do some of the things in my life that I’ve done – like go to Bridges - just because you have to talk about things that happened to you.” The program turned out to be positive for Jeannie and through Bridges, she was able to make contact with the First Nations educational program she is now a part of. She was also able to explore the option of becoming a First Nations Residential Care worker and that is now a hope she has for her future. The program definitely opened doors for Jeannie and gave her a safe place to begin to speak about her abuse experiences.

Betty describes Bridges as a turning point for her. “It really is an amazing program . . . when I talked in the interview of what had happened to me in the past one of the women said it really made her angry – that I went through those things. I didn’t get it – why should she be angry. I wasn’t angry then – what they were saying seemed foreign . . . it was at Bridges that I first really started thinking that what happened to me wasn’t my fault and it wasn’t normal.” Through Bridges, Betty was able to access counselling to deal specifically with her childhood abuse issues. Betty also talked about
the ways in which Bridges helped her think about what she wants from her life now. She has used Bridges as a jumping off point to other career exploration and life skills training opportunities. Bridges continues to be a welcoming and supportive place for her. “I pop into Bridges every now and then just to say Hi. It is a really good place that way.”

For Melanie, the Bridges Program was one of a number of programs she accessed as part of on her healing journey. Aside from mentioning the Program as she created her time-line, Melanie did not speak specifically of her time at Bridges.

Cinnamon alludes to the Bridges program often in her interview. The program was suggested to her by social assistance. She shares that she went through the program and she gained a lot. She also speaks about the challenges: “At first I was quite nervous . . . there were only going to be women and a big group of women too. I’d always been sort of led to believe that in groups of women there can be a lot of nastiness.” This did not turn out to be the case and Cinnamon attributes this to the great bunch of women she did the program with – they supported each other and because they had all been through so much together, a real bond was created among them. Cinnamon also speaks to the personal challenges she experienced in the program. “In many ways it was too early for me to be there . . . I was really out of touch with things like anger management and sexual abuse and things like that . . . a lot of the women had really awful stories and I could see that some of what they were talking about had happened to me too . . . I hadn’t dealt with any of this stuff and then going through the program and dealing with all this other stuff was hard . . . I really learned a lot but it was hard.” The focus of the second half of the program was especially frustrating for Cinnamon. “I didn’t want to think about interviews
– I didn’t want to get out there – I don’t want to go back to work . . . I’m not ready . . . I saw how limited in where I could go and what I could do I really was .”

The consensus from the four women who spoke of The Bridges for Women Employment Program was that it was a supportive and enabling environment. Working with other women, having the opportunity to explore options, and being in an accepting place with other women all play a role. Parts of the women’s stories do speak to the need for extending the program and for a careful examination of readiness to attend such a program.

*Working for Change in the World*

Dass and Gorman (1985) describe coming to terms with suffering as a process of opening oneself to the experience and inevitably moving to compassion. There is a realization that compassion comes from understanding one’s own suffering. Herman (1997) writes that the final stage of recovery from abuse and trauma is the desire to reconnect – this is in fact the core of recovery. Some women may adopt, what Herman describes as a survivor mission. They feel called upon to engage in changing the wider world in some way. They focus their energy on helping others who have experienced similar abuse as a possible means of transcending their own experience and gaining personal power.

All five of the participants spoke directly of their desire to work for change in the world, specifically with other women and children. For Becky this has to do with social work and helping other women get out of abusive situations. She is also determined to make a difference in the way women speak about each other. She sees no reason women should take on the derogatory male terminology that is so prevalent in the media when
speaking about one another. Jeannie had managed, through everything that happened to her, to maintain a volunteer position of working with single moms and she experienced this to be a safe and beneficial place for her. She also looked forward to working with seniors in the First Nations Residential Care Program. Betty shared a very well-thought out plan to create a soup kitchen once a month for women and children. Experiences of feeling unsafe in such situations have created a desire to provide other women and children with a safe place to be together. Melanie spoke of her desire to carry on with her education and pursue a career in counselling. She also volunteers at a hospice. Cinnamon spoke quite passionately of the need for schools to begin teaching children conflict resolution skills and how to stand up for themselves in an effective manner. This was in direct response to her reflections on her own lifelong struggle to find her voice and stand up for herself.

Summary of Chapter Five

Chapter Five began with outlining how I planned to carry out within-participant analysis using Frank’s (1993) rhetoric of self-change model and the identification of themes within each participant’s story. Participant stories evoked anywhere from four to six separate themes. This section also included brief reflections on the participants’ timeline drawings and the concept maps. The next section of the chapter contained a review of three across participant themes, one of which was a major meta-theme, and linked these to the literature on the intersection of abuse and work experiences for women.

Chapter Six will further discuss important themes and highlights of this research. It will also examine implications for research, for career counsellors working with women who have experienced abuse, and for policy makers who will decide on the type
of supports and services these women will be able to access. I will explore my own personal learning in respect to being a qualitative researcher and end with final comments.
Chapter Six – Concluding Comments

Chapter Six will cover important overarching meta-themes I have identified in the research findings. I will then present various implications of this research related to qualitative methodology in general and narrative research in particular, the limitations of my research, the issue of participant feedback, what this research contributes to a body of research knowledge, and future research options. I will also outline several implications of the research in reference to career counsellor practice, including a discussion of constructivist counselling and issues related to complex trauma. Implications will be rounded out by an examination of what policy makers, who provide support for women who have experienced abuse, need to be aware of, in light of the stories my participants have told. I have provided a section that speaks of my personal learning as a researcher and the chapter will conclude with some final comments.

Overarching Meta-themes

I have identified three overarching themes from the research findings: (a) the large role that losses of various types played in the lives of the participants and the ways in which this has affected and continues to affect their ability to work, (b) the ways in which a social constructivist approach to career applies to women who have experienced abuse, and (c) readiness for change.

Multiple Losses

As has been described in the within-participant and across participant analysis, loss plays a significant role in the lives of the women I interviewed. In the final process of analysis for this research, I began to see the major meta-theme entitled the long-range effects of abuse experiences as being related to loss. The losses are wide ranging and
diverse but all have a direct or indirect effect on the women’s ability to work. Loss of health, both physical and mental or emotional, has a very direct effect on ability to work. This was clear in Betty’s story. Loss of emotional well-being and mental health figured largely in Melanie’s story.

Loss of valuable educational and earlier work experiences played a large role in blocking work opportunities and options. Becky shared having had a difficult time with school due to what was happening at home and she did not have any “getting work” experience that she could use at the age of thirty-seven when she needed to go out and get a job. Betty ran away from home at a very early age and by ending up homeless and on the street; her educational options were seriously compromised. Melanie speaks about not being able to pursue educational opportunities because of her abuse. Cinnamon left home before graduating and had to finish Grade twelve through night school classes.

Abuse compromised relationship choices. Would Betty have chosen her “crazy” husband if she had not experienced early childhood abuse? Would Cinnamon have ended up with Calvin if she had not been trying to live out a script of people pleasing? Would Becky have been targeted by Mr. X, or later entered into a relationship with Sam if her earlier abuse experiences had not made her vulnerable to just such revictimization? This cycle of early abuse experiences leading to revictimization over the life-span is explored more below in the section on counsellor implications. The cumulative effects of these abuse experiences have direct impacts on work ability and choices.

Abuse experiences resulted in a serious loss of a sense of safety in the world in general but also in terms of the world of work. Cinnamon is convinced she cannot go back out and work at this time because of her fear of men. Melanie has seen her world as
unsafe for so long that it is hard for her to act on the many dreams and options she can envision because she cannot help but pay attention to all the fearful aspects of work. Becky has many skills and abilities that could be well utilized in any number of job environments and she recognizes that she is actually an over-achiever when it comes to being in a job situation, yet she is terrified of entering this unfamiliar world.

*Social Constructivist Approach to Career*

Loss of health, loss of opportunities, and loss of feeling safe can contribute to a lower level of self-efficacy. These women’s abuse experiences directly affected their sense of being capable agents in the world, able to envision various possible career paths or educational opportunities, and to pursue those options. Stories of feeling incapable of going to an interview, of presenting a resume to an employer, of talking about one’s ability to do a job, of having lost the necessary confidence to problem-solve on the job all indicates a compromised self-efficacy.

A social constructivist approach to career, that emphasizes the whole person in the ever changing context of her or his life (Peavy, 1995; Savickas, 1995) provides an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the five women I interviewed for this research. It is not hard to visualize the ways in which their life contexts had influenced how they understood work. Their stories illustrate the interaction of the many factors involved in approaching, making, and maintaining work choices. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 2000) fits particularly well with the stories of the participants in this research. In each of their stories it was obvious that they brought many issues related to cognitive and personal variables (i.e. past performances, emotionality, vicarious learning, and verbal persuasions) from the past, most of which had affected
their sense of self-efficacy, into their present reality of having to negotiate the world of work. SCCT also emphasizes contextual and environmental factors. An upbringing that emphasized traditional sex-role stereotypes (Cinnamon), an identity formed through adolescence by a verbally abusive father (Becky), and a sense that work was an arena in which you were used like a piece of garbage (Melanie), create very real and specific contexts for the women who are living with these past experiences. An emphasis on context also allows us to focus on issues surrounding relationship.

Many authors quoted in the literature for this research have argued that a woman’s context is relational. SCCT contends that this context is part of what one brings to the world of work. Although this may not be true for all women, for the women that do fit this model, it is logical to make an assumption; when primary relationships have been radically disrupted by abuse experiences there is going to be an effect on all areas related to work. The ability to envision work choices, to enter the arena of “getting a job”, to negotiate work relationships, and to be able to maintain work are all going to be influenced by experiences of abuse. This was certainly the story for all the participants in this research.

Readiness for Change

In all of the participant’s stories the issue of being ready for various experiences emerged. Becky spoke of many fears but she ended on a note of hope and readiness to move forward. Jeannie was at a stage of envisioning possibilities for herself but her story seemed to indicate a need for more time and support before she would be able to move forward with a sense of self-efficacy. Betty’s story indicated a readiness to enter the Bridges program; she was able to hear and integrate the messages she received about not
being to blame for what happened to her and to take advantage of counselling opportunities in relation to her abuse experiences. Melanie had accessed many support and healing programs before coming to Bridges but her story indicates that she was still not ready to move forward. Cinnamon admits that the Bridges program came too soon for her – she was not yet ready for this experience and it was a struggle for her. She experienced the program as positive but attributes that to the supportive group of women with whom she shared the program. Being ready to access specific support experiences is crucial for the success of these endeavours. As is seen in these women’s stories; readiness is a complex process when recovering from abuse experiences.

*Implications of a Qualitative Research Approach*

I believe that taking a qualitative approach, using a narrative methodology to hear and relate the stories of these five women represents a valuable contribution to a body of research on women survivors’ experiences of work. The stories are rich in detail and depth of experience and though not generalizable to other women, they represent a powerful statement about the ways these five women have understood and made meaning out of the intersection of their abuse and work experiences. I think this research also contributes to our understanding of the types of long-term targeted support women who have abuse histories require and I do believe that the stories of my participants add to a body of research literature on the topic of women survivors’ experiences of work.

The research carried out in this study shares the limitations of similar in-depth qualitative interview studies. I have taken a focused approach to the experience of five women. This type of research does not produce generalizability. I can make no sweeping statements about the experiences of all women survivors of abuse and how this has
affected their ability to obtain and maintain work. Each of the five women I interviewed shared a unique story. No two had the same set of experiences though there were similarities across participants and their stories did fit with other research and writing, both quantitative and qualitative.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe the qualitative researcher as a quilt maker—stitching, editing, and putting slices of reality together. This metaphor is taken up by Flannery (2001) when she writes that doing qualitative research is like quilting in that the researcher is not only bringing together bits of pieces of information to create a satisfying whole, but is also working to a defined pattern and in a communal context. This metaphor for qualitative research points to the intense involvement of the researcher in the process of doing research. I have found this both incredibly challenging and very rewarding. As Mason (2002) writes, “Qualitative research is exciting and important. It is a highly rewarding activity because it engages us with things that matter, in ways that matter” (p. 1). When first exposed to the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research, I found myself thinking that I had prepared my whole life to be just this kind of researcher. My personal ontology is relativist—realities are multiple and socially constructed; my epistemology is subjectivist - the researcher is part of the process. I make no claims to objectivity in my research endeavours. I am part of the process – I am situated in and proceeding from a very particular stance.

**Narrative Methodology**

In choosing narrative as a method, I brought another of my deeply held beliefs to my research – we live and make meaning of our lives through stories – we are storied beings – that is all we are, as Thomas King (2003) writes in his book, *The truth about*
stories. In conducting research in relation to the question of the intersection of abuse and work experiences, I found the narrative interview to be an excellent method of having women talk and describe their experiences in the form of a story. The open-ended question employed to begin the interview\(^9\) appeared to be helpful in putting the participants into a narrative frame of mind. As Chase (2005) writes, the participant must be willing to take up the invitation to become a narrator of her life experience.

Early in my research, before I had any participants recruited, I recall being told by another researcher who had done sensitive topic interviews that participants need to tell their story of suffering before they will relate that story to any other experience. I found the time-line drawing to be a useful research tool and a good complement to a narrative method, in terms of facilitating some participants to tell their story. I was able to probe for many details and examples of storied experience while the participant worked on the time-line. It also became useful as a finished product, on the table between us, as a touch point for further reflection. I also found it to be helpful for some participants when trying to gather and express their thoughts. In the context of a sensitive topic interview, the opportunity to switch from a purely verbal way of expressing oneself can also provide valuable distance from what has been experienced; a “break” from a more intense interview process.

I found the use of Rhodes (2000) ghostwriting method a rich source of entering into the relational space of the story (Frank, 2000) in a very real and concrete way. Working in the first person to hear and shape the story gave me closeness to the words

\(^9\) When you heard me say that this research was about abuse and work and asked if you had a story to tell around that – you said yes. What did you think of when you heard me ask that question – what came into your mind?
and experiences of my participants that I do not think I would have had working only from the transcript.

I also found narrative and ghostwriting to be challenging activities. The very nature of narrative is nebulous in many ways. I was often unsure, as demonstrated by my field notes and self-reflexive journal entries, as to whether I was actually “doing” narrative research or “conducting” a narrative interview that would answer my research question. Chase (2005) speaks to this when she writes that the very act of inviting a story is one of not knowing what one will evoke, in oneself or in the participant. Ghostwriting was challenging because I found myself in a constant process of questioning – do I have the authority to write in this way? Is it all right for me to move from what I heard in a participant’s words in terms of metaphor into actually creating a story based on that? Narrative researchers need to view themselves as narrators as well, and the researcher develops her own voice as she shapes the voices of others (Chase). That is, ultimately, what narrative research does. I have also realized that all research writing is in a sense ghostwriting.

There are limitations to the approach I have taken within this thesis, even within a qualitative paradigm, which need to be mentioned. The women’s stories were their stories and though there is no need for me, within narrative methodology and qualitative research, to prove the “truth” of what they said, I am aware that they chose to tell what they told and I decided what to include. My subjectivity played a role in the production of the ghostwritten stories and the subsequent analysis.

Asking women to speak of the intersection of their abuse and work experiences, in the form of narrative, raises an important point that Chase (2005) names as the
trauma/interview culture we live in. Personal narratives of traumatic experiences abound in our society. We cannot deny that people, including our participants, are being shaped by the outpourings of trauma stories heard daily in the media— from news programming, through talk shows, and reality TV. The media is very adept at making it appear as though this is the person’s truth and in his or her own words. It is difficult for the viewer to comprehend that the story is a construction and as a construction is more about context, situation, and audience than it is about any type of “truth”. Chase warns that we must not be fooled into thinking that people reveal their “authentic selves” simply because they are speaking in their own voice of their experiences. Selves and voices are mediated by social context and participants come to the interview situation already formed in what this dynamic should entail.

I found Chase’s (2005) discussion on the trauma/interview culture helpful to keep in mind while listening to my participants tell their stories and conducting the analysis for this research. I found it important to remember that the story being told came through a particular person’s context with all their lenses, defenses, and social encounters firmly intact. Each of the five women who sat down with me were well versed in a cultural context that includes the way in which one is to tell of their trauma experiences and what an interview is supposed to be like. I do not doubt their authenticity and commitment to tell their story in their own unique way and at the same time I was able to keep Chase’s contention, that selves and voices are mediated by social context, in mind.

*Participant Feedback*

Moving through the process of gathering my data and through analysis, I viewed the feedback components I had tried to build into my research as very important. My
transcriber was generous in her feedback and her suggestions added to the clarity of the ghostwritten stories. I had far less success with participant feedback. Repeated phone messages, emails, and a mail out to four of the participants of the actual stories resulted in feedback from only one of the women. The email address given to me by the fifth participant had expired and her phone was no longer in service so I could not contact her for permission to send along her story by mail. As I reflect on this lack of response, I wonder if this is an aspect of the context specific nature of a research interview. These women came to my home during the latter part of November 2005 and spoke of their lives and their experiences at this one unique moment in time. Perhaps the stories were no longer relevant in the Spring of 2006. Perhaps revisiting what they had shared was not easy. Perhaps they felt I had represented them in a way that fit with their own recollections of the interview and had nothing more to add. I am left with many speculations and no answers.¹⁰

*Future Research Options*

In terms of future research, I am curious about the fact that these women were all removed from their abuse experiences for a minimum of a year – for some it had been much longer. Yet they still struggled with many long-term effects related to the abuse they had experienced. A possible direction of future research would be to investigate time away from the abuse situation and how women are coping as time goes by. Many services are available to women in the immediate aftermath of leaving an abusive

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¹⁰ Just prior to the defense (July 2006), I received a call from Becky. She explained that, upon reading the story I had mailed to her, she felt somewhat shattered by the way it appeared in print. She said, “I didn’t really realize, at the time, what I was saying and then I saw it in print and I felt a bit overwhelmed”. Having heard this feedback from Becky I am aware that in any subsequent research with participant feedback I will build into the process more safety for the participant; perhaps a subsequent one-on-one interview to go over the story.
situation. I am wondering about the type of services they need and have available to them as time goes by. It is clear from the stories my participants shared that the effects of abuse do not disappear, even after initial supports have been exhausted. A possible quantitative approach might include a survey that would assess a wider range of participants in terms of services they have received, services they receive now, and services they still feel they require. I would also be interested in exploring a related theme in respect to the issue of readiness for change, the services available to women, and when is the best time to access these services. This research could include both qualitative and quantitative components. Issues around the types of assessments that might help determine when a woman who has experienced abuse is actually ready to access various services could be explored.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Counselling Practice

Counselling women about career and work choices is counselling in the context of their whole lives – work is rooted in life. Current theorists, such as Amundson (2003), recognize this. Blustein et al.'s (2005) contention that work is embedded in complex layers of social, cultural, and political factors points to a need for counsellors to consider how these layers and contexts have affected all areas of a woman’s life. The social constructivist career model makes it clear that life-context matter (Peavy, 1995). Women who have experienced abuse bring a specific context to any counselling setting.

My experience of being a trauma counsellor prepared me to hear the abuse stories that my participants related. What I have learned, doing trauma counselling, is the importance of this story, but also the ways in which this story interacts with everything else that is happening in a woman’s life. This was mirrored in my experience of being a
qualitative researcher using narrative methodology in the present research. A
constructivist framework for counselling is well suited to helping counsellors recognize
how experiences of abuse have influenced other important areas of a woman’s life.

Mahoney (2003) writes that a constructivist therapist experiences clients as
intentional agents in their own lives; as active in their own meaning-making process;
afloat in a web of relationships while moving along with the very individual streams of
their own lives. The practice of constructivist counselling fits well with my own
experience of working with women who have experienced abuse and with what I heard in
the participants’ stories. Mahoney contends that the constructivist counsellor works to
collaborate and facilitate the client as an agent in her own life, holds affirmation and hope
for the client at times when she may not be able to, and comes to understand and know
the client from within her own belief system – the very unique ways she understands and
makes meaning from within her own life.

Constructivist counselling also conceptualizes human experience as complex, a
lifelong experiment in which the client is neither a prisoner of the past nor totally free to
choose any future path (Mahoney, 2003). This explanation of constructivist counselling
serves as a bridge from what I heard in the participants’ stories to some of the newest
research on complex trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006). All five of the women I interviewed
described complex life situations and though, as a counsellor, I am committed to the
belief that people do change and that I can facilitate change. I am also aware of
Mahoney’s comment: clients are not prisoners of their past but at the same time they are
not totally free to choose any path. I believe this relates to the nature of complex trauma
in some of these women’s lives.
John Briere and Catherine Scott (2006) in their latest book, *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluations, and treatment*, describe complex trauma as severe, prolonged, and repeated trauma that takes on a chronic, developmental etiology. Though not recognized by the DSM-IV, Briere and Scott write that complex trauma is the result of a wide range of outcomes that vary from person to person as a function of one’s unique trauma exposure; for example age of first trauma experience, issues related to disrupted attachment, and subsequent revictimization. Childhood abuse issues can lead to maladaptive adolescent behaviour (substance abuse, inappropriate sexual behaviour, ongoing emotional or mental health issues) which in turn result in vulnerability to additional victimization, which leads to further responses and behaviours leading in turn further risk.

When working with this population it is important that counsellors have an understanding of the complex nature of trauma, especially as it may relate to early childhood exposure to traumatic experiences. Although Betty’s story was severe in terms of the cumulative nature of her trauma experiences and the ways in which they made her vulnerable for further victimization, this story is in no way unusual. My own experience of trauma counselling was that these were the types of stories I heard the most. The types of cumulative abuse that many of my participants shared form a life context that influenced all areas of their lives, including their ability to work. By recognizing that career counselling is counselling for life, counsellors realize that to facilitate readiness for work many issues need to be addressed.
Policy Making

The literature and the individual women's stories support the need for long-term targeted support for women who have experienced abuse and are now moving toward re-entering the world of work. Although the Bridges for Women Employment Program was a positive experience for all the women I interviewed, two did speak of issues related to the program not being long enough. Moe and Bell (2004) write that programs aimed at addressing the disadvantages faced by women who have had to leave violent spousal relationships need to offer vocational training, education, employment coaching and support, housing, childcare, legal advice, assistance with welfare, and skills training for independent living. Bandura (1995) writes that to develop higher levels of self-efficacy programs must concentrate on skills, corrective and positive feedback, success experiences as reinforcers, and encouragement. Ibrahim and Herr (1987) write that women need help to develop interpersonal skills and Avery, et al. (2000) stresses the need for assertiveness skills.

These types of targeted programs need, by their very nature, to be holistic in the ways they view women. Models of empowerment, such as the one suggested by Chronister and McWhirter (2003) emphasize: (a) collaboration between facilitators and clients, (b) paying attention to context which includes educational levels, attitudes to work, effects of abuse on this particular woman, family demands, culture, economics, and access to community supports, (c) an active process of recognizing the skills and resources the woman already has, (d) helping women become critical thinkers about their own life situations and move toward exercising more personal agency, and (e) connecting women with the wider community.
There is a need to pay close attention to factors of readiness for change in a woman’s life. If certain types of employment programs are offered before women are ready they may not be able to take advantage of the opportunities for education and skill development being offered. This readiness is related to a process of recovery from abuse experiences that is hard to place on a specific timeline. Lock step programs that focus on one particular model of career preparation or readiness may not work for this population of women. Appropriate assessment and programs designed to meet individual women’s needs would seem to make the most sense. The stories of the five participants in this study indicate different profiles of readiness that is unrelated to the time away from abusive experiences. Some of the women would benefit from supportive employment internship programs, others are still in need of counselling to deal with the long-term effects of abuse, and yet others may need to enter into the world of employment and concentrate on the healing personal work involved in abuse recovery later.

Policy makers must also pay attention to the critical issue that access to safe and affordable housing is for women who are attempting to rebuild their lives. Ensuring that women can find this type of housing is an essential component of their safety and the safety of their dependent children (Moe & Bell, 2004). Reitsma-Street, et al. (2001) in extensive research directed at housing issues and policy options for women living in urban poverty in three Canadian cities, found that low income women experience extreme difficulty meeting their basic housing needs and there is a serious lack of supportive housing for women who have been the victims of domestic violence. This was definitely the story I heard from three of the participants in my research.
Personal Learning

Working on this research has been personally enriching for me. I discovered that though qualitative research is a very good fit for me in terms of my personal ontology and epistemology, it is an extremely demanding form of research. I have also had to struggle with reconciling a counsellor identity with a researcher approach and have realized, as mentioned in Chapter three, this is a developmental process. Maintaining a researcher focus while interviewing women who were speaking about abuse experiences, personal suffering, and the effect this had on their lives was difficult for me. The self-reflexive process is ongoing in relation to this aspect of the research. My learning curve consists of attempting to balance the need to take a critical stance in analyzing what actually occurred in the context of the interview, with accepting that as a qualitative researcher I am the tool of the research. I cannot help but bring who I am to the research process and interview setting. I also bring who I am to being a counsellor. It is not easy or even always advisable to expect we can isolate the various aspects of ourselves – allowing only this part out now and that part later.

I also struggled with raising questions about the participants’ stories, even when this was done with no sense of judgment or censure. Even when I was fully aware of Chase’s (2005) comments; the factual nature of the narrator’s statements do not arise because the narrator is producing a self, a reality, and an experience in the very telling of the story. I am left with the discomfort, but also with the belief that it was important, as a researcher, that I verbalized the questions because they related to the ways in which I saw abuse experiences having an effect on the participant’s ability to find and maintain work. The exploration of these types of questions was the objective of my research.
I have also learned that the rhetoric and ideals around a given methodology do not always represent the voices one hears in actual research. Much of the literature about narrative spoke of the healing affect of storytelling, the ways in which it could be a means of integrating and touching the very self. I am not sure this was the experience of my participants. I cannot really judge what they took away from the experience but I am loathe to over estimate the impact of that one afternoon in their lives. This does not mean that I think we should not have high ideals about what narrative might achieve. I have simply learned to be somewhat more realistic about the actual practice of research

Final Comments

The five women who shared their stories of the ways in which abuse intersected with their experiences of work spoke of many barriers in their lives. At the same time their stories shone with light and hope. They were determined to move beyond abuse experiences and though they were at various points in the process of doing that, their individual courage and determination not be defined solely by these experiences was wonderful to see. Many of them reflected on how far they had come on their individual journeys of recovery and all had hopes and dreams for the future. As mentioned at the end of Chapter three: you, the reader, have been invited to enter these women’s stories and allow them to move to the foreground of your understanding of their experiences. I believe you now have the ability to move between the stories and the background methodological questions and explanations and then forward through the layers of analysis with a clear sense of who these women are, of the experiences they have had, and of how they have understood these experiences to affect their ability to work. You
have walked a few steps with them on their journey. You have touched a part of them through their story.

In the conclusion to his book on storytelling, Thomas King (2003) quotes the Nigerian storyteller, Ben Okri in relation to the power of the stories we live by. I would like to conclude with his words.

"In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy:

We live by stories, we also live in them.

One way or another we are living the stories planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate them with meaninglessness.

If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives (p. 153).
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APPENDIX: A
Brief Overview of the Bridges for Women Employment Program

The Bridges for Women Employment Program promotes empowerment to make positive choices, provides opportunities for integration, promotes healing, offers education to stop intergenerational abuse, teaches skill development, and ultimately leads to employment (Wells, 1994). Feminist, person-centered principles are applied to this empowerment model to assist women in breaking the cycle of abuse by helping them to move from being dependent to being independent and self-directed. Bridging or transferable skills that improve learning potential for further training and employment are taught. Women develop a specific, individual goal plan for future employment. The program consists of two, fourteen week modules. In the first module the women learn independence skills. Psycho-educational workshops on self-care, the change process, values, goal setting, dealing with emotions, and cognitive restructuring techniques form part of this module. Women undertake initial employment preparation in terms of identifying their particular learning style and personality type. Basic computer literacy, English and Math skills are taught and counselling for personal issues is offered in the form of outside one-on-one counselling sessions, program coaching sessions, and success team participation. The second module consists of specific employment and job search skill training. Women create resumes, do informational interviews, go on job shadows, and have the opportunity for job experience placement. Personal counselling continues through each of the modules and is offered as part of follow-up to help support women as they move forward with their education, training, or employment plans.
APPENDIX: B
June 9, 2005

Human Research Ethics Board  
University of Victoria  
Victoria, British Columbia

To Whom It May Concern:

This is to advise you that Bridges for Women Society staff will recruit participants for Francis Guenette’s research for her M.A. thesis.

Bridges will begin recruiting after approval by the Ethics Board. Bridges staff will contact former clients by telephone and/or by letter using Fran’s script as much as possible.

If you have any questions, please feel free to telephone me at 385-7410, Ext. 23.

Yours truly,

[Signature]

Viki Prescott, M.Ed., C.C.C.  
Program Manager
APPENDIX: C
Sample of letter or telephone script Bridges for Women’s Society will use to recruit participants:

Dear _____________:

The Bridges for Women Society of Victoria has agreed to recruit participants for a research study being carried out by Francis Guenette, an MA graduate student at the University of Victoria. Francis is doing this research to complete her MA degree in Counselling Psychology in the Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies Dept. at UVIC.

The research project is entitled: *Women Survivors’ Experience of Work*. Francis is looking for 5 - 6 women who have self-identified as having a history of abuse and who believe that this history has had an impact on their ability to find and hold work. You must either be currently in therapy or have had therapy in the past to deal with your issues around the abuse. If you agree to be part of this research, you would be required to participate in a 1 to 1.5 hour audio-taped individual interview in which Francis would ask you to reflect on your personal experiences of work.

Research of this type is important because the current literature shows that work is very important for women as they try to rebuild their lives after experiencing abuse. Women encounter a number of specific life situations that can interact, overlap, and connect to create barriers to employment. As the investigator in this research project, Francis feels it is important to create a forum to hear your story about the way in which a history of abuse has impacted your ability to find and keep meaningful work.

Francis is offering a $30.00 honorarium to participants who take part in the individual 1.5 hour interview.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact Bridges and we will pass your name and contact information onto Francis who will contact you to assess your eligibility to participate in this research.

Thank you for your time now.
APPENDIX: D
Women Survivors’ Experience of Work - Consent Form

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled, Women Survivors’ Experience of Work, which is being conducted by Francis Guenette. I am a Graduate student in the department of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria and you may contact me if you have further questions by calling me at 361-1298 or emailing me at francisg@uvic.ca

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Masters of Arts in Counselling Psychology. My research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Anne Marshall. You may contact my supervisor at 250-721-7815.

The purpose of this research project is to explore how you understand the ways in which your search for work and your ability to stay employed has been affected by the abuse you have experienced. You will be asked to talk about how you have moved in and out of work, where you have encountered various barriers and limitations in your search for work, where you have found help and support, what strengths you have drawn on, and how you describe the links between experiences of abuse and your relationship with work.

Research of this type is important because the current literature shows that work is very important for women as they try to rebuild their lives after experiencing abuse. Women encounter a number of specific life situations that can interact, overlap, and connect to create barriers to employment. As the investigator in this research project, I feel it is important to create a forum to hear your story about the way in which abuse has influenced your ability to find and keep meaningful work.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have responded to a recruitment call from the Bridges for Women Society and you have also had therapy in the past around your issues of abuse and its impact on work (i.e. The Bridges Program).

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a 1 to 1.5 hour audio-taped, in-depth interview.
Participation in this study will involve the following:
   • Attending an in-depth interview of 1 to 1.5 hours and the possibility of follow-up phone calls or emails
   • Cost of traveling and/or childcare while attending the interview
As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be given a $30.00 honorarium for the individual interview. It is important for you to know that it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants and, if you agree to be a participant in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. If you would not otherwise choose to participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include:
You will have the satisfaction of knowing that your story has contributed to a body of knowledge about the affects for women who have abuse backgrounds when they seek to find and hold jobs.

There is some potential risk to your participating in this research and that risk pertains to the issue of talking about your experience of abuse. The following considerations are intended to prevent or to deal with this potential risk:

- I will ensure, within my screening process, that you have had some therapy for your abuse issues. I will provide referral information to agencies that can offer further counselling (free of charge) to you if you express concern about your well being following the interview.
- It is important for you, as a participant in this research, to understand that though I will use certain techniques to elicit your story (open-ended questions, empathetic probes, non-judgmental listening) what you are participating in is not a counselling session but a research interview and my role with you is one of researcher.
- Having stated the above I want to add that I am a trained counsellor with experience working with women and abuse issues. I will make use of my training to address any distress that may arise from my interaction with you during the individual interview. My intervention at this time would revolve around relieving immediate distress and ensuring that you felt confident to go on with or terminate the research interview. I would then make it clear to you that you should access the support of your current therapist or a professional therapist that I will refer you to in order to deal with any subsequent distress.
- Should you experience any distress at any time during the interview it can be terminated at that point and rescheduled for another time if you so desire.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used in the final thesis writing that will be part of this study or in any other way.

Protection of your anonymity will be ensured in the following ways:

- In the individual interview you will be known only to the researcher. A code or pseudonym will be assigned to you in the recording of the field interviews and data.
- No name or identifying information that would link you with your interview data will be used in my thesis or in any research summaries.
- Signed consent letters will be stored in a locked cabinet separately from the transcribed field interviews, the field notes, and the audio-taped interview.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by:

- The transcribed audio-taped data, and field notes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.
- Only the researcher will have access to the data.
- Data from this study will be disposed of within five years.
Planned uses of this data include:
My MA thesis, possible articles in academic journals, and presentations at scholarly conferences.
My MA thesis will be shared with The Bridges for Women Society of Victoria.

In addition to being able to contact me at the above phone number and/or email, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

_________________________  ______________________  ______________________
Name of Participant          Signature                  Date

* A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*
APPENDIX: E