Disrupting accounts of ‘normal’: Survivors and non–abused women’s experiences of sexual subjectivity and sexual agency

Georgia Ovenden

Bachelor of Behavioural Science: Psychology, Flinders University

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Western Sydney

November, 2010

© G. Ovenden, 2010
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text.

I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

........................................................................................................

Georgia Ovenden
Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful for the guidance and positive encouragement offered by my supervisor, Professor Moira Carmody, whose own work in and dedication to the area of sexual assault has served as a constant inspiration throughout this process. I am also very appreciative of the generous feedback offered by Associate Professor Rosemary Leonard, Dr Damien Riggs and Associate Professor Kerry Robinson, who each dedicated their time to reading drafts. I would like to thank Professor Michael Atherton, whose support, direction, and inspirational words gave me the confidence to finish this thesis.

Importantly, I would like to extend my gratitude to all the young women who participated in this research, and shared their often difficult stories. This thesis was made possible by your contribution.

Finally, I would like to thank my Mother, Mari, for providing endless support and motivation when I needed it the most. I dedicate this thesis to you.
Abstract

Feminist theorisations of child sexual abuse remain largely overshadowed by psychological and therapeutic perspectives, which now occupy significant authority in constructions of adult survivor identities. Research in this area has not only emphasised survivor risk of sexual dysfunction and sexual victimisation in adulthood, it also rarely engages with positive models of survivor sexuality and resilience.

Drawing on interviews with 22 young women (aged 19-28) who identified, and did not identify, as survivors of child sexual abuse, this thesis examines the ways that constructions of survivor sexual pathology intersect with everyday accounts of women’s identity and sexual subjectivity. The narratives suggest that women diverge in distinct ways when commenting on their adult sexual subjectivity and on their pathways to sexual pleasure in adulthood. While the literature has created clear distinctions in terms long-term trajectories, notions of ‘abused’ versus ‘non-abused’ do not really play out in women’s narratives. On one level, psychological indicators such as ‘oversexualisation’ and ‘undersexualisation’ appear less dysfunctional in the context of non-abused women’s experiences. The accounts from non-abused women not only illustrate the importance of moving in and out of different modes of sexual behaviour, high and low periods of sexual activity were often used to narrate their experiences of transition and/or pathways toward sexual agency.
Not surprisingly, the adult sexual experiences of the survivors and non-abused women underline the difficulties that young women encounter in their attempts to take up more agentic sexual subjectivities. Their accounts not only illuminate the context of women’s adult victimisation and sexual violence, but also reveal the complex positions women take up when navigating wanted and unwanted sexual experiences. For survivors, this was further complicated by expectations surrounding their child sexual abuse history, which placed limits on the identities available for them to take up. Given the focus on the difficulty of survivors to ‘heal from’ and ‘restore’ their heterosexual desire, lesbian and queer survivors in particular spoke about how notions of damage appeared to ‘stick’ to them in more permanent ways.

However, survivors were also active in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding their adult sexual lives, and their symbolic position as victims often prompted them to re-make an identity which incorporated their strength, and position of ‘knowing’ (about) sexual violence. For a number of survivors, this included a more embodied connection to sexual subjectivity, which moved beyond markers of harm and simplistic readings of victimisation.

Exploring the context in which women’s victimisation occurs, as well as the importance of addressing a more embodied, sex-positive model of survivor sexuality, this thesis provides a counter discourse to psychological and therapeutic assumptions surrounding survivor adult sexuality. By underlining the complexity of sexual subjectivity for both survivors and non-abused women, the
findings point to the need to broaden current theory and practice to incorporate survivor adult experiences in the context of both pleasure and danger.
## CONTENTS

Statement of Authentication ................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................ iii
Abstract ................................................................................................. iv

Chapter One—Introduction: Interrogating the ‘usual story’ of abuse .......... 1

Chapter Two—Methodology ......................................................................... 20

**SECTION 1: Exploring survivor ‘difference’ in the cultural context** ......... 54
Chapter Three—The science of ‘difference’: Constructions of survivor sexual behaviour in academic and psy-discourse ........................................ 55

Chapter Four—A closer look at ‘normal’, ‘stable’ feminine sexual behaviour: Non-abused women’s experiences .......................................................... 85

Chapter Five—Visible and invisible identities: The demarcation of the ‘victim’ and ‘non-victim’ in the heterosexual matrix ........................................ 122

**SECTION 2: Moving in/between constructions of survivor identity** ......... 163
Chapter Six—Transforming Identities: The construction of victim/survivor subjectivities in contemporary discourses ........................................... 164

Chapter Seven—Coming out and up against the heterosexual matrix: Queering a space for alternative sexual subjectivities for female survivors ........ 204

Chapter Eight—Remaking the self beyond the cycle of abuse: Competing discourses of pleasure and danger ..................................................... 248

Chapter Nine—Conclusions: Thinking around the label of the ‘post-victim’ .... 287

References .................................................................................................. 296
Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet ................................................... 336
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form ......................................................... 337
Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Flyer .................................................... 338
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Interrogating the usual story of child sexual abuse

Widespread exposure of the ‘hidden issue’ of child sexual abuse emerged primarily in response to feminist and media campaigns in the 1980s. However, the larger focus in recent years has been on the perceived harm of abuse for adult survivors (J. Kitzinger, 1992; O'Dell, 1997, 2003b; Reavey & Warner, 2001; S. Warner, 1996, 2009). This guiding discourse has been maintained by psychological, therapeutic and popular representations, which accentuate survivor ‘loss of innocence’ and the immovable injury of abuse in adult survivors’ lives.

Coupled with this, by positioning survivor pathology alongside presumptions of a ‘normal’, ‘stable’ feminine sexuality, dominant representations suggest very different life trajectories for survivors and non-abused women. As feminists like Paula Reavey (2003) and Sam Warner (2003) have argued, psychological research has failed to address the wider context of women’s sexual experiences. Most alarming is the notion that adult survivors of child sexual abuse will inevitably experience problems

---

1. Child sexual abuse has been variously defined in the literature. The Child Protection Council of Australia defines child sexual abuse as an act whereby ‘an adult or someone bigger than the child uses his power or authority over the child and takes advantage of the child’s trust and respect to involve the child in sexual activity’ (1990, p. 46). Such sexual activity can encompass a broad range of experiences, from exhibitionism and sexual touching to sexual intercourse. While many definitions specify the importance of age discrepancies, Fergus & Keel (2005, p. 1) note that while ‘it is considered that young people are not able to make a free and informed decision (that is, consent) to engage in such sexual activities because of their lack of relative knowledge and power...concerns have been raised that definitions that specify age difference between the perpetrator and child or young person fail to take into account non-consensual sexual activity between peers (such as sibling sexual assault, and sexual assault and date-rape perpetrated by adolescents).’
in their adult sexual lives whereas ‘non-abused’ women will have comparably ‘healthy’ sexual experiences (Reavey, 2003; Reavey & Warner, 2001).

Research aims and thesis structure

The aim of this thesis is to build on existing theoretical work through a feminist poststructuralist analysis of interviews with survivors and women who do not identity as survivors (‘non-abused’ woman). By exploring these accounts, this thesis aims to reveal the complex factors which impact young women’s accounts of sexual subjectivity.

Specifically, drawing on narratives from non-abused women, the first section of this thesis examines the influence of wider cultural discourses on young women’s experiences of sexual subjectivity. As I address in this section, although psychological models of survivor sexual dysfunction and (re)victimisation underline ‘difference’ and ‘risk’, these discourses are difficult to disentangle from women’s everyday experiences of sexual subjectivity (Reavey, 2003; Reavey & Warner, 2001). Situating participant experiences alongside everyday discourses that inform young women’s sexuality, this section also considers the ways that abuse symptomatologies reify particular modes of ‘normal’, and at the same time operate to locate survivors outside this range.

Section two of this thesis, which focuses on interviews taken with survivors, aims to interrogate existing assumptions surrounding child sexual abuse. In particular, it explores the ways that survivor narratives have been impacted by, or demonstrate opposition to, these discourses. One key concern is the extent to which avenues of
healing in both therapeutic and self-help discourses influence the subject positions available for survivors to take up. Given the over-representation of survivor harm in trauma models, what remains missing from the contemporary abuse literature is a detailed investigation into other emerging survivor stories. Engaging in narratives of survivor resilience and sexual agency which extend beyond the usual story of abuse, this section provides a subjective account of the ways that survivors position this identity in their own lives. This includes accounts from lesbian and queer survivors who are currently located outside what are considered ‘healthy’ modes of recovery. It also considers the wider role of the trauma model in discounting survivor experiences of adult sexual embodiment.

As I outline in more detail in the Methodology, Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 all include narratives from participant interviews. However, they are also interspersed with theoretical work from feminist, poststructuralist feminist, and cross disciplinary literature. Some chapters are more theoretical than others, although none could be considered strictly as data-driven or theory-driven. Rather, this thesis builds on existing feminist poststructuralist work, and uses participant narratives and theoretical perspectives in an attempt to create a more critical dialogue and to ‘open up new frames’ in which to contemplate survivor identities (Fine, 1992; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000).

Before moving on to outline the structure of the thesis more fully, I first provide a brief historical context of how child sexual abuse emerged as a significant and visible social problem.
A short history of child sexual abuse

Prior to the 1980s there was a dearth of public awareness surrounding child sexual abuse and ‘no models and no words’ available for victims to articulate their experiences (J. Kitzinger, 2001, p. 94). Historical research from medical and psychological records, concerning the incidence of child sexual abuse, suggests that the sexual abuse of children—once named ‘the seduction of children’—was ‘quite a rare thing’ (Wahl, 1960, cited in J. E. Davis, 2005, p. 31). Rates of incest were most frequently obtained through criminal literature, which positioned incest as a form of sexual deviance and suggested that it was proportionally more likely to be found among particular social classes (read ‘lower’ classes). Although human sexuality researchers were influenced by Freud’s proposed intrapsychic outcomes of incest, the possible impact of sexual abuse on victims was rarely a topic of interest. For example, early research in the 1950s Kinsey reports [1953] tended to downplay the effects of child sexual abuse in terms of psychological trauma, and argued that incest had little impact on girls and women (L. A. Jackson, 2000). Indeed, psychologists writing in the area during this time framed abuse as a normal part of childhood and growing up (Lukianowitz, 1972) and others suggested that ‘most women’ who were sexually abused in childhood were ‘left none the worse for the experience’ (Rasmussen, cited in J. Kitzinger, 1992, p. 400).

Driven by feminist campaigns against violence, it was not until the increased media coverage in the 1980s that child sexual abuse was legally defined and situated in psychological and everyday discourse. The factors that led to this development are
discussed in more detail below. Since this time, there have been numerous prevalence studies undertaken, particularly in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. In Australia, predicted rates suggest that child sexual abuse is relatively widespread, and that between 7% to 36% of females experience sexual abuse before the age of 18 (Dunne, Purdie, Cook, Boyle, & Najman, 2003; Fleming, 1997). Statistics regarding the female-to-male ratios for survivors typically range between 5:1 to 3:1 (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2004; Browning, Kessler, Hatfield, & Choo, 1999; Martin, Bergen, Richardson, Roeger, & Allison, 2004). For this reason, child sexual abuse has been identified as a gendered form of violence, where females are at more than three times greater risk of abuse than males (David Finkelhor, 1990; Silverman, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1996). Further to this, current prevalence rates in Australia and worldwide suggest that approximately 96% of perpetrators are male (Laws & O'Donohue, 2008, p. 493). In recent years there has been a shift in research, and in the popular media, toward the exposure of female perpetrators (see Denov, 2003).

Although there have been numerous publications of prevalence rates, and the influence of gender and social positioning on the risk of violence, there remains a paucity of research addressing the specificity of Aboriginal survivor experiences in Australia. Child protection initiatives for Indigenous Australians continue to be affected by the legacy of the Stolen Generation, a Governmental Policy which endorsed the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families between 1909 and 1969. The stolen generation represented a continuation of colonial dispossession of Indigenous people from their homelands,
which often included violent means of assimilation and sexual abuse. Yet, the recent controversy prompted by the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response (or ‘The Intervention’)

2 has also drawn attention to the ways that Aboriginal people continue to be implicated in the process of colonisation. Declaring the alleged sexual abuse of children in Aboriginal communities ‘a national emergency’, the implementation included the deployment of 600 soldiers and medical practitioners to enforce medical checks of children. The Intervention, which effectively vitiated the provisions of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, demonstrated widespread governmental support of draconian measures, which were acted on with no warning and with little support from Aboriginal communities. More than this, the Intervention represented a clear example of Australia’s continuation of institutional racism, despite the long history of failures, and the assurance from Aboriginal people that the ‘legislation does nothing for children, nothing for indigenous disadvantage and nothing to actually stop child abuse’ (Bamblett, National Indigenous Times, 2007, cited in Maddison, 2009, p. 16).

The impact of Freudian revisions

In recent years, feminist historians have drawn attention to the various ways that campaigns against child sexual abuse have been constrained and regulated by legal and ‘psy’ discourses

3. Not surprisingly, Freud’s revision of his earlier therapeutic observations, which included the re-positioning of women’s accounts of child sexual

---

2 The Intervention reflected the Northern Territory Government’s response in 2007 to the release of the ‘Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse’, also known as the ‘Little Children are Sacred’ Report (Anderson & Wild, 2007).

3 Nikolas Rose (1990) employs the term ‘psy’ discourse to refer to ‘the heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise’ (viii).
abuse as ‘fantasy’, and ‘hysteria’ continues to be cited in feminist analyses as a key obstacle in the recognition of child sexual abuse as a real social issue (J. Kitzinger, 1992; Smart, 2000). Some feminists have argued that Freud’s revocation of his original essay on ‘Seduction Theory’ in 1896, whereby he claimed that neuroses observed in his female patients were the result of child sexual trauma, was responsible for the silencing of women’s stories for the greater part of the 20th century (see J. Kitzinger, 1992). Feminists who revisited his work argued that Freud was wrong to abandon his theory, a move which they believe was chiefly the result of relentless pressure from his medical colleagues (Herman, 1981, 1992; Rush, 1980).

However, as Carol Smart (2000) has argued, the presentation of women’s abuse experiences in psychoanalysis as ‘sexual fantasy’ need to be situated in the conservative values of this period, which had an inherent tendency to disbelieve children (p. 68). As she argues, it was more likely in this conservative time for the public to follow Freud’s alternative thesis: that it was ‘normal behaviour’ for young girls with ‘precocious sexual desires’ to fulfil their wishes through vivid fantasies (Bolen, 2001, p. 20). Thus, Freud was able to collude with a society that also opted to deny the existence of ‘bad men’ and abusive fathers and, up until the late 1970s, a large amount of psychiatric literature accepted that child sexual abuse was extremely uncommon, and occurred in ‘no more than one in one million families’ (Henderson, 1975, cited in Herman, 1981, p. 11). Freud’s suggestion that ‘such widespread perversions against children are not very probable’ was also an opinion thoroughly taken up by the criminal courts during this period, and adult/child sexual contact
endured a long battle in this arena before it was deemed abusive and harmful (Wolff, 1988, p. 205).

On another level, feminists have been able to easily situate Freud’s reneging of incest in the context of patriarchal oppression, which implicated daughters for their incestuous fantasies, rather than ‘The Father’ for incestuous acts (Herman, 1981; Rush, 1980). As Herman & Hirschman (1981) explained: ‘At the moment that Freud turned his back on his female patients and denied the truth of their experience, he forfeited his ambition to understand the female neurosis. Freud went on to elaborate the dominant psychology of modern times. It is a psychology of men’ (p. 9–10).

Arguments presented by Judith Herman (1981) and Florence Rush (1980) not only underlined the catastrophic consequences of psychology’s union with patriarchy, they also strongly located child sexual abuse as a gendered form of violence. Within this context ‘the coercive means to achieve sexual conquest’ represented a ‘crude exaggeration of prevailing norms’ of the patriarchy which sanctioned male sexual entitlement and violence (Herman, 1990, p. 177–78). Other critics of Freud, such as Jeffery Masson (1984), have argued that his revision of seduction theory to that of women’s hysteria and internal fantasies, not only concealed the occurrence of child sexual abuse, it also lead to a deliberate suppression of ‘the truth’ for decades afterward.

**Second wave beginnings: Advocating a political model of sexual abuse**

While it has been argued that media coverage sparked the ‘discovery’ of child sexual abuse and brought it into public consciousness, feminist campaigns for
women and victims of abuse began well before the 1970s (Atmore, 1999). For example, feminists and child protectionists were active in lobbying for the introduction of a Department Committee on Sexual Offences Against Young Persons in the United Kingdom as early as 1924 (see Smart, 2000). Later, second wave feminists were influential in speaking out about the gendered nature of child sexual abuse. They suggested that child sexual abuse could be situated as a(nother) form of violence against women and as a means through which male social power could be reinforced and reproduced in patriarchal society (Brownmiller, 1975). Second wave feminists such as Kate Millet (1971) positioned incest as a clear example of men’s assurance of power over women, given that ‘patriarchy’s chief institution’ was considered to be the family (p. 33). They argued that the sexual abuse of women and children represented the extreme end of the continuum of women’s oppression in the patriarchy, and was effective in ensuring that all women remained fearful and subordinate.

As I address in more detail in Chapter Six, early feminist campaigns which emphasised the political importance of child sexual abuse were soon overtaken by trauma models\(^4\) that endorsed individual healing. This shift in feminist approaches to child sexual abuse is clearly represented in the changing focus of prominent texts in the field, particularly the work of Judith Herman. In her earlier text, Father-Daughter Incest (1981), Herman essentially argued that incest could be located in

\(^4\) While numerous ‘trauma models’ have been developed in the field of psychology and psychiatry, contemporary models tend to emphasise the apparent ‘normalcy’ of symptoms following a traumatic event (or events) such child sexual abuse. In this way, they differ considerably from early psychoanalytic (or ‘Freudian’) models which underlined individual pathology and/or ‘deficiency (see Haaken, 1999: 63).
the family, and specifically its entrenchment in the patriarchal model (which included the notion of the ‘seductive father’). She suggested that ‘incest represent(ed) a common pattern of female socialisation’ and an ‘exaggeration of patriarchal family norms not a departure from them’ (p. 125; p. 110). Eleven years later, Herman’s text Trauma & Recovery (1992) told a profoundly different story. Most significant, her early theorisations regarding the role of patriarchy were replaced by therapeutic recommendations which outlined the predictable symptoms of trauma in the aftermath of violence. Subsuming incest survivors and victims of rape under the same category as war veterans and political prisoners, Herman formulated a new version of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (‘Complex PTSD’) which was underpinned by widely accepted psychiatric understandings of pathology. Herman’s turn toward psychological notions of harm followed trends by the wider feminist community from the 1980s onward.

The trauma model and the construction of psychological effects of child sexual abuse

There were some key advantages observed in this redirection. Most obviously, by exposing the violence that women experienced in the private sphere through the respected channels of law and psychiatry, this movement effectively made the concerns of the women’s movement the focus of public attention (Westervelt, 1998, p. 11). Second, Herman’s elaboration of the trauma model, particularly her appeal to ‘normal’ (human) responses to trauma, were equally endorsed by feminists and therapists during this time. The support of feminist advocates reflected the need for
a new model in which to challenge traditional victim-blaming attitudes surrounding sexual assault. There was, and remains, some unease about the dangers in surrendering over feminist therapists working within traditionally feminist political spheres ‘to be co-opted by organs of the state that traditionally traumatize clients’ (Burstow, 2003, p. 1316). However, Herman (1992) offers her own critique of these dangers, stating that ‘the study of psychoanalytic trauma must constantly contend with this tendency to discredit the victim or to render her invisible’ (p. 8). As I will return to later, psychological discourse in particular has had a long history of engaging uncritically with social discourses, and doing what Nikolas Rose (1998) has termed ‘making people up’ (p. 10).

Not surprisingly, the development of a social policy and of legal discourse for child sexual abuse was supported by the shift to including women’s violence in wider psychological perspectives. Ultimately, this shift generated a new dialogue of child sexual abuse, whereby survivors were increasingly viewed in terms of symptomatology and significant psychological harm (O’Dell, 1997). The emerging use of trauma models to outline the immediate and long–term impacts of child sexual abuse gained momentum in the 1980s, and shifted focus away from possible causes toward the identifiable effects of child sexual abuse.

Today, psychological investigation into the perceived long–term impacts of child sexual abuse maintains a prominent position in the research terrain, and has undoubtedly influenced the ways in which child sexual abuse is popularly understood in western societies.
Feminist contestations

This thesis has been informed by critical psychology and feminist poststructuralist work, which consider the wider role of academic and professional research in the construction and regulation of survivor subjectivities. Broadly, feminist theorists have argued that the particular research agenda taken up in psychological and academic work over the past 30 years has functioned to construct female survivors outside ‘normal’ modes of femininity and sexuality (Kamsler, 1990; J. Kitzinger, 1992; O'Dell, 1997; Reavey, 2003; S. Warner, 2003).

For example, feminist academics writing in this area suggest that the comparison of ‘abused’ and ‘non-abused’ women in empirical studies has actively created distinctions in projections of adult sexual subjectivity. As Lindsay O'Dell (1997, 2003b) has argued, the separating of ‘abused’ women in studies which quantitatively evaluate survivor symptomatologies has served to regulate and reinforce particular gendered and (hetero)sexual subjectivities (p. 334). Furthermore, she suggests that because psychological symptomatologies have come to represent the ‘one truth’ about survivors, empirical research in this area fails to reveal how professional discourses of abuse impact adult survivors’ lived experience of these labels (1997, p. 336).

Feminist writing in this area also suggest that because presumptions regarding sexual pathology have been magnified, adult survivors often recount a greater level of scrutiny regarding their access to ‘normal’ femininity (Reavey & Warner, 2001). For example, Paula Reavey and Brendan Gough’s (2000) work draws
attention to the wider role of psychological and professional discourse in the construction of long-term trajectories for survivors:

Connections between the past (abuse) and present (sexualities) have been made by professionals and lay people who have access to abuse narratives and can quite readily pin-point the effect that abuse has had on a person’s (in)ability to form sexual relationships and have a ‘healthy’ sex life. (p. 326)

Furthermore, as Paula Reavey (2003) has argued, the presentation of adult survivor symptomatology in terms of long-term harm can only simplify women’s experiences, and reify those popularised notions of ‘dysfunction’ in survivors’ own sense of self. For example, given the pervasive influence of psychological discourse on everyday understandings of survivors, a number of feminist authors have suggested that survivors often grow up with the expectation that they will encounter sexual and identity difficulties, or perceive themselves as always already ‘different’ (Reavey, 2003; Reavey & Warner, 2001; S. Warner, 2009). As a result, survivors themselves often express intra-psychic struggles in relation to their sexual subjectivity, as Paula Reavey (2003) explains:

In positioning the survivor as separate from the norm, outside the ‘healthy’ developmental path of non-abused individuals, it is easier to locate their ‘symptoms’ and make secure an identity for them as ‘other’ women who supposedly develop outside notions of naturalised femininity. (p. 153)

Importantly, a number of feminists writing in this area argue that while the characteristics of ‘normal’ sexuality are seldom discussed in academic and empirical
studies, reports of survivor dysfunction suggest that ‘non-abused’ women do not struggle with aspects of their sexual life (Reavey, 2003; S. Warner, 1996, 2009). Thus, this (largely empirical) research fails elaborate on the ways that cultural discourses and context influence young women’s pathways to sexual agency, as well as their experiences of sexual victimisation. In this way, feminist writing underlines the dangers in presuming that ‘abused’ and ‘non-abused’ women have comparable histories and identities across race, social positioning and sexual orientation.

Largely missing from the current research terrain is a critical analysis of the ways that symptomatologies of survivor sexual behaviour and vulnerability are qualitatively positioned in the context of non-abused women’s experiences. Building on the existing feminist theoretical work in this area, this thesis seeks to investigate the impact of wider cultural discourses in the construction of young women’s sexual subjectivity. Interrogating what might count as ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ sexuality, this thesis is informed by Nicola Gavey’s work, which considers the impact of the broader cultural context in the formulation of young women’s sexual subjectivity (1992, 2005). Specifically, Gavey draws attention to the ways that cultural discourses surrounding heterosexuality provide a scaffold to support seemingly ‘normal’ sexual practices, many of which restrict women’s access to more agentic positions in their sexual relationships.

Borrowing from Gavey’s theoretical work, this thesis examines the ways in which psychological frameworks of ‘healthy’ sexual behaviour operate to position survivors ‘outside the range’ of ‘normal’. As I will elaborate in Section One, while
this research agenda has been active in creating distinctions between ‘abused’ and ‘non-abused’ women, it neglects the impact of wider cultural discourses in the formulation of young women’s sexual subjectivity. For example, perceptions about survivor harm in the therapeutic realm are also heavily mediated by norms surrounding ‘healthy’ (hetero)sexual behaviour. From this perspective, notions of recovery are often determined by the extent to which survivors are able to fulfil traditional and ‘desirable’ aspects of feminine sexuality (Reavey & Warner, 2001). As I argue in this section, however, by locating survivors in trauma models that suggest underline their increased risk of adult sexual victimisation, research in this area often fails to examine the context of women’s sexual violence, and how cultural discourses might contribute to women’s lack of sexual agency and empowerment.

**Re-situating survivor stories**

The construction of the child sexual abuse survivor as inevitably damaged may interact with survivors’ ability to position themselves as healthy individuals. In particular, the overriding discourses of harm and dysfunction may also impact the ways in which adult survivors come to understand their gendered and sexual subjectivity, and how they negotiate their sense of self in sexual relationships.

Added to this, the emergence of ‘post-traumatic culture’ in the past 30 years suggests that trauma is not simply an issue of individual psychopathology, but one continually bolstered by social dimensions that draw lines between victims and non-victims (Farrell, 1998). Indeed, revealing that you have a history of child sexual abuse is not only ‘the worse thing’ it has also been supported by the broader victim backlash.
This backlash, strengthened by texts published by media feminists such as Camille Paglia (1992) and Kate Roiphe (1993), situates victimisation in the context of women’s failure to ‘use common sense’ and take precautions against (male) sexual violence (Bean, 2007, p. 173). Underpinned by the neoliberal project, not only does this movement discourage survivor use of a political platform, but the fear of being labelled a victim has also contributed to the decreased visibility of victims, and of action toward violence against women more broadly (Lamb, 1999a).

Furthermore, popular representations of survivors in the self-help and recovery literature reiterate survivor responsibility for healing, often in the absence of any discussion about how wider social and political factors might be aiding their victimisation. The rise of televised survivor stories through popular programs such as Oprah, has also meant that ‘trauma talk’ has been appropriated in ways which privilege therapeutic and expert opinion over survivor political testimonial. In this way, survivors are granted specific ways in which to heal from and to speak out about their experiences (Marecek, 1999). From this perspective, while child sexual abuse is often located as a uniquely individualised problem, it has also been informed by wider discourses which promote ‘normal’ avenues of femininity, sexuality and healing. In this way, discourses of survivor pathology and recovery which lean on trauma dialogues may also operate to deny survivors more agentic positions.

---

5 Neoliberalism, as Nikolas Rose (1999) defined it, is a mode of political rationality that seeks to ‘govern through freedom’, rather than through command and control. As such, it upholds the notion that people are essentially free and self-managing, yet at the same time advocates particular standards of self-responsibility.
In sum, the over-representation of psychological and therapeutic models to explain survivor sexuality neglects the role of wider cultural discourses in restricting survivor access to more powerful positions. In addition, the lack of more embodied, sex-positive models of survivor sexuality, fails to provide a counter discourse to psychological and therapeutic assumptions surrounding survivors as always already ‘damaged’.

**Overview of Chapters**

This thesis is organised into two main sections. Section One looks more broadly at the issue of survivor ‘difference’ in the context of non-abused women’s experiences. Chapter Two outlines the methodological approach and some of the key issues which arose in the research process. This includes a specific focus on the ways that ‘difference’ is positioned in my analysis of survivor and non-abused women’s narratives. Chapter Three provides a feminist discourse analysis of psychological and academic research surrounding survivor ‘sexual dysfunction’, and in particular, explores how constructions of survivor pathology lean on traditional notions of women’s sexuality and femininity. In Chapter Four, ‘A closer look at “normal”, “stable” feminine sexual behaviour’, I examine the ways that psychological constructions of survivor sexual dysfunction—such as promiscuity and frigidity—are situated in accounts from women who do not identify as survivors of child sexual abuse.

Engaging with accounts from young women who do not identify as survivors, this chapter aims to problematise the ways that ‘normal’ sexual behaviour has been
positioned in psychological and academic discourse. While the interviews covered a broad range of themes, this chapter focuses on how young women situate their own sexual behaviour in the context of wider cultural discourses which guide and delimit women’s sexual agency. The following chapter, ‘Visible and invisible identities’, draws on interviews with survivors and women who do not identify as survivors, and considers the ways that assumptions of survivor vulnerability have operated to differentiate victims and non-victims in the cultural landscape. It also examines the role that survivor resistance, and the re-positioning of survivors as experts, might play in countering simple explanations of victimisation.

Focusing on interviews with survivors only, Section Two considers the ways that survivors have been constrained by, and demonstrate resistance to, psychological and popular discourses surrounding the impacts of child sexual abuse. Chapter Six begins with a broad review of the recovery movement, and specifically the shift of this movement from the political toward more ‘expert’ and (appropriate) modes of ‘healing’. Drawing on Wendy Brown’s (1995) notion of ‘wounded attachments’, Chapter Six also considers how the recovery movement has influenced survivor narratives and the available subject positions that have been created. Tracing the realignment of the testimonial in popular and therapeutic avenues, this chapter addresses the ways that survivor responsibility for healing, as well as the controversy surrounding false memory syndrome, has influenced the shape of disclosure stories. Exploring interviews from lesbian and queer survivors, Chapter Seven problematises the apparent traumatic connection made between child sexual abuse and sexuality in psychological and popular discourse. This chapter also considers the ways that
lesbian and queer survivor narratives complicate mainstream assumptions about child sexual abuse and adult sexual pathology. Returning to the trauma model, Chapter Eight examines how notions of ‘child innocence’ and the erasure of the body mediate notions of survivor recovery, as well as modes of ‘healthy’ sexuality. Engaging in survivor accounts, this chapter also explores the wider role of embodiment and sexual subjectivity in re-making a survivor identity beyond ‘harm’ and ‘loss’. The final chapter, Chapter 9, concludes by considering the implications of the study and suggestions for further research.

This research aims to complicate existing understandings of female survivors by focusing more broadly on how survivors and non-abused women position accounts of sexual pleasure and danger in their adult sexual lives. By exploring the context of women’s sexual victimisation, as well as the importance of addressing more embodied, sex-positive models of survivor sexuality, this thesis aims to offer a counter discourse to psychological and therapeutic assumptions surrounding survivor adult sexuality. It also aims to add to existing feminist theoretical work, which underlines the particular mediating impact of ‘sexual danger’ and ‘sexual harm’ in constructions of women’s sexuality.
CHAPTER TWO

Methodology and theoretical underpinnings

This thesis explores two major lines of inquiry. The first adds to existing feminist theoretical work concerning constructions of survivor ‘difference’ and ‘compulsory harm’ in psychological and popular discourse (O'Dell, 2003b; Reavey, 2003; Reavey & Warner, 2001). It begins in Chapter Three with a critical feminist discourse analysis of psychological and academic research surrounding survivor sexual pathology and risk of adult revictimisation. By interrogating psychological constructions of survivor sexuality, this thesis aims to reveal the various ways that this discourse is caught up in traditional notions of ‘healthy’ sexual behaviour.

In order to investigate previous research in this area further, a key aspect of the research design was the inclusion of young women who identified, and of women who did not identify, as survivors of child sexual abuse. By incorporating excerpts from survivors and ‘non-abused’ women in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, this thesis aims to investigate the various ways that young women situate themselves in relation to discourses surrounding feminine sexuality and pathology. The interviews, which focused on the ways that survivors and non-abused women positioned accounts of sexual pleasure and danger in their adult sexual lives, aimed to reveal the
wider impact of cultural discourses on young women’s experiences of sexual subjectivity.\(^6\)

The second area of inquiry looks more closely at survivor accounts, and in particular the ways that survivors reflect on this identity in their own lives. It begins in Chapter Six with a theoretical analysis of the rise of the survivor identity in therapeutic and self-help discourse. In particular, it considers the shift from political toward more therapeutic notions of harm, and the wider consequences of this identity for participants. Chapter Seven looks exclusively at interviews with lesbian and queer survivors, and considers queer theoretical work in the construction of a more sex-positive model of survivor sexuality. Engaging with feminist poststructuralist theory, Chapter Eight provides a critical inquiry into the trauma model and popular discourse surrounding child sexual abuse and ‘innocence’. In addition, using excerpts from interviews with survivors, this chapter considers the centrality of survivor embodiment in the process of ‘re-making the self’ beyond contemporary harm narratives.

**Situating participant data and previous theory**

This thesis draws heavily on feminist and poststructuralist feminist theorisations, which underline the discursive construction of survivor identity in psychological and popular discourse. Specifically, the theoretical work of Paula Reavey, Lindsay O’Dell, Sam Warner and Nicola Gavey was central to the development of this

---

\(^6\) I employ the term ‘sexual subjectivity’ throughout this thesis, drawing from feminist poststructuralist descriptions and the definition outlined by Deborah Tolman (2002): ‘Sexual subjectivity...is a person’s experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices and who has an identity as a sexual being’ (pp. 5–6).
project, and to my thinking around broad research questions. Furthermore, the research design, particularly the inclusion both of young women who identified, and who did not identify, as survivors of abuse, could be positioned as a continuation of their theoretical work.

At the same time, this thesis was not structured around rigid research hypotheses. Rather, previous theoretical work and excerpts from participant interviews were utilised to ‘open up new frames’ in which to explore survivor identity. Furthermore, while the majority of chapters in this thesis (Chapter 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8) include excerpts from participants, they are also interwoven with theory from feminist and cross-disciplinary literature.

**Conceptual framework**

A feminist poststructuralist standpoint was adopted as the explanatory theoretical framework in this study. This approach, influenced by the work of Foucault (1981), underlines the construction of sexual subjectivity in language, and draws attention to the privilege of particular discourses in the formation of gendered subjects (see Gavey, 1989; Potts, 2002; Weedon, 1997). Whilst this framework seeks to challenge the inevitability of the categories of male and female, particularly as they relate to women’s disempowerment, it also takes the particular viewpoint that subjectivity is both multiple, contradictory, and a site of struggle (B Davies, et al., 2006, p. 318). Thus, it recognises that gender and sexual identity are discursively constructed and that individual subject positions are both constrained and made available through discourse. As Weedon (1997) notes:
In making our subjectivity the product of the society and culture in which we live, feminist poststructuralism insists on forms of subjectivity that are produced historically and change with shifts in the wide range of discursive fields which constitute them. (p. 32)

The dynamic construction of subjectivity through discourse may be central to survivors of child sexual abuse, who may have aligned themselves with, or attested to, dominant understandings of this identity at different points of their lives.

Alongside this wider epistemological framework, a feminist model of positioning theory was also adopted to explore the interaction between participants’ individual stories and the social and professional discourses from which their stories are produced (see B Davies & Harre, 1990). Positioning theory situates the subject in a dynamic construction with a range of discursive contexts, which may include their investment and resistance to particular subject positions. Thus, while positioning theory recognises the role of discourse in the construction of identity, it also underlines that ‘the subject is composed of, or exists as a set of multiple and contradictory positionings or subjectivities’ (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984, p. 204). Within this context, ‘the self’ is constructed in narratives which suggest both a unified and fragmented identity which is always in the process of being constituted (B. Davies, et al., 2004, p. 367). At the same time, from a positioning perspective, personal histories and experiences create specific desires in individuals, and this can explain why it is that people have different ‘investments in taking up certain positions in discourses’ (Henriques, et al., 1984, p. 238).
The focus of this study is both on the impact that such discourses have on individuals, and on the subject positions made available to women who identify (and do not identify) as survivors of child sexual abuse. A feminist framework of positioning theory allowed investigation of the ways that survivors and non-abused women are differently located in wider discourses surrounding child sexual abuse, femininity and (hetero)sexuality. This includes the ways that young women who do, and do not, identify as survivors might resist these discourses. Emphasising the discursive construction of identity, I also acknowledge that more dominant discourses are likely to be perceived as too powerful, or remain invisible, and thus be more difficult to resist (Foucault, 1982; Gavey, 2005). This is apparent when we examine discourses around heterosex, where assumingly ‘natural’ frameworks of power operate by awarding and punishing particular modes of feminine sexuality. Within this grid of intelligibility, victims of child sexual abuse and adult sexual assault are often required to take up a position as ‘psychologically harmed’ in order to provide a case for a political stand. The less visible positions – including women’s experiences of strength and resilience - rarely allow women a platform in which to ‘speak back’ to these dominant discourses.

**Gender**

A significant tenet of feminist poststructuralist theory has been its rejection of ‘naturalised’ and ‘biological’ formulations of being male or female, feminine or masculine, and a focus on the role of sex/gender in the maintenance of hegemonic heterosexuality. In many ways, Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) renowned declaration
that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ (p. 267) represented the beginning of what materialised as a rigorous debate surrounding the distinction between sex/gender/desire and the formulations of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Butler, 1993).

Contemporary approaches have emerged from this founding premise of the imaginary gender framework. For example, adopting a Foucauldian reading of the construction of the subject through discourse, Judith Butler sought to disentangle the apparent pre-cultural and cultural grounds of the sex/gender distinction. For Butler (1990), ‘gender is not to culture as sex is to nature’; rather, she argues that the ‘natural’ and ‘biological’ meanings we instil in ‘sex’ might be better positioned as a discursive/cultural product of gender itself (p. 7). Butler’s reorganisation of the ways that feminists constructed meaning on to women’s bodies opened a space to explore the ways sex and gender are formulated within the institution of heterosexuality, or the ‘heterosexual matrix’. For Butler (1990), the heterosexual matrix operates as a ‘grid of cultural intelligibility’ through which (some) bodies, genders and desires are naturalized’ and others are regarded as invisible or perverse (p. 151).

More recently, materialist feminists like Crys Ingraham (1996) and Stevi Jackson (1999) have shifted focus to the perceived ‘invisibility’ of the heterosexual structure—or as Ingraham terms ‘the heterosexual imaginary’—and the lack of critical examination of heterosexuality in sociological feminist discourse. As Ingraham (1994) writes:
The heterosexual imaginary is that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution. The effect of this depiction is that heterosexuality circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned, while gender is understood as socially constructed and central to the organization of everyday life. (p. 209)

This thesis, which explores survivor and non-abused women’s experiences, is also concerned with the ways that assumptions surrounding gender and heterosexuality act back on these identities and project ‘normal’ or abnormal sexualities. Although gender is central to understandings of survivor risk of sexual abuse, particular gendered meanings also have a wider impact on what gets attached to psychological notions of ‘harm’. For example, the majority of research surrounding ‘sexual dysfunction’ and revictimisation employs women-only samples, where ‘risk’ is invariably attached to sexual behaviours perceived to be outside appropriate femininity. By widening the context, and examining survivors’ and non-abused women’s experiences within the heterosexual matrix, as well as neoliberal discourses which mould young women’s ‘choices’, psychological notions of harm become increasingly more suspect. From this perspective, the wider context of the heterosexual matrix exists as an important cultural lens through which young women construct sexual experiences.

Clearly, Tolman’s (2002) definition of sexual subjectivity—which emphasises ‘active sexual choices’ and ‘sexual pleasure’—is in conflict to the position commonly
afforded to survivors in psychological and popular discourse (pp. 7-8). Perhaps the most problematic assumption relates to the positioning of survivors as unable ‘to make active choices’ surrounding their sexuality or right to sexual pleasure. Thus, while the discourse underlines blatant forms of ‘sexual dysfunction’, at the more insidious level, it also calls into question the more ‘active’ forms of survivor sexual subjectivity.

**Gender of participants**

This study utilised a women-only group of participants for several reasons. On one level, as discussed in Chapter One, much of the research in this area has focused on female-only (or male-only) samples when reporting the long-term impacts of child sexual abuse (see Liang, Williams, & Siegel, 2006; Morrow, 1991; Noell, Rohde, Seeley, & Ochs, 2001; Sarwer & Durlak, 1996). The specificity of gender in the reporting of long-term outcomes is often situated in relation to wider cultural discourses, which inevitably influence the subject positions available to male and female survivors (McCarthy, 1997). For example the long-term effects for female survivors—which often concern sexual behaviour and adult revictimisation—overlap with wider cultural discourses which guide and delimit young women’s experiences of sexual subjectivity.

Similarly, research has pointed to the need to consider the interaction of trauma and masculinity in the construction of unique outcomes for male survivors (Alaggia & Millington, 2008; Grossman, Sorsoli, & Kia Keating, 2006; Lisak, 2001; Mejía, 2005). Studies in this area point to the impact of cultural expectations surrounding
the male victim, which often exist alongside trauma symptoms for men. For example, Sally Hunter (2009) found that the male survivors in her study were less likely to disclose their experience of sexual abuse and assault, often from fear of being labelled effeminate, or homosexual. Furthermore, as Dorais (2002) suggests, men are likely to view themselves as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘weak’, or otherwise position their masculinity ‘wounded’ by the experience in some way (p. 145).

Thus, while this thesis acknowledges that vast numbers of men have experienced child sexual abuse, gender remains an important factor when considering the long-term impacts for adult men and women. Foremost, the heightened risk of sexual assault in adulthood means that young girls are subjected to increased surveillance and the possibility of sexual violence in distinct ways from young men (Reavey, 2003). Specifically, while methods of ‘prohibition’ might be differently communicated in diverse contexts and cultures, they also have particular regulatory outcomes for girls and women across their lifetime (Levett, 2003, p. 68).

Following from the above point, sexual violence for adult women also affects the ways in which survivors and non-abused women reflect on available subject positions in their adult lives (Banyard, et al., 2004; Browning, et al., 1999; Martin, et al., 2004). It is clear from previous research that the gendered practices surrounding sexual violence have profound implications on the girls and women who experience child sexual abuse, particularly in relation to the formulation of their sexual subjectivity and their access to agency (Naples, 2003). Most significantly, the threat of sexual abuse and violence affects the ways that girls and women make choices in
their daily lives and come to know male power and authority. For this reason, I have elected to use a women-only sample to explore the ways that young women survivors and non-abused women are differently positioned in this (gendered) social context.

Finally, a number of theorists have outlined the importance of female adolescence and young adulthood in the formulation of women’s sexual subjectivities (Phillips, 2000; Tolman, 2006; Young, 1990). For example, this time in women’s lives has been identified as a period of female sexual exploration that is mediated by both pleasure and danger (Vance, 1992). While sexual exploration and positive sexual experiences in adolescence have been associated with greater well-being and sexual agency, research has indicated that young women are also the most likely to experience sexual assault (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996). For the above reasons, I was most interested in investigating how women negotiate their sexual lives, and the ways that they reflect on their experiences of agency and powerlessness during this period.

**Re-addressing the material significance of the body**

This thesis is interested in the ways that the body has been represented in therapeutic and popular discourses of child sexual abuse, and how notions of ‘child innocence’ might impact survivors’ accounts of past and present sexualities. While a number of feminist theorists have questioned the capacity of poststructuralist frameworks to understand and situate the material significance of the body, I would argue that a discursive standpoint engages in the complexities and ambiguities of embodied
subjectivity. As Davies et al. (2006) have argued, ‘discursively constituted as we are, the constitutive effect resides not just in language but in the affect of the material body. Decomposition is not just a play with words, but work on the material body’ (p. 90). While the body (or specifically, the child’s body) is often positioned as the site of sexual trauma, the significance of this bodily harm for adult survivors is largely a consequence of wider, and historically specific, discourses. Thus, a poststructuralist position not only recognises the significance of constructions of child sexual abuse in regulating survivor embodied experiences, it is also able to examine the impact of wider socio-cultural discourses on women’s lives more generally.

A closer look at ‘difference’

Psychological and academic research surrounding child sexual abuse has been active in creating distinctions between survivors and non-abused women’s adult sexual subjectivity. Largely missing from the current research terrain is a critical analysis of the ways that symptomatologies of survivor sexual behaviour and vulnerability are positioned in the context of non-abused women’s experiences. For this reason, a central aspect of the research design was to examine survivor and non-abused women’s experiences of femininity, sexual subjectivity and, possibly, experiences of sexual coercion.

However, rather than look across survivor and non-abused narratives for the ‘similarities and differences’, I was also conscious of the ways that particular identities might come to influence the types of stories that could be told. Specifically,
everyday meanings surrounding women’s sexuality might be laden with ‘other’ identities for survivors, particularly given the assumptions regarding the long-term outcomes of survivor sexualities. From a poststructuralist perspective, it is only through notions of ‘normal’ sexual identity and behaviour that the ‘Other’ can be constructed by what it is not, and what it lacks (Lacan, 1977). Furthermore, following from Derrida’s (1981) notion of diffèrance, the ‘Other’ identity of the ‘abused’ woman also appears to be constructed through a hierarchical system which maintains and marks ‘difference’. Given that survivor difference is largely constituted in relation to those ‘Normal’ aspects of femininity and sexual behaviour, constructions of survivor identity also remain limited in their scope to understand complexities which extend beyond this particular discursive and material context. As Sam Warner (2009) has argued, constructions of child sexual abuse cannot be viewed as unproblematic representations, but need to be considered in relation to the particular discourses that sustain them. For Warner (2009), this might explain why particular survivor experiences are told, and others seemingly ignored (p. 9).

Given my critique of psychological and academic research, which continue to make comparisons between ‘abused’ and ‘non-abused’ women (or survivors and ‘normal’ femininity), I was cautious about not over-emphasising this aspect of my research design. Importantly, this thesis draws on narratives from survivors and non-abused women, but also considers how these identities converge and diverge in a context beyond psychological notions of ‘difference’. For example, the larger focus of this thesis was to examine assumptions surrounding survivor sexuality and identity in view of ‘non-abused’ (‘normal’) women’s experiences, and to consider how the
wider (heterosexual) context might constrain all women’s access to more agentic positions.

Importantly, I also remained cautious about discounting difference. I want to reiterate again in this context that I am not suggesting that survivors do not experience intrapsychic and/or embodiment difficulties. On the contrary, research suggests that a number of survivors report debilitating symptoms, such as flashbacks, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and difficulties surrounding adult identity and/or sexual subjectivity (Johnson, Pike, & Chard, 2001; E. Weiss, Longhurst, & Mazure, 1999; Whiffen & MacIntosh, 2005). While I acknowledge that a myriad of experiences may contribute to survivor narratives, a key aspect of this research was to examine how the survivor identity—or ‘label’ itself—might serve to constrain survivor sexual subjectivity. For example, I would argue that a young woman who has grown up with the ‘survivor’ identity is likely to have experienced competing discourses about her sexuality. From this perspective, what might appear to be ‘similarities’ and ‘differences’ become increasingly complex.

The issue of difference continued to plague my research design, as I explain later in this chapter. While the employment of survivor and non-abuse groups was key to the premise of this thesis, the interviews (with 7 women who identified, and 15 women who did not identify, as survivors of abuse) were not positioned as samples for comparative analysis. Rather than re-present this rigid comparative design, and refer to the participant groups as ‘abused’ versus ‘non-abused’ outcomes, I wanted to distance the overall study design from positivist notions of population ‘sampling’
and ‘difference’. Given that survivors and/or women who identity as lesbian/queer/bisexual were purposefully selected, I was aware that my recruitment process would generate an uncharacteristic sample of young women. This intentional process of selective recruitment follows a feminist poststructuralist approach, and aims to achieve data diversity by purposively engaging with a wider range of participants. Ultimately, the participant interviews were not restricted by sampling logic, nor did this design seek to achieve a ‘representative sample’. Following Hollway & Jefferson’s (2000) discussion, the approach adopted in this thesis was primarily interpretive and exploratory. This methodology allowed greater scope to explore new relationships and contradictions, as well as possible thematic connections across the interviews.

**Research Design**

**Method**

The interviews were largely derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 young women, aged 19–28 years. This method has been identified as an appropriate method of research within the poststructuralist framework, as the open-ended structure allows space for participants to reflect on complex and multifaceted experiences in their sexual lives (Gavey, 2003). The use of semi-structured interviews also allowed for a more detailed understanding of the ways that survivors of abuse both interpret and resist popular constructions of sexual abuse (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Seibold, 2000).
Participants were recruited through advertisements posted at University campuses (located in Western Sydney and Inner Sydney), at women’s centres across Sydney/Western Sydney and through a young LBQT (lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transgender) community organisation operating in inner Sydney. A smaller number (9 participants) were recruited through advertisements posted at inner-city locations, however, the larger amount of participants (13) lived in Sydney’s Western suburbs. The two locations of recruitment—Greater Western Sydney and Metropolitan Sydney—were chosen to allow for a more representative sample of participants from varying ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic locations. Specifically, Greater Western Sydney has been identified as an area which has a greater proportion of socio-economic disadvantage and ethnic diversity.

The flyer (please see Appendix C) invited young women who were interested in participating in the study about their ‘sexual lives and experiences’ to initiate contact via email or phone. One flyer was used in the recruitment of all the participants; however the study also explicitly stated that the researcher was interested in talking to women who had experienced child sexual abuse.

Given issues of confidentiality, participants who indicated an interest in the study were asked whether they preferred the Information Sheet and Interview Availability Forms to be sent via email or mail. Interviews were organised after the Interview Availability Forms were returned by mail.

The interview schedule explored a wide range of themes, including women’s: a) reflections on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ adult sexual experiences; b) experiences with their
bodies and empowerment/disempowerment; c) first experiences of consensual sex; d) attitudes toward virginity; e) experience of any changes over time in their sexual relationships. Most often, the interview began with an informal conversation about what prompted participants to become involved in the study. If participants were unsure about how to answer a question, they were often asked to reflect back on their adult sexual lives as a time-line, and talk about each of their relationships sequentially. This time-line approach has been used in previous research to encourage participants to consider the full range of their past experiences (e.g. see R. Leonard & Burns, 1999). This research project endorsed verbal cues in the interview, rather than the noting down of key events on a paper chart. This time-line approach aided participants in their storytelling, and also offered a clear structure to reflect in which to reflect on previous experiences.

Prior to their interview, participants were given a general verbal description of the study, and at this time they were reassured about the confidentiality of their interview data. They also were given time to ask any further questions about the study and/or interview topic. The face-to-face interviews ranged between 50 mins and 1.5 hours, although the majority were close to 1 hour. This often reflected the time constraints of the interview venue, particularly if a community venue was being used.

The young women who participated in this study also completed a short demographic questionnaire, which asked questions about their sexual identity and cultural background, as well as their current mental health, possible experience of child sexual abuse, and adult sexual history. The questionnaire also asked them
whether or not they identified as a survivor of child sexual abuse. This information was obviously crucial to the recruitment both of women who self-identified as survivors, and those who did not. As I will explain later, because participant recruitment was ongoing, and in response to the one flyer—which encompassed both survivors and non-abused women—the number of participants across these two groups differed substantially.

**Participants**

A total of 22 young women, aged from 19-28 years, participated in the in-depth interviews. Seven (7) young women self-identified as survivors of child sexual abuse and 14 women did not identify as survivors. One (1) young woman indicated that she had experienced child sexual assault, but did not identify as a survivor.

Overall, the interviews largely represent a university-attending sample of young women. For example, 17 of the 22 participants were currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree (at University of Western Sydney, University of NSW, or Sydney University). Given the visibility of the University of Western Sydney logo on the recruitment flyers, students from this university perhaps perceived the study as more accessible. Coupled with this, my position as a tutor at this university may have also allowed greater access to participants from this campus.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Racial /Cultural background</th>
<th>Region (in Sydney)</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Survivor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chelsea</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Filipino-Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Asian-Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alix</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivian</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Anglo-Burmese</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Living with partner</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Australian-Italian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Australian-Italian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Armenian</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sydney</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valentina</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Chilean/Australian</td>
<td>Greater Western Sydney</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants: Sexuality

Overall, 12 participants identified as heterosexual, 5 as lesbian, 2 as bisexual and 3 as ‘queer’. My decision to purposively sample young women who identify as ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’ and/or ‘queer’ was motivated by the current dearth of qualitative studies which represent non-heterosexual women. Further to this, the tendency of the literature to focus on lesbian sexuality or same-sex sexual preference as a negative outcome of abuse presents a limited story of abuse for LBQT individuals. The connection between sexuality and sexual harm may have important impacts on the ways in which lesbian, bisexual and queer women look back on events and construct their identity. Employing a qualitative methodology, this thesis also aimed to allow lesbian, bisexual and queer survivors a more active position in which to re-interpret this connection and/or discuss the wider impact of this trajectory in their lives.

Although participants were asked to indicate their sexuality in the demographic questionnaire, this was often raised in the interview as a point of contestation. For example, one of the young women who identified as lesbian, and one bisexual and one queer woman, indicated that they were not comfortable fitting themselves within a particular sexual ‘orientation’ or category. Indeed, the categories of sexual identity chosen by women were often a reflection of their desire and political identity, rather than an indication of their past sexual experiences. For example, three women, one who identified as queer and two as bisexual, indicated that they had not had a significant sexual experience with a woman.
This more fluid approach to sexuality has been outlined by Lisa Diamond (2005), and more critically by Ariel Levy (2006), who suggest that media representations have led to the increased desirability of female-female sexuality. Diamond (2005), who discusses the recent phenomenon of young women ‘hinting at’ or ‘experimenting with’ lesbian/queer/bisexual sexuality, points to the rising acceptance of particular (white, ‘attractive’, ‘heterosexual-looking’, ‘femme’) depictions of same-sex attraction in popular cultural discourse. For Diamond, while portrayals of same sex sexuality are often ‘positive’, by attending to the desires of male viewers they also continue to regulate and constrain women’s sexuality (p. 105).

However, in many ways, this argument fails to capture the complexity of ‘non-heterosexual’ identities, which may offer young women an avenue in which to contest the repressive aspects of femininity and heterosexuality. For example, it could also be argued that the non-heterosexual identity aligns itself with other neoliberal modes of self-determination which (at least symbolically) position the young women as ‘free’ and ‘in control’ (B Davies, et al., 2006, p. 88).

The young women who indicated a preference for a bisexual or queer identity in the absence of a same-sex experience remained unsure about defining themselves in relation to an explicit and fixed sexual identity. Further to this, as outlined in the below excerpt, by aligning themselves with an ‘other’ sexual identity outside heterosexuality, participants could also envisage a more ‘safe’ and ‘equal’ relationship. As one participant, ‘Alix’ explains:

---

7 Participant pseudonyms have been adopted throughout this thesis.
I’m not sure if I’m bisexual – I must be. I’m not 100% sure but I love women. Women I think generally are so much nicer to look at, and they’re safe as well. Women, to me, are safer. You’re not going to get labelled. You can both do whatever you want to each other. Nothing’s going to come of it; you’re equal in that way, I think. So that’s the power as well—the attraction there. But I am attracted to women.

Further to this, the age of the participants who indicated some uncertainty about their sexual identity may also have contributed to their reluctance to classify their sexuality in a permanent way. Thus, rather than present themselves as unwittingly, or ‘naturally’, tied to heterosexual identity, these young women were careful to describe their sexuality as sexual choice.

**Participants: Cultural background**

The large majority of young women in this study described their cultural background as ‘Anglo-Australian’ (16 participants); however two participants described themselves as ‘Australian Italian, and equal numbers of participants described themselves as ‘Anglo-Burmese’, Filipino-Australian’, ‘Asian-Australian, and ‘Latino-Australian’.

During the interviews, racial and cultural issues were raised in various ways. One survivor, Valentina, spoke at length about the possible significance of her ‘Latino-Chilean’ background and how it may have impacted the gendered violence evident across all generations of her family:
There has been quite a bit of history with rape and assault in my family. And I realise that the amount of women that have been like manipulated or been touched...it scares me. It may be a cultural thing and that saddens me because for a long time I took a lot of pride in my cultural background, you know.

While Valentina suggested that sexual violence was in some way ‘a common occurrence’ in her family, she also expressed pride in the way that her immediate family directly challenged issues of ‘narrow-mindedness’:

A lot of Latino parents who are narrow-minded and religious...I think the good thing about my family is that they didn’t just sit there and eat up what everyone else was thinking…You know, my parents, and my dad as well, and all my family, what I love and detect pride in is that they decided to take their own stance, they’re not narrow-minded.

Cultural background and religion was often raised by same-sex attracted participants as having an impact on their ability to speak freely about their sexual desire. For example, ‘Natalie’, who identified as ‘Italian-Australian’, spoke about wanting to ‘escape’ from her extended family environment, which impinged on her ability to explore her sexual identity when she was younger:

When I turned 21 I took off to London and that’s when I kind of went into my whole sexual identity. With such a tight family background I had to escape in order to find myself and be anonymous, so I didn’t have to report to a Mum and aunty, cousins, you know… there’s a huge Italian family.
For Stella, her experience of coming out to her mother was linked to her religious family life, which she believed had an impact on her mother’s reaction to her coming out as a lesbian:

My Mum goes to Church every Sunday, so I suppose yeah...so I suppose pretty religious. I’ve been kind of out for a long time amongst friends but when I told my Mum she freaked out. She didn’t talk to me for about three months. It was really tough...She did ask me when we were cooking dinner one night ‘Why are lesbians afraid of penis?’ Well, I said ‘Well why don’t you like vagina?’ And she didn’t really say much after that. I was like, ‘It’s pretty much the same thing. Some people are into something and some people aren’t’...I was like ‘No Mum. Doesn’t matter how many times you ask me, you’re not going to get a different answer’.

As outlined in the above excerpts, while a number of participants felt restrained by cultural and religious aspects of their family life, they were also active in challenging their parents’ viewpoints. However, although Natalie spoke about having the freedom to ‘escape’, Stella’s proximity to her family was also a consequence of her financial situation and the good friends who remained in the area where she had grown up. This was not an unusual situation, as approximately half of the participants indicated that they were still living in the family home, or with one of their parents. Given the age group of the young women and their proximity to the university lifestyle, participants indicated that their financial situation was primarily the reason why they had continued to live with their families.
Ethics Approval

This study was approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: H6189). This process was met with a number of requests for revisions, particularly regarding the mental health of the participants. Following concerns outlined by the ethics committee, the recruitment procedure included the completion of a short questionnaire, where participants were asked to indicate whether they were ‘currently experiencing mental health symptoms’. One participant who was currently undergoing counselling was excluded from the study on these grounds. While the questionnaire was an essential tool in determining the sexual abuse history of participants, I was cautious that some participants would not be comfortable with the possible exposure that could arise from the mailing of hard copies of this questionnaire to their residence. As a result, I asked participants if they would prefer an electronic copy of the questionnaire, which they could fill out online. Further to this, participant anonymity was ensured through the allocation of participant pseudonyms, many of which were chosen by participants themselves. As I explained to participants in their interview, the self-electing of pseudonyms would be helpful if they were interested in following up on the research publications.

Situating myself in the research: Reflections on the interviews with young women

This thesis has inevitably been influenced by my own experiences as a university student and qualitative researcher over the past 13 years. My enrolment in a Bachelor of Psychology program at Flinders University (in Adelaide) was quickly overtaken
by my widening interest in feminist studies and political praxis. I fondly recall my
very first lecture in Women’s Studies as a moment of revelation; not only in terms of
my own thinking about gender, but also regarding the theoretical richness of the
writing in this area. My interest in feminism coincided with an increased scepticism
that psychological discourse (as I understood it at this time) could provide a complex
account of women’s experiences of sexual violence. This was particularly evident
when I examined quantitative research regarding women’s ‘risk’ and ‘sexual
dysfunction’, which often explicitly engaged in a dialogue of victim-blaming. Since
this time, I have been motivated by research that disrupts taken-for-granted
assumptions about gender and psychology. In particular, I have been interested in
feminist work which challenges existing cultural discourse surrounding ‘compulsory
harm’ for female survivors. Endorsing a feminist critical approach to psychological
discourse, the interview-based approach adopted in this thesis aimed to not only
‘give women a voice’ but to provide a counter discourse to the more reductive
representations of survivors in this area. For example, participants were encouraged
to view the interview as ‘their own story’, and whilst there were some broad
interview topics, these would chiefly serve as a prompt during the interview when
conversation was exhausted.

However, while psychological quantitative research has a long history in the
reporting of survivor symptomatology, therapeutic narratives have been used
extensively in journals and in publications which address psychological diagnoses.
From this perspective, survivor stories do not represent an excluded voice in public
discourse, but they often take the particular form of a confessional narrative.
Therapeutic and/or disclosure narratives are also recognisable in popular representations of survivor stories (such as self-help texts and talk-shows), which draw heavily on accounts of ‘healing’. For example, identifiable headlines in the 1980s and 1990s addressing the significance of (largely celebrity) survivors ‘breaking the silence’ about their experiences of sexual abuse, also provide an important backdrop for present-day survivor stories (see Illouz, 2003b). The gaining momentum of ‘false memory’ in the United States and elsewhere has also contributed to a focus on legal notions of ‘truth’, which include more detailed narratives surrounding the sexual abuse itself (Doane & Hodges, 2001).

I was aware before I began conducting the survivor interviews that participants might be compelled or feel some pressure to ‘tell’ a particular disclosure story and reveal details about their childhood abuse experience. After introducing myself, I spoke to the participants briefly about the study, and reassured them that it was not necessary for them to give explicit detail about their child sexual abuse experience(s), and that the focus of the interview was chiefly on their adult sexual lives. I was also careful to inform participants that, while this information was not necessary, the semi-structured organisation of the interview meant that there were no restrictions on what they chose to raise in the interview.

My own position in this research project as a young, white, woman undoubtedly influenced the interview process and the content of young women’s narratives. Given that I appeared to be relatively similar in age to the young women I interviewed, there were a number of occasions when participants alluded to a shared
understanding about gendered experiences in the world. This was perhaps aided by my informal engagement in the research process, and my emphasis on the unstructured nature of the interview content.

Although this broad framework promoted a ‘free-flowing’ conversational process, there were moments during the interviews when I questioned the ethical significance of my own ‘body language’ and utterances of ‘yes’, ‘yeah’ and ‘okay’ in generating further dialogue. I remain ambivalent about these small words and actions, such as my encouraging nods of approval, particularly in those instances when participants raised troubling points of view. Of course, the placement of my reply to women’s stories, while often used only to reduce a small silence or to make the participant feel more comfortable, often appeared more persuasive when I reviewed the interview transcripts. As a result of the interview/analysis process—which included my ongoing reading and re-reading of interview transcripts in the midst of conducting other interviews—my conversational voice became less and less noticeable over time.

Given the widening of legal and therapeutic representations of survivors, I was also aware that participants were likely to be limited in relation to the types of stories they could tell. As Hall and Du Gay (1996) suggest, ‘because identities are constituted within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies’ (p. 4). However, while discourses surrounding survivor ‘difference’ and ‘dysfunction’ are undoubtedly (re)produced in cultural institutions, they also operate at the level of individual subjectivity, which may
include survivors’ negotiation and resistance (Malson, 2000). From this perspective, dominant discourses may operate to guide and delimit survivor narratives, but at the same time cannot account for why the ‘telling’ of particular stories are privileged over others (Willig, 2001). Adopting a discourse analytic approach, survivor narratives were positioned as ‘external to the person’, but also reflect the multiple positions from which survivors may speak from. Thus, rather than situating survivor narratives in relation to a stable subject or point of view, they were instead positioned as largely unstable, multiple (and often contradictory) stories which reflect ‘where (survivors) speak from, rather who they really are’ (S. Warner, 2009, p. 8, emphasis in original).

**Analysis**

In Chapter Three I employ critical feminist review of the literature to explore the ways that survivors have been located in academic and professional texts. Specifically, I address the complex ways that survivors have been constructed in terms of ‘dysfunctional’ sexual behaviour and sexual risk. This analysis aims to provide insight into contemporary formulations of female survivors, and in particular, the ways that taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding gender and heterosexuality are discursively reproduced in academic and therapeutic literature (Lazar, 2007). It focuses on psychological and ‘empirical-scientific’ representations because they provide explicit examples of the ways that research in this area reproduces specific discourses to construct notions of ‘harm’ and ‘risk’ for survivors.
The remaining Chapters (4, 5, 6, 7 and 8) include excerpts from participant interviews. A feminist discourse analytic approach is employed to illustrate how participant narratives are located in wider discourses surrounding child sexual abuse, femininity and (hetero)sexual and ‘queer’ identities. This method of analysis also draws heavily on the previous design outlined by Wendy Hollway (1984), which examined both dominant discourses and those alternative, resistant and contradictory discourses that often coexist in women’s accounts of subjectivity.

The interpretation of the themes from the interviews also utilised discursive approaches to data analysis. For example, a feminist model of positioning theory was utilised to explore the interrelationships between discourse and the subject positions made available to and by the women in this study (Harré & Van Lagenhove, 1999; Hollway, 1984, 1989). This analytic approach was useful in theorising why it is that survivors and non-abused women might differently position their experiences of femininity, sexual subjectivity and possible instances of adult sexual coercion in their lives. This approach also allowed the exploration of the various ways in which women may negotiate and resist subject positions in relation to professional, academic and popular discourses surrounding femininity and child sexual abuse.

Davies and Harre (1990) define a subject position in the following way:

> Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (p. 49)
The transcripts were analysed using thematic decomposition, an approach outlined by Stenner (1993) and Braun and Clarke (2006). This technique combines a thematic analysis of the data with discursive approaches, and is situated within a broader poststructuralist theoretical framework. Specifically, this method of analysis focuses on identifying ‘themes’, or coherent patterns, within participant interviews. This includes a close reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts, line by line, and the generation of a thematic ‘map’ of each participant. As outlined by Stenner (1993), this method of analysis identifies patterns and ‘stories’ in the data and the inter-connection of these themes with wider, socially produced, discourses.

Returning to an earlier point, while participants are marked by ‘difference’ throughout this thesis (for example, they are often described as ‘abused’ versus ‘non-abused’) the focus of this study is not on comparing woman, or examining what might arise as similar and/or different between them. Rather, my intention in relation the analysis of the data is to consider the different positions young women adopt in the context of normative understandings of femininity and gender/violence. Central to this analytic approach was the consideration of how different discursive positions are occupied by survivors and non-abused women, and their investment in particular narratives (Hollway, 1984; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

However, it is important to note that in constructing a story that focused on disrupting existing assumptions of survivors, some participant narratives inevitably appear in this thesis more frequently than others. Following a feminist poststructuralist approach, I also remained cautious about acknowledging the
limitations of making ‘truth claims’ based on these interviews. Specifically, I have attempted to portray the individual experiences of participants, rather than dilute their stories and present them as general ‘findings’. Yet, participant narratives were, at least in part, a product of how I organised and approached the interviews. For example, I often asked participants to reflect on a timeline of their adult sexual experiences to assist their own ‘remembering’. This may have had important impacts on the types of stories which were told by participants.

While my analysis did not attempt to incorporate psychoanalytic interpretations of subjectivity, I agree with Hollway (1984) that personal history has some persuasion on the subject positions that people choose to take up. At the same time, following Nicola Gavey’s work, I am also wary of the danger of dipping into the ‘speculative possibilities’ offered in psychoanalytic accounts (see Gavey, 2002, p. 434), particularly given the historical interpretations of incest and child sexual abuse that have emerged from this framework. Along with Freud’s denial of child sexual abuse, psychoanalytic perspectives have contributed to the obscurity of child sexual abuse as a (feminist) political issue. Coupled with this, the authority of psychoanalytic readings which speculate about buried and ‘latent’ sexual disturbances for female survivors continue to add to more mainstream psychological work. As Gavey (2002) has argued, while a purely discursive standpoint has been criticised for its inability to attend to intrapsychic aspects of subjectivity, such criticisms are often based on ‘uncomplicated’ understandings of discourse analysis. Advocates for the fusing of discursive and psychoanalytic perspectives also tend to discount the ethical issues
which might accompany attempts to analyse the ‘inner’ or ‘true’ motivations of participants. As Gavey (2002) suggests:

Such universalist assumptions afford the researcher (and psychology in general) an interpretive framework that is very powerful because it allows the possibility of being read as if it can tell the Truth of people’s inner lives...which are able to be illuminated (with certainty) through the theoretical gaze of the researcher. (p. 436)

Limitations

Reflecting on my analytical framework, I have been careful not to ignore what have been identified by knowledgeable feminist and discursive researchers as the ‘sticky issues’ in representations of women’s experiences (Weatherall, Gavey, & Potts, 2002; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). The first and most obvious limitation concerns the extent to which the qualitative interviews taken with 8 survivors and 14 non-abused women can be generaliseable to the wider population. This debate has been taken up in numerous forums, and I do not have the space to outline the arguments in any detail here. However I do want to emphasise that, in rejecting objective notions of reality, the poststructuralist position I have taken up in this research was driven by an interpretative framework. Pointing to the danger in making ‘truth’ claims, this framework acknowledges the discursive and unstable construction of narratives through language (J. Scott, 1992). From this perspective, narratives are never ‘representative’, but at the same time they provide glimpses of the world from a vantage point mediated by multiple factors, including the interview process itself.
At the same time, I also recognise that the participants narratives presented in this thesis are largely representative of a specific (white, privileged, middle class) position. Reflecting back on the young women who volunteered to be interviewed for this study, I suspect that the cultural silences the surround child sexual abuse, and sexuality more generally, may have limited the range of people who were comfortable about speaking about their experiences.

Further, although a poststructuralist discursive approach rejects the notion that the ‘Truth’ about participants can be revealed in unproblematic ways, the relationships between discourse and a participant’s subject position remain a contested terrain in feminist research. As Weatherall, et al. (2002) raise in their article, researchers often interpret women’s narratives in ways that suggest a relationship between discourse and subjectivity, but at the same time they fail to consider the significance of this positioning in the lives of the participants (p. 533).

The notion that feminist perspectives ‘give a voice’ to women’s stories becomes increasingly complex in the context of survivor narratives about child sexual abuse, particularly given that representations of confessional/therapeutic modes of storytelling have loosely adopted this approach in the past. As I have already suggested, ethical issues surrounding research in this sensitive area put limits on the types of stories that get told. More often than not, confessional modes are privileged over more nuanced accounts because they are perhaps the more recognisable (and acceptable) ways of telling stories about a topic which is still popularly viewed as ‘cultural taboo.’ Following Michelle Fine, I would argue that in order to unearth,
interrupt, and ‘open new frames’, particularly in terms of representing the ‘Other’ in research, we need to ‘tell tough, critical, and confusing stories’ which previous studies have attempted to avoid (1992, pp. 219–220).

**Conclusion**

Overall, this thesis aims to add to existing feminist theoretical work, which underlines the particular mediating impact of ‘sexual danger’ and ‘sexual pleasure’ in constructions of women’s sexuality. Investigating the context of young women’s good and bad sexual experiences, this thesis also aims to challenge those straightforward understandings of survivor (compulsory) harm and (re)victimisation currently presented in academic and popular discourse. As I will outline in Section One of this thesis, by relying on the notion of a stable and (always already) ‘dysfunctional’ sexual identity for survivors, psychological discourse often fails to capture the complicated terrain of (non-abused) young women’s sexual subjectivity.

However, the delineation of survivor and non-abused women’s access to ‘healthy’ (read ‘normal) sexual subjectivities may have considerable impacts on the ways in which survivors of abuse negotiate their identity and sexual lives. I investigate this line of questioning more closely in Section Two of this thesis. Specifically, I address the importance of presenting more embodied, sex-positive models of survivor sexuality, and one which provides a counter discourse to psychological and therapeutic assumptions surrounding survivor adult sexuality.
SECTION 1

Exploring survivor ‘difference’ in the cultural context
CHAPTER THREE

The science of ‘difference’: Constructions of survivor sexual behaviour in academic and psy-discourse

This chapter engages in a feminist discourse analysis of psychological and academic research surrounding child sexual abuse and adult ‘sexual dysfunction’ and ‘revictimisation’. It aims to both highlight and problematise the ways in which explicit and implicit assumptions surrounding heterosexuality and women’s sexuality are adopted in psychological perspectives. As I will argue, this research agenda has operated to construct particular gendered symptomatologies and sexual subjectivities of adult survivors. This chapter draws on both reported findings and excerpts from academic and professional research, and outline some of the chief concerns raised by feminist theorists in this area.

Framing difference: Nikolas Rose and Critical Psychology

Psychological and academic accounts of child sexual abuse often lean on traditional discourses of heterosexuality, and this may have particular outcomes in terms of what gets counted as ‘healthy’ (or ‘abnormal’) sexual subjectivity. Following from Nikolas Rose’s (1998) work, I suggest that much of the research surrounding survivor ‘dysfunction’ and ‘difference’ remains reliant on a comparative ‘ideal’ or ‘Normal’ feminine sexuality. From Rose’s perspective, psychological discourses, along with the other ‘psy’ disciplines (psychiatry, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis),
also engage in the process of ‘making up’ and regulating particular identities to encompass ‘the kinds of people that we take ourselves to be’ (1998, p. 10).

This theorisation of the ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ self is often distant from the dynamic ‘self’ that is caught up in individual subjectivities. Following from Foucault (1985), who underlined ‘the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normality, and forms of subjectivity’ (p. 3), Rose (1998) suggests that ‘psychology is not a body of abstracted theories and explanations, but an intellectual technology’, which makes visible particular forms of subjectivities through the generation of difference:

All the disciplines bearing the prefix of psy or psycho have their origin in the political axis of individualisation…individualising humans through classifying them, calibrating their capacities and conducts, inscribing and recording their attributes and deficiencies, managing and utilizing their individuality and variability. (p. 105)

Yet, rather than present the ‘normal’ subject through demarcation, the focus of the ‘psy’ discourses has been on the identification of the abnormal subject. Indeed, as Rose and Miller (2008) have argued, it was through the problems of ‘abnormality, difference, and divergence’ that the psy discourses gained momentum (p. 9).

Following from the above point, the discourse analysis that follows aims to reveal the various ways that psychological constructions of survivor sexuality are caught up with hegemonic constructions of feminine sexuality and gender. From this perspective, what gets counted as ‘abnormal’ is a reflection of cultural
consciousness, which overlays what gets counted as ‘risk’ and as survivor symptomatology.

**The focus: Sexually dysfunctional survivors**

While there has been considerable research surrounding the relationship between child sexual abuse and psychological distress in adulthood (specifically symptoms of depression, anxiety and dissociation) a large number of studies in psychological, psychiatric and therapeutic discourses have focused on the relationship between child sexual abuse and adult sexual functioning (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2003; Schloredt & Heiman, 2003). Academic research in this area suggests that survivors have an increased risk of ‘heightened and compulsive sexual behaviour’ (often described as ‘promiscuity’) (DiLillo, 2001; Maltz, 2002; Rumstein-McKean & Hunsley, 2001; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991; Tyler, 2002; Widom & Kuhns, 1996); as well as ‘sexual aversion’ (Noll, Trickett, & Putnam, 2003), or ‘frigidity’ (Buttenheim & Levendosky, 1994), and ‘sexual distortions’ that are considered to be ‘oversexualised’ or ‘undersexualised’ with reference to ‘normal’ feminine sexuality (Cloitre, Scarvalone, & Defide, 1997; Sarwer & Durlak, 1996). In their study, Noll, Trickett and Putnam (2003) further argue that survivors may experience ‘both a sexual preoccupation and an aversion to sex simultaneously’ (p. 576).

Of particular interest to researchers and therapists in this area is survivor-reported ‘adult sexual functioning’ or ‘sexual dysfunction’. Recent studies in this area have focused on the relationship between child sexual abuse and adult ‘sexually risky’ behaviours, such as a lower mean age of first sexual intercourse and higher number
of sexual partners (Schacht, et al., 2010; van Roode, Dickson, Herbison, & Paul, 2009). A large number of studies have also focused on quantifying survivors’ sexual behaviour in relationship to the ‘extreme poles’ of sexual behaviour: sexual ‘promiscuity’ or sexual aversion. For example, one Australian study by Najman et al. (2005) suggested that:

Although no specific sexual abuse syndrome has been confirmed, at least for adult women experiencing CSA, the range of difficulties consistently reported in the literature can be usefully generalised into two major patterns: ‘oversexualization’ and ‘undersexualization’… Oversexualization may be characterized by an increase in the frequency and number of sexual partners, lower use of risk-reducing contraceptives, and a greater likelihood of participation in commercialized sex and prostitution. Conversely, undersexualization relates to behavioral indications of diminished sexual satisfaction, in the form of frigidity, sexual arousal disorders, inhibited orgasm, and coital pain. (p. 518)

The above extract presents a familiar model of sexual dysfunction for survivors, who are often reported to exhibit both a ‘preoccupation with’ and an ‘aversion toward’ sex (Noll, et al., 2003). The premise of survivors’ polarised adult sexual behaviour was largely formulated in the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) framework. Following from Freud’s early study of psychodynamic theory, the PTSD model suggests that long-term outcomes surrounding sexuality can be linked to the level of stress experienced by survivors at the time of the abuse. From this
perspective, survivors who experienced the highest levels of stress will have an increased likelihood of suffering from PTSD symptomatology. For Horvitz (1976), symptoms such as ‘oversexualisation’ and ‘undersexualisation’ were considered a response by means of withdrawal (sexual avoidance) or an attempt at mastery over a traumatic event (sexual compulsion) (also see Green, 1993).

This framework of survivor sexual dysfunction has also been adopted in established pathway and trauma models in psychology. For example, Finkelhor’s (1984) renowned ‘traumagenic model’ proposed that survivors’ faulty pathway to ‘inappropriate’ sexual relationships in adulthood can be observed as either an avoidance of sex or a ‘consuming interest in anything sexual’. As Kinnear (2007) suggests:

Traumatic sexualisation results from an inappropriate sexual contacts and relationships; the effects the victims may experience include avoidance of sex, disgust with anything sexual, a consuming interest in sex, or problems with sexual identity. (p. 15)

Research surrounding ‘impairments in sexual functioning’ of survivors often intersect with biomedical discourses which position the survivor’s body as a site of ‘improper’ sexual and psycho-physiological function. For example, a number of studies have pointed to the role of ‘sexual desire disorders’, and ‘orgasm disorders’ in survivor sexual dysfunction (Kinzl, Traweger, & Biebl, 1995; Laan, Everaerd, & Evers, 1995; Rellini & Meston, 2007; Schloredt & Heiman, 2003; Walker, et al., 1988). In these studies, survivor bodies are afforded similar scrutiny as psychological
variables of dysfunction. Consequently, ‘the problem’ of abuse is re-located in women’s bodies rather than ‘outside’, in the gendered and structural inequalities which maintain violence against girls and women.

‘Blurring the boundaries’ of ‘sexually functioning’ women

Descriptions of ‘sexual disorders’ made in the clinical domain tend to underline a ‘blurring of sexual boundaries’ (Finkelman, 1995) in survivors, as well as their failure to adhere to the requirements of a ‘normal’ women’s sexuality, as shown in Noll et al.’s commentary:

There is evidence for heightened sexuality or sexual preoccupation such as excessive masturbation, sexual obsession, increased sex play, and early coitus as well as evidence for sexual aversion and avoidance such as negative feelings about sex, sexual dysfunction, greater anxiety regarding sex, more sexual guilt, and an avoidance of sexual thoughts and feelings. There is also the third possibility that there are those who experience both a sexual preoccupation and an aversion toward sex simultaneously—those who believe sex is undesirable but who also possess a compulsion to engage in sexual activity. (p. 576)

Yet, there remains some ambivalence in the literature as to what scale of dysfunction, and which end of the scale, female survivors are likely to inhabit. Significantly, while there has been extensive investigation of the sexual functioning of survivors, clinicians and researchers have not yet presented a consistent understanding of what it means for a woman to be functioning sexually. Given the lack of consensus regarding ‘normal’ women level of sexual function, and what
might be a ‘healthy’ standard of feminine sexual behaviour, the research in this area needs to be interpreted with some caution.

Contemporary psychological research on women’s sexuality, including research of survivor ‘sexual dysfunction’ and ‘desire disorders,’ is also heavily informed by scientific and biological theorisations of the ‘healthy’ individual. For example, the focus on empirical methods in psychological accounts of sexuality aims to uncover the underlying impacts of sexual abuse by comparing survivors to non-abused women. Within this model, previous research not only underlines the ‘unequivocal’ difference between ‘abused’ and ‘non-abused’ women, but also refuses to engage with broader socio-cultural theories of gender and power. For example, ‘normal’ feminine sexuality in this framework rarely incorporates the complexities that might exist in young women’s sexual experiences or in their attempts to achieve sexual agency and pleasure.

For example, psychological reports adopt a particular viewpoint when describing adult female survivors’ engagement in ‘sexual dysfunction’ and/or ‘risky’ sexual behaviour. Most noticeably, the majority of studies examining ‘sexually risky’ behaviour suggest that frequency and number of adult sexual partners most often predict poor outcomes for adult female survivors. However, there is little discussion of the ways that survivors might position these experiences in their own lives, and in relation to wider discourses surrounding gender and femininity. When researchers do comment on the meanings of particular sexual behaviours—such as ‘sexual
—more sex with more partners is always positioned as a negative outcome for adult survivors. As outlined by Noll et al. (2003) below:

Sexually abused participants endorsed more attitudes indicative of sexual preoccupation than did comparison participants. Sexual preoccupation may be an indication of unexpressed or internalized sexual compulsions. Sexual compulsion or preoccupation that is not acted on may get expressed in the form of continued pornography consumption, excessive masturbation, and an overactive sexual fantasy life. (p. 583)

In the above extract, sexual ‘preoccupation’, and accompanying behaviours such as pornography, masturbation and sexual fantasy, are assigned negative value in women’s lives. It can be inferred from the excerpt above that survivors need to be wary of ‘unexpressed or internalized sexual compulsions’, even if the ‘expression’ of this ‘preoccupation’ takes the form of individual or auto-erotic pleasure. The belief that masturbation represents a ‘bad’ sexual behaviour or outcome demonstrates an unwillingness of psychological research to engage in contemporary discourses women’s sexuality. Thus, rather than present an accurate interpretation of survivor sexual subjectivity, psychological research remains caught up in traditional cultural discourses which generate what Leonore Tiefer (2001) terms a ‘false picture of women’s sexual reality’ (p. 91).

A recent article by Lemieux and Byers (2008) reflects similar conservative opinions about young women’s sexual behaviour:
Interestingly, almost half the women who had experienced CSA were found to have engaged in both more frequent casual sexual behaviour, reflecting a sexualisation of relationships, as well as periods of voluntary abstention from sexual activity, reflecting a withdrawal from sexual relationships. Thus, a significant portion of the women who reported CSA engaged in different patterns of behaviour at different points in time. (p. 139)

Lemieux and Byers’ (2008) article does not provide information about how many ‘non-abused’ women engaged in ‘different patterns of behaviour at different points in time’. However, closer inspection of the questionnaire used to assess sexual behaviour suggests that psychological studies endorse very conservative viewpoints on women’s sexuality. For example, ‘casual sex’—measured by participant engagement in ‘sexual intercourse outside of a committed relationship’ or ‘sexual intercourse on the same day or evening’ of meeting—is considered a common behaviour for the cohort of university students represented in this sample.

Clinicians and therapists in this area have also tended to lean on similar ‘pathologised’ outcomes for adult women survivors. For example, a recent description of ‘the effects of abuse’ by Robin Robinson (2005) reifies a familiar story of the ‘abused woman’. As the following quote demonstrates, the survivor is positioned as marginal, ‘different’ and as behaving outside ‘normal’ feminine behaviour:

The predominant effects of girls' experience of sexual abuse include stigmatization, powerlessness and an acceleration of a girl's identity as a sexual
being…Relational understanding may thus be thwarted, leaving sexual interaction devoid of the qualities of attachment and affection, and probably creating sexual preoccupations and compulsions, precocious sexual activity, and sexual aggression. Of course, a characteristic of good girls is virginity, and a girl who has been sexually violated may see herself as different from other girls, as ruined, even if no one but she—and the perpetrator—know. (Robinson, 2005, p. 65, emphasis added)

In many ways, Robinson’s ‘story of abuse’, which moves ‘in’ and ‘out’ of constructed meanings of abuse, tends to underline the belief that ‘abused girls’ are ‘speaking a different language’ to normal (non-abused) women, and survivors are positioned to have little control over ‘abused symptomatologies’ in their adult lives (Reavey, 2003). The above account also unwittingly positions survivors as unable to partake in those ‘normal’ aspects of ‘healthy’ feminine sexuality: ‘attachment and affection’. Instead ‘violated girls’ are positioned as deviant and as exhibiting extreme sexual behaviours, such as ‘precocious sexual activity’ and ‘sexual aggression’. While Robinson draws on the notion of the ‘good girl’ to demonstrate the polarity between survivor and non-abused women, there is little insight into how constructions of virginity may intersect with survivors’ sexual subjectivity and their perceived exclusion from ‘normal’ sexual development.

**Investing in scientific notions of ‘difference’**

Although a number of qualitative studies have underlined ‘difference’ in experiences of sexual dysfunction between abused and non-abused women, the ways in which
survivor narratives are analysed highlights the investment in labelling ‘abused’ women’s experiences as ‘other’. Specifically, the employment of ‘scientific’ evaluation of survivor sexual behaviour via self-report measures in quantitative research in this area fails to acknowledge subjective elements which inform women’s accounts. For example, in a number of quantitative psychological reports, survivor ‘high number of sexual partners’ is often dependent on dated ‘sexual experience’ surveys, which position female participant experiences as relating to a stable identity construct. Further to this, studies which assess sexual risk behaviours often ask participants to self-report on the number of sexual partners they have had over a 12-month period (Merrill, Guimond, Thomsen, & Milner, 2003; Noll, et al., 2003; Testa, VanZile-Tamsen, & Livingston, 2005).

The methodology used to collect survivor and non-abused women’s scores of sexual behaviour and attitudes has also received criticism from feminist and non-feminist researchers in the area. For example, some studies have relied on self-report measures from survivors to assess sexual dysfunction (Bartoi & Kinder, 1998; J. L. Jackson, Calhoun, Amick, Maddever, & Habif, 1990; Meston, Heiman, & Trapnell, 1999).

Early studies in ‘sexual dysfunction’ noted a higher frequency of dysfunction in abused versus non-abused groups. Becker et al (1986) argued that ‘abused women’ reported ‘more specific difficulties’ such as ‘fear of sex’, ‘lack of desire’ and ‘arousal dysfunction’ than non-abused women, even though the incidence of ‘orgasmic dysfunction’ did not differ between the two groups. Contrastingly, the
experiences of non-abused women were perceived to be ‘more suggestive of a decline in the quality of the total sexual experience rather than the occurrence of specific symptoms’ (p. 46). Among these problems, Becker listed ‘boredom’ and ‘less intense orgasms’ however the positioning of non-abused women’s problems was ‘not associated with loss in sexual desire’ (p. 47). While it is difficult to interpret the ‘difference’ drawn between ‘boredom’ and ‘lack of desire’ between these groups, Becker’s study does point to a discrepancy in the ways that women with histories of child sexual abuse are positioned in relation to their sexual experiences. Evidently, Becker found that women with histories of child sexual abuse were more likely to blame themselves when reporting their experiences of dysfunction: as their own ‘fear of sex’, and ‘lack of arousal’. In comparison, non-abused women were more likely to lean on outside factors (not themselves) when describing the decline in the quality of sexual experience.

A further limitation of previous studies examining survivor sexuality is the variation in what constitutes ‘high sexual risk’ and ‘high level’ sexual dysfunction. For example, a number of studies of sexual functioning have reportedly used unsound or limited levels of assessment (see J. L. Davis & Petretic-Jackson, 2000). In a recent study, Schloredt and Heiman (2003) assessed abuse and non-abuse perceptions of sexuality by asking participants to ‘rate their sexuality at best’ and their ‘sexuality at worst’ (as a score) for a one-year period. They hypothesised (though without conclusive results) that because survivors did not find their sexuality self-affirming, they ‘may be at heightened risk for sexual dysfunctions’ (Schloredt & Heiman, 2003, p. 282). Similarly, Finkelhor et al. (1989) used one question to determine
‘sexual satisfaction’: ‘Generally speaking, would you say your intimate relationships with the opposite sex are very satisfactory, or fairly satisfactory, or fairly unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory?’ (p. 382). Clearly, simple questions such as this fail to capture the qualitative differences in women’s stories.

Elaine Westerlund (1992) and others have argued that the use of behavioural accounts to assess sexual function (for example, the frequency of intercourse) is not an accurate measure of women’s experience of sexuality. She argues that ‘most glaring was the sense that while the sexual problems experienced by women with abuse histories had been categorised and catalogued, the subjective experience underlying the difficulties had been largely ignored’ (1992, p. 22).

Following from the above point, another issue in the empirical literature relates to the impact of survivor negative self-labelling in accounts of sexuality. For example, while a number of studies have underlined associations between child sexual abuse and ‘promiscuity’, Fromuth (1986) found that survivors reported being ‘promiscuous’ more than non-abused women, even though the actual number of reported sexual partners did not differ between the two groups. For Fromuth, the difference between the two groups ‘suggest[ed] that a woman’s self-concept, rather than her actual behaviour, [wa]s affected by the sexual abuse’ (1986, p. 13). A number of studies have suggested that women who identify as ‘abused’ also believe they have limited access to ‘normal’ feminine sexuality. For example, reflecting on her experiences with victims of child sexual abuse, Herman (1981) commented that
‘many of the women described themselves as ‘different’ or stated that they knew that they could never be ‘normal’ (p. 96).

In many ways, it is not surprising that difference has been magnified in survivor self-reports, given the scale of research that links childhood sexual abuse with some adult sexual disturbance. Indeed, as Noll et al. (2003) outline in their introduction, ‘the association between childhood sexual abuse and subsequent sexual distortion is unequivocal’, and multiple pathways have been chartered in the literature which underline survivor deviance from ‘normal’ women’s sexuality (p. 575). In this context, it is easy to see how sexual behaviours comparable to those of non-abused women are likely to be internalised by survivors as relating to abuse pathology (Reavey & Warner, 2001). This may also lead survivors to perceive their sexual behaviours as an expression of their abuse history, and therefore outside ‘normal’ femininity. As Mullen & Fleming (1998) argue, survivors are also more likely to be censorious of their sexual history:

What constitutes promiscuity tends to be a highly subjective evaluation, and women with a history of child sexual abuse are more ready to respond judgmentally about their prior sexual behaviour by labelling it promiscuous than would non-abused woman with a similar range of sexual experiences. This reflects not changed sexual behaviour, but changed attitudes to one's own sexuality. (p. 3)

In their review of research, Browne and Finkelhor (1986) listed three studies that reported that 33%, 28% and 25% of survivor samples engaged in sexual behaviour
that could be considered ‘promiscuous’. However, Browne and Finkelhor’s (1986) review also suggests that the higher instance of promiscuity among survivors might be a reflection of ‘their negative self-attributions than their actual sexual behaviour’ (p. 71). The impact of negative self-labelling was an area of discussion in Mullen et al’s (1994) study, which found that survivors reported similar frequency and number of sexual partners as controls, but were more likely to reflect that their sexual engagements were too frequent, too often, or not often enough.

Unfortunately, few quantitative studies elaborate on what discourses might be contributing to survivors’ exaggerated accounts of sexual behaviour as ‘too much’ and ‘not enough’. Psychological research presenting sexual dysfunction as an ‘inevitable’ outcome of child sexual abuse rarely acknowledges the ways in which these assumptions are taken up in popular discourse, and their impact on the identity of individual survivors. Further, by presenting survivor experiences exclusively within quantitative inventories of ‘sexual dysfunction’ and ‘sexual self-esteem’, psychological research neglects the ways that wider discourses of gender and sexuality impact all women’s experiences in the heterosexual matrix.

Not surprisingly, qualitative ‘interpretation’ of survivor perspectives on romantic relationships also tends to point towards theories of difference. In their study, Rellini and Meston (2007) asked survivors and non-abused women to write fictional stories (sexual and non-sexual) in response to abstract images of women in an intimate scene. They argued that ‘non-abused’ women’s writing about a sexual story tended to suggest that the female character portrayed in the image was ‘in love’ and
‘thinking of a tender and sweet day with her partner’. In comparison, they suggested that women with a history of CSA interpreted the female character’s story in more negative terms; she was interpreted as ‘feeling trapped’, ‘being forced’ and ‘a prisoner’. Throughout this article, Rellini and Meston (2007) become increasingly reliant on the identification of ‘difference’ between the two groups—‘non-abused’ and ‘history of CSA’—and report in their discussion that the ‘lack of group difference’ in one of the exercises regarding sexual fantasy was due to the nature of the essay topic administered, which ‘may not capture difference’. Rellini and Meston’s study argues that the results point to a different ‘internal cognitive process’ in women with a history of CSA versus non-abused women. In marking the difference in the two groups, Rellini and Meston also fail to elaborate on why it might be that ‘non-abused’ women drew heavily on romantic ‘story-telling’ in their interpretations of the scene. The absence of a discussion around what might be considered a ‘standard’ (albeit constructed) interpretation of the image suggests that the exercise was less about ‘internal cognitive processes’ than about observing difference between non-abused (normal) and abused (abnormal) women.

**Child sexual abuse and the ‘Risk of Revictimisation’**

While professional and academic studies over the past 30 years have underlined the adverse impact of abuse in terms of sexual dysfunction, there has been increasing research surrounding the relationship between child sexual abuse and increased vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse (as re-victimisation) in adulthood. Research in this area suggests that survivors have increased risk of experiencing...
adult sexual coercion than women who do not have a history of abuse (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1997; Messman-Moore & Long, 2003). For example, Van-Bruggen et al. (2006) reported that child sexual abuse predicted risk of adolescent and adult vulnerability to sexual coercive experiences, number of sexual partners, sexual attitudes and ‘sexual self-esteem’ in dating situations:

There is increasing evidence that women with a history of child sexual abuse are more likely to engage in risky or dysfunctional sexual behaviours in comparison to women without a history of CSA and that these behaviours might contribute to a vulnerability to further victimisation. (p. 132)

Re-victimisation of adult survivors is often positioned in psychological and popular discourse as evidence that survivors are behaving outside ‘normal’ feminine sexuality. For example, survivors are often described as ‘too passive’ or ‘transferring’ their experience of abuse to adult relationships (Reavey, 2003). Thus, while a number of authors suggest that little is known about the characteristics of women who report sexual coercion, there is an assumption that child sexual abuse both increases both women’s sexual risk-taking and their likelihood to affiliate with aggressive and sexually risky partners (Fergusson, et al., 1997; Littleton, Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2007; Merrill, et al., 2003).

While there is significant research suggesting that survivors are more likely to experience sexual victimisation in adulthood, the empirical findings in this area have not been consistent. Meta-analytic studies have revealed a large margin of results—
between 16% and 72%—linking survivors to re-victimisation in adulthood (Noell, et al., 2001, p. 139). Other studies have not yielded conclusive results. For example, Siegel and Williams (2003) found that child sexual abuse was not by itself a risk factor for revictimisation in adulthood, and that family and socio-economic variables were more predictive of sexual coercion in adulthood than a history of child sexual abuse.

There has also been substantial variability in studies examining differences between survivor and non-abuse women’s experiences of adult sexual coercion. For example, Coid et al. (2001) found that survivors were approximately three times more likely to experience sexual coercion in adulthood than non-abused women. Further studies have revealed that both prevalence across the survivor and non-abuse groups of women, and the percentage difference between them remain unclear. For example, Randall and Haskell (1995) found that 69% of women with a history of child sexual abuse and 42% of non-abused women experienced sexual coercion as adults. However, Orcut and Faison (1988) found a much lower differentiation; with 10% of survivors and 4% of non-abused women reportedly experiencing sexual coercion in adulthood.

**Feminist contestations**

The construction of the ‘sexually abused’ identity undoubtedly interacts with adult women’s sexual subjectivity and their perceived access to a ‘normal’ femininity. Further, the ways that survivors negotiate these two contradictory representations of female sexuality—passivity and activity—in their sexual relationships is influenced
by those cultural and psychological discourses which have thwarted their ability to be seen as ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ women.

Given the pervasive influence of psychological discourse on everyday understandings of survivors, a number of feminist authors have suggested that survivors often grow up with the expectation that they will encounter sexual and identity difficulties, or perceive themselves as always already different. For example, Worrell (2003) found that female survivors in her self-help group tended to assess their achievements and shortcomings in relation to hegemonic modes of femininity (p. 219). She found that many survivors spoke about the ways in which their abuse had influenced their ability to partake in ‘everyday’ modes of femininity. Worrell (2003) writes: ‘as if modes of “doing woman” had somehow been dislodged by the abuse’ (p. 220). Further, she noted that this was particularly heightened when women discussed the difficulties in their sexual relationships with men.

Feminists writing in this area have also challenged the assumption that child sexual abuse contributes to an increase in ‘sexually risky behaviours’ and the likelihood of re-victimisation in adulthood. They argue that current research surrounding sexual revictimisation in adult survivors has focused on the behaviour of female survivors, and thus neglects the current (hetero/sexual) context in which all experiences of sexual coercion are re-produced (Anderson & Sorensen, 1999). Paula Reavey (2003) has suggested that while survivors of abuse are judged in relation to their ability to fulfil the standards of ‘normal’ femininity, many professional, self-help and
autobiographical texts also rest on the assumption that non-abused women do not struggle with aspects of their sexual identity.

By assuming that the world of sexuality is a ‘liberating’ and ‘choice saturated’ territory, many of the problems survivors face can only be explained according to ‘their’ own personal vulnerabilities. (B)ut the territory of sexuality is often far from liberal or neutral for many women. (p. 154)

Feminist theorists in this area suggest that there is a double-bind in perceptions about the impact of child sexual abuse; where child sexual abuse is believed to increase women’s involvement in ‘sexually risky behaviour’ and the likelihood of sexual coercion. Reavey and Gough (2000) have noted that the majority of analyses of abuse draw on the survivors’ past experience of abuse to locate ‘dysfunctional’ outcomes:

Connections between the past (abuse) and present (sexualities) have been made by professionals and lay people who have access to abuse narratives and can readily pinpoint the effect that abuse has on a person’s (in)ability to have a ‘healthy’ sex life. Accounts are linked so directly with childhood experiences of abuse without acknowledging an individual’s development and its framing within gendered norms and expectations. (p. 326)

Not surprisingly, women who make choices regarding their sexual subjectivity are viewed not as agents, but as inevitably ‘damaged’ by their abuse history. As a result ‘the abuse’ is constructed as the ‘source’ of sexual identity, rather than as a women’s individual choice. For example, survivors who decide to exist outside of
heterosexual notions of femininity, whether it be as celibate, ‘promiscuous’ or lesbian, are also viewed in terms of pathology, where the ‘abuse’ is positioned as an inevitable cause of ‘sexual dysfunction’.

Re-contextualising adult women’s experience of sexual coercion

Uncertainty regarding the definition of revictimisation has been taken up by some qualitative researchers, who argue that women’s individual accounts of sexual coercion are often differently positioned, and relate to wider discourses of heterosexuality. For example, Cicely Marston (2005) has argued that ‘sexual coercion’ is ‘impossible to define objectively’ and the ‘understanding of a coercive experience can only be highly subjective’ (p. 68). Therefore, sexual coercion often consists of more than its assumed definition, which is ‘pressure from a person by means of implied or implicit threats of violence, or actual violence, to engage in sexual activities’ (Marston, 2005, p. 69-70). Marston’s study, which was based on narratives from young people in Mexico City, found that while many women’s accounts involved explicit coercion by their partners, many participants reframed their experiences in relation to normative discourses of gendered behaviour. Significantly, she found that many women in her study were reluctant to position themselves as ‘victims’ of sexual coercion, and often reframed their explicit experiences of coercion in relation the wider discursive context of male dominance (p. 74). Marston’s (2005) study also revealed that some narratives were based around women’s past experiences, and that events were often constructed and reconstructed to allow a more positive interpretation of the events. As she explained:
Individuals’ evaluation of sexual experiences after they have occurred is an important part of their subsequent construction, above and beyond the event itself. The degree to which an event is described in positive terms appears to be related to the extent to which it can be characterised as socially desirable. (p. 81)

While I would question Marston’s assertion that constructions of abuse rest ‘above and beyond the event itself’, her suggestion that sexual coercion involves subjective elements does raise some questions in relation to the ways that survivors and non-abused women may differently position their experiences.

The above findings also support wider feminist research investigating the role of dominant heterosexual discourses in women’s sexual scripts (Gavey, 1992; Hare-Mustin, 1994). A number of feminist authors have suggested that many unwanted experiences involving male sexual advances are situated within ‘normal’ discourses of heterosexual behaviour. In their study, Hird and Jackson (2001) found that many women reframed sexually coercive behaviour as ‘normal’ dating behaviour. Elizabeth Stanko (1985) has drawn attention to the ways that sexual coercive experiences are positioned in the context of heterosexual relationships: ‘Because it is the standard way of seeing the world, women learn to view their accommodation as a quality of femininity [and] women’s experience of sexual violation takes on an illusion of normality, ordinariness’ (p. 9).

As I have reviewed previously, Nicola Gavey’s (1992, 2005) research in particular points to the often unclear distinction between what might be regarded by some
women as rape and ‘just sex’ for others. For Gavey, coercive sex is largely supported by heterosexual discourses, which not only valorise passive feminine desire but also present masculine ‘domination’ as both ‘natural’ and ‘romantic’.

What is clear from previous research is that women often adopt an ambivalent relationship to cultural discourses surrounding heterosexuality. This may in part be due to the present cultural context in which sexual relationships are formed, where the context is mediated by both pleasure and danger (Vance, 1984).

**Looking toward positive representations?**

A further area that has not been examined with adequate scrutiny is the intersection of psychological research with ‘positive’ sexual therapies for survivors. There is a significant history in the counselling and treatment of survivors who exhibit dysfunctional sexual behaviours, or sexuality that is assumed to be influenced by the sexual abuse experience. Once more, there is an emphasis in therapeutic discourse on the ways that female survivors might exhibit dysfunctional behaviour as either ‘sexual aversion’ or ‘sexual promiscuity’. For example, in a recent therapeutic resource entitled ‘Counseling Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse’, Draucker and Martsof (2000) draw on earlier research by Maltz and Holman (1987) in order to locate problematic behaviours in survivors. While Draucker and Martsof (2000) underline the importance of cognitive appraisal and ‘restructuring’ to ‘address the misconceptions of survivors regarding sex roles and sexuality’ (p. 92), like other therapeutic literature in this area they remain reluctant to endorse ‘sexual behaviours’ that are deemed ‘outside’ traditional notions of heterosex. More than
this, sexual behaviour that moves away from traditional notions of heterosexuality, such as ‘promiscuity’, non-sexual activity or same-sex experiences are not only seen as ‘deviant’ but as intrinsically related to survivors’ abuse experience. As the following excerpt by Draucker & Martsof (2000) illustrates:

Counselling issues for survivors who exhibit compulsive sexual behaviours including sadism, masochism, bondage/discipline, anonymous sex, telephone sex, compulsive use of pornography, and cross-dressing include techniques used in the treatment of deviant sexual responses. Covert sensitization, for example, involves relaxation, hierarchy construction, and using imagery to pair deviant responses with aversive consequences. (p. 93)

What is missing from the above excerpt is a theorising around the importance of improving pleasurable sexual experiences for survivors (whatever these might be). Within the therapeutic realm, the exhibition of sexual dominance is an indication of harmful sexual behaviour and ‘measures of recovery’ are often determined by the extent to which women are able to fulfil traditional and ‘desirable’ aspects of feminine sexuality. Feminist poststructuralist analyses suggest that the prescribed ‘positive outcomes’ and ‘appropriate’ (hetero)sexual behaviour for survivors in therapeutic arenas involve a resignation to ‘correct’ sexual behaviour, many of which are antithetical to women’s sense of self and expectation of ‘recovery’ (O'Dell, 1997; Reavey & Warner, 2001).
The dangers in discounting models of symptomatology in clinical psychology

It is important to note that while this review is critical of the ways in which psychological texts have constructed the ‘abused woman’, recent quantitative studies have been active in interrogating psychological and clinical labels for their influence in the production of particular ‘abused’ identities. Nicola Gavey (2003) has highlighted the dangers in assuming that all clinical work surrounding child sexual abuse symptomatology is harmful and re-victimising for adult survivors. Gavey argues that a large body of work within psychology remains accessible to feminist poststructuralist researchers in the area. For example, Gavey sites Briere and Myers’ ‘self-trauma model’ (2002) as instrumental in understanding the traumatic effects of CSA, and of understanding various avenues and strategies for survival (2003, p. 197).

Given the propensity of psychological discourse to support existing understandings of survivor harm, the presentation of conflicting findings has also been subject to extensive scrutiny. Most significantly, the controversy surrounding a meta-analytic paper published by Rind and Tromovitch’s (1997)—which argued that only a small number of survivors are permanently harmed by the experience—highlights the widespread investment in presenting particular accounts of abuse. Rind and Tromovitch’s paper, which examined 59 community-based studies across the US, Canada, Spain and the UK, included a discussion about the possible negative impact of reporting on long-term outcomes of clinical samples. For example, the authors argued that child sexual abuse was ‘not associated with pervasive harm, when it
occurs it is not typically intense’ (p. 237). The meta-analysis, which was published again a year later in the Psychological Bulletin, also suggested that the long list of psychological outcomes commonly associated with adult survivors— including ‘inappropriate sexual behaviour’ – ‘are exaggerated at the population level (and) may stem from our culture’s tendency to equate wrongfulness with harmfulness’ (p. 253). However, the bulk of the controversy stemmed from claims by Rind and Tromovitch that the effects of child sexual abuse for boys were minimal and, in some cases, positioned as consensual and pleasurable. Understandably, the results provoked outcry in the psychological and wider community, which led to a response from the American Psychological Association that child sexual abuse causes lasting psychological harm and that ‘such activity should never be considered harmless...’ (1999, emphasis in original).

Although the larger public reaction surrounding the findings points to the centrality of the ‘harm’ discourse in guiding understandings of child sexual abuse, the article at least challenged the centrality of the victimological model. Furthermore, findings in support of Rind and Tromovitch’s (1997) study results had also been previously presented by prominent theorists in the area. For example, Browne and Finkelhor (1986) reported that less than 20 percent of adults in their review of 28 studies experienced serious psychological harm. Similarly, Conte (1985) reviewed 25 studies and reported that the high number of ‘asymptomatic’ survivors of abuse suggests that ‘sexual abuse appears to affect some victims and not others’ (p. 117).
In many ways, psychological research concerning the construction of identity through labelling and biases is not completely divorced from some social constructionist work, which similarly looks at the impact of discourses surrounding the ‘abused’ and ‘damaged’ child in the construction of adult sexual subjectivity. For example, a recent study by Holguin and Hansen (2003) examined the effects of the labelling of the ‘sexually abused child’ in the creation of a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ and of other adverse consequences for children and adults who have experienced child sexual abuse. They argued that the labelling of a child as ‘sexually abused’ often influenced the ways in which other adults and children interacted with and informed expectations about the child’s personality and abilities. This research suggests that stereotypes and assumptions surrounding the ‘abused child’ taken up by psychologists, social service workers, teachers and others, may inadvertently promote helplessness and lowered motivation in children (Holguin & Hansen, 2003, p. 660). As DeRoma found, the popular assumption that child sexual abuse will result in a ‘damaged individual’ often interacts with women’s self identity, and many women may come to feel that they are somehow destined to have substantial adverse psychological, emotional, and behavioural outcomes (DeRoma, Hansen, Tishelman, & D’Amico, 1997). More simply, self-labelling itself might operate to fuel pathology (George, Marr, Barrett, & McKinnon, 1999).

Similarly, in a study of the mediators of long-term effects of CSA, Coffey, Leitenberg, Henning, Turner, & Bennett (1996) also found a strong relationship between stigma for child sexual abuse and adjustment. Investigations into the long-
term effects of abuse need to consider societal beliefs and the constructed nature of the abuse experience:

Clearly, feelings of self-blame and stigma regarding sexual abuse can linger long into adulthood. This sense of being ashamed, tainted and blameworthy regarding the abuse may impact adjustment by affecting the survivors’ core beliefs about their worth as a person. It may be that higher levels of sexual activity (in adulthood) result in an increased sense of being ‘damaged goods’ and tainted due to a greater sense of personal and societal violation. (pp. 453-454)

However, as Lindsay O’Dell has argued, what is absent in current academic and professional research is an analysis of the ways that various psychological ‘namings’ of abuse survivors- such as ‘having poor adjustment’, or as presenting ‘significant impairments sexual functioning’- may lean upon and impact everyday constructions of survivor identity (Kinzel, et al., 1995; L. M. Leonard & Follette, 2002; Silverman, et al., 1996). O’Dell (1997) suggests that professional and clinical research often reifies pathologies of CSA in order to provide ‘support’ for symptomatology rather than presenting more optimistic messages from survivor life stories (p. 336).

By drawing attention to the discursive construction of survivor identity, I am not suggesting that women’s experiences of child sexual abuse, or their position as victims/survivors, do not have real impacts on the ways that young women negotiate their sexual subjectivity and/or possible experiences of sexual coercion. On the contrary, a number of survivors have sought therapeutic assistance for debilitating
flashbacks and sexual difficulties that relate to their abuse experiences. Yet, I propose that constructions of ‘normal’ women are too readily positioned alongside accounts of survivor dysfunction, and that they often demonstrate little insight into complex scripts involved in all women’s negotiations of sexual subjectivity. Further, while a number of psychological studies acknowledge the impact of survivors’ ‘self-labelling’, there is a blatant oversight of the ways that psychological accounts of ‘dysfunction’ and ‘risks’ may influence wider, popular discourses of child sexual abuse.

**Conclusion: Examining ‘difference’ in the context of ‘Normal’ and ‘Norms of truth’**

This chapter has focused on a particular ‘research agenda’ taken up in the psychological academic work over the past 30 years, which has effectively drawn a line between adult survivors and ‘sexual dysfunction’ and sexual ‘risk’. While the content of this chapter may have appeared narrow in its scope, this presentation of specific examples from the literature aimed to reveal the wider, encompassing aspects of the ‘trauma model’ itself, particularly in relation to the construction of survivor identity. Feminist theorists have expressed concern about the usefulness of this model for extending beyond notions of harm. As Mary Gilfus (1999) has noted, ‘trauma has come to be used interchangeably as a label for the injurious event itself (replacing naming the violence) and as a psychological condition’ (p. 1241). Currently, the presentation of survivor sexual pathology overshadows more positive
accounts of survivor sexual subjectivity, which might include survivor strength and resilience.

Although the construction of survivor identity extends beyond academic research, the virtual absence of empowering accounts places limits on public vocabularies and on what gets counted as ‘truth’. As Nikolas Rose (1985) argued vehemently in his earlier work, scientific discourses like psychology not only seek truth through the guise of science and rationality, they also make truth. For Rose, everyday appropriations of psy-discourse and ‘norms of truth’ have emerged because individuals actively frame themselves in relation to governing practices such as ‘abnormality’ and ‘dysfunction’ (1998). Given the centrality of psy-discourse in guiding understandings of the self, particularly the influence of sexuality on our psyche, the over-emphasis on survivor sexual pathology is hardly surprising. However, as I outline in Chapter Six, the function of psy-knowledge in the wider trend toward governmentality and self-management has ensured an emphasis on the importance of ‘healing’ (the self) rather than claiming a political identity.

The following chapter examines how psychological constructions of survivor sexual dysfunction—such as ‘promiscuity’ and ‘frigidity’—are situated in accounts from women who do not identify as survivors of child sexual abuse (‘non-abused’ women). Specifically, this chapter explores the ways that psychological and academic notions of ‘normal’ are viewed in the wider cultural context, and the subtle ways that taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding gender and sexuality are positioned in non-abused women’s accounts.
CHAPTER FOUR

A closer look at ‘normal’, ‘stable’ feminine sexual behaviour: Non-abused women’s experiences

This chapter argues that the assumptions surrounding ‘normal’ women’s sexuality in psychological accounts rely heavily on traditional notions of femininity. At the same time, they often ignore the complexities apparent in more nuanced accounts of young women’s sexuality outlined in contemporary, feminist and qualitative analyses. As Paula Reavey (2003) has argued, the presentation of survivors as ‘different’ in relation to their ability to partake in ‘normal’, feminine sexual behaviour also suggests that non-abused women do not struggle with aspects of their sexual identity. As a result, psychological findings of survivor ‘difference’ and sexual dysfunction fail to address the ways in which the broader cultural context thwarts all women’s access to more empowering subject positions.

This chapter has two objectives. First, by interrogating psychological benchmarks of ‘Normal’ femininity, it aims to problematise the ways that women (and women’s sexual behaviour) are positioned more broadly in the literature. This includes an examination of psychological investment in scientific and traditional discourses of femininity. More broadly, this chapter argues that psychological understandings of women’s sexuality is often (implicitly) made via connections with survivors ‘different’ sexuality and sexual behaviours. Within this context, the theorisation of ‘disordered’ sexuality is overrepresented in the literature as an exclusive ‘problem’
for survivors. As I argue, by neglecting the world outside, the abuse literature often
demonstrates little insight into complex scripts involved in all women’s negotiations
of sexual subjectivity.

Second, by purposefully focusing on the narratives of heterosexual women who do
not identify as survivors, this chapter also attempts to capture subjective accounts of
what the abuse literature has named ‘normal’ or ‘non-abused’ in the comparative
studies. As I will explain, it is only when the phantom of ‘normal femininity’ is
challenged, that accounts of survivors and all women begin to emerge from complex
positions within the heteronormative landscape.

**Hypothesising ‘normal’ women: Locating scientific origins of feminine sexual
pathology in psychological research**

In achieving a population which Lindsay O’Dell (2003b) refers to as ‘distinctly
different,’ psychology’s imagined notions of ‘normal femininity’ borrows from
scientific constructs surrounding (biological) sex and sex difference, traditional
femininity and masculinity, and long-standing constructions of ‘pathology’
surrounding women’s sexuality (Potts, 2002). This version of femininity, framed in
reference to ‘naturalised’ understandings of gender and sexuality, positions feminine
sexuality as innately ‘passive’, compared to the accompanying ‘active’ masculine
desire.

Historically, theorisations of female sexuality have largely been developed through
the lens of scientific and medical discourse. As Jeffery Weeks (1985) has noted,
early sexologists, such as Kraft-Ebbing and Havelock Ellis, reflected the significance
of ‘the laws of nature’ and the importance of biological factors, rather than social ones, in the determination of sexual practices (p. 72). For example, it was Kraft–Ebbing (1965 [1886]), who first emphasised the importance of the ‘male sex-drive’ in maintaining sex differences and promoting reproduction. Given their endorsement of scientific method and supposed ‘neutrality’, Kraft–Ebbing and Ellis’s theories were also positioned as the criterion of ‘Truth’ in the understanding of human sexuality, a trend which continued into the 20th century, when psychoanalytic diagnoses of sexual pathology became more pronounced in professional evaluations (McClelland, 2010; Tiefer, 1995).

The perspective that male sexual identity (whether it be ‘hormonal’ or ‘instinctive’) is ‘active’ and female sexual identity ‘passive’ remains prominent in contemporary understandings of heterosexuality. The biomedical and psychological model of ‘healthy sexuality’, reflected in Hollway’s (1984, 1989) elaboration of ‘the male sex drive’ and the ‘have/hold’ discourse, suggests that women’s sexuality is associated with their ‘biological need’ to reproduce and to be a recipient of the more dominant male sexuality. For example, Hollway’s (1989) analysis of heterosexual discourse contends that the taken-for-granted belief that men ‘naturally’ have a strong ‘sex drive’ ensures women’s position as the passive recipients of male desire. Further to this, the ‘have/hold’ discourses suggest that sex must take place in the context of legitimate relationships, which not only endorse the notions of ‘monogamy’, ‘commitment’, and ‘security’, but are also more stringently policed to produce more desirable behaviours in women rather than in men (Hollway, 1989, p. 55).
While it was Kraft-Ebbing (1965 [1886]) who first theorised sexual ‘hyperesthesia’ (or ‘excessive sexual desire’) as an expression of sexual perversion, Freud’s (1932) theory of psychical development also positioned active sexuality and passive sexuality as indicators of sexual pathology for women. Embracing a scientific and reductionist view of sexual identity and the importance of passivity in the construction of healthy feminine sexuality, Freud’s (1909) theories were framed by a belief in certain fixed characteristics of femininity and masculinity:

One uses masculinity and femininity at times in the sense of activity and passivity, again in the biological sense and then also in the sociological sense. The first one of these three meanings is the essential one, and the only one utilizable in psychoanalysis. (p. 77)

As Elizabeth Grosz (1989) has noted, Freud’s theory of psychical development allowed three options for women: ‘She could accept her castration (normal development); she could refuse her castration and consider herself phallic (the ‘masculinity complex’); or she can refuse to convert her sexual organ and orientation to vaginal heterosexuality’ (‘frigidity’) (p. 133). Clearly, in underlining biological difference in psychosexual development, Freud also neglected the importance of cultural influences and the ‘whole significance of these factors’ in the formation of the subject (Horney, 1926).

In many ways, the alliance of scientific and medical discourse with sexology has also encouraged the construction of ‘sexual dysfunction’ so frequently outlined in psychology research today. Accounts of sexual disorder, while shifting significantly
in the past 100 years, remain dependent on men’s ‘unquestionable need for sex’, and women’s sexual compliance (J. Kitzinger, 1992; Potts, 2002). Thus, women who fail to be available for sex—or attempt to mirror a masculine ‘active’ sexual desire—are positioned as ‘abnormal’ and ‘dysfunctional’.

The emergence in recent years of similar models in medical psychology and sexology expounding the ‘problem’ of ‘female sexual dysfunction’ suggests that it is not only survivors of abuse who experience an ‘aversion to sex’. While discourses of sexology continue to provide more liberal commentary regarding women’s right to sexual pleasure, newly defined models of ‘unhealthy’ sexual behaviour—such as ‘lack of desire’—have also been given extra clout through scientific accounts, biomedical endorsements and ‘disease mongering’ (McClelland, 2010; Tiefer, 1995, 2006). Indeed, the creation and promotion of ‘female sexual dysfunction’ in the medical and pharmaceutical arena, along with reports that 43% of women suffer from this ‘disease’, suggests a blurring of boundaries between what we perceive to be ‘normal’ and ‘sick’ about women’s sexuality (Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999).

Clearly, perceptions about harm are also heavily mediated by norms surrounding ‘healthy’ (hetero)sexual behaviour. For example, within the therapeutic realm, the exhibition of ‘oversexualisation’, or engagement in sexually dominant or ‘permissive’ sexual behaviour, is often perceived as an indication of harm. As a result notions of ‘recovery’ are gauged in relation to women’s perceived ability to fulfil traditional and ‘desirable’ aspects of feminine sexuality (Reavey & Warner, 2001).
Psychology’s re-presentation of the old binaries of Virgin/Whore: Cultural idioms of sexual dysfunction found in everyday discourse

The belief that feminine sexuality is ‘naturally’ passive is also intimately linked to anti-promiscuity discourses, which limit women’s sexual behaviour through the stigmatisation of women as ‘loose’, and as ‘sluts’ or ‘skanks’. Gail Pheterson (1986) argued that ‘the whore stigma’ ensured that ‘unacceptable’ forms of female sexuality that existed beyond male control were policed and subject to self-control by women themselves. Thus, passivity and activity also remain caught up in ‘double standards’ of sexual behaviour which ensure that it is only women that receive general disapproval regarding promiscuity or deviant sexual behaviours (Klesse, 2005). As contemporary theories suggest, young women’s narratives continue to emphasise the importance of sexual reputation and, at the same time, speak to the lack of more powerful expressions of feminine desire (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998; Hollway, 1984; Lees, 1993; Stewart, 1999b).

While some research suggests that alternative subject positions are being made available to women (see Adams & Bettis, 2003), the large majority of studies in this area have revealed that the discourse of victimisation is still very present in young women’s talk about sexuality. For example, Jackson & Cram (2003) have argued that media representations of ‘girl power’ and assertive feminine sexuality have had little real impact on shifting traditional notions of heterosex (Holland, Ramazanoglu, & Thompson, 1996; S. Jackson & Cram, 2003; Lees, 1993). One study by Amy Wilkins (2004) argued that while the traditional rules of sexuality and gender are
changing, women’s access to sexual agency still remain caught up in cultural understandings which emphasise women as the ‘other’ or as the object of male sexual desire. That is, while some studies suggest women’s resistance to age-old discourses like the Madonna/Whore syndrome, there are currently no subject positions that allow ‘nice young girls’ to take up an active sexual subjectivity (S. Jackson & Cram, 2003, p. 114). They suggest that women have not yet been granted a language within which to frame a desiring and powerful sexual subjectivity. Rather, research suggests that women often internalise male standards and values about heterosex. As Holland et al. (1998) have argued, the ‘male-in-the-head’ have been effective in regulating women’s own expectations surrounding sex and has thwarted their perception of agency in sexual negotiations with men.

The impact of heterosexual double standards, which position sexually desiring women as ‘sluts’ or ‘slags’, have been subject to extensive research over the past 30 years. However, while research suggests that violations of normative femininity (such as passivity) can result in social rejection and stigmatisation, policing of women’s sexuality also occurs in both directions. As Sue Lees has argued, young women are being increasingly judged against two incongruent expectations and as such ‘girls walk a narrow line: they must not be seen as too tight or too loose’ (1993, p. 29). A recent Australian study by Carmody & Willis (2006) found that young women often attempt to negotiate a position between ‘being sexually active’ and sexually promiscuous. They found that some young women ‘needed to balance the peer pressure to be sexually active to ‘fit in’ with friendship norms but also had to
avoid being condemned as sexually promiscuous’ (Carmody & Willis, 2006, pp. 51-52).

Anxiety surrounding expectations of appropriate sexual conduct means that women have to continuously manage their reputation, often at the expense of their own desire. For example, Fiona Stewart has suggested that the various ‘technologies of reputation’ are central to the ways in which women judge themselves and believe they are judged by others (1999b). As Nicola Gavey and Sandra Lee Bartky have argued, the technologies from which women’s reputations are formed show some similarity with Foucault’s notion of the panopticon, where women are often motivated to be active in their own policing and ‘persuaded into apparent complicity in the process of their own subjugation’ (Bartky, 1988; Gavey, 1992, p. 127).

The predicament of young woman who choose to step outside the bounds of expected feminine behaviour, particularly those who engage in sex with multiple short-term partners, are very visible in the heterosexual landscape, and are often identified by young women themselves as evidence of the repercussions of sexual deviance. The labelling of women as ‘loose’ or ‘slut’ connotes their demarcation from the heterosexual matrix, and from ‘proper femininity’. The Latin origin of ‘promiscuous’—‘to blend’—also suggests that promiscuity has long been caught up with the abject, and the ‘dirty’, shameful and contagious sexualities (LeMoncheck, 1997). As Staunæs (2005) writes:

Promiscuity is the opposite of keeping clean, keeping order and the unambiguous. And this reflects especially on girls and their relations to boys.
When girls do not perform femininity correctly, the issue becomes one of asexuality—or of promiscuity. (p. 150)

In many ways, the competing ‘romantic discourse’ and contemporary discourse surrounding virginity suggests that passivity is often framed as a more ‘desirable’ position for young women. Evidently, discourses which promote women’s passivity share some similarities with anti-promiscuity discourses; both move women further away from formulations of their own sexual desire and sexual pleasure. Phyllis Chesler (1972) coined the phrase ‘double-bind’ to describe the ways that women are commonly pathologised for both conforming to, and failing to conform to, expectations regarding traditional feminine sexuality. It is clear from the research that women are subject to conflicting messages surrounding sexuality; one overarching discourse underlines the need for young women to ‘abstain’ from sex, and to remain ‘passive’ and ‘virginal’, and the other emphasises their need to engage with the culture of sexuality. However, as feminist Jessica Valenti (2007) suggests: ‘they both say the same thing [to women]: ‘your sexuality does not belong to you’.

**Situating accounts of ‘undersexualisation’ and ‘oversexualisation’ in the context of ‘Normal’ women’s experiences**

In recent years feminist theorists have argued that it is necessary to move beyond theorising heterosexual desire from a biological framework, which includes the formulation of male/female desire within the active/passive dichotomy. However, research suggests that this version of femininity continues to reverberate within discursive fields such as medicine, law, popular culture and academia (Allen, 2003a;
S. Jackson & Cram, 2003). As Annie Potts (2002) has argued, it is also a position that is frequently taken up in heterosexual encounters: ‘Most heterosexual negotiations take place within the dominant essentialist biological/ reproductive discourse of male and female sexuality [where] men have access to a positive image of active male heterosexuality, while women learn a negative, passive image of female sexuality’ (Potts, 2002 p. 43). The problematic of ‘choice’ and ‘pleasure’ is central to contemporary theorisations of young women’s sexuality and ‘equal rights’, particularly when considered in the context of liberal and gender discourses. As Nicola Gavey (2005) has argued:

Many feminists have argued that the so-called sexual revolution was not all what it was cracked up to be, and the gender neutrality of the permissive discourse was only a façade behind which a double standard and gender inequality went on as usual. (p. 106)

At the same time, a number of theories have emerged that consider women’s agency in heterosexual relationships. For example, Hollway’s (1989) framework included the ‘permissive discourse’, which suggests that both women and men are sexual agents who are both capable and able to express their sexuality in ‘any way they choose’. As Hollway and Jefferson (2000) explain in their work, the permissive discourse also rests on a basic proposition that sex with many partners can be both ‘pleasurable and harmless’ (p. 14). There has been some indication of a shift in young women’s positioning within heterosexual relationships, with recent research suggesting that young women often contest their positioning as sexually passive,
uninterested in sex, and unable to enjoy and express sexual pleasures (Allen, 2003a; Carmody, 2004, 2009; E. Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Stewart, 1999a). From this perspective, while the discourse of passivity is still taken up by young women, it is no longer considered the only position available to young women.

**Young heterosexual women’s reflections on sexual experiences**

The findings that follow are based on interviews with young women who did not identify as survivors of child sexual abuse, and who were currently (or had recently) engaged in sexual relationships with men. The interviews investigated the ways in which young heterosexual women positioned their adult sexual experiences; which included their reflections on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ adult sexual experiences, attitudes toward virginity and sexual reputation and their accounts of pleasurable sexual experiences in and out of committed relationships. They also focused specifically on participant accounts of ‘casual sex’—commonly referred to by participants in interviews as ‘hooking up’, ‘sleeping around’, having ‘one-night-stands’—and engaging in periods of frequent sexual activity.

Psychological discourse often implicitly endorse ‘normal’ feminine sexuality as a passive, stable identity rather than an identity that is always in flux or, to borrow from Deleuze & Guattari (1983 [1973]), an identity which engages in the ‘process of becoming’. Clearly, the use of sexual behaviour inventories which map ‘number of sexual partners’ and ‘casual sexual intercourse’ over the period of 12 months, not only fails to consider a more contemporary view of young women’s sexuality, but it
also neglects to consider how young women’s relationships may transition over short time periods.

A number of heterosexual young women in this study who did not identify as survivors reflected on periods of heightened (and lower) sexual activity across their adult sexual lives. For many of the participants, casual sex was positioned in terms of ‘gaining experience’ or ‘sexual exploration’, and a ‘phase’ that usually took place at the beginning of their sexual relationships with men. For example, Alix reflects on her first experience of a ‘one night stand’ and how ‘proud’ she felt about ‘doing it’:

Oh yeah and then I had my first one-night stand with the hottest guy ever. But that was cool. I was so proud. I wanted to get out there. Like I said I want to have a lot of experiences and because I started so late, I’m quite anxious to get out there and do things so I was really proud of myself that I did that. It wasn’t the greatest sex but it was more about ‘doing it’ and it was exciting going to his house and flirting so the chase I think, essentially, is really the fun, oh, I suppose not really the fun part…But, how can you have really…it’s pretty lucky to have fantastic one night stand sex isn’t really? It wasn’t great sex but I was still happy that I did it. I thought ‘I’m on a roll’. Yeah, it was definitely fun.

In the above extract, Alix situates casual sex as both ‘fun’ and as a necessary step in gaining sexual competence, particularly given that she ‘started so late’. Thus, rather than reflect on her casual sex behaviour as evidence an over-sexualisation of relationships, Alix positions casual sex as an indicator of her ‘freedom’ to ‘have fun’
within the bounds of the heterosexual matrix. In doing so, Alix also presents casual sexual experiences within the realm of ‘healthy’ sexual behaviour, and underlines the relationship between these experiences and her desire to appear as a coherent and liberal agent.

As transcripts from other participants demonstrate, greater significance was placed on the extent to which they were able to achieve a ‘transition’ from a position of ‘passivity and powerlessness’ to one where control and agency were perceivable, if not obtainable (Stewart, 1999a). For a number of young women, sex was not so much ‘pleasurable’ as much as it represented an opportunity to ‘have fun’. For example, another participant, Monique, spoke about early sexual experiences and engagement in casual sex as ‘fun’ and as something that was negotiated along with other freedoms in early adulthood:

I always end up falling into those relationships and I don’t really want them to happen so after the HSC, schoolies was coming up I was like ‘I’m going to be single for a while’. But I had heaps of fun on schoolies. A couple of my friends didn’t really have that much fun because they didn’t really let go. I don’t know if that makes any sense…They were still thinking about ‘I only just turned 18 and I shouldn’t rush into doing stupid things’; where I’m from the idea that you should be able to do what you want. Girls should be able to do what they want, guys do what they want. I was like ‘Woo hoo, let’s do whatever’ kind of thing.

Monique, who recalls wanting to ‘be single for a while’ during this time, takes up a position as a sexual agent in arguing that ‘girls should be able to do what they want’
given that ‘guys do what they want’. However, at the same time it is evident that she feels the implicit or explicit policing of her female friends, who warn her of the dangers in ‘rushing into doing stupid things’. Recalling this time, Monique is able to assert her position within Hollway’s (1989) ‘permissive discourse’, and the opinion that ‘sexual activity is good and right for both men and women, and anything goes, as long as no one gets hurt’ (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003). However, Monique also positions casual sex as an indicator of gender freedom, and her engagement in it is positioned as an example of ‘letting go’ and ‘be[ing] able to do what [she] wanted’.

Over the course of the interview, Monique produced a number of competing discourses in her talk which threatened her ability to achieve a more overarching ‘sexual freedom’ in casual sex encounters. For example, her proclamation that ‘you should be able to do what you want’, and the retort to her friend regarding her ability to ‘let go’ and ‘have fun’ was not situated in relation to sexual pleasure in her recollection of later sexual experiences. As Monique goes on to explain in the interview:

So after that relationship ended I slept with other guys (but) I didn’t really get that much pleasure out of the sex with those two guys. It was fun at the time – most of the time it was alcohol-fuelled, although with this other guy, he used to pick me up in his car and we’d go somewhere in his car. It felt like one massive booty call when he picked me up a couple of times. I was trying to talk to him and he really didn’t say much. I probably had the most trouble with that. He
probably knew what it was all about. Yeah, I don’t think I was looking for a relationship; it just kind of felt nice to have a guy there that you would be sharing this experience with who didn’t just give you one word answers afterwards. At the same time I gave those two guys the flick because I didn’t really like that whole thing. It was fun, but it wasn’t me, in a way. I probably felt more secure in a relationship.

As Lynne Phillips (2000) found in her study, young women are often able to speak confidently about their ‘active’ sexual identity and equal right to engage in casual sex. However, ‘in their actual encounters, things often felt much more complicated’ (p. 115). In the above extract, Monique continues to position her experience of ‘freedom’ and ‘fun’ in these encounters as evidence of her sexual agency. In many ways, this position reflects contemporary accounts of young womanhood and ‘girl power’, where ‘choice’ is portrayed as wholly autonomous and individualised. However, as Monique’s casual sexual encounters with the above men illustrate, this position remains largely hidden from view throughout the relationship. Rather, it is the male position—which in the above excerpt Monique describes as largely ‘silent’ and ‘knowing’—that has agency to make decisions about what sexual script will get played out in sexual encounters. As a result, we see her desire (to have ‘fun’ and experience pleasure) reconstituted as something that is much more tangible within the heterosexual matrix, and as something that she can only ‘realise’ in a ‘secure’ relationship.
For other young women, transition was positioned as something that occurred after a period of ‘experimentation’. Lauren, for example positioned her period of heightened sexual activity at high school within the context of ‘young frivolity’:

Everyone was experimenting, progressing through like 15 and taking drugs and things but they often go hand-in-hand, doing all of the naughty things, like you sort of get...sort of more like exploring and you’re new to it so you’re just going to try it.

Interviewer: So what happened, what was your experience?

I think I was stoned and I had sex with a couple of people and that was stupid, like just being, waking up and thinking, damn it, that was not supposed to happen. And then I think it was because I was young in the year, I think I was one of the first people and I was having sex and no one else was doing it, that’s when I made a few mistakes in terms of sleeping with people at that age and then didn’t understand the boundaries of between good experiences and bad experiences and the way people would respond.

In the above extract, Lauren situates her early sexual experiences as a precursor to her transition, and this period of her life as a time when she lacked the knowledge to distinguish between ‘sexual/romantic’ relationships and, as she explains later in the interview, ‘the repercussions socially’ of casual sex. However, Lauren is mindful to separate her younger experiences from her identity today, and there is a distinct transition in the way that she speaks about her high school and early university
experiences. For example, in the following extract Lauren speaks about ‘learning from her mistakes’:

Yeah and I guess the other thing is that, you know, most women have been labelled these things during their lifetime so most women look back and say like, oh ok, I had this period here when I was called a slut, or whatever. But, I think I felt like I couldn’t differentiate between guys who were interested in me because they liked me and who were interested in me because they thought that they could have sex with me. Because nobody else was really doing it for me to gauge how, and I think that was why I learnt quite early that I wouldn’t just go and sleep with anyone because, like you might not feel good about yourself after doing it but you might not be expecting the repercussions socially from it.

Lauren reflects on how others labelled her sexual behaviour in high school as related to an unstable age where she lacked the understanding to distinguish ‘good experiences’ and ‘bad experiences’. Foremost, this period of transition into a coherent and ‘competent’ sexual identity was also influenced by her realisation that her sexual behaviour may be met with social repercussions. She recalls that it was a friend who first communicated the dangers of engaging in casual sex with multiple partners:

I think one of my friends said to me, you’re just really out of control, you know, you’ve slept with three people in three months. She was like, “oh you don’t want people to call you a slut” and then I just felt like after that, people maybe
were calling me a slut and then I was very conscious and didn’t even kiss anyone for like a whole year because I was so afraid of getting that name.

Clearly, the excerpts from heterosexual ‘non-abused’ participants presented above not only problematise psychological assumptions surrounding a ‘normal’, ‘healthy’, and ‘stable’ feminine sexual identity; they also underline the complexities in young women’s experiences. For many participants, reflections of sexual experiences did not represent a continuous sexual identity, but were, rather, characterised by periods of high sexual activity, ‘single periods’, ‘casual sex’, and sex inside long-term relationships. However, more than being an ‘unstable’ category, the participant excerpts also underline the myriad experiences which constitute women’s individual transition from powerlessness to positions of greater control and expertise. Their experiences cannot reflect a ‘normal’ femininity, but do reflect an investment in particular modes of sexual subjectivity. Still, I would argue that the subject positions taken up by participants defy rather than correspond to psychological notions of ‘normal’ (passive) femininity. Rather, participants appeared to engage with the contradictions of feminine sexuality, and used modes of ‘doing feminine sexuality’ to carve out their own sexual subjectivities.

**Locating the missing discourse: Active desire as symptom of feminine pathology?**

From a distance, the non-abused women’s narratives operate to normalise psychological identifiers of (survivor) pathology; where ‘oversexualisation’ and ‘promiscuity’ could be interpreted as ‘sleeping around’ or even as a ‘fun’ (if not
pleasurable) experience for young women. Not surprisingly, when this ‘benchmark’ of women’s feminine sexuality is applied, and the complexities are made visible, it became increasingly difficult to imagine that this model could be upheld in the ‘real world’. However, as I outline in this section, psychological labels such as ‘promiscuity’ are also appropriated in everyday language in ways which indicate ‘abnormality’ and ‘pathology’. As the following excerpt from Alix suggests, women who ‘sleep around’ are also assumed to be ‘suffering’ intra-psychic crises, such as ‘low self esteem’:

Yes, like if they like sex that means they’re only doing it because they’ve got low self-esteem. That pisses me off. It drives me insane. It’s like ‘She sleeps around’ and if I hear that nowadays, I’m like ‘High five, good on her. She doesn’t care what people think. She goes out, she does it, she gets her rocks off, good on her’, but you know, then it’s like ‘Oh, no, no, she has low self-esteem. She’s only doing it to make herself feel better’. Does it have to be like that? I think a lot of the time it is though, but I think that’s because society says you shouldn’t be doing it to enjoy it—in that way anyway.

Pathology surrounding women’s ‘promiscuity’ and ‘frigidity’ represented a significant point of political contestation for feminists who advocated a new version of sexual liberation in the 1980s. For example, in the introduction to Pleasure and Danger, Carol Vance (1984) underlines women’s vulnerability to ‘being shamed about sex’, and emphasised the urgency of social movements to move toward a focus on women’s pleasure and sexual desire: ‘If sexual desire is coded as male, women
begin to wonder if they are really ever sexual. We cannot create a body of knowledge that is true of women’s lives, if pleasure cannot be spoken about safely, honestly and completely’ (p. 6-7).

As previous research in this area suggests, many young heterosexual ‘non-abused’ women continue to be policed for their engagement in ‘promiscuous’ behaviours or ‘sexual distortions’ (including ‘sex with too many men’) or for appearing ‘too prudish’ and sexually ‘uptight’ (Carmody, 2009; Phillips, 2000). Within this context, young women are forced to manage their reputation to ensure that they adhere to expectations of ‘normal’ sexual behaviour.

Deborah Tolman (2002) has argued that young women’s sexual feelings and pleasure are either nonexistent, irrelevant, or do not correspond with women’s descriptions of desire (p. 41). However, poststructuralists would argue that the ‘missing discourse’ of desire—or otherwise ‘alternative’ discourses of women’s heterosexual desire and pleasure—are neither visible nor available to be actively taken up by women (Fine, 1988). As Judith Butler (1990) suggests, ‘there is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there’ (p. 74). More often, women are compelled to take up those, more familiar, tools which position active desire as ‘some flaw in their character’ or through familiar psychological channels that suggest that a women’s ‘low self esteem’ or ‘needy behaviour’ might better explain women’s ‘unconstrained’ position. As Lynn Phillips (2000) suggests: ‘These terms suggest that the social world is just fine, and that it is women who
demonstrate poor adjustment, cognitive deficits, or self destructive impulses’ (p. 188).

‘I don’t usually do this’: ‘Secret sluts’ and the un-naming of feminine desire

The policing of acceptable feminine sexual behaviour through pathology has a long history in psychology and ‘sexology’. However, in this section I am interested in demonstrating the ways that young women take up, challenge and describe notions of ‘abnormal’ sexual behaviour. Given the consequences of the ‘slut’ label, particularly its ability to characterise women in relation to victimised or abject identities, a number of young women were cautious to avoid ‘being labelled’ at all. For example, Rosie talked about feeling the compulsion to tell men that she ‘doesn’t usually’ have casual sexual experiences:

I’ve always thought that people think less of women who sleep around than men and it’s always pissed me off and I’ve gone ‘No, I’m just… I’m adding to that prejudice by thinking that’. I’m adding to that by saying ‘Oh, you know, if I sleep around, then I’m a slut’. And it’s always bugged me because it’s always in the back of my mind if I meet a guy out and even if we like kiss or something I’m like ‘Hey, I don’t’. You know, ‘I don’t usually do this’ because I remember saying that… I’d always go ‘I don’t usually do this’. I’d feel like I had to say that. But I still think I feel that. If I was single now and I just went out and had a one night stand, I don’t know if I’d say it, but I think I’d think it and want to say it. I don’t know why.
For Monique, it was often easier to remain ‘a closet slut’ than admit to your friends that you engaged in casual sex with men.

I ended up sleeping with two people I think from these other schools and they were just pretty much one-night stands, but it was fun, you know? Actually the funny thing about the whole experience from 16 to 19 was that at the time, what I call it was I was kind of a ‘closet-slut’ kind of thing because the girls at school that were overtly sexual, everyone knew that they were doing it; nobody knew I was doing these things and it was kind of cool, I thought it was kind of cool. So when I started doing this with these two guys I didn’t tell them about it because I didn’t think they’d be very supportive of it. I just wanted to be this independent young woman doing whatever I wanted.

In many ways, Monique’s position as a ‘secret slut’ represents the lack of positive positions available for ‘good’ women to engage in casual (hetero)sexual experiences. Monique’s hesitation to tell her friends because she ‘didn’t think they’d be supportive of it’ also suggests a narrowing rather than an acceptance of sexual scripts that allow ‘independent young wom(e)n’ pathways to sexual agency. Rather, dominant sexual scripts ensure that women’s engagement in casual or ‘un-romantic’ encounters are ‘hidden’ from view, and remain outside ‘legitimate’ feminine sexual behaviour. For example, one participant, Alix, suggested that the ‘proper way’ to engage in sex was ‘with (a) long-term boyfriend’. As Alix explains, sexually pleasurable experiences can only really occur in the context of meaningful relationships and ‘making love’:
It’s so exciting and great and everything and I was eager to have them, but from that I suppose you learn that comparing a one night stand – yeah, it’s exciting – comparing it to something with meaning and all that making love – I hate that term ‘making love’, so disgusting – but that, with somebody that you love and care for and you’re passionate about, is so not even comparable, at all, not even a single bit. But it was still fun.

As Fiona Stewart (1999b) found in her study, women will go to great lengths to protect their reputation as a ‘non-slut’; where ‘the persistent guarding of being known as anything but ‘nice’ (read respectable) illustrates the pervasiveness as well as the importance which girls can attach to their social and sexual reputations’ (p. 380).

The young women in this study frequently reported on their own, and other women’s, active sexual behaviour with reference to gender pathologies. Casual sex was rarely positioned in terms of pleasurable sexual experiences. For example, women described both themselves and other women who had ‘too much sex’ with ‘too many partners’ as ‘crazy’, ‘going wild’ or ‘out of control’. Casual sex was also positioned by participants more broadly as indicative of women who ‘had low self-esteem’, were ‘too needy’ or wanted to ‘gain attention’ from men. Thus, beyond the realm of reputation, where women are forced to endure the social consequences of their ‘sexual behaviours’, women were also positioned as being caught up in an intrapsychic struggle of some kind.
One participant, Abigail, who was explicit in the interview about actively positioning herself as a ‘slut’, spoke about the difficulty in taking up a positive, active feminine sexuality and one beyond pathology and gender stereotypes regarding the ‘normal,’ ‘good’ woman. For example, she often struggled to reconcile thoughts that there was ‘something wrong’ and that her ‘self-esteem issues’ might explain her promiscuity:

Maybe it’s because I have various self-esteem issues – that’s why I do this? I don’t know—I think definitely I felt that way, or used to feel that way. But I’m in a really good place at the moment. I’m really, really happy and I’m getting a lot of enjoyment out of various meaningless promiscuous relationships. But I definitely think it obviously must relate to...Something else. Like there’s something wrong with me. But I’ve also got my older sister is worse—more extreme than me in these ways. I talk to her a lot and have to really counsel her through that because she feels that there must be something wrong with her or ‘Oh my God, I’m such a slut. I did all these things’. I’m like ‘Don’t fall for that —There’s nothing wrong with doing that. I keep telling her she’s a stud.

While Abigail suggests that she ‘is really happy’ and ‘get(s) lot’s of enjoyment out of meaningless relationships’, her taking up of a more active, pleasure-directed sexuality is met with her own questioning of possible internal, intrapsychic, attributions for the behaviour. However, as Amy Wilkins (2004) has argued, the positioning of young women as victimised rather than active subjects thwarts their ability to negotiate experiences which consider their own desires and pleasure (p. 331).
For example, Abigail suggests that she ‘definitely’ thinks ‘that it must relate’ ‘something wrong with her’. While research suggests that women demonstrate varying levels of subversion and movement away from traditional discourses of femininity, the subject positions available remain ‘fragile’ and ‘tenuous’ (Allen, 2003b; S. Jackson & Cram, 2003). The persistence of the ‘missing discourse of desire’ has been re-presented and challenged in numerous forums surrounding young women’s identity. However, as feminist theorists like Fiona Stewart suggest, there is a clear absence of sexual identities which describe sexual pleasure as ‘normal’ expressions and experiences for women.

While some of the discourses of femininity taken up in the abuse literature reveal the investment of this area in scientific and biological discourses of sexuality, their pursuit and perpetuation of a ‘normal’ femininity also operates to deny young women’s access to more powerful, desiring sexual subjectivities. For example, the investment of psychology in scientific discourses of young women’s sexuality obscures the wider meaning, and individual consequences, of labels such as ‘over-sexualised’ and ‘under-sexualised’ in women’s lives.

**Situating non-abused women’s accounts**

Overall, the narratives from the young women described above highlight the importance of undertaking transition from relative ‘naivety’ or disempowerment to demonstrating greater competence and control within the heterosexual matrix. However, as the discussion surrounding the ‘archetypes’ of femininity—‘the virgin’ and ‘the slut’—suggest, both positions could be reflected upon unfavourably and
could be positioned as passive and reactive modes of femininity. Unfortunately, there were few occasions when women reflected positively on experiences of casual sex, or saw their experiences as separate from the dichotomy of ‘slut’/bad girl and virgin/‘good girl.’ Thus, the narratives also reveal the difficulty for young women of envisaging a sexual identity within a continuum of experiences; where periods of sexual activity might be followed by long periods of inactivity. Rather, their sexual identity was often described at each period ‘before and after’ transitions, or was polarised in the same way’, in that it embodied ‘one-or-the-other’—the ‘slut’/‘bad girl’ or the ‘virgin/ good girl’. Not surprisingly, this is typically how the psychological literature presents women’s sexuality as well.

**Young women making a ‘choice’: The influence of popular ‘girl-power’ and ‘grrrl’ movements on positions of sexual agency**

A number of feminists have commented on the role of neoliberalism, and the emerging discourses such as ‘girl power’ in the early 1990s, in positioning young women as creators of their own identities and ‘choice biographies’ (Ulrich Beck, 1995, cited in Harris, 2004, p. 167). While feminist authors remain wary of the temptation to perceive social movements such as ‘girl power’, and the representation of ‘sexually competent characters’ as potentially liberating for women, these representations have undoubtedly influenced the ways that young women position their sexual experiences (Gonick, 2006; McRobbie, 2004). Clearly, the existence of different subject positions within the discourses of heterosexuality and femininity have particular implications for subjectivity and experience, and ensure that
heterosexuality, and women’s position within it, is not a singular, monolithic structure. As previous research has shown, young women who situate themselves within a ‘post/feminist’ heterosexual matrix are often privy to the existence of alternate, more powerful, subject positions. Yet, psychological research surrounding young women’s sexuality remains incapable of translating what might be perceived as ‘powerful’ or ‘agentic’ in their sexual experiences. Rather, ‘numbers of sexual partners’ and ‘ratings’ of sexual experiences are accepted as good indicators of the ‘truth’ about young women’s sexual subjectivities. However, while ‘oppositional’ subject positions are often perceived as less desirable or dangerous, young women are also active in challenging oppressive representations of feminine sexuality (B Davies, 1989).

One participant, Abigail, spoke about the centrality of the ‘good girl’ position in popular culture and film. For Abigail, the characterisation of the good woman, over and above ‘the slutty girl’ and other two-dimensional figures, presents ‘the same story’, where ‘good girl’ can ‘go wild’, but only in the context of romantic heterosexual relationships:

It’s always the ‘good’ girl who goes a bit ‘bad’ and wild when she meets this guy. Her slutty bitch best friend—and then every other female character in the film is two-dimensional bimbo—every film is like that. Drives me mad and I think that’s all we feel like there is and everyone wants to be that ‘good girl’ and maybe go a bit wild with someone that’s ‘the one.’ It means you’ve got to
be a ‘good girl’ or a ‘bad girl’. There’s no positive in-between…I think I’m trying to take on the angry, slutty best friend instead.

Abigail’s consideration that there is ‘no positive in-between’ sexuality represents a significant challenge for many young women. However, while the discourse surrounding virginity and romantic pursuit remains very visible within popular culture, the position of the ‘bad girl’ has become more acceptable and more desirable for young women. In many ways, Abigail’s attempt to take up a position as the ‘angry, slutty best friend’ suggests a freedom from the alternative ‘good girl’, who is often perceived as lacking desire, autonomy, and a defiance of traditional heterosexual scripts. In comparison, the ‘new’ sexualised young woman has arisen as an expression of young women’s independence, taken up as a subjectivity which is capable of asserting desire and right to sexual pleasure with male partners (Phillips, 2000). However, given the ‘post-feminist’ illusion of gender equality, the necessary ‘anger’ which accompanies this position often becomes internalised. Given the dissolve of ‘patriarchal power’ and ‘gender inequality’, this anger effectively has ‘nowhere to rest’ except with women themselves.

Clearly, the positioning of women as one or the ‘other’—the ‘good girl’ or the ‘slut’—does have social repercussions, and most young women who are negotiating a position within the heterosexual matrix are very aware of these opposing subjectivities. Further, although the ‘sexually more competent’ and assertive ‘slut’, is presented in popular culture as a relatively ‘new’ position for women, the illusion of equality in this image ensures some ‘old’ struggles within the contemporary
heterosexual matrix. Abigail outlines the difficulty in consciously taking up this position:

One of my friends the other day was having a bitch about a girl saying that you know ‘She’s such a slut, seriously’ and I was like ‘Don’t say that. I would call myself a slut’. She’s like ‘you’re not a slut; you’re a good girl’ and I was like ‘I find that more insulting than being labelled as a slut. I’d rather be a slut than a good girl or a nice girl’…and it’s a conscious decision that I’ve made. No-one would be questioning if it was a guy. I mean…I’ve realised I can’t have sex like a man and not be thought of as a slut, so all I can do is reclaim that term and make it a positive thing– I’ve reclaimed it and make it a positive term because I don’t think people can think of it in any other way. And then my friends who haven’t slept with anyone, people think they’re frigid. So it’s like ‘C’mon’.

Abigail’s intention to re-present feminine sexual identity of the ‘slut’ through avenues of identity politics signifies a clear defiance of existing heterosexist structures. Further, her ‘reclamation’ (of ‘slut’) as a ‘positive thing’ cannot be easily situated as a ‘male imagined female sexuality’ or within a post-feminist’ rhetoric. Rather, in taking up this position (which must be understood in the context of her social positioning as a ‘white’ educated woman) Abigail co-constructs a ‘contestable identity’ that is both ‘outside and inside’ the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix. Abigail’s attempt to challenge existing notions of ‘sexual promiscuity’ at least represents a shift in the language used to describe positive feminine sexuality. Not
surprisingly, this shifting of available subject positions for young women remains unrepresented in psychological accounts of ‘promiscuity’ and ‘oversexualisation’.

In the last section that follows—which examines ‘Emily’s story’—I want to highlight the ‘complicatedness’ of young women’s sexual identity. In doing so, I reiterate my earlier point about the current lack of complexity in psychological accounts, but I also want to discuss the current absence of dialogue surrounding young women’s sexual pleasure.

**Complicating notions of young women’s sexual power and sexual pleasure**

While Abigail’s standpoint pushes up against both expected and acceptable feminine sexuality, recent studies suggest that despite social fractures such as ‘girl power’ and the pseudo-active ‘raunch culture’ movement, young women’s talk remains secondary and/or ‘responsive to’ (active) male sexuality (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Levy, 2006; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001). For example, a number of researchers have commented that this ‘new sexuality’ is also rife with contradictions regarding sexual behaviour; for instance, young women are encouraged to appear sexually available. However they are expected to refrain from having sex, particularly outside the realms of romantic relationships (Holland, et al., 1998; Levy, 2006). Feminists like Angela McRobbie (2004, 2007) and Susan Bordo (1997) have argued that the representation of a self-conscious sexism in these campaigns and characterisations—where women can claim sexual autonomy from men and at the same time pander to traditional ideals of femininity—represents both an ‘undoing’ of feminist advancement and a re-positioning feminism as the ‘Other’.
As McRobbie (2004, 2007) has argued at length, the union of consumerism with a feigning political activism also presents particular ‘hyperfeminised’ subject positions as more ‘desirable’ and ‘powerful’. At the same time, this consumer repertoire encourages young women to take up a position which appears ‘sexy and carefree’, yet continues to maintain feminine power as an object (not a subject) of sexual desire. It is this ‘rhetoric of choice’ that has crept into marketing campaigns, where ‘girl power’ represents that right for women to be ‘girly girls’. For McRobbie, the phenomenon of the ‘post-feminist masquerade’—the bill-board for women’s sexual empowerment and desire in consumer culture—also operates to re-establish gender norms within the heterosexual matrix (2004, 2007).

Clearly, there is a difference between taking up a mindful position as a sexual agent, who stands in defiance of heterosexual double standards, and the positioning of what Deborah Tolman (2002) refers to as a ‘silent body’ in the matrix; where sex is something that ‘just happens’ to women. One participant, Emily, commented on the lack of agency afforded to young women ‘growing up’ with the backdrop of ‘raunch culture’:

I think definitely like everyone wanted to be ‘sexy’. Everyone, it was like pretty much your sexuality defined you. And it’s not even that people intend of putting themselves out there sexually but it’s like they start dressing to fit in and bit by bit...and then they become accustomed to the sort of comments they’re getting from the guys and girls. And suddenly they realised that they are like...it is about sex but it didn’t start like that. But later on you see like the choices you
made and you see what it actually did to you and further on how I disregarded sex as well and thought I was very powerful because I could have sex...It was very like there were no rules, there were no boundaries, you’re free to do whatever you want. And to speak however you want...But if you get caught up in that yourself, it’s like a different story. You know, in that you feel a lot of pressure. But you just ignore it because you think, ‘Oh well, that’s what you have to do’.

Rather than position her earlier sexual experiences as positive, and necessary, in attaining sexual autonomy, Emily’s engagement with hetero-sex contributed to her feelings of disempowerment and confusion. In Emily’s story, as well as the other heterosexual women’s stories, there was an obvious lack of discussion about sexual pleasure. Indeed, for Emily, taking up a position within the discourse of ‘female power’ was largely reactionary, given that ‘guys treat you like shit, like really crap’; as a result, young women ‘have to have the power’, and pretend that they ‘don’t care’, don’t feel compromised, and they don’t feel used:

I don’t think anyone was old enough to understand like sex is supposed to be like pleasurable. But pleasurable because it’s mental as well. Because it was just simply physical no one was feeling anything I don’t think. You know and then they might pretend they did to the guy or they might be like ‘Yeah it was so good.’ But they’re just saying that because that’s the appropriate thing to say. They’d never said ‘that was so bad let’s do it again’. And I remember like me and my friends would be like ‘guys are never going to treat you good’, sort of
as if that was the whole female power. But because the guys are going to treat you like shit, like really crap that you have to have the power. But it’s just the same thing you’re using that power in such a destructive way…and once I left high school, I’d already been through that thing that I didn’t care, I don’t care that’s just how you have to be, you don’t care.

Undoubtedly, the likelihood of women taking up an ‘angry’ position, or a position which recognises their own sexual desires, is particularly difficult in a landscape where feminine compliance is re-marketed as ‘girl power’. Indeed, Emily’s position of apathy, so readily taken up by young women as a mode of self-protection, could be likened to what Deborah Tolman (2002) describes in her study as a ‘silent body’;

A sexual identity that leaves their sexuality out. Hence the question of whether or how to integrate their own sexuality into their identity or their relationships was moot for these girls; sexual desire, sexual pleasure, sexual subjectivity—none of these notions was in their lexicons or their lives. In essence, these girls illustrate a kind of unconscious pre-emptive action: they avoid having to address the dilemma of desire by not having a desire. (p. 78)

Emily also spoke about her transition from casual sex with men to a committed romantic relationship as a ‘moment’ where ‘so much changed’. In contrast, she reflected on her ‘single life’ and ‘casual sexual encounters’ as representations of women’s ‘oppress(ion)’ rather than a ‘freedom with sexuality’. As she explained in the following extract, women just ‘think this is freedom’:
When I go out I meet people, or I see them at clubs I see that they all seem to represent what I’ve experienced before. They seem all very…I think, I think they’re all sexually oppressed. Yeah. Nothing’s sacred...But so much changed from that moment. It was like my respect for myself was so much down…like so, so down. Like it would be really nice if we say like women have freedom with their sexuality. Really like in the way they dress you know you’re allowed to be free and show cleavage and stuff but its little things like that when you start losing the structure because you think its freedom. And then you’re more susceptible to feeling like okay this is normal I guess that’s normal too. Yeah we can make choices to do whatever we want without being scrutinised. But we also lose some structure as to what is healthy and what’s not.

In the above extract, Emily reflects on her experience of the ‘girl power’ movement and its fallacy of granting women’s ‘freedom with their sexuality’ in casual relationships. For Emily, being ‘allowed to be free’ and ‘show cleavage and stuff” has been presented as a ‘desirable’ position for young women. However, it has actually operated to loosen the structure on ‘what is healthy and what is not’ for young women. Emily’s identification of ‘compulsory sexual agency’ points to some obvious cultural shifts in depictions of young women’s sexuality in advertising and post-feminist media (Levy, 2006; McRobbie, 2006).

Yet, from another perspective, Emily’s story also draws attention to the diverse positions women take up when reflecting on their past sexual experiences. For Emily, sexual ‘pleasure’ and ‘power’ were associated with her transition to
traditional heterosexual ‘structures’, which included ‘romantic pursuit’ and ‘marriage’, where she argued young women could be offered the most protection and ‘respect’. From this perspective, Emily did not position romance in terms of sentimentality in her narrative as much as she positioned it as a sanctuary from the ‘destructive things that can happen’ to young women. Thus, it is not ‘prince charming’ or a ‘man in shining armour’ that she turns to, but the ‘structure’ of romantic love itself, which ‘could have changed her path’ and led her to something more ‘fulfilling’ and respect(ful)’. However, in moving from a position of ‘resistance’ to one of complicity, Emily’s pathway is complicated and includes agency and resistance. From one perspective, taking up a position within romantic discourse has offered Emily more independence because she feels like (finally) she is within a legitimate structure of meaning, and no longer outside. As Korobov & Thorne (2009) have argued, enacting the romantic repertoire is a ‘way of securing independence (and) resisting this logic has potential costs, particularly in light of the alternative of trying to be a completely autonomous agent’ (p. 66).

A final note on difference

In a recent article, Sharon Lamb (2010) suggests that while women’s ‘pleasure’ and ‘desire’ have been employed by theorists in an effort to counter the historical absence of women’s sexuality, translating ‘pleasure’ to deduce ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ sex might also carry wider ethical implications for feminism (p. 296). She argues that ‘the kind of sexual person that feels pleasure, desire and subjectivity may be ironically similar to the commodified, sexualized, marketed teen girl that is also
problematic for feminism’ (p. 296). While I agree with Lamb’s point, I would also argue that it is a task for feminism to ensure that young women are aware of the importance of sexual pleasure, albeit in the face of questionable modes of commercialised ‘girl power’ or ‘raunch culture’, as Levy (2006) has defined it. In problematising taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding young women’s sexuality, I would also argue that ‘pleasure’ for young women may take a myriad of forms.

To rule out particular modes of sexual desire—such as a passive sexual desire—as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘disempowering’ is not to attempt to engage in a dialogue with young women themselves. Indeed, practices which might appear ‘self-objectifying’ may be reflected on differently by women, and it is doubtful that all women will concur on what might constitute a ‘healthy’ female sexuality. From this perspective, I think it is important that theorists remain cautious about closing down this dialogue, particularly on the grounds that some young women’s desires or behaviours have been critiqued by feminists. As the excerpts from these participants reveal, while there is often an unclear line between feeling ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ sexual agency, young women are likely to identify more empowering positions when they reflect back on their timeline.

**Conclusions: Looking beyond unitary notions of ‘normal’ feminine sexuality**

Overall, the narratives from non-abused young women demonstrate that cultural discourses make it difficult for women to achieve ‘normal’ femininity. For example, while a number of non-abused women actively challenged notions of ‘normal’ sexual
behaviour, most women spoke about their ‘inevitable position’ outside the bounds of a healthy of ‘ideal’ of sexuality: young women were accused of being ‘too prudish’ or being ‘too slutty’. Not surprisingly, women who freely engaged in sex, or voiced an ‘active’ feminine sexuality or identity were met with considerable social scrutiny. This often included pseudo-psychological labels—such as ‘low self esteem’—which challenged women’s intra-psychic ‘health’, and at the same time relegated young women to a less powerful position in the heterosexual matrix.

As this chapter has shown, while academic and therapeutic discourses underline survivor ‘difference’, psychological models of survivor sexual dysfunction can be difficult to disentangle from everyday discourses which guide and delimit young women’s sexuality. However, it is important to note that while the narratives from non-abused women suggest that engagement in ‘promiscuity’ was often connected to specific pathologies, they (unlike survivors) were also granted the freedom to ‘transition’ beyond these identities. Clearly, by framing survivor sexual experiences in relation to pathology—as ‘promiscuity’ and/or ‘undersexualisation’—the abuse literature not only obscures the heterosexual matrix, it also fails to observe their intersection with popular discourses which thwart young women’s access to sexual agency.
CHAPTER FIVE

Visible and invisible identities: Demarcating the ‘victim’ and ‘non-victim’ in the heterosexual matrix

This chapter presents a more critical understanding of the female survivor by examining the ways that psychological, therapeutic and popular discourse organises this identity within the heterosexual matrix. It aims to complicate existing understandings of female survivors by focusing more broadly on how survivors and non-abused women position accounts of sexual pleasure and danger in their adult sexual lives. As outlined in Chapter Four, the language and identity-laden symptomatologies frequently adopted in psychological discourse to describe survivor adult sexual behaviour appeared less visible in the landscape of ‘non-abused’ women’s experiences. The narratives from young, non-abused women captured the complexity of sexual behaviours within a ‘normal’ context, which was heavily mediated by traditional gender discourses. This included their anxieties surrounding meeting the requirements of ‘normal’ femininity, as well as the difficulties they experienced in taking up positions which granted sexual agency and pleasure.

However, while there was no clear ‘sexual agent’ or powerful position readily available for young women in this context, the participants often spoke about sexual experiences as transitions rather than as stable, unmovable labels. For example, the non-abused women in this study may have been labelled (or considered themselves to be) a ‘slut’ or a ‘good girl’ for a period; however their narratives also suggest an
identity in flux. That is, these positions did not appear to ‘stick’ to non-abused women in a permanent way, but were often used to illustrate their transition to a more powerful position in the heterosexual matrix.

In contrast, predictions of survivor past and present identity remain considerably more rigid, particularly in the ‘re-victimisation’ research which underlines the continued ‘risk’ of sexual violence for adult survivors. This position is also reiterated in the psychological and trauma literature, most glaringly in theorisations which suggest that because of their abuse history, survivors may be permanently ‘stalled’ in their ability to engage in ‘healthy’ sexual relationships. The emphasis on individual pathology and ‘risk’ in these accounts not only ignores the larger context of sexual violence, it also draws a line between ‘victims’ and ‘non-victims’ in the cultural landscape. The danger of this delineation is in its ‘always already’ approach to sexual victimisation, which ultimately re-positions the ‘risk’ of sexual violence onto (female) subjects ‘with a history’ and intra-psychic vulnerability. From this perspective, the position of the victim/‘Other’ not only ensures the self-determination of the ‘normal, heterosexual woman’, it also obscures the heterosexual landscape in ways which make particular identities eternally visible and vulnerable to abuse, and others seemingly resilient.

There has been considerable research to suggest that notions of ‘abused’ versus ‘non-abused’ identities do not really play out in women’s realities. Although the victim (or ‘survivor’) identity is rarely embraced and is often openly rejected by women, victimised experiences (or at least ‘unwanted’ sexual experiences) represent a
common, unifying narrative in women’s lives (Gavey, 1992, 2005; Haaken, 1996). While research suggests that at least one in five women experience rape or attempted rape in their lifetime (Hazelwood & Burgess, 2001), women’s accounts of sexual experiences suggest that ‘victimisation’ often operates on a more insidious level, where the ‘identity’ of the ‘victim’/‘survivor’ and the ‘non-victim’ become more indistinct. Clearly, by labelling particular sexual behaviours as ‘linked to abuse outcomes’ the psychological literature fails to consider that ‘Normal’ women continue to be constrained by expectations of feminine sexuality and experiences of sexual victimisation.

This next section will explore the, often unclear, delineation between adult victimisation and ‘normal experience’ in young women’s narratives. In doing so, I want to draw attention to the various subject positions that both non-abused women and survivors take up in their sexual experiences and accounts of identity.

**Marking survivor vulnerability: Psychological discourse and the ‘process’ of (re)victimisation**

The symbolic representation of the ‘victim’ continues to have lasting impacts on contemporary understandings of sexual violence (Dunn, 2005; Lamb, 1999a). In particular, as Janice Haaken (1998) has argued, the child sexual abuse victim has come to represent the ‘master narrative’ and a ‘unifying vehicle’ to explain women’s victimisation. This is because, unlike more subtle forms of female violence, it symbolises clearly women’s vulnerability to sexual violence. Yet, while therapeutic and recovery discourses largely mediate processes of ‘healing’ and individual
transformation, cultural representations of the victim are decidedly more negative. As Miltenburg and Singer (2000) suggest, the abuse literature and psychological discourse more generally rely on a ‘doctrine of continuity’ which configures victimisation as a ‘process’. Within this framework it is expected that ‘if you have a history of child abuse, your adult life will be continuous with your early life, that is, defined and marked by affective-behavioural disturbances (and) re-enactment of abusive forms of interaction’ (Miltenburg & Singer, 2000, p. 504).

Although women’s ‘victimhood’ and/or ‘survivorship’ is decreasingly seen as a platform from which to stage political action, the belief that adult victims of sexual abuse are ‘compelled’ to re-establish and reiterate a powerless position is well established in psychological and therapeutic discourse. Numerous feminist theorists have commented on the tendency of the abuse research to position survivors as caught up in their own re-victimisation (J. Kitzinger, 1992; O'Dell, 1997; Reavey, 1997; S. Warner, 1996). They argue that psychological studies in this area suggest that survivors often suffer from ‘a continuum of sexualisation’ which results in their inability to trust themselves and men in general. As Lindsay O'Dell (1997) explains:

Much psychological research concerning the long-term effects of CSA suggests that women who have been abused in childhood are ‘visibly vulnerable’, or active in their ‘choice’ to re-enter abusive relationships with men. (p. 336)

Theories of re-victimisation often cite survivors’ inability to engage in ‘normal’ sexual relationships as a hangover of their abuse experience, rather than an indicator of men’s sexual violence against women (Fergusson, et al., 1997; Littleton, et al.,
Studies in this area often draw on a woman’s past experience of abuse in order to locate dysfunctional outcomes, such as early onset consensual sex, multiple sexual partners, unprotected intercourse, ‘promiscuity’ and ‘sexual aversion’ behaviours (Fergusson, et al., 1997). For example, Testa et al. (2005) suggest that survivors ‘reflect difficulty in establishing stable and safe relationships’ (with men) because ‘their history of CSA has thwarted their ability to identify potential re-abusers’ (p. 1118).

Studies that rely on pathway models of child sexual abuse and re-victimisation have also commented that perpetual abuse may make women ‘easy targets’ to sexual predators ‘who may learn to recognize signs of a woman’s vulnerability and be more likely to attack such women’ (Cloitre, et al., 1997; Messman-Moore & Long, 2003). Research in this area has pointed to Finkelhor and Browne’s (1985) earlier model of traumatic sexualisation to argue that characteristics of CSA, such as ‘dissociation’, ‘powerlessness’ and ‘numbness’, increase survivors’ vulnerability to re-victimisation (Chu, 1992; Koss & Dinero, 1989). Koss and Dinero (1989) have also suggested that the ‘vulnerability hypothesis’ can be used to explain the increased risk of rape among ‘abused’ women. Further, they underline that ‘women with a history of CSA, with liberal sexual attitudes and above average levels of sexual activity, had the highest risk of rape’ (p. 245). While the literature suggests that survivor ‘choice’ of abusive partner can be explained as an ‘obvious’ indicator of abuse, there is a particular ‘victimised’ dialogue surrounding theorisations in this area. Catalina Arata (2002) writes:
The dissociative/avoidant victim may overlook warning signs in a male (e.g. sexualizes relationships, controlling behavior and negative attitudes towards women) and consequently be more vulnerable to be victimized by that perpetrator than a women without a history of sexual abuse. (p. 31)

There are some explicit gendered connotations evident in Arata’s representation. For example, this account not only positions women as ‘more vulnerable’ but also presents masculinity as ‘sexualised’ and ‘controlling’. A number of feminist theorists have warned of the dangers reiterating stereotypical models of masculinity and femininity. As Carmody (2003) suggests, the re-presentation of victims as within the bounds of passive femininity ‘robs women of any agency or ability to exert power, express desire, take control, resist, prevent or avoid their victimisation in intimate sexual encounters with men’ (p. 202).

**Inciting notions of ‘Us versus Them’: Victim discourse and the creation of ‘different’ woman in the heterosexual matrix**

Once victimised, it is relatively easy to see oneself in the role of victim once again; the experience is now ‘available’ and one sees oneself as representative of a subsample of people who are victimised. Victims no longer see themselves as safe and secure in a benign environment. They have experienced the malevolent world. In human induced victimisations, such as criminal assaults, this is particularly distressing as the victim is no longer able to feel secure in the world of other people (Kahneman and Tverskey, 1973, cited in Janoff-Bulman, 1985, p. 20).
The above excerpt, which appeared in a popular text outlining the conditions of post traumatic stress disorder in the mid-1980s, draws attention to some of the most important tenets of victimhood in trauma theory. Specifically, the notion that victims of trauma are suddenly restricted from seeing the world as it used to be—as ‘safe’ and ‘secure’—but instead look upon a world which has inevitably been transformed by their experience. This new way of ‘seeing’ the world is positioned as debilitating for the victim, chiefly because the experience is ‘available’ to be taken up again, in the form of re-victimisation. Focusing on the transformation of the victim’s perspective, the deliberate exclusion of gender outcomes inadvertently presents a risk-free, ‘benign’ environment turned ‘malevolent’ through the experience.

Yet, perhaps more interesting in the above extract is the emphasis placed on the apparent intra-psychical role of the victim in their own re-victimisation, including their re-presentation of the self as part of the ‘subsample’ who are victimised. Historically, the division of the victim from the ‘non-victim’ can be dated back to early criminological research which underlined the impact of ‘victim proneness’ in instances of crime such as assault. For example, Von Hentig’s uncritical theorisation of gender in The Criminal and His Victim (1948) suggested that ‘structural characteristics’ meant that some individuals—namely white, heterosexual men—were less likely to be victims.

Essentially, Von Hentig’s, and later Mendelson’s (1963) appeal to the unique characteristics of the victim differentiated the victim from the non-victim in ways that kept the world ‘outside’ intact. To some extent, psychological research of
‘abused’ versus ‘non-abused’ women uses similar tactics. Drawing attention to ‘victim typology’ and ‘victim behaviour’ suggests that particular women are somehow responsible for their own victimisation. As Paula Reavey (2003) has argued, not only are survivors distinguished from ‘non-abused’ (‘normal’) women, but their vulnerability to victimisation is often theorised in relation to their abuse history rather than as a consequence of male violence.

Returning to the quote at the beginning of this section, I want to draw attention to the ways that ‘survivors’ and ‘non-abused’ women’s experiences might complicate taken-for-granted stories or (re)victimisation. Specifically, while it is suggested that it is ‘relatively easy’ for the victim to ‘assume this role again’, lines drawn between past and present victimisation in psychological and popular accounts also obscure the foundation of this identity, or the context in which sexual violence occurs. By focusing on the ‘process’ of victimisation, and labelling particular women as always already ‘injured’, or as more visible or ‘representative’ of victims, the abuse literature disregards how everyday experiences of ‘un-injured’, non-abused women are also caught up in a culture of sexual violence.

Noticeably, accounts of survivor re-victimisation which position survivors as ‘damaged’, ‘sexually risky’ and ‘lacking sexual agency’ fail to acknowledge young women’s position within the heterosexual matrix, which not only obscures their access to sexual autonomy, but renders all women ‘at risk’ of sexual violence (Carmody, 2003; Fine, 1988; Gavey, 1992; S. Jackson, 2001; Vance, 1984). From this perspective, the abuse literature ensures the lasting label of the victim, but also
presents women’s (re)victimisation in the context of an otherwise ‘safe’ and ‘secure’ world.

**Remembering Victimisation: The spectre of the ‘victim’ in women’s narratives**

Feminist theorists in the 1970s and 1980s first began to question the existence of those ‘less-visible’ and seemingly ‘ordinary’ forms of violence which encompass women-related-abuse. Researchers like Ann Edwards (1987), who drew attention to women’s everyday experience of violence, suggested that it was indicative of the ‘underlying struggle’ of patriarchy to ‘retain and enforce their dominant position as a group over women in society’ (p. 23-24).

Similarly, Liz Kelly’s (1987) concept of ‘the continuum of violence against women’ aimed to demonstrate that ‘all women experience violence at some point in their lives’. Furthermore, she argued while ‘some women only experience violence at the more common, everyday end of the continuum’, this was likely ‘a difference in degree and not in kind’ (p. 58). Thus, in underlining the specific and material acts of violence against women (from sexual harassment to rape), Edwards and Kelly also emphasised that violence against women was not an act of ‘a few sociopathically violent men’ but was instead ‘socially-produced’ and ‘socially-legitimated’ (Cooper-White, 1995; Edwards, 1987, p. 26).

Laura S. Brown (1995) suggests that women’s experiences of violence (and trauma) are hardly ‘outside the range of human experience’, but rather represent a likely occurrence in women’s lives:
These experiences are not unusual, statistically; they are well within the ‘range of human experience’. They are the experiences of most of the women who come into my office every day. They are the experiences that could happen in the life of any girl or woman in North America today. They are experiences to which women accommodate; potential for which women make room in their lives and their psyches. (p. 101)

Following Cathy Caruth (1995), Brown’s critique also revealed that conventional, psychological definitions of trauma were largely formulated around the ‘normal’ and ‘usual’ lives of the (male, white, able-bodied, educated, middle-class) dominant class. In the article from which this extract was drawn, Brown (1995) suggested that the definition of trauma outlined in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual [1987] reflected ‘male human experience’ and thus neglected the ‘silent’ yet ‘constant presence and threat of trauma’ in women’s everyday experience (pp. 101-103).

Four women in this study spoke explicitly about their experiences of adult victimisation. Not surprisingly, a number of other participants also revealed their proximity to sexual violence by recounting the experiences of female friends. For example, Alix spoke about how ‘hearing’ about these experiences impacted her life:

I didn’t personally (experience child sexual abuse), but all of my friends – 99% of them and I’m still really affected by what’s happened to them…like most of them. Nicole my friend, her father used to try and molest her and stuff. He didn’t actually do it because she was quite a bit older when he came back into her life, but he was trying to do stuff to her all the time and it’s just disgusting.
Another best friend I had a while ago, she was 15 I think and she was on holidays and she was talking to a group of guys and they drugged her and one guy raped her while the other four watched. And just even hearing that, I hated men for a long, long, long, long, long time. Really hated them and that really…Yeah, that affected…you know, who do you know that hasn’t had something foul happen to them?

More recently, Janice Haaken (1996, 1998, 1999) has argued that while the experience of child sexual abuse exists as a very serious and intrusive example of sexual violence, many ‘non-abused’ women continue to identify with survivor testimonials. Thus, for Haaken, women’s sexual abuse testimonials ‘speak to’ distinct gender differences surrounding victimisation, and at the same time offer a clear example of women’s vulnerability to sexual violence. In this way, the child sexual abuse story may represent a familiar story for women who experience everyday sexual victimisation in a ‘normative’ context:

Sexual victimization is a far more pervasive theme in female than in male development, from lewd comments on the part of male ‘bra-snapping’ and pinched bottoms through to male exhibitionism, rape and incest. In other words, male intrusions into female spaces—psychological and physical—continue to be deeply normative. For many girls and women the concept of sexual invasion infiltrates and colors autobiographical recall, capturing the deep cultural affinity between sexual vulnerability and femininity. (Haaken, 1999, p. 25)
For Haaken (1998), the child sexual abuse narrative is a ‘symbolic tale’ which ‘feels universal to women’ because it portrays a vulnerability that is common to women’s experience of being in the world (p.127). One participant, Lucy, who did not identify as a survivor of child sexual abuse, reiterated Haaken’s position about women’s symbolic vulnerability to violence. As Lucy explains in the following excerpt, even in the absence of an experience of sexual abuse, the fear of abuse may operate on a psychical level:

It’s not just you’ve been abused or you haven’t. It can be that someone close to you has been abused or even that you feared abuse. It really can impact your psyche regardless of whether anything happened to you.

Lucy spoke about a significant experience in her childhood which largely shaped her understandings of feeling (un)safe and vulnerable to abuse:

When I was about 11—we had a family friend who was the quite quintessential scary guy that you should keep an eye on around the little girls. In hindsight I think that, I don’t know if it was on purpose or whether he was just extremely socially inadequate—this is what my mother thinks—but he was way too interested in me in a way that made me very uncomfortable. I picked up that something was not okay, like really quite inappropriate level of interest yet never touched me…Like he’d pick me up and stuff that you do playing around with kids. But I didn’t feel that it was okay and would remove myself from that situation. And it was incredibly traumatic because I was quite a switched on 11 year old, I knew about that stuff. My parents were ironically quite proactive
about it, like stranger danger and what’s not okay and what some people do
with kids that’s not okay and so I knew what the possibilities were and I was
terrified. This went on for about a year I think. I was terrified that something
would happen and I was too embarrassed or didn’t have the words, or whatever,
to tell my parents and I was the most anxious child you will ever meet. This
kind of went on until we moved. It was a terrible year in my life even though
nothing happened.

For Lucy, having an awareness of her vulnerability – and ‘knowing about that stuff’ -
in this situation was central to her feelings of anxiety. However, on another level,
Lucy’s narrative also acknowledges the complex subjectivity which arises from
women’s proximity to violence and/or vulnerability to violence. Foremost, Lucy’s
recollection of ‘being terrified’ but ‘not having the words to tell’ evokes feelings of
helplessness and anxiety because it is representative of women’s universal lack of
agency and security. For Lucy, this memory of vulnerability became central to her
own sense of ‘being in the world’, which continued to be fraught with distress. As
she explains in the following passage, it was ‘the spectre of abuse that has massively
affected (her), without ever having happened’.

And that was fine until I was 16 and my mother disclosed that she had been
sexually abused by her year 6 teacher, so when she was around the same age
that I had been and that she hadn’t remembered until she was an adult. And I
went into this massive panic…just traumatised for my mother who I adore and
that this had happened to her, but went into this massive panic that if she hadn’t
remembered, maybe something had happened with this dude and I hadn’t remembered. I proceeded to trawl through every possible childhood memory, not even regarding him, regarding any male or just any adult or anything that could possibly have been abusive that I didn’t remember and I think I was quite convinced that there must be something and that eventually that would come out and I would cease to function. I had a breakdown. I couldn’t go to school for a couple of weeks. So the kind of spectre of abuse has massively affected me – not just who I am and how I think and things that I worry about, without ever having happened.

In the wake of her mother’s recovered memories of child sexual abuse, Lucy spoke about the inevitability of abuse in her own life. For example, her assertion that she was ‘quite convinced’ and ‘that there must be something’ which would ‘eventually come out’ positions sexual violence as a pending experience in a woman’s life story. Further to this, the intersection of the trauma model in this scenario—as demonstrated in Lucy’s fear that ‘something would come out and (she) would cease to function’—suggests that any ‘discovery’ of abuse would impact her life in a monumental, yet uncontrollable way. From this perspective, Lucy’s panic was understandably all-encompassing, where the threat of abuse in her life unsteadied foundations of ‘feeling safe in the world’.
Dis-locating the culture of violence: Women’s experiences of unwanted sex and the centrality of self-blame

In many ways, Laura Brown’s (1995) work underlined the extent to which violence against women has been shunned in public consciousness, and at the same time, represented as a ‘usual’ experience in women’s lives. Contemporary feminist poststructuralist approaches to violence have drawn attention to the ways that cultural discourses surrounding sex and gender might contribute to the occurrence of rape and those other sexually coercive and unwanted experiences that are not always discernible from rape itself. For example, Nicola Gavey’s (1992, 2005, 2008) research suggests that young women’s accounts of sexual victimisation, or at least those experiences they call ‘unwanted’ or ‘not empowering’, are often re-positioned within the realm of ‘normal’, and ‘ordinary’ sexual behaviour. However, rather than focus on the choices and self-labelling of individual women, Gavey’s work draws attention to the role of popular discourses in the formulation of the ‘norm of experience’, which she argues not only discount women’s active sexual desire, but also provide a ‘cultural scaffold’ for rape.

Gavey (2005) argues that ‘unwanted’ sexual experiences (from an unwanted kiss to unwanted sexual intercourse) and ‘more subtle forms of coercion’ exist on a continuum of sexual violence against women. For example, she suggests that discourses which reiterate femininity as ‘passive’ and women as ‘gatekeepers’ of masculine ‘sex drives’ and men’s ‘natural’ or ‘instinctual’ need for sex, often construct sexually coercive experiences as something that women are responsible for
protecting themselves against. Further, as Moira Carmody’s (2009) study found, often young women’s assumed consent or sexual compliance masks the context of these sexual encounters, where women’s ‘disembodied response to non-negotiation’ and ‘inability to find (their) voice’ go unchecked (or are ignored) by their male partner.

As the following extracts demonstrate, while women who recalled experiences of unwanted sex did not openly label themselves as a ‘victim’ of violence, they often suggested that their (non)engagement in them demonstrated their own insecurities or lack of self worth. For example, in the below extract, Sophie reflects on an early casual sexual experience as a period in her life when she ‘didn’t care about herself’ and ‘needed attention’.

We kept sleeping together for the next six months—every now and then, occasionally, whenever he felt like it because I was always there…I’d just go along with it because I desperately wanted him to fall in love with me at that point, as well. And it was shit. It was really bad sex, like fast and had nothing to do with me whatsoever, and I was really aware of that and was really aware that I didn’t enjoy it and was really aware that he didn’t give a shit about me. But I didn’t care that much because I really didn’t care about myself at all back then—just did not care. The fact that he was showing me any attention at all made me happy. I was just craving for any kind of affection I could get at that point so whatever I could get was fine.
In the above extract, Sophie reflects on her acceptance of unwanted sexual experience in two distinct ways. First, she positions unwanted sex in the discursive context of ‘romance’, and as a ‘desperate’ attempt to induce male partners ‘to fall in love with (her)’. Consequently, her quest for love in this example operates to legitimise ‘the really bad sex’, while also contributing to her vulnerability and passivity to ‘just go along with’ ‘bad sex’ that she ‘didn’t enjoy’.

Sophie also positions the fusion (and confusion) of sex with love in this example as evidence of her low levels of self worth. While she recalls being ‘very aware’ that this partner ‘did not give a shit’ about her, the male partner’s ‘sexual pressure’ in this experience goes unmentioned. Rather, Sophie suggests that the combination of ‘not caring about (her)self’ and her ‘craving attention’ was responsible for her feelings of vulnerability throughout this experience.

A number of studies have commented on the role of young women as ‘gatekeepers’ of male desire in heterosexual relationships (Gavey, 2005; Phillips, 2000). In this example, Sophie instead positions her failure to refuse sex as an indication of her devalued self-worth and ‘self esteem’ during this time. Thus, rather than question the behaviours of the two men in this sexual experience, Sophie turns the blame on herself for ‘not caring’ enough. She recalls a further negative experience with the same male partner later in the interview:

One morning he called, 7.00 o’clock Sunday morning—he’d been out on drugs all night, goes ‘I’ve lost my keys. Can I come over and just hang out on your lounge?’ and I was like ‘Okay’ and he comes over with a guy who’s a friend of
his who I had also slept with at one point because I was so desperate—just didn’t care. They both came up into my bed…and then the next minute—this is a story that I have not told…I think I’ve told one person. But this is the story that makes me feel ill because this is when I realised I didn’t want to care that little for myself because then I just let them both have sex with me—just didn’t give a shit. They left… and it’s funny, I wasn’t devastated after that—all the other times I used to sleep with him I’d be really upset because it hadn’t given me what I wanted and it made me feel even more alone but after that, I wasn’t upset—I was really cranky. I was really angry with myself that I’d done that because I think it just showed how little respect I had for myself. I think it’s a pretty fucking disgusting thing for them to do, but I didn’t think it was their fault necessarily because I went along with it.

In the above extract Sophie positions herself as virtually non-existent in relation to her negotiation and bodily presence within this sexual encounter, chiefly because she ‘didn’t give a shit’ and ‘cared so little about her(self)’. There is a clear shift in the way that she perceived the relationship in general; for example she moves away from being ‘devastated’ in her inability to maintain a romantic relationship to ‘being really cranky’. However, she recalls that her anger did not arise because she perceived the experience as ‘their fault necessarily’, but rather because she saw the evidence of her own lack of self-worth and the ‘little respect (she) had for (her)self’. Thus, Sophie’s transition and resulting anger appeared to be less about challenging the actions of the men in this unwanted sexual encounter than about the realisation that she needed to change her behaviour and avoid the possibility of it occurring again.
While I am cautious not to define Sophie’s experience, her recollection suggests that she felt some pressure to participate in this sexual encounter. What is clear from Sophie’s narrative is that while she did not position the above sexual experience as ‘rape’, the experience was most definitely ‘unwanted’. Seemingly, her position in the experience was not as a ‘victim’ of coercive sex, but rather one where she suffered from feelings of ambiguity about her own ‘self-respect’. Sophie suggests that she did not make verbal appeal for them to stop but rather ‘went along with it’, despite an obvious lack of concern from her partners regarding her lack of sexual pleasure. Further to this, the experience did not end as ‘just sex’ for Sophie; her proclamation that it was ‘the story that makes (her) feel ill’ suggests that the experience had a considerable psychological impact.

However, while Sophie does not identify as a victim, the account she gives of herself in the above scenario—as ‘desperate’, and ‘not caring’ or ‘respecting’ (her)self—certainly parallels the language of victim-blaming in popular discourse. Thus, in following a familiar story of victim-blaming—and positioning the experience as arising from her own ‘going along with it’ and state of mind—Sophie suggests that the experience was ultimately something that she did to herself.

Another participant, Emily, also located feelings of disempowerment in her earlier sexual experiences with men as relating to her own behaviour of ‘going pretty crazy’ and ‘needing attention’:

Since I finished high school...I went out and you know went pretty crazy with all that stuff. Not for enjoyment because it was like this overwhelming sense of
needing attention. Yeah there was pressure but also there was like ‘this is what I should be doing’…and I didn’t feel compromised about the sexual part of it. I felt like parts of my freedom were being taken but I never really related that to sex. I never felt like I’m being used for sex even though I obviously was. I mean, sex had already lost its meaning. Just meaningless, how I could have?...if it wasn’t rape then it must have been consensual. So if it was consensual I knew what I was doing? But instead... when I think back on sex it’s like, it feels like just a sex abuse story. That went for like five years but I was doing it to myself’ (my emphasis).

Clearly, Emily did not feel that her own pleasure or enjoyment in sexual relationships was being considered during this time. Rather, Emily reflected on this time as a period when she ‘was losing freedom’ and ‘losing an identity.’ At the same time, she felt compelled to play out the same sexual script because ‘this is what (she) should be doing’. While Emily recalls that ‘there was pressure’ to fulfil aspects of a sexual relationship during this time, she ‘did not feel compromised about the sexual part’. Thus, in recalling her lack of desire and pleasure in this experience, Emily not only points to the danger of young women engaging in the ‘meaninglessness’ of sex, she also underlines the risk evident in perceiving this position as a normal and voluntary one.

As Nicola Gavey (2008) has argued, heterosexual technologies of sexual coercion not only mediate women’s behaviour, they also ensure the position of unwanted sexual practices within the realm of ‘normal experience’. Looking back on this time,
Emily’s proclamation that sex ‘fe(lt) like just…a sex abuse story’ was centred around her participation in ‘meaningless’ sex which was not connected to her own desire. Like Sophie, Emily positions her lack of pleasure and enjoyment in these relationships as something that she ‘was doing to (herself)’; because she accepted that this position was the ‘normal’ one: where you ‘hook up with guys knowing that they’re going to want something from you...knowing that it is expected but still wanting to do it’.

The problematic of ‘choice’, along with the (lack of) ‘desire’ and ‘pleasure’ evident in Sophie and Emily’s stories are powerful because they clearly illuminate the ‘missing discourse of desire’ in young women’s heterosexual encounters. As Deborah Tolman (2002) has argued, the lack of sexual desire can operate to place young women in danger and ‘at risk.’ She argues that the absence of women’s desire – on both a bodily and psychical level- also means that young women become essentially ‘invisible’ in these experiences, and this opens a space ‘where sex just happens’ (Tolman, 2002p. 21-22). As Moira Carmody’s (2004, 2009) research suggests, consent (and non-consent) often occupy unclear positions in women’s sexual encounters, where the consent process is caught up in discourses of male desire, as well as their sexual reputation (2009, p. 94-96). Carmody argues that the ‘highly gendered’ and ‘rigid’ model of consent endorsed in campaigns such as ‘just say no’ seriously impede the process of ethical sexual behaviour. It also ensures that particular positions of ‘knowing’—such as women’s negotiation of sexual desire — are not considered in sexual experiences. As Carmody (2009) found in her study, while some young people had developed ethical ways of negotiating sexual
experiences, a large majority reflected on their inexperience and the influence of cultural constraints in their decision-making.

Reflecting on her sexual experiences in high school, Emily suggested that with unwanted sexual experiences, ‘pretty much everyone who was going through it was feeling like some guilt, some shame’, it was also something that continued to be positioned as a ‘normal’ experience for women:

Yeah if there’s no like sort of...yeah because we didn’t really have an idea of what was right or wrong. But it was more like if a guy took advantage of one of our friends, they’d go ‘Oh what a bastard.’ You know, because obviously pretty much everyone who was going through it (unwanted sexual experience) was feeling like some guilt, some shame. But you know being like the view that it was okay was reinforced by everyone.

The above narratives from Sophie and Emily draw attention to the limited positions women are able to take up in unwanted sexual encounters. Although I do not question their position as the ‘non-victim’ in these scenarios, I would argue that the consequences arising from this position (which ultimately involved self-blame) hardly grant an empowering outcome for women. Most alarmingly, for Sophie and Emily the most powerful position was not to label themselves as a (passive) ‘victim’, but to continue to question their own intra-psychic short-comings and complicity in the experience. Thus, whether a victimised identity is taken up or not, the onus of ‘blame’ remains fixed on women’s consent or non-consent. As I argue in the next section, the unclear distinction between the ‘victim’ and ‘non-victim’ in these
accounts is ultimately maintained by the heterosexual matrix, and its inherent
technologies of heterosexual coercion, which reinforce women’s position of self-
blame in unwanted to sexually coercive experiences.

Keeping the peace-ful matrix: Explorations of blame and the impact of ‘cultural
baggage’ on accounts of sexual assault

Early theories of victimisation in psychology suggested the victims often blamed
themselves in order to preserve a positive view of the world. As Sharon Lamb
(1999c) notes in her review of victim discourses, the ‘just world’ perspective
maintains that it ‘is easier to see oneself as blameworthy than to give up the more
important belief that the world is a fair place’. (p. 30). While psychological theories
attempted to position self-blame as a tactic for individual preservation, this
perspective is also maintained by cultural discourses which question victim
responsibility or uphold particular behaviours within the periphery of ‘normal’
sexual conduct. For example, expectations surrounding gender behaviour and ‘male
hormones’ often limit the culpability of men in sexual assault, as well as suggest that
women ‘should have known better’ or exercised better self protection.

In more recent years, however, notions of self-blame have also intersected with
liberal feminist discourses which suggest that victims should at least ‘take some
responsibility’ for their behaviour (Roiphe, 1993). For example, critiques of ‘victim
feminism’ which emerged in the 1990s suggested that women could take up a more
powerful position if they turned away from feminine powerlessness and
‘performances’ of victimhood. As Kate Roiphe (1993) has argued, this is a role that
is not only ‘readily available’, it is also a position that has been largely generated by feminist discourse:

Now, if you're a woman, there's another role readily available: that of the sensitive female, pinched, leered at, assaulted daily by sexual advances, encroached upon, kept down, bruised by harsh reality. Among other things, feminism has given us this. (p. 172)

The principle of Roiphe’s (1993), as well as Naomi Wolf’s (1993) ‘power feminist’ argument is simple: personal responsibility and self-determination will allow women more opportunity to take up positions of power. However, attempts to combat women’s ‘victimised identity’ via collective representations of women as ‘active agents of change’ ultimately recasts women as agents of their own victimisation. Most alarmingly, by advocating women’s personal empowerment as a means to emancipation, experiences of victimisation are necessarily re-positioned as women’s failure to ‘take control’ and ‘take some responsibility’.

Clearly, there is a lack of discussion about the complexities which might exist in a women’s decision to position herself as a ‘non-victim’ (as we have seen in unwanted women’s experiences), or as ‘blameworthy’. It could be argued that the position on the female ‘victim’ has also been influenced by neo-liberal rhetoric, which situates young women’s stories through the lens of ‘choice’ and of ‘self-empowerment’. Significantly, given the emphasis on individual self-empowerment, young women are under increasing pressure to ‘narrate their life stories as if they were the outcome of deliberate choices’, and to appear as a ‘non-victim’ (Gill, 2007, p. 74). The
increasing influence of neoliberal rhetoric not only ensures that this version of the victim is outwardly rejected, it has also impacted the ways in which women recount their stories and sexual subjectivity. As Rebecca Stringer (2000) has argued, neoliberal notions of individual responsibility not only conceal cultural discourses which support sexual violence, they also fail to consider that victim self-blame might also be caught up with women’s inability to place blame on others.

It is this intersection of psy-therapeutic and neo-liberalist discourse, which proposes victim ‘compulsory harm’ on one end, and women’s ‘compulsory empowerment’ on the other, that makes experiences of victimisation and non-victimisation increasingly blurred. Moreover, while the long-term ‘woundedness’ of the ‘victim’ remains very visible in psychological and therapeutic discourses, young women continue to seek out identities which distance them from being caught up in stories of harm or ‘states of injury’ (W. Brown, 1995).

This is illustrated in the broad ‘backlash’ against victims in cultural and popular discourses. As Moira Carmody (2009) suggests, the undercurrent of ‘women’s responsibility’ is not only caught up in traditional discourses of femininity, but remains prominent in campaigns surrounding sexual violence prevention. Ultimately, the impetus on women’s responsibility denies ‘victims’ a position beyond that of self-blame. One participant, Emily, made clear that she was ‘not sympathetic’ towards women ‘who put (themselves) in that situation’:

There was one case where a really popular girl got raped and went to court…Like I think a lot of girls have very little sympathy because they see it
like...a lot of girls accused her like even myself I think well...It’s funny because like we all thought, she shouldn’t put herself in that situation. But we all put ourselves in that situation...There is that hazy area I think my experience has led me like, I’m not sympathetic. I’m not sympathetic that they put these laws saying like ‘If you have sex when you’re drunk well it’s not really your fault’. Because we need to say, well take some responsibility because I know these situations, I’ve seen them happen, I’ve been in this situation. You know it’s going to happen. You go to a party dressed up liking a guy, you know that people are going to be asking you, ‘Oh you’re going to have sex with him you’re going to have sex with him?’ The next day they’re going to ask you. What are you going to say, ‘Well I got so drunk I can’t really remember I think I had sex with him I didn’t consent’? You like the whole situation you know you were going to have sex one way or another.

In the above excerpt, Emily positions the centrality of women ‘knowing what is going to happen’ as key to her lack of sympathy. However, in underlining her own vulnerability to victimisation—and admitting that she ‘has been in this situation’—Emily also locates these experiences in the everyday. While the excerpt includes some obvious neoliberal undertones, it is primarily a woman ‘putting herself in that (everyday) situation’ that she attacks so vehemently. Thus, Emily has been undoubtedly influenced by ‘where (her) experience has lead (her)’; and has informed her own ‘knowing’ that violence not only exists, but that women should also ‘know it’s going to happen’.
The above account can be juxtaposed to the powerful account by an adult survivor of sexual assault, Jordan, who argued that the ‘cultural baggage’ and victim-blaming made it almost impossible for women (and men) to take up a position against sexual violence:

There’s so much cultural baggage around a man sexually assaulting a woman, like with the whole football thing that’s happened recently. People always assume – instead of keeping a level head and looking at the facts and going ‘Well, even if they didn’t actually rape her it’s a really toxic environment and we should probably see, as a society, our way towards improving that’, they’ve gone ‘What a lying slut-bag’ instead. How damaging is it for girls to see that on TV or on the radio or on the newspapers or hear their dads or their mums saying it? If they get sexually assaulted, that’s what’s going to happen to them. They’re going to get victimised. I think that’s the reason that people don’t say anything about it because there’s such cultural pressure and it’s really weird because it’s total double-speak. There’s the whole ‘violence against women – Australia says no’, which is all government theoretical type stuff but then when it actually happens you see it playing out in this horrendous, massively sexist victim-blaming way and that’s really confusing. You think: ‘Well I’m living in a liberal democracy, progressive society, I should be able to say this’ but then you look at what actually happens and you’re like ‘I actually can’t say anything about it. I should be able to and I want to but I can’t.’ There’s no safe space – society’s not a safe space when you’re talking about that kind of thing, which is really sad and that’s how I felt afterwards.
I would argue that rather than blaming themselves for the sake of the ‘just world’, survivors of sexual violence inadvertently re-positioned themselves as ‘blame-worthy’ to maintain the safety of those around them. Thus, rather than positioning violence as an ‘act of a few (bad) men’, contemporary cultural discourse has shifted to ensure the blame and (re)victimisation of those women who have been ‘identified’ or who speak out.

‘Creating possibilities for the present and future’: Survivor resilience in the context of ‘usual’ and ‘acceptable’ re-victimisation

Child sexual abuse may affect a woman by making her less skilled at self-protection, less sure of her own worth and more apt to accept revictimisation as part of being a woman. Thus, these learned messages create an atmosphere in which revictimisation may be more likely to occur, because such abuse is not seen as unusual, but expected and acceptable. (Messman & Long, 1996, p. 399, emphasis added)

The above quote represents a typical portrayal of ‘the victim’ of child sexual abuse in the abuse literature. Specifically, while there is some mention of the ‘atmosphere’ in which sexual violence may occur, the survivor however is depicted as largely responsible for ‘accept(ing) revictimisation as part of being a woman’. By turning attention toward the victim, psy-discourses not only position survivors of abuse as being caught up in their own (re)victimisation, the original sexual trauma is also theorised as a process rather than an event in women’s lives (Schaffner, 1999).
For the survivors in this study, the experience of childhood abuse and the taking up of a ‘different’ identity allowed them greater access to the ‘world outside’, and a number of survivors considered themselves ‘more apt’ to deal with the possibility of sexual victimisation in adulthood. As the following excerpt from Charlotte suggests, rather than positioning herself as a target of revictimisation, the knowledge gained from previous experiences of vulnerability is more likely to engage her in ‘stronger reactions’ than other women:

    If I was put into that situation again, I think I’d have stronger reactions than another woman, in saying ‘Hell no, get away from me or I’ll scream, because I’m not putting myself through that again’. You know what I mean? The fact that I was abused and the fact that I’ve had time to think about it and to talk about it with people if, for whatever reason, I was put in a situation where I was vulnerable…well, see I’d probably avoid situations where I was vulnerable. I’m very aware of my surroundings and I’m aware of who I’m with and if I’m at a train station at night—what to do to keep myself safe, or safer than you can be—number one, I avoid situations in which I can be victimised and number two if I found myself in a situation where I was victimised, I’d have a massive strong reaction, I feel. Of course you can’t predict what you would do in situations, but that’s how I think I would react.

Charlotte’s vehement rejection of the possibility of sexual victimisation is largely framed in relation to her ‘knowing’ of the world outside, and ‘what to do to keep (her)self safe’. Thus, rather than positioning herself as incapable of avoiding
victimisation, Charlotte suggests that she has ‘had time to think about it’ and about
the steps she might take to ‘avoid situations that make (her) vulnerable’. Charlotte’s
position is contrary to the research surrounding victimisation, where experience of
previous harm is theorised as a predictor of further harm. Rather, the presentation of
the survivor in terms of their knowledge, caution to danger and perceived reaction to
revictimisation of abuse is rarely addressed in psy-discourse and therapeutic
accounts. Indeed, while the presentation of survivors as more capable of recognising
sexual violence might be perceived as a dangerous step away from the trauma model,
the presentation of survivor resilience is hardly the same as saying that they were not
harmed in any way.

Perhaps more alarming is that (re)victimisation and more generally ‘vulnerability to
re-victimisation’ is now perceived as a ‘standard story’ for adult survivors of abuse.
In recent years, a number of feminist theorists have commented on the ways that
‘trauma outcomes’ have been normalised as a ‘uniform experience’ in women’s
experience of sexual assault (Gavey, 2008, p. 236). However, as Nicola Gavey
(2008) outlined in her study with adult survivors of sexual assault, women’s
narratives often reveal a wide range of dialogues, many of which extend beyond the
traditional trauma framework:

What is generally missing in the literature is some kind of reflexive recognition
that the nature and experience of rape can be so diverse that the more exacting
notions of trauma not only might not always provide the best fit but might
occlude consideration of the form and complexity of some women’s experiences. (p. 236)

As Armstrong (1994) has argued, while the self-help literature opened up another dialogue for survivors, the focus continued to be on identifying and healing aspects of survivor suffering. Within this framework, any indication of ‘knowing’ or ‘learning’ about the world are silenced, and instead survivor stories focus on personal encounters with victimisation and ‘overcoming bad feelings’ associated with the harm of abuse. As Joseph E. Davis (2005) writes:

The most common of the interpretive ‘lessons’ concern victims themselves. These lessons are variations on four propositions: that victims are not alone, that they are not to blame, that their victimisation helps to explain other debilitating features of their lives in the intervening years and that there is no hope of overcoming it. (p. 104)

This framework of ‘harm’ to describe the problems continues to be adopted in therapeutic settings. As Jeanne Marecek (1999) found in her study of therapeutic discourse in (feminist) clinical institutions, the vocabulary of ‘trauma talk’—which includes keywords such as ‘injury’, ‘emotional pain’, and ‘damage’—continue to structure outcomes of healing and recovery. However, the centrality of this talk in therapeutic discourse suggests that symptoms of harm occupy considerable space in survivors’ own retelling of this narrative. As a result, ‘trauma’ may become instilled in survivors’ outcomes and healing at the expense of more transitional, and/or
resistant narratives. As Marecek (1999) warns, we need to begin to ask questions about which survivor stories might be more ‘useful’:

Even though a woman has experienced abuse, narrating her life in terms of that experience produces only one of many possible stories. There is no single life story, nor one correct feminist version. Many versions are true; many are feminist. The constructionists question is: Which ones are useful?...On one hand trauma stories respect and acknowledge women’s experiences of violations, ‘recognizing the reality of women’s lives’. On the other hand, they run the risk of reducing women clients to nothing more than those experiences. (p. 171)

There is presently little qualitative research that focuses on survivor stories of resilience. Rather, as Paula Reavey (2003) has suggested, accounts in psychological and therapeutic literature often position the adult survivor as ‘frozen in time’, and sustaining the emotional and cognitive injuries from their abuse experience. Further, while self-help and neoliberal discourses embrace ‘personal growth’ they largely rely on abstract notions of ‘healing’ amidst an otherwise tumultuous existence. However, as the survivors in this study demonstrated, narratives are rarely formulated in terms of past (harm) and present (healing), but occur in relation to everyday experiences and reflection. As Kristy, a survivor, explains in the following excerpt:

I had a boyfriend and I was 16 at the time and in retrospect it was almost like I felt like I had to be with him in a way. That sounds really weird and it makes no sense but I felt like I had to be with him, like it was just a natural thing and I didn’t like it at all; I didn’t like the sex part and whatever and it turns out that he
wasn’t a nice man. He’d been treating other girls—I found out afterwards you
know—quite harshly and I thought it was normal. I thought it was normal. I thought that’s what men are like, like animals…I guess because I grew up with
sexual assault and stuff, I kind of viewed it as that ‘he can’t help it’, it’s what
men do and women were very different. But it turns out that...that wasn’t
normal so we broke up. And then after that, I realised, ‘You know, it’s not
normal’. I just kind of realised ‘Oh…’ and I realised that my behaviour was
different, that I had pride in myself.

While parts of Kristy’s story lean on her experience as a survivor of childhood sexual
abuse, her transition from feeling coerced and feeling pride really emerged from her
acting autonomously and ‘outside’ of this (victim) identity. In many ways, the notion
of compulsory harm presented in the PTSD and trauma frameworks make it difficult
for survivors to see themselves beyond the range of the ‘victimised’ to reflect on
their behaviour in self-affirming ways.

‘Seeing the world clearly’: Re-positioning adult survivors as witnesses and
experts

No one can tell me that my politics are the hysterical over-reaction of a
paranoid rape victim who has been pushed to the edge by a bad experience. I
see reality. I have no distance from it, no more rationalisations to protect
me…please value us, the survivors, because we have seen the scary truth about
As the above excerpt suggests, the prescribed symptomatologies of trauma (or PTSD) have been traditionally positioned as an indication of female hysteria or as testimony to survivors’ public and private ‘over-reaction’ to male violence. While notions of ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ cannot be viewed uncritically, claims to experience and knowledge regarding ‘the scary truth about our world’ illustrate an alternative subject position which effectively moves away from ‘trauma talk’ and from silencing survivors. For example, it could be argued that the position of ‘knowing’ also counters the alternative (lesser valued) position of victim, which has come to represent particular known (feminine, passive) attributes that circulate in the trauma literature. Following from Marecek’s (1999) work, it could also be argued that narratives that move away from the centrality of ‘the (passive) victim’ and the surrounding vocabulary of harm could contribute to the expansion of a different survivor story.

Within this context, ‘speaking out’ about the likely presence violence in women’s lives has been considered an alternative to ‘silence’, although this has been variously argued by feminist theorists. As I outlined in Chapter Four, the value of survivor testimonial, particularly in relation to its position in the recovery movement, has been the focus of much critique. For example, Susannah Radstone (2001) has argued that the testimonial is dangerous because it re-presents the story of the infantilised, passive victim and denies any possibility for the teller to re-narrate their past.

Similarly, Lauren Berlant (1997, 2000) suggests that the reliance on healing through the employment of ‘sentimental politics’ is ineffectual in challenging structural
injustice. For Berlant, the political stance of the testimonial not only rests on ‘self-evidence’ and ‘objectivity’, but is also governed by the notion that a ‘performance of a scene of pain’ can bring social change (2000, p. 35). Berlant cautions that the focus on soothing personal pain—and the myth of the empathic audience—is dangerous because it is foremost a ‘technology of self’ which distracts from social engagement in political change.

Berlant’s theoretical work raises important questions about the value of survivor public narrative, particularly when it coincides with therapeutic discourses of healing. However, it could be argued that political models of identity which conceptualise ‘trauma as truth’ are less about the ‘performance’ of pain than a taking up of a more powerful position in a landscape that has silenced and under-valued women’s stories. For Anna, who identified as a survivor of adult sexual violence, the impact of her experience unveiled a changed self who was not only ‘stronger’, but who was able to ‘see’ violence ‘clearly’:

I know that people say ‘oh, if it doesn’t kill you, it will only make you stronger’. I know that I’m highly sensitised to gender issues now. I mean I was prior and I always felt strongly about this even before it happened but now, even more so...It’s like if you were looking through rose coloured glasses before; it’s been lifted. You’re not anymore. It’s like you can see clearly what is violence now, even if it’s passive but you can see it. It’s like the boundaries have become clearer, gender boundaries maybe. That’s what I’m telling myself
I think. I guess what I feel like. It’s just the accumulation of all my experiences just rolled into one.

As Anna outlines in the above excerpt, ‘knowing’ about gender violence, and ‘having the rose coloured glasses lifted’, was central to her taking up a more powerful position. Her narrative reveals a new lens, which positions gender violence as a continuum—or as ‘an accumulation of all (her) experiences rolled into one’—rather than an isolated event in her life.

For Chelsea, her expectation surrounding the ‘inevitability of abuse’ for women, and girls, was translated in a different way:

With my abuse and it’s sad, I’ve got two sons and a daughter and of course abuse is rampant with boys, little boys as well, and teenage boys but with my daughter I say ‘It’s not that it won’t ever happen, it’s a question of when and what will I do when it does’...Because she’s a girl and she’s very pretty...she’s really pretty and very outgoing and I know that someone’s going to do something to her. I know that it will happen. I don’t want it to happen...I hope it doesn’t but I, just being realistic—isn’t it terrible? Yeah, I think it will. I have a feeling it will and I just don’t know what I’ll do if it does.

In her theoretical work addressing the commonality of women’s experience of violence, Laura Brown (1995) was careful to point out that women’s habituation to violence does not lessen the possible damaging effects. In an effort to capture the range of women’s experiences of violence, Brown (1995) argues instead for a more
political definition of trauma to incorporate ‘ordinary’ experiences which contribute to women’s powerlessness:

A feminist analysis thus raises different questions, moves us to reevaluate our approaches to working with survivors of trauma. How, rather than desensitising survivors to symptom triggers, a currently fashionable approach to the treatment of post-traumatic symptoms, can we help them reconstruct their worldviews with the knowledge that evil can and does happen? Rather than teaching trauma survivors ways to attain their pretrauma levels of denial and numbness, how can we facilitate their integration of their painful new knowledge into a new ethic of compassion, feeling with, struggling with, the web of life? (pp. 109–110)

It is perhaps this ‘other’ survivor story, which combines survivor experiences of being in the world with their position as experts rather than ‘victims’, that is currently lacking in the abuse literature, as well as in popular representations. However, as Valentina suggests in the following excerpt, while she recognised the negative outcomes of the experience, in retrospect she also believes that the experience led to her greater expertise in the ‘real world’:

When I was young I was aware that sex was meant for pleasure…I do think (the abuse) awakened me in terms of the fact that sex could be violent…so as a negative experience it has impacted me in the sense that, I don’t trust a lot of men, like older, like particularly older men. That is the only sequelae that I, I can see, and is an identity that is of course from that (the abuse)...But I can also see that it is a positive experience, or that I have made it into a positive
experience...because I was one of the very few girls that knew about sex and already knew about that stuff, and so number one it helped me to prevent it, it if any bastard tried to touch me again.

Indeed, on another level, testimony has served as a medium of ‘truth-telling’ in a context that has historically condoned widespread violence against women. Before its ‘slide into therapeutic discourse’ the public confession first emerged as part of a (largely feminist-led) social consciousness and political movement against women’s violence (W. Brown, 1995, p. 75). For Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray (1993), survivor public testimony is still able to capture a truth-telling about women’s violence, although the focus needs to re-position women as witnesses and experts, rather than solely in the realm of ‘trauma talk’:

We need to transform arrangements of speaking to create spaces where survivors are authorized to be both witnesses and experts, reporters of experience and theorists of experience. Such transformations will alter existing subjectivities as well as structures of domination and relations of power. In such a scenario, survivors might, in bell hooks' words, ‘use confession and memory as tools of intervention’ rather than as instruments for recuperation (p. 282, emphasis in original).

For Anna, speaking out about her experiences as an expert was not only an ‘outlet’ but also helped her to concentrate on being ‘constructive as opposed to destructive’:

It’s for research and so I feel like I’m doing something constructive about it…I need an outlet for it so if I can do something constructive as opposed to
destructive…I guess talking about it, doing seminars in high schools maybe is an idea that I have. Especially just going back to my old high school for a start and going over that with the girls there. That’s an idea and I guess just things like that kind of pull me out of it. Maybe reading feminist literature helps because it’s empowering.

Anna’s outlook underlines the importance of providing avenues which both utilise survivor knowledge, and at the same time offer a story beyond harm and victimisation. In doing so, rather than reiterating a ‘damaged’ identity, survivor public narratives could begin to incorporate both strength and expertise as central to survivor stories.

**Conclusion**

Psychological frameworks of survivor victimisation borrow heavily from discourses of (passive) femininity and broader representations of the victim in legal and criminological discourse. Locating survivor adult (re)victimisation within the continuum of sexualisation’, psychological discourse also functions to keep the ‘world outside’ safe and intact. However, by positioning sexual (re)victimisation as a consequence of survivor behaviour and/or their intrapsychic weakness to resist abusers, the abuse literature discounts how the everyday experiences of ‘non-abused’ women are caught up in a culture of sexual violence. Indeed, as the participants in this study revealed, distinctions regarding the vulnerability of ‘victims’ versus ‘non-victims’ failed to capture the wider, all-encompassing context of violence, where
feeling unsafe ‘impacts (women’s) psyche regardless of whether anything has happened’ to them.

Following from Nicola Gavey’s (2005) work, participant accounts of ‘unwanted’ sexual experiences also drew attention to the ways that wider cultural discourses surrounding heterosex mediate what gets counted as ‘normal’ sex and sexual assault. Furthermore, given the widespread ‘victim backlash’, along with the centrality of the neoliberal subject, participants narratives also point to the increasing pressure on young women to identify as ‘non-victims.’ Ultimately, as the excerpts from young women in this study suggest, this has resulted in a rhetoric which maintains the notion that women are responsible for sexual violence.

Importantly, this chapter has argued that by adopting uncomplicated notions of the victim, psychological and popular discourse has failed to present the ‘other’ story of survivors, which includes their engagement with resistance. Yet, in order to (re)formulate more positive representations of survivors, this ‘other’ story will also need to include survivors taking up a more powerful position—as witnesses and experts—in a landscape which has consistently silenced and under-valued their stories.

As I will argue in the next section, the trauma model has contributed to the victim identity as all-encompassing in women’s lives, particularly given its emphasis on long-term victim powerlessness and vulnerability in the world. While recovery literature in some way attempts to present a way to ‘heal’ wounded identity, the trauma model re-presents the victim in relation to the immovable injury of sexual
abuse. Further to this, because psychological models of trauma now represent and correspond to ‘normal outcomes’, expectations surrounding survivor harm have also ensured that there is nothing ‘new’ or unordinary about their experiences of adult (re)victimisation. On the contrary, as Sharon Lamb (1999a) has argued, survivors who appear to be ‘over it’ are often viewed with suspicion, and perceived to be harbouring a deep-seated anger or hatred toward men in general (p. 115).
SECTION 2

Moving in/between constructions of survivor identity
CHAPTER SIX

Transforming Identities: The construction of victim/survivor subjectivities in therapeutic and self-help discourses

This chapter aims to investigate the impact of psychological and popular discourses of the victim/survivor, particularly the centrality of themes such as disclosure and ‘survivorship’ in women’s accounts. A closer examination of the prevailing discourses in this area suggests that ‘the pathway to healing’ is strongly mediated by both professional and self-help ideologies regarding ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ responses to trauma (Crossley, 1997). Within this framework, ‘expert’ knowledge, and the language of trauma and illness, has been appropriated by the more popularised ‘recovery movement’. The surrounding discourses which have emerged from this period have undoubtedly impacted survivor perspectives of empowerment following abuse (Reavey, 2003). Significantly, the popularisation of the survivor movement on television talk shows, as well as other therapy mediums like self-help books and support groups, have re-presented the victim of sexual trauma as an autonomous agent, responsible for their own recovery.

Coupled with this, as Ian Hacking (1991) suggests, psychological and psychiatric models have historically been based on a premise of the ‘cycle of abuse’ or the ‘disease’ framework, which not only locates cause in terms of individual ‘defects’, but also emphasises the process of individual ‘recovery’ (p. 281). From this perspective, psychological research surrounding the ‘damage’ of child sexual abuse
has also provided an important (empirical) foundation from which to build therapeutic models of ‘healing’.

As I outline in this chapter, while psychological and trauma models are often loosely applied in the more popular contexts of ‘self-help’ and television talk-shows, these cultural appropriations continue to perpetuate familiar psychological tenets of recovery. The most obvious example of psy-therapeutic influence in this arena can be dated back to Freud’s early theoretical work concerning female hysteria. For example, Freud’s development of psychotherapy, which included the practice of ‘free association’ and ‘talking cure’, encouraged the centrality of the patient as an ‘active agent’, but also gauged therapeutic progress in relation to the communication of emotional pain and trauma. In many ways, this method of self-disclosure in a therapeutic setting has been endorsed in more contemporary mediums—such as talk-shows, self-help books and survivor autobiographies—which underline the necessary ‘telling’ of abuse in the process of survivor healing and recovery.

However, as the excerpts from survivors reveal, the centrality of ‘emotional investment’ in these versions of recovery has also operated to shift the focus of the survivor movement away from its political beginnings, such that private healing has replaced public discontent. I draw on Wendy Brown’s (1995) concept of ‘wounded attachment’, and suggest that contemporary survivor identity remains caught up in internalised notions of ‘healing’ through suffering rather than an externalisation of this identity from a political platform. I begin this discussion by presenting an overview of how these shifts developed.
Moving toward the self: the rise of therapeutic models of child sexual abuse

The process of ‘unlearning to not speak’ does not solve the problematic of what is to be said, what is to be done. Speaking truth to power does not topple it, and the freeing of our voices has made it clear that women have many voices, many experiences, many ‘truths’. (Deborah Gerson, 1995: 33-34, cited in Naples, 2003)

The politicisation of sexual abuse by feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s involved a rallying for greater protection of women and children and recognition of the ‘serious harm’ of sexual abuse (Doane & Hodges, 2001). This often included the communal gathering of women who shared personal anecdotes of abuse to address the ways violence against women had been silenced in the private sphere. However, the feminist emphasis on public disclosure also intersected with a growing acceptance that ‘speaking out’ also had important therapeutic rewards (Armstrong, 1994). Historical accounts suggest that the feminist movement’s emphasis on public disclosure, which shared commonalities with the psychoanalytic approach of the ‘talking cure’, aided in the transformation of what was a political movement into a recovery movement. Furthermore, as Janice Haaken (1998) has argued, the increased presence of the trauma model and diagnoses of sexual harm for survivor—which included criteria regarding post-traumatic symptomatology—was also encouraged by feminists during this time. They remained determined to pronounce rather than minimise ‘the sustained trauma’ of sexual violence in women’s lives (Haaken, 1998, p. 75). Significantly, the second-wave movement ‘broke the silence’ surrounding
sexual and domestic violence against women, claiming that greater numbers of ‘women in civilian life’ than ‘men at war’ were affected by post-traumatic symptoms in the private sphere (Herman, 1992). As noted by various feminist scholars, while consciousness-raising women’s groups urged women to speak publicly about their experiences of sexual violence, the emphasis was on ‘the personal-is-political’ rather than individual transformation (Bolen, 2001; Haaken, 1996; Whittier, 2009).

**Collective trauma and the erasure of the political**

Ultimately, feminist-led ‘speak outs’ about the socio-political causes and impact of sexual violence were intercepted by the growing acceptance of therapeutic discourse and the establishment of concrete ‘psychological indicators’ of abuse. The dominant ‘trauma model’ developed during this time established that traumatic events—which included war, natural disasters, violence and sexual abuse—often produced commonality of post-traumatic symptoms in their victims (Herman, 1992, p. 33). By positioning post-trauma symptoms as ‘ordinary human adaptations to life’, the trauma model ‘provide(d) a language for articulating the pain and injury of women while preserving the position of women’s essential normalcy and rationality’ (Haaken, 1996, p. 1078).

In addition, as Mary Gilfus (1999) has noted, the trauma model also offered tremendous appeal to feminist therapists working in an area previously dominated by victim-blaming and traditional psychoanalytic models. At the same time, the profound focus on the ‘harm’ of sexual abuse inevitably placed greater emphasis on victim pathology, which remains the chief focus of victim research and evaluation
today. It was this focus on the victim’s ‘underlying pathology’ that feminist and psychoanalyst, Judith Herman (1992) raised in her early theoretical work:

The tendency to blame the victim has interfered with the psychological understanding and diagnosis of a post-traumatic syndrome. Instead of conceptualizing the psychopathology of the victim as a response to an abusive situation, mental health professionals have frequently attributed the abusive situation to the victim’s presumed underlying psychopathology. (p. 16)

In the introduction to her book, Trauma: explorations in memory, Cathy Caruth (1995) suggests that the ambiguity surrounding the classification of trauma induced pathology, and the symptoms which constituted its diagnosis, appeared to ‘engulf’ a great number of collectively experienced historical events. As Caruth (1995) comments, ‘suddenly responses not only to combat and to natural catastrophes, but also rape, child abuse and a number of other violent occurrences have been understood in terms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (p. 3).

In many ways, the incoherency of the diagnoses, and the ‘all inclusiveness’ of trauma outcomes in this model, demonstrate the limits in theorising ‘collective trauma’ within the therapeutic realm. Symptoms come to stand for ‘real’ experiences of social and political injustice. Foremost, while one can understand that the traumatic event of a natural disaster would negatively impact on an individual for years to come, it is hardly ‘the same’ impact as a woman’s (or a child’s) experience of sexual violence. Clearly, the diagnostic reduction of distinct trauma experiences into one framework espousing symptomatologies inevitably ignores the complexities
of women’s distinct experiences. Second, as I will outline later in this chapter, the focus on the outcomes of trauma, along with the ‘truth’ surrounding the abuse experience, not only obscures the position of the perpetrator in survivor accounts of sexual abuse, it also thwarts women’s opportunity to author their own individual stories.

**From psychological harm to healing: the impact of the recovery movement and the rise of the Survivor**

While there was increasing awareness of the issue of child sexual abuse during the 1980s and 1990s, a number of feminist commentators have since argued that the recovery movement essentially turned ‘the problem’ of child sexual abuse back on survivors themselves, who were made responsible for their own healing (Crossley, 1999; M. L. Davies, 1995; Haaken, 1996; Reavey & Warner, 2001). As Haaken and Lamb (2000) suggest:

> With the decline of an activist women’s movement during the 1980s, the struggle of women against patriarchal control took on a more individualistic cast. The social problem of exploitation of women and girls was increasingly defined as a mental health problem. (p. 10)

The focus on individual healing as the major tenet of recovery has also destabilised the collective power of survivor discourse to ‘break the silence’ on the larger social issue of violence against women. This incorporated a distinct rise in therapeutic and professional advice surrounding victims of abuse, where correct pathways for recovery were promoted in popular self-help and therapeutic texts. This shift to the
‘expert’ in the survivor movement has perhaps operated to take away the gains of the feminist movement. As Armstrong (1994) suggests, re-gaining power in the survivor movement will need to involve survivors ‘speaking for themselves’, rather than investing in ‘expert’ discourse:

There needs to be a greater awareness on the part of adult survivors that their experience… can play a role that can make a difference to children now…this would require that women reclaim their own experience and adopt scepticism that one can find empowerment by turning power over to the ‘experts’. (pp. 273-274)

At present, feminist theorisations of child sexual abuse remain largely overshadowed by psychological and therapeutic perspectives concerning pathology, which emphasise survivor recovery rather than the socio-political factors which sustain violence against women. However, a number of feminist theorists argue that the prevailing political climate and economic instability during this time made it increasingly difficult for feminists to maintain an active role in the child sexual abuse movement. As Whittier (2009) suggests, a great many of the losses experienced in the U.S. were the result of bureaucratic roadblocks. For example, she argues that because the government funding in this area was favourable to applications which expressed a scientific, medical and criminal framework, feminist activists lost ground while the therapeutic organisations were rewarded (p. 94). Ultimately, the new version of self-help and therapeutic discourse that emerged relied heavily on the authority of scientific discourses. This self-help genre become increasingly de-
politically in the 1980s, as mass media reports fuelled emphasis on the importance of the recovery from and prevention of sexual abuse.

The cultural shift in the ways that survivor discourse has been outlined in numerous feminist analyses (Linda Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Armstrong, 1994; M. L. Davies, 1995; Haaken, 1998, 1999; Naples, 2003). As Michele Davies (1995) comments, while earlier autobiographical accounts emphasised ‘speaking out’ about the ‘reality’ of the experience, contemporary survivor discourse focuses on women’s own healing of the intra-psychic trauma of abuse (p. 19). This is most visible when we look at therapeutic models of abuse and the widening of the self-help and recovery discourse in women’s lives.

The focus on individual rather than political change includes a shift in the ways the victim has been positioned in the therapeutic terrain, as well as in popular culture. Indeed, the rising visibility of the survivor in the media, which rose dramatically in the early 1980s, encountered fatigue by the mid 1990s. As Chris Atmore (1996) has argued, the political thrust of the movement was soon overturned by media reports of ‘overzealous feminists’, who were campaigning against ‘innocent fathers’ and men. The media’s reduction in reports of abuse in the mid 1990s was also subsumed by the salacious headlines from ‘media feminists’ espousing the end to ‘victim feminism’. As outlined in Chapter One, the ‘victim backlash’ in the mid 1990s, commonly associated with the theories of Naomi Wolf (1993), Camille Paglia (1992) and Kate Roiphe (1993), proposed that feminism’s attention on women’s weaknesses, and vulnerability to male violence, ‘convin[ces] young women to be
victims’ (Paglia, 1992, p. 274). While the theories proposed by these authors diverge in distinct ways, they are united in their belief that mainstream feminism compromises women’s identity, and a large part of this can be traced to feminisms ‘elaborate vocabulary’ of the ‘sexual harm done by men’ (Wolf, 1993, p. 184). As I address later in this chapter, given the backlash against both victims and victim advocates, it is little wonder that stories of abuse became increasingly reliant on the intra-psychic impact and ‘effects’ of sexual abuse.

**Consuming survivorship: Confessional healing, self-help discourse and the prime time survivor**

For trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth (1995), it is knowledge about the truth that will topple violence against women, she writes: ‘trauma is the story that addresses us in an attempt to tell the reality or truth that is not otherwise available’ (p. 4). However, as the narratives from survivors in this study demonstrate, the reluctance to disclose abuse, publicly or privately, appears to have more to do with the absence of a solution. Indeed, after decades of women’s public disclosure of child sexual abuse, survivor discourse remains caught up in the transformation of the self rather than challenging the cultural discourses that support sexual abuse.

Criticism of the self-help movement has been directed toward increasing investment in the language of trauma, mental health and the ‘promise of recovery’. For example, a number of poststructuralist feminists argue this has thwarted all efforts to address the socio-cultural sources of female trauma (Armstrong, 1994; Doane & Hodges, 2001; Marecek, 1999). The ‘self-help’ movement has been effective in
commodifying the therapeutic ethos. For example, the self-help dialectic suggests that while ‘truth’ can be determined through narration, individual change can be achieved in isolation (Woodstock, 2006, p. 340). From this perspective, recovery is dependent on the extent to which survivors can alter ‘flaws in their own thinking’.

Early self-help texts, and most famously Bass and Davis’s The Courage to Heal (1988), were heavily seated in the trauma model, and emphasised the importance of disclosure in healing and recovery. The success of the self-help formula, which was largely modelled on Bass and Davis’s (1988) text, is often attributed to the therapeutic method of ‘writing the self back to psychological health’ (Champagne, 1998, p. 86). For example, in one of their ‘change’ exercises Bass and Davis (1988) suggest that: ‘The first silence you break is to yourself’ (p. 155) and the practice of writing about experiences is positioned as ‘an important avenue for healing because it gives (survivors) an opportunity to tell their own story’ (p. xxxiv).

I do not want to discount the enormous impact of Bass and Davis’s (1988) book, coined by the authors as ‘the bible’ of child sexual abuse recovery. However, their emphasis on intra-psychic healing represents a missed opportunity to consider how socio-political factors might aid the construction of women’s victimisation. In addition, the focus on psychological and sexual dysfunction, albeit using the language of self-empowerment, intersects with psychological theorisations that child sexual abuse will ‘inevitably’ cause harm.

However, a central premise of the self-help genre has also been to re-position survivor feelings of difference. For example, the majority of bestselling self-help
texts have include autobiographical narratives from survivors, which reassure the reader that none of their thoughts about, not their ways of coping with the abuse are different or abnormal (J. E. Davis, 2005). Still, as I outline in the next section, by encouraging the reader to ‘self-diagnose’ as a survivor, the recovery discourse also places limits on the types of practices and attributes female survivors can take up.

Fitting the label of abuse? Survivor adoption of divergent positions and the rejection of victim/survivor

The direction of academic and professional literature in the past 30 years has also had important impacts on the formulation of survivor discourse. Interestingly, while theorists suggest that women are often expected to assume the role of the ‘good victim’, the success of the survivor, and indeed their ‘believability’ in legal contexts, is often reliant on their adoption of desirable feminine characteristics (Konradi, 1996; Lamb, 1999a; Renzetti, 1999). As Marcia Worrell (2003) has argued, ‘only particular voices and ways of speaking about abuse are legitimated within the deployment of a unitary survivor identity’ (p. 222). Further, the popularisation of the survivor movement, and the depiction of the ‘transformation’ of the victim to survivor as a desirable identity, informs survivors’ own stories by drawing a line between ‘survivorship’ and ‘victimhood’.

To date, there has been little investigation into the various positions—including socio-political and intra-psychic—that survivors lean on when situating their experiences of child sexual abuse. Clearly, the primacy of the trauma model in the recognition of ‘typical symptoms’ and recovery, may guide and delimit what gets
counted as ‘normal’, and the subject positions available to survivors. The increased televisation of the recovery movement through public testimonials suggests that ‘victims’ of abuse can shed their stories and embark upon a ‘new’, more empowered, journey of survivorship. However, as the excerpts from survivors in this study demonstrate, public and private disclosure does not always result in a positive therapeutic benefit. Rather, opportunities to ‘tell’ their story of abuse are often reconsidered, and survivors reflect on these experiences with ambivalence.

The participants in this study tended to complicate popular victim/survivor narratives and adopt more self-directed positions. For example, Charlotte seemingly took up a position as an active survivor, who had ‘learn(ed) from her past’ and was ‘proud’ to have ‘lived through that’ and remain ‘sound’:

I don’t have the feeling like ‘Well, get over it’ and I acknowledge that it’s an awful, awful thing that happens and it does wreck lives and it is devastating, but I think that some victims are very quick to blame their past for what they’re like today and I’m a bit like ‘Well, you can learn from your past; you don’t have to just be upset about it all the time’. They’re called survivors of abuse for a reason, so you should be proud that you survived that and that you lived through that and that you’re sound enough to talk about it.

Charlotte’s opposition to the ‘media feminist’ discourse, which has been popularly viewed as a backlash that urges survivors to just ‘get over it’, is evident in the above excerpt. The impacts of abuse are instead positioned as an ‘awful thing that happens’ that ‘wrecks lives’. However, Charlotte also distances herself from this ‘type’ of
victim, and victim experience. Specifically, her position is made more salient by the reference to the (lesser valued) position of the victim, who fails to take the responsibility of ‘learn(ing) from (their) past’ and who is ‘quick to blame their past for what they are like today’.

However, as the following excerpt from Kristy suggests, declaring oneself a ‘survivor’ of abuse not only carries political connotations, it is also laden with assumptions about pathology. For this reason, Kristy, and a number of other participants in this study, did not feel comfortable using the identity of the ‘victim’ and/or of someone who was ‘abused’. In particular, Kristy felt that she didn’t earn the label of ‘child abuse’, chiefly because she positioned it as ‘old history’ and was no longer psychologically traumatised by the experience:

I was quite traumatised about it when I was younger but then I got therapy and got better and everything, so it was all fine after that. Now I just view it as old history—don’t think about it at all. It’s actually weird to put ‘survivor’ or ‘child abuse’ as a label for it. Doesn’t feel right. I don’t earn that, or something. Technically it is but I don’t view it as that’s what happened—it was just an experience. It’s not denial; it’s just not such a big deal that I get the label of it. It is when I really think about it from an outside perspective but from my perspective, no. A lot of people were so traumatised about it and everything. Maybe I used to view it as a huge deal when I was younger, like 14 and whatever, quite young, but now, because it’s not traumatic anymore, I don’t see it as a big deal because I’ve got used to it or something. So it
probably used to be a big deal. I wouldn’t want it to happen to someone else, obviously, but yeah, it’s not a big deal anymore.

In many ways, Kristy’s position fits in with the philosophy of the recovery model; however, rather than position herself as a ‘survivor’, who has overcome psychological trauma, she feels more comfortable extinguishing this identity along with its traumatic impact.

However, while Kristy distances herself from the survivor identity, and situates the experience as ‘not a big deal’, other participants spoke about the impact of media and popular television depictions of child sexual abuse on their developing identities. For Charlotte, television shows which portrayed the horror of sexual abuse made her ‘realise how bad everyone else thought it was’:

I guess originally I was a bit like… actually, no, I’ll rephrase that. Originally, when I was younger, when it happened I kind of didn’t think about it for a long time. Probably about three or four years, until 16, 17 when I started dating, but then when that happened and I realised how big of an issue it was—see when I was 11 I knew it was bad; I don’t think I realised how bad everyone else thought it was, so growing up and then watching just media, like movies, and ads and…Yeah, CSI, stuff like that—I realised that ‘Oh, okay, this is big deal, like a really big deal’, so I don’t know, I felt upset that I didn’t do more to stop it and that was a big problem for a while, for probably about a year I felt guilty. I didn’t feel shame. I felt guilty for not doing more to stop it.
For Charlotte, ‘the big deal’ of child sexual abuse also transformed her own reflections about abuse and the guilt associated with ‘not doing more to stop it’ into a ‘big problem’ for her personally.

Other participants were more willing to take up the position as survivors of abuse, and integrate the experience into their personality. For Eliza, this position communicated to others that her abuse experience was ‘not something (to be) ashamed about’, but rather an experience that ‘shapes who you are as a person’:

Yeah and I guess I’ve kind of integrated that experience into my personality. It’s not something that I’m ashamed about, so maybe it’s messed up in saying this but I don’t actually view it as a negative experience anymore. I view it as something that’s in terms of phenomenology and the loop and how every experience shapes who you are as a person. It’s obviously shaped me somehow and I actually feel comfortable with how it’s shaped me. I can’t really pinpoint what exactly it’s done or how it’s impacted on me because there’s nothing to compare it to but I feel comfortable with who I am now and I feel okay with who I am now, because how much I struggled through it, through the end of high school to me kind of says it was obviously something important in my life, to shape me and because the end result right now, I’m actually kind of happy with so I don’t really view it as a negative.

Given that one of the major tenets of the self-help movement revolves around the possibility for survivors to ‘heal’ and ‘move on’ from the abuse, Eliza’s position of ‘integration’ breaks away from this identity framework in particular ways. Foremost,
Eliza does not lean on the identity of the victim or the survivor in her talk, and adopts a phenomenological rather than therapeutic philosophy to describe the fusing of experience and selfhood.

‘Breaking the silence’ in a post-feminist context

Louise Armstrong (1994) argues that the political stories of incest were transformed into public viewing in the 1980s and 1990s, when prime-time accounts involving survivors ‘breaking the silence’ became an increasingly bankable industry (p. 206). For Armstrong, the rising presence of the consumer-oriented recovery movement during this time not only operated to infantilise survivors, the discourse of ‘treatment’ also underlined their passivity, ‘fragility’ and ‘hopelessness’ (1994, p. 3). Similarly, Alcoff and Gray (1993) suggest that ‘the very act of speaking out has become used as performance and spectacle’, which is more concerned with titillating viewers with ‘the emotions of survivors’ than providing support for other survivors (p. 276-77).

This can be observed in the shift toward a more therapeutic genre in talk shows such as Oprah Winfrey, which frequently present disclosure as an act of liberation and transformation for survivors (Illouz, 2003a; Shattuc, 1997). As Eva Illouz (2003b) suggests, the popularity of programs such as this, which endorse the ‘glamour of misery’ through their endorsement of ‘overcoming’ and ‘personal growth’, have also added to the cultural construction of the survivor and the popularity of the expanding self-help movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Within this context, recovery is gauged by the extent to which adult survivors are able to ‘speak the unspeakable’, and their
engagement in a pseudo-therapeutic encounter aims to present to them a ‘new pathway’ to ‘healing’ and ‘recovery’. Like Haaken, Illouz (2008) calls attention to the individualisation of suffering in women’s stories of trauma, and the ways that suffering has been used as an identity indicator in the recovery movement:

This mechanism can transform suffering into victimhood and victimhood into identity. The therapeutic narrative calls on us to improve our lives, but it can do so only by making us attend to our deficiencies, suffering and dysfunctions. (p. 185)

The countless television programs that have focused on the ‘telling’ of abuse stories for public consumption have undoubtedly had an impact on how survivors position experiences of disclosure, and how their stories are interpreted by others. Public disclosure in this forum not only operate to objectify the survivor, and make a ‘humiliating exhibition of their pain’, it also mediate widespread public reactions to the issue (Linda Alcoff & Gray, 1993). Significantly, survivors’ confessions are often heavily mediated by ‘expert’ opinions of psychologists and therapists in a public forum, where the overriding discourse of healing and ‘psychological impact’ often denies them the opportunity to author their own experiences (Doane & Hodges, 2001). Further to this, the confessional format, which aspires to evoke emotional reactions in the survivor and audience rather than to build political vigour, also guides and delimits the position that survivors take up in their own disclosure experiences.
As I have outlined earlier in this chapter, survivor public and private ‘speak outs’ in the 70s and 80s feminist movement were not only promoted to empower the victim, they were also endorsed as a strategy for ‘fighting back’ and educating society about the commonality of sexual violence against women. In many ways, the early politicism of the survivor movement has largely been surpassed by post-feminist rhetoric about individual healing and trauma symptoms, and has emptied survivor disclosure of potency and meaning. As Alcoff and Gray (1993) argue:

The confessional is always implicated in an unequal, non reciprocal relation of power. And the explicit goal of the process of confession is always the normalisation of the speaking subject and thus the elimination of any transgressive potential that might exist. (p. 272)

Adding to this, while the movement promised to diminish the shame associated with sexual violence, recent research suggests that, for most survivors, disclosure of their experiences rarely outweighs the feelings of humiliation associated with re-telling the abuse (Linda Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Lamb, 1999b). A number of participants spoke about the difficulties they faced when disclosing their experiences of abuse. One participant, Charlotte, felt that people without knowledge of her abuse ‘still’ viewed her as a ‘strong, independent woman’, yet felt that ‘if they did know’, people would probably give her the ‘victim stereotype’:

Well I found with ‘Alice’, I talk about it to her a lot – we’re very close and we talk about lots of other things, but we also talk about this. Her views on it is the fact that most people don’t know and still see me as a strong, independent
woman. If they did know, she thinks that people should think of me as more strong and more independent but we both acknowledge that...that’s probably not going to happen. They’re probably going to give me a victim stereotype and ‘oh, that’s really sad for her...’ I just feel like...It should be like ‘Wow and she did that’, but no, it’s like ‘Oh wow, that sucks. Poor girl’.

In the above extract, Charlotte reveals the dominant discourse of the victim in her disclosure experiences, which she believes overshadow what ‘people should think’—that she is ‘more strong and more independent’. In many ways, the recovery movement has done little to deflate traditional victim stereotypes. Rather, the admission of past experiences of (male) violence continue to be caught up in discourses and femininity, where women are ultimately perceived as the ‘poor girl’, and the perpetrator the ‘dangerous other’ or ‘an evil monster’ (Lamb, 1999a, p. 108).

As Carmody and Carrington (2000) argue, there are obvious dangers in creating dichotomies based around ‘innocent’ women and ‘evil’ men when discussing instances of sexual violence. Significantly, the reliance on traditional gender discourses not only operates to simplify women’s experiences of abuse, it also masks the wider social forces that contribute to the culture of violence (Carmody, 2006; Marecek, 1999).

The widespread exposure of survivor stories and the empathic dialogue of the talk show framework have also influenced the types of expressions which get taken up during disclosure. Further to this, while it remains crucial for survivors to inhabit a ‘safe place’ to tell their stories, the public exposure of suffering has also generated
expectations of an overriding emotional response to abuse stories. While this affective dialogue has certainly been ‘on show’ via popular mediums, participant stories suggest that the seemingly ‘active’, ‘independent’ and ‘empowered’ identity of the survivor remains eclipsed by traditional understandings of the victim, which evoke sadness and sympathy. Thus, while feminist therapists underline the healing benefits regarding ‘the process’ of telling one’s story (or writing about personal trauma), the strength of survivors’ stories remains caught up in the image of the passive, helpless woman (Hesford, 1999). As Hesford and Kezol (2001) argue, survivor narratives prompt passive empathy or judgement from viewers rather than a stance of critical witnessing (p. 17). A number of participants in this study commented on the difficulty of managing disclosure in the wake of the emotional reactions from their audience. As Chelsea explains in the following passage:

What I find (is) it makes other people uncomfortable…and I only hear about ‘How did you feel about the abuse, and what did it do to you then?’…And I don’t know whether people don’t want to talk about it or it probably just doesn’t really come up or…but you do you find with people that haven’t been abused—your close mates—they have that pained expression on their face? You know that kind of like ‘Oh…’ and you think ‘Fuck off. I don’t want you to be sad’.

For Chelsea, the disclosure story remains focused on ‘how (she) felt about the abuse’ at the time, and ‘what it did to (her) then’ rather than how she views it now. In some ways, the ‘story’ of abuse has been scripted, and survivors often feel like they are no longer in control of authoring their own experiences.
Janice Haaken (1998) has argued that the trauma model of abuse, ‘which focuses on vivifying emotional suffering’, continues to view women, and the female psyche, as ‘perpetually vulnerable’ (p. 76). Further, while Haaken acknowledges that this model is effective in depathologising survivors’ ‘typical’ response to trauma, it inevitably reifies the popular belief that ‘vulnerable’ and ‘powerless’ women are easily overcome by masculine sexual aggression. This position not only leads to an ‘anticipat(ion) of psychic shattering’ in survivors, it also ignores the nuances of women’s stories and their individual position within this narrative (Haaken, 1998, p. 76). This argument has also been addressed in qualitative research concerning adult victims of sexual assault. For example, Gavey & Schmidt (2011) have drawn attention to the limiting identity positions that accompany constructions of rape as always traumatic, severe and long-lasting.

For Charlotte, the decision not to disclose was largely influenced by her aversion to the cultural positioning of the victimised woman:

I think that the taboo in society has gone down—people are more willing to talk about it, more willing to acknowledge that it happens. But I think that the effect that it has on people, is misunderstood. I think that it’s a lot to do with the way it’s portrayed in the media…I don’t like how everyone thinks that we must be so fragile. I don’t tell a lot of people because I don’t want to be identified as a victim. Not that I think people will treat me differently but I think people will think of me differently and I don’t want them to be like ‘Oh, poor Charlotte’. Oh, look what she’s been through.
Despite the rise of the ‘survivor’ in popular discourse, this model of ‘recovery’ essentially fails to dissolve the assumption that women who are sexually assaulted (by men) are ‘fragile’ and perpetually devastated. Indeed, while the image of the survivor in the recovery movement connotes an identity that is ‘active’, ‘positive’ and ‘empowered’, it is still associated with the ‘highly emotive language’ of this movement. In this context, she is a ‘survivor’, but it is doubtful that she got through ‘it’ unharmed. Furthermore, despite the impetus on the transition from ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’ in the self-help literature, the meaning of each remains embedded in this discourse. As Sharon Lamb (1999a) has argued, the survivor remains caught up in the ‘old victim psychopathology’, which includes the overriding belief that while ‘their abuse had nothing to do with them, it is still shameful to be overpowered or vulnerable in this culture’ (p. 119-120). One participant, Valentina, spoke about the importance of actively challenging this identity:

The term victim now has a stigma attached to it that these people can’t function…I mean the more we hide it, the more we are reinforcing that it is taboo. I think they should start campaigns to fight and say ‘you are strong, you are a survivor’ you are not a victim. That is how I feel.

However, although the survivor ‘label’ was borne out of a feminist agenda which aimed to challenge the ‘victim’ stigma surrounding women who experienced sexual assault, it is perhaps more aligned with the contemporary recovery movement with a political agenda. Another participant, Eliza, proposed that keeping abuse ‘closeted’ contributed to women’s shame:
I think that’s why it makes it kind of problematic because by keeping abuse kind of secret and closeted, it makes people feel ashamed of it instead of being ‘Yeah, it happened’, whatever… In terms of the amount of the people that it happens to—kind of demystifying it a little bit more—just because of all the shame that’s associated with it and it doesn’t necessarily have to be shameful.

While the closeting of the abuse ‘makes people feel ashamed’ there is not yet a position available that allows survivors to be ‘yeah, it happened, whatever’ about their experiences, particularly when we look toward the common reactions of the audience following survivor disclosure. Rather, as Chelsea reveals, the expectations surrounding the ‘normal’ effects of sexual trauma also function to ostracise survivors, who are presumed to harbour underlying psychopathology:

For those who know about the abuse or the family history, there’s always that kind of pity and I was on drugs before and it’s ‘Oh, it’s because of the abuse’. I didn’t really give a shit about the abuse, you know what I mean? I had that kind of friendship group and I just wanted to do it. I did it and I got off it. And then, having the children young, ‘Oh, lucky she’s got ‘Justin’ because she was a bit off the rails before and she’s had the child now’…and she’s had another one, then she’s had another. You know? I don’t know if people mean that but that’s how I take it, when they comment and talk to me. It’s always in the back of my head.

Another participant, Charlotte, spoke about having to continually having to defend her choices from a position beyond her victim identity:
That’s what I feel sometimes people do. ‘Oh, you’re studying psychology. Is that because you were abused?’ ‘No, it’s because I’m interested in psychology and I have been since I was younger’. They think that my whole life must surround the fact that I was abused and I think that...that...yes it happened, but it’s one part of my life. And it’s unfortunate that it happened, but I’ve learnt from it and constantly talking about it like I’m reliving it through every aspect of my life, isn’t helping anybody. It’s not helping me, it’s not helping the way you think about other victims.

In many ways, the dissemination of trauma model into popular discourse has also meant that survivors are often confronted with pseudo-therapeutic responses which universalise their own reactions to events. For example, Charlotte spoke about feeling irritated by people’s assumption that she ‘felt guilty’ or responsible for the abuse, and the everyday appropriation of therapeutic assumptions regarding survivor characteristics:

When I tell people—if I decide to tell people—the first thing they always say is ‘It’s not your fault. You know it’s not your fault right?’ And I’m like ‘Well did I say I thought it was my fault?’ I’ve never thought it was my fault. I was 11. And it diminishes the pain I am feeling, like ‘Well if we tell her it’s not her fault, then everything will be better’, and I’m like ‘Well, no, the fact that it’s not my fault doesn’t make me feel any better, so you saying that isn’t helping’, you know?
As Charlotte describes above, the emphasis on harm and recovery via popular revisions of psychiatric discourse—such as ‘the abuse was not your fault’—suggest that the struggle for survivors is analogous with the recovery model. The development of indicators to affirm the commonalities of the trauma experience also operates to simplify women’s response to sexual abuse as ‘one-and-the-same’. As the time-honoured feminist debate surrounding the politics of identity across race, social positioning and sexuality suggest, the trauma model cannot account for the complexity of survivor experiences.

It also fails to consider the ways in which sexual trauma is perceived to impact women across these identity characteristics. For example, the presumption that working class families, and Indigenous women, are more vulnerable and differently impacted by sexual abuse suggests that discourses of violence and abuse lean heavily on historical and cultural narratives of violence (Hesford, 1999, p. 199). Second, the research expounding that women from lower social positioning engage in more ‘sexually risky’ behaviours with more ‘dangerous’ men, suggests that the group of women are more blameworthy for their abuse. Clearly, the reporting of ‘typical’, ‘underprivileged’ victims in the media and through academic discourse also reifies the opinion that sexual abuse does not occur in ‘good’, ‘safe’, middleclass nuclear families. This position not only works against political action across differences, but also fails to challenge community attitudes and the existence sexual assault in the home (Carmody, 2003).
**Being angry is the ‘worst thing’: Psychology, therapeutic work and the construction of the survivor**

Given that the overriding objective of the self-help genre is to encourage survivors to re-build a more positive intra-psychic self, a number of self-help texts also emphasise the importance of managing emotions. Bass and Davis (1988), who devote an entire chapter to anger, refer to it as the ‘backbone of healing’, and underline the various ways survivors might ‘direct (their) anger where it belongs’ (p. 145). It is perhaps not surprising, given that A Courage to Heal is quintessentially a self-help text that much of this chapter is devoted to controlling anger and intra-psychic strategies survivors might use to manage inappropriate anger. In similar texts, survivors are encouraged to channel their feelings of anger or rage within therapy sessions, rather than in the ‘real world’. For example, Ollier & Hobday (2004) promote the use of an ‘anger diary’ to monitor and control ‘triggers’ which lead to anger in clients who suffer child sexual abuse (p. 85). Thus, while a number of therapeutic solutions recognise the advantages of anger (particularly in steering survivors away from depression) expressions of anger must be deemed ‘appropriate’.

At the same time, increasingly there has been research in the academic and professional arenas investigating the outcome of inappropriate emotional expression for (female) survivors. In this context, anger is often constructed as a reactive emotion, and psychological studies suggest that if left untreated, or unresolved, anger can lead to depression and low self-esteem for survivors (Neumann, Houskamp, Pollock, & Briere, 1996; Sappington, Pharr, Tunstall, & Rickert, 1997). More
broadly, anger has also been associated with the physical and mental health of survivors, were greater anger predicts ‘greater trauma-related distress’ and post-traumatic symptoms (Connor, Davidson, & Lee, 2003). Within this psychological framework, ‘persistent unresolved anger or related negative feelings might serve to promote post-trauma symptoms, whereas forgiveness may be accompanied by less severe symptoms’ (Connor, et al., 2003, p. 488).

Yet, anger has also been theorised as a mediating factor in recovery. For example, a number of studies in this area suggest than women’s positive recognition and use of anger is ‘importan[t] in facilitating survivor recovery’ (Van Velsor & Cox, 2001, p. 619). Not surprisingly, a number of studies in this area point to survivor ‘inability’ to ‘use their anger’ in positive ways. As Leahy, Pretty, & Tenenbaum (2003) have argued, survivors might also suffer from ‘affect dysregulation’, which is an ‘incapacity to regulate the intensity of affective responses’ (p. 659). Citing previous research, Van Veslor and Cox (2001) also suggest that (female) survivors ‘struggle to contain and manage feelings’ and cope with their emotions through ‘extremes of suppression’ to ‘uncontrollable outbursts’.

The theorisation of survivor emotion in relation to suppression and ‘uncontrollable outbursts’ shares some obvious similarities with psychoanalytic understandings of women and hysteria, where anger is re-inscribed as a symbol of women’s instability and pathology (Freud, 1910; Showalter, 1993). This has been taken up somewhat in the media following the false memory controversy, and the depiction of feminist activists as angry and vengeful, and for ‘spreading lies’ against men (Atmore, 1996).
However, the dearth of positive representations of ‘the angry survivor’ suggests that this emotion is reserved for intra-psychic pondering only (Orgad, 2009). For example, the portrayal of the ‘angry victim’ of sexual assault in popular films, such as Final Analysis (1992), and Monster (2003) dramatise survivor retaliation as an uncontrollable, vengeful spree. As Curtis-Webber (1995) suggests, these films ‘seek to control women’s speech by representing them as victims, but also as manipulative liars, and as aberrant, violent extremists, made monstrous, not so much by their experience of abuse, but by their determination to fight it’ (p. 43). It is this determination to fight that is absent from the discourse of survivorship, where anger and political vigour are positioned as futile, and displays of anger in survivors as ‘dangerous’ and ‘pathological’.

Following from the above point, Van Veslor and Cox (2001) also propose that survivors not only have difficulties ‘coping’ with their anger, they also struggle to use anger in advantageous ways: ‘As adults, survivors often fail to use their anger as an information channel identifying ‘danger’ and often prolong situations that are unhealthy for them’ (p. 619).

The ‘unhealthy’ situations that survivors prolong and endure are never explained. However, Van Veslor and Cox (2001) do note later in their study that the ‘focusing solely on women’s intra-psychic change in response to felt anger leaves unspoken the sociological changes that could be experienced by them’ (p. 619). In their clarification of this point, the authors effectively discount the existence of the feminist political movement, and instead use the absurd and remote example of how
‘social activism organised against toxic waste’ might ‘reclaim personal outrage at big business and government authorities’ (p.19). The careful omission of feminist activism in this discussion suggests that what remains ‘unspoken’ is the acknowledgment of the feminist movement, whereby the ‘accessing of personal power’ might be fostered into political action. In other studies, the position of feminism in the recovery movement is more rigorously scrutinised. For example, Newman & Peterson (1996) examined the correlation between survivor anger and ‘feminist’ consciousness or ‘identification with feminism’, and reported the following findings:

Anger at mothers (and fathers) was associated with one’s tendency to agree with feminist ideas. Identifying the causal effect here is impossible, but if nothing else…these results suggest that feminism may, at least in the short term, heighten women’s expression of anger. Indeed, it is legitimate and perhaps beneficial for survivors to be angry about specific individuals and occurrences, but highly generalised anger might well create problems elsewhere in their adult lives (pp. 471-472).

Psychological studies in this area, which share a number of similarities with the recovery movement, exclusively examine women’s anger in relation to the intrapsychic recovery process. As a result, ‘the internalisation’ or ‘suppression’ of anger is largely monitored by the therapeutic experiences rather than ‘channelled’ through socio-political avenues. From this perspective, recovery and survivorship is legitimate only if women assume a particular model of femininity, which excludes
anger, a feminist position, and an unwillingness to deal exclusively with the self (Lamb, 1999a; Orgad, 2009). As Shani Orgad (2009) suggests, the ‘identity framework’ is underpinned by the neoliberal project, which not only positions the survivor as a self-oriented, empowered agent, but ultimately ‘deflects the responsibility of larger sources beyond the self, and the liability of society at large’ (p. 151).

Not surprisingly, the survivors in this study rarely used the term ‘anger’ to describe their feelings of injustice surrounding their abuse, or sexual violence in general. At the same time, there were clear examples in the interviews where survivors revealed their frustration toward their perpetrator, particularly in instances where they felt powerless to prevent the possibility of further abuse. As Erin reveals in the following extract:

He now has a little girl and a little boy and I was in the car with Dad and I said ‘Maybe we should watch him. Maybe he hasn’t told his wife about the situation’ and Dad said ‘Oh, don’t worry about it, he’s fine’ and I said to Dad ‘You can’t be serious here. This is a concern. Maybe we should just watch the little girl and just see…’ He’s a good father and everything...don’t worry about it. It won’t happen again’. So he kind of just feels a bit blasé about it or maybe even though he was in the room when I gave the statement to the police officer—my Dad was—he just seemed to have viewed it as something small but…So I’ve been annoyed about that.
When anger was articulated by survivors, it was often turned inward. For example, Charlotte spoke about feeling ‘angry at (her)self’ for allowing her perpetrator to ‘affect (her) life now’:

And I get angry at myself because the man who abused me has moved away and I’m a bit like ‘Wow, you’re giving him so much power in your life now, even though he doesn’t really exist to you anymore. As an independent woman and a strong person you shouldn’t be giving him that kind of power, to affect your life now’. So then I felt not – I don’t want to say ‘guilty’…Yeah, upset at myself. Not even so much towards him but towards myself for allowing it to get to the point where it upsets me.

In many ways, the absence of ‘anger’ survivor narratives could reflect this shifting identity, which privileges the image of the stoic and empowered survivor. For example, studies investigating survivor anger also point to an overriding influence of the recovery movement in containing, and moulding, a particular survivor identity. As Sharon Lamb has argued, survivor anger is effectively ‘written out of the story’ and reframed as part of individual survivor dysfunction (1999a). From this perspective, psychological and therapeutic metaphors regarding the impact of abuse draw heavily on both survivor and gender discourses, which delimit the emotions that women are able to express following trauma. Specifically, anger is positioned as a negative outcome of abuse because it does not align itself well with the model of the ‘together’, ‘harmonious’ individual that the survivor is encouraged to project. At
the same time, the recovery movement, and psychological discourse surrounding abuse victim, delimit the emotions that women are able to express following trauma.

**The recovery movement and the making of the ‘wounded identity’**

Clearly, the recovery movement has had some important impacts on the construction of survivor identity. I want to emphasise here that the influence of this therapeutic turn has not been wholly negative. On the contrary, the spreading public empathy and support which have accompanied this movement, along with the increased cultural awareness, have been integral to the acknowledgement of child sexual abuse as ‘a problem’. At the same time, I remain unconvinced that it has contributed to increased understanding of child sexual abuse as a cultural problem, and one worthy of political discourse and action. Indeed, the increased classification of ‘the survivor’ as an individual, transformed by disclosure and yet responsible for their own recovery, suggests that the movement has been most effective in turning ‘the problem’ of child sexual abuse back on survivors themselves.

Wendy Brown’s (1993, 1995) notion of ‘wounded attachments’ becomes increasingly relevant to the survivor identity transformed by the recovery movement, particularly in relation to the waning political standpoint of this group. Drawing on Foucault’s understanding of disciplinary power, Brown argues that identities formed by a ‘codification of injury and powerlessness’ will inevitably fail in their pursuit of political action (p. 27). For Brown (1995), this is because members of a group inevitably lean on their own suffering in order to substantiate their identity within this group (p. 406). Following from Nietzsche’s notion of ressentiment, Brown
(1995) argues that the continual focus on the ‘logics of pain’ to establish an identity platform eventually becomes infused with the identity itself, and is thus ‘more likely to punish or reproach than to find venues of self-affirming action’ (p. 71). Supporting Nietzsche’s proposal ‘of the triumph of the weak as weak’, Brown’s work suggests that ‘wounded attachment’ constructs a particular, self-centred identity which fails to get beyond its injurious self (p. 66).

Brown’s critique can be applied to the existing and potential failings of survivor politicisation, and specifically to the survivor recovery moment, where the ‘need to heal’ not only determines individual subject positions within this discourse, but also overrides survivor collective identity. To overcome this predicament, Brown advocates that members cease defining themselves in relation to ‘what they are’, and replace the permanence of this position with the language of what they want. This involves a re-focusing on an identity that begins to address the desires of survivors rather than address the continued powerlessness of this identity (1995, p. 407). More simply, Brown argues that victims who make demands for social justice, for what they want rather than what they are, will eventually cease to be defined by their wounded identity. In the context of survivors of child sexual abuse, this would mean taking up a social position and ‘learning to speak’ of a political agenda against sexual violence in a way that begins to address the voice and agency of survivors. Clearly, this is not an easy proposition. However, as I address in Chapter Seven, there may be some benefit in renouncing some of the ‘woundedness’ which has attached itself to this identity over the past three decades.
On claiming ‘truth’ and taking up a feminist position

In many ways, the beginnings of the recovery movement and the rise in survivors’ televised disclosure are not completely divorced from feminist understandings of the testimonial. Indeed, while the influence of the testimonial has been compromised by the rise of the ‘testimonial culture’, most blatantly represented in the autobiographical turn of popular talk-show mediums, the feminist origins of ‘speaking out’ about sexual violence suggest that it is an evocative medium for circulating the stories of patriarchal domination (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001). From this perspective, women’s testimonials, particularly when it depicts images of their victimisation by a male perpetrator, occupies a very powerful position in feminist political praxis. As Lynne Pearce suggests, while trauma is often positioned as ‘that which cannot be spoken’, the rise of ‘testimonial culture’ also ‘speaks to’ the sense of disempowerment in contemporary western society (Pearce, 2004).

At the same time, as Janice Haaken suggests, women’s trauma narratives have come to represent a ‘unifying vehicle’ for the collective expression of women’s feelings of disempowerment in patriarchal culture:

Within feminism, trauma stories have become a unifying vehicle of expressing female disturbances within a narrative that wards off exploration of potentially deunifying differences…The trauma story anoints the survivor with a heroic status –as the bearer of unspeakable truths. (p. 1083)

Although feminism has employed the testimonial in an effort to re-present the speaking subject and to expose the political foundations which contribute to
women’s oppression, the perceived ‘failure’ of the feminist movement to bring about meaningful social change has been debated in a number of recent forums (Bolen, 2001). Thus, while the child sexual abuse movement began as a unifying feminist agenda against patriarchal power, this outlook was soon muddied by the recovery movement and particularly by the wider social unease that became ‘speaking out’ about abuse. It was no longer seen as a political topic but rather as an individual pathology or a psychiatric issue, reserved for the therapeutic arena. As Charlotte suggests in the excerpt below, the topic of sexual abuse is not something that people ‘get into a debate about’ because ‘people react very strongly about it’:

But sexual abuse is not something that people can talk about in general conversations. You know how people get in debates with each other or whatever. I’m friends with a lot of people at uni and we’ll often be at parties together and we often get into big philosophical debates…and I think that it would be helpful if I could turn around and say ‘Well actually as a victim, I don’t really feel that that’s right’. But I wouldn’t do that. Not because I feel any shame or not because I care about whether or not they know, but because I don’t want to dampen the mood. I think that people react very strongly and it’s not something you can bring up.

**Survivor retreat in the advent of the false memory debate**

While the recovery movement has undoubtedly had a lasting impact on survivor discourse, the controversy surrounding ‘False Memory Syndrome’ (FMS) has also placed limits on the types of stories which have been told in this arena. The FMS
storm, emerging in the early 1990s, also led to some important theorisations regarding ‘memory’ and ‘truth’ on the legal and political standpoint of child sexual abuse survivors (Lamb, 1999a). This increasing scepticism surrounding child sexual abuse was no doubt led by the media, and the resulting headlines surrounding the false memory debate served to quieten the public voice of survivors, as well as activism in the area. From this perspective, the ‘speaking out’ about ‘woundedness’ and the ‘journey toward healing the self’ may have more to do with what types of survivor stories have been privileged as ‘truth’ over others.

In recent years, a number of feminist theorists have also commented that the false-memory debate has operated to ‘de-legitimise’ women’s stories, even when accounts have been substantiated with other evidence and criminal convictions (Contratto & Gutfreund, 1996, p. 2). As Janice Haaken has argued, while the sexual abuse recovery movement has placed greater value on women’s ‘storytelling rights’, controversy over the ‘truth’ and ‘accuracy’ of memories has shifted the emphasis to details regarding the ‘facticity’ of the trauma they endured (p. 57). Ultimately, the memory wars and emerging controversy regarding the ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ of child sexual abuse memories deconstructed the potency of women’s testimonial by calling to question the integrity of their stories (Haaken, 1998, p. 57). The uncertainty concerning the authenticity of memory resounds in survivor narratives, not only because it compromises the legality of their experiences, but because it presents itself as yet another cultural defence to the existence of child sexual abuse. For example, rather than position their experiences within the realm of ‘truth’, and as testimony to their ‘knowing’ injustice, a number of participants in this study recalled a history of
doubting their memories of abuse. For example, while Kristy experienced flashbacks about the abuse, the ‘truth’ ‘that it happened’ was only realised when it was substantiated by external sources:

I had flashbacks and I kept remembering these things and because I knew I had been to court when I was younger but had completely forgotten about it and then suddenly I’m having these flashbacks. So it was helpful (speaking to a therapist) because I could talk about it because before that I’d been really confused, working out what had happened and she said ‘I’ve spoken to your Mum and yes, this did happen’ and I just blurted out ‘Could that really have happened?’ and she goes ‘Of course it could have’. We did stuff like we read the court report—the statement—so that was helpful, just to bring it all in line.

In the above extract, Kristy presents two very different processes of memory. The first, represented in her recurrent flashback, corresponds to her own internal, or intrapsychic remembering. However, the other process of remembering, and the pathway to ‘truth’ that brought ‘it all into line’, represents the corroboration of memory from an external source, including the memory of a court hearing. Kristy’s sequence of remembering in the above excerpt suggests memory is rarely experienced as ‘a fixed entity’, but is instead mediated by a number of sources. However, the way in which Kristy ‘remembers’ what happened is central here, as it underlines the newfound importance of women providing a framework of ‘truths’ in their accounts of abuse.
Another participant, Eliza, spoke about her early anxiety surrounding the lapses in her memory and, while she was reassured that it was ‘normal’ to have difficulty remembering, she remains convinced that her memory is caught up with the ‘answers’:

I went through this whole stage, I was just like ‘Maybe it didn’t happen’ and kind of freaked out about it because I couldn’t remember things properly. I’ve only really got two strong memories and that kind of freaked me out so it was helpful to talk to the university counsellor and for them to go ‘Yeah, no, that’s okay, that’s normal’ and all that sort of stuff. And for me to be okay with those lapses and I’m still a bit worried because Mum often says to me ‘We have to sit down and have a talk about it because I’ve got questions to ask you’ and I’m always like ‘Yep, that’s cool’, but I’m worried about the question that she’s going to ask—I don’t know if I have the answers for her. I don’t know what she wants from me and I don’t know if I’m going to be able to give her what she wants and that kind of worries me because I feel like she needs some kind of closure and I don’t know if I’m the person who can provide it for her.

In the above two excerpts, narratives of remembering and forgetting are caught up with not just their own, but wider cultural anxieties surrounding ‘truth’ and women’s stories. As Sara Scott (1997) has argued, the ‘discourse of disbelief’ generated by the false memory debate has also operated to destabilise survivor assertions about their own accounts.
In many ways, the emphasis on the ‘authenticity’ and ‘truth’ of women’s stories has not only impacted the ways in which survivors remember ‘what happened’, but ‘what happened’ now occupies an overriding position in women’s abuse narratives. Ultimately, the dominance of this motif in recent years has functioned in a way that denies survivors their own narrative structure and authorship. In this way, ‘fitting the label’ of the ‘victim’ may also disallow young women appropriate avenues in which to ‘speak out’ about the injustice they feel. The pervasiveness of narratives surrounding ‘truth’ may also have significant implications for survivors, who may feel delimited by the types of experiences that they can disclose about their abuse experiences in both private and private contexts (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011).

**Conclusion**

Clearly, the recovery movement, with its emphasis on individual and intra-psychic healing, has operated to shift survivor discourse away from its feminist political beginnings. As I have argued in this chapter, the focus on ‘healing’ the harm of abuse using a language of self-empowerment inevitably reiterates the notion that change can be achieved by eliminating individual difference. However, following from Wendy Brown’s work, in advocating a ‘wounded’ identity the recovery movement not only resigns survivors to a uniquely dis-empowered position, it also fails to address the wider social and political factors that might be aiding their victimisation. For the survivors in this study, the prominence of this ‘wounded’ perspective influenced the subject positions available for them to take up. Most often, their disclosure of abuse inevitably got caught up in empathic and pseudo-
therapeutic dialogue. For example, survivor experiences of disclosure, as well as reactions from others, tended to reinforce the belief that they were ‘fragile’ or ‘could not function’ in the world.

On another level, the recovery movement has also contributed to the construction of a particular modality of ‘survivorship’. For example, the self-help rhetoric and ‘expert’ advice that has emerged from this movement advocates a largely apolitical process of healing, void of ‘unnecessary anger’ and behaviours which are deemed beyond the individual. The focusing on intra-psychic healing, along with the model of the ‘harmonious’, ‘together’ survivor, has undoubtedly placed limits on the ways that survivors process emotions surrounding their abuse experience. Indeed, the ‘responsibility of healing’ was a key theme in survivor interviews. As Charlotte revealed, the failure to overcome negative emotions associated with abuse was often met with feelings of self-blame. More broadly, survivors in this study felt some pressure to collate with a particular ‘story’ of abuse. Not surprisingly, following the controversy of ‘false memory syndrome’, this story was likely to include their anxieties about the ‘truth’ surrounding their abuse, a theme which has undoubtedly impacted the shape of the survivor testimonial.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Coming out and up against the heterosexual matrix: Queering a space for alternative sexual subjectivities for female survivors

A great deal of my discussion has focused on psychological and therapeutic appropriations of ‘Normal’ in research surrounding survivor sexual function and identity. Chapter Four, which exclusively examined heterosexual, non-abused, women’s accounts, did not illuminate a one-faceted, stable account of femininity and sexual subjectivity. On the contrary, while there were some points at which young women’s experiences intersected, the complexity revealed in their accounts suggest a multiplicity of discursive possibilities for heterosex. Furthermore, it was evident that heterosexual young women were both restrained by and demonstrated resistance to dominant discourses of heterosexuality, and through these ‘dual processes (were) actively taking up as (their) own the terms of subjection’ (B Davies, et al., 2006, p.92).

The complexity of young women’s (hetero)sexual experience not only points to the danger of alluding to a ‘normal’ femininity, their accounts also reflect the absence of more empowering sexual scripts in psychological and popular discourses that comprise ‘healthy sexual expression’. Given the particular heteronormative stance in psychological accounts, the emphasis on ‘normal feminine sexuality’ has also meant that sexual identities perceived to be ‘perverse’ or ‘other’—such as lesbian, bisexual and queer—are underrepresented in the research overall.
While Chapter Four examined how heterosexual, non-abused women’s experiences challenged psychological accounts of ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ feminine sexual subjectivity, this chapter asks how lesbian and queer survivor experiences challenge psychological accounts of ‘abnormal’ and/or ‘unhealthy’ sexual subjectivity. In doing so, it aims to reveal how psychology locates particular identities as ‘healthy subject positions’ and demarcates others as ‘outside’ this range (Riggs, 2005; Stainton Rogers, 1991). Indeed, as my review suggests, there has been very little research surrounding lesbian and queer women that extend beyond the ‘lesbian as problem’ model. Further to this, clinical and popular assumptions surrounding lesbian and queer survivors not only suggest that an abuse history can explain ‘arising’ sexuality; it is most often positioned as a ‘symptomatology’ or a ‘negative outcome’.

Drawing on interviews with two lesbian survivors and one queer survivor, this chapter suggests that women may diverge in distinct ways when commenting on their adult sexual subjectivity and on their pathways to sexual pleasure in adulthood. The narratives from the above participants were selected because all three women self-identified as both survivors of child sexual abuse and as members of the LBQT community.

**The making of the ‘lesbian as problem’: Psychological accounts of lesbian difference**

The lack of positive representation of lesbian, bisexual and queer identities is particularly evident when we examine how these groups have been broadly
positioned in psychological research over the past 40 years. As Laura Brown has argued, the ‘non-conscious’ heterosexism in psychology presents lesbian experiences ‘as an interesting variant of human experience, equal but still separate and always marginal’ (1989, p. 447-448). Lesbian, bisexual and queer women, like the survivor sample, are generally compared to heterosexual women either to demonstrate their pathology, or to draw attention to points of deviation or fracture which may have led to ‘difference.’ For example, a number of studies lean on scientific discourse in order to prescribe an ‘authentic’ genetic origin of homosexuality, using the reference of ‘normal’ heterosexual identity as a benchmark. As Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins (1993) suggest, psychology’s position as a ‘scientific’ and value-free discipline has not only operated to reify normative (heterosexual) approaches, it has also ensured the ‘individualisation’, and ‘pathologisation’ of political issues for lesbians and women (p. 5-6).

However, paralleling the trauma studies framework, there is also an emphasis on mapping individual outcomes of difference, with little attention afforded to the impact of societal oppression and the construction of sexuality in psy-discourses (see L. Hillier, Edwards, & Riggs, 2008). Indeed, psychological and scientific research continues to position non-heterosexual identities within the realm of the ‘Lesbian as Problem’ model. For example, a recent article by Lee and Crawford (2007) suggests that a significant proportion of research surrounding lesbian women can be located within a ‘problem framework’—including mental health, therapeutic issues, Sex/STIs and Alcohol/Drug abuse (p. 122).
In more recent years, feminist psychology has begun to underline some specific mental and physical health concerns for lesbians (as well as gay men). While much of this research employs a heterosexual comparison group, researchers in this field remain more concerned with the dangers in subsuming lesbian physical and mental health issues within mainstream women’s health research (Terry, 1999). Research in this area draws attention to the ‘different’ health needs of lesbians, which include their experience of discrimination, but also the higher rates of alcohol and drug use and sexually ‘risky’ behaviour.

There has been some disquiet regarding the reporting of mental health findings which concern the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) population. As Hiller, Edwards and Riggs (2008) suggest, while there are clear advantages surrounding the dissemination of LGBT mental health statistics, these findings are also likely to add to the pathologisation and marginalisation of the community (p. 65). Furthermore, they suggest that while quantitative research seeks to magnify difference when reporting risk, there is a dearth of research examining positive differences specific to the LGBT community. The absence of positive representations is perhaps a reflection of current social conditioning. As Hillier and Harrison (2004) concluded in their study, there were ‘no positive discourses’ in participant stories to suggest that same-sex attraction is ‘good, healthy and/or natural’ (p. 91). Rather, positive (and ‘normal’) positions were likely to be created by same-sex attracted people themselves, and often through avenues of resistance (p. 88).
One lesbian survivor, Vivian, spoke about the lack of representation of lesbian participants in studies in general, and the tendency of the research to overlook ‘complex’ and ‘complicated’ aspects of lesbian sexuality:

Sometimes I don’t feel particularly represented, those studies and things that come out, and I think: ‘Well I don’t know that that necessarily represents me or my experience. ‘Actually sometimes I’m surprised when I guess lesbians are mentioned in things but, yes I think often I feel like ‘Oh, that’s not really directed at someone like me’ but then I have all kinds of other thoughts around sexuality. I mean for me, it’s complex and complicated and things are always simplified. It’s nice I think, if there’s an opportunity for someone to get to know maybe a more three-dimensional view of someone’s sexuality and their experience sexually rather than like you know, ‘I am a lesbian’, because it’s maybe not as black and white as it seems.

Christina Lee (1998) has argued that lesbian health concerns tend to be ‘qualitatively’ different to heterosexual women due to specific experiences of sexism, heterosexism and homophobia (pp. 161-162). In a recent article commenting on lesbian health, Julie Fish (2009) suggested that the challenge for feminist psychology is the presentation of adequate explanations for lesbian psychological and physical health difference, which consider the social, political and cultural context of heterosexism. For Fish (2009), the prominent health framework used in quantitative studies encapsulates lesbian difference in terms of ‘risk’ and ‘healthy behaviours’, and these inadvertently reinscribe pathology:
A research agenda based on differences has the potential to be associated with the historical pathologization of lesbians in the classification of lesbianism as a mental disorder in the DSM and with biomedical approaches that emphasized biological or hormonal deficiencies. (p. 447)

This includes lesbian health perspectives, which often homogenise lesbian experiences while at the same time excluding minority ethnic and other groups from health perspectives (Fine & Addelston, 1996). From this perspective, it is not enough to underline ‘difference’ in the mental and physical health of lesbians without considering the homophobic context in which adverse outcomes emerge. This should also include a more critical examination of the ways that psy-discourse might contribute to the marginalisation of lesbian, bisexual and queer women in their own research agendas.

Yet, the positioning of sexual identity as ‘biological’ or ‘genetic’ has a long history in psychological, as well as scientific and medical, discourse. Predominately, innate difference has been used to support accounts of ‘homosexual’ deviance and moral deficiency (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2009, p. 12). For example, medical as well as Freudian theory emphasised gender incongruence through concepts such as ‘sexual inversion’, which positioned lesbian behaviour as masculine and dysfunctional. Freud’s (1925 [1963]) suggestion that homosexuality was an indication of ‘arrested development’, was also taken up in pseudo-therapeutic practice as a means to describe lesbians’ ‘incomplete’ or ‘immature’ desire (Phelan, 1994, p. 48).
In the 1980s, a significant shift in theorisations surrounding ‘innate’ homosexuality was endorsed by the gay affirmative movement, which aimed to deflect homosexual theories of deviance. Notably, the research initiative adopted during this time was primarily concerned with proving that lesbians and gay men were ‘normal’, and ‘natural’, like heterosexuals. For gay-affirmative advocates, the perception that lesbians and gay men were ‘born with’ and ‘did not choose’ their sexual preference offered an alternative ‘positive’ way for lesbians and gay men to perceive their sexual subjectivity.

**Challenging ‘heteronormativity’: Queer theory’s retort**

In more recent years, the emerging theoretical terrain broadly referred to as ‘queer theory’ has offered a critique of psychological and popular discourse, particularly in regard the notion surrounding the ‘normal’ and ‘authentic’ (hetero)sexuality. Originally described by Michael Warner (1993), ‘heteronormativity’ refers to contemporary practices, beliefs and expectations which assume heterosexuality to be not only ‘normal’, but also demanded as the ‘ideal’ in society (see L. Berlant & Warner, 1998). At present, ‘heteronormativity’ represents a wider examination of the expectations and constraints posed by the heterosexual regime and, more importantly to queer theorists, ‘its long-standing interpretation of everything other-to-itself as a perverted desire for the same’ (Wiegman, 2006, p. 9, emphasis in original).

Early critiques of heterosexuality arose from lesbian feminist theorists, such as Adrienne Rich (1980), who argued that ‘heterosexuality need(ed) to be recognised
and studied as a political institution’ which perpetuated gender inequality and women’s sexual, economic and creative subordination (pp. 637-639). Rich’s thesis, which was largely founded on a radical feminist position, represented the theoretical beginnings of ‘heteronormativity’, a fundamental concept in academic queer discourse. During this time, material feminist Monique Wittig (1981) also drew attention to the regime of heterosexuality, which she argued was responsible for the construction of the ‘naturalised’ identities of man and woman. Wittig (1981) argued that the ‘appropriated consciousness’ of ‘woman’ was an ‘imaginary formation’, which was more a product of historical and social forces than testimony to an ‘essential’ or ‘female nature’:

Our first task, it seems, is to always thoroughly dissociate ‘women’ (the class within which we fight) and ‘woman’, the myth. For ‘woman’ does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while ‘women’ is the product of a social relationship. (pp. 50-51)

Wittig argued that because lesbian identity exists beyond the male/female dyad it also represents a freedom from the political economy of heterosexuality. Recognising that there is no position ‘outside’ heterosexuality, Wittig’s assertion that ‘lesbians are not women’ underlined the necessity for lesbians and gay men to renounce their collaboration in the political categories set forth by heterosexuality: ‘If we, as lesbians and gay men, continue to speak of ourselves and to conceive of ourselves as men and women, we are influential in explaining heterosexuality’ (1982, p. 52). Most importantly, by situating ‘gender trouble’ and threat in this
defiant identity, Wittig also demonstrated how the very presence of the ‘other’ could disrupt the organisation of the heterosexual project.

**Queering a space for alternative, sexual subjectivities for female survivors**

The discontinuity of the subject presented by Wittig, and later by Judith Butler, drew attention to the importance of ‘sexual outlaws’ as agents of social change. The earliest examples of ‘queer theory’ challenged the binary of the hetero/homosexual divide, arguing that the presence of the ‘homosexual’ as a deviant sexual identity was instrumental in maintaining the sexual order (Warner, 1991, p. 5). As Teresa de Lauretis (1991) explained:

> Homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined...it is no longer to be seen as transgressive and deviant vis-á-vis a proper, natural sexuality according to the older, pathological model. (p. iii)

Thus, queer theory arose as a form of ‘resistance to cultural homogenization’, where the presence of unstable and fluid sexual ‘non-identities’ could transgress problematise heteronormative foundations (de Lauretis, 1991). In one of the landmark texts in queer theory, Diane Fuss (1991), drawing on Foucault, underlined the antagonism between the hetero/homosexual divide and the ways that deviant sexualities are demarcated ‘outside’ visibility and dominant discourse. At the same time, Fuss acknowledged that the presence of the border between inside/outside meant that individuals could never truly be ‘out’, or outside, heterosexuality (also see Seidman, 1996, p. 200). Rather, as Fuss (1991) argued, each of the terms relies on
the other for its meaning, where ‘transgression of the border is necessary to constitute the border itself’ (p. 3).

As I will reveal, queer theory has been instrumental in destabilising attempts to establish an ‘authentic’ ‘homosexual’ identity. Following a poststructuralist framework and the centrality of the discursive construction of identity, queer theory has strongly argued against the representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans individuals as generated by ‘genetics’, ‘family background’ or ‘unresolved psychological issues’ (de Lauretis, 1991; M. Warner, 1993). Foremost, queer theory has challenged the existence of the stable subject by underlining the ways that identity is made and remade in diverse contexts.

**Harmful sexualities: Theorisations of lesbian sexuality and child sexual abuse in psychological discourse**

‘Homosexuality’ has been traditionally described by psychological researchers as a pathological outcome of sexual abuse and as a ‘sexual disturbance’, until relatively recently (Beitchman, et al., 1992). The emphasis of this research continues to be the reporting of elevated levels of child sexual abuse in lesbian women, and theorising the ‘plausible assumptions’—in terms of causality—of the relationship between the two.

For example, there are significant studies and large sections reserved in therapeutic texts which suggest that child sexual abuse might have an impact on women’s sexual identity formation (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Hughes, Haas, Razzano, Cassidy, & Matthews, 2000; Lechner, Vogel, Garcia-Shelton, Leichter, &
Steibel, 1993; Matthews, Hughes, & Tartaro, 2005; Morris & Balsam, 2003). Such studies propose that there is ‘evidence’ to suggest that child sexual abuse ‘may predispose victims to later homosexuality or gender identity disturbance’ (Beitchman, et al., 1992, p. 540). While homophobia is often implicit in this research area, studies continue to underline higher rates of child sexual abuse among lesbians, or suggest that early sexual experiences may lead to a ‘chronic confusion about sexual identity’ (Gonsiorek, 1988, p. 116). Notably, the literature overwhelmingly positions lesbian sexuality as a ‘bad’ outcome in terms of the long-term sequelae of child sexual abuse. Where this negative correlation is not explicit, studies draw connections between child sexual abuse and lesbian sexual identity as indicating ‘poor outcomes’, such as higher rates of alcohol abuse (J. M. Hall, 1996; Hughes, Johnson, & Wilsnack, 2001), depression (Hughes, Johnson, Wilsnack, & Szalacha, 2007) and obesity (Aaron & Hughes, 2007). Not surprisingly, few studies in this area offer a discussion of ‘risk’ that move beyond the ‘cataloguing of consequences’ (Kendall-Tackett, 2005, p. 253).

In the second, less comprehensive area of research, lesbians and gay men are positioned as more ‘at risk’ to abuse than heterosexuals. For example, Balsam (2005) suggests that a survivors’ early awareness of same-sex attraction might lead to ‘acting out’ and ‘risky’ behaviours that could make them more vulnerable to abuse: ‘For girls, early awareness of same-sex feelings may lead to acting out behaviors that could increase risk of sexual victimization by predatory men’ (p. 484).
Similarly, Corliss et al. (2002) suggest that lesbian identity might contribute to an increase in risk of sexual violence in adolescence, due to stigma related to sexual orientation, drug and alcohol abuse and gender nonconformity. For the researchers, ‘children who grow up to establish a minority sexual orientation in adulthood may be proportionally more likely to display gender atypical behaviors during childhood, which could place them at risk for maltreatment’ (p. 1175). From this perspective, lesbian, bisexual and queer survivors are positioned as ‘doubly risky’, rather than doubly at risk; where the probability of child sexual abuse is elevated because their sexual orientation and outward display of ‘premature sexual desires’.

**Impossible to heal? Survivorship outside the bounds of the heterosexual matrix**

While there has been an increased discussion in feminist literature regarding the need to address lesbian health concerns, there is a dearth of research that addresses positive outcomes for lesbian and queer survivors. In many ways, the tendency of the literature to focus on lesbian sexuality or same-sex sexual preference as a negative outcome of abuse for survivors reifies heteronormative ideals regarding ‘healthy’ subjects that have long informed the psychology and sexology fields. From this perspective, the elevated levels of child sexual abuse among lesbian and bisexual women are positioned as a defiant end for women who have struggled to achieve a ‘normal’ heterosexuality. For example, the ‘outcome’ of lesbian sexuality for survivors reflects survivor inability to regain trust and safety in a male sexual partner. Given that heterosexuality is always already positioned as the default identity, childhood trauma experiences are often theorised as a point of divergence.
from an otherwise healthy pathway to heterosexuality. For example, while the focus of attention continues to be the difficulty of heterosexual survivors to ‘heal from’, ‘reclaim’ and ‘restore’ their heterosexual desire in adulthood (J. Kitzinger, 1992), lesbian identity for survivors has come to stand for an impossibility to heal. Subsequently, lesbian and bisexual survivors of child sexual abuse are not viewed as agents, but as inevitably ‘damaged’ by their abuse history. As Lindsay O’Dell (2003b) has argued, the ‘abuse’ is constructed as the ‘source’ of sexual identity, rather than as a natural, inevitable process or a positive, deliberate choice (p. 141).

However, the positioning of lesbian and bisexual identity as a negative outcome continues to be informed by broader perspectives concerning non-normative sexuality in psychological research. For example, lesbian, bisexual and queer survivor sexual identities are positioned as particularly harmful because they appear to permanently impact survivors’ ability to participate in heterosexuality and endorse appropriate modes of femininity. As Eve Sedgwick (1990) has argued, biological and scientific accounts of homosexuality continue to describe lesbians as ‘deficient’, or ‘imbalanced’ in comparison to heterosexual norms. Indeed, while the removal of homosexuality from the DSM is often cited as pivotal in the reconceptualisation of lesbian identity, non-heterosexual sexuality is rarely, if ever, positioned as a positive model in scientific psychological research. Rather, research involving lesbian and bisexual women continues to employ a control group of heterosexual women to gauge the extent to which lesbian and bisexual women adhere to benchmarks of ‘normal’ mental health and femininity (C. Kitzinger, 2001, p. 278). As Laura Brown (1989) explains:
There are ‘women’, and then there are ‘lesbians’ tucked away in our own chapters of textbooks…Lesbian experiences are seen as unique, offering little to the understanding of the norm. What occurs instead is that we are compared to the norm, in the past to demonstrate our pathology and, more recently, to affirm our normalcy. Or we are simply categorised as an interesting variant of human experience, equal but still separate and always marginal. (pp. 447–448)

While there has been a gradual decrease in research which focuses on the ‘causes’ and ‘negative impacts’ of homosexuality, this shift follows changes to the social positioning of lesbians and gay men as a result of broader political rights campaigns (C. Kitzinger, 2001; I. Lee & Crawford, 2007). As Celia Kitzinger (1987) has argued, much of the psychological, or ‘gay-affirmative’ research generated in the 1980s and 1990s emphasised the personal and private identities of lesbians and the importance of integration into heterosexuality, rather than the political identity of lesbians.

More recently, political and social movements demanding the ‘equal rights’ of homosexual citizens suggest a significant shift in the position of lesbian and gay men, who are increasingly rallying against their marginal position as unequal to the ‘good heterosexual citizen’ (Richardson, 2004, p. 395). Indeed, while lesbian sexuality is often perceived as less threatening, gay and lesbian sexual practices continue to be reviled in mainstream social structures as ‘bad', 'abnormal', or 'unnatural' (Rubin, 1984, p. 152). As Michael Warner (2000) has argued, political ‘equality’ movements which insist on the acceptance of lesbian and gay men as
‘normal’ and ‘ordinary’ have inevitably served to quieten representations of gay and lesbian sex practices. For example, in minimising ‘difference’, this political movement encourages the dissolve of those ‘homosexual’ sexual behaviours considered outside the bounds of ‘normal’ domestic settings (Cooper, 2006). Similarly, for Binnie and Bell (2000), pathways toward sexual citizenship are ultimately marked by ‘compromise’, where homosexual identity is increasing ‘privatized, deradicalized and deeroticized’. In effect, lesbians and gay men are persuaded to take up a more de-sexualised position in the cultural landscape, as Richardson (2005) suggests:

Lesbians and gay men were previously constrained by representation of themselves as mad, bad or sad; now they are being shaped through normative constructions of responsible and respectable sexual citizenship. (p. 130)

It has also been argued that the progression toward homosexual ‘acceptance’ (or ‘assimilation’) has not only shifted the emphasis away from the political needs of lesbians, it has also coincided with a move away from research addressing lesbian, bisexual and queer sexual practice as positive difference. Indeed, the current lack of non-heterosexual experiences in psychological versions of ‘healthy’ women’s sexuality suggest an exclusion, rather than assimilation, of lesbian sexual subjectivities in the research terrain (D'Emilio, 2000). As Stewart-MacBride Smith (2007) argues, research and practice often fail to incorporate lesbian, bisexual and queer women’s own viewpoints on health and ‘healthy’ sexuality. This position is reflected in the psychological and therapeutic literature, which often examines the
correlations between lesbian survivors and ‘risky practices’ without considering the complexities that might be revealed in qualitative research (C. Lee, 1998).

Traumatic connections: Lesbian and queer sexual subjectivities

The coupling of homosexual identity with sexual trauma and victimisation in psychological, psychiatric, and popular discourse has made it difficult for lesbian, queer and bisexual survivors to take up more empowering positions. To date, while there have been few qualitative studies in the area, the connection between child sexual abuse and lesbian identity as an indicator of harm remains a recurrent theme. For example, Butke (1995) found that the lesbian survivors in her study were often concerned that their history of abuse and sexual identity would become negatively associated in people’s minds:

One woman stated that when others found out about her abuse history, a comment would often follow that suggested that she was a lesbian because of her sexual abuse experience. She understood this as a causal link that suggested that if she had not been ‘damaged’ by the abuse she would be heterosexual and therefore ‘normal’. (p. 243)

As shown in the excerpt above, the positioning of lesbian sexual identity as an indication that their abuse had somehow ‘ruined’ their access to ‘normal’ development, it also leans on particular pathways to healing. As Jenny Kitzinger (1992) suggests, heterosexuality is not only positioned in psychological discourse as the only ‘healthy’ sexuality for survivors, it is also integral to their ‘restoration’ back to heterosexuality (p. 414).
However, the perception that lesbians have a history of abuse or sexual violence is also supported in popular discourse. For example, one participant in this study, Alix, suggested that her ‘friends (were) gay…because they have been mistreated by men’:

Half my friends are gay because…well, I think it has a lot to do with it—have been mistreated sexually by men and whatever happens in there, they don’t like men anymore—sexually and 99% of my gay friends that’s happened to. I think I’ve got two out of all of them that haven’t had anything dodgy in that way happen to them. They were just born that way. Yeah, so it’s interesting how it plays out and how it plays out in your relationships. Like if any sexual wrongdoing is done young, how it plays out in your relationships in the future – how it never really goes away…And your sexuality as well…it’s so disgusting and ruining someone’s whole life—like I’d rather you kill me, as a kid, kill me than burden me my whole life and my sexuality’s totally fucked up and I’m not saying if you’re a lesbian it’s fucked up at all—I think it’s excellent—whatever.

In her text, An Archive of Feelings (2003), Ann Cvetkovich explores the difficult and stigmatised relationship that exists between lesbian public cultures and child sexual abuse. For Cvetkovich, sexual abuse has traditionally been linked to queer communities in ways that signal ‘harm’, were lesbian sexuality has been ‘caused by the abuse’ and where women need to be ‘healed’. This notion is reaffirmed in popular discourse where sexual trauma is situated as an ‘interruption of heterosexual identity’ (Noble, 2006, p. 73). Cvetkovich cites examples to demonstrate how the connection between survivorship and queerness has been disavowed in lesbian and
gay communities. Most significant for Cvetkovich is the lack of discussion afforded by the lesbian authors of The Courage to Heal (1988), Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, whose comments ‘on being a lesbian and a survivor’ fail to engage in a dialogue beyond lesbianism as ‘a problem’. Reviewing the section in question, Cvetkovich’s argument becomes glaringly obvious. Bass and Davis’s use of defamatory statements such as ‘You’re a dyke because daddy did this to you’ in their excerpts taken from survivor narratives tend to disallow, rather than present an understanding of, lesbian sexuality as a positive outcome. As Cvetkovich (2003) explains: ‘But why can’t saying that ‘sexual abuse causes homosexuality’ just as easily be based on the assumption that there’s something right, rather than something wrong, with being lesbian or gay?’ (p. 90).

Cvetkovich (2003) draws a line between lesbian identity and sexual trauma, however she also uses the term queer to signify ‘the unpredictable connections between sexual abuse and its effects, to name a connection while refusing determination or causality’ (p. 90). As I return to later in this chapter, it is when this association is actively taken up by queer women, that the ‘productive’ and ‘dense connections’ between the two terms can yield subversive qualities and reformulate simple connections made between past (trauma) and present (sexuality).

The lesbian and queer survivors in this study often complicated the relationship between their sexual identity and childhood sexual trauma. On one level, the young lesbian and queer survivors in this study were active in delinking associations between child sexual abuse and lesbian sexual identity. Significantly, the following
narratives from lesbian and queer survivors suggest that the only way to deflect the ‘damaged’ identity is to deny the influence of child sexual abuse altogether.

One survivor, Kristy, who identified as a lesbian, explained that she had often been made to question her sexual preference after friends alerted her of the possible connection:

Sometimes it takes someone else to alert me because a lot of my friends are aware of the situation…but I don’t think it’s really influenced me that much. I mean, sometimes I wonder if I’m gay because of it but then think I had, even before I appreciated that I’d been sexually abused—even before I appreciated it was wrong, I had gay urges so that kind of makes me think it’s not as a direct result or anything...Maybe there are some people who are traumatised by it and they say look for the same-sex relationships but I think there might be nothing to it. Either way, I’m gay. I don’t know how it happened, but it happened.

Although Kristy points to the importance of ‘gay urges’ when she was younger, the above excerpt also suggests that the ‘source’ of her sexual identity has generated some scrutiny from those around her. Further, there is some emphasis in her narrative that her sexual identity was not a ‘direct result’ of her child sexual abuse, but rather a destined, innate component of her identity. While I do not wish to dispute the very individual ways in which lesbian, queer and bisexual women conceive their identity, whether it be formulated as a positive choice or envisioned as an innate part of the self, the emphasis on biological or genetic routes to explain
sexual desire may take on particular meaning for survivors of abuse. Kristy’s positioning of her lesbian sexuality as ‘biological’ or ‘genetic’ also allowed her to adopt a more powerful position in relation to her sexual subjectivity. Specifically, by advocating a sexuality that is always already formed, Kristy is able to construct a schism between the sexual trauma (not-self) and her sexual subjectivity (self).

As I have already suggested, there has been considerable debate in gay and lesbian, as well as queer theory regarding the significance and legitimacy of lesbian and gay men’s pathways to sexual subjectivity. For example, dispute over the authenticity of lesbian sexuality, coupled with a lack of positive representation of lesbian survivors, in many ways delimit the subject positions available for lesbian and queer survivors. In this scenario, lesbian survivors must lean on biological or genetic origins to sexual subjectivity or otherwise risk the oversimplified conclusion that links their sexuality (self) to the pathological symptoms of sexual abuse.

Clearly, the pathway to a more ‘authentic’ self offered in these theories has also led to an increasing silence surrounding sexual abuse in lesbian communities. This is most visible when considering the lack of representation of the issue beyond psychological and quantitative literature which maps a ‘strong relationship’ between the two (J. M. Hall, 1996; Roberts & Sorensen, 1999; Robohm, Litzenberger, & Pearlman, 2003).

Another participant, Vivian, spoke about the assumptions surrounding lesbian sexuality and sexual violence and her inability to ‘dispute’ and ‘disprove’ psychological and popular understandings, which draw correlations between the two:
I find it really annoying when people assume that because I’m a lesbian I must have been assaulted. And it’s even more annoying for me because I can’t dispute it. I wish I could, but I can’t. I was assaulted so I can’t disprove it. But you know, I knew I was a lesbian when I was seven and I was assaulted years later and things got confused but that’s kind of normal. So for me it doesn’t really relate but again, it annoys me that I can’t dispute it.

Following from Kristy, Vivian’s position also reflects the ways that lesbian and queer sexuality has historically been negatively attached to trauma and victimology. As a result, her position as a childhood trauma survivor and a lesbian inevitably become caught up in narratives of causality—where abuse ‘led her to become a lesbian’—which have long been generated in psychological and popular discourse. Similar to Kristy, Vivian’s assertion that ‘she knew [of her sexual identity] when she was seven’ suggests that it was something that formed before the abuse, and thus exists aside from sexual violence. By framing her sexual identity history ‘outside’ her trauma history, Vivian’s excerpt ensures that it does not encompass a harmful impact of abuse, and therefore is not something that she needs to ‘heal from’.

However, while exposing some of the taken-for-granted connections between child sexual abuse and ‘disorder’ can open up another dialogue in which to speak about trauma, acceptance of this previous stigmatised identity may also operate to de-author lesbian and queer survivor stories. For example, the narratives from lesbian and queer survivors point to the dangers of accepting popular and expert accounts to tell stories about trauma, sexual abuse and sexuality. As Vivian suggests, the
connection between her sexual abuse and lesbian sexuality also has the capacity to erase her own unique story. She explains her frustration with the overriding narrative of lesbian trauma in the following excerpt:

I know it’s terrible but there was a girl recently who came out and was speaking publicly ‘I’m a lesbian’ and she chose to speak publicly about the fact that she was abused but her take on her abuse, like it led her to become a lesbian. For her, that was her story and it upset me because…it was her representation of her story. For her, she had been abused and for her it had played a role in her sexuality but I just felt that it was an unfair representation and her story could potentially be taken as the norm and I don’t feel that it is really.

Clearly, the assumed relationship between lesbian identity and sexual trauma not only undermines lesbian pathways to authentic desire and sexuality, it also threatens to engulf the guiding narratives of ‘choice’ or ‘biology’ which may inform sexual subjectivity.

Vivian’s assertion in the above excerpt that the public speaker’s story was an ‘unfair representation’ breaks away from the perceived notion that lesbian and queer sexual trauma is somehow caught up in ‘the same’ history. However, Vivian’s admitting that the women’s story ‘upset her’ because ‘her story could potentially be taken as the norm’ also speaks to the difficult relationship between child sexual trauma and sexuality from within the lesbian community.
For Kristy, revealing any long-term impact of abuse was difficult, and as a result, her narrative was contradictory at times. For example, although Kristy did not ‘look at (her) abuse as traumatic or a big deal any more’ she felt that her abuse experience had contributed to her ‘unhealthy’ and ‘negative’ view of men.

Just with men I think I have an unhealthy view and that’s about it. It hasn’t really impacted that much…I think if I hadn’t—and this is just speculation—but I think that if I hadn’t those experiences as a child I wouldn’t be as aware of how much men require sex and how much…Maybe I wouldn’t fear men that much and they would just be like ‘Blah’, but they’re not; they’re kind of to be wary and watchful and that kind of thing. They are unpredictable. They might not be able to help themselves. You’ve got to be constantly wary. I don’t know if other people are like that…It sounds so unhealthy actually, when I talk about it.

Kristy’s internalisation of her fear of men as ‘unhealthy’ suggests that this may be a complicated position for her to take up openly. While Kristy does not elaborate further, later in the interview her ‘unhealthy’ feelings about men are juxtaposed with her ‘healthy’ engagement in the gay scene. As the following excerpt shows:

I think that I’ve now got more confidence—that I can say ‘No’ and more awareness of everything. I’m more confident now so if I want to say ‘No’, I can say ‘No’ and that kind of thing. So it’s developed…I’m more healthy. I know what I want and that kind of thing and getting into the gay scene has probably helped a little bit as well as an alternative that feels comfortable.
Vivian’s, and Kristy’s, narratives call attention to the dangers of the association between lesbian identity and ‘harm’ stories, which inevitably return focus to the ‘woundedness’ of this identity in an effort to establish a subject position. As outlined in Chapter Six, Wendy Brown (1995) has argued that the organising of social identities around ‘wounded attachments’, and narratives which chiefly centre on harmful, traumatic and painful histories, also ensures that minority groups are continuously caught up in their own oppression. More than this, as Linda Alcoff (2006) comments, Brown’s argument is based on the premise that we are ‘maintaining a cycle of blaming that continues the focus on oppression rather than transcending it’ (p. 79).

On another level, Vivian’s position in the above extract also suggests that the position of harm may be particularly harmful for those identities that are always already marked by heteronormative prejudice. In Excitable Speech, Judith Butler (1997) addresses the ways that names adopt historical, injurious meanings over time:

Clearly, injurious names have a history, one that is evoked and reconciliated at the moment of utterance, but not explicitly told. This is not simply a history of how they have been used, in what contexts, and for what purposes; it is the way that such histories are installed and arrested in and by the name…The force of a name depends not only on its iterability, but on a form of repetition that is linked to trauma, on what is, strictly speaking, not remembered, but relived, and relived in and through the linguistic substitution for the traumatic event. (p. 36)
To borrow from Sara Ahmed’s (2004) term, the ‘sticky connection’ between trauma and lesbian sexuality conjures more entrenched epithets of homophobia that continue to be caught up in popular discourse about lesbians. From this perspective, if a lesbian is not ‘naturally’ or ‘biologically’ gay, her sexual preference is evidence that she is instead a ‘man-hater’, an ‘angry lesbian’ or is ‘damaged’ in some way which makes it difficult for her to have relationships with men. It is this story that Vivian vehemently rejects in the following excerpt:

It’s really frustrating to me that there is this perception that you know, I’m a lesbian, so I must hate men and I must have this really bad deal with men and I just don’t. But I was assaulted so I can’t really disprove it…I was a bit ‘Mm, okay, you’re playing into this already existing notion that people have that we’re all ‘damaged goods’ and we choose to be with women because we can’t cope with men, or because we’ve been damaged in some way.

For Vivian, her experience of sexual assault affirms rather than disproves the popular belief that lesbian sexuality is interconnected with ‘damaged’ past, or an avenue chosen solely to vent rage against the (male) perpetrator. From this perspective, lesbian sexuality is ‘damaged’ by default, and representative of a group of women who purposely turned away from heterosexuality and a ‘normal’ identity. However, the association that binds trauma and lesbian sexuality is difficult to dislodge. As Ahmed (2004) has argued in her examination of race and ethnicity, identities are often caught up in the transference of emotion, and the product of this transference makes these identities ‘sticky’ by association:
When a sign or object becomes sticky it can function to 'block' the movement (of other things or signs) and it can function to bind (other things or signs)… but it is a relation of doing in which there is no distinction between passive or active, even though the stickiness of one object might come before the stickiness of the other, so that the other seems to cling to it. (p. 91)

While Ahmed specifically examines the ways that racial identities are rendered sticky through historical attachments, her notion of relationality could also be used to explain why lesbian and queer sexuality is bound to trauma and to other cultural slurs—such ‘man-hater’, ‘dyke’, and ‘queer’—which are used to publicly ridicule lesbians.

On another level, it could also be argued that these ‘sticky signs’ which connect lesbian sexuality to trauma are also marked by what Cvetkovich (2003) terms queer unspeakability (p. 7). From this perspective, representations of sexual harm remain unacknowledged because lesbians and gay men have historically been denied participation in wider discourses of trauma and mourning. Following from her earlier text, Cvetkovich (1992, 2003) suggests that child sexual abuse accounts are also caught up in queer trauma, most saliently in the battle against AIDS, which have often denied queer culture the full expression of emotion or an avenue in which to tell trauma stories openly, without shame. Her text maps the uneasy relationship in history which has excluded gay and lesbian trauma from public consciousness, and argues that both trauma and queer narratives lack representality. As Cvetkovich (2003) notes, her own involvement with the AIDS crisis ‘offered clear evidence that some deaths were more important than others and that homophobia, and
significantly, racism, could affect how trauma was publicly recognised’ (p. 5). From this perspective, it is the connection of sexual trauma to lesbian culture itself that ensures lack of representation in public discourses of trauma, including therapeutic and self-help genres. For this reason, rather than focus on the ways that queer culture has been excluded from mainstream discussions of trauma, Cvetkovich instead examines the productive elements of this fissure (I will return to this later).

Following from Cvetkovich’s argument, the unspeakability she raises could be easily mapped in terms of shame, or rather, the ‘double-shame’ of identity that encompasses sexual victimisation and queer sexuality. In this context, unspeakability becomes an equivalent of therapeutic shame, and shares undercurrents with self-help genres, which advocate survivors ‘let go of’ or ‘move beyond’ the shame of their childhood abuse. Similarly, popular versions of shame and queer sexuality are suggestive of what remains unspeakable, but ever-present, for gay and lesbian youth who contemplate the exposure of their ‘coming out’ of the closet. In recent years, queer theorists have re-embarked on the centrality of shame in the formulation of gay public culture and identity. For example, in their recent edited book, David Halperin and Valarie Traub (2009) argue that queer pride is intimately tied to shame, albeit often subtly whereby ‘collective affirmations of pride’ conjure ‘residual experiences of shame’ (p. 4). In this context, gay shame is more about revisiting the ‘demonization of homosexuality’ and acts of homophobia which essentially instigated the movement of queer pride. As Heather Love’s chapter suggests, the connection demonstrates that ‘the experience of queer historical subjects is not safely distant from contemporary experience: rather their social marginality and abjection
mirror our own. The relationship to the queer past is suffused not only by feelings of regret, despair and loss, but also by the shame of identification’ (Love, 2009, p. 263). However, the impetus of work in this area appears counter-productive, particularly in terms of its stalling of the queer identity within the bounds of shame; where pride becomes the only avenue to countering shame.

Eve Sedgwick’s (1993) insightful work on shame underlines the possibility of moving beyond the childhood instance of shame as spectacle toward more performative expressions of shame as integral to identity construction. As Sedgwick argues, the performance of shame is intimately attached to identity because it is these parts of ourselves—our gender, sexuality—that ‘may be established and naturalised in the first instance through shame’ (Sedgwick, 1993b, p. 12). From this perspective, therapeutic and political strategies which aim to diminish or to excavate shame from particular populations, such as incest survivors and ‘gay pride’ advocates, fail because ‘shame are not toxic parts of a group or individual that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the process by which identity is formed’ (2003, p. 63). Further, Sedgwick (1993a) argues that shame might instead be viewed as a foundational component, particularly given its power to re-configure the queer subject. Thus, ‘queer’ shame not only becomes malleable with the self, it can also assume creative or destructive influences on identity, as she illustrates in the following passage: ‘If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that’s because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy’ (Sedgwick, 1993a, p. 4). Similarly, David Halperin’s (2007) work has drawn
attention to the ways that gay subjectivities might also operate to counteract notions
of shame and abjection. Specifically, Halperin suggests that by taking up alternative
pathways in their approach to sexuality, loss and community, gay subjectivities also
exists outside, and alternate to, prevailing social norms which pathologise gay men.

The following excerpt from Eliza, who identified as a queer survivor, illustrates the
subversive potential of both refusing and transforming the shame attached to sexual
abuse into positive self-identity. Specifically, Eliza’s refusal to embody shame as a
marker of the self, rather than to ‘integrate the experience into her personality’
suggests a queer process, which embraces the ‘transformative’, ‘peculiarly
individuating’ potential of the experience:

I think that’s why it makes it kind of problematic because by keeping abuse
kind of secret and closeted, it makes people feel ashamed of it instead of being
‘Yeah, it happened’, whatever…In terms of the amount of the people that it
happens to—kind of demystifying it a little bit more—just because of all the
shame that’s associated with it and it doesn’t necessarily have to be shameful.
Yeah and I guess I’ve kind of integrated that experience into my personality.
It’s not something that I’m ashamed about, so maybe it’s messed up in saying
this but I don’t actually view it as a negative experience anymore. I view it as
something that’s, in terms of phenomenology and the loop or whatever and how
every experience shapes who you are as a person. It has obviously shaped me
somehow and I actually feel comfortable with how it shaped me. I can’t really
pinpoint what exactly it’s done or how it’s impacted on me because there’s
nothing to compare it to but I feel comfortable with who I am now and I feel okay with who I am now, because how much I struggled through it, through the end of high school to me kind of says it was obviously something important in my life, to shape me and because the end result right now, I’m actually kind of happy with so I don’t really view it as a negative.

Eliza’s narrative is unique because it evokes questions about what shame does, rather than how shame feels. Thus, it reflects on shame’s performative, transformative potential rather than exclusively on its attachment to the survivor identity. In this way, shame in Eliza’s account is not embedded in the intra-psychic but following Sedgwick’s interpretation, exists as ‘a kind of free radical that attaches to, and alters the meaning of…a named identity’ (2003, p. 62).

**Coming out and coming out: Lesbian and queer survivors and the double closet**

In The Epistemology of the Closet, Sedgwick (1990) borrows from Foucault’s analysis of silence to illustrate how homophobia, and the enforced silence surrounding homophobia, operate to marginalise individuals positioned ‘outside’ or in secrecy. Sedgwick argues that ‘the closet’ is a ‘shaping presence’ which symbolises the dichotomy of the heterosexual/homosexual divide, and secrecy/disclosure as a series of ‘double-binds’ for sexual nonconformists: gay men and lesbians can either ‘come out’ of the closet and risk condemnation, or remain silent and thereby remain caught up in their own discrimination. For this reason, the emphasis for queer activism is the necessary coming ‘out’ of the closet, and refusing silence. Indeed, the act of ‘coming out’ is often considered a shared symbolic
experience for gay individuals, and in the same way, for survivors of sexual abuse, who would otherwise be confined to secrecy. For example, it has been described as ‘the quintessential’ narrative (Roof, 1996) and ‘the most momentous act’ (Plummer, 1995) for gay and lesbian individuals. As David Halperin (1995) suggests: ‘Coming out is an act of freedom…not in the sense of liberation but in the sense of resistance’ (p. 30, emphasis in original).

There are some apparent similarities in the ways that survivors of abuse and lesbian and queer women are located politically. For both groups, the act of disclosure and ‘coming out’ about their identity as lesbian and survivor of abuse is positioned as transformative, particularly in terms of restructuring feelings of shame and fear into feelings of pride and strength (Whittier, 2001). For Rosaria Champagne, ‘coming out’ collectively symbolises a rejection of ‘normalising’ practices which have sought to locate particular identities outside of public consciousness by inducing shame and stigma (1998, p. 6). Specifically, feminist and queer groups who advocate ‘coming out’ as a survivor of sexual abuse or as a lesbian/queer underline the importance of rejecting ‘polite silence’ and using emotional strategies to speak out about experiences (Champagne, 1998).

Similarly, Ken Plummer (1995) suggests that the coming out story encompasses a transition from a position of victimisation toward a more public and positive identity. While the revealed ‘secret’ of one’s sexuality remains integral to the ‘coming out’ story, the narrative often embodies a shift from ‘individual’, ‘hidden’ trauma to one about political action and recovery (p. 50). As discussed in Chapter Four, therapeutic
discourses have influenced the privatisation of ‘coming out’ about sexual abuse in ways that emphasise the transformation of the self, rather than lobbying for social change. In this scenario, ‘coming out’ about abuse experiences, and/or sexuality, is perhaps more representative of a therapeutic end rather than the beginning of political action, as Champagne (1998) explains:

The solution to oppression posed recently in both movements has been ‘coming out’, a gesture that confines the closet as a problem, thus occluding the heterosexism, homophobia and victim-blaming maintained in our patriarchal society that make necessary private hiding places. (p. 6)

The narratives from the lesbian and queer participants in this study complicated the relationship between ‘compulsory disclosure’ and therapeutic outcomes. Overall, the lesbian and queer survivors took up very different positions in terms of their disclosure and non-disclosure of abuse, and this often related to their lesbian or queer identity. For example, Eliza’s coming out about her sexual identity was a precursor to her disclosing about her abuse, although they were differently positioned in her memory.

I disclosed the same time that I told my Mum that I was same-sex attracted, so it was when I was 17. It was on my 18th birthday. Yeah, which is really bad because she didn’t deal with it (the disclosure of abuse) very well...She said ‘Oh, I know you better than you know yourself’ and she always says it but for some reason it just really pissed me off. I said ‘You don’t know shit about me; you don’t even know that I have a girlfriend’ and she dealt with that and then I
kind of subtly said something to her, alluding to sexual abuse but without actually saying it so then she could sit with it and it was really horrible. Anyway so I kind of left it up to her to figure it out and she spoke to me about it afterwards and so I told her.

Eliza reflected with greater emphasis on the importance of disclosing her abuse experiences, which she had kept secret for so long. Yet, by letting go of the truth about her sexuality, Eliza symbolically ‘opened the floodgates’ to her closeted identity. As she explained later in the interview, the experience of ‘double-disclosure’ was ‘really bad’ at the time but also helped to ‘release the baggage’ that she had been carrying about the abuse, and to a lesser extent, her same-sex relationships.

But, I don’t know—I feel like after I just told Mum, even though it kind of opened up a kettle of worms, there was kind of this release for me and this is baggage, but I feel like I maybe dumped all my emotional shit just on to her and just left it and that’s why I feel bad because I felt really good after I told her. Awkward and weird and there was lots of negative feelings as well but, for the most part, I felt a lot better.

Eliza’s initial disclosure was positioned as an emotional ‘release’, which ‘felt bad’ at the time, but ultimately ‘really good after’. Even after her initial disclosure, Eliza felt more comfortable letting her partners know about her abuse experiences because it was a significant part of her history that she had ‘integrated into (her)self’. As she explained later in the interview, disclosing her sexual abuse experience and sexual
identity at the same time, effectively interconnected these two identities in terms of her life narrative.

It’s unhelpful for me personally to just sit on things and think about them. It’s better to put it out there and by saying it, and it feels better for me to get it out there and then I can kind of work with it instead of being all internal and whatever. Because I want to share bits of my past with them and that’s a significant bit of my past. It’s usually like I have to explain it in terms of my relationship with my mother as well or if I ever tell my coming out story and then I explain why Mum found it hard to deal with. Yes, so it’s something that I’ve always disclosed and maybe because I feel like I’ve integrated it into myself and it’s just like ‘Yeah, this is a part of me and that’s cool and we can move on’ and I embrace it almost.

However, while the act of ‘coming out’ as a survivor and a lesbian share some analogies in terms of their re-presentation of shame and silence, there are also important ways in which these two areas diverge as well. Most obviously, the positioning of the past-present and shame-pride is differently formulated in the survivor and in the queer subject. Champagne (1998) reflects on the conceptualisation of the two identities in her own life:

As a lesbian, I feel pride in my love of and for women. I participate in queer pride marches and, in honour, share my love for women with (sometimes unsuspecting) colleagues and dog walkers. But the ‘pride of survivorship is not born out of the experience that marks and names the subject as a survivor’ (p. 9)
While the lesbian and queer survivors in this study were all ‘out’, and reflected on positive experiences in terms of their sexuality, two of the participants chose not to disclose their abuse experiences to their friends and partners. For example, Kristy, who described her abuse as ‘old history’ and ‘not a big deal’, rarely disclosed to anyone about her abuse experiences:

It’s something that I just don’t talk about at all to people. It’s private and it’s embarrassing as well and it’s a bit sad but I guess because it’s sex, it’s embarrassing, a bit. Plus people ask questions and I guess it’s also a need-to-know basis.

In many ways, the remnants of the relationship between child sexual abuse and lesbian sexuality demonstrate the link to the past trauma that continues to inform queer identity. It is perhaps for this reason that participant narratives regarding child sexual abuse and lesbian sexuality were presented as parallel stories; each connecting to the identity of participants at different points in time. The following section examines Vivian’s story in some depth, and specifically traces the ways that she positions her experience of sexual abuse as compiling her ‘not self’ and ‘self’ across different points in time. As Vivian suggests, while memories and the feelings stirred by her sexual abuse were ‘buried’, they continued to bubble up as well as submerge in recollections of her forming identity:

When I was 11 I was raped by a man…I couldn’t really talk about it with my Mum so I just didn’t and then a day goes by and then two and then a week and so then you don’t end up saying anything for years and years and years. So I
think, I would say probably I just pushed all that down and just buried it for years and I’d like to say had ‘normal’ development from there but I don’t think it was actually, looking back on it. I think that as a result of that experience I then started to split my life apart. I think a lot of my sexual experiences after that were with that sort of bad crowd, that sort of delinquent crowd where I was involved with alcohol and drinking and with drug taking, but I kind of managed to maintain this ‘good girl’ thing. So I was clever about it but to my detriment ultimately. And then I got really, really sick a few years later and I ended up having to leave school, just from years of abusing it me not coping really—psychologically not coping. That was pretty positive in the end. Not positive at the time, but afterwards, fairly positive. It did mean that it was very difficult for me when I did go back to school because I was older, and I was a big, giant, fat lesbian—it was very obvious so got picked on, but I kind of coped with it better because at that point I knew really kind of who I was and I wasn’t prepared to put up with this stuff and I wasn’t going to change because it was inconvenient to you.

Vivian’s silence surrounding the sexual violence she endured could be interpreted as an indication of past trauma and avoidance. However, Vivian’s decision to ‘take up the position as a non-survivor’ also offers an(ther) avenue that resists easy interpretation by medical and therapeutic discourse as harm-filled and psychologically dismantling. Indeed, the effectiveness of ‘coming out’ about experiences of abuse has also been challenged by a number of opponents who argue that ‘named identity’ (in the mode of therapeutic disclosure) has done little to
unsettle the foundations of violence against women. The ‘heaviness’ of this discourse, intensified by homophobic links drawn between survivorship and lesbianism, does little to challenge the stigma of pathology associated with this identity.

**Engaging queer pleasure and danger in accounts of sexual subjectivity**

While the increasing silence surrounding survivors may point to the danger of, as Wendy Brown has argued, the politicisation of an ‘injured’ identity, it is also intimately connected to the historical debates by lesbian feminists surrounding ‘pleasure’ and ‘danger’. Specifically, the divergence of lesbian feminist writing to address a sex-positive agenda, which has now come to be called ‘the sex wars’ or ‘the lesbian sex wars’, contributed to a transformation of thinking about sexuality, particularly lesbian sexuality. Carol Vance’s (1984) edited book, Pleasure and Danger, a forerunning text of this era, raised very important questions about the inherent contradictions that construct women’s sexuality both as a site of repression and danger, and a site of pleasure and exploration. For Vance (1984), ‘overemphasis on danger’ not only ‘follow(ed) the lead of the larger culture’, but the result of ‘hiding pleasure’ also failed in making women ‘feel empowered’:

> When pleasure occupies a smaller and smaller public place and a more guilty private space, individuals do not become empowered; they are merely cut off from the source of their own strength and energy...If women increasingly view themselves entirely as victims through the lens of the oppressor and allow
themselves to be viewed that way by others, they become enfeebled and miserable. (p. 7)

The shift toward sex-positive writing during this time was undoubtedly influenced by the AIDS crisis, which inadvertently increased the visibility of lesbian sex practices. As Dawn Atkins (1999) has argued, ‘the proliferation of lesbian erotica in the past decade may be interpreted as a form of reinforcement for a sexual liberation movement severely debilitated by the right wing and AIDS, but it is also a response to the initial invisibility of lesbian sex and sexuality’ (p. 97). The sex-positive movement led by lesbian feminists, whose campaign beginnings and promotion of ‘queer’ sex practices such as S&M, butch and femme roles and pornography were unashamedly vocal and visible, has also bolstered contemporary safe sex campaigns for lesbian and queer women.

The impetus of sex-positive writing was not just on recognising women’s sexual desire, it also included complicated narratives of victimhood from a number of prominent lesbian survivors, such as Dorothy Allison (1984), who wrote openly about her own life:

When we speak of sex, grief should not be where we have to start...I never wanted fear to be the only impulse behind political action. As deeply as I wanted safety or freedom I wanted desire, hope and joy. What after all was the worth of one without the other. (p. 107)

Accounts of incest and trauma from lesbian subculture have also emerged alongside, and in response to, the denial of more nuanced accounts of sex and violence from
mainstream feminism. Most importantly, the debates, performances and activist work led by lesbian sub-cultures during this time did not attempt to separate feminist binaries of ‘pleasure’ and ‘danger’, but instead wrote about how they sometimes come together in women’s lives. As Allison (1996) writes:

Two or three things I know for sure, but this one I am not supposed to talk about, how it comes together—sex and violence, love and hatred—I am not supposed to put together the two halves of my life. (p. 45)

As Cvetkovich (2003) suggests, unlike feminist theories, which often embrace ‘desexualised’, ‘sanitised’ and largely therapeutic accounts of trauma and healing, lesbian subcultures often complicate the ways that trauma and sexuality intersect with lesbian identity. Allison’s wider project—‘politically incorrect sexuality’—was supported by other sex-positive lesbian feminists (such as Gayle Rubin, Joan Nestle and Cherrie Moraga) who wrote about lesbian sexuality in relation to classism, racism and other types of prejudice. As Cvetkovich (2003) comments, ‘Allison is breaking the silence, but she is doing so in a way that is fiercely uncompromising that doesn’t edit out anger, or lesbianism, or complex sexual lives.’ (p. 4)

The debate surrounding women’s sexual desire which began in the 1980s ‘sex wars’ not only succeeded in breaking the silence about sexual practices that feminists had long regarded as sexually ‘abusive’, but their work also contributed to the more desirable position of the lesbian as a ‘sexual outlaw’. As Sally Munt (1998) suggests, it is this position ‘beyond, out there, exterior, peripheral, foreign and different’ that enables lesbian women to ‘occup(y) a deregulated space unconstrained by the norms
and common sense of mainstream culture. It is a utopic space she can operate with self-determination’ (p. 96).

In recent years, a number of books have been published which espouse diverse lesbian sex practices such as S&M, role-play and promiscuity in the realm of sex-positive practice (Bright, 1999; Califia, 1988). For example, Felice Newman’s (1999), ‘The Whole Lesbian Sex Book’ included a section on role-play which demystified some common assumptions surrounding fantasy rape role-play for lesbian survivors. Notably, her book suggested that ‘many women opt for play that intentionally pushes their button’ because ‘things that make us feel intense shame or anger can also evoke great sexual heat’ (p. 188).

The narratives from the lesbian survivors in this study tended to resist psychological and therapeutic notions of sexual abuse and victimhood, which situate trauma as a permanent hollowing-out of women’s sexual desire. For example, Eliza spoke about bringing trauma and sex together in a way that refused pathology and enabled her to be present and honest in her sexual desire and activity:

I don’t like ‘promiscuous’ because promiscuous has negative connotations to it and I’ve never really thought of sex like that… I guess, I like people and I like being with people and I wouldn’t identify as being a promiscuous person but maybe according to definitions then I might be and I’ve never really thought about that in terms of ‘Oh yeah, I’m promiscuous because I was sexually abused when I was young’… I’m quite happy to do rape role-play, all that sort of stuff and it doesn’t… If anything, rape role-play turns me on more but I
haven’t felt not okay about anything. Maybe I haven’t allowed any situations to come up where it might trigger something but I can’t think of any sexual activity that I feel weird about.

Eliza’s narrative actively challenges some mainstream and therapeutic assumptions surrounding sexual abuse survivors. Notably, her account of sexual pleasure in promiscuity, fantasy and role-play disrupt one-dimensional accounts which automatically pathologise sexual subversive behaviour as ‘symptoms of trauma’. More than this, Eliza spoke about her desires openly, honestly, and did not pause to explain or self-silence her story or allow it to be caught up in the language of pathology. Later in the interview, Eliza spoke about the complexity in her relationship in regard to ‘being in control sexually’ and complicated the relationship between bottom/passive (bad) and top/active (good), particularly with reference to her position as a survivor:

I’m definitely not in control sexually. Oh, maybe—I don’t like the top/bottom thing. I don’t like definitive terms but I’m probably more of a bottom than a top but maybe it’s just with my current partner because it just works better that way. But I’m not like a bottom/bottom. (My partner) says that I’m an ‘active bottom’. I guess it depends on the person you’re with because you just have to negotiate what sort of dynamic you kind of work at. It works in our relationship at the moment…and I really enjoy being an active bottom. And I don’t feel sort of ‘Oh, no it’s really bad to be a bottom; should be a top’ thing. With like S&M stuff, I’m quite happy to be beaten and restrained and stuff
like that – that’s a different sort of relationship because it’s not complete lack of control because I feel comfortable with the person that if I said ‘Hey no, you have to stop’, then they would stop. So maybe I haven’t had an experience where I’ve got complete lack of control but I’m quite willing to relinquish it within a safe environment—like faux relinquish of control.

Similarly, Vivian spoke about the dichotomy of these positions in her sexual life:

I feel in control of the pursuit and of whether or not I take someone home. I’m very in control of that and usually it’s at my place and it’s kind of all of that stuff, but once we’re actually in bed, I don’t mind relinquishing that. It depends on the person. It does depend, in fact, a lot on the person but there’s an interesting dichotomy there for me. If I have a partner that I trust or that I can see potential in them for certain things, then I’ll relinquish all control and let them go for their life.

Eliza and Vivian’s narrative challenge broad assumptions about abuse survivors as ‘passive’ and ‘powerless’ in terms of their sexual identity and relationships. However, the queering of this position in their same-sex relationship—and their refusal to anchor themselves in terms of ‘passive’ or ‘active’—also presents an-other avenue for sexual pleasure beyond the realm of ‘healthy sexuality’. Significantly, their engagement in ‘voluntary passivity’ and S&M sexual play ensures that they are no longer defined in terms of ‘harmed’ sexuality, but instead become agents of their own desire and sexual pleasure. It may be the unique positionality of lesbian survivors like Eliza and Vivian who, because they perceive themselves ‘outside’ of
traditional heterosexual discourses, are given more opportunities to engage agentic sexual practices. Following the work of same-sex researchers like Lisa Diamond (2005), lesbian survivors may be able to better resist cultural discourses, and thus map out their own experiences of sexual agency.

**Conclusion**

Rejecting the one-dimensional accounts currently offered in psychological discourse, the lesbian survivors in this study revealed diverse and complex narratives when commenting on their sexual subjectivity. In many ways, the assumed connection between their (past) sexual abuse and (present) sexuality thwarted their ability to take up an ‘authentic’ lesbian sexuality, or, alternatively, one mediated by their own choice. Ultimately, given the negative and ‘sticky’ association between abuse and lesbian sexuality, it is not surprising that participants felt they were denied the full expression of emotion in which to tell trauma stories openly, and without shame. Participants’ mounting lack of agency was often expressed through their recollections of simultaneously ‘coming out’ as same-sex attracted and ‘coming out’ as a survivor. Overall, participant narratives regarding child sexual abuse and lesbian sexuality were often presented as parallel stories, which drew attention to the unclear ways that they had interconnected these experiences as trauma(tic) in their own lives.

At the same time, by combining individual pathways of sexual pleasure as ‘healing’, the participant narratives also complicated mainstream assumptions regarding trauma and survivor sexual dysfunction. For lesbian survivors like Eliza and Vivian, taking up ‘passive’ and ‘active positions and engaging in S&M sex and role-play, was
connected to gaining sexual agency and pleasure in relationships. Thus, rather than position their sexuality as indicative of an ‘impossibility to heal’, their responses allude to a widening of possibilities for ‘healthy sexuality’ in the context of their same-sex relationships. Importantly, the narratives from lesbian survivors point to the potential of engaging in new links which promote sexual play, survivor agency and ‘healing’. 
CHAPTER EIGHT

Remaking the self beyond the cycle of abuse: Competing discourses of pleasure and danger

The focus of this chapter is to illuminate some of the complexities in adult survivor accounts of sexual subjectivity. Specifically, it aims to problematise notions of ‘child innocence’ and the erasure of the body, which mediate notions of survivor recovery and modes of ‘healthy sexuality’. I argue that the centrality of the innocent child/victim in contemporary and historical discourses of abuse not only encourages easy ‘truths’ about abuse, but that nostalgic connections drawn between the child and adult survivor also make it difficult for survivors to take up positions as sexual agents in adulthood. Further to this, by marking ‘damage’ and ‘harm’ onto the survivors’ body—and positioning survivor sexual desire and agency as a ‘re-enactment’ of abuse—the trauma model also ignores the cultural significance of women’s dis-embodiment. Addressing the role of wider cultural discourses in survivor experience of embodiment and sexuality, this chapter underlines the importance of survivor re-construction or ‘re-making’ of themselves beyond the ‘cycle of abuse’.

Mapping sexual pleasure and sexual danger onto survivor bodies

It is not enough to move women away from danger and oppression: it is necessary to move toward something—toward pleasure, agency, self-definition (Vance, 1984, p. 24).
Carol Vance’s (1984) recognition of the tensions in accommodating both ‘pleasure’ and ‘danger’ in representations of women’s sexuality remains pertinent to theorisations of survivor sexual agency. As I have argued in Chapter Five, while psy-discourse and popular accounts of abuse rely on the pretence of the ‘safe’ and ‘secure’ cultural context to ascribe survivor vulnerability to a hangover of abuse, perceptions about harm are also heavily mediated by norms surrounding ‘healthy’ (hetero)sexual behaviour. For example, within the therapeutic realm, the exhibition of ‘oversexualisation’ or sexual dominance is often perceived as an indication of harmful sexual behaviour and ‘measures of recovery’ are determined by the extent to which women are able to fulfil traditional and ‘desirable’ aspects of feminine sexuality (Reavey & Warner, 2001).

At present, there are few accounts of survivor sexual experience across therapeutic, psy-discourse and autobiographical discourses which do not emerge from the central narrative of dysfunction. Aside from the constant stream of self-help and therapeutic texts addressing the need for survivors to ‘heal’ their sexuality, positive accounts of survivor sexual identity have been largely neglected in academic (including feminist) writing. Indeed, although survivors and non-abused women continue to navigate the complex terrain of sexual violence and sexual pleasure, desire has been differently mapped onto survivor bodies. As outlined in Chapter Three, survivor pursuit of sexual pleasure is likely to be perceived as a response to trauma—and inevitably read as ‘oversexed’ and/or ‘risky’ sexual behaviour—rather than as authentic sexual agency. Yet, while ‘promiscuous’ sexual behaviours are conflated with survivor vulnerability to sexual revictimisation, the chief concern in psy-discourse, as well as
the popular self-help literature, is the imperative of (hetero)sexual ‘restoration’ (J. Kitzinger, 1992, p. 414). The narrative of survivor recovery has undoubtedly been fuelled by therapeutic and self-help literature, which focus on the imperative of sexual healing in ‘acceptable’ or ‘healthy’ contexts (Doane & Hodges, 2001). As I outline in this chapter, the rhetoric of healing in descriptions of survivor sexual subjectivity inevitably places limits on the types of sexual stories that are told. For example, advocating survivor participation in ‘healthy’ adult sexual relationships alongside a discourse of survivor child/sexual ‘innocence’, the self-help literature remains caught up with particular modes of ‘doing femininity’.

**Trauma discourse and the centrality of the ‘inner-child’**

Many abused children cling to the hope that growing up will bring escape and freedom. But personality formed in an environment of coercive control is not well adapted to adult life...She approaches the tasks of early adulthood—establishing independence and intimacy—burdened by major impairment in self-care, in cognition and memory, in identity and in the capacity to form stable relationships. She is still a prisoner of her childhood; attempting to create a new life, she reencounters the trauma. (Herman, 1992, p. 110)

Historically, the child has been differently constructed in psychoanalytic and psychological discourse surrounding sexual abuse. For example, the above excerpt taken from Judith Herman’s (1992) landmark text, Trauma and Recovery, alludes to the ghostly presence of the child-self, continually thwarting survivor attempts to establish a ‘new life’ beyond the trauma narrative.
The centrality of the child in the abuse literature is also evident in the countless ‘recovery’ texts published since the 1980s, which encourage survivors to engage with their ‘child within’. The representation of this spectre of the child, which most often positions the adult survivor ‘as a prisoner’ of her damaged ‘inner-child’, has been afforded a powerful position in therapeutic texts (Bacon, 2001; Collins & Marsh, 1998; Parks, 1990). However, the ‘inner-child’ is not only positioned in the child abuse literature as a nostalgic link to the past (abuse), it has also come to symbolise survivor ‘loss’ and the inability to heal. As Sandra Knauer (2002) explains in her therapeutic text aimed at a survivor audience, reconnection with the ‘inner child’ and the surrounding ‘grief work’ is positioned as vital for survivor self-care:

It is only when we own and honour the child who we were and the experiences that that child had can we learn to love the person that we have become. At the very heart of the inner child work lies intensive grief work. If as adults we cannot own our childhood experiences (by own I mean genuinely recognize that the feelings we have are true and accurate) then we cannot forgive our own past behaviours and learn to love and care for ourselves in the future. (pp. 91-92)

Borrowing from psychoanalytic perspectives which propose a blurring of past and present in the unconscious, re-connecting with the imagined inner-child (and allowing them to re-exist in a ‘safe-space’) remains a recurrent theme in the self-help literature (L. Hall & Lloyd, 1993). Most often reaffirming the disconnect between child-adult ‘normal’ development, the inner child motif suggests that the survivor has been stalled in her ability to form stable and intimate sexual relationships in
adulthood (Reavey, 2003). The importance of the child in therapeutic accounts has perhaps been magnified by the trauma model, which underlines the relationship between the original experience and the formation of adult ‘interpersonal’ and ‘attachment’ problems. As Joseph Davis (2005) has argued, the trauma model not only interprets the survivors’ adult identity as ‘fragmented’ and ‘stunted’, but also works with the survivor to identify specific thoughts and behaviours which might reveal evidence of the ‘damaged’ inner-child (p. 202).

However the significance of the ‘inner-child’ can also be observed in the overarching discourse of child innocence in popular therapeutic and self-help literature. For example, the phrase ‘loss of innocence’ is now identifiable in popular discourse as a description of child sexual assault, as well as a key indicator of the enduring ‘damage’ of child sexual abuse. As Jenny Kitzinger (1997) has shown, innocence has featured prominently in the titles of therapeutic and self-help texts about abuse, from Betrayal of Innocence (Forward & Buck, 1988), Innocence Destroyed (Renvoize, 1993), The Right to Innocence (Engel, 1989), to Shattered Innocence (Kohn, 1987). Doane and Hodges (2001) argue that literary, autobiographical and feminist accounts of child sexual abuse often present straightforward stories of abuse which incorporate the ‘unknowing’, ‘innocent’ child enmeshed in a journey from ‘blindness to insight’. Making connections between child sexual innocence and adult recovery, this discourse has undoubtedly influenced survivor adult trajectories and notions of healing. Most obviously, while prescriptions of sexual innocence and passivity represent dominant ideologies of both ‘harm’ and ‘healing’, they also promote
measures of recovery which are likely to be antithetical to adult survivors own perceptions of sexual subjectivity.

**The importance of being ‘pure and true’: The centrality of ‘sexual innocence’**

Historical analyses suggest that the re-presentation of the child ‘innocent’ emerged in response to discourses surrounding child sexuality in the mid twentieth century, which commonly labelled children as provocative and ‘knowing’ seductresses in sexual encounters with adults. As Kerwin Kaye (2005) notes, during this time survivors of sexual abuse were most likely to be positioned as an ‘oversexed Lolita’, and at least active in (if not fully aware of) their seduction of adult men. This viewpoint was emphasised in the psychological literature during this time, as shown in the following quote from Bender and Blau (1937):

> These children undoubtedly do not deserve the cloak of innocence which they have been endowed…we might have frequently considered the possibility that the child might have been an actual seducer, than the one innocently seduced

(Bender and Blau (1937), cited in Seu & Heenan, 1998, p. 62)

The emphasis on the seductive behaviour of young girls was forcibly challenged by second wave feminists, who located the abuse of girls as a superimposition of patriarchy in the context of the modern family. Feminist discourse surrounding the child’s inculpability in abuse have ranged from the acknowledgement of ‘the inherent power differential’ in the adult-child relationship, to accounts which position children as wholly asexual and ‘unknowing’ (Angelides, 2004, p. 145-147; Burman, 2002; E Renold, 2005). As Steven Angelides (2004) has argued, the ‘thorny
issue’ of child sexuality in these accounts was avoided or, at best, acknowledged in relation to wider discussions of adult ethical responsibility (p. 153). Angelides is careful to position the lack of dialogue about child sexuality as ‘an unfortunate casualty’ in a movement that attempted to address speculation on child culpability. Yet, feminist accounts have at least acknowledged this early omission, as well as the surrounding issues associated with simple theorisations of child (a)sexuality. The possibility of the child experiencing sexual pleasure was often raised by feminists and therapists to explain survivors’ complicated accounts of self-blame in abusive situations (Kaye, 2005). For example, Herman and Hirschman (1981) raised the issue of child sexuality in their earlier text, while Ward (1985) used narratives to draw attention to survivors’ sense of culpability in experiencing sexual pleasure.

Still, while the advocating of child ‘innocence’ may have been necessary for feminists to construct a platform to address the ‘harm’ of abuse, it has also undoubtedly impacted the extent to which women come to see themselves as ‘real’ victims. As Janice Haaken (1996, 1998) has argued, the tendency of the literature to omit the child’s experiences of sexual pleasure in the abuse has also informed cultural discourses regarding the ‘deserving’ victim. Within this framework, survivors are compelled to look back on their ‘child-self’ as unknowing or asexual, or otherwise to question their own collusion in the abuse. One participant, Eliza, reflected on the incongruence between her own ‘messed up’ story of abuse and what emerged in adolescence/adulthood as the ‘acceptable story’ of abuse. Not surprisingly, the ‘acceptable story’—‘which was not meant to be talked about’—added to the ‘badness’ and ‘secrecy’ of the abuse:
I had a hard time dealing with it in high school because I just didn’t know how to talk to Mum about it and how it would affect her and how she would view me – she’d view me as going along with it and that was kind of messed up and to a certain extent I did. I could have said ‘No’ but I was a child and there was an abuse of power. At the time, until towards the end of it, I was quite happy to go along with that and have our ‘special time’ or whatever, because it felt good. But it wasn’t until I got older and I knew it was a relationship that wasn’t meant to be talked about with my mother and it wasn’t meant to be talked about with other people. I knew that it was bad or secretive but I still went along with it.

Given the likelihood that some survivors may have ‘knowingly’ participated in their abuse, constructions of child ‘asexuality’ and ‘innocence’ may also add to survivor self-blame (Kaye, 2005, p. 149). The denial of child sexuality to confirm ‘innocence’ (which extends to legal definitions) may also reinforce the notion that a girl’s sexuality is abhorrent, or something to be ashamed of. Thus, while there is a need to underline the notion that children (and adult survivors) are not responsible for their own victimisation, the therapeutic rhetoric of ‘it’s not your fault’ fails to engage with the ways that survivors reflect on their experience (Lamb, 1996). Further to this, although the abuse experience itself might represent a significant narrative in survivors lives, constructions of the child and the present-day ‘self” often exist alongside memories of ‘the abuse’. For Eliza, reflecting on the abuse experiences was less about remembering ‘innocence’ than about situating these memories in relation to more stable aspects of her personality. As she explains in the following excerpt:
I know there was a power dynamic and all that sort of stuff and maybe if I had a different temperament, because I was quite shy when I was younger—if I had a different temperament...yeah, because there was this moment on the tractor and we all got to ride up front with him and use the steering wheel and stuff and it was all really exciting and my younger sister who’s four years younger than me, she’s really boisterous, she had a totally different personality to me when I was younger and she was sat on Pa’s lap and used the steering wheel and then she got off and she said to me and my brother ‘Oh that was a bit weird—he tried to touch me’. In hindsight I’m kind of like ‘Maybe my temperament and me being shy and something about the type of child that I was...allowed, not allowed...I don’t want to say the word ‘allowed’ but if I had maybe her temperament and was more ‘Hey this happened, blah’ about it, maybe it wouldn’t have gone on for as long as it did, maybe. Because it happened to her—she was able to go straight away ‘Hey, that was weird. That was kind of wrong’.

Advocating a move beyond the ‘monster talk’ and the sentiment of ‘innocence’ in the abuse literature, Doane and Hodges (2001) underline that the inherent power imbalance of abuse needs to be presented alongside more nuanced accounts of child sexuality (2001). Another survivor, Charlotte, spoke about the tendency of the literature to ‘explain away’ her own story, which included a critique of popularised representations of the child as ‘unknowing’ in abuse:

You know when you read things and they’re all like ‘victims of sexual abuse feel this way and generally they feel this way’ and I’m just a bit like really I
can’t identify with that and I don’t know. I sometimes think that they oversimplify things and they don’t give children enough credit. I don’t remember how old I was, it was somewhere between like 10, 11. But you know how they’re all like ‘Oh and at 10 you’ve got no idea what’s going on and all of that’. I didn’t feel that way. I knew what was happening so…Yeah and I think it’s very…I haven’t had any treatment for the sexual abuse but when I’ve read about treatments for children, to me, and I could be wrong…with children they’re all like ‘They didn’t understand what was happening, so make sure you reinforce that’…but I think that at 10 and 11 it’s a really, really difficult age because you have been taught about sex ed at school and you probably have had the birds and the bees talk by your parents so you’ve got some idea of what’s going on but you’re still not old enough to be able to assert yourself enough. And age is really tricky too, because every 11 year old isn’t the same. I know when I was 11, I was much older than 11. I know that sounds really stupid, but I mean, just the type of upbringing I had, I was quite mature for an 11 year old.

Charlotte’s position is important because she remains cautious not to omit her own agency in exchange for an account of ‘innocence’. In doing so, Charlotte is able to resist easy explanations about abuse that emphasise victim passivity as central to accounts of ‘harm’ and ‘guilt’. By reflecting on the ‘knowing’ rather than ‘unknowing’ aspects of this narrative, Charlotte is able to fully situate her lack of power to do anything to stop the abuse. As the following excerpt illustrates, her admitting to feeling ‘guilty’ and ‘resentful’ that she ‘didn’t do more to stop it’ was
later contextualised in relation to her real attempt to ‘stand up to a man much bigger than her’ and ‘acknowledge the (this) was quite an achievement’:

Well, I felt guilty and resentful towards myself that I didn’t do more to stop it. At the time I told my mother and also at the time I told him that I didn’t want it happening anymore. This is during a sex act I was like ‘Hey, no, I need to go do homework’ and he’s like ‘You can do it later’ and I’m like ‘No, no, no. I’m going to go do homework’ and then he physically pushed me back down so then I was like well, for 11 year old to stand up to a man much bigger than her, like even now I know he’s a big man, so for an 11 year old to do that, I acknowledged that that was quite an achievement and I think that looking back, I really did everything that I knew how to do at the time, so I don’t feel as guilty as I used to. Yeah, that’s how I came to feel this way about that.

The position that Charlotte takes up in relation to the abuse—which is neither an ‘unknowing’ or ‘innocent’—also has an impact on the positions available for her to take up in the present. While it might be ‘easier’ to tell stories of abuse from the perspective of the ‘innocent child’, and engage in the existing trajectory of the ‘good victim’, it also cuts survivors off from speaking about their adult sexuality in ways that allow for women’s sexual agency. Most apparent, the situating of ‘innocence’ and ‘asexuality’ in survivors’ life trajectories could delimit their access to the range of survivor subjectivities available, including their ability to take up a sexualised position in adolescence/adulthood. As Charlotte outlines in the following passage,
the emphasis on survivor ‘damage’ has also impacted their ability to partake in ‘normal’ discourse about sex, or ‘sex talk’:

Well I mean, me and my friends, my girlfriends, we’ll talk about sex and to me…I can’t even think of any examples but to me I just fit in very easily with their conversation and the ones that do know about my past have come to understand that it’s not an issue for me to talk about sex. You know how some women who have been abused don’t like to talk about sex or are very private about it or whatever? I don’t identify like that at all. When people first find out, they’re always very hesitant as to how to talk to me and that’s why I don’t like to tell people because I think that it changes relationships sometimes, whereas like with ‘Kara’ she was all like ‘But you’ve spoken to me about sex before so clearly it’s not an issue’ and I’m like ‘It’s not an issue. Talk to me like you talk to anyone else’ and she’s like ‘Okay’.

Clearly, relying on simple explanations of abuse may also operate to de-author survivor experiences, particularly when presumed outcomes of abuse cut survivors off from engaging in sexual subjectivity. Both Charlotte and Eliza were conscious about not over-simplifying the relationship between their child-adult self, or allowing their narrative to be overtaken by popular assumptions regarding child ‘asexuality’ and ‘innocence’. Rather, for Eliza, being straightforward about the connections between herself as a ‘really sexualised child’ and ‘a sexual being’ in adulthood meant that her narrative was not ‘cut off’ or consumed by notions of ‘loss’ and ‘harm’:
I’m pretty sure that…I don’t know…I was really sexualised when I was younger. All the way through school, I would just rub on everything. Even in primary school. Actually yeah, I have a memory in primary school of sitting on the floor and rubbing my fanny on my arm while I was sitting there and there were people behind me as well. In hindsight I’m like ‘Damn people probably would have known and stuff’ and that would have been really awkward but at the time I was…So that sort of behaviour for me is kind of like ‘Okay, that’s really highly sexualised really, really young’ so that’s probably maybe attributed to the abuse that happened as well. And I guess to some extent I kind of feel maybe that I was such a sexual being because of the abuse because I was exposed to something. At the time it felt good and whatever, even though that’s really fucked up but I’ve come to terms with that and that’s okay. I guess to some extent that has influenced maybe that I am so sexualised now or that I feel that I’m really a sexual being, or whatever.

As Eliza explains above, ‘being sexualised’ at a young age could perhaps be attributed to her abuse experiences. However, rather than leave out these experiences, Eliza’s narrative suggests that ‘com(ing) to terms with’ the ‘fucked up’ aspects of the abuse has also allowed her to take up a ‘knowing’ rather than ‘unknowing’ position. Without denying the difficult impacts of this experience, Eliza instead situates her sexual subjectivity in relation to a more positive trajectory of survival. This position not only rejects the need for a disconnect between the ‘innocent’, ‘inner-child’ and adult sexuality, it also challenges assumptions surrounding survivors’ necessary engagement with therapeutic ‘healing’.
Locating the (missing) body in survivor accounts of sexuality and desire

I am worried that the body has been left out of the picture altogether. (G. Weiss, 1999, p. 140)

As I have argued, the abuse literature has tended to theorise notions of ‘innocence’ and ‘damage’ in ways that locate the survivor as explicitly ‘marked’ by the abuse. For example, popular discourse surrounding the ‘loss of innocence’ not only reiterate the belief that survivors will not escape unmarked by the incident, it also suggest that survivors will carry the ‘devastating stain’ of abuse. For example psychological discourse, as well as popular accounts of abuse, is largely mediated by psychoanalytic and therapeutic approaches that espouse the ‘lasting effects of child abuse’ (Wyatt & Powell, 1988). Most influential among these approaches is trauma theory, which draws on Freudian notions of the ‘unconscious’ harbouring of the abuse experience, suggesting that traumatic events will leave ineffaceable ‘wounds’ on the feminine psyche (Haaken, 1998, p. 63). As Joseph Davis (2005) suggests, the ‘abuse’ itself is positioned in the trauma model as ‘an event that overwhelms the psyche’ and as a result is ‘warded off’ to the recesses of the unconscious (p. 249). From this perspective, the mind itself is central to an individual’s ability to cope with the trauma, and its response to ‘disassociate’ from the event/memory is both mechanistic and long-lasting.

Locating the harm of abuse with reference to ‘intra-psychic’ disassociation, the absence of the body in the trauma model raises concern about women’s dis-embodiment in therapeutic and psychological accounts. When the body is addressed
in the abuse literature, it is often raised in terms of detachment: for example, the mechanism of the mind ‘splitting’ from the immediate bodily trauma of the abuse. From this perspective, the trauma model not only suggests a dissolve between the mind-body, but also locates harm in terms of the ‘non-body’. As Judith Herman (1992) suggests, while the ‘splitting away from the body’ is primarily a coping strategy used by survivors during the time of their abuse, this ‘disintegration of the self’ continues into adulthood. This position is reiterated in self-help and therapeutic texts, such as Blume’s (1990) text Secret Survivors:

The child who experiences abuse learns that the body is not her own. She learns that touch is not affection, but violation. One way to separate from the violation of incest is not to be with one’s body: my body is not myself, is not me. Often they feel no wholeness with their physical selves, no continuity between the experiences of their physical feelings and their bodies. (p. 192, 198)

By linking the ‘non-body’ to psychic aspects of the survivor, the trauma model is able to weave a connection back to ‘healthy embodiment’ through the process of mind/body ‘restoration’. Indeed, the task of re-connecting the body to the mind and ‘feeling’ is often theorised as the most important step to ‘recovery’.

For therapists like Peter Levine (2008), while trauma not only ‘robs us of our body sense’, ‘unresolved trauma’ may also be used to explain the presence of innumerable symptoms: such as body pain, fatigue, illness and harmful ‘acting out’ (p. 46). Thus, while the trauma model does not theorise a lifelong mind/body detachment, it also does not propose that the (female) body remains wholly uninhibited by experiences
of trauma. Specifically, disassociation has been linked to survivor compulsion to (passively or actively) ‘re-enact’ the abuse situation in adulthood in order to gain control over the intrapsychic and ‘undigested’ affect of the original abuse (Irwin, 1999; Van Der Kolk, 1989; Wiederman & Sansone, 2009).

Following from Freud’s ‘hysterical conversion symptoms’, trauma theorists propose that while the mind may appear to ‘forget’ the trauma, the body becomes the vehicle for processing and (often unconsciously) re-enacting the abuse. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) has argued, Freud not only presented a body that is ‘psychologically pliable’, but underlined the necessary permeable boundary between the body and the psyche in order to account for the ways that psychological problems result in symptoms like excessive anxiety and ‘bodily disturbances’ (p. 28). From this perspective, the trauma model ‘looks toward the body’ as a vehicle for psychical disturbance and suggests that the repressed ‘unconscious’ memories of abuse can be observed in enduring after-effects, many of which relate to survivors’ sexual subjectivity.

The long-term outcomes of ‘bodily disassociation’ represent a familiar narrative in popular self-help, therapeutic and psychological discourse onwards from the 1980s. Again, this discourse is largely supported by the trauma model, which posits the shifting of the ‘state of injury’ from the intrapsychic to the corporeal. Not surprisingly, psychological and therapeutic texts point to emerging bodily ‘symptoms’ and ‘dysfunctional’ sexual behaviours as evidence of the harm of abuse. At the same time, this perspective also frames any non-normative sexual behaviour as something apart from the self, or as a threat to an ‘authentic self’ which has been
largely ‘hidden’ from her awareness. More simply, notions of ‘healing’ from abuse, and pathways to the ‘true self’ are largely gauged in relation to survivor adherence to ‘normal’ (hetero)sexual behaviour.

Along with the discourse which focuses on the dysfunctional outcomes of abuse, there is also an assumption that sexual trauma will impact survivor feelings of ‘ownership’ or her ability to ‘be in her own body’. For example, Bass and Davis’ A Courage to Heal (1988, 2008) incorporated a long list of the sustained bodily symptoms associated with sexual abuse, which included survivor difficulty ‘experiencing their bodies as a unified whole’ and ‘being fully present in their bodies’ (p. 7). Other texts emphasise the magnitude of dissociation, which can range from ‘feeling betrayed and angry at their bodies’ (Sanderson, 2006, p. 56) to ‘feeling fearful of their own desires and the desires of others’ (Mann & Oakley, 1999, p. 129). Evidence of bodily disassociation becomes evident later in Bass and Davis’s text, when they suggest that ‘survivors have trouble staying present when making love’ and ‘engage in sex that repeats aspects of their abuse’ (p. 9).

Although the trauma model has been embraced by many feminist therapists, it has also been subject to criticism on account of its ‘mechanistic’ and ‘cause-and-effect’ explanations (Marecek, 1999, p. 165). For example, the ‘psychical churning’ which accompanies a survivor’s individual abuse experiences is inevitably afforded similar embodied outcomes in this framework. This is particularly evident when we turn to the psychological literature, which maps survivor sexual behaviour as sexual pathology (and as ‘oversexed’, ‘undersexed’, and ‘vulnerable to revictimisation’).
By supporting easy explanations of abuse, trauma theory inevitably fails to engage with the ways that wider cultural discourses and shortcomings surrounding women’s sexuality interact with the trauma narrative. One survivor, Chelsea spoke about the complicated positions she has taken up in the past on account of ‘being normal’:

Yeah, I read it in a book when I was receiving counselling as a child. It was What Society Does to Girls. It’s a very old book. I’ve got it at home and it says about being promiscuous and being, God, so dirty, ‘loose’, you know what I mean? Yeah, it had all women but it had more about the stigma about being abused...Being promiscuous. Yeah, because I’d read it before. Not that I did it because the book said so. It’s just that I found myself going down that way, that path, I thought ‘Oh, well…This is expected? Yeah, it’s expected. I’m normal’.

It has been widely theorised that the trauma model was supported by feminists because it re-positioned ‘outcomes of abuse’ previously considered ‘pathological’ as both ‘expected’ and ‘normal’ reactions to violence (Bumiller, 2008; Haaken, 1998). Yet, while the model is recognisable in the legal terrain, where claims of sexual harm are considered with reference to the certifiable signs and symptoms, the supposed ‘normalcy’ of trauma outcomes can hardly be considered ‘de-pathologised’ in terms of public consciousness. As Chelsea explains in the following excerpt, her acceptance of the abuse discourse, and the residing ‘expectations’ of survivor sexual behaviour did not take away her thoughts about her earlier sexual behaviour, which she describes in the upcoming extract as ‘sick’ and ‘twisted’.
Yeah and as sick and twisted as it sounds, I felt that I knew more about it and I knew what to do. I can’t even express it properly, but because I had been interfered with since I was, from my recollection, seven. I felt that I knew and I was in control but looking back, so obviously wasn’t. I just felt that…and friends that were virgins, they used to come to ask me what you know…and I used to feel like I was King Shit. Yeah, grown up because I’d always been told that I looked older, that I acted older and probably most likely because I was abused by two different people… I just felt that I was an expert; I knew what to do and it was very mechanical. I didn’t care. I just did what I wanted to do and, I felt that I was obligated to do it. To please. And as a girl, that was my perception to…oh wow, this is big, to make him happy, to keep the man, my boyfriend or whoever, happy because I was a lesser being kind of thing. Just this dumb girl. Yeah, it was just expected. That’s what I thought in my head, yep. Yeah. And sometimes I would initiate so that was confusing but it was just an obligation for me to do it. That was my role. I don’t know. It was weird. Really twisted.

Chelsea’s narrative highlights some of the difficulties survivors have in telling sexual stories outside of the ‘abused’ and ‘damaged’ narrative. As Chelsea explains, her feelings of being ‘in control’, ‘an expert’ and ‘grown up’ in her body in her earlier consensual sexual experiences were reconfigured in the present as the actions of ‘dumb girl’ who felt ‘obligated to please’. From this perspective, the ‘harm’ of the abuse is not only ‘in (her) head’ and in her ‘thinking’ that she was ‘a lesser being kind of thing’; it also translates in the body as ‘role’ and ‘expectation’, which denies
survivor access to sexual agency. It is perhaps for this reason that the body occupies a kind of ‘absence-presence’ in survivor narratives. For example, while survivors’ explicit experiences of the body were rarely discussed, the wider importance of their embodied experiences could be mapped in their talk surrounding gender and sexual subjectivity.

In many ways, because the trauma model underlines the process of re-enactment as the necessary symptom of ‘undigested affect’, which is neither incorporated in or ‘let out’ of the body, it also runs the risk of re-authoring women’s adult sexual experiences. Most obvious, if survivors begin to see their sexual behaviours as always already relating to their abuse history, their own sexual desires are inevitable forfeited, or ‘over-written’ as (‘active’ or ‘passive’) ‘re-enactment’.

Further to this, while Chelsea’s mind/body ‘disassociation’ can be observed in her lack of feeling in the body (as ‘very mechanical’), her narrative also illustrates a clear differentiation between past/present thinking around agency. As the following excerpt suggests, change is not only observed ‘in the body’ but is also dependent on the multiple ways that survivors look back on their body across different time periods. For example, while Chelsea admits that in her teenage years she ‘knew what to do and it was very mechanical’, her experiences out/in of her body have also transformed along a timeline from ‘bad’ to ‘good’.

Oh, so teenage-hood, teenage years—awful. Awful, awful, awful and then say-mid-twenties till now, awesome...It’s two ends of the spectrum I guess. Before it was… I guess the partners that I chose to, or the people that I chose
to do things with—not necessarily like intercourse, but just intimate stuff, I don’t know, it’s probably not relating to the abuse, but I felt a little bit used afterwards, especially when it was very casual and not really caring...not that I’d feel guilty but I’d feel emotionally drained afterwards because it was such a big thing and just doing it, even though I didn’t care at the time, it’s still...I’m contradicting myself, aren’t I? But you just kind of feel like ‘Oh, I’ve done it again’. There’s no happiness with it. But now, with him, with my husband, it’s all good. Yeah, I don’t know if that’s any different for women who haven’t been abused or...? There are similarities.

In re-telling her sexual subjectivity across past and present time periods, Chelsea also illuminates the dangers in relying on singular notions of ‘the (non)body’ when telling stories about abuse. As I outline in the next section, by presenting the ‘symptomatic’ body of the survivor, the trauma model ultimately fails to engage in the wider roles that the body, or multiple ‘body images’, play in situating individual narratives (G. Weiss, 1999). As Chelsea’s narrative suggests, while notions of the ‘disembodied self’ are likely to be incorporated into survivor sexual subjectivity, it is also likely that changes in their relationships with themselves/others over time will impact their investment in straightforward notions of the self.

**Re-figuring an agentic, desiring body in survivor accounts**

Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler (1993), Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Moira Gatens (1996) have drawn on Foucauldian notions of the ‘lived body’ as both a product and an agent of social interaction and systems of meaning. For Grosz (1994),
‘the body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning’ (p. 18). Grosz uses the model of the möbius strip as a metaphor for the psyche, where the inside (body) and outside (culture) continuously overlap each other and ‘carve out a social subject’.

Similarly, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s [1962] work, Gail Weiss (1999) suggests that while our past experience plays an important role in moulding our own perspectives of the body ‘or body image’, this image is always in a state of flux:

Put simply, there is no such thing as ‘the body’ and ‘the body image’. Rather than view the body image as a cohesive, coherent phenomenon that operates in a fairly uniform way in our everyday existence. I argue for a multiplicity of body images, body images that copresent in any given individual, and which are themselves constructed through a series of corporeal exchanges that take place both within and outside of specific bodies. (pp. 1-2)

Weiss’s theory challenges simplistic readings of the survivors’ necessary disembodiment after sexual trauma. Foremost, building on the work of Iris Marion Young (1990), Weiss’s notion of embodiment as a ‘process of growth’, incorporates women’s bodily experiences of past and future which instantly fragment therapeutic notions of the (non)body as either/or ‘present/absent’ for survivors. Importantly, Weiss’s theory not only emphasises the ‘expressive space’ of the body, it also shifts the focus of individual embodiment toward a mode which recognises historical, cultural and discursive contexts (1962, cited in Parkins, 2000, p. 60). In doing so, Weiss (1999) considers the ways that bodies are comprised of both inside (self) and
outside (other), and the ways that interactions and experiences with others might produce ‘intercorporeality’:

To describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasise that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by out continual interaction with other human bodies. (p. 5)

Drawing attention to the subject as a site of intersection, Weiss underlines the importance of moving beyond unilateral understandings of embodiment as a static representation or ‘surface identification’ of the self.

A number of survivors in this study endorsed Weiss’s notion of ‘multiple body images’ when commenting on their embodied sexual experiences. For Zoe, identity with the survivor/non-body could be located in her talk about feeling sexually passive and lacking agency to ‘take control’ of her sexual experiences. However, rather than moving on a line from absence to presence, changes over time, which included her interactions with different partners and ‘the right guy’, allowed her to ‘find her footing’ and ‘figure out’ who she wanted to be as a sexual partner:

I didn’t really think of it in terms of what happened when I was younger. I suppose it probably had an impact at the start when I was being a more passive sexual partner...but I think I just needed the right guy who would sort of let me take control a bit more and then I sort of could find my footing and figure out who I wanted to be as a sexual partner sort of thing...Yeah, like someone that lets you, like make the relationship so it’s about you as well as him, rather than just, because all the other guys it was more about them
because, like when I was growing up it was all about other people and like my needs sort of just fell by the wayside, but now it’s like equal kind of thing...like it’s pleasurable in that sense but before it was more for the guy but now it’s for me as well as the guy. Yeah, it’s pleasurable. Yeah. And like he waits for me to make the moves and if I want to take control he’ll let me take control because I want to and stuff.

In the above extract, Zoe reflects on her timeline from passivity to pleasure in a way that incorporates popular notions of abuse (such as her reflection on being ‘a more passive sexual partner) but also a changing ‘body image’ which is more able to ‘take control’ and experience pleasure. The ability to reflect on the self in terms of a ‘corporeal fluidity’ is important, not only because it allows Zoe to move beyond a singular (cultural) image of the survivor as ‘passive’, but also because it problematises the notion of the stable self after abuse. As Weiss (1999) suggests: ‘it is the very multiplicity of these body images that guarantees that we cannot invest too heavily in any one of them, and these multiple body images themselves offer points of resistance to the development of too strong an identification with a singularly alienating specular (or even cultural) image’ (p. 100).

Similarly, describing the changes in her sexual relationship over time, Chelsea situates the body—and body detachment—as central to her lack of desire and emotion surrounding sex. However, reflecting on the ‘non-body’ and surrounding metaphors of detachment, Chelsea is also able to locate her present embodied self:
In high school...yeah, I just didn’t care...There was no intimacy; it was just a random thing. It wasn’t like a pleasurable thing on my side. I just did it and I used to just—it’s not that I’d prepare myself but I just—I guess it was...I just kind of detach and just say ‘It’s just the body’ and I’d just do it. I’d never—it’s ironic—only with my current partner, this long term relationship that I’ve had—if I’m not willing or I’m not really like I said, ‘feeling it’, I’ll tell him I’m not...and I won’t say no, I’ll just say ‘I’m not really...I’m tired’ or whatever ‘I’m not in the mood’ but with past people I’d just do it. I’d just detach myself. Wouldn’t get overly emotional. Yeah. It’s just the body...I think from when I first met my partner...It’s only with him in the last few years, that I can feel that comfortable, even about how I look and the feelings. Yeah. That’s been a massive impact. I don’t know if I would have kind of reverted to those ways when I was a teenager if I had a partner that wasn’t understanding or not really caring or loving, but he’s very affectionate and very, very patient.

**Always already? Re-tracing the cultural significance of women’s dis-embodiment**

By assigning survivors a ‘non-body’, and focusing on the realm of the ‘intrapsychic’, the trauma model often re-presents standardised symptoms of femininity which blur the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘metaphoric’ sources of pain. As I outlined in Chapter Four and Chapter Six, theorising survivor stories from a position inside the trauma model and ‘sexual dysfunction’ misses out on wider issues of
disempowerment that plague women’s narratives in general. Importantly, by privileging intrapsychic outcomes of trauma, this model also fails to examine how women’s bodies, with or without the experience of sexual abuse, are caught up in symbolic forms of abuse (Haaken, 1998). For example, drawing attention to the mind/body divide in traumatic experience, the trauma model effectively frames the self in two parts in ways that elide the female body and women’s experience of their body in everyday oppressive acts.

For example, Chelsea spoke of feeling detachment and ‘treating her body badly’ when she was a teenager, in ways which incorporated her tangible memories of abuse, but also her struggle to own sexual subjectivity, and to experience sexual desire as a woman. As the following excerpt suggests, Chelsea’s story reveals a ‘broken’ body enmeshed in wider cultural forms of gender oppression.

I had the, well the teenage years but I’m sure that ‘normal’ girls go through that too—of course they do...Fourteen, I lost it then, prior to, I remember the terminology with the court prep and everything and the virginity issue and I did feel a little bit ‘broken’. It felt like it was taken; it was something that was actually tangible that was taken from me. That’s probably why it was so easy for me to just enter this sexual relationship at 14 and not really care. It was massive and I had from 14 till 18—so four years, there was heaps of boys. Yeah, I just didn’t care...even though it was very...there was no intimacy; it was just a random thing. I was slutty. I didn’t care and I had poor body image. I’ve always been a bigger girl so with that and the abuse, giving it was more for an
acceptance thing. It wasn’t like a pleasurable thing on my side. It was just like ‘Oh, I’m part of the in crowd. I don’t care. I’m just doing it’. I had a few friends that were like that too...Yeah, there was no respect, no self-respect at that time, no.

Chelsea’s recollection of this time in her life, and the emerging motifs of the ‘broken body’ and of ‘poor body image’ speak to the ‘real’ and resounding aspects of trauma in survivors’ everyday lives (Haaken, 1998, p. 106). While her memory of child sexual abuse is situated in her life story as ‘something that was actually tangible that was taken’, the lack of pleasure afforded to her engagement with sex after this time illustrate a body contoured by wider norms which effectively ‘cut her body off’ from feeling. Following from Haaken’s (1998) interrogation of clinical motifs, along with the notion that survivors of trauma necessarily respond through ‘body disassociation’, Chelsea’s narrative also demonstrates a body in collision with everyday forms of oppression. From this perspective, Chelsea’s reflection on ‘not caring’ and ‘poor body image’ might also speak of a body imposed on by cultural meanings of ‘lack’ which have denied woman (as body) the possibility to speak from a position that articulates their own self-hood (Cixous, 1976; Irigaray, 1985).

Drawing on psychoanalytic feminist work, Haaken (1998) suggests that survivors disconnect from their body may have ‘less to do with child sexual abuse than with the agonising search for a voice.’ Situating the female body as ‘lack’ in the symbolic order, Haaken (1998) suggests that the trauma model fails to consider the cultural specificities that create ‘body memories’. From this perspective, ‘it is more a
problem of the body as a whole for women than of any discrete, momentous acts in violation of it’ (Haaken, 1998, p. 104).

In many ways, ‘the problem of the (female) body’ extends to notions of recovery. For example, while survivor narratives remain caught up in their abuse experience, their ‘pathways to healing’ are ultimately hindered by what is lacking and unavailable to them as women. Yet, the complex and multifarious ‘outcomes’ of trauma are invariably met with straightforward (yet often impossible) expectations surrounding ‘curing women’. For example, Bass and Davis (1988; 2007) present healing in terms of ownership of the body—and of women ‘experiencing their bodies as a unified whole’ and ‘being fully present in their bodies’—and other dimensions individual autonomy which have been routinely denied to women (Haaken, 1998). In this way, feminist investment in the trauma model illuminates not what needs to be ‘healed’ but what is perpetually absent for women more broadly, which is the recognition of an autonomous female sexual subjectivity.

The non-body versus multiplicity: Accounting for change and the ‘re-building’ of the self

The problem of the trauma model resides not only in its endorsement of a fixed set of bodily symptoms to explain the effects of disassociation, but also in its failure to theorise beyond the survivors’ ‘non-body’. Situating the body as the site and outlet of trauma, popular frameworks of ‘recovery’ in psychological discourse effectively render the survivor body as something apart from herself, and her own desires. Indeed, even when it is appropriated to specifically endorse modes of ‘sexual
recovery’, notions of ‘positive sexual behaviour’ are often gauged by the extent to which survivors are able to participate in ‘functional’ sex with men. Not surprisingly, survivor pathway to ‘reclaiming their right to healthy sexuality’ is caught up in the same non-body that plague non-abused women’s attempts to achieve sexual autonomy.

On another level, the emphasis on survivors’ journey from the ‘non-body’ toward a ‘healthy (hetero)sex’ ensures that any sexual difficulties she experiences will be not only be tied to her ‘abuse identity’, but this identity will also come to dominate her thinking about her-self. From this perspective, the survivors’ (non)body is interwoven with ‘post-trauma’ inasmuch as the body becomes a vehicle for ‘curing’ (or not curing) the self.

Jenny Kitzinger (1992) outlined some early feminist concerns about therapeutic measures which emphasised the importance of survivor engagement with ‘healthy’ heterosexual sex. For Kitzinger, the new impetus of much of the therapeutic and self-help texts at this time was that survivors must ‘reclaim their (hetero)sexuality’ in order to take a positive step toward recovery. However, notions of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ failed to consider that survivors might have legitimate reasons for choosing not to engage with sexual relationships with men. By exchanging psychological terms such as ‘sexual dysfunctional’ for survivors’ ‘right to pleasure’, therapeutic language also ignored wider discourses which might interrupt survivors’ striving for sexual autonomy and pleasure (J. Kitzinger, 1992, p. 407).
Most alarming, therapeutic discourses which espouse survivor ‘sexual healing’ rarely attend to the ways that heterosexual sex might further problematise women’s ability to achieve sexual agency, for both survivors and non-abused women. While I do not wish to undermine the importance of sexual pleasure in women’s lives, the rhetoric of survivor pathway ‘back to heterosexuality’ also presents ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ (hetero)sexuality as a choice-laden and liberating territory for women (Reavey, 2003; Reavey & Warner, 2001). By presenting sex as an avenue of healing, therapeutic discourse also fails to reveal that sexual relationships are inevitably formed within existing frameworks which privilege male pleasure. One survivor, Charlotte, who sought professional assistance regarding her emotional response to sex with her partner, spoke about wanting sex to be ‘pleasurable’ while at the same time ‘feeling bad’ about her reactions:

Actually, yeah, I went to a school counsellor...because I’d just lost my virginity so that brought back a lot of feelings and emotions with my consenting boyfriend of nine months. It wasn’t a traumatic event at all, but just being sexually active made me think in a different way...just being involved with a man and you know, being sexually active and doing the things that couples do, it was…I felt bad for my partner. That’s why I went because sometimes I’d get emotional and say ‘Well, hey, let’s not do this now’, you know, and he understands that and he’s really, really great, but we were 17 and I feel like ‘Well, that’s a big load for any 17 year old guy to bear’, when he’s been with his girlfriend for nine months. I felt really bad for him. So I went to try and like ‘I feel bad for ‘Jake’, how do I fix it? How do I make myself not so upset?’
Because sex is meant to be a pleasurable thing and it’s meant to be fun, so when I get upset because of something that he does, with good intentions, I feel really bad for him...I felt bad for doing that to a 17 year old boy who likes to have sex. You know what I mean? I’m worried about other people because I’m making everything about other people, not about myself or whatever. But I’m like ‘I really, really, really like this guy. I want him to be happy. I know that this is making him unhappy. I feel bad’.

While I do not wish to overwrite Charlotte’s experience and agency in the above account, the constant slippage between sex as ‘fun’ and ‘pleasurable’ to ‘feeling bad’ suggests some ambivalence about what she believes needs to be ‘fix(ed)’ in the relationship. Looking back on the experience, part of Charlotte’s ‘feeling bad’ resides in the belief that her own actions are denying ‘a 17 year old boy who likes to have sex’ the experience of ‘pleasure’ and ‘fun’. Again, while it is important to recognise the complexity of Charlotte’s position, ‘feeling bad for (her) partner’ and ‘making everything about other people and not about (her)self’ seemed to override the possibility that she might want to consider her own needs (and pleasure) in the experience. In this way, the underlying issue of male heterosexual desire occupies a significant role in her feelings of inadequacy.

However, while ‘feeling bad’ was connected to the discourse of the male sexual drive, it was also related to Charlotte’s perceived failure to ‘move on’ from her abuse experience and take up a position as a ‘strong’, ‘independent woman’: 


It was more…okay, it was a bit like a cycle to me. I’d get upset. I’d have like an anxiety reaction towards what…towards the situation. It wasn’t really the fear or the anxiety or the stress about being abused. That’s upsetting but then I’d get upset because I felt like I shouldn’t have to be dealing with this. I’m 17, it’s not fair, this should be a good thing, why am I upset? It was the repercussions and how like ‘Wow. It’s six years on and you’re still upset and it’s affecting your life now and that sucks’. Why should it be tainted?

The above extract suggests that Charlotte’s ‘feeling bad’ has also been turned inward. Alongside feeling inadequate, due to her inability to partake in ‘normal’ heterosex, Charlotte is also at odds with the repercussions of ‘still (being) upset’ because these reactions are heavily tied up with being an active victim. Her divulging that she ‘still has to deal with’ emotional issues surrounding the abuse automatically denies her the opportunity to take up a position as a non-victim. Thus, Charlotte’s belief that her life is ‘tainted’ intersects with contemporary discourses surrounding women’s sexuality, which outwardly resist notions of victimhood and passivity (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). This bind between ‘feeling the effects of abuse’ and neoliberal notions of self-sufficiency and control make it difficult for Charlotte to take up a position as a sexual agent. Rather, her admission that she sometimes felt ‘emotional’ about sex seem to automatically deny her a subject position which considers her strength and desire, as well as episodic difficulties surrounding her past abuse.
Clearly, by advocating sexual ‘recovery’ and survivors’ necessary pathway ‘back to heterosexual sex’, therapeutic readings of survivor sexual dysfunction encourage dichotomous identities of ‘victims’ and ‘non-victims’ (J. Kitzinger, 1992; O’Dell, 1997, 2003a). As I have already discussed, psy-discourses which reify survivor ‘abnormality’ are also active in generating ‘imaginary’ subject positions to endorse non-abused women’s ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ sexual subjectivity in the heterosexual matrix (Reavey, 2003; Reavey & Warner, 2001). Furthermore, distinctions between the ‘victim’ and ‘non-victim’ have been further inflated by contemporary understandings of feminine sexuality that emphasise women’s responsibility and risk in the context of an otherwise ‘choice-laden’ terrain. As Lise Gotell (2007) has argued, neoliberal frameworks not only demarcate ‘coercive sex’, they also present heterosexuality on the ‘other side’ of this boundary as relatively ‘free from power’ (p. 152-3).

**Remaking the self? Competing discourses of change and sexual enlightenment**

That day was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck, and I've lived inside the 'fire' in my head ever since. (Vogel, 1997, p. 90)

Commenting on Paula Vogel’s contemporary drama, How I Learned to Drive, Ann Pellegrini (2007) draws attention to the disorganised narrative which is often caught up with survivor stories. Resigning the possibility of a cohesive ‘story’ of abuse, Pellegrini notes that Vogel’s play, which presents a patchwork of memories of abuse from the protagonist ‘Li’l Bit’, highlights memory’s attachment and detachment to a coherent script over time. By refusing the portrayal of a survivor identity that is
‘always already’ damaged, Pellegrini suggests that Vogel’s play purposefully ‘refuses a conception of identity as a story that could have one ending and one beginning’ (p. 416). Further, she argues that while women’s experiences of child sexual abuse, incest and rape are ‘far too common experiences’ they are not representative of the same experience. In this way, rather than present the ‘usual story’ of abuse, Vogel’s character resists the dominant discourses of ‘victimisation’ which have constituted her body and identity.

Clearly, survivor experiences of her body and sexuality play an important role in her thinking about herself, and her identity as a ‘victim’ or as a ‘non-victim’. Following the self-help and therapeutic rhetoric, there is an expectation that she will endure some uncertainty surrounding sex, and her body. In this way, the body can also be positioned as the site through which survivors construct their meanings about the world, and their gendered position within it.

On another level, by establishing past and present continuity in survivor narratives and sexual subjectivity, psychological discourse is active in establishing the ‘cycle of abuse’ as a key motif in survivor development. Situating the ‘undoing of the self’ in relation to ‘loss’ and childhood (sexual) innocence, psychological literature not only exists in a dialogue with popular notions of ‘healing’, it also allows little space for survivors to conceive a subjectivity outside of ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ sexuality. As I have argued throughout this thesis, a successful ‘healing’ remains dependent on survivors’ ability to meet the requirements of ‘normal’ femininity. Survivors who reject this ideal or continue to express concern over their ability to partake in
heteronormative understandings of healing are likely to be situated in relation to their ‘failure to heal’. Returning to the trauma model in particular, it is evident that taking away notions of child sexuality and survivor’s access to sexual embodiment might thwart her ability to re-model her-self in ways that promote sexual agency in her present life. As Chelsea’s excerpt below suggests, the emphasis on pathways to healing often limit the extent to which survivors can dis-engage with ‘the normal kind’ of sexual scripts offered in account of ‘healing’:

I want to experiment more. I don’t know if this relates, but he doesn’t want to and I guess it’s not really a difficulty but it’s just a…I don’t want to do the whole normal kind of boring thing and he’s not for any change at all. I’ve already reached that point where I’m comfortable, I’m happy, I’m not feeling weird and I’m getting satisfaction out of it but I just wanted to experiment a little bit more but he’s like ‘No’ and I feel like ‘Oh, I married him, so I can’t do anything about that’.

From this perspective, there is not only a lack of distinction between past-present, but also a reliance on ‘putting back together’ the (lost) pieces in order to make the (whole) ‘healed’ self. Invariably, however, the ‘whole’ self is remodelled by psy-discourses that discount survivors’ own authentic pathways to sexual agency. As Haaken (1998) suggests, this construction of the victim works against the ‘complex truths and honest self-exploration’ which are necessary for survivors to build on the past to develop a more self-defined identity (p. 123).
Yet, the model of the ‘lost’ or ‘missing’ self following trauma has also been taken up by feminist philosophers. For example, Susan Brison (2002) argues that trauma not only provokes the ‘undoing’ and ‘disintegration’ of the self, it also causes a fracture in terms of an individual’s ongoing narrative:

Trauma undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present and anticipated future. (p. 41)

Engaging somewhat with therapeutic language or ‘trauma talk’, Brison suggests that the survivor might reintegrate the lost parts of herself by ‘piecing together’ the ‘shattered self’ and ‘fractured memory’ of the trauma (p. 48). However, rather than presenting the self as resigned to ‘loss’, or permanently ‘marked’ by the experience, Brison argues that survivors of trauma are able ‘to reconstruct themselves’ through the telling of their own trauma narratives. Specifically, Brison (1999) suggests that by transforming trauma narratives—through the action of ‘speech acts of memory’—survivors can re-position themselves as subjects (actors) rather than objects of violence:

Survivors need to reconstruct their personalities, memories, values and dreams before their trauma, integrate that past with their trauma experience, and move beyond that experience so they can enjoy their lives in the present and look forward to the future. (p. 46)

For Brison, ‘speech acts’ do not necessarily have to comprise an oral public (or legal) confession, but may also take the form of a private reflection, or a journal
entry. What is most important is that survivors are able to engage in a process of re-mastering their trauma narratives in a way that allows them to integrate their past, present and future self. However, rather than point towards a ‘cure’, or even a ‘re-healing’, Brison’s (1999) theorising of ‘speech acts’ emphasises the importance of uncovering a survivor who has been ultimately remade by her experience:

Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that diffuses traumatic memory, giving shape and an order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake the self. (p. 40)

At first glance, Brison’s notion of ‘remaking the self’ is not dissimilar to therapeutic approaches, which focus on meditating survivor narratives of the ‘false self’ and the ‘true-self’ to interrupt connections to the past/identity (J. E. Davis, 2005, p. 166-167). However, by rejecting notions that the self can be ‘recovered’ or ‘put back together’, Brison’s theory also encourages another mode of looking ‘forward’ to the self. In doing so, her theory not only challenges straightforward notions of survivors’ ‘splitting’ of the mind/(non)body following abuse, it also rejects the idea that survivors are permanently unmade by their child sexual abuse experience, or are representative of loss (of innocence; of adult sexual desire). As Brison (2002) adds in her concluding chapter, the most important aspect of a survivors’ narrative reconstruction lies in its ability to reveal ‘that there was never a coherent self (or story) to begin with’ (p. 116). Indeed, she asserts that while ‘trauma unravels whatever meaning we’ve found or woven ourselves in to’ it is equally capable of
opening up possibilities for a future self (p. 49). The poignant message effectively
cuts through old assumptions, where ‘lost pieces’ no longer need ‘rebuilding’, but
rather make way for a ‘new’ (survivor) identity to emerge.

**Conclusion**

In an effort to establish clear indicators of survivor harm, the impetus of the self-help
and therapeutic literature has been a focus on the perceived ‘loss’ of sexual
innocence for survivors. However, the healing motif of the ‘inner child’ which
accompanies this movement, and the emphasis on building a connection between the
child and adult survivor, has also impacted survivor pathways to sexual subjectivity.
Specifically, because the ‘acceptable story’ of abuse has deliberately edited out child
sexuality, survivors are compelled to look back on their ‘child-self’ as ‘innocent’ and
asexual, or to otherwise risk feeling blame or to question their own collusion in the
experience.

While the overemphasis of ‘innocence’ and ‘asexuality’ in abuse discourse has often
limited survivor access to unproblematic adult sexualities, the overriding notion that
survivors were ‘cut off’ from their body also plagued their attempts to achieve sexual
agency. Furthermore, because ‘healthy’ modes of ‘sexual healing’ remained caught
up in their ability to partake in ‘normal’ heterosex, survivors inevitably encountered
the same lack of agency as non-abused women.

In underlining the absence of sex-positive perspectives, I do not aim to dispute
survivor experiences of sexual inhibition, or the often debilitating presence of
flashbacks in their adult sexual experiences. However, the emphasis on compulsory
sexual harm and the necessity of adult sexual recovery has perhaps overshadowed more nuanced readings of survivor sexuality that extend beyond markers of abnormality. What remains missing from therapeutic literature in this area is a theorising around the importance of the body and of improving pleasurable sexual experiences for survivors. Furthermore, while sexual desire may remain a site of struggle for many survivors, psychological and popular accounts remain caught up in a culture of victimhood, which leaves little space for survivors to carve out new or individual sexual subjectivities.
CHAPTER NINE

Conclusions: Thinking around the label of ‘post’-victim

While I remain wary of the connotations of the title of this concluding chapter, especially its relationship to a particular strand of post-feminism, it is clear that many of the participants in this study positioned themselves in ways which challenged simple notions of victimisation. Indeed, the survivors in this study often disputed popular discourses which situated them as ‘fragile’ or as ‘unable to function’. However, the widespread exposure of survivor stories through popular talk show frameworks which focus on the individualisation of suffering and healing have influenced the subject positions available to survivors.

This was most visible in survivor recollections of disclosure, which were frequently met with pseudo-therapeutic responses or ‘trauma-talk’ (Marecek, 1999). These reactions often overshadowed survivor narratives and the way they situated this identity in their adult lives. For example, one survivor underlined the incongruity of popular ‘victim stereotype’ with what ‘people should think’-that survivors were ‘more strong and more independent’. While the recovery movement has raised public awareness about the perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse, it has also anchored survivors to an identity that reiterates narratives of ‘harm’ and the importance of ‘healing’. On one hand, this movement has advocated survivors’ ‘personal pathway’ to recovery. Yet, on the other, it has also been strongly driven by expert advice and a therapeutic tone which underlines survivors’ ‘responsibility to heal’.
By locating a collective identity through the promotion of survivor harm and suffering, the resulting ‘wounded identity’ that has emerged from this movement has also dissolved survivors’ political voice (W. Brown, 1995). As the survivors revealed, given the empathic dialogue or ‘mood dampening’ which followed their own attempts to speak about child sexual abuse, it remains far removed from any political topic of conversation. In the absence of a political platform, or at least a model of survivorship which makes demands for what they want rather than what they are, ‘re-learning to speak’ needs to begin addressing survivor agency and resilience. Following Laura Brown’s (1995) work, this thesis has argued that it is perhaps this ‘other’ survivor story, which combines survivor experiences of being in the world with their position as ‘experts’ rather than victims that is currently lacking in the abuse literature, as well as in popular representations.

Presently, lines drawn between ‘victims’ and ‘non-victims’ in the cultural landscape suggest that particular women are somehow more vulnerable to or responsible for their (re)victimisation. As I reviewed in Chapter Three, this tactic has been at least encouraged by psychological and academic research, which differentiates survivor pathology and sexual behaviour from ‘normal’, non-abused women. However, as the interviews from young non-abused women reveal in Chapter Four, current theorisations of ‘normal’ feminine sexuality rarely incorporate the complexities inherent in young women’s sexual experiences or in their attempts to achieve sexual agency and pleasure. Clearly, notions of survivor dysfunctional sexual behaviour need to be scrutinised with reference to the often complex and contradictory ways that young women describe themselves in contemporary sexual relationships. Indeed,
non-abused women’s stories drew attention to the ways that psychological symptomatologies overlap with dominant discourses of heterosex. By marking particular sexual behaviours in relation to abuse outcomes, this literature also fails to acknowledge its engagement with cultural discourse surrounding ‘healthy’ (and desirable) femininity, which continue to constrain both non-abused and survivor access to more empowering sexual subjectivities.

Following from the above point, both survivor and non-abused women’s narratives underlined the growing pressure for young women to identify as ‘non-victims’. As I discussed in Chapter Five, this trend has undoubtedly been reinforced by neoliberal rhetoric, which has supported a widespread victim backlash. Ultimately, the disintegration of a political platform for survivors, coupled with a very vocal popular discourse which positions women as responsible for sexual violence, has operated to conceal cultural discourses which support sexual violence. In this way, it is easy to see how the classification of ‘vulnerable’ or ‘risky’ women might function to maintain the ‘safe world’ perspective, and why victim self-blame has emerged as a familiar story for managing sexual violence, as well as those ‘unwanted’ sexual experiences (Gavey, 2002).

Unfortunately, this ‘story’ has taken precedence over more positive accounts of survivor resistance and resilience to sexual violence in their lives. On the other hand, as I addressed in Chapter Six, not only do popular representations of the ‘angry’ survivor discourage the outward display of emotion but this position also shares some similarity with the traditional hysteric. Indeed, negative emotions which do not
align well with the model of the ‘together’, ‘harmonious’ individual are often explicitly discouraged in the recovery and therapeutic literature. In this way, ‘fitting the label’ of the ‘victim’ may also disallow young women appropriate avenues in which to ‘speak out’ about the injustice they feel. As the survivors in this study revealed, this position was also caught up in wider cultural anxieties surrounding the ‘authenticity’ and ‘truth’ of women’s stories in the wake of the false memory debate.

More often, survivor identity remains dependent on self-help and therapeutic notions of loss, particularly in terms of ‘childhood innocence’, which inevitably places limits on what is considered an ‘appropriate’ account of abuse. As a number of survivors revealed, the significance of ‘innocence’ and ‘asexuality’ in the abuse literature and popular discourse also impacted the stories they could tell about their abuse experience. Foremost, survivors have felt compelled to edit out possible experiences of child sexuality to avoid blame or suspicion about their complicity in their abuse. The disquiet around child sexuality also raises questions about how the recovery and self-help literature might be contributing to notions of survivor self-blame, while at the same time producing texts to alleviate it.

In addition, evocative connections to the past such as the motif of the ‘inner-child’ often make it difficult for adult survivors to take up unproblematic adult sexual subjectivities in the present. While I do not wish to dispute the significance of this experience in survivors’ own lives, a number of survivors revealed that assumptions surrounding the ‘compulsory sexual harm’ of abuse cut them off from engaging in
sex talk with their peers. It is perhaps these largely unspoken issues that have lasting impacts on how young female survivors come to ‘see themselves’ as ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’. This could have implications in terms of how survivors understand their sexual subjectivity, and they may approach adolescence and sexual maturity with an expectation that they will inevitably encounter ‘issues’ about sex.

For lesbian and queer survivors, assumptions surrounding the (traumatic) connection between sexual abuse and sexual identity make it difficult for them to take up an unharmed sexual subjectivity. As I outlined in Chapter Seven, not only does psychological and popular discourse suggest that an abuse history can explain the outcome of lesbian sexuality; it rarely positions this outcome as positive. This ‘sticky connection’ positions lesbian sexuality as a failed attempt by survivors to achieve ‘normal’ heterosexuality, and is often translated in terms of their impossibility to heal (Ahmed, 2004). Yet, it was perhaps this unique positionality that allowed the lesbian and queer survivors in this study more opportunity to resist cultural discourses and to transcend usual modes of healing. Furthermore, by challenging simple connections between healthy (hetero)sex and recovery, lesbian and queer survivors were able to engage more fully in their own sexual biographies.

As I revealed in Chapter Eight, the ‘problem of the body’ for survivors can be traced back to the trauma model, which underlines the significance of bodily detachment or its ‘splitting’ (away) from the intrapsychic. However, the overriding belief that survivors are somehow ‘cut-off” from their bodies has also impacted their own perception of healing, and ultimately their pathway toward sexual agency.
Moreover, because the survivors’ body is bound up in emerging sexual dysfunction and at the same time positioned as the vehicle for sexual healing, any non-normative sexual behaviour viewed as relating to the abuse, or as a threat to survivors’ ‘authentic self’. Yet, as the survivors in this study revealed, while the ‘normalcy’ surrounding trauma outcomes amplified expectations that they would encounter problems with their body, ‘healthy’ sexual embodiment was also theorised as stable and unchanging. This model did not really represent survivors (or indeed non-abused women’s) experiences. On the contrary, few survivors relied on one body image in which to tell stories about their sexual subjectivity. Not surprisingly, their sexual lives were often comprised of multiple body images, where sexual experiences were rarely anchored to one sexual identity, but rather to survivor’s own changing body images over time.

This study points to the need for academic, therapeutic and popular discourse to engage in more multiple and encompassing notions of healing for survivors of child sexual abuse. Ultimately, this will need to incorporate a rethinking about what might entail ‘healthy’ and ‘normal’ sexual subjectivity, as well as a new frame in which to consider survivor ‘difference’. As I have argued in this thesis, there are presently few accounts across therapeutic and psy-discourse which move away from the central narrative of dysfunction. Yet, it is perhaps the ‘other’ survivor story, which combines survivor experiences of being in the world as experts rather than victims that is currently lacking in the abuse literature, as well as in popular representations. For example, rather than an exclusive focus on the ‘immoveable injury’ of abuse, and the tailoring of risk management for survivors, psychological research might
begin to examine alternative stories which attend to survivor strength and resilience. This may have important implications for survivors who feel misrepresented by current research, or feel delimited by the types of experiences that they can tell in both private and private contexts.

As I have argued in this thesis, survivor experiences of adult sexual trauma also need to be contextualised in relation to the wider cultural context which both supports and normalises violence against women. The delineation of sexual subjectivity with reference to ‘victim’/‘non-victim’ women not only offers false alternatives, it also leads the movement away from a critique of the underlying cultural discourses that underpin violence against women. This may have significant impacts on how survivors come to view their own sexual subjectivity, or reflect on possible issues in their sexual relationships. Given the potential for these damaging consequences, academic and therapeutic literature would benefit from a more overarching focus on the everyday context which might thwart survivors (and non-abused) women’s access to more empowering sexual subjectivities.

In many ways, ‘the problem’ of child sexual abuse continues to be theorised in relation to survivor adult sexual behaviour rather than ‘outside’, in the gendered and structural inequalities which maintain violence against girls and women. However, the rhetoric which situates survivors as always already damaged and/or vulnerable to revictimisation may operate to deny survivors a position beyond that of self-blame. This is a particularly dangerous position as it has the potential to contribute to, and regulate, what gets counted as sexual victimisation and/or sexual pathology for
survivors. In this way, academic and therapeutic literature may need to rethink the ethical implications of their research and practice, particularly its role in reinforcing dominant discourses of women’s sexual subjectivity.

Coupled with this, current applications of the trauma model which move survivors away from ownership of her bodies and sexual subjectivity may also interrupt survivor pathways toward sexual agency. Within this framework, alternative and/or non-normative sexual behaviours are positioned as a hangover of child sexual abuse, rather than as a natural, inevitable process or a positive, individual choice. This is particularly apparent in the literature surrounding lesbian, bisexual and queer woman, where notions of ‘sexual dysfunction’ override their own unique pathways to sexual identity and sexual agency.

From this perspective, existing heterosexist approaches taken up in trauma counselling, and in the trauma literature more generally, may be working against survivors, particularly lesbian and queer survivors. Indeed, the current framework of survivor healing not only draws a line between heterosexuality and healing, it also fails to adequately engage with the potentiality of lesbian, queer and bisexual narratives to offer a ‘different’ story. Foremost, in widening the possibility of what might count as ‘healthy’ sexuality, lesbian and queer sex-positive practices may also encourage new links which promote survivor agency and alternative pathways to healing. This connection is important, and the current lack of exploration of lesbian, queer and bisexual survivors points to a need for future research in this area.
While I acknowledge the limitations in making generalisations from a restricted number of participant narratives, their stories offer significant insights into understandings of survivor, and young women’s, sexual subjectivity. Building on existing research scholarship in the area, this thesis underlines the need to develop new psychological and therapeutic agendas which consider women’s sexual experiences and subjectivity in multifarious ways. Foremost, this thesis complicates existing understandings by focusing more broadly on the ways that survivors and non-abused women position accounts of sexual pleasure and sexual danger in their adult sexual lives. Overall, by interrogating these dominant discourses, and what has emerged as the ‘usual story’ of abuse, this thesis also opens the possibility of re-making a survivor sexual identity beyond trauma and dysfunction.
REFERENCES


MacBride-Stewart, S. (2007). Que(e)rying the meaning of lesbian health: Individual(izing) and community discourses. In V. Clarke & E. Peel (Eds.), Out in psychology: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer perspectives. Chichester: Wiley.


Reavey, P. (1997). `What do you do for a living then?' The political ramifications of research interests within everyday interpersonal contexts. Feminism & Psychology, 7(4), 553-558.


APPENDICES
Appendix A: Information Sheet

Young Women’s Experiences of their Sexual Lives
Volunteers Wanted: Women Aged 18-28

Thank you for your interest in this research. The aim of this study is to investigate the commonalities and differences in young women (aged between 18 and 28 years) who have and who have not experienced child sexual abuse in relation to their sexual lives. We are interested in talking to women who are in both heterosexual and lesbian/bisexual relationships. This research aims to explore how survivors and non-abused women think about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ adult sexual experiences, and the ways that young women reflect on pleasure and danger in their adult sexual relationships.

This research is concerned with women’s story-telling and aims to develop knowledge and awareness that will contribute to the development of the current understanding of survivors of child sexual abuse and the adult sexual lives of young women more generally. The study is being conducted by Ms Georgia Ovenden and Associate Professor Moira Carmody (Supervisor) who are based at the Social Justice Social Change Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney.

If you choose to become involved, the study will consist of audio-taped interviews. The interview will explore a range of themes including: reflections on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ adult sexual experiences, attitudes about peer pressure surrounding sexual activity, attitudes toward virginity, and women’s reflection on changes they have experienced over time in sexual relationships. This discussion will be audio taped to allow us to go over what is said in detail afterwards. The entire session will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete, with a break mid-way. Interviews will be conducted in a private room at the University of Western Sydney, Bankstown Campus, or at a location and time that is convenient for you. Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any point without giving a reason. Your responses will remain confidential; you will not be identified by name in our files, or in any future publication of results. Your privacy will be guaranteed through the use of a pseudonym (an alias) to replace your first name.

Contact details are available below if you have any issues you would like to raise or if you experience any discomfort after you have participated.

The NSW Rape Crisis Centre offer a 24 hour phone and online counselling support services and a referral service for anyone who has experienced sexual violence
Phone: 1800 424 017      Website: www.nswrapecrisis.com.au

If you would like to know more about this study, please contact the Principal Researcher:
Georgia Ovenden
University of Western Sydney, Bankstown Campus (24.3)
Locked Bag 1797, PENRITH SOUTH DC 1797
Phone: (02)9772 6114   Email: g.ovenden@uws.edu.au

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you experience any distress or have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the UWS Research Ethics Officer at email: humanethics@uws.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

ID ____________

Participant Consent Form

Young Women’s Experiences of their Sexual Lives

I, ___________________________________________________ [Name] have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet on the above-named research study. I am aware that this study involves discussing experiences relating to my sexual life. I am aware that the conversation will be audio taped and transcribed, but that I will not be identified in any way on the transcript. I am also aware that all information collected will be held in a secure location at the University of Western Sydney, Bankstown Campus.

I freely chose to participate in this study and understand that I can withdraw at any time.

I also understand that the research study is strictly confidential.

I hereby agree to participate in this research study.

NAME: ____________________________________________

SIGNATURE: ______________________________________

DATE: ___________________________________________
Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Volunteers Wanted: Young Women’s Experiences of their Sexual Lives

The 'girl power' messages in popular magazines suggest that young women are more assertive in their sexual lives than ever before. However, recent studies show that young women are still influenced by notions of romantic love, and that many young women negotiate their adult sexual lives around traditional expectations of femininity. Is this your experience?

If you are a woman aged between 18 and 28 years, I am interested in hearing about your experiences.

This study aims to investigate young women’s experiences of sex and sexuality in their current relationships.

⇒ I am interested in talking to women who identify as survivors of child sexual abuse and those who do not

⇒ I am interested in talking to women who have sex with men or sex with women

If you choose to become involved, the study will consist of audio-taped interviews. The interview will explore a wide range of themes, including: women’s experiences with their bodies and empowerment/disenpowerment since puberty; first experiences of consensual sex; reflections on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ adult sexual experiences; attitudes about peer pressure surrounding sexual activity; attitudes toward virginity and any changes women have experienced over time in their sexual relationships.

If you would like to become involved in this study, please contact the Principal Researcher, Georgia Ovenden, on (02) 9772 6114 or email g.ovenden@uws.edu.au for more information.