Resistance and Reconstruction:
Older Women Talk about Childhood Sexual Abuse

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University

June, 2015
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
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Acknowledgements

My PhD project has presented many fortunate opportunities to meet and connect with extraordinary people who have supported and encouraged me. This has been very important in meeting the challenges associated with studying part time and balancing the responsibilities of work and family, as well as a few unexpected life circumstances which transpired along the way.

Foremost, I want to acknowledge and thank in every way, the women who participated in my study. They taught me the value of persistence, endurance and resilience. They generously shared their stories with me and in the time I spent with them, I was privileged to witness their spirit of courage and fortitude.

I would like to thank my supervisors Professor Bob Pease and Dr Selma Macfarlane who worked hard and kindly ‘rode the waves’ with me. They always offered thoughtful, erudite feedback and encouragement. I respect your commitment to social justice and making it real in your everyday lives.

There are many colleagues who, throughout my study period, expressed interest or engaged in stimulating debate and discussion on my topic. For their enthusiasm and belief in me, I am also grateful.
List of Publications


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Abstract

Research which explores the experiences of women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse is, in the main, focused on young and middle-aged women. Recognition of their perspectives is limited in academic literature. Ostensibly, this reflects broader social issues of ageism. This study uses a feminist research approach to explore the personal stories of 16 Australian women aged 57 years and older who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. It aims to feature their views and social contexts in light of how they managed the impact of childhood sexual abuse during their lives.

The concepts of resistance and reconstruction have been developed as a basis for a thematic analysis of how the women have made sense of their experiences. Often, normative discourse regarding older women is negative or the nature of their lives marginalised, and this research aims to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of their perspectives, and to also provide a space for their insights to be recognised. In sharing their stories, the women contribute to knowledge regarding the patterns of gender and age-based inequality and how they enact agency in constructing subjectivities in difficult life circumstances. Furthermore, this project attempts to contribute to professional knowledge by developing anti-ageist practices for social work and human service workers.
Chapter 1 Introduction

Background to the Research

The ideas for my thesis began long before I started this research project from my work as a social work practitioner and also, as a woman growing older. Since 1984, for the most part, my work in human services in Australia has been with women who had experienced family violence or sexual abuse. My reflection on practice in that time has been a chief factor in the choice of this particular topic. As well, my own efforts to make sense of my personal history as a woman, working and living in a range of contexts throughout my childhood and adult life has drawn me to consider issues concerning discrimination and older women.

Over the years when working in family violence contexts as a social work practitioner, I noticed how older women seldom accessed these services. To me this was surprising given the relatively high prevalence of violence against women across many class and cultural groups. Indeed, whenever I did encounter older women, I noticed that mostly their stories included chronic and harsh experiences of violence over long periods of time, sometimes spanning more than 40 years. However, commonly, I noticed how many of the women had never before spoken about these experiences. Despite, or perhaps in spite of this, these women lived what I considered remarkable lives that were highly engaged with others in a variety of ways and they were making significant contributions to their families and communities. These observations led me to critically question the ways in which older women do
indeed experience services such as those for which I had worked, and further, how they managed the impact of abuse during their lives. This informal review formed the basis of my topic for research focusing on the lived experiences for older women and childhood sexual abuse in their particular social and historical contexts.

My project is strongly influenced by feminist research practice. As a woman, mother, partner, student, social worker and academic, I have been committed to the ideals of social justice and equality and to addressing the social conditions which contribute to injustice as best I can. I have felt most comfortable during my times of employment, working within feminist organisations or those that adhere to principles which mirror similar ideals. My interests and concerns about issues which are relevant for women, are particularly in regards to the connections between broader structural patterns of inequality in societies and the everyday lived experience.

As I have grown older, my own awareness of the social position of older women has evolved. When I consider the history of gender equity and the status of women over the past 50 years, it seems astonishing that for older women, their status, issues and concerns are largely unrecognised, invisible and marginalised. It is also true that women still experience harm physically, sexually, emotionally, socially and economically as a result of gender violence in many forms and that gender inequality is a fundamental issue for most societies globally. In undertaking this project, it has been somewhat remarkable to notice that many of the concerns I held some thirty years ago when I began as an idealistic graduate are still salient today. Some things I have learned from conducting this study are how older women’s lives, their
experiences and concerns, their ideals and dreams cannot be categorised in orderly patterns. This is important in terms of recognising age stereotypes embedded materially and psychically in our public and private lives, and reflected in attitudes or behaviours and consequently also in policy and practice contexts. I became very inspired and excited by the stories of the women who participated in my study and in my contacts with them. As a result, I indelibly understood the importance of creating social spaces that invite and reflect the array of complex and diverse dimensions in the lives of older women in order to shift and resist confining, limiting and marginalising discourses that may locate older women at the fringes.

**Description of the Research**

My research explores the personal experiences of 16 Australian women aged 57 years and over who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. It aims to feature their views, their lived experiences and stories in light of how they managed the impact of childhood sexual abuse during their lives. Their stories are important since little is known from the perspectives of older women themselves. This particular group of women shared their insights for the purposes of my study. At times their stories reveal commonalities, or resemblance and comparability, but there is also, divergence, distinctiveness, and assorted variations in the women’s outlooks.

I have endeavoured to identify how the women’s narratives illustrate agency to resist and reconstruct their identities in the context of difficult and constraining social contexts and circumstances. I believe this is exceedingly relevant to the social work profession since arguably, social work is only
beginning to develop critical frameworks when working with older people (Ray, Bernard & Phillips 2009; Ray 2013). Therefore, in listening to and hearing from this group of women, I have also attempted to contribute to the development of anti-ageist practices in social work and by extension, related human services.

In essence, I have used a combination of ideas from feminism, post-structuralism and critical gerontology to inform the theoretical basis of my enquiry and in doing so, have drawn on a range of works from social science disciplines including sociology, cultural studies, identity and gender studies, politics and human geography. My intention in approaching the study in this way was to follow a process of research and garner key ideas so that the lived experiences of older women can be understood by considering the complexity of the intersection between age and gender. Potentially then, there are opportunities to demonstrate the possibilities for alternative identity positions which challenge ageist identities in order to represent diverse social and political standpoints.

My rationale for the study springs from a number of concerns regarding the status of women globally, and clearly, those which are relevant for older women, especially in terms of the necessity for a critical practice approach in social work, as follows:
1. Violence against women, and in particular childhood sexual abuse, is a common and critical issue for women globally in terms of wellbeing and safety.

Globally, violence against women is endemic (Hightower, Smith & Hightower 2006), and it increasingly constitutes a human rights violation (McMillan 2011). Whilst efforts to address gender inequality have resulted in some public policy progress, women worldwide still experience significant gender inequity and gaps in terms of health and survival, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment and political empowerment (Schwab et al. 2013). For instance, women experience greater poverty rates worldwide in terms of land ownership despite being the majority food producers, comprise three quarters of the world’s illiterate adults, and experience high prevalence rates of violence due to a range of socioeconomic, political and cultural factors (Amnesty International 2009).

Childhood sexual abuse is one form of violence that may be experienced by women during childhood. The impact and prevalence of childhood sexual abuse has been widely researched and acknowledged as a serious issue for women and men with its impact potentially long lasting (Briere & Elliot 2003; Burgess et al. 1978; Courtois 1988; Farris 1996; Finkelhor et al. 1990; Fleming 1997; Goodwin 1982; Herman 1981; Lombard & McMillan 2013; McMillan 2011; Osgood & Manetta 2002; Putnam 2003; Russell 1986; Sgroi 1982). Establishing prevalence rates is problematic given that most violence against women occurs in private or may be a culturally sanctioned practice (Lombard & McMillan 2013, p.10). Nonetheless, Peters, Wyatt and Finkelhor (1986) learned that from a review of a sample of
international surveys, between 6 and 62 per cent of females and 3 and 31 per cent of males were victims of child sexual abuse. Later studies (Mullen & Fergusson 1999) found that rates were between 15 and 30 per cent for females, and between 3 and 15 per cent for males. These particular studies are often cited as evidence for the well versed claim that at least 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men experience childhood sexual abuse (ACSSA 2005).

Specifically in Australia, childhood sexual abuse is recognised as one of the most prevalent abuse experiences for women and men (ACSSA 2005), with estimates being 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 12 boys having experienced sexual abuse (James 2000). My research is a contribution to efforts that highlight and attempt to address the issues of violence against women, specifically childhood sexual abuse. It is also a timely project, given the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse established in 2013, and continuing in 2015, as well as the inquiry conducted by the Parliament of Victoria into child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations (Family and Community Development Committee 2013).

2. Research regarding older women who have experienced violence in their lives, and specifically childhood sexual abuse, is generally limited.

In Australia, research regarding older women’s experiences of violence and abuse generally, is ‘barely mentioned in either the aging literature or the domestic violence literature’ (Mears 2003, p. 1478) and accounts of older women’s experiences of sexual abuse in childhood or indeed in later life is minimal (Duncan & Mason 2011).
For older women born prior to 1960, most childhood abuse was not recognised as such, and there were few legal sanctions or public protections. Documented reports were rare and consequently, determining prevalence is difficult. Farris (1996), in tracking prevalence rates for women in North America, found that most information obtained for surveys came from younger women. She identified only two studies which have reported prevalence rates that include statistics relating to women aged over 60 years. Some retrospective research estimate prevalence rates of childhood abuse for adult women at this time to be in the range of 11.5% to 34% (Langeland & Hartgers cited in Osgood & Manetta 2002, p 101). However, given the low social status of women for the most part of last century, it is reasonable to assume that for women over 50, during the time in which they lived as children, abuses occurred, and many women grew up experiencing childhood sexual abuse as a normalised family experience (Osgood & Manetta 2002, p 100).

3. The perspectives from older women themselves about personal and systemic violence, and in particular childhood sexual abuse, are often absent, marginalised or hidden and we need to hear those stories.

Until 1997 in Australia, no research regarding violence against women had included the perspectives or the input of older women (Mears 1997). Browne (1998, p. 250) was one of the first social work academics to argue that the life experiences and perspectives of older women are ignored in public and private life and that this has major significance for the quality, meaning and nature of women’s lives throughout their lives. Many theorists of ageing support the notion that the prominence and validation of a diverse
range of perspectives from older women themselves about their lives is
critical to contribute meaningfully in deconstructing negative ageist myths or
stereotypes, to remedy oppressive cultural constructions of ageing and
ultimately to redress ageism (Bernard et al. 2000; Browne 1998, p. 233;
Calasanti & Slevin 2006; Ray 2008).

Privileging the diverse voices of older women is one way to counter
the reproduction of stereotypes (Browne 1998, p. 253). The inclusion and
promotion of older women’s perspectives is a political act that challenges,
‘taken-for-granted hegemonies to show how subjugated lives are edited,
experience is shaped, and social interaction is constrained’ (Warner 2009, p.
71). There is little recognition despite being, in most countries, the majority
of older population cohorts, that, ‘older women are victims of poverty,
inequality, and violence and abuse’ (Hightower, Smith & Hightower 2006, p
207). Their experiences are not often the subject of research and importantly,
‘[o]lder women’s voices telling of their experience of violence are still rarely
heard’ (Hightower, Smith & Hightower 2006, p. 208).

Hearing the narratives of older women’s experiences and perspectives
of childhood abuse can, ‘enrich, inform, challenge and reshape theoretical
understandings about the issue’ (Warner 2009, p.73). Likewise, more
generally in research which seeks to enhance understandings of older women:

There is a need for qualitative research that can describe and analyse
the nuanced experiences of older women and provide a knowledge
base to inform policy and practice… As social work professionals and
feminist theorists, we need to conduct more research that examines
elderly women’s lives within the context of the women’s diverse
positions and further develop feminist theories that provide a more nuanced understanding of elderly women’s complex conditions. (Ross-Sheriff 2008, p. 310)

Aligning with this approach, my research sought to follow research practices and processes that were inclusive, and which might contribute to critical practice approaches. My theoretical approach and methodology are discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4.

4. Understanding the intersecting oppressions associated with gender and age contributes to a greater awareness and appreciation of the particular nature of experiences such as violence, whether past or present, for older women. Alongside this, normative age and gender identity constructions are generally limiting and restrict older women’s participation/inclusion socially, culturally, economically and politically and thus require redress.

The experience of later life is gendered (Chambers 2004). Older women encounter the conflation of two intersecting oppressions, sometimes referred to as, the ‘double jeopardy’ of age and gender (Bernard et al. 2000; Krekula 2007). The portrayal of ‘misery’ or disadvantage (Krekula 2007) characterise dominant narratives in research on the lives of older women. Largely, this may stem from structural disadvantage experienced by older women who are more likely than older men to experience poverty, widowhood or living alone (Chambers 2004), make greater use of health and social services, experience institutionalisation in later old age (Arber & Ginn 1993) and live longer than men with chronic morbidity or disability (Kalache, Barreto & Keller 2005).
Embedded stereotypes and the reality of disadvantage, however, for older women is a partial tale, and does not illustrate the diverse and nuanced lives of women. Moreover, the intersection of age and gender is currently under theorized (Krekula 2007) and insufficient attention is given to the role of agency and power that ‘can create qualitatively different experiences’ (Krekula 2007, p. 162). A more complex reading of difference and nuance in ageing, especially when consideration is given to race, the body/embodiment (Krekula 2007), sexualities, historical contexts (particularly the impact of social and economic forces after 1960), and men’s experiences of ageing (Arber, Andersson & Hoffet 2007), can produce understandings, for example, which include stories of strengths, and activity (Krekula 2007), and commitments to the private sphere or connectedness to others (Bernard et al. 2000; Chambers 2004). Stories of independence and competence, diverse interests and community connections are the themes of relatively recent qualitative studies that consider variation in the lives of older women (Ross-Sheriff 2008). As well, the experience of ageing changes according to different historical periods. Increasingly in contemporary life, cultural, social, economic, and political differentiation and fragmentation is relevant in the lives of older people, and consequently the nature of self and identity (Gilleard & Higgs 2005).

Older women as ‘subject’ in research theory is limited with much work characterising women in later life as ‘objects in need of care’ or, ‘women’s ageing as a problem’ (Krekula 2007, p. 159-60). Therefore, a motive for my study has been to challenge ‘misery’ or bio-medical approaches which exercise enormous influence in constructing a homogenous
‘older woman’s identity’. I wanted to interrogate this discourse, beginning with what older women say about their own experiences. Identity is a complex mix of gender, ethnic, race, religious, sexual orientation, class, and age related aspects including the significance of particular forms of rationality in various historical and social contexts (Ross-Sheriff 2008). The potential for resistance and reconstruction of gender and age identities was very encouraging to me:

Even though the interplay between power relations shows a double jeopardy on a structural level, when it comes to the micro level, individuals are actors, who interpret and define their reality and also work out strategies to change structures and societies (Krekula 2007, p. 167).

I also discovered social work practitioners who agreed with my position and I drew upon those insights in order to theorize the complexity of identity in later life:

I would argue that a framework rooted in critical feminist gerontology, individual and collective biography, and ageing identity enables a critical engagement with older women's stories in order to get beyond the dominant 'problematising' narrative. Older women's lives are recognised as multi-faceted, and their ageing is recognised as an integral part of the life course: what may appear to be a 'problem of old age' may not be solely due to current circumstances. (Chambers 2004, p. 753)

5. Anti-ageist frameworks of practice for social work are required in working with older women.

Age stereotypes are developed in early childhood and continue during adolescence and adulthood often reinforced and reproduced by social and
cultural processes, notably through institutions such as the media (Bevan & Jeeawody 1998; Mason, Kuntz & Mcgill 2015). Once established, ageist attitudes are difficult to change. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, in a profession such as social work, ageist values, assumptions and stereotypes are often deeply internalised among social work students (Allen, Cherry & Palmore 2009; Gellis, Sherman & Lawrance 2003; Kane 2006) as well as social work academic staff (Papadaki, Plotnikof, & Papadaki 2012), constituting one of the barriers to developing social workers who are appropriately skilled to work with older people (Wang & Chonody 2013). In Australia, as in the United States and United Kingdom, there is concern that social workers are ill prepared to work with ageing populations, both in terms of the number of practitioners that will be required and due to a lack of preparedness regarding the development of knowledge, theory and skills in gerontology and critical perspectives (Cummings, Adler & DeCoster 2005; Hokenstad & Roberts 2011; Kropf 2003; McCormack 2008; Ray, Bernard & Phillips 2009; Rosen, Levy Zlotnik & Singer 2003; Scharlach et al. 2000). The need for social workers to be knowledgeable about ageing extends to all areas of social work practice given the nature of changing social relations where older people occupy an increasingly diverse array of roles including, for example, the provision of primary care for great/grandchildren (Scharlach et al. 2000) and increasing participation in the workforce (Chou 2012).

New models of service delivery, theoretical perspectives, educational and research approaches as well as responses to policy arrangements will be required for the development of a critical social work approach to working with older people in light of changing demographics. For instance, Ferguson
and Schriver (2012) discuss the need for social policy leadership at national levels in order to advocate and develop contemporary models of care. They suggest a more complex consideration of intergenerational diversity, differently ageing cohorts and the devolution of the notion of ‘retirement’ creating unprecedented possibilities for the nature of our later lives. Another example is discussed by Chou (2012) in regard to the need for a greater recognition of how ageism in the workforce impacts older workers and the resulting potential roles for social workers at the micro and macro levels. These may include counselling older workers and their families, employment services provision or advocacy in achieving employment equity for older workers (Chou 2012). Additionally, the nature of social work gerontology in the future must include an invigorated advocacy role due to contemporary and emerging family or informal care networks especially in multi-cultural contexts, policy reform which addresses health and well-being across the life span beginning in childhood (Crampton 2011), and the need for specialists in the provision of social and community services. An emphasis on community development perspectives that highlight the importance of social work in building, empowering and supporting coalitions of older citizens, and engagement with care giving responsibilities of older people (Hokenstad & Roberts 2011) are also important future directions.

The development of critical frameworks for social work practice in working with older women has been discussed. For instance, Chambers (2004), in a study exploring the narratives of older women experiencing widowhood argues:
It is crucial if health and social care workers are to work sensitively and in partnership with older women, that they have access to knowledge, policies and practices which enable them to develop their awareness of both age and gender, and its impact over the life course. Critical social gerontology would seem to fit the bill well. (Chambers 2004, p. 756)

Inappropriate assistance and inadequate service provision has previously been identified as an issue for women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse (Glaister & Abel 2001) and also for older women who have experienced domestic violence (Scott et al. 2004). Models of practice need to be relevant for older women. Duncan and Mason (2011) have found that group work is an encouraging model for working with older women who have experienced sexual violence:

We recommend that workers in the sexual assault field reflect carefully about the nature of support provided to older women. Our observations, and previous research, demonstrate that when women are ready to reconnect, participating in a support group is an empowering experience that builds on and transcends professional interventions such as individual counselling. (Duncan & Mason 2011, p. 27)

The development of appropriate models of practice for older women can be linked to particular age related vulnerabilities such as failing health and loss of social support (Gagnon & Hersen 2000), the cumulative effect of abuse and re-victimisation over many years (Zink et al. 2006) and also the nature of particular social and historical contexts. For instance, for some women their roles were typically domestic. Alternatively, for women in paid work, they have often occupied lower paid positions, or perhaps they may
have experienced social and financial dependence in another relational context (Zink et al. 2003).

Critical reflection as a part of social work practice, on the ‘stories’ and narratives of ageing, whether in terms of identity or the social policy, has the potential to create spaces for the inclusion of alternative and diverse perspectives and to contest culturally normative expectations of what it means to grow old (Biggs 2001). Clearly, a critical perspective in social work on ageing has great latitude in developing a progressive approach to gerontology across a range of areas including leadership in policy advocacy and reform, the maturation of critical knowledge and practice approaches, and via the critical engagement with the cultural meanings of ageing.

**Research Aims**

First and foremost, this research aims to explore and privilege the personal stories of the women who participated in the study. Sixteen Australian women aged 57 years and over, talk about how they experienced and managed the impact of childhood sexual abuse over their lifetime. The intention was not necessarily to investigate the nature or detail of the abuse, but to reveal, affirm and acknowledge the complexity and nuance in their journeys. In speaking with older women, I wanted to hear from the women themselves, and represent and recognise their insights, and contribute to work which begins with understanding the multitude of ways that older women might have to manage the effects of childhood sexual assault.

Secondly, the exploration of the women’s experiences illustrates the ways in which our social and cultural contexts can marginalise and construct
subjectivity for older women or as Warner (2009, p. 12) states, ‘how particular versions of identity are mobilised to promote and secure existing cultural inequalities.’ Thus my research also explores the interface between gender and age, often considered a ‘double jeopardy’ in terms of discrimination (Krekula 2007), and analyses how the women might resist and reconstruct social norms. Following the work of many feminist gerontologists (Browne 1998; Calasanti 2004; Calasanti & Slevin 2006; Calasanti & King 2011; Cruikshank 2009; Estes 2006; Freixas, Luque & Reina 2012; Garner 1999; Marshall 2006; Ray 1999, 2004), my intention was to ‘research to trangress’ (Ray 1999), and align with the development of a critical consciousness regarding the status of older women. I hoped to contribute to a feminist research praxis and

… not only demand fuller representation of women and women’s issues in research theory, and practice, but also seek methodologies and interpretative strategies that extend current thinking about how knowledge is made and disseminated (Ray 1999, p. 172).

Having been influenced by neo-Marxist theory and from civil rights movements (Biggs 2008), there are various complementary theoretical streams in critical gerontology (Phillipson 1998), including a focus on the political economy (Minkler & Estes 1999), ethical and historical considerations (Cole et al. 1993) and biographical or narrative perspectives which emphasize the meaning of ageing from the perspectives of older people themselves (Biggs 2001, 2004; Kenyan, Ruth & Mader 2008; Zeilig 2011). Theories associated with critical gerontology seek to interrogate the status quo (Ray 2008) and focus on exploring the dominance of biomedical models in research, the intersection of race, gender and class, normative constructions
of age, the inclusion of the perspectives and narratives of older people in research, the nature and impact of ageism in society, and self-reflection in the academy (Ray 2008). Thus critical gerontology understands age as a fragmented, culturally derived concept.

It signals the paradigm shift away from the dominant understanding of age, as represented in the positivism of the biomedical model, to the alternative view, a critical stance which exposes the underlying power structures and socially constructed “age conceptualizations” on both micro and macro levels. (Anderson 2011, p. 49)

Thirdly then, my research aims to develop social work practice models for working with older women and the issues of childhood sexual abuse but also more broadly, to contribute to building anti-ageist frameworks for social work practice, especially since little research begins with the perspectives of older women themselves. Consequently, my thesis includes some reflection and problematizes the notion of ‘recovery’ and service delivery models. The contributions of the women in my study provide insight informing this process for older women managing the impact of childhood sexual abuse.

**Research Question**

My research question was constructed with a view to exploring the views and perspectives of older women in relation to the influence or impact (if any) of child sexual abuse over their lifetimes. The research question is as follows:

*What do older women say about how they have managed experiences and long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse throughout their lives?*
From this over-arching question, the ensuing three sub-questions assist to deconstruct my research question and guide my analysis of what the women say:

*What do the women say about how their experiences of childhood sexual abuse impacted on their lives?*

*What do the women say about what has helped?*

*How have they, as older women managed the long term effects of childhood sexual abuse?*

The responses from the women have implications for social work practice and so accordingly, I discuss in my final chapter, how we might, as social work practitioners, construct practices which are anti-ageist when working with older women and the issues related to experiences of childhood sexual abuse.

My study follows, in some ways, from Farris (1996), a social worker from the United States, in exploring the views of older women and the effects of childhood sexual abuse. Her research is distinguished from my own, in terms of the historical and geographical context, participants, theoretical perspectives, methodology and analysis. Farris (1996) conducted her study almost twenty years ago and presented three ‘Triptych of Lives’ that provided an in-depth analysis of three women’s stories, as well as a portrayal of 12 older women’s narratives, analysing their stories using a narrative discourse approach. Whilst our interest in exploring the perspectives of older women is similar, my thesis is an interpretation of the views of 16 older women in Australia using the themes of resistance and reconstruction to represent their
stories. Additionally, I discuss the implications for social work practice in the broader context of ageism and social work education and propose an appreciation for and understanding of critical perspectives such as critical gerontology in social work.

In Chapter 4, I include the construction of my interview questions which served as a guide to encourage an open conversation with the women and respond to my research question. My aim in conducting the interviews was to create spaces, in so far as possible within the artificial limits of a research interview, for the women to speak freely about what has been important for them regarding the themes of the research. I was also open to participants speaking about tangential matters should they arise. Therefore, alongside my research question, I formulated several interview questions as a guide for discussion.

**Definitions**

There are a number of terms which are used consistently throughout the thesis and this section clarifies their relevance to my discussions.

*Childhood sexual abuse*

Across cultures and societies the definition of what constitutes childhood sexual abuse varies significantly. Centrally the involvement of a child by an adult or an older child in sexual activity is a common feature of most definitions.

Kinnear (2007, pp. 2-3) has made distinctions between contact and non-contact abuse and the situations in which sexual abuse can arise
indicating the contextual nature of some behaviours. She also includes legal definitions that are used in both civil and criminal contexts. However, Kinnear (2007, pp. 3-4) concludes that there are some universal features across most definitions which include the premise that children cannot consent to sexual activity, that there are always elements of exploitation by older persons who are stronger and more resourceful than the child, and the presence of coercion and secrecy.

The National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) (2009), identify other unifying features which characterise child sexual abuse including:

- Childhood sexual abuse occurs in all cultures, and in all types of families, regardless of income and education level
- Children of all ages may be sexually abused.
- Child sexual abuse may occur once or many times over a period of months or years
- Child sexual abuse happens to both boys and girls.

In Chapter 2, I discuss in more depth, the debates and implications of definitions for research. In summary however, for the purpose of my research, I did not subscribe to a particular definition of child abuse or specifically, childhood sexual abuse. My intention was not to compare or analyse specific experiences, but to explore how the women managed the effects over their lifetimes, irrespective of exactly what had occurred. I wanted to privilege the views and self-assessments of women in the study, rather than impose a construction of the nature of the abuse. Consequently, it was sufficient that
the women themselves identified as having experienced sexual abuse in childhood. Essentially, I assumed that if women volunteered for the research then they would have engaged in self-assessment and identified for themselves the nature of their experience, drawing on my advertisements for participant recruitment. Thus self-identification was adequate.

I assumed that, even though I did not expect participants to discuss the detail of the abuse, most would. Some of the women did so because they simply wanted to, in light of my research topic, and others in order to illustrate a particular impact in their lives. In essence I maintained a position that for the purposes of this research, the definition of childhood sexual abuse should remain broad, and contingent on the women’s own definitions of their experiences. After all, my intention was to foreground the insights of the women.

*Categories of chronological age*

Many studies involving older people rely on chronological age as an indicator for what constitutes ‘old’ or ‘older’ and different age groupings may qualify for definitional purposes, for example, being over 40, 50 or 60 years (Lombard & Scott 2013). Despite this trend, chronological age is only one dimension of ageing identity (Scott et al. 2004) and signifies age constructs which are linked to cultural contexts. For example in Western societies, ‘old age’ is considered to begin at 60/65 years, ‘and is a modern phenomenon arising from the bureaucratization of the life course around the administration of retirement pensions’ (Vincent, Phillipson & Downs 2006, p. 2). Significantly, and especially for my research, the social construction of age is
very relevant since it is these constructions which so often provide the context for meanings associated with a particular age cohort. The link between chronological age as an identifier and its social construction is the subject of much discussion and debate (Anderson 2011; Andrews 2000; Browne 1998; Bytheway 2000, 2005; Calasanti & Slevin 2006; Cruikshank 2009; Estes 2008; Gibson 2000; Gullette 2004; Katz 1996; Lombard & Scott 2013).

Indeed, my own experience has been instructive with regard to the process of constructing a particular age cohort for this research project. At the start, I began unconsciously, with several assumptions regarding ageing. My intention was to interview women who were over 65 years old and my advertising material for recruitment reflected this. Women over 65 years did in fact respond, and several women aged between 60-65 years old also called. Towards the final phase of my recruitment process, three women had contacted me who were 57 and 58 years old and asked to participate in the study. I engaged thereafter in a process of reflection on my own internalised assumptions regarding age identity and its cultural construction. In the end, I felt that the women should decide whether they believed they would ‘fit’ in my study on ‘older’ women. My rationale is discussed further in Chapter 4 on methodology. Suffice to say, all these women were welcomed into the study and became valued participants.

In summary, however, I have adopted the use of general terms such as ‘older’ in order to understand the sense that the women themselves have made in relation to their age identities. My approach to problematizing age categories parallels Bytheway’s (2000) argument, which states:
… anti-ageist gerontology should be promoting a relativist vocabulary rather than an absolutist one: older people not elderly people, and later life and older age rather than old age. In doing this, we should be making it clear that this is not cosmetic. We are not proposing ‘older people’ as a euphemism for ‘elderly people’ or ‘the aged’. Rather we want to be able to draw upon a more inclusive vocabulary, one which does not divide life up into bite-size stages and the population into box-like categories. … gerontology should give ‘elderly’ and ‘old age’ a rest. Rather than expend effort on rehabilitating these concepts, and rather than constructing a framework for gerontology which has ‘elderly people’ and ‘old age’ at its centre, I would prefer to work towards a better understanding of how we age, how we make sense of our experience of ageing, and how we relate to, and work with, people who may be older (and who may be younger) than ourselves. (Bytheway 2000 p. 788)

Similarly, throughout the course of completing my thesis, I regularly reflected on Russo’s (1999) question regarding the social construction of age:

Numbers count, of course, but what do they mean? (Russo 1999, p. 25)

**Thesis Overview**

I consider that no knowledge is ever complete and can only be partial (Fook 2002). Therefore, my research is a particular ‘snapshot’ of the perspectives and stories of a group of women. It is idiographic and not necessarily generalizable to wider populations. Whilst my research makes modest claims in terms of knowledge production, the value of my work rests with a feminist regard for the importance of the lived experiences of women in research and also because it is unique in terms of its emphasis on the views and perspectives of the women who participated in the study.
I have arranged my thesis in nine chapters as follows:

*Chapter 2 Experiencing Childhood Sexual Abuse*

This chapter discusses some approaches to the definitional challenges and contexts of childhood sexual abuse in the research literature. Dovetailing my thesis topic, I also provide an overview of key discussions and research that have been conducted in relation to older women and childhood sexual abuse.

*Chapter 3 Theorising Older Women’s Lives*

My research is grounded in a particular theoretical framework which includes feminism, postmodernism and critical gerontology. In this chapter I discuss the theories, assumptions and choice of rationales which have informed my research approach, conduct and processes, as well as my reporting strategy.

*Chapter 4 Researching Older Women’s Lives*

Connected to the previous chapter on theoretical perspectives, this chapter discusses feminist epistemology and my research methodology including the principles of research practice that were adopted, selection and recruitment of participants, the interview process and thematic analysis, as well as exploration of the ethical and political nature of my social positioning as researcher.
Chapter 5 Stories of Resistance

This chapter presents the first over-arching theme of resistance and how the women’s stories and responses relate to this concept. It demonstrates how I have answered my first research sub-question, ‘What do the women say about how their experiences of childhood sexual abuse impacted on their lives?’ by presenting some of their responses.

Chapter 6 Stories of Reconstruction: Coming Through; Chapter 7 Stories of Reconstruction: Holding the Line; Chapter 8 Stories of Reconstruction: Living Outside the Box

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are all connected to my second over-arching theme of reconstruction. Each chapter describes a different aspect of this theme that is related to the performance of reconstructive self-practice. These chapters demonstrate how I have answered my second and third research sub-questions:

‘What do the women say about what has helped?’

‘How have they, as older women managed the long term effects of childhood sexual abuse?’

Chapter 9 Conclusion

Finally, my conclusion summarises the significance of the women’s insights and includes a discussion regarding the implications for social work practice. My project has been a modest attempt to explore the commonalities and contradictions in the journeys and stories of a group of older women.
managing childhood sexual abuse. It is recognition that their stories are important:

… because, so often in our history, events, however major their ramifications, occur at the level of the molecular, the minor, the little and the mundane. (Rose 1999, p. 11).

In speaking about themselves and the issue of childhood sexual abuse, the women demonstrate how, at the level of the everyday, powerful and nuanced resistances and reconstructions work to challenge normalising discourse regarding gender, age and recovery. Fundamentally, I hoped to represent the narratives of the women in a way which did justice to their efforts to participate in the research and, most importantly, to their bold, undaunted and daring approaches which were sometimes humorous and optimistic, but oftentimes painful and confronting.
Chapter 2 Experiencing Childhood Sexual Abuse

Introduction

We become informed about the issue of childhood sexual abuse through knowledge systems which are partial, fragmented and contestable (DVIRC 2003) and therefore charting the experience of childhood sexual abuse is connected to particular meanings which are produced in different historical, social, cultural, political or professional and academic contexts. Depending on the context, different forms of rationality work to create meanings of the experience of child sexual abuse. For instance, childhood sexual abuse is the subject of extensive inquiry and research in social and health science disciplines such as psychiatry and psychology (Briere & Elliot 2003; Briere 1992a; Burgess et al. 1978; Finkelhor et al. 1990; Goodwin 1982; Herman 1981; Levenkron 2007; MacMillan et al. 2001; Rodriguez-Srednicki & Twain 2006; Russell 1984, 1986; Sgroi 1982), family therapy (Karakurt & Silver 2014), social work (Darlington 1996; Hilarski, Wodarski & Feit 2012) and criminal justice perspectives (Cashmore & Shackel 2013a) or interdisciplinary approaches (Cashmore & Shackel 2013b). These perspectives and contributions are oriented within ideologies which are informed by a range of assumptions and values that produce specific understandings of the nature, incidence and impact of childhood sexual abuse. Acknowledging historicity and the contexts from which we speak, helps us to understand child sexual abuse from a number of standpoints and reveals hidden or taken-for granted assumptions (Warner 2009, p. 3).
This chapter discusses some historical, cultural, social and political discourses which have normatively been associated with the experience of childhood sexual abuse including definitions, prevalence and effects and questions their relevance for older women. I argue that a critical perspective in understanding the experience of child sexual abuse for older women must take account of dominant narratives which position ageing women in particular ways. Understanding the experience of childhood sexual abuse for older women requires critical reflexivity and a thoughtful approach in order to be inclusive of the diverse and nuanced expressions of managing child sexual abuse in their lives.

**Questioning Constructions of Childhood Sexual Abuse**

Recognition of child sexual abuse\(^\text{1}\) as a public issue can be traced to the seventeenth century (Tomison 1995) and despite historical texts including reference to incest (Rush, cited in Farris 1996, p. 3), the term ‘child sexual abuse’ is a relatively recent one (Farris 1996) and is associated with particular constructions emerging in the twentieth century. Prevailing social norms and attitudes in the first half of the twentieth century were characterised by silence in relation to the experience of child sexual abuse alongside a dominant professional discourse which promoted children’s stories of abuse as fantasy (Masson, cited in Farris 1996, p. 3), such as, that children were willing participants in sexual relationships with adults (Olafson, Corwin, & Summit, cited in Farris 1996, p. 3) or that child sexual abuse was a rare event hence

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\(^{1}\) Although both males and females experience child sexual abuse, for the most part, my discussion relates to girls and women.
not widely discussed, nor consequently, was it a significant public policy concern (DVIRC 2003, p. 6).

Child sexual abuse as a factor in later life psychological disturbances was introduced by Freud in 1896 when he proposed, in The Aetiology of Hysteria, that early childhood sexual experiences were the basis of the ‘neurosis’ experienced by 18 of his female patients. Freud later amended this position and developed his theory of the Oedipus complex (Davis & Frawley, cited in Reich 1996, p. 15). It is speculated that Freud’s decision to provide an alternative explanation for the stories of sexual abuse by his patients occurred in a political context, due in part to the incredulity of his professional colleagues, thus potentially implicating and damaging his reputation. As a consequence, in 1898, Freud’s explanation for the disclosures of child sexual abuse was ultimately attributed to unconscious fantasy or a misinterpretation of what had occurred (Van der Kolk, cited in Reich 1996, p. 15). Herman (1992, p. 14) describes this development in psychology as foundational in terms of the denial of women’s reality. She states,

Psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, disassociated from the reality of experience. By the first decade of the twentieth century, without ever offering any clinical documentation of false complaints, Freud had concluded that his hysterical patients’ accounts of childhood sexual abuse were untrue.

Distinguishing this view, Smart (2000), by analysing the medical, political, legal and psychoanalytic discursive contexts to understand the social meanings of child sexual abuse during the last century until 1960, argues that the discipline of psychology, and in particular psychoanalysis
(derived from the work of Freud), has been misrepresented as being responsible for the silencing of children. This has occurred by way of discounting or disbelieving the abuse accounts of children and adults and accordingly, providing a culturally sanctioned rationale for the behaviour of the abuser. Smart cites evidence which rather, describes a ‘fissure’ in the perspectives of therapists during the first half of the twentieth century with some practitioners advocating that children should be believed, and legal frameworks developed for the recognition of child sexual abuse as a criminal offence and for appropriate legal remedies. The contest in psychology was largely related to the nature and definitional differences of childhood sexual abuse, rather than disbelief as had been the case earlier. Of more consequence in Smart’s view, was the slow progress of law reform aimed at providing avenues for conviction and punishment as well as safety for young people and children,

In other words, they recognised that the legal forum provided the most arid of sites for children looking for support and protection. (Smart 2000, p. 67)

In the latter half of the twentieth century (specifically the 1970s and 1980s), significant attitudinal shifts arose in policy, research and public discourse whereby child sexual abuse was recognised in the field of psychology as a phenomenon with serious long and short-term impacts (Smart 2000) corresponding with the growth of professions and ‘powerful lobbies of medical and legal institutions’ (Levett 2003, p. 53). In this social and political context, constructions of the impact and explanations regarding causes arose largely from psychology:
All of this occurred in the wake of post-Second World War moves to increase professionalisation, along with the development of social policies highlighting the plight of various groups (the emergence of victimology), and the shaping of public policy and social interventions to improve the situation of such groups. It is conspicuous that there is almost no discussion of child abuse in the non-English literature and very little on this phenomenon in non-English-speaking communities. (Levett 2003, p. 53)

The women’s movement and feminism, also emerging in Western societies during the twentieth century, variously conceptualised violence against women, including sexual abuse, as a denial of the personal lived experience of women and children that was linked socially and politically to broader structural gender inequality. Feminists during the 1960s and 1970s began writing and researching influential accounts of childhood sexual abuse, analysing violence against women generally through a socio-political lens which sought to establish how economic, social and political institutions such as, for example, the family, education and industrial arrangements, legitimised unequal relationships between men and women under a system of patriarchy (Brownmiller 1975; Daly 1973). Feminist research often focused on the everyday realities and extent to which women lived with male partner violence. For instance, Russell (1984, 1986) conducted a large survey of 900 women, recording in-depth accounts of women’s experiences of sexual exploitation and domestic violence. She specifically discussed incest as a concern in the lives of these women and girls, demonstrating the serious immediate and ongoing effects. One of the impacts included the sense of shame felt by women as a result of societal disbelief, blame towards women and public silence. During this period, feminist and liberal human rights
movements analysed child sexual abuse as a function of male exploitation. It has been argued that currently, in some respects, feminist understandings of sexual abuse, which often in the past have been regarded as ‘fringe’ or radical propositions, are now sometimes assimilated by dominant ideologies such as psychology that, ‘have recuperated what was a political social agenda into a more individual, therapeutic one’ (Reavey & Warner 2003, p. 4).

Understanding the nature and causes of child sexual abuse and remedies for the impact can be located within a number of principal discourses including psychiatric and psychological constructions which focus on individual diagnoses based in pathology (Warner 2009, p. 2) and also ‘assume that childhood experiences have a great deal of influence on adult behaviour’ (Levett 2003, p. 53-4). As well, feminist theory understands child sexual abuse and all forms of violence against women as being the consequence of the oppression of women in patriarchal society (Brownmiller 1975; Daly 1973, 1978; Edwards 1978; Hanmar 1978; Hester, Kelly & Radford 1996; Kelly 2013 (1988); MacKinnon 1983; Millet 1971; Reavey & Warner (eds) 2003; Smart & Smart 1978). Additionally, child abuse has been explained by child rights advocates who argue that abuse occurs in families because of the vulnerability of children due to an absence of social or political power (DVIRC 2003, p. 7). Indigenous communities have explained violence in the family directed at women and children as a consequence of colonisation (Lees 2001). Libertarian or right wing conservative discourses, respectively, and on moral grounds, normalise adult sexual relations with children (Malon 2015), or argue that child sexual abuse is indicative of declining, liberal values on sexuality (Haaken & Lamb 2000).
Scrutiny of discourses such as outlined above is significant because there are a number of implications regarding assumptions and knowledge about child sexual abuse. There are also consequences for how we might act, for example, in developing legal remedies or public policies and importantly, how these discursive contexts will influence what we make of our own and others’ experiences. This is due, in part, because the nature of its representation as a social problem is mediated through language. Language is not value neutral and the words we choose to describe our social realities convey a ‘world’ of meaning (Hartman 1991). Some 15 years ago, Marecek (1999, p. 158) described clearly the power of language in constructing discursive fields:

Language is not a transparent medium through which reality can be seen; rather language creates the reality of which we speak. Language practices shape what we can see and think. Moreover, language is not a vehicle for expressing private thoughts formulated inside a speaker’s head; it is a social practice.

The way we understand and speak about child sexual abuse is a contested field of competing and complementary ideas, and so too, knowledge production about child sexual abuse is political, and connected to relations of social power between individuals, groups (for instance based on gender, class or age) or institutions (such as medicine) (DVIRC, 2003, pp. 8-9). Accordingly, there will be prevailing views, omissions or absences, in respect of dominant perspectives and those that are marginalised or unrepresented (DVIRC 2003, p. 9). Child sexual abuse is

… something that, as survivors, theoreticians or practitioners, we make sense of [italics in original] in the re-telling, and how we make
sense of it shifts according to the contexts in which we speak, with whom we speak with, and who we speak about. It shapes the ways we see ourselves, the way we view others and it structures what we decide our actions around child sexual abuse should be. (Reavey & Warner 2003, p. 1)

In questioning the experience of childhood sexual abuse, the way that it is variously defined will be a determining factor in whether we perceive it to be a moral, legal, social, therapeutic, public, private, political issue or otherwise. Definitions of child sexual abuse are widely variable in existing research and this will impact upon the nature of conclusions reached or prescribed directions (Cashmore & Shackel 2013c). Differences in definitions and hence the conceptualisation of what constitutes child sexual abuse are a function of the professional context in which the definitions are used (Haugaard 2000, p. 1037), and importantly, the social, cultural and historical context in which they are adopted (Levett 2003). Research aimed at exploring the experience of child sexual abuse will encounter questions of definition. This is a complex task due to competing difference in defining concepts such as ‘sexual abuse’, or ‘childhood’, and evaluating the nature of ‘behaviours’ in the context of accepted social norms and values. For instance, what should be the age difference between the abused person and the abuser in order for them to be identified as such (ACSSA 2005; Levett 2003)? Unsurprisingly then, researchers will adopt definitions that align with the logic and interests of their particular research notions of comparison and coherency. This extends to research that aims to calculate prevalence rates, as well as in terms of the development of appropriate professional interventions (Haugaard 2000).
Take for example the definition of child sexual abuse, and the debate regarding whether the term ‘abuse’ or ‘assault’ should be used (DVIRC 2003, p. 20). These two terms may be perceived as representing different ‘orders’ of experience, such that one (most often the latter), is potentially considered more ‘serious’. Finklehor (cited in Tomison 1995), has preferred to use neither term, and instead adopts the phrase, ‘sexual victimisation’. His intention is to avoid common perceptions associated with the nature of violence and to locate the experience within a human development framework so that connections are made with a child’s age, cognitive naiveté and the relationship of trust to adults (Tomison 1995). Throughout my thesis I use the term ‘abuse’ because I believe it is a broad signifier of many behaviours and experiences and can be used without signifying a continuum of ‘seriousness’. My politics are feminist and in the following chapter I discuss in further detail, the sense I make of this claim. My thesis is an attempt to rely on the narratives provided by the women who volunteered for my study about their experiences. I chose the phrase, ‘child sexual abuse’ because for many similar reasons as Tomison (1995), it is an indicator of all and any type of sexually abusive behaviour. Given that potentially, the women who came forward to participate would have diverse experiences, I did not want to confine, restrict or presuppose any particular scenario but allow the women to define their own experiences in accordance with their own values and social scripts. Additionally, my preference was not to use ‘victimisation’ or ‘victim’ as descriptors, since I believed this would conceivably be an imposition on recognising the agency of the women and on the freedom of the women to define their particular experiences. My intention was rather to explore their
own perceptions, as far as possible through adopting a critically reflexive position, and not to impose judgement, emphasise or investigate the nature of what actually happened to them.

Corresponding with definitional issues, prevalence of child sexual abuse is difficult to assess given that under reporting is widely acknowledged (Bartkowiak-Theron et al. 2012) and that particular constructions of child abuse will inevitably produce various inclusions and exclusions. Research in this area is necessarily then, fragmented, and is generally conducted for specific populations and groups in certain social and cultural contexts. Therefore, a review of prevalence estimates worldwide vary considerably between 2% and 62% depending on the variables used (Hunter 2006). A global meta-analysis of 331 studies published between 1980-2008, found that prevalence of child sexual abuse was 11.8.7% whilst acknowledging methodological limitations (Stoltenborgh et al. 2011). The activity of assessing child abuse prevalence rates is located within the political terrain of allocating resources and is therefore this is an important consideration in terms of equitable access to services and strategies or systems of support.

Diana Russell’s (1986) compelling and influential tome, The secret trauma: Incest in the lives of girls and women, documented the abuse experiences of 930 women across various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and discovered that more than one third of respondents reported unwanted sexual contact during their childhood. Furthermore, one half of the reported experiences involved family members. These figures, although contested at the time, have been replicated in many studies since, and range in geographical context, methodology or definitional parameters as well as in
terms of reported rates which range between 7% and 36% (Dube et al. 2005; Dunne et al. 2003; Finkelhor et al. 1990; Finklehor 1994; Fleming 1997; Langeland & Hartgers 1998 cited in Osgood & Manetta 2002, p. 101; Mouzos & Makkai 2004). More recently, Barth et al. (2013), conducted a worldwide survey of 55 studies from 23 countries including 16 from Asia and 14 from North America, 11 studies from Europe, 9 from Africa, and 4 were from Central and South America. In reviewing these studies, prevalence rates for girls were between 8 and 31% and for boys, 3 to 17%, concluding:

Our results based on most recent data confirm results from previous reviews with adults. (Barth et al. 2013, p. 469)

In Australia, Cashmore and Shackel’s (2013c) review of the 15 most contemporary studies discussing child sexual abuse found that of those, five included measurement data that grouped child by gender. From those five studies (Dunne et al. 2003; Mamun et al. 2007; Mazza et al. 2001; Moore et al. 2010; Najman et al. 2005) prevalence rates for female children ranged from 4% to 36%. Furthermore, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2013) report that 12% of all confirmed child abuse and neglect notifications (48, 420) are in relation to child sexual abuse. Clearly this figure reflects situations which are known to government agencies and which satisfy each State authority criteria for sexual abuse.

The prevalence of child sexual abuse has been assessed largely via retrospective accounts by adults (Putnam 2003) and depending on the type of sample selected, definitions used, and the method of the research, figures vary as a function of these research practices. Almost twenty years ago, Farris (1996) discussed the variance of prevalence rates with respect to other factors
such as the administration of the survey (for example, personal interviews have higher reporting rates than phone or mail surveys), and location of the survey. She adds that reliance on respondent’s memory, contributes to great variability in estimating prevalence. Additionally, definitions of childhood and the ability to give consent also vary considerably; for example, research can focus on whether the abuse occurred before puberty or 18 years of age, the differences being based on assumptions in relation to when a young person is deemed to be able to provide consent to having a sexual relationship with an adult. Haugaard (2000) discusses the impact of definitional variance by demonstrating how broad terms such as ‘any sexual contact’ can support rates of 50% in comparison to narrower definitions which may result in rates being much lower, for instance, 5%.

Levett (2003, p. 55), has deconstructed the implications of prevalence studies and highlights how most research is ethnocentric and is largely focused on populations in the United States or the United Kingdom, so that certain sexual behaviours across different social and historical contexts are grouped into simplified categories without consideration of their contextualised meanings. Nonetheless, with most studies reporting relatively high prevalence rates, she raises an interesting unexamined paradox,

Given the high prevalence figures it is difficult to regard child sexual abuse experience as unusual. However, sexual abuse of children is generally studied as if these are uncommon events with specific outcomes even though a very large proportion of girls and women have been sexually abused under the age of eighteen years. (Levett 2003, p. 55)
This statement moved me to question the experience of child sexual abuse. It is a powerful rationale for critically reflecting on and assessing any claim to ‘truth’ and to locate abuse experiences within social contexts in order to consider their ramifications. Oftentimes, the great extent of violence against women is overlooked. Alongside this, the issue of impact is another important narrative which requires closer scrutiny.

During the 1970s and 1980s, various studies explored the impact of childhood sexual abuse mainly from a bio-psycho medical perspective (Burgess et al. 1978; Goodwin 1982; Herman & Hirschman 1977; Herman 1981; Sgroi 1982). Courtois (1988), in an early text, aimed to develop a practice framework for therapy, recognising that serious and long-lasting effects can be experienced as a result of childhood sexual abuse. Drawing on work by Burgess and Holmstrom (1974), which associated the psychological and emotional impact of rape with symptoms experienced by returned combat soldiers, Judith Lewis Hermann (1981, 1992) established wide recognition for her argument that the short and long-term impact for many survivors of sexual abuse (as children or as adults), can include a phenomenology normally associated with any other traumatic experience. Hermann (1992) and others (Beitchman et al. 1992; Browne & Finkelhor 1985; Macdonald, Lambie & Simmonds 1995) have established a well-recognised range of effects that may be experienced as a result of child sexual abuse including, hyper-arousal, intrusive memories, dissociation, sleep disturbance, eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, phobias and anxiety, social isolation, difficulty relating to others, lowered ability to concentrate, difficulties in sexual relationships and intimacy, poor self-esteem, lack of
trust, denial, numbness, shame, fear, anger and hostility, guilt, and self-destructive behaviours.

In reviewing research over a ten year period, Putnam (2003) described significant links between childhood sexual abuse and adult psychiatric conditions, as well as problematic sexualised behaviours. The relationship between child sexual abuse and the DSM disorders of major depression, borderline personality disorder, somatization disorder, substance abuse disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, dissociative identity disorder and bulimia nervosa has also been established by a variety of early large community sample studies (Beitchman et al. 1992; Bifulco, Brown & Adler 1991; Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey 1996). Widom and Ames (1994) found links between a history of child sexual abuse and increased arrest rates for sex crimes and prostitution. For children, increased sexualized behaviours have been associated with past experiences of sexual abuse (Friedrich et al. 2003). In the Australian context, Fleming et al. (1999) examined adverse adult outcomes in a community sample of women and found significant associations between reporting childhood sexual abuse and later life issues such as domestic violence, rape, sexual problems, mental health problems, low self-esteem, and problems with intimate relationships.

Correlations have been made between child sexual abuse and a range of possible long and short term impacts including, psychological harm (Collishaw et al. 2007; Edwards et al. 2003; Molnar, Buka & Kessler 2001; Paolucci, Genuis & Violato, 2001; Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2014, Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2013; Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2010; Schneider, Baumrind, & Kimerling 2007; de Visser et al. 2003), problematic alcohol or drug use or dependence.
(Dube et al 2005; MacMillan et al 2001; Molnar, Buka & Kessler 2001; Schuck & Widom 2001), antisocial behaviour (MacMillan et al. 2001; Putnam 2003), suicide risk (Beitchman et al. 1992; Dube et al 2005) and anxiety about sex (de Visser et al. 2003). There are connections between childhood sexual abuse and anxiety or stress in social situations (Feerick & Snow, 2005), difficulty with relationships and interpersonal problems (Abdulrehman & De Luca 2001; Colman & Widom 2004; DiLillo 2001, Friesen et al. 2010), later life intimate partner violence (Friesen et al. 2010), dissociation (Briere & Elliot 2003), and eating disorder behaviour (Carter et al. 2006; Romans et al. 2001; Wilson 2010; Wonderlich et al. 2001).

Health issues such as obesity, autoimmune disorders (such as irritable bowel syndrome, asthma, and fibromyalgia) (Wilson 2010) as well as gastrointestinal or gynaecological problems (Sickel et al 2002) have also been linked with past experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Likewise, low self-esteem, fear, anxiety and depression (Beitchman et al 1992; Briere & Elliot 2003; Cecil & Matson 2001; Molnar, Buka & Kessler 2001; Sachs-Ericsson, Kendall-Tackett & Hernandez 2007; Widom, DuMont & Czaja 2007), and increased risk of victimisation (Beitchman et al 1992; Browne & Finkelhor 1986; Coid et al. 2001; Finkelhor et al. 1989, Noll et al. 2003; Russell 1986; Siegel & Williams 2003) form associated impacts. Posttraumatic stress (including intense fear, recurring nightmares and intrusive memories, avoidance of anything reminiscent of the trauma, feelings of numbness, hypervigilance, sleeplessness) is commonly associated with child sexual abuse (Briere & Runtz 1993; Coid et al 2003; Cromer & Sachs-Ericsson 2006; Feerick & Snow 2005; Herman 1992; Molnar, Buka & Kessler 2001; Noll et
al. 2003), as well as mood and anxiety disorder such as panic attacks and phobias (Molnar, Buka & Kessler 2001), poor self-esteem, difficulty trusting others (Browne & Finkelhor 1986), depression (Browne & Finkelhor 1986; Dube et al. 2005; MacMillan et al. 2001; Molnar, Buka & Kessler 2001; Putnam 2003; Wilson 2010), sexual difficulties/concerns and marital problems (Beitchman et al. 1992; Briere & Elliot 2003; Dube et al. 2005; Levenkron 2007), substance abuse (Browne & Finkelhor 1986), racial and cultural factors (Kenny & McEachern 2000), feelings of shame (Feiring, Taska & Lewis 2002) and suicidality (Molnar, Buka & Kessler 2001).

AIFS (2014) in summarising research investigating the long term adverse effects of childhood sexual abuse also report similar difficulties such as re-victimisation, physical and mental health problems, suicidal behaviour, eating disorders and obesity, alcohol and substance abuse, aggression, violence and criminal behaviours, high risk sexual behaviour and homelessness. Notable is the history of feminist challenge to psychiatric and psychological categories on the basis of individual pathology, masculinist or market ideology, institutional power and privilege (such as bio-medical models of health and sickness), ethnocentricity or hetero-normativity (Marecek & Gavey 2013).

Hunter (2006) reviews a particular range of research studies identifying the effects of child sexual abuse; however, given the variability of consequences, and debates regarding the nature of impacts within the diverse contexts in which child sexual abuse occurs, she cautions against the uncritical adoption of causality between child sexual abuse and later life social or psychological distress. Hunter (2006, p 350) argues that the
experience of sexual abuse varies considerably according to the possible range of diverse and linked factors including,

… the age of the child (Putnam, 2003), the sex of the child (Colton & Vanstone, 1996), the nature of the relationship between the adult and the child (Colton & Vanstone, 1996; W.C. Holmes & Slap, 1998), the severity of the abuse and use of force or coercion (Colton & Vanstone, 1996), other forms of maltreatment experienced by the child (Edwards et al., 2003), the frequency and duration of the abuse (Cecil & Matson, 2001), whether or not the child has a disability (Putnam, 2003), the child’s sexual orientation (de Visser et al., 2003; Tomeo, Templer, Anderson, & Kotler, 2001), the family environment (Colton & Vanstone, 1996; Putnam, 2003; Rind et al., 1998), and the perceived level of social support from family and friends at the time (Reyes, Kotovic, & Cosden, 1996).

Characteristics of the abuse and the circumstances surrounding disclosure of child sexual abuse are also acknowledged as being a factor in explaining why people develop a range of negative consequences to varying degrees (Jonzon & Lindblad 2006).

The difficulty in assessing the impact of child sexual abuse arises due to other possibilities such as certain dysfunctional dynamics in the family and the nature of the connection to other forms of abuse including physical and emotional abuse that always form the context of sexual abuse (Hunter 2006). Consideration must also be given to the notion that gender differences exist in responses to child sexual abuse, with women more likely to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and adjustment problems than men (Feiring, Taska & Lewis, 2002; Horowitz et al. 2001).

Social issues such as poverty and inadequate housing or unemployment are
also considered factors in the longer term impact of child sexual abuse (Horowitz et al. 2001).

Cashmore & Shackel (2013d) discuss, in the Australian context, how despite a recognition of the impact being long lasting, complex factors such as difficulty in separating the effects of child sexual abuse alongside other adverse experiences in childhood, the nature of the relationship to the abuser, lack of clarity in assessing prevalence, age and gender, responses to disclosure, retrospective accounts, variable definitions of childhood sexual abuse, and a variety of research methodologies adopted in the study of child sexual abuse, means that any definitive perspective is unattainable. Their argument is to emphasise the importance of not adopting a view of abuse as ‘destiny’ but instead, as variable and nuanced, since not all experiences will result in similar outcomes, and there will be degrees of consequences or, for some, no significant impact at all. For each personal scenario, there will also be a profusion of mitigating factors, for instance, the level of family support or of others in the social support network (Cashmore & Shackel 2013d). In Australia again, Parker & Lee (2002) conducted a significant longitudinal study of women’s health commissioned by the Commonwealth Dept. of Health and Aged Care using mailed self-reporting questionnaires. There were 1168 female respondents aged between 49-53 years, living in urban, rural and remote areas. The study explored the more complex inter-relational aspects of women’s abusive experiences. Significantly, they concluded

… the results imply that a history of abuse is only one aspect of a woman’s life that will impact on her well-being and that even the most extreme experiences of violence are not total determinants of general
physical and emotional functioning. To blame the experience of abuse for most, if not all, deficits to well-being may obscure other personal and social contributing factors. Abuse does not occur in isolation, and recognition of the idiosyncratic nature of women’s encounters with abuse would be useful for helping professionals and service providers. (Parker & Lee 2002, pp. 996-97)

According to Cashmore and Shac kel (2013d), the experience of child sexual abuse cannot be standardised or simplified. It is not a homogenous experience in terms of the circumstances or indeed the impact, particularly if consideration is given to aspects such as race, ethnicity, dis/ability, sexuality, geographical location, socio-economic status or class, religious and cultural belief, and of course, age. In light of this, Parker & Lee (2002, pp. 997-8) recommend that future approaches to research attempt to examine the ways that women cope, and the characteristics of the social environment which are helpful, especially to explore characteristics of various contexts such as specific actions, of the women or of their social environments.

These perspectives which explore some complexity and acknowledge diversity, have served to foster the ideas for my project. Some thirty years ago, my colleagues working in the field of sexual abuse, Scott, Walker and Gilmore (1990) explained how over emphasising individual pathology can lead to ‘victim’ blaming, blaming the mother, and attaching labels such as ‘dysfunctional’ to families. I believed then, as I do now, in the importance of carefully considering the context of abuse. Many times I witnessed ‘re-abuse’ by systems who turned away a woman for support when she decided to remain living with a confirmed abuser or, a service refusing to assist a woman escaping family violence because it was assumed she would, in all likelihood
return to her partner in time, given that she had done so, and perhaps many times, in the past. These recollections, for me, retain the sense that no one solution is a panacea and that our actions, if unchecked, can reproduce and reconfigure oppressive circumstances, values and ideas. Before proceeding onto my discussion regarding critical engagement with the experience of child sexual abuse, the following section discusses the literature on child sexual abuse and older women.

**Older Women and Childhood Sexual Abuse**

A lesser degree of attention by researchers is paid to the impact of childhood sexual abuse in later life. However, some studies have found a lasting impact of childhood sexual abuse despite the passing of 60 or more years (McInnis-Dittrich 1996; Farris & Gibson 1992; Allers, Benjack & Allers 1992; Draper et al. 2008; Draper 2014; Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2013). Mostly, information regarding the impact of child sexual abuse for older women emerges from the disciplines of psychology, social psychiatry, life review approaches, health sciences or psychiatry. Importantly, some approaches speak to the importance of problematising age identities when discussing violence against older people, such as considering ageism (Phelan 2013), particularities of experiences across all age groups (Duncan 2008), the intersection between age and gender (Chambers 2004; Kekula 2007), or incorporating feminist perspectives (Bernard et al. 2000).

Most research regarding violence in the lives of women is focused on young and middle-aged adults (Allers, Benjack & Allers 1992; Duncan & Mason 2011). In Australia, the lack of research regarding the experiences of
violence for older women and the need for policy reform has been a continuing concern (Mears 2003). In particular, research which includes the views and perspectives of older women about violence is limited (Hightower, Smith & Hightower 2006; Mears 1997). Duncan and Mason (2011) in advocating for further research effort regarding older women’s experiences of sexual violence state:

Opportunities for older women to talk about sexual violence and make meaning of their experience, its impacts and place in their life story are extremely valuable and rare, generally confined to individual and group based psycho-education and counselling. (Duncan & Mason 2011, p. 20)

Significantly, in terms of my topic, oftentimes research, although relatively limited, is focused on older women’s experience of physical or sexual violence in adulthood, such as domestic/family or intimate partner violence (Cook, Dinnen & O’Donnell 2011; Lombard & Scott 2013; Mears & Sargent 2002; Scott et al. 2004; Wilke & Vinton 2005; Zink et al. 2003; Zink et al. 2004; Zink et al. 2006a) and elder abuse (Clare, Blundell & Clare 2011; Cooper, Selwood & Livingstone 2008; Mears 2003; Phelan 2013; WHO/INPEA 2002). Specific attention to their experiences of childhood sexual abuse and its impact over their lifetime is less likely to be the subject of research (Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2010).

Prior to the 1970s, in a social context when women aged 60 and over were children and young women, for the most part, childhood abuse was not reported, legal recourse was limited, violence against women was a common and normalised experience for women, and hence the prevalence of abuse
experiences for older women is not possible to accurately gauge (Osgood & Manetta 2002, p. 100-01). Farris (1996), in reviewing prevalence rates for women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse in North America, found that most information came from younger women with only two studies reporting prevalence rates by age cohort inclusive of women over 60 years. Farris discussed how the experience of child sexual abuse was not only been largely based on the experiences of younger women, but also generally from university cohorts. These groups are likely to be from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, experience fewer difficulties than the general community and may be too young to have experienced long-term effects (Farris 1996). This is despite some surveys in Northern America indicating that 29% of women over 60 and 37% of women over 50 have experienced child sexual abuse (Farris 1996, pg. 12). More recently, the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse for older women is conflated with other forms of violence including intimate partner violence and elder abuse (Hightower, Smith & Hightower 2006).

Research regarding the impact and nature of childhood sexual abuse for older women is located, in the main, within psychological or biomedical frameworks. In Australia, there is some work regarding the links between suicide, suicide ideation, mental health aspects and childhood abuse for older people. For instance, Draper (2014) is a well-known psychiatrist specializing in research on ageing and childhood abuse, including mental health issues, depression, substance use, suicidal behavior and psycho-geriatric service provision. Suicide and suicide behaviour is a significant issue for older people worldwide (Draper 2014) and child abuse is one factor among a number, that contributes to increased suicidal risk in later life. Similarly, Almeida et al.
(2012), in a study of 21,290 Australian adults aged 60–101 years, found that 4.8% expressed suicide ideation in the last two weeks. Of those, a greater proportion of respondents had experienced childhood physical or sexual abuse (13% and 10% higher respectively) than compared to the group who did not express suicide ideation. Child abuse was a factor among others such as isolation, poor social support, financial stress, grief and loss issues, illness and past depression in the group expressing suicide ideation. Draper et al. (2008), in a study on depression involving 21,819 older adults (58.7% females and 41.3% males) aged over 60 years, 6.5% reported they had experienced childhood sexual abuse and 3% reported both physical and sexual abuse. They found there was a significantly greater risk of poor mental (depression and high anxiety) or physical health (cardiovascular events and stroke) for older adults who reported physical or sexual abuse histories concluding that the impact of childhood physical and sexual abuse can be poor mental and physical health in later life (Draper et al. 2008, p. 269).

In North America, Sachs-Ericsson et al. (2013, p. 492) similarly found that there was a significant link between childhood physical and sexual abuse and late-life suicidal ideation in 1,610 adults aged over 60 years. Also Talbot et al. (2004), from a group of 127 women aged 50 years and over who were admitted to hospital for depression, reported that 14.2% of respondents disclosed child sexual abuse histories and were more likely to report suicide ideation and have multiple suicide attempts than women who did not report having experienced child sexual abuse. In another study which examined the possible link between childhood abuse and later life depression or anxiety, particularly whether self-esteem had a role in mediating the effects, Sachs-
Ericsson et al. (2010) twice interviewed a group of 1,460 and 1,082 adults respectively (with a three year interval) aged over 50 years who reported emotional, physical and sexual abuse in childhood, with 2.4% specifically reporting sexual abuse. Experiencing sexual abuse was associated with lower self-esteem, and poorer psychological, and physical health functioning:

The negative effects of childhood abuse persist for many years, even into older adulthood. However, contrary to the findings in younger adults, self-esteem was not correlated with childhood abuse in older adults. Moreover, childhood abuse only had a negative effect on those who had low self-esteem. It may be through the process of lifespan development that some abused individuals come to separate out the effects of abuse from their self-concept. (Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2010, p. 489)

In 2014, Sachs-Ericsson et al. further explored the impact of rape for 1,228 women aged between 57-85 years. Seven percent of the women had experienced rape during their adult life occurring on average, some 36 years ago. They found that the experience of adult rape was associated with lower self-esteem, as well as lowered psychological and physical health functioning:

Self-esteem partially mediated the association between rape and psychological functioning, but not health functioning. These associations were significant even after controlling for participant characteristics and risky health behaviours. (Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2014, p. 717)

Research which explores the impact of childhood abuse in later life is limited (Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2010), however, in existing studies (‘a handful of studies’ Sachs-Ericsson et al. 2010, p. 491), there are links to negative
consequences which last into later life, such as poorer medical illness and physical function in adults aged over 50 years (Talbot et al. 2009) and, as described earlier, childhood abuse has been linked to poorer physical and mental health (Draper et al. 2008).

From the field of social work, Farris and Gibson (1992) discuss the particular difficulties associated for older women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and how they might be connected to common themes of ageing such as increased dependency on others and social isolation, life review and grieving. With increasing age, there is a greater likelihood of failing health and hence assistance may be required from health care providers and family or others. Their concern is whether, alongside increasing dependency, issues of physical intimacy due to past sexual abuse could arise in the context of the close physical contact required in the process of receiving care. Additionally, disclosure can be a complex issue when carers are the adult children (Farris & Gibson 1992, p. 38). Conversely, many older women are carers for others and particularly their parents (Farris & Gibson 1992, p. 38). Here too, issues which stem from past sexual abuse may arise if women become carers for a parent who has sexually abused her or indeed, perhaps simply the act of caring for another person may trigger memories.

Some research associates later life issues with a greater potential to experience grief-related events. For instance, the loss of health, friends and close relatives such as spouses and siblings are likely, and Farris & Gibson (1992) discuss that in particular, regarding child sexual abuse, the death of the abuser can be significant. McInnis-Dittrich (1996) found that depression and anxiety in older adults is more likely and therefore may be incorrectly
attributed to normal changes associated with failing health. She also discusses how, generally there is hesitancy for professionals to explore sexuality issues with older adults and this may lead to incorrect assessments.

Some 23 years ago, Allers, Benjack and Allers (1992) identified a need for further research into the connections and issues of childhood abuse and later life. I have chosen to include in my review, some earlier studies since, as stated, there is little research generally in this area, but also because some early work includes discussion which problematizes age and identity compared with more recent studies that tend to rely on psychodynamic frameworks to a greater extent. This is not to say, however, that earlier work does not rely on psychology at all, but some studies include recognition of social contexts, particularly assumptions related to ageing. For example, Allers, Benjack and Allers (1992) highlight how symptoms of long term trauma as a result of childhood sexual abuse such as depression, anxiety and dissociation can be misdiagnosed as dementia or mental illness in adults aged over 65 years. Thus older women with chronic depression may be experiencing distress associated with child sexual abuse but without appreciation of this link, they may receive inappropriate diagnoses.

This theme was further explored by Reich (1996) when working as a psychotherapist and consultant in nursing homes. She noted the limitations of these systems of care for older adults and her research examines how older women living in nursing homes may experience long-term impacts of child abuse which can be misdiagnosed as a ‘problem of ageing’. At that time, there were no studies which explored how older women managed the effects alongside the, ‘tasks and milestones associated with aging’ (Reich 1996, p.
65). Growing older may intensify symptoms of posttraumatic stress and furthermore may arise for the first time due to the specific issues associated with aging (Reich 1996). Age stereotypes and age discrimination contribute to misdiagnosis since older women receive a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress less often than younger women, resulting in older women prescribed inappropriate medications, over medicated, ‘unnecessarily hospitalized’, institutionalized, or experience loss of independence after moving to assisted care (Reich 1996, p 113):

Misdiagnosis not only leads to survivors being labeled and/or pathologized, but also leads to incorrect and ineffective treatment… The most appropriate treatment for an individual diagnosed as demented or psychotic is very different from the most appropriate treatment for a survivor of childhood sexual abuse (Reich 1996, p. 113).

The theme of later life impact and childhood sexual abuse has been explored by Gentlewarrior (1997) who mailed questionnaires to professional women consisting of two cohorts, one aged 29- 59 years and the other aged 60- 90 years. Her findings showed that for older women, sometimes the impact is not experienced until much later in life, sometimes 40- 70 years later. Consequently, the common wisdom that, time is a healer, cannot be taken for granted, and there is a need for acknowledgement of the lasting impact which may likely be experienced by older women (Gentlewarrior 1997, p. 141). The implications carry over to service provision:

At present older women experiencing symptoms of traumatic impact too often go unidentified, or are misdiagnosed by practitioners,
because of ignorance regarding older survivors (Gentlewarrior 1997, p. 141).

Age discrimination contributes to stereotypes that presume older women are not as ‘troubled’ by sexual violence in the same way as younger women, the assumption being that older women are too frail or not robust enough for ‘resolution work’, and have limited cognitive ability (Gentlewarrior 1997, p. 141).

Age stereotyping can also occur for older women (specifically in this case over 60 years of age) who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, rape and domestic violence in assuming that because the abuse may have occurred a long time ago, then the impact will be lessened or absent (Higgins 1999). In fact, older women may only be beginning to describe and discuss their experiences given that in the time they were children, the potential harm associated with sexual abuse may not have been recognised, or likely to be minimized, normalised, or seen as a private matter (Higgins 1999). Somer (2000) specifically examines incest in childhood and the long-term effects for older people since many will not have received professional support at the time, or will experience a delay in distress (as is the case for many traumatic experiences such as trauma sustained in war conflicts) and considers approaches to treatment in the context of late life issues such as failing health.

Some work exploring the impact of early life trauma in later life, also draws on psychological perspectives and includes discussion on child sexual abuse. For instance, there is an increased likelihood for posttraumatic stress (in the form of intrusive memories) due to traumatic early experiences linked to age related ‘decreases’ in memory which consequently may increase
distress for older adults (Floyd, Rice & Black 2002). Graziano’s (2004, p. 18) study confirms earlier work which highlight how, for older adults; symptoms of posttraumatic stress (such as grief, anxiety, helplessness, hyperarousal, and depression) can be ‘overlooked, misunderstood, misdiagnosed and/or incorrectly treated’. Those who are most at risk include, among others, older adults who have experienced child physical or sexual abuse. She advocates for social workers to be educated about the long-term effects of trauma, availability of resources for the purposes of referral, increased awareness of the specific issues of ageing which will be connected to how older people experience PTSD and appropriate expressions of ‘treatment’ in order to manage the impact in later life (see also Somer 2000). Bowland, Edmond and Fallot (2012) conduct spiritually-focused psychotherapeutic groups for women aged over 55 years who have experienced trauma including child sexual abuse, and who identify as being from a Christian background, to reduce depression, posttraumatic stress and anxiety. They advocate for trauma-informed practitioners and services, as well as spiritually-informed group work as a possible framework for therapy.

Many older women who are entering supported care or aged care may experience a reactivation of dormant thoughts, feelings and symptoms related to the past abuse (Peters & Kaye 2003). The transition to an aged care institutional setting, presents certain challenges such as the loss of their home in a physical sense, but also emotionally. For women who have experienced child sexual abuse, this may represent a loss of the physical and emotional space which for them has meant safety (Peters & Kaye 2003, p. 40). The lack of privacy, so often a feature of shared accommodation in institutional
settings may also present challenges for women by once again returning to a space where there is no control over who and when someone enters their room (Peters & Kay (2003, p.41). These practices can mirror experiences associated with past sexual abuse:

Suddenly, she (again) may experience loss of control over the people who come, whenever they choose, into her personal space and view (“checks”), wash, wipe, touch, or insert (medical) objects into her body (Peters & Kay (2003, p. 41).

Additionally, there are social losses, relationships with friends, family and communities that in the past might have been an important strategy to manage the negative effects of child sexual abuse (Peters & Kay 2003, p. 42). The loss of daily rituals which similarly, might have contributed to a sense of safety and predictability may for some women who have experienced sexual abuse, represent the loss of another method to acquire emotional safety (Peters & Kay, p. 42). Other factors with the potential to have a particular impact for women who have experienced sexual abuse include negative attitudes or coercive behavior by staff, and sexual assault (Peters & Kay 2003, pp. 43-5). Research which examines the social and historical contexts of older women entering aged care is important since their meanings and perceptions of themselves, their families and others in relation to the experience of sexual abuse will be diverse:

Are the effects of child sexual abuse the same for women born in the 1920s and 1930s as for the survivors born in the 1950, 60s and 80s who have been so widely studied? How has the meaning attached to the events changed over time? Do the changes in circumstances and
meaning, if any, create different symptom profiles? (Peters and Kaye 2003, p. 47).

Studies which rely on theories of human development have engaged with the process of life review or reminiscence to analyse the impact of child sexual abuse for older adults. Life review is regarded as a part of the human development process which as we age, is characterized by returning to past experiences in order to resolve, survey, and reassess our experiences as we draw closer to the end of our lives and has been viewed as a method for older adults to process past trauma including sexual abuse (Farris & Gibson 1992; McInnis-Dittrich 1996). Gagnon and Hersen (2000) assert that late life vulnerabilities for older adults aged who have experienced childhood sexual abuse include the inclination to review the past and reminisce, as well as loss of social support and declining health. They link relatively high rates of depression in older populations as being possibly linked to unresolved issues of child sexual abuse:

… the influence of early traumatic events may persist into old age. It is reasonable, therefore, to speculate that anxiety may be a problem for aged survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Gagnon & Hersen 2000, p. 193).

The developmental task of life review alongside possible loss of work and cessation of coping strategies such as alcohol use may increase the impact of unresolved childhood sexual abuse (Gagnon & Hersen 2000, p. 196), the perception of a foreshortened future and a hastened need to achieve resolution leading to overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame.
Psychological, bio-medical and psychosocial models for understanding childhood generally, are dominant and powerful discourses in Western thought and professional human service communities, such that they are often considered ‘universally applicable’ (Levett 2003, p. 53-4) and this also the case in the human service professions for understanding behaviours, emotions and our psychic lives. Research on child sexual abuse is not unaffected by the influence of biomedical and psychological models or theories to inform practice. In social work education, many universities have transferred social work schools from arts and humanities faculties to health faculties, signifying a shift in the epistemological preference for situating social work knowledge and expertise. Questioning knowledge assumptions is a thread in my thesis and one of my aims is to develop a critical engagement with child sexual abuse for older women. As demonstrated, most studies about child sexual abuse generally do not question epistemological assumptions and values. So too it is the case when considering the intersection of age and gender. Older women’s experiences of domestic violence are often neglected in most research and prevalence data (Lombard & Scott 2013), and this is also the case in relation to child sexual abuse, such that older women are, ‘invisible’ (Lombard & Scott 2013, p. 128). The ‘double jeopardy’ of age and gender means that whilst some aspects of younger women’s experiences will be similar and some of their experiences of ageing will be similar to men, for the most part, the intersection between age and gender requires further critical reflection.
Developing a Critical Engagement with Childhood Sexual Abuse

DVIRC (2003) contribute to understanding how dominant discourses convey social worlds with a critique of the several authoritative narratives regarding child sexual abuse. For instance, how the experience is defined can imply what is included and excluded and importantly, who is included or excluded. In addition, service responses reflect particular professional frameworks and thus there are implications in terms of how women encounter recognition of their experiences. Levett (2003) has also critiqued the power of psychological discourse in terms of the social construction of child sexual abuse which relies on middle class Western understandings of childhood, sexuality and ‘normal behaviour’ such that, ‘it is extremely difficult to study child sexual abuse except in relation to prevalence and expected trauma’ (Levett 2003, p. 66).

Certainly in my own literature review, I found most studies were premised on psychological or psychiatric frameworks with a particular focus on the individual. She argues that:

We need to be careful to avoid researching and dealing with child sexual abuse in ways which are not useful for changing the gendered systems of power and which fundamentally maintain patriarchal power (Levett 2003, p. 65).

Her argument points to the importance of locating the experience of child sexual abuse within understandings of how gendered identities are socially produced.

Girls grow into women with gendered subjectivities in which sexual assault and harassment by males are part of everyday life. Although
there has been a trend to research and discuss child sexual abuse as if it were a separate phenomenon (Russell, 1984, is a significant exception), experiences of sexual abuse in childhood must be seen as part of the broad processes in which male–female power and authority are epitomised. For both boys and girls who are sexually abused in childhood there is an exploitation of power differences between adults and children, but for girls the dynamics involved in male–female sexual relating also enter the picture (Levett 2003, p. 57).

Feelings of stigma, self-blame and shame are a consequence of the way child sexual abuse is currently constructed because it is largely associated with negative and damaging consequences, or a woman’s experience may not ‘fit’ within the categories that embody the definitions of sexual abuse,

If a woman cannot connect specific current problems with childhood experiences she has come to identify as sexual abuse … she may re-label the experience (‘perhaps it was not sexual abuse because I allowed it to happen’) (Levett 2003, p. 67).

Countering dominant professional discourse can be realised by documenting the ‘talk’ of women and girls from a range of groups about abuse experiences (Levett 2003, p. 67). Hightower, Smith and Hightower (2006) documented the stories of 64 women aged 50 and older who had experienced abuse as adults asking them about the types of resources that would be of benefit. The authors similarly argue that the ongoing nature of violence in the lives of older women receives little attention in research and despite comprising the largest group of older adults, their perspectives are rarely heard.

A political struggle is intrinsic to the process of augmenting the diversity of ‘speakers’ who are able to voice their experiences and perspectives about sexual abuse (Naples 2003, p. 1176). Naples (2003)
argues that her position, being a materialist feminist approach, is one whereby, collective resistance to a ‘monolithic’ or ‘totalizing’ discourse about the nature of women’s experience of child sexual abuse, ‘can contribute to a politically oppositional survivor discourse’ (Naples 2003, p. 1177). In developing a politics that addresses ‘the dynamics of oppression in contemporary society’ (Naples 2003, p. 1179), Naples believes it is important to find ways that the diversity of experiences and perspectives, especially considering class, race and sexual difference, can be told, so that, ‘new voices and new analyses can be inserted into the political process’ (Naples 2003, p. 1178).

Similarly, Reavey and Warner (2003) examine how culturally sanctioned social scripts can represent the experience of child sexual abuse from perspectives which are invested with power and authority. Politically, they argue, societies where patriarchal privilege is dominant, broader narratives about femininity and sexuality are affirmed and reproduced. The different ways we represent and work with the issue of sexual abuse will determine who is being spoken about, how they are spoken about, how the issue is constructed, what is held as a concern or conversely, minimised (Reavey & Warner 2003, p. 1). Dominant discourses about child sexual abuse are linked to historical and social contexts and to the construction of identity in terms of sex, gender, race, ability and, relevantly for my thesis, age (Warner 2009 p. 15). Prevalence, impact and definitions are constituted within social and historical, cultural contexts and therefore claims are, ‘limited and unstable, and function primarily to raise or restrict concern about particular groups of individuals’ (Warner 2009, p. 15).
A critical position which informs knowledge about child sexual abuse involves questioning structural power and the ‘medicalisation of social issues’ (Levett 2003, p. 71) and is attentive to including the voices of women who have experienced abuse in their lives. Counter narratives are fundamental in contesting ‘deeply entrenched beliefs and normative systems’ (Levitt 2003, p.71). My thesis adopts a feminist position which aims to be politically congruent with these understandings. I have chosen to be open to the ways in which the women in this study speak about their experiences and their meanings. Thus my research aims to be open to the complexity of the women’s lives and their identities. Following Parker and Lee (2002, p. 996):

… a history of abuse is only one aspect of a woman’s life that will impact on her well-being and that even the most extreme experiences of violence are not total determinants of general physical and emotional functioning.

**Conclusion**

Discourse regarding child sexual abuse is located within social and political contexts and can be reflective of dominant ideologies in specific historical periods. My research contributes to the gaps in current thinking and practice on child sexual abuse, and particularly in relation to older women, by recognising the social and political discursive contexts in popular thinking, research and approaches to professional practice. There is a lack of research which problematizes child sexual abuse, gender and age, including the questioning of taken for granted assumptions, or the perspectives of older women themselves. Whilst life changes associated with ageing are a vital aspect of understanding older women’s experience of abuse and violence, a
critical engagement with the issues of child sexual abuse regards the perspectives of older women as a key to contesting normative constructions that oftentimes, for older adults, are located within bio-medical frameworks which may marginalise their personal and particular standpoints. This study is distinguished from most other work on child sexual abuse and older women by featuring the perspectives and stories of the women who participated, and by drawing on theoretical frameworks which take into account, the social status of older women. In developing a critical approach to thought and approaches regarding childhood sexual abuse and older women, the following chapter explores the relevant theoretical perspectives that inform my research strategy.
Chapter 3 Theorising Older Women's Lives

Introduction

This chapter combines a number of critical perspectives to theorize ageing and child sexual abuse with respect to women, and is a guide for my research strategy discussed in Chapter 4. Specifically, I discuss aspects of feminism, postmodernism/post-structuralism as well as critical gerontology which all share common ground as well as distinctions and contradictions. These perspectives are also relevant for a critical approach to social work practice with older women.

Adopting Feminism as a Critical Perspective

Critical and feminist theory both aim to address social inequality and in so doing, seek systemic change. Feminism can be viewed as ‘a legitimate variety of critical social theory’ (Agger 2006 p. 99), which engages with the notion of gender as a basis for analysis. All critical theories examine the nature of social issues and their meanings for our life experiences by understanding how they are shaped by social structure. For example, patterns of inequality are theorized as being the result of socially constructed social hierarchies and dominant hegemonies. A critical theory position therefore explores the nature of particular value positions because, ‘reality is shaped or constructed by social, political, cultural, and other forces’ (Strega 2005 p. 207). Furthermore,
the production of knowledge itself is a social practice that is variously repressive or emancipating. Therefore, following Strega (2005 p. 207):

Critical social science not only acknowledges its value position, it takes the stance that some values are better than others, and makes an explicit commitment to social justice.

A critical approach to research legitimates subjective knowledge and encourages the expression of ideas and perspectives from individuals/groups/communities about issues which affect their lives.

Although feminist theory is aligned to critical theory, both have developed separately (Martin 2003), with the former being difficult to define conclusively (Bernard et al. 2000, p. 9). Feminist scholarship is complex and there is considerable variance, such as liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, womanism (Campbell & Wasco 2000; Jaggar 2004), post-structural or postmodern feminism (Fawcett & Featherstone 2000), queer theory (Butler 1990, 2004) and post-colonial feminism (Mohanty 2003). Nonetheless, the following characteristics are typically associated with feminist theorising and inform my own study.

Feminist perspectives are focused on, ‘making visible women’s experiences’ (Bernard et al. 2000, p. 16) and is therefore most often the object of feminist research (Campbell & Bunting 1991). It is an engagement with privileging the voices of women, through their own words (Bernard et al. 2000, p. 16) and highlighting women’s particular views in a range of contexts (Frye 1996). Consequently, feminist theory paradigms aim to position women’s lived experiences as valid sources of knowledge. Feminists rely on the assumption that everyday aspects of women’s lives and experiences are
informative and authoritative. The validation of women’s subjective knowledge about their experiences in their social and personal worlds (Harding 1987) is a touchstone for my own research approach. Following Campbell and Wasco (2000):

The ordinary and extraordinary events of women’s lives are worthy of critical reflection as they can inform our understanding of the world (Campbell & Wasco 2000, p. 775).

I work from the assumption that women are ‘knowers’ and the experts of their own lives and that, ‘women’s experience is authentic, true and sufficient’ (Trinder 2000 p. 45). Alongside this, critical reflexivity as a ‘researcher’ is a key component of the study which I discuss in further detail in Chapter 4. The development of a critically reflexive position as a researcher, particularly in relation to ageing is also an aspect of feminist research. Therefore, my research aims to acknowledge the perspectives of the women who participated in the study, to consider my own positioning as a feminist researcher and woman, and accordingly, my reflections are interwoven throughout the thesis.

Feminism is a way to understand oppression and its multiple expressions and being emancipatory in intent, a focus of critique is generally on patterns of gender inequality, whether they be overt or less obvious. In adopting feminist conceptualisations of gender, care, power and diversity/difference, social work practice can more deeply understand the contexts and politics of women’s lives (Swigonski & Raheim 2011). Feminism provides perspectives which are located in the views and lives of marginalised groups and in developing and conducting my research, I wanted
to make a positive contribution to social change in the lives of older women. Feminism has relevance for research about older women by locating their experiences in the context of gender inequality. There is a recognition of the relationship between the personal and structural aspects of women’s lives, and valuing ‘women’s experiences as contributing to new forms of knowledge’ (Chambers 2002, p. 105).

The politics of gender has been theorized by feminists in order to define and understand the oppression of women as being linked to systems of patriarchy that variously structure women’s experience (Agger 2006). In patriarchal societies, the universalising of men’s interests as if they represent the interests of both men and women, often then disregards the concerns of women (Davies 1992; Gilligan 1982; Martin 2003). As Swigonski and Raheim (2011 p. 10) compellingly state:

To bar taking the lives of men as the universal trope for being human is critical feminism in its most powerful articulation.

Achieving and demonstrating social change in the everyday personal and public lives of women is an intrinsic aspect of authentic structural change (Swigonski & Raheim 2011, p. 10) and this is relevant for critical social work practice which also aims to achieve social justice, and re-dress inequality, marginalisation and disadvantage (Allan, Briskman & Pease 2009; Fook 2002).

Older women experience gender oppression as do all women; however, in order to recognise the differences and multiplicity in how their lives are impacted and how they might negotiate their social roles,
postmodernism can assist by theorising the interlocking oppressions of age and gender (Krekula 2007).

**Bridging Feminism and Postmodernism**

Some ideas associated with postmodernism have relevance for my research and resonate with feminist theory in understanding the intersection between age, gender and the multiplicity of women’s identities. Deconstructing the commonalities and differences between and among women, particularly in relation to the complexity associated with understanding the nature of age and gender identities is an aspect of my thesis and there is merit therefore, in spending some time teasing out these tensions. This discussion aims to transcend a dichotomous approach to the analysis of social problems from either a structural/material perspective or one that may only emphasise agency, by adopting a variety of epistemological assumptions and concepts from feminist thinking, in particular feminist standpoint theory as well as postmodernism. Following Pease (2010, p. 103), what I attempt is ‘a dialectical perspective that transcends the limitations of single paradigms.’

Thoughtful consideration of the theoretical perspectives adopted by critical researchers is important since the assumptions and values associated with the logic of particular paradigms can be variously progressive or conservative (Pease 2010, p. 105).

Language itself is self-referential and Jacques Derrida has theorized that reading and writing are living engagements such that all texts are indecipherable or ‘undecidable’ without reference to their ‘concealed’ assumptions. The deconstructive reading of a text ‘prises open inevitable,
unavoidable gaps of meaning that readers fill with their own interpolative sense’ (Agger 1991, p 113). I agree with Derrida, and on that account, the following section attempts to locate some of the assumptions and values in my own written work.

The ‘weaving together’ of my theoretical approach has required some difficult and complex thinking because the theoretical disparities and convergences of feminism and postmodernism are very much like the metaphor of Indra’s net. This Hindu parable tells of a ‘cosmic net’ filled with jewels attached to each knot in the net, so that every faceted gem is reflected in each other, metaphorically indicative of the infinite and complex arrangements in relationships. Both feminism and postmodernism are difficult to define and both represent a range of complex theory positions, such that ‘feminisms’ would be a more accurate moniker (Ray 1996) and, paradoxically in a chapter discussing theory, wariness of theory is central to postmodernism. Therefore, in the process of presenting some of the inter-reflective relationships of my theoretical position, perhaps more is revealed about my own subjective positioning, aspirations, assumptions and politics than any final account of theory. This section is a particular attempt to represent the concepts associated with postmodern and feminist theories that are relevant to theorising the intersection of age and gender and is much like the infinite gem reflections in Indra’s net.

Firstly, however, it is important to distinguish between postmodern and post-structural perspectives. Doing so has been a perennially complex task to unpack, not only for myself, but also more generally for postmodern thinkers. This is attributable to the difficulty associated with definitively
categorising two broad ranging streams of philosophy (Agger 1991). Ironically the challenge to ‘essentialism’ is a keynote of postmodernism and post-structuralism. Ideas associated with postmodernism and post-structuralism overlap and some authors speak about similar concepts under an ‘either/or’ title because understandings of the two are variable. A thorough discussion is beyond the scope of my thesis and for my purposes I have chosen to adopt a similar approach to that used by Fawcett and Featherstone (2000), who acknowledge that feminist theory makes use of ideas from both postmodern and post-structural thought and that the term ‘postmodern’ is one which is used generally as the umbrella moniker.

I argue that feminist theory can be enhanced by some postmodern notions and that combining elements of postmodernism and feminism is consistent with a critical approach to social work theory and research. Fraser and Nicholson (1997, p. 132) suggest that the reason for some complexity and contradictions between feminism and postmodernism is due to a difference in emphasis between the two. For instance, postmodernism is a philosophical perspective which is positioned ‘outside of the problem’ and thus would eschew the universalising and progress orientated tendency of feminism to understand the nature and cause of women’s oppression. As well, a postmodern approach positions the construction of a political ideal to redress gender inequality at the macro level as espoused by feminism, as unattainable. Feminists on the other hand, maintain that there is credit in understanding the systemic nature of oppression and hence reify political pragmatism in order to have theoretical tools to achieve social change without resort to an apolitical relativism. In attempting to thread feminism with postmodernism,
Grosz (1988) views a postmodern feminist practice as one which occupies a ‘middle ground’, where it is neither absolutist nor relativistic but retains a recognition of the functions of power:

Absolutism and relativism both ignore the concrete functioning of power relations and the necessity of occupying a position, particularly a changeable one, with regard to the socio-political context of theory production. (Grosz 1988, p. 100)

The contradictions at the potential nexus between feminism and postmodernism has been extensively described by postmodern feminists (Benhabib et al. 1995; Fawcett et al. 2000; Healy 2000; Hekman 2013; Lather 1991, 2001a; Laws 1995; Nicholson 2013; Scott 1997; Weedon 1987). Recently, Morley and Macfarlane (2012) have argued the importance of revisiting the ‘nexus’ between feminism and postmodernism as a way to strengthen critical thinking in the context of the increasing potency of neoliberal and conservative agendas in academia and social work practice environments.

Lyotard (1984) argues that ideologies such as Marxism or indeed feminism, rely on identifying patterns of subordination and domination including axes of race, class and gender. A postmodern critique highlights how, such an analysis can be an imprecise attempt at social critique since it is reductionist, and thus divests social identities of the complexity and fluidity which now characterises contemporary society. So for example, feminism theorizes the oppression of women to be a result of sexism, a system of discriminatory social practices based on gender. Moreover, feminism relies on this type of social theory, ‘to identify causes and constitutive features of
sexism that operate cross-culturally’ (Fraser & Nicholson 1997, p. 138). From a postmodern perspective then, feminism can be said to operate as a meta-narrative that provides a singular ‘story’ of women’s oppression in a patriarchal society (Morley & Macfarlane 2012). Fraser and Nicholson (1997) have persuasively argued that feminist theory, despite now acknowledging and recognising diverse identities, still lacks theoretical weight in fully addressing its universalising tendencies, especially in relation to the notion of gender identity itself (see Scott 2010, for a helpful discussion on ‘gender’ as a construct for analysis).

Fraser and Nicholson (1997) suggest several propositions which together, frame a well-cited alliance for postmodern feminism. Postmodern critique of feminism can inform feminist theorising and practice by foregrounding how patterns of gender inequality must be historically located and culturally specific. Temporal and cultural specificity means that ahistorical categories such as ‘mothering’, ‘reproduction’ or indeed ‘woman’, must be ‘genealogized, that is, framed by a historical narrative’ (Fraser & Nicholson 1997, p. 144). Thus rather than universalising women’s identities and experiences, postmodern feminism replaces

... unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. (Fraser & Nicholson 1997, p. 144)

Consequently, in terms of social identities, there is the potential for the representation of diversity in experiences for instance in the case of issues
such as child care which may be a common concern among women, but one which is also differently experienced according to class, sexuality, race, and dis/ability (Fraser & Nicholson 1997, p. 144).

Fraser and Nicholson (1997, p. 143) refer to ‘fallibilism’, indicating an openness to revision and uncertainty. Also, Morley and Macfarlane (2012, p. 696) discuss the potential at the ‘nexus’ of feminism and postmodernism as being a theoretical space where ideas from both these philosophical traditions can inform one another, rather than being in dichotomous opposition. The potential in a complex world they argue, is in liberating

… us from how we construct social problems, and to enhance the application of feminist values to practice. (Morley & Macfarlane 2012, p. 701)

There are several aspects of postmodern and feminist thought that when interwoven, are relevant for my thesis. To begin, when describing older women’s experiences, recognition of diversity within the categories of ‘woman/man’ or ‘old/young’, enables a more intricate reflection of the multiple interpretations of what it might mean to be a woman growing older. In my view, a nuanced portrayal of the views and lives of older women is respectful of diversity, conscious of context and at the same time, can be attuned to marginalisation that is experienced in a variety of ways in numerous circumstances. For instance, Laws (1995) uses insights from feminism and postmodernism to highlight the diversity in how we age, by rejecting essentialism, and instead, exploring ageist practices within historical and geographical contexts. Essentially Laws (1995, p. 113) draws attention
to the many expressions of ageism, racism and sexism according to their context.

By way of example, Laws (1995) discusses the importance of contesting negative age relations and identities in the labour force context, households, popular culture, the state and the built environment, in order to demonstrate how in practice, oppressive conditions are manifested as multiple sites of struggle that may vary across time and place and according to race, class or any other axis of identity. Age oppression may be located in the workforce but not in other areas of life or materially, older women and men may differ according to class or race and finally, age stereotypes may be repressive or productive (Laws 1995). In terms of a pragmatic and active approach to social change, Laws (1995) argues that it is only by specifically identifying the sites of struggle, that they may be redressed. Postmodern attention to recognising multiple and complex identities has resonance with my feminist research practice approach by highlighting the various ‘sites of struggle’ and diversity in the lived experiences of the older women in my study and the ways they have perceived and managed the impact of child sexual abuse.

Harding (1987), a feminist standpoint theorist, almost 30 years ago discussed the importance of feminist analyses remaining sensitive to the multiplicity of women’s lives across race, class, sexualities, and culture. Additionally, feminist standpoint theorists have highlighted the importance of the context and nature of social relations in the production of dominant and marginalized knowledge (Harding 1987; Hartsock 2004; Hill Collins 2004; Jaggar 2004; Smith 2004; Wylie 2004). A point of departure, however, for
standpoint theorists from postmodernism is in how particular ‘standpoints’ are ‘favoured’ in order to contest existing social arrangements, such that Strega (2005, p. 214) comments:

Feminist standpoint theory … understands knowledge as contextual, historical, and discursive… and [my emphasis] … privileges the perspective of women.

In order to adopt a feminist perspective which maintains the aim of emancipation and social critique, privileges the ‘standpoint’ of women and recognises multitudinous ‘standpoints’, an ‘audacious balance’ (Rubio 2011, p. 33) must be struck between these notions.

Identities such as ‘women’ are replaced by a multiplicity of irreducible versions comprised by the intersection of different axes of differentiation. The combination of race, sexuality, ethnicity, sex, gender and class give place to numerous identities whose oppression and narratives cannot be merged into only one. Nevertheless, this does not mean we cannot say anything about ‘women’ in general without essentializing them. Rather, it means that the shared experiences and/or features are more limited and must be defined with caution.

Specifically for my study, feminism locates specific social locations or ‘standpoints’ in order to identify oppression and marginalisation with respect to age and gender. However, rather than reduce the experience of older women to general theories as if they all share a similar reality (Tanesini 1999), or over state any similarities as if they are normative (Warner 2009, p. 4), a postmodern approach, ‘allows difference and similarity to be theorized rather than assumed’ (Warner 2009, p. 5). In so doing I acknowledge that my consideration of mainly two categories, being age and gender, are alone insufficient to adequately circumscribe a woman’s experience. Complex
differences exist among women depending on the repressive or productive operation of power at micro and macro levels:

Not only do our gender experiences vary across the cultural categories; they also are often in conflict in any one individual’s experience… These fragmented identities are a rich source of feminist thought (Harding 1987, pp. 7-8).

‘Standpoints’ then, in recognising the diverse and changing nature of identity can be conceptualised as mobile, multiple and fluid and reflect ‘where we speak from, rather than who we really are’ (Warner 2009, p. 8).

To analyse the experiences of the women in my study, the notion of intersectionality is another ‘thread’, helpful in theorising the intersection of gender and age. Intersectional theory has emerged as a relatively recent paradigm from critical feminist theorists, although it can be considered to be trans-disciplinary (Bilge 2010, p. 58), to develop a more complex understanding of the multiplicity of identity and inequalities (Bilge 2010), and to understand structural oppression as well as the diverse individual oppressive experiences of women (Belliveau 2011, p. 32). Meekosha (2007) argues that the extension of understandings in the complex nature of identity by using an inter-categorical analysis, theorizes subjectivities in more holistic and elaborate ways rather than an approach which relies on mutually exclusive categories such as race, class and gender. As with other identity categories, age denotes a social relationship (Meekosha 2007, p. 162) and the inclusion of gender as an aspect of identity, can assist to understand subjectivity as a more ‘complex web of cultural interpretation’ (Meekosha 2007, p. 170). Intersectionality is another way that thinking about the
complexity of identities can introduce deeper analysis, and this is important for critical social analysis because all markers of identity are, ‘social constructions of exclusion and processes of naming and classifying who does and who does not constitute a full citizen’ (Meekosha 2007, p. 172). McCall (2005) also advocates an intersectional approach to subjectivity in order to understand its complexity. Intersectionality can account for the contradictory nature of single categories and kindles unlimited, nuanced, flexible and inconstant possibilities for the nature of subjectivity, possibilities that are contingent on every moment (McCall 2005). It is with these understandings that my thesis attempts to employ a strategic use of theory in order to represent categories of age and gender.

Ross-Sheriff’s (2008) application of an intersectional approach to address age oppression, argues for critical insights into the experience of aging as has been done for gender and race. Identity is always interwoven with other indicators such as gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and age (Ross-Sheriff 2008, p. 309). Narratives and life histories are important tools used to help explain complexity in the experience of aging:

Older women have been relatively less visible in gender theory, and their voices have not been heard in research. As social work professionals and feminist theorists, we need to conduct more research that examines elderly women’s lives within the context of the women’s diverse positions and further develop feminist theories that provide a more nuanced understanding of elderly women’s complex conditions. (Ross-Sheriff 2008, p. 310)
By way of example, the intersection between ageing and gender is discussed in Wilinska’s (2010) study of social policy in Poland to demonstrate how, at a macro level, two dominant discourses, that of age and gender powerfully ascribe roles to older women and men. She argues that these subject positions are discriminatory and one dimensional reproducing inequality, such as ‘older women can only be grandmothers’ (Wilinska 2010, p. 892). The use of intersectionality in this way serves as an analysis of dominant discourses and how the technologies of governance operate to enact a political subjectivity.

Theory is not only relevant in understanding identity but also the difficulties associated with fixed definitions in understanding women’s experiences of sexual abuse. The intent of my thesis is to remain open to the various meanings that women make of violence in their lives. In problematizing dominant discourses on rape, Brenner (2013) deconstructs the victim/perpetrator framework typically used to understand the nature of sexual violence in the lives of women under patriarchy. She argues that the use of these labels may be counterproductive in achieving rape reform because of simplistic assumptions associated with the narratives of agency, power, passivity and disempowerment. Thinking about ‘perpetrators’ only as predatory, or more ‘powerful’ relative to a ‘victim’ contributes to a stereotype of what constitutes ‘real’ rape. A ‘perpetrator’ who does not fit these narratives may be perceived as less blameworthy, more sympathetic or ‘benign’ (Brenner 2013, p. 520) and, some rapes seen as less serious than others. Conversely, the same framework is constitutive of ‘real victims’ so that some people who experience sexual violence are excluded from
recognition such as sex workers as well as ‘victims’ who do not fit a hetero-
normative stereotype marginalising then,

… male, queer, transgender, and intersex rape survivors. Such
perceptions obscure forms of sexual victimization that may in fact be
profoundly under-recognized (Brenner 2013, p. 527).

The victim/perpetrator framework can mask the complexity and ‘multiplicity’
of experience in the everyday realities of many different people across a range
of social, political and cultural contexts, and consequently may also
participate, ‘in the disempowerment and traumatization of rape victims’
(Brenner 2013, p. 503). McAlinden (2014) also advocates for more complex
understandings in the constitution of ‘victim and ‘offender’ identities. Her
discussion relates to child sexual abuse and the politics of ‘risk’ evaluation
for those ‘at risk’ of being ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’. Similarly, McAlinden
(2014) deconstructs the victim/perpetrator framework to demonstrate how it
represents hierarchies of ‘victimhood’ and ‘offending’, thus constituting
legitimate ‘victims’ and ‘offenders’. Reframing the politics of risk and
creating dynamic ‘cultures of safety’ among communities has the potential,
in her view, for proactive risk management, and the provision of greater
accountability regarding child protection strategies and sex offender
management. Another approach to theorising the politics of ‘victimhood’ is
argues that the difficulty in delineating what constitutes rape is the result of
cultural scripts that normatively constitute the boundaries of sex, gender,
gender relations and sexuality. Thus any response to reform in addressing
sexual violence must focus on creating gender relations which do not
reproduce the preconditions for rape, namely, ‘women as passive victims and men as sex-craving aggressors – that make room for rape to be confused with sex in the first place’ (Gavey 2013, p. 4).

Gavey’s (2013) argument is instructive when considering other discourses which emerge in reconceptualising ‘victimhood’ specifically when positioning agency as progressive or as an expression of ‘freedom’ (Stringer 2014). Reconceptualising ‘victimhood’ so that women are perceived as ‘powerful, active and resistant agents’ (Stringer 2013, p. 153) is the basis for the creation of another subject position, one where social vulnerability is recast as personal responsibility (Stringer 2014). Stringer (2014, p. 9) calls this the ‘neoliberal victim theory’ where ‘victims’ become ‘authors of their own suffering’ and sexual violence is de-politicised:

According to this conception, victimization does not so much happen ‘to’ someone as arise from the self – through the having of a ‘victim personality’, through the making of bad choices, through inadequate practice of personal vigilance and risk management, through the failure to practise the rigorous discipline of positive thinking (Ehrenreich 2009). (Stringer 2014, p. 9)

Thus recognition of one’s experience of sexual violence is not necessarily related to what has occurred but is dependent on

… the particular parameters of victim recognition that exist in their social world, including their position within gender relations, ethnic hierarchy, class stratification, and other engines of social difference, and their positioning in relation to dominant discourses that distinguish between worthy and unworthy victimhood, between sufferings that demand humane recognition and response, and claims
of suffering that are able to be cast as suspect or otherwise unworthy of recognition. (Stringer 2013, p. 150)

Similarly, Bumiller (2008) locates particular constructions of ‘women as victims’ within the discourse of neoliberalism resulting in individualistic problem solving strategies to address sexual violence, and reproducing gender relations and stereotypes which further entrench the social conditions for sexual violence. Her rationale is that gender identity is positioned as the cause of sexual violence and is reified over other aspects such as race and culture (Bumiller 2008, p. 155). Thus, she argues, the alliance between feminist activists and the state in addressing sexual violence becomes a form of neoliberal social control:

… rather than seeking a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomena or counteracting other forms of domination in women’s private and public lives… it is critical to “protect” women by removing the economic and social obstacles they regularly encounter rather than by expanding the capacity of the state to reproduce violence. (Bumiller 2008, p. xiv-v)

Both Stringer (2013, 2014) and Bumiller (2008) draw attention to the importance of discursive analysis in addressing violence against women. Positioning ‘victims’ as dependant and, vulnerable or as agentic and responsible, potentially reproduces existing gender relations and obscures the structural economic, social and cultural social parameters which contribute to gender violence. Awareness of social scripts which reproduce disadvantage and marginalisation is a part of disrupting those same scripts, and feminism and postmodernism both contribute to insights about how to critically reflect, and represent diversity such that there is no ‘final account’ in the experiences
of sexual abuse (Warner 2000, p. 78). Importantly, the inclusion of ‘multiple truths’ is an aspect of working towards an emancipatory framework (Warner 2009, p. 4). For instance, Brown (2013) discusses how in a study exploring women’s experiences of trauma, the expression of uncertainty may not necessarily indicate the absence of trauma. Her study demonstrates how the women’s narratives highlight contradictions and gaps and how ‘trauma’ can be constituted through dominant discourses. Consequently, Brown also advocates for the representation of complexity and uncertainty in relation to women’s stories of trauma. Similarly, my research aims not to be representative of any one ‘right’ or conclusive way to understand the experiences of the women in terms of the issues regarding the interface between sexual abuse and age.

Feminism and postmodern thought, in tandem, provide the potential to problematize regimes of truth regarding gender and experiences such as sexual abuse. My research approach seeks to recognise the contextual nature of the insights of the women in my study. The integration of feminism and postmodern perspectives creates the possibility of openness to the diversity of experiences which exist among women as a result of differing aspects of their identity. Partly my desire in conducting the research in this way, has been to be open and accepting of the women’s stories and what they wanted to share. As a result, my study is modest in its claims. It has been important for me as a researcher that my thesis is not seen to be representative of any conclusive way to understand the experiences of the women. The following section explores theoretical frameworks to assist in understanding the intersection between age and gender.
Theorising Age and Gender

In all categories of identity such as gender, class, sexuality and race, age is the least theorized (Krekula 2007). Age markers determine life experiences due to the effects of social, employment, housing and health policy, as well as personal experiences with respect to how others will respond to us and make summations about competency and character (Sontag 1997; Westerhof & Tulle 2007). A critical theory approach to ageing explores how cultural norms construct age identities and how the nature of individual experience is shaped in part by social structures creating inequitable access to wealth and incomes, safety, healthy communities, and quality health care (Holstein & Minkler 2003). The following section discusses the particular aspects of feminism, postmodern theory and critical gerontology which scaffold my understandings of ageing and its potential to explore the complex meanings of ageing for older women.

Although ageing is an axiomatic experience for each one of us\(^2\), it is also ‘necessarily a women’s issue’ (Ray 1996, p. 674) because, in tandem with similar trends occurring in Western democracies, by 2012, women comprised 54% of people aged over 65 and 65% of people aged over 85 in Australia (AIHW 2013, p. 238). In age studies, practice and research in gerontology has privileged perspectives from functional health paradigms rather than query the ‘existential and social challenges of adult ageing’ (Biggs

\(^2\) It is estimated that 22% of Australians will be over 65 years of age by 2061 and that the median age will rise from 37.3 years in 2012 to 44.5 years in 2061 (ABS 2013) due to greater life expectancy and lower levels of fertility in Western societies.
2008, p. 116) with little focus on theorising discourse, agency, governmentality, narratives, sexuality, resistance, bodies, and race (Katz 2014). Critical engagement with aspects of ageism including cultural and social constructs of ageing, age narratives and social policy mostly emerges from the fields of sociology, gender studies and critical gerontology (Aberdeen & Bye 2013; Bernard et al. 2000; Calasanti & King 2011; Calasanti & Slevin 2006; Estes, Biggs & Phillipson 2009; Gullette 2004; Minkler & Estes 1999; Phillipson 1998; Powell 2006; Wilson 2000). Most recently, in humanities disciplines, the study of ageing has incorporated epistemological and cultural aspects relevant to contemporary change in societies, producing theory in the areas of identity and subjectivity, the body and embodiment, representation as well as the visual, time and space (Twigg & Martin 2014, p. 1). Cultural gerontology, with its emphasis on postmodern/post-structural analysis, has been critiqued on the basis that it obscures, ‘the economic and social factors that materially shape the experiences and situations of old people’ (Twigg & Martin 2014, p.4). However, it provides future scope for the development of a politics of ageing in everyday life (Twigg & Martin 2014) and as such is a potential evolution towards building critical perspectives on age.

Critical gerontology is an important perspective that, ‘attempts a radical approach to adult ageing drawing on both the personal experience of older adults and their relationship to social and structural inequality’ (Biggs 2008, p. 115). In considering the positioning of older women, my study adopts some key ideas associated with critical gerontology and in particular a feminist gerontology. Critical gerontology has been developed by social
gerontologists over some time (see for example, Baars et al. 2006; Cole et al. 1993; Minkler & Estes 1991; Phillipson 1998) and furthermore, some theorists have fused aspects of feminism with critical gerontology (Browne 1998; Calasanti 2004, 2008; Calasanti & King 2011; Calasanti & Slevin 2001, 2006; Cruikshank 2009; Estes 2006; Formosa 2005; Freixas, Luque & Reina 2012; Garner 1999a, 1999b; Marshall 2006; Ray 1996, 1999, 2004). Having been influenced by neo-Marxist theory and sentiments emerging from civil rights movements (Biggs 2008), there are various complementary theoretical streams in critical gerontology (Phillipson 1998) including a focus on the political economy (Minkler & Estes 1991, 1999), ethical and historical considerations (Cole et al. 1993) and biographical or narrative perspectives which emphasize the meaning of ageing from the perspectives of older people themselves (Biggs 2001, 2004; Kenyan, Ruth & Mader 2008; Zeilig 2011). Theories associated with critical gerontology seek to interrogate the status quo (Ray 2008) and focus on exploring the dominance of biomedical models in research, the intersection of race, gender and class, normative constructions of age, the inclusion of the perspectives and narratives of older people in research, the nature and impact of ageism in society, and self-reflection in the academy (Ray 2008). Thus critical gerontology is associated with a move from modernist constructions of ageing to understanding age as a fragmented, culturally derived concept.

It signals the paradigm shift away from the dominant understanding of age, as represented in the positivism of the biomedical model, to the alternative view, a critical stance which exposes the underlying power structures and socially constructed “age conceptualizations” on both micro and macro levels. (Anderson 2011, p. 49)
Netting (2011, p. 240) describes the main aim of critical gerontology as interrogating

… the underlying assumptions that form the paradigms, theories, models, and approaches that are used to conceptualize the studies and interventions in the field.

And finally, Biggs (2008, p. 115) describes critical gerontology as

… the discovery of the hidden, be these structural inequalities that present themselves as reasonable and natural, age prejudices that appear to be facts, or personal desires that cannot be fulfilled and may not even be raised in consciousness.

Critical gerontology is therefore concerned with the relationship between ageing, the social construct of ageing and its impact on identity as well as social and structural inequalities that are experienced in later life stages (Biggs 2008, p. 115). It is concerned with the identification of dominant ideologies that can contribute to oppressive ageist narratives or practices (Allen & Walker, 2006 p. 156). The scholarship of critical gerontology has been informed by Marxism, and other schools of critical thought such as the Frankfurt school of philosophy, by postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault, and by a range of feminist theories from the late twentieth century, discussed later (Ray 2008, p.97). Its aims are variable and its critiques include, ‘challenges to scientism and the hegemony of biomedical research in gerontology’, ‘the normative construction of the life course’, ‘insensitivity or indifference to gender, race, class, and age relations’, ‘a lack of historical and philosophical imagination in constructing meanings of old age’, and ‘the unacknowledged impact of cultural images and narratives of aging’ (Ray 2008, pp. 97-8).
Generally, many critical gerontologists have considered feminist theorists to be ‘neglectful’ in addressing ageism (Calasanti, Slevin & King 2006, p. 13) or paying ‘scant attention’ to age relations (Calasanti & Slevin 2006; Freixas, Luque & Reina 2012, p.45), and have drawn special attention to the ways critical gerontology has worked to re-address the paucity of scholarship on ageism by feminist theorists (Allen & Walker 2006). The inattention by feminism to age theorising can be argued as, ‘unacknowledged privilege and is itself oppressive in fostering covert participation in systemic neglect and internalized domination’ (Ray 2000a, p. 225). Hooyman et al. (2002) encourage feminist gerontologists, to work toward improving the image of older women, because in many social contexts, older women tend to be invisible and their concerns understudied (Cruikshank 2009). Developing a critical approach to ageing by utilising insights from feminism and critical gerontology has been one of the motivations for my research. Alongside this, there has been the desire to develop anti-ageist frameworks for practice in social work.

Despite the identified ‘paucity’ of scholarly attention to age relations by feminist theorists, early writers were interestingly, mostly all social workers (Richardson & Barusch 2006, p. 45) and include influential works such as, Women, Feminism, and Aging (Browne, 1998) and, Fundamentals of Feminist Gerontology (Garner, 1999b). Feminism and critical gerontology share a common concern with the intersection between gender and age (Richardson & Barusch 2006) and notwithstanding the contributions of feminists such as de Beauvoir (1970), Sontag (1997) and Friedan (1993) who all explored the intersection of ageism and sexism, feminist gerontologists
have since worked to theorize gender and age in specific contexts including issues of age and gender oppression (Laws 1995), the gendered nature of social, political and economic contexts of ageing (Calasanti & Slevin 2001; Estes 2001), cultural constructions and narratives of ageing (Gullette 2004), the gendered ageing body (Twigg 2004), the nexus between feminism and critical age studies (Marshall 2006), and empowerment perspectives from feminist gerontology (Garner 1999a, 1999b). Exploring the social experience of ageing using the lens of gender assists in understanding gender inequality in later life, for example, women’s ongoing care giving responsibilities and lower financial status (Calasanti 2010, p. 731). The institutionalisation of power relations according to gender, constructs particular life circumstances for older adults and for women. Being so, a gender analysis of ageing can highlight particular inequalities.

Feminist gerontology whilst acknowledging the nature of social forces and structures that configure life experiences for older women, also considers agency which is variously expressed, as a guide to understanding women’s multiple and dynamic identities across a range of social contexts. Primary accounts and sources from the lived experiences of older women are a way to produce qualitative research that ‘is shaped by their perceptions and concerns’ (Cruikshank 2009, p. 184) and forms a part of feminist gerontological logic. In documenting the experiences of older women and the complexities of their lives, feminist gerontology aims to develop ‘emancipatory social change’ (Freixas, Luque & Reina 2012, p. 46). My decisions to focus the research on older women and their experiences of child sexual abuse contributes to addressing the exclusion of older women in
academic research (Freixas, Luque & Reina 2012, p. 55), providing ‘space and voice’ (Freixas, Luque & Reina 2012, p. 55) and recognition of the complexity in their experiences, perspectives and contexts. The themes of resistance and reconstruction in my thesis, whilst being an aspect of ‘agency’, are not demonstrative of dichotomous representations as discussed earlier, being either/or ‘victims’ or ‘free’ and independent of social expectation. Rather my approach is representative of complexity and aims to value the women’s changing and variable standpoints. It arises from understandings learned from feminist gerontology which incorporates recognition of the intersecting oppressions of age and gender, the social constructions of ageing more generally especially for women, the interdependence of material and structural inequality and agentic expression.

Stories from older women about their lives provide critical insights on the experience of ageing and the influence of gender, race, religion, sexuality, dis/ability, class, and ethnicity intersections. Feminist gerontologists explore the complexity of growing older for women using narratives to explore ...

… the context of the women’s diverse positions and further develop feminist theories that provide a more nuanced understanding of elderly women’s complex conditions. (Ross-Sheriff 2008, p. 310)

Similarly, my conversations with older women about child sexual abuse attempt to explore their insights and create spaces for recognition of their particular perspectives. Ross-Sheriff (2006) demonstrates how in her study of Afghan refugee women and their experiences under the Taliban regime during the US military response after September 11, 2001, simplistic constructions of these women’s identities is an inaccurate understanding of
experiences which involve war, trauma, death, forced migration, and repatriation. Through life stories and narratives, Ross-Sheriff (2006) unfolds the layers of self to discuss the women’s ‘sense of power’ and control in oppressive circumstances and to explore their multiple and unique roles, agency and identities.

Postmodern thinking and ideas also contribute to theorising the complexity of older women’s lives. Powell and Wahidin (2006, p. ix) identify how the construct of age has developed through a series of institutionalized practices and how a Foucauldian analysis can seed ‘spaces of resistance and artistic practices of the self.’ Theorising age in this way provides opportunities to disrupt fixed constructions of age that can be ‘brutal and destructive’ and instead, move toward ‘a world of contingency, a world of imagination and story, a world not of finding but of making’ (Irving 2006, p. 20). Foucault demonstrated the possibility for transformation of the self by understanding the ‘technologies’ used in particular historical epochs alongside particular forms of rationality to construct subjectivities.

Irving (2006, pp. 21–3) identifies three discourses of age that have come to represent the category of ‘old’. First, there is the development of essentialist binary categories such as young/old and a subsequent ‘industry’ of social practices and bodies of professional knowledge that manage the boundaries of ‘old age’. Second, there is a discernible array of imagery associating old age with decay and decline. The final age discourse constructs cultural measurement systems aimed at ‘ordering’ the ‘old’ body. In a similar vein, Westerhof and Tulle (2007) discuss the discursive context of aging with
respect to the medicalisation of the aging process, social policy, and mass media.

In terms of theorizing age identity, Foucault’s ideas assist to transcend dominant prescriptions of what it means to grow older. It is this idea and the creation of spaces for plurality and untold stories of ageing that is relevant for my own work:

Being human for Foucault means resisting identifying truth(s), thereby creating spaces for being-different … inventing new kinds of relationship and imaginative ways of life. (Irving 2006, p. 28)

I wanted my research to be premised on this reasoning. My themes of resistance and reconstruction tell of the multiple meanings the women in my study make of their experiences of child sexual abuse. It is a demonstration of how they have questioned and understood their constituted experience. At its core, theorizing age in this way questions, ‘the take-for-granted aspects of our aging politics and the social policies that mediate and administer them’ (Culpitt 2006, p. 132).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed some theoretical ‘threads’ which frame my research project including feminism, postmodernism and critical gerontology. They are important in understanding dominant discourse with respect to women and ageing as well as the issue of child sexual abuse and in building critical perspectives which question taken for granted assumptions about older women and later life.
The experience and nature of ageing as well as childhood sexual abuse can be perceived as constituted by social, political and historical contexts and being so, it is infinitely complex to represent conclusively. Therefore the adoption of a theoretical basis which explores assumptions about gender and age is helpful in order to explicitly recognise social and political factors that may marginalize and stereotype older women. Moreover, there is value in adopting a theoretical approach which aims to re-dress discrimination and achieve social justice. As discussed in Chapter 1, my research explicitly aimed to inhabit a theoretical ‘space’ that recognizes how social and cultural contexts can marginalise and construct subjectivity for older women and maintain existing cultural inequalities (Warner 2009, p. 12). The following chapter discusses how my theoretical placement informed the methodology for my project.
Chapter 4 Researching Older Women’s Lives

Introduction

Methodology in research practice is concerned with the ways in which information can be created and why research is conducted in a particular way. Often erroneously, methodology is depicted as simply methods; however, methodology includes the theoretical bases that provide intellectual foundations for the study (Carey 2012). Whilst it reflects research strategies that include the methods, procedures and techniques adopted in order to collect and interpret information, methodology is importantly concerned with the rationale for making certain choices when deciding how to conduct an inquiry. Therefore, methodology is ultimately a social construct which is located within specific historical contexts (Hester, Donovan & Fahmy 2010, p. 251) and includes value assumptions. This chapter outlines my research strategy, including the method and process of inquiry and its epistemological assumptions. I include some consideration of my own social location as a researcher as well as discussion regarding the ethical aspects of conducting this type of research project.

This research is linked to a scholarship of inquiry which is informed, partly, and in particular ways, by feminist and postmodern perspectives discussed in Chapter 3, and is specifically intended as a contribution to critical feminist gerontology. It aims to work towards creating ‘spaces’ for a group of older women to explore their knowledge and insights with respect to their personal experiences of managing childhood sexual abuse over their
lifetimes. Ultimately, it is hoped that in creating a place in research for multiple expressions, there is a possibility for an emerging and evolving practice in respect of anti-ageist practice in social work.

**Principles of the Research**


Ray (1999) articulates a ‘transgressive’ research approach in gerontology much like a parallel journey to that undertaken by Michele Fine (1994) and bell hooks (1994) in addressing women’s unequal social status. She aims to develop the field of gerontology so that it

… questions, challenges, contests, and resists the status quo. Critical feminists not only demand fuller representations of women and women’s issues in research, theory, and practice, but also seek methodologies and interpretative strategies that extend current thinking about how knowledge is made and disseminated. (Ray 1999, p. 172)
Although written over a decade ago, Ray’s (1999) framework is still very relevant and an important approach to my research project which aims to improve the social position of older women. Ray’s (1996, 1999) notion of a ‘transgressive’ research practice is informed by theories of feminism and postmodernism, which have at their core, the idea that research and methodology must be empowering and transformative. Her ideas can be summarised in five broad principles and I discuss how each of these are relevant to the approach taken in my project.

Firstly, Ray (1999, p. 173) suggests that critical feminist gerontology requires an interdisciplinary approach which not only incorporates paradigms and processes from a range of disciplines, but in another sense, the freedom and flexibility to express wide ranging ideas and theories so to avoid binary patterned thinking which can be limiting for researchers when attempting to understand the complexity of the self, language, social life, social action and the experience of ageing. Ultimately, Ray’s (1999, p. 173) objective is that research can ‘take the form of disciplinary border crossings, paradigm shifting, and ‘genre-bending’’ (Ray 1999, pp.173-4).

I read Ray (1996, 1999) as encouraging a thoughtful stance in research, one which is fluid and evolving, interrogates fixed categories of identity and aims to transfigure unequal relations. Hence, my research draws from a range of principles, perspectives (some of which have already been discussed in Chapter 3) and ideas to inform my methodology so it reflects the experiences and views shared by the women who participated in this study. Indeed, I have found the task of representing the complexity of their responses within social, cultural and political contexts that address ageing, age identity,
and of course, the experience of childhood sexual abuse to be one of the more difficult aspects in writing this thesis.

The second principle adopted by Ray (1999) is consideration of the subjectivity and social location of the researcher. One of the ways that research can be empowering is by challenging positivist paradigms that position the researcher as detached and ‘uninvolved’ and by politicising the subject matter of the research via the empowerment of the researcher as well as those participating in the research. Ray (1999, p. 174) relies on the critical pedagogies of Paulo Freire to explain how researchers must firstly become aware of their own oppression and tendencies to oppress others as a part of the process toward ‘liberating’ others. I began my project with the idea to actualise my role as researcher as an active participant which I achieved in part, by exploring my own motivations and social location using critical reflection, as a standpoint from which to analyse and interpret. This is in contrast to a role that is impassive and detached. I hoped to be an ‘empowered’ researcher, by participating in the research from a position of authenticity. In my conversations with the women who participated in my study, I aimed to be communicative in terms of my motivations and political positioning. I wanted to be open to any questions the women might have had, be they personal or otherwise, and ‘enabling’ in terms of the process of the research during the interviews. I also wanted to be responsive to how the women chose to interact with me. Some for example, often contacted me to inquire about my progress and I also invited the women to meet with me following the completion of my analysis in order to share the themes which had emerged from my perspective. I was open, at these times, to further
comment and constructive critique from the women. My positioning as a researcher is explored later in the chapter; however, adopting a critically reflective and reflexive stance has been a fundamental practice for me working with women in the human services field over the course of my working life and I adopted this approach as a parallel process in my study.

Thirdly, Ray (1999) believes that the validation of personal experiences and in particular those of marginalised groups, must be the source of knowledge production. This idea has been discussed earlier as a core characteristic of feminist practice. Consistent with this principle, my research emerged as a result of the desire to speak with older women and in doing so, privilege and feature their views as an important way to address the normative invisibility of older women’s lives. This principle formed the rationale for the use of semi-structured interviews as a research method, to create scope for conversation and the inclusion of the women’s stories in ways that were relevant for them.

Fourthly, Ray (1999) advocates an approach to research which is embedded within critical theory perspectives in contrast to a purely phenomenological approach. This is at the heart of what Ray constructs as being critical feminist gerontology. My aim was to locate my own research within critical paradigms (as discussed in Chapter 3 and threaded throughout my discussions) with the aim of questioning assumed social constructions about ageing and women, and re-evaluate what is taken for granted to ‘help transform social reality’ (Freixas, Luque & Reina 2012, p. 44). Estes, Biggs & Phillipson (2009, p. 3) similarly adopt the view that the study of structural inequality, especially from the standpoint of the personal experience of aging,
is essential for critical gerontology if it is to be a project for progressive change. Importantly, they argue for a reflective stance and a questioning of ‘established positions’ in terms of identity and this, they argue, is a key to redressing ageism. Researchers committed to disrupting normative discourses which are damaging specifically in respect of ageing, as well to the development of policy and practices that are empowering can actively ‘transgress’ by adopting critical processes and approaches to methodology. Empowering research is explicitly political, based in a particular value paradigm and ‘unafraid to take on an emancipatory consciousness’ (Formosa 2005, p. 399).

Finally, Ray (1999) believes that the ways in which research is reported is an integral aspect of the empowering process and that its presentation must not be neutral or ‘hide’ the voice of the researcher (Formosa 2005, p.399). This principle, along with the second, constitutes the rationale for my decision to often write in the first person and to publish from this work in scholarly sources that maintain an involvement and commitment to critical perspectives. The inclusion of a first person presence in writing would I hope, assist to relay my own assumptions, values and politics. I begin this process with discussing the epistemological assumptions of my study.

**Epistemology**

Epistemology is the philosophical study of the nature of knowledge and claims to ‘truth’. It is a ‘partner’ to methodology since theoretically it explores, ‘the questions of what can be known and who can be a knower’ (Campbell & Bunting 1991, p. 4). It is a practice of deep exploration into the
nature of knowledge and the positioning of the researcher, and thus the consideration of assumptions, values, as well as the social, cultural and political contexts of the research is central to an authentic critical approach to academic inquiry. My research as discussed in Chapter 3, is a feminist project. Essentially, feminist epistemologies, and I would argue, all epistemologies, implicitly include ‘accounts of the knowing subject, the object of study, and the relationship between them’ (Sprague 2005, p. 32). Therefore, research accounts cannot be defined in absolute terms but must be problematized, especially if they are endeavours in feminist research. Accordingly, what follows is a discussion which outlines the key epistemological concepts relevant to my study. In my belief, all research endeavours presume epistemological positions and hold implicit and overt assumptions regarding the nature and value of knowledge and hence it is an important act in discussing methodology, to also explore epistemological foundations if, as a researcher, I am earnest about fidelity to critical perspectives.

**Epistemology, Positivism and Feminism**

Current Western forms of rationality and accordingly, epistemological assumptions are widely influenced by the thought and philosophy of the 18th century German philosopher Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804). Lang (2011) argues that the popularity of Kant’s worldview emerged in response to prevailing theological epistemological models of the time. This model based on a Christian canon, held that knowledge was manifest, innate and preordained. In dissent, Kant argues that knowledge was not certain in this way and in order for beliefs to be considered as knowledge, they must be based on experience, which in turn is constantly reviewed according to new
experience or evidence. The ‘knower’ and not ‘nature’ was the source for the creation of knowledge. Thus influentially, Kant established the notion of ‘objectivity’ as a process whereby a ‘knower’ gains knowledge. It was during this time that ‘reason’, being defined in particular ways, became established as a tool for ascertaining ‘truth’ or ‘objective’ knowledge. Thus Kant’s view was significant in developing the avatar of the ‘rational autonomous knower’ which has become a rather ubiquitous and unfettered epistemological model in Western thinking, particularly influential in the development of scientific reason. Lang (2011, p. 79) explains three major assumptions/implications of a Kantian worldview which serve as a watermark for Western cultural practices and institutions, setting a ‘gold standard’ against which all knowledge claims are judged:

(1) the knower is a discrete, empowered, individual agent capable of rational activity and detached objectivity; (2) that one individual is capable of taking another’s point of view and, thus, that individuals can be stripped of their particularities and — relative to their abilities as knowers and moral agents — universally interchanged with one another; and (3) that thought can be consistent from person to person, unaffected by individual particularities or circumstances.

Feminist theorists have especially engaged in debate regarding the nature of knowledge since, ‘epistemological questions are fundamental to feminist inquiry’ (Code 1991, p. 315). In discussing epistemology, they have, in the main, critiqued the Kantian worldview on the basis that it forms part of a regulatory system which supports patriarchy. Key to a feminist perspective is a focus on the influence of gender in the process of knowing and knowledge production, particularly in terms of the construction of notions such as...
rationality, objectivity and experience as well as the relationship between power and knowledge (Hester, Donovan & Fahmy 2010, p. 257). Theorising knowledge production and the links to patterns of social domination has been a major contribution of feminist theory in the study of epistemology (Sprague 2005).

Feminist epistemologists problematize hierarchies of knowledge demonstrating how legitimacy regarding who can be ‘knowing’ subjects, is connected to relationships of power and social privilege. Lorraine Code (1991) in her instructive tome on epistemology, *What Can She Know*, critiqued dominant and mainstream knowledge claims by linking the assumptions of epistemologies based on Kantian concepts to a patriarchal system which privileges middle-class white males as follows:

Ideals central to the project – ideals of objectivity, impartiality, and universality are androcentrically derived. Their articulation maps onto typical middle-class white male experiences to suppress the very possibility that the sex of the knower can be epistemologically significant. (Code 1991, p. 314)

Earlier, Grosz (1988, p.100) characterised feminist research practice as being openly dependant on context and on the observer. More precisely, feminist theory, in Grosz’s view, is engaged with representation and the political impact of language and representation:

Feminist theory is neither subjective nor objective, neither relativist nor absolutist: it occupies the *middle ground* excluded by oppositional categories. Theory is *relational* rather than relativist. (Grosz 1988, p.100)
This is an important distinction, and one which I believe to be the essence of a critical analysis in exploring the nature of knowledge. It forms the heart of the justification for my research project. In this way, the dichotomy of an objective/subjective divide can be problematized alongside the acknowledgement of an absence in mainstream Anglo-American epistemology of a moral or political responsibility in terms of recognising how patterns of power and politics are embedded in processes of knowledge validation (Code 1991). Code (1991, p. 29) critiques the nature of dichotomous categories by demonstrating how this type of thinking contributes to processes that exclude the possibility of complementarities, interdependence and continuity. When exploring and investigating real world issues and situations with real people who have material concerns, Code’s logic supports the notion that knowledge can come from lived experiences in order to form useful and utilitarian social or political comment and action (Code 1991, p. 30).

The importance and the issue of legitimacy in understanding women’s experiences from their standpoints and perspectives have already been raised in the previous chapter. Hartsock (2004) advocates for the need to develop sophisticated understandings of the nature of experience beyond dualisms, given that it is largely boundless, complex, interdependent and incalculable:

The female construction of self in relation to others leads in an opposite direction – toward opposition of dualisms of any sort, valuation of concrete, everyday life, sense of a variety of connectedness and continuities both with other persons and with the natural world. If material life structures consciousness, women’s relationally defined existence, bodily experience of boundary
challenges, and activity of transforming both physical objects and human beings must be expected to result in a world-view to which dichotomies are foreign. (Hartsock 2004, p. 45)

In a similar vein, any single definition of feminist epistemology is conceptually contradictory since, as Code (1991) maintains, it is important not to define feminist epistemology as an oppositional epistemology or as one ‘feminist’ epistemology because in doing so, the result is the creation of further alternative exclusionary categories, essentialising once again, the concepts of ‘woman’ and ‘knowledge’. Far better that feminist epistemological effort to reconstruct epistemology should be a nuanced exercise. Importantly, she argues that in the theoretical fields of epistemology and there must be a creation of ‘space for productive relocations of knowledge in human lives.’ (Code 1991, p. 315). An authentic development of feminist epistemological analysis can only be re-mapped to create a ‘productive imagery’ which Code (1991, p. 317) defines as

… a clearing, an open middle ground where an inquirer can take up a position, a standpoint, within a forest of absolutes: the exigencies of objectivism, the fervour of ideology, the quietism of extreme relativism, and the hegemony of universal Truth - to mention a few.

Thus, epistemological positioning should be a continual balancing approach and one with which I agree. For instance, in terms of the objective/subjective dichotomy, constructs must be conceived in interaction with one another, and claims of ‘knowledge’, always a fusion of a variety of perspectives and values. Knowledge is continually linked to particular standpoints and inter-related value positions that are open to evaluation. Code (1991, p. 70) advises that,
An epistemologist has to devise ways of positioning and repositioning herself within the structures she analyzes, to untangle the values at work within them and to assess their implications.

And again following Code (1991), who advocates for a remapping of epistemology (Code 1991, p. 265), and a retreat from a definitive ‘feminist epistemology’ (Code 1991, p. 315), my discussion treads this delicate balance between the current tensions in epistemological debates within feminism. I aim to present a nuanced and imprecise representation which accordingly favours the standpoints of the women in my study without essentialising their experiences. The balancing occurs in also working and thinking about categories of age and gender. Furthermore, I have attempted to make my values explicit. With some qualification, perhaps my research adopts what Code (1991, p. 320-21) refers to as a ‘mitigated and critical relativism’, a research practice which does not seek the unification of concepts at the expense of difference, discontinuity or incongruity. Seeming contradiction or incongruence may be at issue, however, this is precisely the nature of a multi-dimensional practice which aims to acknowledge the construction of knowledge beyond dichotomies. Contradictions form the nature of human experience and so must be normalised and legitimated.

My research is an attempt to understand, acknowledge and present the complexity of the women’s experiences. The context in which the women speak and live is a touchstone for understanding and exchange. As a researcher engaged in the process of formulating knowledge, the acknowledgement and complexity of my own social location (discussed in a later section) and its relationship with the participants in the study is also a
factor in the web of assumptive possibilities. Epistemologically, my aim is reflected in the sentiments of Paul Veyne (2010), when he states what he believes is the most that can be achieved in a quest for ‘knowing’:

We can know nothing for certain about the self, the world or the Good, but between ourselves, whether living or dead, we can understand one another. (Veyne 2010, p. 16)

**Epistemology, Women and Ageing**

Younger is not better; it is simply different. (Copper, cited in Browne 1998, p. 253)

Gender as a focus for the analysis of oppression is inseparable from other dimensions of oppression (Grasswick 2011) and its intersection with age has been under theorized as discussed in the previous chapter. Browne (1998), a social worker and early theorist in developing a feminist theory of ageing, centralised the politics of knowledge production in her work on women and ageing as a way to make social issues regarding ageing visible. An aim of feminist theory is to legitimise ‘knowledges’ which are normatively marginalised in society (Browne 1998, p. 231) and regarding women growing older, their life experiences and perspectives have been absent or devalued in public discourse. Following Browne (1998, p. 263) then, my thesis centralises older women’s perspective in terms of the study of age. This requires a focus on gender while acknowledging multiple oppressions, strengths and paths of resistance or acceptance taken by older women.

As discussed, the epistemological approach adopted in this thesis is broadly embedded in feminist theory, albeit one which resists a hegemonic formulation of what constitutes feminist theory and knowledge production.
In essence my approach is aligned with what Browne (1998, p. 253) broadly terms as feminist age theory:

Feminist age theory seeks to hear out and validate what older women say about their lives. A balanced perspective acknowledges the varied experiences of women with age and seeks out their commonalities and differences, and the benefits and burdens among women based on their material world. In emphasizing diversity, we avoid a single perspective of normality for aging women.

Browne (1998) builds on the contributions and omissions in both fields of feminism and gerontology and introduces useful themes to assist in developing knowledge about women and age. In research exploring women and ageing, the deconstruction of negative myths is essential in order to redress ageism, and the inclusion of older women’s perspective and experiences is a key process in achieving this aim (Browne 1998). Also, though ageism is normatively a negative force, ageism can be reconstructed as a potentially productive force in the exposition of dominant discourse and being so, there is potential to alter these discourses (Browne 1998). Ageism can be ‘a new tool’ (Browne 1998, p.233) to uncover oppressions and better understand the nature of gender, power relationships and connecting forces.

As Browne (1998, p. 259) sees it, ageism is a powerful tool for deconstructing salient realities about the inequity experienced by all women:

Aging illustrates how women are all trapped by the current system. Therefore, it provides a strategy to resist and change it. (Browne 1998, p. 259)

Feminist gerontology is a counter discourse to a gender neutral study of age and can contribute to understanding the interlocking oppressions of
gender and age. Legitimising voices and experiences of older women thus creates a touchstone for reconstructing older women’s relationships and status in society. It locates and reconceptualises the relationships and operations of power which affect women as they grow older and thus also, has the potential for the creation of new knowledge regarding women and ageing, including the potential for social justice at both the individual and structural level (Browne 1998, p. 233). Epistemologically, my thesis aims to critique normative notions of productive aging and discourses of what constitutes ‘worthwhile’ ageing in the context of how the women have discussed their experiences of child sexual abuse.

Methodology

My study is a qualitative research project informed by feminist epistemology and feminist practice approaches to research. I conducted semi-structured interviews, and received written correspondence via email or letter with sixteen (16) women aged fifty-seven (57) and over (the eldest woman being 75 years old) who had experienced childhood sexual abuse and who were willing to discuss the impact of their experience over their lifetime. The interviews were guided by several general open-ended interview questions. There was an emphasis on the autonomy and choice of the participant to discuss their experience within their levels of comfort and to hear any associated issues they wished to raise. The aim of this research process was to affirm the perspectives of the participants as being experts of their own journey without pathologising any particular perspective, story or experience.
Arguably there is no, ‘distinctively feminist approach to methodology’ (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002, p. 15). Nonetheless, feminist research practice will usually include attention to women’s diverse experiences and perspectives and is ‘grounded in women’s experience’ (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002, p. 16), the acknowledgement of power in the relationship between researcher and participants or ‘hierarchies of power and authority in the research process’ (Hesse-Biber 2012, p. 4), the questioning of dominant epistemological assumptions on the basis of gender bias, and will seek to transform unequal social patterns and relationships (Hesse-Biber 2012). Feminist research practice therefore can be conceptualised as a ‘methodological matrix’ which frames the aims, approach and sensibility of the research project and includes particular discussion of epistemology and ontology, subjectivity or location of the researcher, method/s and ethics/politics (Wickramasinghe 2010, pp 52-3), all of which emerge according to the ‘social situation of the researcher’ (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002, p. 16). The following sections outline my particular approach to this ‘methodological matrix’.

Privileging the meanings that respondents attach to their life experiences can also form a cornerstone of feminist research practice and qualitative approaches to methodology are often suitable for feminist research praxis, particularly when exploring lived experience. There can be scope for design shifts as the project proceeds, and can accommodate the necessity to describe life accounts in some depth and complexity especially in terms of an activity which seeks to inscribe and make sense of meanings. Creswell (2013, pp.45-7) lists common credentials of qualitative research some of which are
relevant to the ‘methodological matrix’ of my study including: natural setting, researcher as key instrument, participant’s meanings, emergent design, reflexivity and a holistic account. This framework is a useful tool in which to frame my study and following Creswell (2013), the application of these broad characteristics are outlined in further detail below:

**Natural Setting**

The women were invited to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview with me with provision of the option to choose the setting in which they felt most comfortable (I discuss the detail of this process later). Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the physical setting was important to enable safety, both emotionally and physically. Suitably then, three of the women preferred to correspond with me either by letter or email. Hence, two responses were written in letter form and one was an email correspondence. I felt it was important to accommodate requests regarding the manner in which the women communicated with me so that sufficient consideration to the safety of the participants was granted. At each interview conducted in person, I explained and discussed consent, and sought permission to audio tape the interviews for the purposes of transcription at a later date. I also informed the participants about the purpose of the study and how the information would potentially be used in the future.

For the women who chose to write, I discussed this by telephone with them and asked if a consent form could be returned with their letter. The same applied for the email communication, and the consent forms were returned by mail. In many cases, I had several telephone calls with the women in order to
arrange the responses if they were to be sent or emailed, or in regard to the practicalities of meeting in person for interview. These telephone conversations served as a beginning to discuss the project by way of introduction, responding to questions, as well as attending to the process of consent to participate. It was also a start in terms of establishing rapport with the women and alongside this, trust and safety by answering their queries and allowing them to engage with me or set boundaries in the ways that were most comfortable. Importantly, I discussed my approach to how I understood the process, being one in which each participant was ‘in charge’ of what they might like to share with me. Of course their participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any stage.

At the interviews, I provided appropriate morning or afternoon tea and drinks, comfortable seating, pens and paper and my undivided attention. I tried to be sensitive to the needs and requests of the participants as far as possible, in part by focusing on being mindfully present and reflecting on my internal processes and responses during and following our meetings. I also expressed my gratitude for their participation, recognising the courage and effort it took to attend and to speak about such sensitive issues. Since some of the interviews were conducted in office buildings, I met each woman on the ground floor or outside the building in order to assist with lifts and directions. For the two women whose homes I visited, I telephoned ahead once I had commenced the travel to their location and again just prior to my arrival at their home. One of the destinations was a considerable journey length of three hours.
An aspect of the interview process included the taping of our session. As such, some discussion included what the taping process entailed. I advised the women that if they did not feel comfortable with this, then I could take notes; however, each participant agreed to the taping. This process of data collection for me includes a sense of artificiality, including the attempt to create a ‘natural setting’ in office buildings. Nonetheless, it is a signifier of the limits and boundaries in research projects, which I consider to be constructive and an aid to promoting physical and emotional safety as well as honesty in terms of the nature of our relationship in the research project. On the other hand, taping the sessions allowed me to focus, concentrate and respond to the women while they spoke without the distraction and interruption that taking notes can bring. Sometimes, my variable ability to operate the tape device served as an ‘ice-breaker’ and an entry into informal chat. Following the interview, I telephoned each woman a week later to check in with them and ensure they were comfortable with the interview and had not experienced a negative impact in the short term. All the women expressed satisfying experiences of the process even though difficult memories or topics had been discussed or emotions expressed. Once I had analysed the information from the women into themes, they were contacted and invited to attend another interview to hear about the themes and make any further comments. This then comprised a further element of the project.

**Researcher as Key Instrument**

As already discussed, the role of the researcher is a significant aspect of feminist research and the issues of social location, self-reflection, reflexivity, authority and power are discussed further in a separate section. Beyond this,
however, and given my central role in constructing and conducting the research, qualitative researchers require core skills that enable social research projects, not least being, commitment, energy, reliability and resilience (Carey 2012, p. 12). The nature of my conversations with the women was mindful, inviting and open. Where appropriate, I revealed aspects of myself and why I was undertaking this research. I answered questions that the participants had of me as a person, in a truthful manner while balancing this with boundaries that were mindful and sensitive to how the women might be experiencing this situation and the possibility for discussion that was potentially distressing and controversial. Throughout this chapter, I return to the themes of reflexivity, reflection and social location since it comprises a significant methodological aspect of the study.

Participants’ Meanings

Often, at the heart of feminist methodology, is a focus on the meaning of women’s experiences and this of course was the rationale for the use of a semi-structured interview method. When ‘researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue’ (Creswell (2013, p. 47), these meanings are often multi-dimensional and changing and therefore the original intention of research work can alter also. For instance, during the interviews, the range of issues that arose became much broader than I had anticipated and therefore my final themes also broadened to include issues that, although are connected, were different to a strict focus on childhood sexual abuse. Again too, the evolutionary nature of meaning from conversations and ‘talk’ in interviews emerged following the interviews for those participants who were interested in receiving feedback
about the themes. It was also a way to re-affirm the intention and meanings created at the initial interview.

**Emergent Design**

Emergent design in qualitative research is, as Creswell (2013, p. 47) tells us, when ‘all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data.’ As mentioned in the previous discussion, this certainly was the case for my interview process whereby the issues that arose were broader than expected.

An example of emerging design occurred when I commenced recruitment for the research. Initially, I had planned to interview women aged 65 years and over however I found that despite my advertisements stating the age criteria, many women who were younger called me to ask if they might be able to participate. The age of the youngest woman who contacted me was 55 years, some ten years younger than 65. This naturally led to a re-evaluation and reflection on my assumptions regarding what indeed constitutes the category of ‘older’ and on what basis had I originally selected 65 years as the delineation.

Relevantly, Ray (2000a, p. 226) has discussed, how in establishing a demarcation between generations or in creating generational ‘splits’, we belie something of our own internalised and unexamined ageism. This, I saw as a wonderful opportunity and point of learning for me. I decided to be open to all the women who saw the advertisement, and for their own reasons, wanted to join the study. I wanted to hold the idea that the women themselves were experts of their own ‘age identity’. Finally, for various reasons, some of the
women who initially contacted and who were younger than 65 years, did not proceed resulting in the youngest women in my study being 57 years old. These two women certainly self-identified as being an ‘older woman’ and I embraced their participation in the project.

The theme of emerging design was also relevant in terms of my choice of method. Whilst I had initially decided to hold face-to-face interviews with participants, some women wanted to be involved but were not able to attend an interview. Thus I included three written responses, two by letter and one by email. Again, my rationale being that my selection of research method was more so based upon my own assumptions about the best way to hold a discussion.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity in feminist research is an important concept and is related to self-reflection; however, includes a reflective activity that situates the researcher within broader historical, social, cultural and political contexts. As a part of the research process, it can be a conscious process of writing in first person thus bringing attention to the subjectivity of the researcher, but also in terms of being able to, ‘engage critically with the conceptual, cerebral and emotional aspects of the research process as far as it is consciously possible’ (Wickramasinghe 2009, pp. 56-7). Thus there is an acknowledgment that a part of my own engagement with the research process will be unconscious and inaccessible, and of course, readers will add a further layer of their own interpretation. As stated, I have included a specific section later in this chapter exploring my social location in more depth.
Holistic Account

Creswell (2013, p. 47) describes a holistic account as the development of ‘a complex picture of the problem or issue under study… reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges.’ In my analysis and discussion of the themes, I aimed to develop a holistic account in terms of building connections between themes and grouping them according to my own interpretation of what the women said, namely the larger themes of reconstruction and resistance discussed in the following chapters. In my engagement with interpretation and analysis, I found that I constantly ‘see-sawed’ between allowing the women’s responses ‘speak for themselves’ and the application of particular frameworks of review or explanation in order to strike a ‘holistic’ balance in representation. Here too, perhaps the final account in my thesis reflects more about my own priorities and preferences.

Recruitment and Participants

My choice in selecting a small sample to interview in contrast to a larger sample where perhaps I may have surveyed or provided questionnaires and structured interviews, was motivated by a desire to learn about the experience of managing sexual abuse over a lifetime in more depth than is possible in a questionnaire. Additionally, since the nature of this topic is particularly sensitive and potentially disturbing, I wanted to be mindful and attentive to this aspect, so I decided that personal and direct communication with the women was apt. Moreover, there are few studies which explore this issue with older women and therefore I understood it to be important to begin with
speaking to women themselves. There are methodological debates about what constitutes trustworthiness in research and of course these are linked to the epistemological assumptions one may hold. For my topic, I chose to explore complexity and nuance and importantly, to respect the sensitive nature and potential distress involved by engaging a small group of women with whom I might conduct meaningful, careful and thoughtful conversations. Whilst researchers may replicate this study, it is not envisaged that similar results will be produced because partly, my aim is to represent the diversity in the experiences and stories of the women.

I sought participants for the study by using, in the first instance, a recruitment strategy of advertising in three ways. This included an RMIT website entitled, *Volunteers needed for research on abuse survivors* (Appendix 1) given that many researchers at the University use this avenue, and a newspaper article in *The Senior News* (Appendix 2 includes a pictorial copy plus an external link to the article) as well as a letter to service providers working with women who have experienced sexual assault (Appendix 3). I anticipated that if there was not adequate interest via these channels, then I would proceed to another strategy, including perhaps visiting seniors groups and forums either in person or online.

From this, 26 women had read the newspaper article and flagged their interest in participating. Ten of these women did not proceed with an interview or any further involvement. The reasons for non-participation ranged from ill health and medical operations, personal issues, and simply, no further contact for unknown reasons or changes in contact details making them un-contactable. Of the 16 women who did continue and participate in
the study, not all were able to attend an interview. In the spirit of flexibility and affirmation of the particular context and life circumstance of each of the women, I arranged for two of the participants to send written submissions and one woman preferred email communication.

Later, once I had completed an initial draft of my thesis and collated themes emerging as a result of the interviews, letters and email, 10 women were contactable and welcomed a letter to invite them for a further discussion on the themes (Appendix 7). Ultimately 5 women met with me for a further meeting to discuss the themes. The following table outlines the participation of the women according their pseudonyms which served to de-identify them:
I committed to the conviction of privileging the women’s concerns and it was equally important for me to ensure their comfort with each stage of the process. In terms of the interviews, I arranged for the choice of either a comfortable office at RMIT University in the heart of Melbourne city, an
office space at Deakin University in the outer suburbs of Melbourne for those not wishing to travel to the city, at their home or any other office setting close to where they lived. As a result, nine interviews were conducted at RMIT University, City Campus, one was conducted at Deakin University in Melbourne, two were conducted in the home of the participants, with one other conducted at a city council office in the home town of the participant.

I provided each potential participant with a Plain Language Statement (Appendix 4) outlining the purpose and process of the research as well as an Explanation of Interview statement (Appendix 5) on attendance at the initial interview and also a follow up letter during the intervening period between the interview and my analysis of the themes (Appendix 6). Later I invited the women who were able to attend a second meeting via a letter (Appendix 7). The Plain Language Statement was later amended in consideration of my transfer of enrolment to Deakin University (Appendix 8).

**Research Method and Interview Questions**

Oakley (2005a) in reflecting on her thirty years of experience ‘interviewing’ women advocates for the use of interviews for how they can promote a feminist approach to research practice, whereby the researcher’s own identity is invested, but also importantly because of the opportunity to displace hierarchical differences so that women’s own interpretations are validated and given authority. The researcher is ‘informed’ but not the ‘expert’. Hence, whilst the interview schedule was a guide for me, however in the main, I was led by the talk of the women in terms of the variation from my questions.
according to what was important and comfortable for each of them and, I welcomed the new directions.

From the outset in planning my research, I decided to use a set of general interview questions which could be used as a touchstone during individual semi-structured interviews as a way to explore the subjective experiences and stories of the women who decided to participate in the study. To this end, I developed several key interview questions that formed a basis for my ‘conversations’ with the participants on topics relevant to the study and my research questions. Considerable attention was given to considering how I would create a context for the interviews which included the development of rapport and trust, the reconciliation of dilemmas about potential conflicting aims of the research (academic, personal, professional aims), and to the potential power dynamics between myself as researcher and the women who participated in the research. As discussed earlier, in choosing an interview method, I held many assumptions in terms of believing that face to face communication was an ideal in a hierarchy of other possibilities. Ultimately as earlier mentioned, and based on suggestions from the women, three of the responses were written and I never did meet these women in person.

Nonetheless, as a research method, interviews hold considerable potential for capturing the lived experience of women’s lives and their perspectives and it was a way to explore their views about their experiences managing childhood sexual abuse over their lifetimes. A feminist approach to research methods includes, ‘an ethic of caring, an acknowledgement that the emotional content of women’s lives is an integral part of the research
Kasper (1994) in her study of women’s stories about the experience of having breast cancer, applied several principles to her interviews which, although articulated twenty years ago, I also adopted, as I believed them to be of perennial value and relevance ethically and methodologically, and a powerful approach to the use of a research method that is actively demonstrative of a feminist approach. This framework resonates with me and reflects the style I adopted during the research process.

The first principle of Kasper’s framework can be described as a ‘collaborative and a consensual process’ between researcher and participants, working with the assumption that, ‘the woman is the expert, the steward of the interview’ (Kasper 1994, p. 270). Kasper (1994) describes the interview as an enterprise among women where emphasis is placed upon women’s needs in tandem with the feminist research goals of equity and fairness. The second principle is earning trust. I sought to respect the sensitive nature of the discussion by responding to difficult issues when the woman raised them on her own terms. This is my rationale for not seeking details or discussion regarding the abuse specifically, but rather, providing ‘spaces’ for the women to talk about this if they chose to do so. Some women spoke extensively about the nature of the abuse and others to varying degrees. I worked to ensure this aspect of the interview remained in the control of the woman herself. Here I drew upon my experience in the field as a practitioner. Third is listening well. A vital aspect of the methodology for me was to take ‘the back seat’ and actively listen, without interrupting or assertively leading. Kasper (1994, p.
271) has argued that listening can be a much more valuable approach to data collection than ‘carefully crafted questions’. Indeed,

… listening in active and different ways means hearing the words which are the infrastructure of an account (not merely answers to questions) and which reflect a woman’s effort to give an accurate portrayal of her experience. (Kasper 1994, pg. 271)

Associated with the principle of listening well, is silence and invisibility. Most women in the study spoke freely and extensively in response to my question prompts and mostly the intended hour interview extended to beyond two or three hours. Creating this context allows time and place for participants to, ‘recall difficult events and emotions’ and remaining appropriately silent or ‘invisible’, represents a way to demonstrate ‘unspoken interest (as with direct eye contact, facial expressions that show concern or understanding, and the position of hands, shoulders, and back which demonstrate alertness and attention being paid) and yet barely intruding on the woman’s presentation of her account’ (Kasper 1994, p. 272). For me, this is a fine balance which is linked to a deep appreciation of another’s prescience and it is a way of being that I believe has become a part of my expression. It is reflective of how I prefer to ‘be’ in the social world since it has become representative of many of my inner values and beliefs.

The final principle is forms of talk. Kasper (1994, p. 271-2) writes powerfully about how women can oftentimes experience difficulty in expressing felt experience because of a ‘bifurcated consciousness’ which results from conflict between personal beliefs or private meanings and the public expression of these via language which is linked to public expectations
and where established categories are not always congruent with women’s lives. Attention to the way women express themselves and speak about their experiences is deeply interesting to me since I understand it to be an issue for myself as a woman. I agree with Kasper’s analysis and reading of hesitant speech and the use of stereotypical phrases since I had unconsciously (and at times consciously) understood particular forms and patterns of speech in much the same way having worked with women for almost 25 years as a social work practitioner. She explains women’s internal struggle to express felt experience as being the result of difficulties that arise by using language which mostly reflects male experiences. In speaking with the women in this study and asking about their experiences, their ‘talk’ was indicative of trying to find new ways of expression. Brown (2013, pp 1-2) argues that a dominant discourse on violence and trauma that blames women and minimises the impact in their lives, produces uncertainty and struggle in speaking about their experiences and serves a regulatory function. I return to this theme in the following chapters.

Naples (2003), in also discussing discourse on sexual abuse, advocates for a reflective process and a particularisation of the knowledge produced so that unifying categories are not created which ignore, ‘the diversity of women’s experiences across the intersectional terrain of race/ethnicity, class, sexualities, and cultures’ (Naples 2003, p. 1178). This study does not specifically address issues of race, class or sexuality but includes attention to diversity in older age groups. The use of an interview approach in this way attempts to contribute to the development of ‘talk’ that is aligned with the perceptions and language of the women in the study. This
is important since I aimed to reflect and provide some insights of the women’s ideas, views and perceptions. As I spoke with the women, I did not use phrases which might ascribe meaning, such as ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’. The use of preconceived concepts can be restrictive in terms of how a woman might use her own resources (Verco 2002).

The interview questions were formulated to promote and encourage an open conversation with the women. The interviews were constructed as an open inquiry which also created a safe space for the women to speak about what has been important for them along the themes of the research. I hoped to understand the perceptions and meanings of how the women managed the impact of child sexual abuse over their lifetimes. I was particularly interested to know what sense they made of the notion of recovery and whether support services were helpful to them. The following questions formed the broad structure of what I thought could constitute a conversation about the aims of the research:

- *What meaning do you make of your experience of childhood sexual abuse?*
- *Has this changed over your lifetime?*
- *What do you think of the ideas associated with the words/concepts of ‘recovery’, ‘healing’, ‘moving on’ or ‘getting over it’?*
- *What meaning does this have for you?*
- *What has/does assisted you during your lifetime?*
- *What has/does not assist you now?*
- *Is there anything else that you would like to contribute?*
Alongside these questions, I prepared similar questions which might be used as an aid to discuss the issues more specifically, with the women, and in the spirit of an open inquiry. They are as follows:

- What meaning if any, do you give to your experience of living with the effects of childhood sexual abuse? How do you think your views have been influenced by the context at the time?
- Did this change over your lifetime? Were there any circumstances which contributed to changes, if any?
- What factors, circumstances, events or anything else might have contributed to how you experienced the effects?
- How do you feel or think about the ideas of ‘recovery’, ‘healing’, or perhaps, ‘moving on’, ‘trauma’ or ‘getting over it’? What do they say about what helps?
- What about ‘not getting over it’? Are there women who feel they have not ‘recovered’?
- If things were ideal how would things have gone differently?

**Thematic Analysis**

The information from the interviews with my sample of 16 women is not intended to be representative of older women generally. However, it does represent an opportunity to understand something about an area of which little is known from a group of women who are not often consulted in this way, to explore the particular biographies and journeys of these women, and to discover similarities and differences, if any (Slevin 2010, pp.1008-9). This
study then provides important findings on how older women might manage the longer term effects of childhood sexual abuse. Following the taping of the interviews, I chose to transcribe the sessions myself in order to maintain a commitment to confidentiality, but also because listening again to the interviews became the first step in my analysis. I assumed that the women who had responded to my advertisements had already formed some of their interpretation of my project from their particular reading of my invitation. As already discussed, my approach to be open the views of the women, their ‘talk’ and their topics, and additionally is aligned with my own view that interpretation and analysis begins from the moment a potential participant makes contact.

The next stage of analysis involved the construction of potential themes, some of which were common to all the women and then some which may have been relevant to a particular woman. The resulting themes arose from my understanding of what was meaningful or important to the women, but also what seemed important to me. Finally, in the later stages of analysis I chose to organise the themes into two over-arching concepts being resistance and reconstruction. There is a tension, contradiction and apprehension associated with overlaying the words of the women with a theoretical analysis for a project such as mine which aims to privilege their perspectives. This process entreated me into a ‘trespass’ of sorts. Curry-Stevens (2014) discussed a similar dilemma in reflecting on her own positioning as researcher in community based participatory research in Oregon:
… the rendition of all research stories is an act of trespass, one that risks compromising the respectful recognition of community partners… While many reasons may exist for not inviting research partners into dialogue on such reflections, the academic researcher needs to trouble such decisions and understand that this, too, is an act of imperialism, even if the project itself is anti-imperial and intersubjective. (Curry-Stevens 2014, p.151)

And much like Curry-Stevens (2014, p. 150), I also, ‘make a dedication to being unsettled’. This process on reflection has led me, despite the approach taken in this thesis, to undertake future research which is designed to address the ‘imperialism’ which occurs at the level of analysis. Hopefully in future projects, I am able to work with the ambiguity and complexity (Curry-Stevens 2014, p. 150) which invariably will arise as a result.

The information from the women in the process of analysis produced considerable material about how the women made sense of their difficult experiences of childhood sexual abuse. It seemed to me that the way the women managed these feelings, thoughts and emotions over their lifetimes through changing circumstances demonstrated the ways that these women reconstructed and resisted social norms, expectations and constraints. Therefore, whilst my analysis intentionally focuses on the subjective experiences of the women, is also a subjective approach to making meaning of ‘data’ by the researcher. My approach to analysis then can only be more or less oppressive. I hoped to provide a forum for the views of the women who are so often are invisible, and to demonstrate

… how individuals arrive at meanings which sustain them, live as social beings among many, interact with social conventions and
intuitions, and maintain the boundaries which help define them as individuals. (Kasper 1994, p. 278)

**Location of the Researcher**

I have already begun to discuss the ‘unsettling’ tensions that are presented to researchers in attempting authentic feminist research praxis, in particular regarding interpretation and analysis. My feminist epistemological position includes attention to the role and subjectivity of the researcher which arises from a recognition of the potential as a researcher, to construct ‘subjects’ and participate in a process of ‘othering’ (Curry-Stevens 2015). I understand my own subjectivity as embedded within the context of human relationships as Oke (2005, p. 25 describes:

> In contrast to and as a reaction against the Western construction of an autonomous self-regulated self; the feminist relational, contextualised approach seeks to understand the interwoven strands of peoples’ lives.

Additionally, because any research process is a social practice that may contribute to or mitigate the promotion of a social justice agenda, my aim in exploring my positioning as a researcher is facilitated by critical reflection. Critical reflection is a way to self-reflect on how our thoughts, feelings, values and actions are influenced by discourses, and, ‘to unearth how we ourselves participate in discourses which shape existing power relations’ (Fook 2002, p. 98). I have used this process in conducting the research so that I may explore the influence of my inherent and intended bias, values, politics, philosophy and motivations, thereby hopefully improving mindfulness and openness to challenging my assumptions. In so doing, I aim to not simply represent ‘the other’, but something of myself, and explicate how my project
evolves from exchange and context. Feminist research practice assumes ‘continuity and interrelatedness’ between the researcher and research participants/issues (Grosz 1988, p. 101) and as a result, I understand my project as a continual ‘becoming’ since the thesis is not a static representation but rather, it is a dynamic interactional process in the production of knowledge. Following Grosz (cited in Kontturi & Tiainen 2007, p. 247),

The real is always mediated by representation and consequently, representations are always in the process of perpetual differentiation.

One of those ‘perpetual differentiations’ is not only linked to the researcher/writer but also potentially located in the layer of readers’ interpretations. The notion of a dispassionate researcher is considered a myth and without an exploration of the social position of the researcher, research may produce knowledge which supports dominant interests (Jagger 1997, pp. 395-6). An example is, often in research practice, emotions, either that of the researcher or participants, can be dismissed because they can be considered as ‘non-scientific’ and hence not credible. And yet the emotional life of us as humans is, I believe, intrinsic to our experience of being.

Differently to positivist notions of researcher as a distant, detached and uninterested entity, a critical feminist research approach locates the position of the researcher as integral to the process. Smith (2004, p. 28) argues that every relationship is contingent on social practices which are operational through power relations:

The only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within. We can never stand outside it.
The process of reflexivity within research acknowledges that the researcher brings subjectivities (including biases and objectives as well as assumptions based on individual backgrounds) and rather than dismissing them based on the notion that objective reality exists, reflection can situate the knowledge produced (Shields & Dervin 1993, p. 67). Defining characteristics of feminist epistemology include acknowledgement of the centrality of researcher’s biases and beliefs in the research process (Campbell and Wasco 2000, p. 779) and consideration of the researcher’s role in shaping analysis and results (Harding 1987, p. 9) through the filtering of participants’ stories via interpretation by the researcher (Cotterill & Letherby 1993, pg. 74) as well as recognition of how our interpretations can reproduce dominant or unexamined discourse (Ray 2000, p.6). Thus, all research involves the ‘weaving’ of both the researcher and respondents’ biographies (Cotterill & Letherby 1993).

Sprague (2005) describes her guidelines for critical researchers as ‘crossing borders’ and I have adopted some aspects of her approach. For instance, a researcher may occupy privilege in terms of their relationship to the production of knowledge (ownership of project) or economic power (greater access to resources whether material or incorporeal), or simply the inevitability of limitation that comes from any standpoint. However, a researcher may be simultaneously a member of contradictory marginalised positions, as defined by gender, sexuality, carer status, race, or age. This perspective is one which entails daily ‘border crossings’ in terms of subjectivity, an experience of life which can move the researcher to, ‘develop more accurate accounts’, that are reflective of lived lives rather than detached,
constrained and faulty social science accounts (Sprague 2005, p. 75). Researchers are encouraged to create, ‘a strategically diverse discourse’ so that knowledge, ‘empowers the disadvantaged’ (Sprague 2005, p. 75). Researchers start work from the perspective of the disadvantaged, or more precisely, explore the dynamic of power and advantage (Sprague 2005, p. 75-6). Additionally, adopting the conceptual categories that marginalised groups themselves use can assist to uncover cultural assumptions that exist in dominant discourses.

Specifically in relation to ageing, Ray (2004) argues for the development of ‘age consciousness’ and a self-reflective stance that includes inquiry into our own ageing journey, not only on intellectual or social levels, but also including psychological and spiritual aspects (Ray 2004, p. 109). Thus for feminist researchers, being ‘self-conscious’ about our age identities will mean personal engagement in the examination of how we are ‘aged by culture’ (Gullette 2004) and how our own autobiographies are influenced by ageism (Cruikshank (2009). Such engagement must transform the researcher and also others who read our works (Ray 2004).

My background as a practitioner in the field against sexual assault and as a woman who is becoming more aware of my own ageing, is relevant in terms of the motivation for this research and also in how I have chosen to analyse the stories of the women in my study. My understandings and relationship with this work has also evolved throughout the time of my involvement and all the more, will continue to modify and transform as I grow older and undertake further work in this field. I have been a social work practitioner since 1983 and most recently (last 10 years) an academic. Tertiary
education in the early 1980s, during the second phase of feminism is associated with an emphasis on differentiation between the sexes rather than sameness as well as highlighting women’s experience of rape, domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse (Warner 2009). During my undergraduate years, I was profoundly influenced by my teachers and the thinking of the time, their ideas being largely embedded in radical theory, critical theory and the analysis of power in society. It had a particular resonance with me, especially analysis of patriarchal society and race relations from critical theory perspectives. At the time, I felt these ideas were an accurate reflection of my experiences as a young woman. It explained for me the contradiction in how I believed I could be constructed and how, in fact I was constructed by others. I still experience this discrepancy and I have found it to be more pronounced as I moved into midlife. My choice to interpret the women’s stories through the themes of resistance and reconstruction reflect perhaps, my own hopes, desires and aspirations. Being older and with a particular life experience, a part of my subjectivity, has also ushered a deeper appreciation of ambiguity and uncertainty, thus the appeal for me of postmodern ideas. Whilst my commitments to fairness and social justice remain perhaps even more steadfast, my understandings of the nature of injustice has transformed significantly. Now, as a woman increasingly more aware of the impacts of growing older beyond midlife, my interests have been recast to consider issues regarding the experience of ageing and ageism.

My commitment to social justice I am sure, is connected to my biography. My parents were migrants to Australia from Poland, following World War 2. Having suffered trauma, discrimination, poverty and violence,
they continued to experience racial discrimination following their migration in the social context of the 1950s in Australia. My parents’ stories of war, refuge and ultimately the loss of their home and country were instrumental in forming my identity and perhaps inevitably then, I chose a field of work and study which is concerned with these themes. I worked for some 23 years in areas and organisations which, besides providing social services to others, also promoted a social reform agenda in the wider community. My level of comfort-ability and inner resonance working within these services was always strong.

At times throughout the research process I have felt the ‘unease’ and tensions associated with maintaining a ‘respectful recognition’ (Curry-Stevens 2014) emerging from the potentially oppressive dialectic between researcher and researched. In this, I have tried to be aware of how, at times my privilege is enacted and the potential for ‘trespass’ (Rossiter 2000b) by constructing the ‘other’. I have found the reflections of critical gerontologists helpful, in particular their perspectives on how personal aspects of our lives shape, and are shaped by age studies (Ray 2008). Reading Carroll Estes’ (2008) reflections on being a critical gerontologist and entering her seventh decade, she cites Adrienne Rich (1979):

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. (Rich cited in Estes 2008, p. 123)

This sentiment, along with Gullette’s (2008) experience teaching age studies helped me to unpack some of my age related assumptions and understand my positioning as a ‘mid-life’ researcher (as did Ray 2000a). I
will ‘trouble’ the meanings I make of working with older women as I continue to work on developing anti-ageist practice. In the process of my research, I attempted to remain open about who I was and my objectives; I communicated my politics and something of myself, mindful of allowing ‘spaces’ for the women to also tell their stories. This process has been one of establishing ‘intersubjectivity’ that turns on the relationship between me and the women in my study. Fine (1994) uses the metaphor of the ‘hyphen’ to describe reflections, ‘on the self as other and the other as self’ (Preissle 2007, p. 526) in order, ‘to problematize rather than to assume the relationships between researcher and researched’ (Preissle 2007, p. 526). Fittingly, this perspective is connected to the ethical framework I formed for this project.

**Ethical Considerations**

My methodology is influenced by ethical considerations specific to a feminist research approach. Kirsch (1999, pg. 4-5) outlines five principles for feminist research which have guided my methodological approach. Whilst these principles were formulated over twenty years ago, I have felt these particular aspects most accurately accord with my own sensibilities, and they remain relevant. There is no single or unique approach to feminist methodology (Gringeri, Wahab & Anderson-Nathe 2010, p. 391) but rather, ‘tenets’ that prescribe what makes research ‘feminist’ (Gringeri, Wahab & Anderson-Nathe 2010, p. 391). For instance, Kirsch (1999, p. 5) states, generally feminist methodology is characterised by, ‘a commitment to improve women’s lives and to eliminate inequalities between researchers and
participants’. Some of Kirsch’s (1999, pp. 4-5) principles apply to my research in the following way:

- Asking questions which acknowledge and validate women’s experiences.

This principle guided my approach to developing questions which were touchstones for conversations about the women’s experiences. I hoped to create ‘spaces’ in which the women were able to explore what was important to them and also to tell their stories in the way they wanted to speak about themselves. I began the project with an assumption that this topic would be of interest to older women, and in the process of speaking with them, I discovered that these women were extremely passionate and interested, and shared similar ideals in addressing the issue of justice. As a result, one of the subthemes specifically addresses the importance of this type of research since it was raised many times as a motivation for why some of the women responded to my advertisement and wanted to participate.

Attention to the emotional and physical safety of the participants is an aspect of communicating respect and validation. Especially for my research, which focuses on highly sensitive and difficult experiences, the risk of harm, the importance of confidentiality and the wellbeing of participants during the interview process all formed key considerations in my methodology as previously discussed.
Collaborate with participants as much as possible so that growth and learning can be mutually beneficial, interactive and cooperative. My collaboration with the women was premised on maintaining a spirit of mutual learning, understanding and interactivity. Throughout the course of my research, some women chose to keep in contact in order to be informed about my progress. There was genuine interest and a desire to remain connected to the project and I welcomed the additional responses from the women. Thus, throughout my research there was informal discussion about the project. Others who had not been in contact were also genuinely pleased and interested when I called to invite them for another session following the analysis of the women’s stories. Several women had expressed how they often wondered about the progress of the study. In terms of mutuality, it was this encouragement that, during the times when I became tired or questioned the usefulness of my work, I was buoyed by the support from the women in my study. This always evoked in me, the desire and inspiration to continue with the same spirit that motivated the women themselves. I sought to at least match their commitments and energies. The spirit of collaboration was also another reason why I chose, from the outset, to invite the women back, if willing, to discuss my themes and provide them another opportunity to comment. Many of the women have suggested ways forward in terms of future projects and I am grateful for their insights. They have inspired me to continue and deepen any future endeavours with respect to participatory research processes.
• Analyse how the researcher’s identity, experience, training and theoretical framework shape the research agenda, data analysis and findings.

The inclusion of my own voice in various parts of my thesis is informed by this principle. I have included in this chapter a specific section regarding my social location and connections to the work however I have also written in the first person at times when I understood that my interpretation and selection of rationale were integral to the aims of this study. Reflexivity has been discussed as an aspect of feminist praxis which seeks to question the nature and production of knowledge (Gringeri, Wahab & Anderson-Nathe 2010, p. 393).

• Take responsibility for the representation of others in research reports.

The politics of representation has been extensively discussed in feminist research literature (Curry-Stevens 2014; Fonow & Cook 2005; Geerts & van der Tuin 2013; Gringeri, Wahab & Anderson-Nathe 2010; Hinterberger 2007; Kirsch 1999; Lather 2001b; Preissle 2007; Rossiter 2007). This complex discussion is beyond the scope of my thesis, however, Rossiter (2014) has discussed an emerging application of Honneth’s theory of recognition in relation to social work practice. She has argued that the formation of identity, and hence the constitution of our ‘selves’, is dependent on intersubjective recognition, or achieved through our intersubjective relationships with others (Rossiter 2014, p. 94). Therefore respectful recognition of others is a matter of social justice, and for me, an ethical issue in representing the women who participated in my study.
- Acknowledge the limitations and contradictions inherent in research data

Research, being a social practice, will always be limited and bounded by its particular social, political and historical context. The final chapter discusses the limitations and acknowledges the boundaries of this research. For instance, my research is focused on the views of a particular group of women and my aim was not to assume applicability in any other context.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed my methodology including five broad research principles, feminist epistemology particularly in relation to the study of age, and the principles and process of my research design. The research is also situated within a feminist ethical framework that aims to validate participants’ experiences, utilise processes which are collaborative and respectful and acknowledge how the research is shaped by my social location, background and interpretations. To this end I have discussed the ways in which my own subjectivity, being a combination of my social identity, past experiences and beliefs have been ‘inter-woven’ into my thesis.

Ultimately the construction of my methodology aimed to support hearing and validating the women’s stories, without presenting any normalising depiction of older women. Rather, I sought, through choosing this particular research strategy and approach, to affirmatively reconstruct older women’s status. The proceeding chapters (5, 6, 7, 8), present the women’s stories and what they say about their experiences in relation to childhood sexual abuse according to my specific over-arching themes of
resistance and reconstruction. Chapter 5 discusses the first theme of Resistance and Chapters 6, 7 and 8 consider Reconstruction in three parts.
Chapter 5 Stories of Resistance

Introduction

There are countless ways I might have interpreted the issues about which the women spoke. My interpretation is framed in the context of how, the lived experience of older women can be expressed as resistance to, and reconstruction of dominant forms of subjectivity (Thomas & Davies 2005). The women in my study responded to my interview questions in distinctive and diverse ways and I discuss each concept separately in the following four chapters which are arranged according to two over-arching themes of resistance and reconstruction, each divided into several subthemes. This chapter is focused on the macro theme of resistance and responds in part to my first research sub-question:

*What do older women say about how they managed experiences and long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse throughout their lives?*

This chapter highlights what the women say about how their experiences of childhood sexual abuse impacted on their lives.

Resistance to patterns of subordination and domination is often how diverse subjectivities are constructed and reconstructed in the management of the relationship between the subject and society (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Pease 2014, p. 1). Once I began speaking with the women who volunteered for my study, I witnessed through their energy and commitment, how they resist, in the sense of creating their particular meanings in managing childhood sexual abuse. Also, in doing so, they reconstruct subject positions and consequently
social identities in nuanced and diverse ways in their everyday lives. I also aimed to extend the ways that the notions of resistance and reconstruction are conceived in order to provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of how the women make sense of their past and present.

Whilst my focus has been on the ways that older women might manage the effects of childhood sexual abuse, other aspects of their lives and perspectives emerged during the interviews. In the spirit of my chosen methodology which sought to grant latitude for the women to elect to speak about the research questions in their own ways, I have then also included these insights. The way the women discuss their experiences demonstrates their agency in adapting to, subverting and reinscribing (Thomas & Davies 2005, p 687) a range of oppressive patterns in their everyday lives, embodying nuance and fluidity. Their insights are particular to them and contribute to knowledge regarding age and gender-based oppression. In light of their lifelong struggles to manage the impact of childhood sexual abuse, several themes relate to the notion of recovery and dominant models of counselling which will contribute to greater awareness in developing alternative practices and are discussed in subsequent chapters concerning reconstruction. To begin this chapter I outline some key theoretical understandings of resistance at both the macro and micro levels, before presenting the women’s stories.

Resistance

Resistance in a normative sense is often perceived as antisocial or public and related to social movements that are organized and have political aims (Hollander & Einwohner 2004) and as such, it has been conceptualized in
linear, deterministic or dualistic terms (Thomas & Davies 2005, pp. 686-7). Indeed, some authors argue that visible, collective, overt and public activities which are specifically and consciously aimed at social or political change are how resistance as a concept and activity should be defined (Rubin 1996). However, theoretically, there are many permutations and modifications of what it can mean to resist and as a concept, resistance has been defined variously across a number of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, women’s studies and the political sciences as a tool to analyse various behaviours and practices in a range of contexts (Hollander & Einwohner 2004). Thomas and Davies (2005, p. 711) in their study on managerial identities demonstrate how feminist theory has evolved understandings of resistance. Feminism has theorized resistance as generative or productive and, as rich accounts of constituted subjectivities that can provide a ‘practical politics of change and transformation whilst avoiding the problems of universalism, essentialism and privilege’. They argue that the emphasis on micro politics at the level of everyday actions, thoughts and intentions creates spaces for multiple voices and while potentially considered ‘mundane’, should not be underestimated in its influence to create empowered and autonomous ‘selves’ (Thomas & Davies 2005, p. 728).

Thus in considering the women’s stories from their particular perspectives, an opportunity is provided for a range of possibilities in constructing subjectivity using the notion of resistance. I believe this is because who we are can never be a definitive project and must, for the most part, be left unanswered to allow for consideration of plurality and infinite subject positions (Irving 2006, p. 28). Irving’s (2006) interpretation of
Foucault’s theory of identity formation assists to understand the nature of our own ‘selves’ and is indicative of my own approach to representing the women’s stories:

Being human for Foucault means resisting identifying truth(s), thereby creating spaces for being-different… inventing new kinds of relationship and imaginative ways of life. (Irving 2006, p. 28)

My understanding of everyday resistance is, as a practice, ‘entangled’ with everyday power, and contingent on changing contexts or situations (Vinthagen & Johansson 2013, p. 39). For instance, Turiel (2003) has theorized how resistance is a part of everyday life aimed at transforming the social system, while Rose (1999, p. 279) has distinguished resistance as a varied demonstration of what is made of the self in the private realm, at the interpersonal level, in ‘cramped spaces’. Specifically in relation to age identities, Powell and Wahidin (2006, p. ix) identify how the construct of age has developed through various institutionalised practices and by using a Foucauldian analysis can identify ‘spaces of resistance and artistic practices of the self.’ Similarly, I have relied on these understandings to theorize the possibility of challenges to a fixed construction of age and rather, create

… a world of contingency, a world of imagination and story, a world of not finding but of making. (Irving 2006, p. 20)

Resistance is often indicated by action, active behaviour, opposition to something or someone, or arguably, recognition by others, and includes an intention by the actor to specifically address an issue (Hollander & Einwohner 2004; Hynes 2013). Macro-political examples of resistance include collective and visible movements often aimed at structural change in light of power
struggles, for instance social movements (Hynes 2013, p. 562) and micro-sociological concepts of resistance that include micro-political acts by individuals at the level of the everyday; the difference between the two often being scale or quantity (Hynes 2013, p. 562-3).

Everyday resistance is exemplified by Wang’s (1999) demonstration of how the American seniors’ movement produces new experiences and thus new subject positions via their activities which contest the social construction of old age as passive and nonproductive. As well, Lamotte (2014) explores the ways in which American democracy is challenged and citizenship enacted by young people in South Bronx who engage with hip-hop culture to reclaim spatial, symbolic and psychological ‘spaces’. In another example, Luna (2009) identified the ways that single mothers enact agency to resist a ‘welfare identity’ through strategies such as avoidance, withdrawal and dissociation. And again, Spowart, Hughson and Shaw (2008, p. 187) have discussed how resistance to traditional discourses on ‘motherhood’ and cultural expectations of what it means to be a ‘good’ mother is enacted by mothers who snowboard. The engagement of the women with snowboarding is seen as a resistance to dominant motherhood scripts through the embodiment of ‘freedom, hedonism and irresponsibility’. Importantly, Spowart, Hughson and Shaw (2008, p. 202) identify how the concept of resistance in examples such as their study, while not necessarily aimed at changing social structures of domination, do illustrate rebellion and cultural change in terms of how ‘alternative practices of motherhood’ are performed. Notably for older women, Barratt, Pai and Redmond (2012, p. 535) discuss how the ‘Red Hat Society’ operate as a ‘gendered subculture of ageing’ where
older women address, on their own terms, the issues of marginalisation, gender and age inequality in various ways which includes resistance to dominant cultural expectations of older women as carers through a focus on leisure.

The notion of resistance, however, can be extended, and is not necessarily confined to overt or oppositional politics; it may also be less perceptible and may include affective dimensions (Hynes 2013). Resistance can represent more than ‘a form of reaction through which mass movements challenge existing structures of power’ (Hynes 2013, p 572). It can also transcend ‘a strategic response of individuals to the workings of systemic structures in everyday contexts’ (Hynes 2013, p 572).

In this chapter, I define resistance at the macro-political level and micro-political level of the everyday self-practice, as potentially including the characteristics of action, opposition, recognition and intention (Hollander & Einwohner 2004), because certainly these aspects are evident in the women’s stories of how they managed childhood sexual abuse over their lifetimes. However, I also include Hynes’s (2013) less tangible notion of ‘affect’ as a ‘virtual’ dimension of resistance in the sense that it represents the unseen capacity and preparedness to act (capacitation), the less perceptible and the not so easily recognizable potential for imagining resistive possibilities which are not yet actualized. The addition of a ‘virtual’ characteristic of resistance is in a sense, a contribution in addressing the dense and complex debate of whether subjectivity, itself a product of discursive power, and thus unable to fashion agency. The need to address this complexity is not only relevant to my thesis but is borne out by Twigg’s (2004, p. 64) argument that
constructivist approaches to resisting age identity oppression are yet to be realized in respect of ‘deep old age’, a transition where the reality of the infirm body, ‘dominates subjective experience’, and where the contests to ageism and reconstructed identities becomes challenging if denial of bodily decline is not acknowledged. The challenge is how the abiding reality of physical decline and therefore the tendency for a bio-medical model characterization of age to dominate in ‘deep old age’, can be contested as it is for late middle age.

The origins of this type of ‘virtual’ resistance emerge from the field of human geography where the notion of ‘affect’ has been adopted from the work of cultural philosophers, Deleuze and Guattari (cited in Anderson 2006, p. 735). ‘Affect’ is used in this context to refer to something other than emotions which have been, in a modernist fashion, identified as subjective and residing within an individual or objective, such as a discreet set of feelings (Anderson 2006, p. 735). ‘Affect’ in this context refers to a transitional process, at times imperceptible, but nonetheless powerful, and is the, ‘transpersonal capacity which a body has to be affected (through an affection) and to affect (as the result of modifications)’ (Anderson 2006, p. 735). In attempting to expand what can count as resistance, Hynes (2013) has configured a conceptual framework to apply this dimension of the social experience, that of ‘affect’, to the potential for micro-political resistance. Hynes (2013, p. 573) argues that resistance

… has an affective dimension that operates beneath and between both individual and collective struggles – a more than-reactive, barely recognizable, less-than-conscious mobilization of bodily potentials,
which is an exploitation of the margins of openness in every situation, an activation of new capacities of bodies and an interruption of our more determinant modes of sociality. Certainly, questions of political agency remain important, but an attention to the virtuality of affect adds to more conventional ways of addressing agency the recognition that ‘political alternatives to present domination are not there, simply waiting to be chosen, possible but not yet real’ (Grosz 2004: 261). Once the openness of affective relations is brought to the fore, the challenge is no longer one of planning for the future but of inventing it.

Conceptualizing the nature of resistance in this way has been useful for me in this study because it speaks to the unsaid, intangible power and pre-conscious potential in everyday interactions, but it can also be relevant for the analysis of structural change in macro-political settings. It is from this perspective that Hynes and Sharpe (2009) evaluate the mass actions of the anti-globalization movement which examines resistance and macro change. And in a different context, Zembylas (2006) uses the potential of ‘affect’ in classroom settings to address long-held cultural animosities between Turkish and Greek students in Cyprus to transform political consciousness. The relevance to my study became apparent during the process of speaking with the women. In our interactions and speaking together, moments and episodes were created where unexpected creativity in thought and action worked powerfully to transform meaning even during the interview sessions. I quickly rid myself of expecting responses which could be discreetly catalogued. For this reason, at times, I have included my own words to draw attention to the transformational prospect which I noticed emerging in the course of our conversations as well as other relevant material.
It is important to me as a social work educator and critical researcher to question how assumptions might be challenged and to conjure the ways that identities can be transformed. In my study, I found the women’s narratives to be illustrations of how agency and power can be enacted in understanding the effects of childhood sexual abuse and growing older. The following stories of resistance demonstrate the continuing questioning of constituted experience. My particular representation of resistance describes the ways the women in my study use their ‘cramped spaces’ socially and politically at the level of the everyday, but also in broader political contexts of social life, and of course, as described, in a virtual sense where resistance resides in transactional, pre-conscious, ‘virtual’ and intangible territories. It is a conceptualization of how the women create alternative subject positions, and reconstruct their identities and enact agency in action, thought and affect. Ray (2000a, p. 9), in recognising the gendered nature of life narratives of women and how life stories are ‘co-authored with history and culture’, suggests that the challenge for feminist researchers, is in initiating a ‘revision’ via critical intervention which is sensitive to cultural and gender influences. Two of the most salient strategies relevant for this study include identifying, ‘women’s agency in the midst of social constraint’ and avoiding, ‘the search for a unified or coherent self or voice’ (Stewart cited by Ray 2000a, p. 9). In developing my themes, this framing has been a guide and since my methodology is explicitly feminist, I begin, and return to the perspectives of the women who participated in the conversations with me.
Stories of Resistance

The following subthemes reflect how the women have resisted normative expectations about themselves in relation to their identity and the experience of childhood sexual abuse. Their stories are particular to them and demonstrate how they managed resistance to the pressures and trauma they experienced, including prescriptive views about childhood sexual abuse, gender or age. Stories of resistance in respect of master narratives of sexual abuse particularly those that blame or negate women, influence how women perceive their agentic possibilities and self-worth (McKenzie-Mohr 2014, p. 65). Given how prevalent these ideas are, it was important to listen for the many ways that the women resisted and reconstructed these master narratives.

The subthemes in this chapter include the women’s stories of being pariahs and social outcasts, being alone and the lifelong impact, mistrust, sex, child protection and its link to social justice, speaking out and telling their stories or being kept silent and how this area is so important for research. I begin however with the first subtheme of being a resister, a rebel or an activist because this became very apparent early on in my interviews during much of the women’s talk. I have arranged the subthemes into the following categories:

Resisters, rebels and activists

Child protection and social justice

An important research area

Pariahs and social outcasts
Resisters, Rebels and Activists

During the process of interviewing the women, I was struck by the fervency and dynamism of their desire to help others and to contribute to social change. All believed in the importance of achieving social justice, for themselves and others. The women were passionate about preventing childhood sexual abuse and wanted to address the issue of how society responds following disclosures of abuse. In speaking about their experiences of childhood sexual abuse, the women illustrated how they resist normative views of how older women should think and act and demonstrated plurality in the lived expression of those views. They spoke about what they see as ethical wrongs and how they actively pursue issues when they believe they can make changes. The construction of this subject position is a counterpoint to discourses of aging that are characterized by passivity, insouciance, and decrepitude.

Activism and resistance tend to be viewed as collective activities with a social justice agenda that take place in public. The women in the study certainly revealed a strong sense of being resisters, rebels, and activists in public forums. However, their activities also occurred in unexpected, unseen,
and unorthodox ways, and I interpret these activities as resistance. Involvement in my research was a significant resistive act for most of the women because they perceived the study as an important activity in which their involvement could contribute to change in terms of better understandings of abuse. This was the dominant motivation for their involvement. All the women expressed ideas about their desire to be a force to assist younger generations.

The women spoke about their efforts to achieve justice for everyone across a number of issues, including childhood sexual abuse itself and managing its impact as well as aging and the role of women. Marjorie (71 years of age) has written and continues to write many letters, articles, and public-issue texts, and makes herself available for interviews and reflections regarding wide-ranging public matters such as the management of sexual abuse complaints by religious institutions from congregation members, nursing home care, government budget implications for Australians receiving pensions, and critical perspectives on the recent introduction of ‘smart’ electricity meters into Australian households. Inarguably, her activism, informed opinion, and direct action are of great benefit to the broader community. Marjorie has contacted Heads of State, Church authorities, human rights organisations, and the legal profession regarding the judgements on particular contemporary legal cases. Her contributions to difficult issues in the public realm are insightful, informative, and refreshing. She is erudite and practiced with the pen so that her words and perspectives are informative and contribute to difficult issues in the public realm. Despite the huge benefit to the broader community as a result of her perceptive
insights and informed opinion and directed action, she finds these types of actions personally helpful too because as she explains it:

*I’m standing up to my parents.*

One issue on which Marjorie has been campaigning for many years is mental health advocacy and, in particular, the accountability practices of specific professionals, institutions, and systems. She is concerned about the way information was recorded in the past by mental health professionals. For instance, as a result of the right to access her personal medical records, she discovered that when she described the sexual abuse she had experienced as a child to a mental health professional, inverted commas were used in recording her disclosure, making the reporting of her experiences appear as allegations. She feels that she was not granted the opportunity to relay her truth and be heard:

*You know, all I want is an acknowledgment that I was telling the truth ... It’s negated my childhood. These people, they were aware of ... well, that I was ‘allegedly’ sexually abused as a child. I apparently ‘alleged’ this. He wrote this on the very first page of my medical records and I'd never even met him before.*

For Marjorie, having her disclosure represented by professionals as if it was potentially untrue, felt as if she was not believed, and the consequences have been immense. Further, she was appalled by the way she was described, judged, and constructed:
You know, they described me as being ‘manipulative’.

Marjorie also feels she was constructed as unreliable and that her perspectives were dismissed. She spoke about an instance when the nature of her marriage was described by professionals. The conclusions reached were stated as factual; however, for Marjorie, they were based on incorrect assumptions. For example, comments included in her personal documents described the marriage as a ‘happy’ one, while Marjorie’s experience of the marriage was, in her estimation, far more complex and certainly not inconclusively ‘happy’. Further, Marjorie spoke about material that was written about her without being consulted. Marjorie expressed her deep anger about these issues and is unafraid to speak out, despite often having experienced rejection or dismissal of her claims. She rallies against labels and continues to advocate on social justice matters, including legal reform for women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse.

Marjorie does not accept that the dominant discourses constructing older women as frail, retiring, and unproductive are relevant to her current way of being. In many ways, publically and privately, quietly and loudly, and always with precise intent and strategic direction, she thinks with foresight and beyond the normative social constructions of ageing women. She rallies against the inaccuracy of her mental health assessments. She disputes the manner and content of these reports and lives her life in ways that disrupt familiar social constructions of what it is to be a woman growing older. Marjorie says she does not care how others perceive her.
Bernardez (1991) explains the experiences of women such as Marjorie as a function of structural oppression, in which the pathologizing of women is an outcome of non-conformity:

Diagnosis and treatment in the cases of women who are unconsciously resisting conformity represent an acceptance of the status quo and indicate blindness to the potential strength in the woman who is acknowledging and challenging a state of oppression. (Bernardez 1991, 219–20)

Certainly, throughout her life, Marjorie has experienced what it is like to be labeled and constructed as ‘ill’, untrustworthy, lacking judgment, and silenced. In spite of this, she is re-creating her identity in ways that disrupt and confront dominant age and gender constructions.

In her study on emotions and ageing, Woodward (2002) argues that the cultural expectation with respect to ageing, or the emotional standard for older people, is ‘wisdom’. This assigns a discourse and establishes the stereotype of the older person as detached, calmly dispassionate, or someone who has a measured and balanced view. Woodward believes that this assigned wisdom is also regarded as useless and irrelevant. In later life, ‘we need to change what has been called an affect script for older people in our culture’ (Woodward 2002, p. 207). Ageing discourse encourages suppression, particularly of anger. Woodward argues that the ideal older woman is viewed as wise and without anger. Women who express anger are often labeled hysterical and irrational and, particularly for older women, the emotion of anger is ‘outlawed’ (Woodward 2002, p. 206). Irni (2009) concurs, stating that when older women express anger, they are seen as ‘cranky old women’.
The value of their views is minimized and older women might be seen as ‘difficult’. By expressing her anger and forging on, despite the obstacles presented by a cultural discourse that marginalizes her perspectives, Marjorie is living out ‘new scripts’ for age and gender subjectivities.

Another woman in the study, Edith (72 years of age), believes social justice is vitally important to her life. Edith belongs to animal rights groups and regularly attends rallies, stalls, and events promoting animal welfare. Her over-arching reason for her activism is a commitment to social justice; she believes in, ‘social justice ... for everybody and animals’. Edith explained that she values her connection to all creatures and believes it is her responsibility to change anything she views as unethical:

\[
I \text{ think that people or animals who haven’t got a voice are the vulnerable ones and I think because I felt so vulnerable all my childhood that I relate to that feeling.}
\]

Edith also spoke about why she is regularly involved in activities such as providing food to homeless people:

\[
I \text{ think it helps me to feel stronger because sometimes ... when they know somebody cares, it possibly helps them so it makes me feel stronger.}
\]

She rejects the idea that her aim and actions to create positive change for animals and others arose from any sense of altruism or ‘maladjustment’ to past trauma:
I think it’s the sort of thing you come to yourself ... I guess I just felt sorry ... seeing that I was able to look after myself after a certain age, I felt sorry for people who could have had a dreadful childhood and do not have the skills to live how we’re expected to live. And I thought, well, perhaps I can make a difference somewhere.

Edith has possessed a keen sense of justice all her life:

I was one of the people against the Vietnam War and ... yes, I was one of the early ones that have gone on from there. We supported what we could. We were involved in the Aboriginal strike that was on at the time.

Tina: Did you? The one at Wave Hill? Was that in the Territory led by Vincent Lingiari?

Edith: Yes. It’s a long while ago now. I think that opened up my eyes to lots of things that were happening.

Similarly, as a result of her past experience, another interviewee, Fran (57 years of age), expressed the view that her commitment to social justice arose out of an understanding that communities needed to address the issue of sexual abuse differently to how she had experienced the aftermath in her own community:

Once I realized that no one gave a shit in hell about us children, and then I realized that also the community was involved, in that they were there, and although in those times
nobody got involved, they were aware. I came to accept that no one gave a crap about us kids.

From that, I can see that this is a society that is really very dysfunctional. That none of us were getting the support that we needed, the care we needed. And society itself had neglected us. And that’s when I realized that this is a problem that needs to change.

Other women in the study, such as May (57 years of age), also expressed their commitment to making positive social changes. May’s impetus came from an important moment when a simple comment was made to her,

_The idea that nothing is impossible would have come from my maths teacher... a damn good teacher, and she used to say, ‘Nothing is impossible.’ and that really stuck with me and somehow the way she lived those words was very empowering for me. Even though I felt so atrocious ... about me and was still very much trying to puzzle out what on earth the world was about and all these inconsistencies... justice is important... justice of the child not being compromised because someone set them up... that sort of justice is important._
Rose (66 years of age) describes how speaking out when she saw injustice has had implications for her, but that has not deterred her:

*I’m a very just person and I don’t tolerate injustice to myself or other people and that’s caused me some confrontations where I’ve seen other people just hide under the table ... In the work area, I think people get rewarded for being ‘yes men’ where, despite not being happy about a situation, they did not speak out ... whereas I, not rudely or anything, have always spoken my mind, even if it’s had the potential to not be helpful to me. So that’s sometimes an issue. I also have an issue with people who are incompetent. And unfortunately in the government, incompetence is what gets promoted. If you say ‘yes’ to certain people, you get promoted. So that, I feel, has been a problem.

So, where other people couldn’t have cared less, I’ve felt I’ve been the one to go in there and do battle ... That has been an issue for me and I’ve reared all my children like that, too. I would never want them to be downtrodden ... I mean, they’re not rude or abusive or use foul language, but they’re confident.

The commitment to social justice expressed in its various forms by the women demonstrates how they each created meaning and purpose from experiences in their lives. It seemed to me that these meanings were sustaining throughout and heralded ways to ‘revision’ their own identities. In
some cases commitment to ‘correcting’ social wrongs led to ways of expression and understanding what had happened to them, not only in terms of sexual abuse but many other issues such as contact with professionals or attitudes of the social era, some which remain today. It prompted in me an appreciation of how the concepts of everyday resistance are so important and can be so unexpected. It was after hearing many of these stories from the women that I began to become very excited about the unlikely and unanticipated turns in this project.

**Child Protection and Social Justice**

The perspectives identified by the women bear some resemblance to Hunter’s (2010) study where 22 men and women were interviewed about their experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Hunter (2010) identified how consistent themes of ‘justice at any cost’, ‘remaining defiant’ and a refusal to be defined by experiences of past sexual abuse were features of how the participants in her study spoke about themselves. However, Hunter’s research included only two participants who were aged over 55 years. Hunter’s (2010) themes which include ‘protecting and helping others’, are also evident in the ways that the women in my study spoke about their experiences of sexual abuse in childhood. May (57 years old) spoke emphatically about her commitment to address the issue of childhood sexual abuse, and particularly evident was her genuine concern for others:

*I don’t think society is doing it well enough... there is that fear we don’t want to look in our own backyards... Well god, come on!*
Tina: You have a real commitment to social justice and doing something about the incidence of childhood sexual abuse. This is a theme from the other women too...

May: If we don’t care for people, if we fail in care for people, and I mean truly caring for people, then what is living? Is living gaining every bit of belongings and social standing in our society? Look, everyone’s got to live the way they wish to live and do no harm to others, or do the least harm to others. I have no right to stand and say how pathetic those things are in society because we are all at different stages of our own development. And I’ve had challenges that other people might not have had. I’m no better or worse than other people. I just see that the crux of living...is about caring for people. You only live once... if we’re not able to... not to live people’s lives for them... but to help them live more constructively...to help them learn... to help them gain skills then ... I just see that how can the human race progress constructively? How can it not self-destruct?

To me, May (57 years old) was an example of how activities aimed at achieving social justice do not need to be grand gestures, but can occur over a lifetime in many undisclosed but powerful ways. May has though, engaged in achieving broad structural change and she spoke about some of her actions over time, as well as her analysis of what might be important areas to address:

I’m not sure if social change will happen. I think the ripple in the pond is crucial ...certainly with anything... but I think that like-minded thinkers will have to coalesce to really try and nut out a strategy that
we can make decent inroads... I wrote a submission to the Law Reform Commission some years ago. That was quite hard to do but I got wind of it, good things have come out of that, for example the improved ways kids attend court. That's a change... a change for the better.

We can't just sit back and say it's too hard.

Tina: Well I can see you don't sit back because you've made a submission and contributed to a change in the law. You write and you obviously are not shy of putting forward a view... that's a political act.

May: You do turn around and you think well... you do get concerned about paedophile behaviour that occurs in a range of people in society. It's not limited to males... you don't know... if you look at the known statistics... it would be nice to see more detailed statistics... because how many people were in the situation that I was?

So we're always going to have that percentage of people in these situations... but in the raw stats that are there, in a room of ten people you know that 1 in 4 were abused. In any group of people, they'll be a percentage of people who engage in paedophile activity.

I think protective behaviours are excellent.... But that's not going to do anything for the kids that have been abused.
An Important Research Area

All of the women in the study told me about why they had responded to my advertisement, and mostly their participation in the study was perceived as a way the women could help others.

*I’m happy to help if it helps other people. (Ava, 65 years old)*

I could see how being a participant in my study could be viewed as a solid move to contribute to a very important issue in society. It is a way to resist passivity and feelings of helplessness, and in the process of doing so, transform identity as the following comments illustrate:

*The fact that I was willing to respond to your little thing in the paper was kind of like stepping over a hurdle too. It was like... hang on...I’m sick of this being in the shadows...*

*Tina: that’s what other women have said too...the value of contributing so as to benefit other people.*

*Fran: I think for me to know that other people are getting something positive out of knowing me. It’s the kind of positive feedback that I haven’t had. It’s all about learning about who we are individually and collectively I think and the ways we want to change that. So ultimately awareness is a good thing.*

*It is important if this research can inform ongoing understanding of what people struggle with... (Fran 57 years old)*
Bess (65 years old) talked about how her decision to become involved seemed not only personally affirming but also represented validation more substantially, in the form of evidence from outside of her family establishing further credibility for her, but also an opportunity to help others:

It was advertised in the senior’s paper and it’s something I thought I could do because what happened in my life couldn’t be salvaged in the family. It might provide a mechanism for a more improved intervention at least somewhere down the line... because it’s very destructive. It’s an extremely destructive thing. And within the family and you just don’t go around blabbering... But because of the anonymity with this, because it’s a proper inquiry then I thought it’s something that I could perhaps leave behind for others, from the wreckage of what’s happened to me. (Bess, 65 years old)

In fact participating in the study was discussed by a number of the women. Some saw this act as a powerful way to resist the lifelong isolation and anguish; a counter story to being silenced.

There are no more secrets anymore. (June, 75 years old)

They believed too that by communicating their insights, change could occur. Without embellishment, in the straightforward words of Bess (65 years old):

It’s the power of one really.

Some of the women had participated in previous studies of a similar nature due to the same motivation and some continue to seek out and participate in studies that they believe will assist others.
The women who volunteered their time, energy and passion to participate in this study, each delivered their individual story in the hope that others would listen. Fran described her motivation in terms of an opportunity to exist, something she had felt least of all during her life. To me, this is an act of resistance to invisibility:

*I’m sick of this being hidden...I’m sick of feeling hidden myself... If anything I say is a contribution then I’m a part of something that is contributing in some way and so it meets a need for me in that way.*

*Yes... you’re validating our experience on a personal level and because you’re recognising it... I exist. I’m important.* (Fran 57 years old)

Despite the research not guaranteeing any gain for participants, it has been recognised that oftentimes research can contribute to positive outcomes for the individual participants (see for instance, Oakley 2005, p. 227 in relation to her study on mothering). This established for me the importance of interviews as safe spaces where interactions are human and respectful rather than mechanistic. Some women discussed how participation was helpful, an act of self-selection toward understanding and in this case, I believe resistance to isolation:

*I feel energised by what we’ve said because all your feedback has been like...I’m not making it up. It isn’t just me the lone wolf. This is other people’s experience and that was really what I wanted out of it.*

(Fran, 57 years old)
Pariahs and Social Outcasts

Many of the women who participated in the study discussed their feelings of being an outsider. Clearly, many of the women often felt that they lived on the margins of society for all their lives and they passionately expressed this sense of not belonging. This awareness arose for some, as a result of not being believed, and being ostracised by family:

You weren’t just a pariah. You were really cast out. You just removed yourself. You were like a token attachment because of the dynamics in society and in the family. (Bess 65 years old)

The feeling of dislocation has been discussed as arising from prevailing belief systems in the time when this group of women were children (Hunter 2010) although arguably still persists. For Bess, the effect meant complete exile from society as well as her family. She felt that she was trapped in exile for all her life and that it governed many life decisions because she believed, she could not express what had occurred:

It completely destroys you, in that you can’t form good or trusting relationships. Your perception of the opposite sex is so distorted and so vilified. Your function in that family was to sort of just do what he demanded. In your mind, you are so isolated; you are isolated in a cauldron of fear and coercion, isolated and expelled. And that’s been in many families. At the time it was the norm really. How to deal with it? Society did not let you expose it; because exposure meant total and utter exile. (Bess 65 years old)
Bess reflected on how the views of society had changed, how, being open and discussing abuse is important, and how she has wholeheartedly embraced the change in social attitudes:

*Over the years shows like say, the police shows where the issue of sexual abuse is more easily talked about, is a good thing. Once we start to get different views about sexuality into television and into people’s lounge rooms then it has a familiarity and it didn't have the connotations like back then of branding you. In the earlier days you were branded; you were ex communicated; you were reviled for even bringing up the issues.*

*Bringing it out in the open has familiarised the population with these events and issues. And it has reduced a lot of the effects, even in our own mind. You don’t have to speak about it but you notice in your own mind; you know that you are not alone. (Bess 65 years old)*

A sense of not belonging and being an outsider lingered throughout the lives of many of the women despite having formed their own families. The sense of dislocation from everyone else was a lifelong feeling which contributed to the decisions made later in life and the experience of feeling lingering inner pain. One of the first comments that Marjorie made in her conversation with me was regarding this feeling and of her dislocation to her own children and the family that she had formed as an adult:

*I don’t belong! People would say to me but you’ve got a family. And I’d say yes they belong to me, but I don’t belong; belonging is being me. It’s about belonging. I don’t belong. I don’t belong anywhere.*
Even with my children, I don’t belong. So this is how I worked it out…

Belonging is being a part of, not belonging is being apart from, and that is me. (Marjorie 71 years old)

It was interesting to hear that Bess described a very similar feeling of being ‘apart’ from others and of not belonging anywhere,

I went into myself and I just kept it there. I used self-talk and this is an inner world when you simply have got nowhere to go and in some ways it manifests itself differently in different people. It’s like the Stockholm syndrome. This primeval relationship of family where all the essential core of the family is destroyed and you find you have no elements of trust in your family. It can be with your mother and whoever is the father figure, if that’s the abuser, or whoever is concealing the abuse. It goes back to the ultimate, almost, as I say, primeval urge to belong. You find you don’t belong. (Bess 65 years old)

Other women described their sense of dislocation from their families and people in general or indeed a psychic disconnection from the world as being long lasting. Fran spoke about living on the ‘outside’ of relationships whenever one might expect to feel a bond such as within families, and she expressed how this sense seemed to be infinite.

I will never have a ‘family’ because of this. Something has been severed within the child I was. I feel something has been broken in me, some trust; a fundamental trust in the world has been broken. I think if there is such a thing as ‘healing’ it is feeling a sense of
belonging somehow and I have a great deal of trouble feeling a sense of belonging anywhere or having a sense of contribution. It is because I’ve struggled with my issues for so long that I feel much marginalised in society.

I have a great deal of trouble feeling a sense of belonging anywhere.

(Fran 57 years old)

Fran described how her marginalisation arises from having to conceal what had happened in her family. Her family and community had, over the years, normalised a situation wherein the actions of her father were implicitly condoned. She maintained a sense of dislocation for many years and started to examine the effects when her father died not long ago. By this time, however, she found that so much of her life was lived with a veil of concealment and silence regarding the actions of her father.

The biggest thing was concealment. Concealment is the only defence you have as young person. And the length of concealment is continuing on in my life even now.

There’s so much family history in that place that I came from in terms of the pioneer families. This has just severed that connection. I don’t have direct access to those people or that place. And so once again I feel marginalised. I’m looking at the consequences really. I didn’t spend my adult years in that community, you know I left. I did all this acting out through my adult life and it was seen as just my tragic little life. For years and years I’ve been trying to just get approval; an approval. That’s been the source of my tension. Now that dad’s dead
and I can say, oh crap, so this is what has happened; really this is what’s happened! What then is my place in this life? God, I’ve been marginalised all this time. Well my behaviour mightn’t have been acceptable but that doesn’t mean you don’t love a child. All my behaviour has been used as an excuse to criticise and judge me and dismiss me and reject me. And so whether it’s a genuine lack of understanding or whether it’s simply the need to sure up his reality, I don’t know. Really, what I can see now is that my beliefs and my thinking have been controlled by my father’s need to protect this dirty little thing that he’s done under our noses. But because no-one else wants to look at it, it seems like I am the alien. I’ve got it all wrong.

(Fran 57 years old)

Fran like several other women in the study specifically used the term ‘pariah’ to describe themselves and chose this term as a part of how they perceived their identity. This identity construction was something to which they ascribed to throughout their lives in various ways. They felt the sense of dislocation cast them as pariahs. As mentioned, several of the women used the term, ‘pariah’ to describe themselves not knowing that others had also used the term.

_The way I feel is that everyone else is in their safe little world and I’m out here going, why doesn’t anyone want to care about me? Why am I this pariah? I’m the pariah! And so my anger and my hurt are enormous at the moment because it’s like… oh I can see what’s gone down now and I can see that the family need to reinforce their own_
In listening to these stories of being outcasts as expressed by some of the women, I could recognise many normative meta narratives coming through the women’s stories such as being ‘damaged goods’ (Hunter (2010), or being blamed for the sexual abuse, or having to negate and minimise what had occurred, or indeed feeling that they were irretrievably traumatised (McKenzie-Mohr 2014). Certainly, dominant cultural expectations at the time when this group were women were children created barriers for the women in speaking about the abuses. Hunter (2010) discusses some of the barriers which were relevant for women in their fifties during the 1960s, 70s and 80s. However, these barriers were also a part of typical social norms during the 40s and 50s for women in their sixties and seventies. They include respect for authority, rigid gender roles, taboos surrounding sexual issues, lack of supportive adults and lack of language to describe what was happening (Hunter 2010). Compounding this, from the 1930s until the late 1960s, at the level of public policy and law, and unlike the recognition of child physical abuse and neglect during the same era, child sexual abuse was variously, ‘marginalised, hidden and minimised’ (Boxall, Tomison & Hulme 2014, p. 9), not least due to a professional emphasis on family dysfunction rather than individual culpability and social attitudes which minimised the potential traumatic harm caused (Boxall, Tomison & Hulme 2014, p. 9).

What is salient is that despite these incredibly powerful social norms that worked to silence, or blame the child, these women spoke passionately and openly, determined to be heard and to address injustice not only at the
personal level, but at the structural or broader societal level. For me, hearing the women talk, I always felt from them, a sense of struggle, amidst an underground defiance and resistance to the impact of imposed conventions.

**Being alone**

The feeling of being outcast and a pariah was like the twin to a feeling of being alone which was poignantly expressed by some of the women. Being alone in the world was attributed by the women to how the issue of childhood sexual abuse had been responded to by the wider community and families or individuals. This too, the sense of being alone, just like feeling an outcast, was experienced by the women throughout their lives. Being alone, however, does not necessarily mean being lonely:

*It’s interesting not to feel alone out there because often you feel you are alone... very interesting for me... I mean you’ve got a conflict with me in that I’m a loner... very introverted. I’m alright when I’m talking about something where I’ve volunteered for it... I’m feeling comfortable... but I spend hours alone... I lose myself in books and you know one of my treasured possessions is my new telly... a real big one... I treated myself... but you know I spend hours alone and I don’t mind...I’m not lonely...I’m alone. (Rose 66 years old)*

Hazel (58 years old) spoke about how being alone was something she experienced in childhood but also as an adult, even now. In particular she related this to her relationships with her family:
My parents didn’t know what was happening and well, I was too young and too innocent to have known that was wrong…

My sister doesn’t know and we don’t communicate and my brother we only see at Christmas. He doesn’t know and my mother doesn’t know.

(Hazel 58 years old)

Hazel expressed her views about her decision not to disclose to her family members and was comfortable in this choice, given the circumstances and the passage of time. For her, she believed this was the correct path and whilst resigned to this, she conceded how it contributes to the sense of being alone in the knowledge of what had occurred to her.

Ruth (72 years old) discussed her explanation of how being alone comes about and how it can be due to the dynamic of silence which corrals a child and continues into adulthood:

People, who are not abused, do not realise, the brain washing the abuser uses, and leaves a small child living alone in a world of fear and shame. I never played with other children, as I had been told not to talk about what happened at home, and I felt the bruises on my legs were my fault for being so wicked, but I didn’t know… I was always trying to be so good. In the end, I just shut down and shut-up – permanently.

I felt I lived in a bubble … and everybody lived outside it. (Ruth 72 years old)
Ruth described how her life now is still bounded by the feeling of being alone. In a sense, though, she ‘doesn’t mind’ and resists the notion that one must be connected to others in particular ways in order to live a nourishing life. Living alone can be a sanctuary, and companions can take many forms:

*I live alone now, with my dogs and a lovely garden I am making. I don’t like mixing with people, I just don’t know who to trust, and people cannot cope with it. I guess it would be like coming out and saying you were gay –society says they don’t mind, but they do, and with sexual abuse, you are part of that ‘dirty’ act, and so you are tainted, I feel. I’m comfortable when I am with myself and my dogs and garden.* (Ruth 72 years old)

**Lifelong impact**

Importantly, many of the women expressed how the impact of childhood sexual abuse had a whole of life impact. For Ruth, this was a totalising feeling and one which held much anger for her:

*My whole life has been governed by my childhood. To be abused steals your childhood... It has ruined my whole life.* (Ruth 72 years old)

The emotion of anger is often constructed as negative, or as distressing with ominous consequences (Taylor & Risman 2006). Notwithstanding that Ruth has and does experience pain regarding the impact, I also recognised via other comments, how this emotion was ‘source of energy for resistance’ (Taylor & Risman 2006, p. 60).
Olive was more circumspect.

_{It certainly changed the course of my life. (Olive 70 years old)}_

She noted how the impact was experienced differently at particular periods of her life:

_{I think it affected my teenage years by my being quite content not to have a boyfriend or indulge in trying to ‘look nice’ (I didn’t want to attract any male attention). Yet I enjoyed ballroom dancing in my late teens. (Olive 70 years old)}_

Some of the women linked the feeling of being alone to not being able to tell anyone about the abuse. For some, this was not possible when they were young and as a result they lived with the knowledge of their experiences, seemingly alone. This was especially the case for Hazel and Ruth and they explain the circumstance and reasons:

_{I kept it inside me because until this year most people didn’t know. My parents knew about it but nothing was ever said about it again. (Hazel 58 years old)}_

_{There is no one to run to, especially in my day (and I don’t think it would be any better for a child these days). There were hardly any phones or cars then, and although I thought of running to my aunts, both within walking distance, I know they would have bought me straight back home and the punishment would have been even greater. I was always threatened with a reform school for bad girls. People, who are not abused, do not realise, the brain washing the abuser uses,}
and leaves a small child living alone in a world of fear and shame.

(Ruth 72 years old)

And now, for their own reasons, some of the women are still ‘living alone’ with their knowledge. Rose resists the way that this might be seen as unhealthy or sad by making her introversion a safe place,

*I just put it away. I think you kind of put it away. I’m known as a…well I was always accused of being arrogant and a liar…well that was the introversion in me. I kept myself inside. I didn’t have another person or anything like that but I just kept myself safe inside me.* (Rose 66 years old)

Later in life, Rose found an opportunity to help others which then reminded her of the inner pain that had been locked away in an effort to manage the feelings of isolation. She resists the idea that the lifelong isolation was necessarily harmful and illustrates how, much later in her life, this became an opportunity to develop her own meanings and to reconstruct her perception of who she felt she was:

*It’s only in the later years when I went and worked in accounts. One day I thought to myself…I’ve got do something with this…I’ve got to turn my scars into stars… This is after I came here so it was quite late in life. So I had a friend who was working in a women’s refuge and she went on maternity leave and she asked if I was interested in doing anything like that. So that’s how it started. I went to work with the women and the children and of course some of the good came back to me.* (Rose 66 years old)
For Bess, interestingly, her resistance is the resolve never to disclose what occurred to her. For her, the impact is lifelong and continuing but she stands by her decision not to tell anyone:

*I will never let them know... It would never alter my status... My brother and I were collateral damage in my mother’s marriage because of the repercussions. It’s always a snowball, and it can be catastrophic.* (Bess 65 years old)

Bess stated that she was more comfortable in not telling anyone since the consequences would be more damaging than the existing scenario in her family.

The lifelong impact means for some of the women, that either they did not tell anyone until recently, or until later in their lives. The circumstances can be triggered by another critical period. For instance, Hazel told some of her adult children only in the past twelve months about the abuse that she experienced, and this was because she learned that her daughter had been also been sexually abused as a child:

*None of my kids knew that I was sexually abused until this year.* (Hazel 58 years old)

Particular events, and maturation prompted many of the women who did not start to explore the impact of their childhood experiences in a conscious way, until later in their life to re-visit childhood abuse:

*As a child you don’t know anything about all of this. You don’t understand what that was. You have no idea... I was well in my 30s...*
It was always probably in the background. But I was too busy...getting married, having kids...all those sorts of things. And I can’t even remember how it came up or why it came but it just began to become a focus. (Pearl 60 years old)

Commonly for many of the women, re-visiting the impact did not occur until they were in their fifties. For instance, Jane did not disclose to anyone until she was 53 years old and this was despite seeing a counsellor when she was 40 years old. Similarly Susie did not disclose until she was 51 years old.

Ruth (72 years old) has recently begun to explore the meaning that the abuse has held for her currently in her life; this was despite seeing a counsellor from the age of 35:

I haven’t coped with it at all... I had to block the worst of it out, until 2 years ago, when I was 70. (Ruth 72 years old)

One woman spoke about returning to counselling after having a heart attack which triggered her thinking differently about certain aspects of what happened. It was then she began to discuss the childhood sexual abuse:

As I was getting better, I found that I had dissociated again. I went and saw my counsellor again and she explained this was a learnt way of responding to trauma. Oh I thought ...now I have to go through it all again! This is what I meant when I said you have to keep on having to deal with it. Anyway I sorted that out. I think I went four times because I did my homework and I would work on it at night times. So that’s as far as I’ve got. (Jane 76 years old)
Oftentimes, it seemed that the death of the person who was the abuser enabled some of the women to think more freely about how the childhood sexual abuse had affected them. For Fran (57 years old), this occurred eighteen months ago:

"It’s definitely my father passing on that’s allowed me to look at his behaviour and I couldn’t do that while he was still alive…. Wasn’t prepared to…wasn’t allowed to…the conflict in me if I tried to…and I’ve been trying to do it for many years was just too hard… too hurtful. I think I would have gone mad… Well I wouldn’t have gone mad but it would cause me a great deal of suffering.

Tina: so him passing away....

Fran: That actually allowed me to start looking at it.

Tina: so how long ago did that happen?

Fran: A year and a half ago...

Tina: so only very recently?

Fran: I’m glad you say that because it still feels very raw. Well maybe if I could heal myself whatever that means, I could go into that place and not feel that sense of distress that I feel. But right now it’s so raw. (Fran 57 years old)

Many women described how the impact of childhood is always there for them, sometimes saying that it is there forever. They described how
everyday experiences are linked to memories of the past and can act as a trigger for the past.

Well it’s something I think about every day and it still affects me every day. There are heaps of triggers. I mean if you’re abused once, ok then you might have one trigger. But if it’s hundreds of times, by various people, there are heaps of triggers. (Susie 66 years old).

And similarly Ava (65 years old) spoke about the ongoing nature of the experience:

I still feel to this day, and I don’t know how to deal with that, I don’t know whether it goes or whether other women still experience the same, but if a man compliments me, I think he wants something. And he could be quite innocently just saying a compliment. Someone did that at my new church that I went to years ago, and he’s a lovely married man and he didn’t mean anything other than what he said and I feel that men still seem to have this type of power over me. (Ava 65 years old)

Fran described the lifelong impact a little differently:

It is very hard because here I am in an adult body. People expect to see an adult, but internally I’m often a very vulnerable child. I’m learning to recognise that and I am learning to nurture and protect myself but, well hello, it’s not something I grew up with. So at 57 I’m just beginning to learn by witnessing myself or watching myself. It’s like I’ll move forward and then I’ll move back into the old pattern of
being. I sense that I’ll be in that old pattern of distress for a long time. And then something will shift in my consciousness and I go, hang on...I’m back here again...and I realise the thoughts I’ve been having that contribute to my emotional state and I can see that I’ve been stuck in this pattern again. I feel like crap. I feel like crap. I feel hurt and angry and I feel like crap. And so I’m reinforcing all this kind of, being ‘stuckness’. And then I start to get out and about and do things and start moving forward again but my sense of self is very fragile.

The story of my life seems grossly unfair and there is nothing I can do about it. It’s completely out of my control. I feel very hurt. It just doesn’t go away... Its how you learn to manage and cope with it I think....You make a life in spite of it. (Fran 57 years old)

So too Bess described having to continue on in spite of the ongoing painful memories:

It was a terribly negative impact and there was absolutely nowhere to go... and particularly it is such a destructive thing that you know your mother knows about it.

You have to build your own resilience because you have to live. So you conceal things from people but it is very difficult to live like this. I was sort of cast adrift in many ways because before I went away overseas and I had a relationship with an older gentleman, and he was very much older than me but I knew it couldn’t go anywhere. So the fact of going overseas and these relationships was linked to what
happened in my childhood…. And they all play a part in your whole makeup your whole life. (Bess 65 years old)

One of the factors in feeling the impact over a lifetime was due to the termination of a pregnancy. The emotional and physical toll of a termination at young age in secretive circumstances has been tremendous for some of the women. For instance, Marjorie (71 years old) realised only much later as an adult that she had an abortion when she was 14 years old. She remembers going to see a doctor but due to the secretive nature of the circumstance, this incident was never spoken of. At the time of realisation, the shock was enormous and she left her husband for a short while travelling to another state. She was 61 at the time. Bess (65 years old) also still feels great loss as a result of the termination:

At one time I even became pregnant and I had to go and get a D and C and that’s created lifelong problems…Oh god…. It was just awful. (Bess 65 years old)

The lifelong impact was also linked to a feeling of never knowing why the abuse occurred:

And you’ll never get the answer to that because they’re different generations and you won’t get the answer to that. (Hazel 58 years old)

Some women felt that by participating in the study, their sense of isolation could be addressed and their voices could be heard. Additionally, all the women were keen to inform others and their communities so as to work
towards prevention, whether that be prevention of childhood abuse or amelioration of the lifelong feelings experienced by themselves.

You know my motivation is that people are suffering in isolation...that this is such a taboo area...that the victims are being punished...and I’m very angry about that. So if there’s any little thing that can create solidarity for women in all this. I reckon that’s a damn good thing. My righteous anger is a good thing....It is about justness and fairness and all that stuff...

I think the fact that you’ve been motivated to do this study...I think there’s a lot of good for all of us in it... Having another place to talk and just really the fact that someone is doing research on this means that we are all united. There is a sense of solidarity there and that’s valuable ... How would I ever bump into another person who is struggling with these issues? ... I feel a sense of belonging just being here and that’s good.

I feel like I’ve made a bit of a shift.

If there are common themes then that would be useful to know and really the fact that you can embrace the complexity of my situation is helpful too....

What I really want is to belong, to belong in my community, to belong in that past community, and to have connections with people that are not full of pain. (Fran 57 years old)
So too Olive (70 years old) felt that public awareness, through her activities was extremely important:

_I turned to doing what I could to alert the public to the seriousness of the after-effects of childhood sexual abuse, I joined a group and volunteered at their healing retreat, I try to listen empathetically with anyone who divulges to me that they were a victim and I have had some of my story published in various magazines. I hope by telling my story, others will find ways to prevent childhood sexual abuse._ (Olive 70 years old)

Most of the women discussed how the lifelong impact of childhood sexual abuse had meant that they mistrust men generally and oftentimes this includes other women also. They spoke candidly about a dislike for men or about their difficulties in having intimate relationships with men. Edith (72 years old), like most of the women who participated in the study, discussed how she never allows any man to ‘get close’ to her, and how very difficult it has been and still remains, to be trusting of others. Susie (66 years old), not only spoke about her own sense of mistrust but spoke about other women of her age group who had also experience childhood sexual abuse:

_So my friend has lived her whole life blaming herself for that and hating all people. I mean, I know lots of ladies who particularly hate men._ (Susie 66 years old)
And of herself:

So yes, I really don’t like men. I don’t trust any men. In fact I don’t trust anybody. I only trust myself. And I think my daughter feels the same way. She’s been abused so many times. ... I do however; trust myself not to abuse kids. That’s what I trust myself about…not abusing kids. I actually love kids but then it’s dangerous to say you love kids!

Tina: It’s a good thing to trust yourself right?

Well I only trust myself not to hurt other people. (Susie 66 years old)

Olive (70 years old) spoke about mistrust being present from a young age:

The meaning of the abuse was that I then totally lost any trust in others, particularly anyone older that I was. I became withdrawn, lost in my own fantasy world that was fuelled by fairy tales and any other book I could get hold of to read. As I was always the youngest in my school classes by two or more years, this meant that I didn’t even trust anyone at school.

The long-term effect of the abuse was that I hate being touched by anybody, even today, and I had an extremely miserable marriage, as I hated the sexual side of it. I have had several series of sessions with counsellors in an attempt to become a more ‘normal’ person. Each different counsellor has helped with a problem specific to the time I sought help, but overall, I don’t believe I have ever truly adjusted to become a normal, balanced human being.
On the plus side, I developed a skill of coping, by using my imagination. I also turned to academic and creative outlets, losing myself in study, and became a workaholic. (Olive 70 years old)

Bess (65 years old) also spoke about the devastating effect on relationships:

And this abuse really destroyed my ability to have trust in relationships. (Bess 65 years old)

Marjorie (71 years old), like many of the women was very clear about the nature of her relationships throughout her life and what helped her:

I’ve talked to a lot of psychiatrists about the fact that I don’t love people. But I know what love is...I love my dolls. I’ve still got my doll that I had when I was one. I love books. I love music. I do not love animals and I do not love people. (Marjorie 71 years old)

Edith (72 years old) similarly explained the impact on her relationships and decisions:

It made me a wary person I suppose... I felt that there were very few people I could trust.

That’s why I would never get married again...because I wouldn’t trust anybody. Like, I’d go out but I would never trust anybody to that extent. I have noticed that I don’t allow men to get too close to me. I am divorced. I divorced at about when I was 45. So I’ve been divorced a long time. And I’ve had several relationships in that time but I don’t ever commit myself because I don’t ever trust. I haven’t got the trust there. And I’ve always felt that the only person...the only male in my
life...I’m an only child... the only person in my life I felt I could trust, the only male was my step grandfather.... because he was such a wonderful man.

When I divorced I think I used to think...I’m going to meet someone like him. He was my grandmother’s second husband. But there wasn’t anyone around like him. He was always so kind and gentle and he wasn’t what I was used to. So I thought there must be a lot like him... but there wasn’t.

Even in a crowd I would be in a busy arcade or something like that and I’d be very cautious of a man getting too close.

I’m sort of quite happy how I am. But that’s ...I guess what’s made me how I am. (Edith 72 years old)

Ruth (72 years old) felt also that the issue of mistrust was something that impacted on her decisions regarding relationships:

I made a bad marriage to a sadist husband. I think it would almost be impossible to make a wise choice if you had been abused sexually. I always had this GUILT! I didn’t know why, so was always bending over backwards trying to be the perfect wife and mother. (Ruth 72 years old)

Ava (65 years old):

And then when I started a couple of years later going out with other men, I was very afraid, very ummm...you know if a man would pay me attention, I’d think: what does he want? (Ava 65 years old)
Fran (57 years old) spoke in some detail about the dynamics of relationships with which she struggles:

*I’m so defensive…not just defensive …but I’m so wary of how easily I’m hurt…It’s like I’m very sensitised to …to abuse coming at me …but at the same time continually reconstruct relationships with people who at some point down the track, I realise…there’s something in it…like you know I set up friendships with people who say, “I’ll be there for you” …but then I realise later on that there’s a price I pay and the price I pay is abuse.*

*And so the repetition of patterns of relationships I find it’s made me very wary…It’s left me feeling very wary of people…very mistrustful of people and their deeper motives and very distrustful of people full stop.*

*So I have very few friendships and even those at some point I generally…say, “Oh I don’t like that”. So I find it very hard to negotiate the kind of darker interactions…the ‘what’s in it for me’ stuff.*

*I feel disempowered very often. I feel like a victim a lot. So that ongoing results of the learning patterns that I’ve learnt through this upbringing, I think will be with me forever… And of course once I get down to that level of clarity, then I find it really difficult that the relationship’s gone on in this pattern for some time and it’s very hard to shift it. And so I find often I just have to remove myself.* (Fran 57 years old)
Hazel (58 years old) identified herself as living in an abusive relationship. She squarely blames herself for aspects of the situation and she does not feel that leaving him is an option. Hazel described the impact as follows:

*He is such a horrible revolting person... I don’t talk to him... very little... as little as I can possibly say, for example, ‘pass the jam’. So the cycle of abuse is definitely continuing.*

*At this stage, leaving gets too hard. I mean, who takes the fridge and who has the washing machine and I mean, this is yours and mine and where do I live? We’ve been together for 30 odd years. But by living with someone for that long... you still don’t know them. I should have left him a long time ago but I didn’t.* (Hazel 58 years old)

Hazel believes that hope for a change in the quality and tenor of her life will come when her husband dies. Each day she feels she lives with the consequences of what occurred to her as a young person, and then how it impacted on her relationship choices as an adult. These consequences, she believes, are still alive.

*When my husband dies ... oh that’ll be a celebration.* (Hazel 58 years old)

In a similar vein, June (75 years of age), did feel a sense of relief and freedom when her husband, who had been controlling passed away. It was only when this occurred and she was 57 years of age that she began to examine her
worldview, became stronger and confident in herself where today she feels comfortable with her sense of self:

Tina:  So it wasn’t until you were 57 and he passed away, that you really started to soar with becoming the person you are now.

June:  In a small way at first, and then you gradually build up stronger and stronger... I can stand up to anybody now... male or female. (June 75 years old)

Olive (70 years old) conclusively told me:

Now, I am rather contemptuous of men, as I have rarely ever come across one with whom I could hold a decent conversation. (Olive 70 years old)

Sex

Aligned with the issues of relationship with others, sexuality was a topic that some women raised. Some of the women discussed the nature of their sexuality in relationships during their lives, for instance, Olive (70 years old):

I was almost 21 when I married, against my own wishes. I knuckled down and did the best I could, to do my duty as a wife and mother. As often happens with victims of childhood sexual abuse, I married an abusive, inconsiderate man and spent a miserable 31 years married to him. I was trapped by the economic circumstances of having no money of my own with which I could have escaped the marriage. I gradually came to understand that men as a species had such a
powerful sex drive that they would stoop to any means to satisfy it. I wondered if I was indeed frigid, but grew to realise that sex without love or consent, is actually rape. I never experienced tenderness and caring from anyone else but my kindly grandfather. There were no sexual overtones to his acceptance of me, for the person I was. (Olive 70 years old)

Some of the women discussed how they thought sex was all they were good for. An example was June (75 years old):

\[That’s what I thought I had to do… programmed like a robot… the only thing I was good for. I think with all of this… if a person was nice to me …even though I didn’t necessarily like sex myself… I ‘rewarded’ them. . (June 75 years old)\]

Some women feel that it was later in life that they had any control over their bodies:

\[Now, I don’t think I’d have sex with anyone full stop. But I’m more attracted to women than I am men I think. I’ve gone through stages feeling like I could have a relationship with a woman but now I don’t. I think I’m just totally nothing… I used to think about why…and I would attempt to have a relationship with my husband after it all came out but then if I’m doing anything of a sexual nature, I just get this little message that says ‘no’… and that’s a good turnoff I can tell you. For me, nothing is safe, nothing to do with sex, nothing to do with looking attractive, nothing to do with men is safe and quite often women aren’t safe either. (Susie 66 years old)\]
And Marjorie (71 years old):

Well once I turned 70, I said to my husband, “Now that’s enough, you’ve had a good go”, and I was done with it. Best thing I ever did.

(Marjorie 71 years old)

And finally, Rose discussed not having information about sex when she was growing up:

I had no idea in those days, they didn’t tell you about sex... I didn’t even menstruate until I was 16 so and my mother was pretty hopeless in that field... These days, I mean folk are much more educated and what have you...but you don’t know what to do and what to do with it really. (Rose 66 years old)

Speaking Out

I found that many of the women struggled with finding their voice and for some, there was little opportunity for them to speak out about what had happened to them. It was interesting that only one of the women had been able to report the abuse to police and none of the women had the opportunity to engage with a formal complaints or court process. In the next chapter I discuss this issue in more depth, in the context of feminism and women’s status. It seemed to me that based on the social context of each woman, they individually found ways of making sense of their circumstances. For instance, some women felt they could speak up:

I’ve learnt to speak up. I’ve learnt to give an opinion. I was so terrified at school that I’d nearly faint if anyone asked me to do any reading.
And I would never put up my hand to answer a question or that sort of thing. I was a meek little thing. (Susie 66 years old)

For Edith and Ava, speaking out is difficult in everyday life and sometimes in any circumstance:

I looked at the questions you gave me and I just scribbled it down at the time. I think I’ve become a little bit hard in myself to people that don’t know or don’t care...critical of other people. I think I’ve become a little bit hard... in my head, I say things about them to myself you know. Like a lady came down to the mission one day and she goes there once a year, and we’re buttering the bread and I said, ‘Oh we don’t put the crusts on the table.’ And she said ‘Why not? They should be eating their crusts.’ I said, ‘Well that’s the first thing that goes, their teeth’. And she wanted to put the crusts on there! But you know I’m saying all these things to myself. I’d say it in my mind... in my thoughts... I haven’t said anything hard to her but as my daughter says, ‘It’s my silence that speaks volumes’. (Edith 72 years old)

I still feel to this day, I can’t speak out. (Ava 65 years old)

The capacity to speak out was variable among the women and some had found ways to express their views, whether that be about child sexual abuse specifically or otherwise. Some of the women continued to struggle with this, had come to accept themselves as not speaking out, or had discovered ways to manage any difficulty. All of the women however, came to participate in my study because they wanted to speak and speak out.
Conclusion

My conversations with the older women who participated in the study, demonstrate how their experiences of childhood sexual abuse have had lifelong impacts, particularly in relation to trusting others, establishing relationships and feeling alone or an ‘outcast’. Amidst discussion of painful and distressing issues, I found that how the women spoke about their challenges can be recognised as resistance to social norms and to stereotypical identities for older women. Their resistances occurred at the personal or the everyday level and can be viewed as micro-political acts of resistance, but also at the broader macro level, exemplified by their actions and concerns regarding child protection issues and social justice more generally. Their participation in my study and their stories of struggle revealed how their multiple ‘voices’ in ‘cramped spaces’ expresses many facets of resistance and fortitude, not usually recognised. For instance, ‘standing up to my parents’ by becoming involved in a range of overt and public discourse regarding sexual abuse of children or questioning ‘expertise’ of professionals and various processes employed to construct ‘patients’. And another example at the everyday level might be working to assist vulnerable groups or teaching children how not to be ‘downtrodden’.

The following three chapters discuss further aspects of what the women spoke about in relation to childhood sexual abuse and to me, indicates how they reconstructed their identity through actions, thoughts and feelings in order to manage and assess their roles throughout their lives.
Chapter 6 Stories of Reconstruction: Coming Through

Introduction

In this chapter, and the following two chapters, my focus is on the women’s stories of how, they reconstructed a sense of self in the present and also in the past throughout their lives. I asked the women about what in their lives has been helpful and another question, although similar, about how they managed the effects of childhood sexual abuse. Thus, I am responding to the second and third research sub-questions:

What do the women say about what has helped?

How have they, as older women managed the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse?

I have separated each subtheme of reconstruction according to my analysis of how the women enacted a particular type of reconstructive self-practice.

Reconstruction

I have chosen the macro theme of reconstruction as an umbrella for the women’s stories because I argue that in doing so, the analysis of the relationship between the subject and regimes of power can provide important possibilities for how subjectivities based on the lived experience can be remade (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Pease 2014, p. 10). The experience of childhood sexual abuse was devastating for all of the women I interviewed. However, their stories of managing the impact throughout their lives demonstrated to me the reconstructive possibilities of their identities through the performance
of agency (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Pease 2014, p. 1), and their ever-changing engagement with reparation and reformation of the difficult aspects of their lives. Pallotta-Chiarolli and Pease (2014, p. 1) have argued that new and reconstructed forms of subjectivity are needed, ‘to challenge social relations of subordination and domination.’ The approach is reflective of Pallotta-Chiarolli & Pease’s (2014, p. 2) concept of ‘inter-weaving’ which describes how axes of difference can give rise to multiple strategies of agency to construct alternative subjectivities and demonstrates how people can be active agents in negotiating their social world because self-evidently, ‘people are, and always have been, active agents in the constitution of their unfolding social worlds’ (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010 p. 106). This model of reconstruction is useful in analysing and understanding how the older women in this study, remake ‘subordination and domination’ in their lives.

The notion and nature of ‘reconstruction’ and the idea of an agentic subject is potentially complex, and in particular, the issue of the extent to which the ‘active remaking of our selves’ (Gatens 2010, p 618) is indeed at all possible. It can be argued that, given subject positions are themselves produced through discursive practices linked to the operation of power, the expression of identity then, is constricted. For instance, in relation to the nature of the gendered subject, Gatens (2014, p. 41) expresses the dilemma as follows:

If power has already done its work through sexing the subject then in what sense are already formed subjects capable of genuine autonomy?

This dilemma has been variously theorized (for further in-depth discussions see, Allen 2008; Benhabib et al. 1995; Butler 2004; Davies 1992;
Gatens 2014; Gill 2008; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Pease 2014). However, for the purposes of this study, a complete consideration of this dialectic is currently beyond my available scope and therefore I have chosen to rely on an understanding of agentic possibilities in the following way. I agree with Gatens (2014) who refers to the earlier work of Benhabib (1999), to argue that in relation to the nature of the formation of the self, whether constituted a priori or not, it is ultimately an unanswerable question and embedded in the, ‘deep and necessarily mysterious limits to the knowledge we have of our own and others’ self-formation.’ (Gatens 2014, p. 49).

Ergo, the nature of the self can be regarded as capable of revealing many ‘horizons of meaning’ (Benhabib 1999, p. 350) and transformations of the self. The approach considered in my thesis is that the self is constructed, ‘though solidarity with others, through listening to others and being listened to’ (Gatens 2014, p. 49). Gatens’ (2014, p. 49) summary description of how transformation is possible in this way, is, to me, a veritable description of how we can make, adjust and shape meaning in everyday life and it reflects the process of my research as I spoke with the women:

We always dwell with others with whom we construct human possibilities for living against a pre-existing backdrop of a collectively constructed tapestry of ongoing meanings.

I have interpreted what the women told me in my interviews as the various ways in which the women reconstructed their identities. Of course, it could be argued that, at the operational level of method, I draw a long bow given that my interpretations rest on mostly singular conversations with the women in the context of a particular research interview. I acknowledge,
therefore, that the stories of the women in this particular context can only be facets of Indra’s net (as introduced earlier) and constitute narrative identities where, ‘meanings are forged in relational contexts and are subject to change according to context’ (Oke 2005, p. 289). The construction of identity arises from the women’s agentic subjectivity whereby narratives are produced in dialogue with me during our conversations. Thus, the stories we ‘make’ of our lives exist in an ever changing flow of construction and reconstruction depending on contexts which, in each moment, are relational and layered. They are productive and dialectical and similarly to how Oke (2005, p. 44) describes the concept of making meaning from narratives.

The narrative relational self or narrative identity … represents a fluid self, privileging lived experience and meaning, existing within, formed and transformed by relational, cultural and historical contexts.

The narrative self is not an autonomous actor nor merely passively acted on by outside forces. Individuals are both influenced by and act to influence their social environment, this action being in the context of reflection and meaning making processes. However, while we create our identity through the telling of our story, ironically we are not necessarily the authors of our own lives, in that we cannot totally control what happens to us. What we can do is make meaning of events and attempt to act in accordance with those meanings (Oke 2005, p. 45).

In order to interpret the self-making possibilities of the women’s stories of what helped them and how they managed throughout their lives, Karakayali’s (2014, p. 2) framework describing three ways in which ‘self-practices’ can be seen to produce possibilities for constituting ourselves as
‘autonomous subjects’ as we try, ‘to give a shape to ourselves’ and ‘relate to our social environment.’ is helpful. This conceptual model includes the inter-related concepts of adaptive, defensive and transformative self-practices. Reconstruction in the sense that it is used in this thesis, draws loosely upon all three typologies; adaptive reconstruction is how the ‘self’ achieves autonomy through accommodation to normative values and social mores, defensive reconstruction is how the ‘self’ attempts independence from the social environment as reflected in the women’s insights on issues regarding recovery and counselling, and transformative reconstruction ‘is the idea of a self who confronts, at every moment, the question of whether it will continue acting in accordance with its past dispositions or whether it will attempt to transform itself and experiment with new modes of existence’ (Karakayali 2014, p. 13). I found the women’s stories could be categorised using this framework. However, since, as I have argued, meaning is constantly remade through collective unions with others, my own interpretation of this model is reflected in the way I have re-named the categories. Karakayali (2014) argues that via these three methods of self-practice, there are different possibilities for an autonomous existence.

In this chapter I have arranged the women’s stories, their perceptions and their lived experiences into subthemes and grouped the subthemes according to the three typologies described above. I demonstrate how the women reconstructed their identities by creating their own meanings in ‘cramped spaces – within a set of relations that are intolerable, where movement is impossible, where change is blocked and voice is strangulated’
(Rose 1999, p. 280). These agentic practices is linked to the feminist politics of personal agency and reminds us of how:

… such a molecular and minor engagement with cramped space can connect up with a whole series of other circuits and cause them to fluctuate, waver and reconfigure in wholly unexpected ways. (Rose 1999, p. 280)

**Stories of Reconstruction**

The women in my study talk about what has helped them over their lifetimes and how they managed the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse. For me, this demonstrates the hidden and the diverse ways which have been powerful in reconstructing the identities of the women. Mostly, each woman spoke about ways which were unique to each of them, however, at times, the women spoke in similar ways about certain issues. Thus I have attempted to represent the particular alongside themes which were common to some of the women. My adaptation of Karakayali’s (2014) framework is used to categorise my subthemes, and utilises his original definitions (which are included in brackets) alongside my themes in the following way:

**Chapter 6 Coming Through** (Adaptive Reconstruction)

- **Being Strong and Successful**
- **The Impact of the Social Age**
Chapter 7 Holding the Line (Defensive Reconstruction)

Developing an Inner Self, Support Networks and Helping Others

The Garden

Writing and ‘Haptic Expression’

Refuge and Safety with Animals

Knitting

Work

Recovery and Counselling

Relationship with Mother

Chapter 8 Living Outside of the Box (Transformational Reconstruction)

Making a Life from Little

Living out your Beliefs

Black Humour

Growing Older

Having Children
Coming Through (Adaptive Reconstruction)

The following section describes how reconstruction occurs in terms of how the women have managed expectations in their lives by adapting their conduct to accommodate social expectations and norms. Karakayali (2014, p. 2) describes this self-practice as the ability to ‘develop socially required habits and skills…’ thus ‘rendering it possible … to live in harmony with others’. The ability to live harmoniously with others and accommodate social expectations has been relevant for some of the women in order to remain strong and become successful in particular areas of their lives such as for Pearl, Marjorie and May. The ability to live within socially oppressive attitudes and constraints were described by Bess, Jane, Ava, Fran, Susie, Marjorie, Cathy, Edith, Rose, Olive and Stella who all discussed this theme as being important in relation to the impact of the social age in which they grew up. I understood their self-practice as courageous struggles to maintain a semblance of ‘normality’ and ‘coming through’ the successful negotiation of difficult circumstances in their lives.

Being Strong and Successful

Pearl (60 years old) provided a valuable insight into the ways she negotiated an uncertain future in light of the abuse she experienced, by working hard and excelling in everything she attempted. She viewed this as personal strength and spoke about how it enabled her to forge a life despite setting high expectations of herself. Pearl consciously positioned herself to spring from this particular notion of strength:
One strategy is about strength...about not being put in a vulnerable position. Not being exposed to ...not getting into trouble. It’s probably my main thing... and that’s where it’s hard to differentiate where that all came from ... So I learnt at a very early age that I would never do anything wrong...hopefully... because the consequences would not be good. But the thing was that I was always excelling so that I could win the affection and admiration of my parents. And I never got into strife because I had a real fear of doing something wrong. So throughout my life I have excelled at everything I’ve done...

Tina: An over achiever perhaps?

Pearl: Over achiever? Exactly. And, I’ve put those expectations on other people too. So that if people don’t perform to my standard or my view of what is acceptable, then I get cranky and irritated and annoyed ....and I get angry about everything. You know all of the high achieving, the expectations, and the emphasis on other people all the time about their actions drives me crazy sometimes! Then I really get annoyed with myself. I say to myself, ‘Can’t you just shut up? Can’t you just not say something for once?’

I can see that through my whole life. I can see it... At school I wasn’t academically very good. Not in maths but I loved science and all that sort of thing. So my mother sent me to a commercial school for typing, shorthand and bookkeeping and I did well in all of that. And every job that I did, I made sure that I was the best. And I outperformed everybody. And I would get cranky if other people ...
Tina: Couldn’t keep up?

Pearl: Yeah…not even keeping up…I expected a report on the desk because I managed to work for fairly high level people. I wanted it and I wanted it now and if you can’t give it now… well do something about it! (Pearl 60 years old)

Later, when I re-visited Pearl after inviting her for a second interview, and I discussed this particular theme, she reiterated this feeling about ‘always wanting to do the right thing’ and ‘never making a mistake’. She explained to me further that for her, fitting into the rules, helps her to feel safe and that this extended to feeling responsible for others, and to also ‘follow the rules’. Pearl thought that while this was useful in the past when the emphasis was on employment, now that her life had moved on from those contexts and the focus is on personal relationships, particularly those with her husband and adult children, the need to feel safe by following rules and expecting others to do so also, becomes difficult. For instance, Pearl described how, if her son receives a fine for not registering his dog, she nearly, ‘haemorrhages inside’. Thus now she is still working on how she manages her desire to feel safe in this way knowing the impact it might have on others.

Another example of ‘coming through’ came from Marjorie (71 years old) who takes great satisfaction and self-respect from never having outstanding debts and it is a value she holds for herself and others. For her, it is a way to maintain control:
I like to pay my debts before I owe them... That’s because I’m not willing to pay what is demanded of me. So I pay first and then they can’t demand of me. (Marjorie 71 years old)

May (57 years old) is a very successful professional woman who has achieved many high watermark moments in her career and family life. For her also, being successful in socially acceptable ways became a way to maintain control and remain strong in life despite the adversity she had experienced:

People would see me as extremely successful. I worked extremely hard because I always felt inadequate.

I ‘grew up’ at a very young age as a result of abuse. In my twenties I socialised and I felt more comfortable with people who were much older than me. I did activities which involved lots of people from different ages. I took life very seriously for that stage of life. I was far too mature in many ways. Far too responsible for the age I was and I just didn’t engage with what people were getting up to, things I thought were not good for you. I’d think why? Why expose yourself to having your life not in your control? It made no sense. I understand now thirty years later why that was so marked in me. I didn’t understand then.
The Impact of the Social Age

All of the women in my study were children before the 1970s at which time a ‘sea change’ in public attitudes supported by feminist sensibilities and cultural liberalisation more generally increased public awareness and attention to the prevalence, nature and impact of sexual violence in the lives of most women (D’Cruze 2012; Gavey 2013; Rutherford, 2011). Before the 1970s, sexual violence against women was not ostensibly considered a public issue (Rutherford 2011, p. 342) due to perceptions that sexual violence was rare (Rutherford 2011, p. 342), or when acknowledged, was mostly, ‘silenced, denied, minimized or condoned.’ (Gavey 2013, p. 17) Some researchers argue that despite feminist activism creating paradigm shifts regarding attitudes, law reform and understandings of the nature of sexual violence, sexual violence remains a normative reality for women in the twenty first century and hence, is still largely condoned and tolerated because it is now regulated rather than prohibited (Gavey 2013, p. 17; Rozee & Koss 2001, pp. 295-6). For the women in my study, who were children either between the wars during the twentieth century, or just after the end of the second world war, their experience of childhood sexual abuse occurred within a social context of mistrust or hostility towards children’s, and indeed women’s accounts of sexual violence, and accordingly, they all experienced secrecy, silencing and a lack of legal protection. Certainly many of the women referred to the impact and effects of the social context at the time during their earlier years. I found it interesting, although not surprising then, that none of the women I spoke with had their case heard in the legal system, even though some had reported to police.
Bess (65 years old) described how, as a younger woman, in the course of her work in human services, she witnessed many instances when women were blamed for sexual violence towards them and, in her words, ‘nobody would speak about it.’ Jane (76 years old) explained it further:

*I think women in that age didn’t know that it was abuse, because nobody ever ‘raped’ them, if you know what I mean.*

Tina: Yes, it was not seen as abuse. Is that what you mean?

Jane: Yes, even if you told your parents, which was unthinkable…but even if you did… they didn’t know how to cope with it.

Specifically, some of the women spoke about the role of women during the period of growing up and how this influenced their sense of self and identity:

*It’s like you’re powerless because of being a woman….*

*I lived in a family where my step father beat my mother every week so he was the dominant male and we had to tip toe around him …. Males were superior. You did everything your husband said. (Ava 65 years old)*

The theme of how it felt to be a woman within restrictive and oppressive gender norms was also discussed by Fran (57 years old) in the context of her young adult life and how this has stayed with her currently:

*I’ve had no status as a single woman. I’m not a married woman. I have no status because I have no career. And I have no status because I’m on a pension and therefore I feel society is saying to me, I’ve*
mucked up and it’s my fault. You’ve made your bed now you lie in it.

That is how I’ve been marginalised.

Fran also spoke about gender inequality and what it meant for women generally:

The women were just chattels, slaves to the men. Quite strange. I think about how there weren’t even instances where women were allowed to do their own thing, you know. They might be artists or whatever but it was all just marginalised. Everything was for supporting the man who was the king of the castle.

In talking about the social era in which their identities were forming, Susie (66 years old) referred to this period as being ‘an immoral age’ signifying her critique on the values which were expressed regarding sexuality, puberty, gender roles and child abuse:

I think that just about everything was brushed under the carpet if it was going to look bad for the family. So I reckon it was a very immoral age. Because the males were out there doing all this horrible stuff... a fair percentage of them, the women were covering for them, the children were kept in the dark about any protective methods, not that they work necessarily, they don’t. It was a very immoral age. I think my age was pretty terrible actually. We really were considered that we were to be seen and not heard.

I remember my grandmother’s age getting married and not knowing what sex actually was. But no doubt her husband had been out with a
whole lot of prostitutes. That’s the way it was. I used to have good conversations with my grandmother. She didn’t even know that the sex act could contribute to making a baby! So she was kept well and truly in the dark. Even in my day I was never told anything about stuff like that. I’d ask my mother and she’d clam up. I used to send away for books in brown covers. You’re too young to know I was told. But on the Modess and Kotex boxes, you used to have the little cardboard cut-out and you could send away for your free books about all sorts of things. I’d get my books and send away for those and probably got better information than my mother could tell me.

For Susie (66 years old), she later managed this by making different decisions regarding her own children:

*I made a deal with myself that I was always going to talk to my children about anything they wanted know.*

Jane (76 years old) felt a similar way and took the same approach with her child:

*I can talk about it all now because of ‘training’ you might say from the psychotherapist. And of course, I had a child so I didn’t want him to grow up with all these peculiar ideas….You know boys don’t cry and all that sort of stuff. I would say to my son, it’s ok to cry…I want you to cry…You’d be peculiar if you didn’t cry.*
Marjorie (71 years old) summed up succinctly how accepting what had occurred openly and honestly is one of the ways that assists her and helps her to manage the terrible truths of her experiences:

\[ I \text{ accepted the acceptable and I think that just about says it for everybody. In those early days sexual abuse was swept under the carpet.} \]

The impact of social attitudes was something that many of the women had thought much about and spent considerable time coming to various understandings about the effect of social norms, for instance, Heathcliff (67 years old):

\[ I'\text{ve gone back to see old films of the 1940s and 1950s to try and understand the attitudes of mind which people had.} \]

Edith (72 years old) also had wondered about the causes for particular attitudes during this era.

\[ \text{At times I wonder if some people are born...or brought up that way that they can't handle things ...whether all decisions are taken out of their hands and they just ...every little thing they just can't cope with.} \]

\[ \text{Look, at times I think people just need to get out into the world and see how some people are coping with so little or how they've had a dreadful childhood.} \]
Jane (76 years old) elaborated on how it felt to live in this era.

*Women in my age group who have been abused usually don’t trust anybody … they usually don’t trust anybody especially men. You feel bad, worthless as if, nobody would like me if they knew what I was like. Nobody really likes me… they pretend to… these are all the messages one has… definitely not mentioning anything like sexual abuse.*

*A woman of my age would be terribly embarrassed if a doctor asked her when her last period was. She would be so mortified. And even me… I had to go in, I had a urinary thing… a stone… and the doctor in there had a student and said would I mind if he came in and I said no that’s alright and then after it we filled in all the forms and everything. She said right, hop up there and take off your knickers and everything, and I said I don’t want him in here. She said why not? … He’s a doctor. I said I don’t care, he’s not coming in! She said well they have to learn somehow and I said he can learn on the young ones! Not on me!*

*I mean you don’t just tell these things to just anybody… a relative or a friend who dismisses it and says get over it or even when there’s something in the paper or television and there’s people around who say, “oh for heaven’s sake, she’s 43 and she’s suing this guy for something that happened so long ago” so you try and put it straight but they don’t really understand.*
And Stella (68 years old) too reiterated this sentiment:

> When I was a girl and a young woman I had an awful feeling of having less worth than other girls. There were ugly terms like ‘damaged goods’ to describe girls who were sexually active before marriage however that may have come about. I felt others saw me as having less worth. I found it difficult to deal with my male peers and the predatory attitudes of men in general. I found it incredibly disappointing that most males had crass attitudes towards me and women in general. It was a cruel double standard for males and females. Young males were admired for sewing their ‘wild oats’ and young females were branded ‘town bikes’ when in fact there was an epidemic of weekend gang rape in this town at that time.

Regarding the secrecy and silence commonly surrounding sexual abuse at the time, most of the women felt they had no avenues in which to tell or discuss the abuse:

> To all intents and purposes we were this normal working class family. So who would you tell? You can’t tell anybody…it’s not like today...who would you tell? There weren’t any facilities around...there weren’t the support agencies and things like that. So I guess you kinda sucked it up. (Rose, 66 years old)
Rose provided many insights about how she managed and came through these times.

*That's one of the things I think I learnt from this. People, you know, have been very stoic. And it's really about protecting yourself, keeping your emotions in check, and not showing your hurt. Because another thing too ... was you weren't allowed to have an opinion...children were seen and not heard... if you cried, you got smacked...if you answered back, you wouldn't dare. You'd get accused of things...*

*You learn to control your feelings and keep your emotions in check. And that was the way you were brought up. It was part of the culture... You were brought up that way. You were brought up to be ...you know...just get on with it... eat hard and look down...get over it sort of thing.*

*And you know you got whacked at school and if you didn’t get whacked at school, you’d get whacked when you came home as well. It was a really tough life anyway.*

Bess (65 years old) experienced a similar situation:

*At the time you couldn’t speak... You couldn’t even say anything... How dare you? ....You know?*

She explained with great sensibility and compassion, the challenging and formidable circumstances that women then were facing if they became pregnant:
Talking about how many issues affected women, sexual abuse and children being born to unmarried mothers, you know, it was the social environment that forced the removal of children because you couldn’t go back into the ‘nice’ social environment. It prevailed everywhere. And it was catastrophic.

And with the multitude of sexual abuse in families where women had to come to the hospital anonymously to have babies... you know and they had to keep quiet... So and so wouldn’t do that! They wouldn’t be believed... How dare you? You lying little thing!

It was never that there was anything wrong with the structure of the family, oh no, never that! It was a paternal family pattern. Take for example now my grandmother who was a very, very small woman and her husband had gone. She had 6 children but she was also a very, very strong woman... She had 4 boys and 2 girls...and at that time social security didn’t exist... You had to keep a facade of absolute adherence to the behaviour requirements and you didn’t look upstairs or downstairs.

In those times, it was all about an available orifice, excuse me for saying it that way, but girls are often a commodity in society. Throughout history, it’s always been hormonally driven and it really just is access. Access is a problem along with the social structure. (Bess, 65 years old pg. 3)
Olive (70 years old) referred to the way women are portrayed sexually in society and she saw this as inextricably linked to sexual abuse of women generally:

> Sexual abuse is not confined to any one social group however, so the problem seems insurmountable. The vilification of women as sexual objects through the media increases the likelihood of abuse and harassment I believe. A return to the Victorian era is neither possible nor practical, but a damper ought to be put on blatant nudity and sexual acts in films, TV and other media.

Since some of the women spoke about their roles in society and social norms, I raised the question about their thoughts on feminism in the following way:

> Tina: What you are saying makes me think about feminism and women’s changing role in societies as a result of feminism. I’m hearing you say that in fact for women in your generation, you did not experience the societal shift in the position or status of women, is that right?

This discussion took a variety of directions with different women. Jane, (76 years old) responded in the following way:

> That’s because they’ve lived most of their lives without it. And although they may be feminists in the sense that they think they’re as good as their husbands...there’s a lot of denial going on and a lot of stuff that they still don’t talk about. It’s not that they don’t want to talk about it... It’s that ‘nice’ people don’t talk about those sort of things.
For instance, when I was at school nobody, NOBODY ever mentioned the word ‘period’. I mean they're talking about it all the time now. You would have died...I mean you couldn’t have, people would have all looked at you in judgement you know.

Heathcliff (67 years old) had even bought along a book to the interview which she thought would be relevant, indicating to me that she had already made links between her experiences and feminism:

Here is a book by Lady Jessie Street; she was one of the first feminists.

She said, ‘You can have either truth or repose, but not both’.

This particular quote is personal to Heathcliff as she explained, because she felt it presented to her the options in speaking out about sexual abuse and specifically, attending my interview to discuss childhood sexual abuse.

Fran (57 years old) believes that despite feminism and the changes brought about in society towards women’s roles and status, similar issues are being experienced by young women today:

Well look at young girls who have embraced the idea of career but have also continued to embrace stereotypes of being feminine.... Far more than we did in the 60s and 70s.... There’s a real conservatism to young people that challenge my notions of what it is to be a young person in the world. And obviously they still struggle with notions of career and being a mother, having children...they’re still struggling with the same issues.
The issue of violence against women has of course been a central focus for feminism and it has largely radically altered the analysis of violence against women in the last century from the idea of women as the ‘temptress of innocent man’ to a focus on men’s responsibility for their violence against women (Rozee & Koss 2001, p. 295). In their examination of feminist contributions to reform, Rozee and Koss (2001) discuss two broad areas of feminist intervention, including socio-cultural change such as legal reform, and the focus on psychosocial change through educational programs. Interestingly and not dissimilar to what some of the women told me, particularly Fran’s last comment, Rozee and Koss believe that in the 21st century, new forms of resistance aimed at changing socio-cultural mores, institutions and laws need to be explored. They critique educational programs which affirm cultural stereotypes and argue that currently rape is functionally normative drawing on MacKinnon’s (1983) earlier assertion that rape is regulated, not prohibited.

Differently to some of the other women in the group, Stella (68 years old) felt that feminism was especially helpful to her:

Over time I was able to remake myself, partly because I continued to seek opportunities to talk and listen to others and some useful one to one therapy. More importantly it came through active participation in the women’s movement of the 1970s. I came to understand the nature of power relationships and to develop a broader social, political and historical perspective.
Stella’s comments about ‘remaking herself’ will also be explored a little further in the following section on resilience.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presents the ways in which the women discussed how they managed childhood sexual abuse throughout their lives and what has been helpful to them. I have arranged the subthemes of ‘being strong and successful’ and, ‘the impact of the social age’ into a broader theme of ‘Coming Through’, to indicate how the women have reconstructed their experiences in order to adapt, live with others and make accommodations to social expectations. To me, their perspectives demonstrate how they have ‘remade’ dominating and subordinating loads on them as women. The following chapter discusses how the women defended themselves against these social pressures.
Chapter 7 Stories of Reconstruction: Holding the Line

Introduction

Karakayali (2014, p. 1) describes defensive reconstruction as a self-practice which maintains and protects ‘self-identity despite de-individualising pressures’. I have reconceptualised this part of his framework as ‘holding the line’. My interpretation of Karakayali’s (2014, p. 3) original meaning associated with this model is that self-practices which, rather than attempting a ‘radical change’ in personal life or at the social level, create the possibility of autonomy from societal pressure or the social environment by enabling people to ‘maintain their individuality’ (Karakayali 2014, p. 3) and remain steady, to sustain and support themselves under pressure, and to retain ‘self’ integrity and control.

Holding the Line (Defensive Reconstruction)

My theme of ‘Holding the Line’ comes to reflect the ways in which the women defend their inner lives from pressures which arise externally in the social world, particularly in the context of issues arising from the experience of childhood sexual abuse. An example of defensive reconstruction is therapy, which was discussed by the women in my subtheme of Recovery and Counselling. Karakayali (2014, p. 7) draws on the work of Giddens (1991) and Rose (1998) to theorize how institutionalised practices of therapy (whether formally or through self-help books) is at once, a self-practice aimed at protecting our inner worlds ‘from external pressures.’ Having the aim of providing ‘a coherent and liveable form to your existence’ (Karakayali 2014,
p. 12). It is arguably also a ‘technology’ of control, thus unlikely to be transformational such as the type of self-practices discussed in Chapter 8 which considers the theme of transformational reconstruction.

I have classified what the women told me as defensive reconstruction on the basis that each subtheme is representative of the creation of mental or physical spaces and characteristics that attempt to understand and make sense of often disastrous and chaotic childhood familial contexts (Anderson & Danis 2006) and at times, difficult adult lives. Hazel (58 years old) raised the notion of being resilient as a way that she coped and managed in her life, and as a result, she believed that strengthening this quality in others is worthwhile:

Well my world didn’t fall apart like for some people... Maybe I was more resilient... That’s what I think about... Maybe we should bring children up with more resilience.

You learn to get over things quicker I suppose—

I suppose too the younger generation is used to talking things out...

The world is so different now... Say for example, single mothers...

There is no such thing as an illegitimate child anymore. There definitely wasn’t any counselling or anything like that, so you had to be resilient and do it for yourself.

Anderson and Danis (2006) describe how, through acts of ‘withstanding and opposing’ (resistance) the adversity experienced in the lives of adult daughters of mothers who had been ‘battered’ by male partners, these actions developed into lifelong skills of resilience. Resilience, in this
context, represents a process promoted by strategies that the participants in their study drew upon throughout their lives, and contributed to their commitment to break the cycle of violence. Their model can also be adapted to represent how resilience is a reconstructive self-practice which can emerge during and following experiences of violence.

Strategies associated with ‘withstanding the environment’ in order to protect oneself and endure the abuse as well as directly opposing the violence in order to actively prevent or stop the violence have been theorized by Anderson and Danis (2006) as generating the development of adaptive skills of resilience used throughout life. Although none of the women, with the exception of Hazel identified resilience specifically, I noted that all of the women displayed this quality, and in particular, the strategies of withstanding, including:

(1) creating physical and mental escapes, (2) attempting to understand (make sense of) what was going on in their families, (3) building support networks, and (4) trying to create order within familial chaos. (Anderson & Danis 2006, p. 426)

The following sections are illustrative of how, in certain ways, there was great diversity between the defensive reconstructive efforts of the women and, hence at times, one woman may be representative of only one sub-theme. Yet for other subthemes, such as Recovery and Counselling, all the women expressed views that are variously divided and at times merging. In developing my subthemes of developing an inner self, the garden, writing and other creative activities, refuge and safety with animals, knitting, work, and finally, recovery and counselling, I demonstrate how the women practice
defensive reconstruction of their identities in spite of difficult social environments and attitudes.

**Developing an Inner Self, Support Networks and Helping Others**

Many of the women spoke about developing an inner life through strategies of internal strength, mindfulness and meditation. Bess (65 years old) rationalises it in this way:

*Because you were never able to expose things... you had to develop an inner capacity to deal with it.*

Often this was achieved by developing a step by step process in the physical world:

*I keep finding myself little positive goals to look forward to. (Hazel 58 years old)*

Fran (57 years old) discussed the concept of ‘mindfulness’ and how it helps her to achieve an acceptance of herself and something positive as a result. She also discusses how growing older is playing out as an aspect of her current thinking:

*Well it is a tool so that when I might fall back into unconsciousness in the relationships that I set up, at some point, mindfulness will bring me back into awareness.*

*There’s an acceptance within me that these are issues I will struggle with... and having reached the point of understanding that, is also very comforting... because for so many years I looked for the thing*
that going to fix me. And once I accepted that I am broken, it’s ok. I’m broken. This is what I am and who I am... this is how it is. And just...you know I can fall into the pit or I can pick myself out of it at any time. I can choose to look for ways to live in the world that support and enhance my sense of self. That is the talent that I was born with...that I can develop my essential self. That I don’t have to carry this stuff as a burden...It actually enhances who I am.

And so in fact this great terror of my life has also been a great source of growth. Quite often I could do without it... It is very painful... Would I have had the need for those ecstatic moments and would I have searched for them?

So therefore, not having a mother has meant that I’ve wanted to experience the universal mother...the world as mother, and so everything that we experience makes us look for other bits to complete ourselves. There’s been a driven-ness in me to see the bigger picture because the small picture was so uncomfortable. Well, that allows me to live the life that I’ve got... It allows me to live with the limitations of my life.

The fact that I don’t really have access to working because I have so much resentment and anger that comes up within me; I’ve had to come to terms that. That is a truth for me because it just mirrors the lack in my earlier experience. And you know the social anxiety means that I’m quite often isolated and that’s allowed me to develop my creativity. That’s given me the time to do that. So I’ll juggle feelings of anger, resentment, inadequacy... Where is my place in the world?
What have I got to contribute? Does my life have any meaning whatsoever?

And so I am constantly juggling all that. And I think a lot of that has to do with being older as well...looking back and seeing where I’ve come from and seeing all the different experiences that I’ve had so far....and now I’ve got a finite amount of time...Well I ask myself ....

What’s important now?

What has assisted me in my lifetime? What hasn’t assisted me? Where do I want to go from here? What’s left with the time I’ve got? So that’s why coming here is so important... its sort like a little light bulb moment... maybe it will be good.

In another way, June (72 years old) has also built an inner life which for her, represents safety:

I’ve accepted people are complex but also that the only safe place is in your mind.

Stella (68 years old) specifically discussed the importance of meditation during her life and support networks:

Understanding that I am my own agent while accepting the help of others that I chose when I wanted to has assisted me. Also learning what the meditative space is has helped me. I don’t sit to practice mediation regularly but I have done so a lot in the past. Because I have learned what that space is (built the neural pathways), I can always go there and feel the troubled thoughts melt away.
When I re-interviewed Susie (66 years old), after she accepted the invitation to meet with me to hear about the emerging themes in my project, she added some reflections regarding her own process of trying to understand the meaning of the abuse in her life. She told me that for her, remembering the abuse and internally wrestling with the implications, has led her down many unexpected paths, which she could never have dreamed of, such as physically, emotionally and financially supporting others who are struggling to provide health and education for their families in overseas countries, some of whom she has befriended over a period of twenty years.

Similarly, Rose (66 years old) found that working with and helping others who have experienced trauma was very helpful:

*I think I saw people who had a much worse time in some respects. I felt well... or equal but I think you can’t compare... I’m thinking well there’s more than that, you can turn yourself around. I think it was because I had that opportunity to have some kind of role in assisting them in that rehabilitation it took it away from me...in that respect you know it was the positiveness of me having empathy, not sympathy, empathy with similar things that happened to them that enabled me to put mine aside if you like, in one respect, but utilising it positively.*

*I know this is hard but what I’ve found is that it’s assisted in a way... if I hadn’t gone there, if that hadn’t happened to me, then maybe I wouldn’t be in a position to hopefully have a positive input.*

*That’s one the things I think I learnt from this. People, you know, have been very stoic. And it’s really about protecting yourself, keeping your*
emotions in check, and not showing your hurt and things like that.

(Rose 66 years old)

And finally, for Bess (65 years old) and Olive (70 years old) having a supportive relationship or significant others throughout their lives helped most:

That’s been the biggest thing that has helped. Who would have thought? Having that relationship... it was like a real anchor in a storm you know.... We had our ups and downs of course... It was a saving grace actually ... It was salvation. (Bess 65 years old)

I had five people in my childhood who cared for me, believed in me and helped offset the horrors of the abuse. My grandfather and aunty encouraged and supported me, even arguing against my parents’ harsh treatment of me. My great aunt and uncle took me in and cared for me during winters, as they lived in a warmer, drier climate that was more suitable in preventing recurring bouts of pneumonia. They set a great example of living the golden rule: love/do to one another as you would to yourself. For the first time in my life, I felt cosseted at their home. A high school teacher believed strongly in my academic ability and tried to convince my parents to let me continue at school. Without the love and care of these people, I would never have known any love or affection. Their attention was the hook I clung to, in trying to believe that my life had some purpose. (Olive 70 years old)
The Garden

Places and spaces that are created by the women in their everyday lives were discussed as providing sanctuary. For instance, Ruth (72 years old) takes great refuge from making a beautiful garden:

*I am actually happy as long as I can make my garden more beautiful.*

*I live alone now, with my dogs and a lovely garden I am making.*

Several other women also mentioned the importance of their garden as safe sanctuaries. Raisborough and Bhatti (2011, p. 473) have discussed the idea of women’s agency and empowerment in the context of leisure activities (see also, Du 2008; Maidment & Macfarlane 2011), specifically gardening. In theorising one woman’s reconstruction of identity through an autobiographical account of her gardening activity, Raisborough and Bhatti demonstrate her interaction with gardening as a reflection on the theme of the garden as a means to relate to the demands of social environments, build networks, ‘creative positioning’ and empowerment, thus highlighting agency in the creation of social identities:

The garden becomes a site and source of her empowered agency as demonstrated through her self-expression; rewards of commitment and discipline; pleasure; control of space and time; and, importantly a social recognition as she takes up her position to the socially intelligible identities of gardener, wife, mother and neighbour. (Raisborough and Bhatti (2011, p. 473)

Writing and ‘Haptic Expression’

Activities such as writing also provided a sense of purpose, and a strategy which assisted to reconstruct identity in addressing the issues of
abuse. Two of the women have written widely and have had numerous works published in local newsletters, group newsletters, newspapers and journals. Marjorie (71 years old) told me that as a result of her writing activities,

*I have accepted the unacceptable.*

We then discussed the process of writing and what it meant for her:

*Tina: So writing was important?  
Marjorie: Well evidently, because I found I could express my anger in a different way and I could express it outwardly. I wasn’t turning it in. Some of my published stories about the abuse might assist in understanding what makes me tick.*

Marjorie reiterated these sentiments when I went back and met with her in a follow up interview to recount my themes from the project. During our discussion and in a parallel process with Marjorie, I reflected on how my own writing also worked to spotlight women’s voices (including my own) in ways that sought safe and meaningful recognition. Chan (2013, p. 95) reflects on her own writing experiences as a woman from a Chinese cultural background and doctoral student. Drawing on the work of other authors, she considers the reconstructive potential of writing and accordingly tells us:

*Writing can allow people to see themselves with their own eyes rather than via a representation constructed through the eyes of others (Cubbison, 1997). Writing mediates the relationships between the self and lived experience (Ray, 1998). Writing shares the private events that can express our feelings and share intimate thoughts (Balk, 2000). Writing about a traumatic experience can increase a subject's well-being and immune functions (Joplin, 2000).*
Writing as a strategy and process for the reconstruction of identities, whether concerning gender, culture, race or sexuality has been discussed extensively across a range of disciplines and issues including, painful experiences (Bunch-Lyons & Few 2007; Chan 2013; Fu 2012; Harris 2003; Muhammad 2012). During my second follow up interview with Susie (66 years old), she spoke more about her writing, and told me that she had written a book. The book remains unpublished, however, the process of writing was helpful for her as a way to understand the past. She said:

As an adult in my 40s, I kept a journal because I thought my brain will get me through this. I did a lot of drawing too. And then I wrote a book. I also like reading other people’s stories of how they dealt with what had happened to them. I like case histories. I like the truth.

Akin to writing, Heathcliff (67 years old) recounted how creating art installations was a means for her to manage the difficulties she experienced as a result of past abuse. For instance, assembling ‘found pieces’ to create a finished installation is what Heathcliff describes as her ‘haptic expression’. It is the tactile, emotional and intellectual process with which she engages to create meanings and demonstrations to herself of both what she has experienced, and how she managed this in reconstructive ways. The following photograph is an illustration of how Heathcliff used this particular installation process to signify her responses to my research questions. The title of the installation is ‘Haptic Expression’ and was created during our second interview:
The doll and surrounding objects are representative of what Heathcliff has achieved in her life and also her struggles. Butterflies surrounding the doll represent her achievements and the white rose is a symbol that despite the sexual abuse, she was still worthy of marriage. One of her achievements has been to become a carer for people with disabilities. The doll itself and the ‘old fashioned’ teddy reflect love, and the Jewish cap is a symbol of Heathcliff’s lost cousin who suffered from a range of physical disabilities. The installation includes a plastic knife and a spoon each reflecting her feelings of anger toward the abuser and of being a ‘stirrer’ respectively. Heathcliff has
extended this theme in a separate installation entitled ‘Another Stirrer’. She describes how in that piece, a found object of Jesus on a crucifix is representative of him being a ‘stirrer’ with surrounding butterflies demonstrating how all that he achieved in his thoughts and perspectives are infused throughout many institutions. She believes that ultimately much of his values are reflected in organisations which promote caring and loving actions or thoughts.

**Refuge and Safety with Animals**

One of the participants, June (75 years old) spoke at length about the importance of creating safe spaces in the form of refuge with animals. This she developed while still a child, but also now in her adult life:

*I lived in silence. I wasn’t able to sit in with adult conversations. But also I was not to speak... right ...and so my life was with animals. Luckily I lived on a farm. But I was very troubled. I would sit with a dog or even a cow or a bull, a horse... and there I would be, sitting in the chook pen... with all the ‘yuck’ that was happening in my life at that time for hours and hours and hours. What helped you ask? Animals. As a child, definitely, because it’s unconditional love... isn’t it? And also because everything else was conditional. It was like, I’ll be nice to you if you do this or that or whatever. But with animals it is unconditional. (June 75 years old)*

June (75 years old) found that while having animals all her life was beneficial to her, so too it has created a source of courage in her to stand up for her beliefs and rights:
And I’ve always had an animal in my life. Always. Well naturally, being brought up on a farm. Animals were helpful. I always had an animal. Even now, I’ve got 2 cats in the unit where I live. The body corporate said to me, that you can’t have animals. I stood up to that, and I’ve still got them, my cats. I made them re-write the owner’s (body corporate) manual. I don’t take crap from anybody.

Knitting

It was interesting that activities such as knitting were also important in helping to make sense of how anger was being managed. In Marjorie’s case, knitting was not a refuge, but the conduit through which she saw her anger being turned inward:

... And I knitted. Mother taught me to knit...and I became an obsessive knitter. So when I went to hospital, my plastic bag of knitting went with me. If I was home and it was half past eight at night and I’d finished something, I would go down to the bungalow. I had a great big box of wool, and patterns and everything and just pick out something and by quarter to nine I’d be knitting again.

Tina: So was the knitting something helpful to you?

Marjorie: Well not really. An example is when I was in group therapy doing a session on anger...And we were all putting in and I’m knitting away. And all of a sudden she (the facilitator) turned around and she said ...What do you do with your anger? And I just said, I knit mine.
But I realised that I was knitting baby clothes. I was knitting everything back in...no wonder I was sick. It wasn’t coming out. I was turning it all back into me somehow. And I thought no, I’m not knitting baby shawls and baby clothes and kids jumpers anymore. Because of anger...and because of that, I stopped knitting. That was it. (Marjorie 75 years old)

Hearing Marjorie’s thoughts on knitting, I was surprised. This is because I had assumed that knitting would be an activity which might release, rather than contain anger. I cannot say for sure why I held this assumption. This was a moment when I fully recognised the value of listening to and reflecting on personal assumptions. It was an opportunity to also address my own internalised ageism.

Work

For one of the women, working was a way to ‘hold the line’ against the long term detriment suffered as a result of the abuse:

I worked, and work has always been my sanity. (Rose, 66 years old)

I saw through Rose, that work, in its many forms could be a ‘space’ for defensive reconstruction.
Recovery and Counselling

Working for many years in a therapeutic context with women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, I was often struck by the fact that older women did not often use counselling services. Furthermore, when they did, almost all of these women did not attend for long. I wondered whether this might be due to the fact that, for older women, sexual abuse and abuse issues more generally, were not discussed openly. For the most part, for women born before 1945, sexual abuse in families and outside was considered a private matter, with few laws protecting them when disclosures were made (Osgood and Manetta 2002, p. 100).

Alongside this, the rise in disciplines such as psychology (but also for example, accounting, see Miller & O’Leary 1987) and the associated social practices of therapy, counselling and self-improvement movements have become a dominant method for addressing many personal issues and is a relatively contemporary approach. I wondered too whether women of older generations were unfamiliar with the social practices of therapy or counselling. Indeed, therapy more generally has been theorized as a modernist, contemporary phenomena, and can be linked to the ways in which the ‘self’ is constructed through various ‘technologies of the self’ that inscribe identity, or classify and individualise personal attributes and deficiencies (Cruikshank 1993; Gellner 1996; Miller & Rose 1994; Rose 1998; Russell 1999). The nature of professional discourse and its constitutive power in constructing the self has been extensively discussed (Furedi 2004; Rose 1998; Russell 1999). Rose (1998, p. 17), in drawing a genealogy of the self in Western thought has discussed the influence of the psycho-sciences in
‘making’ individuals and by adopting a Foucauldian analysis, argues that ‘psychology invented the normal self.’ His view is that the ethic of the ‘autonomous self’ is supported by complex organisational, emotional and interpersonal practices where legitimisation is provided by the discipline of psychology, among others. This has resulted in a normative discourse that has provided legitimacy for social science professions where authority is exercised over others such as in social work, teaching, management, and nursing (Rose 1998, p. 17). By linking the influence of psychology to the contemporary construction of the self, Rose (1998, p. 17) states:

> It has invented what one might term the therapies of normality or the psychologies of everyday life, the pedagogies of self-fulfilment disseminated through the mass media, which translate the enigmatic desires and dissatisfactions of the individual into precise ways of inspecting oneself, accounting for oneself, and working upon oneself in order to realize one’s potential, gain happiness, and exercise one’s autonomy. And, it has given birth to a range of psychotherapies that aspire to enabling humans to live as free individuals through subordinating themselves to a form of therapeutic authority: to live as an autonomous individual, you must learn new techniques for understanding and practicing upon yourself.

Furedi (2004), uses the phrase, ‘the therapeutic turn’ to describe the manner in which Anglo-American society has developed a therapeutic culture where ‘personhood’ is governed and emotional life is managed through the ‘prism of emotions’ resulting in disempowerment and constructed ‘illness’. Cruikshank (1993, p. 343) equates these powerful techniques of self-governance, and particularly interests in ‘self-esteem’ with the creation of ‘self-rule’, a voluntary political relationship of ‘self to self’ that is ‘essential
to democratic stability’. Rather than coercive or forceful social control, subjectivity is constituted in ways that promote conformity. By extension, Cruikshank (1993, pp. 343-4) critiques the development of self-esteem as a construct on the grounds that the role of power and politics are not problematized and hence this ‘terrain of government’ in constituting subjectivities separates personal experience from political realities, resulting in the personalisation of poverty and racism for instance, and resistances being rare.

Rossiter (2000, p. 150) also agrees that political and ethical dimensions are invisible in therapy approaches emerging from the human service professions and that such social practices are ‘culture-creating activities’ that enable self-governance through the constitutive nature of power. This type of analysis is important since ‘all knowledge simultaneously produces the silence and invisibility of other knowledge’ as demonstrated for example, by Deegan (2001), discussed later. Rossiter (2000, p. 152) contends that as professionals, reflexivity is required in order to operate between the ‘dual face’ of social justice and social control, that although culture is created from our activities, responsibility must be taken for the politics of this relationship. In order to remain reflexive and thus ‘vigilant’ regarding how the micro politics of everyday lives constitutes regimes of truth, Rossiter problematizes the instance of solution-focused therapy approaches in working with women who are experiencing family violence where, without an assessment of social forces, patriarchal inequalities are reproduced through therapy. Similarly, Solas (2000) illustrates how this occurs at the level of ‘talk’ between therapists and ‘clients’. This occurs by inattention to the nature
of dialogue which is possible in the encounter between therapist and ‘client’. For instance, ‘conversation’ is conducted according to several rules of communication such as questions, answers and interpretation. It is prescriptive in terms of providing interventions with the assumption that the therapist can resolve difficulties and is value neutral. Importantly, however, the social context in which the therapist/client relationship exists is embedded within a web of power so that dialogue fails to confront the dynamics of disadvantage present between and among the therapist and client themselves. Open dialogue is constrained by the deep divisions that exist between people in the wider society. (Solas 2000, p. 350)

Consider for example, Maracek (1999) who discusses how in therapy, the choice of language which may on one hand validate and affirm the traumatic nature of the experience for women, but may also adopt terminology such as ‘broken’, ‘emotional pain’, and consequently minimise the role of agency and agentic possibility or indeed limit identity to only the experience/s associated with trauma.

In a broader sense, Miller and Rose (1994, p. 31) demonstrate the exercise of regulatory authority by therapeutic interventions in a genealogy of the Tavistock Square Clinic for the Treatment of Functional Nerve Disorders (‘the Tavi’). Their example identifies the practices, ‘that transform relations of power between authorities and those whose lives they claim to understand and seek to improve’ and that are reproduced in many therapeutic contexts.
The development of alternative paradigms in understanding ‘recovery’ and mental health emerged as a result of questioning particular constructions relating to ‘well-ness’. In accounts of experiences with regimes of clinical and psychological interventions, due to a mental illness diagnosis in her late teenage years, Patricia Deegan highlighted the importance of talking about experiences from the perspectives of people who have experienced issues regarding their mental health. Of her life lived with mental illness, she tells us:

We were told that we had a disease that had no cure. We were told to take medications that made us slur and shake, that robbed our youthful bodies of energy and made us stiff like zombies. We were told that if we stayed on these medications for the rest of our lives we could perhaps maintain some semblance of life. They kept telling us that these medications were good for us and yet we could feel the high dose neuroleptics transforming us into empty vessels. We felt like the will-less souls or the waking dead as the numbing indifference and drug induced apathy took hold. (Deegan 1996, p. 3-4)

As a result of her efforts to resist professional interventions, Deegan (2001) developed a process of self-directed recovery which, rather than being a restitution narrative describes the journey from distress as a transformation narrative,

The restitution narrative does not tell us the story of the struggling self, but rather is a testament to the expertise of the professional and their technologies that have “fixed” the problem. This type of narrative is the preferred narrative of the medical professions, as well as the powerful interest groups/industries behind medicine. The restitution narrative permeates our culture in a myriad of ways. TV advertisements, infomercials, brochures in doctor’s offices, and drug
advertisements in magazines, newspapers and professional journals all tell of the restorative wonders of medications. (Deegan 2001, pp. 18-9)

Moving from the medicalisation of her issues, Deegan (2001) reconstructed a restitution narrative, to a transformation narrative,

Transformation narratives emphasize the agency of the self in the healing process as opposed to crediting professionals with curative powers….Helping people learn to become self-directing as opposed to compliant, is a goal of the recovery process… there is no cookbook approach…Professionals who learn to collaborate with the active, resilient, adaptive self of the client will find themselves collaborating in new and rewarding ways with people who may have been viewed as hopeless by others who reify diagnoses and related prophecies of doom. (Deegan 2001, p. 19-20)

Differently, Crossley (2000, p. 15) has critiqued medical paradigms, dominant in health psychology, by demonstrating the deficiencies of scientific approaches to health and illness when applied cross culturally or in various social contexts, as if free of value assumptions and apolitical, hence unproblematic. These ideas are relevant in terms of my own thesis where the uncritical use of therapeutic paradigms is assumed to be relevant for all age groups.

In my work with women who had experienced male violence, I have noticed a trend over twenty years or more in the adoption of therapeutic interventions closely aligned with psychological explanations, practices and scientific paradigms. The strength of this change has been associated with changing ‘technologies of the self’ which are produced discursively through global and parochial social systems in the context of neoliberal governance
(Gray 2011; Haaken & Schlaps 1991). These practices are evident in Western nations in the context of globalization and the rise of information technology as a vehicle for communication throughout all aspects of our social, emotional, economic, political, cultural and intra-psychic lives. Haaken and Schlaps (1991) early on, had flagged the development of these trends and their implications for the provision of therapeutic services in the resolution of trauma associated with incest. They argued that within the competitive context of a neo-liberal marketplace, the rise in categorising issues and the use of labels such as ‘incest survivor’ or ‘adult children of alcoholics’ and the development of specific interventions was linked to the need for increasing specialization by clinicians. These developments rested on the assumption that interventions and treatments which were quantifiable were representative of greater efficacy and efficiency. Also that ‘marketable’ therapy was preferable and superior due a basis within scientific paradigms thus constituting a rationale for ‘evidence’. Haaken and Schlaps (1991, p. 45) critiqued this trend in terms of the inherent value of therapy as a normative discourse:

As therapeutic services flood the marketplace, offering competing claims of effectiveness, the lexicon of incest therapy, e.g., “healing the incest wound,” “reparenting the little girl within,” “resolution of the trauma,” take on surplus meaning. Within a market economy, the promise of a therapeutic cure takes on magical possibilities, offering as it does, a secular form of personal redemption and freedom from emotional misery.

The uncritical adoption of therapeutic approaches and models of recovery can be restrictive and can marginalise or discredit other approaches
as described by Deegan (2001). For instance, Haaken and Schlaps (1991, p. 45) warn:

**Within this competitive context of the marketplace, honesty and self-critical reflection become more difficult to sustain, associated as they are with the emergence of doubt and anxiety.**

Additionally, approaches such as strengths-based perspectives which are often conceived as countering difficulties such as power imbalances between therapist and ‘client’, can be argued to focus on pathology, and lack attention to the social context (Saleeby 2002). They can be grounded in a set of assumptions which are linked to liberalism, the reification of individual autonomy and reason, and importantly, be inattentive to structural inequalities via the shift of responsibility for social change onto the most vulnerable. Specifically, Gray (2011, p. 8), has critiqued strengths based perspectives and particularly as used by social workers in managerial environments on the basis that they devolve, ‘social responsibility from neoliberal governments onto local people, poor individuals and families and, more often than not, women- who bear the brunt of the burden of participation.’ Furthermore, it is argued that the emphasis on communities and social networks follows a neoliberal agenda that shifts social responsibility from government to civil society, and promotes self-governance as a mechanism to maintain free market regimes in the realm of wellbeing (Gray 2011, p. 9).

This is relevant for my thesis where I have questioned the uncritical transportation of therapies and counselling models for older women. However, rather than counter the value of therapeutic services and the benefit received by many women, my aim was to question any formulaic approach
to therapy in the context of neo-liberal market forces and dominant science discourses in regard to older women (and perhaps to other groups) whose social and historical contexts require more complex and particularized understandings of their diverse life experiences and perspectives. Haaken and Schlaps (1991, p. 46) similarly outline the potential problem:

While it is essential to convey real hope in working with victims of abuse, the use of terms such as “resolution” and “reparenting” offer a false promise – a means of exalting one’s shamanistic powers by minimizing the difficulties in assimilating and neutralizing the pathogenic influences of the past...clinicians who develop specialized practices in the area of abuse often rely on the growing popular clinical literature on sexual abuse. This literature, often written for a lay audience, is replete with useful information about general patterns, symptoms, and feelings associated with abuse, as well as exercises aimed at changing feelings and cognitions...The assumption is that information and knowledge offer power and with that comes curative results...these materials have been appropriated by mental health providers and implemented in ways that promote both overconfidence in a limited set of clinical techniques and singleminded focus on sexual abuse treatment.

In the latter years of my time as a practitioner, the adoption of working paradigms such as the trauma model became popular and mirrored prevailing dominant psychological discourses of recovery. Certainly, the force of neo-liberal approaches to service provision was felt in terms of constructing responses which were ‘time and cost effective’, marketised and reliant on individualised forms of helping. Public advocacy as a part of a suite of service provision, was gradually de-funded, while time limited, therapeutic trauma models of care were preferred.
Gilfus (1999) sees the trauma model as offering a welcome move away from explanations of distress as a result of violence that blamed women and pathologised behaviours. The idea that the experience of victimisation due to male violence towards women could be equated with other traumatic experiences such as war, genocide and natural disasters enabled the emergence of non-blaming explanations and processes for addressing the distress associated with experiences of childhood sexual abuse (Gilfus 1999). Herman (1992) in particular, explored this paradigm for use with women who had experienced sexual abuse in childhood alongside other researchers in the field of inter-personal violence (see Briere & Runtz 1993; Burgess & Holmstrom 1974). Gilfus (1999, p. 1240) summarises the sentiment regarding trauma theory at the time:

Many of us thought we had found a “home”, albeit not always an easy one, under the trauma umbrella.

Notwithstanding the many benefits that trauma models have brought to the issues associated with the impact of violence against women which include the validation of emotional injury (often long lasting and extreme), the identification of the parallels with other forms and experiences of violence, and the development of effective techniques available for women to address symptoms of trauma (Gilfus 1999, p. 1241), there have been limitations which as discussed, rely on scientific constructions of ‘injuries’. For example, Gilfus (1999), argues that due to the medicalisation of trauma, the experience is thus individualised and can pathologise women’s responses. Additionally and importantly in terms of my research project, the approach does not necessarily consider social and historical contexts:
The medicalized trauma model looks only at the psychological aftermath (sequelae) for the victim, not at the offender, the source of the injury, or the social and cultural context of the victimization – the conditions that give rise to such violence…Rendering exposure to violence as an individual psychological response strips male violence against women and other forms of hate violence of its context, meaning, and political import…Most studies of violence and trauma are done by stripping the violence of its social and political context: the gendered nature of the inequalities of power relations that give rise to domestic forms of violence (Kurz, 1989; Yllo, 1993). (Gilfus 1999, p. 1242)

The consequences of framing the issue of violence against women, or indeed any other form of violence in this way is that the model becomes prescriptive regarding what constitutes legitimate ‘injury’, and who it is that can legitimate an ‘injury’. It also constructs the notion of ‘victim’ as a label, with particular assumptions regarding the nature of the ‘self’. By way of example, while I was working as a practitioner in the field of violence against women, I was often required to refer women to psychologists so that they could provide reports for court processes on behalf of women. So, despite having worked with the woman for many months and sometimes many years, the court system only accepted testimony from a psychologist who could ‘substantiate’ the existence of ‘injury’ based on, as was generally the case, a one hour session.

Most importantly however, the trauma model often excludes the ways in which women who have experienced violence may exercise self-practices associated with resistance and reconstruction in terms of identity. The failure to contextualise these experiences is significant for the group of women in
my research. Not often accessing psychotherapeutic services in respect of their experiences of childhood sexual abuse, little is known about how women from older generations have managed the impact throughout their lives.

Gilfus (1999, p. 1244) discusses how the absence of context obscures the strengths and skilfulness of many individuals who not only are experiencing violence at a personal level but also experience such violence as a result of oppressive regimes across racial, gender and class arrangements.

Some of those strengths exist individually and/or collectively prior to specific traumatizing events and may have been forged within a particular cultural or community context shaped by the historical necessities of survival and resistance to oppression.” (Gilfus 1999, p. 1244)

Gilfus (1999, p. 1252) also advocates the importance for researchers of ‘leaving home’ and adopting a ‘survivor-centred’ epistemology where perspectives arise from women’s ways of knowing and being in the world. Although Gilfus (1999) uses the term, ‘survivor’, I have chosen not to use this terminology and thus remain open to the ways in which the women in my study speak about themselves. Interestingly, never once did any of the women use this label to describe themselves. Crossley (2000), in developing a critical approach to health psychology, highlights the complexity in lived experiences of wellbeing, particularly across race, gender, class, dis/ability and age categories challenging orthodox approaches, which themselves are historically and politically located, to explore the implications in making universal claims. Managing trauma effects in particular, ‘can only be answered in the practical and social context of each individual’s life’ (Crossley 1999, p. 1685) and in relation to the construction of the self,
concepts of repression, liberation, self and morality are inextricably intertwined and can only be defined in relation to the ‘interchange of speakers’ in a ‘defining community’ of which one forms a constituent part. (Crossley 1999, p. 1695)

Radical approaches to trauma models have been developed, based upon a critique of psychiatric and psychological models of therapy, as well at times, feminist praxis (see Burstow 2003). Additionally, the assessment of ‘harm’ as a function of psychological measurement whilst important in recognising the damaging effects of childhood sexual abuse, can be argued to be constitutive of a scientific practice that is itself a demonstration of a power nexus which ‘disciplines’ researchers or counsellors to create particular ‘subjects’, namely, the ‘victim’ of child sexual abuse (Boyd 2012). Critical analysis of trauma models includes consideration of broader social contexts, for example, the role of structural forces in constructing body image (Gibson 2014), the inclusion of the state as a source of trauma (Burstow 2003), the creation of normative ideals such as who is considered a ‘victim’ or indeed a ‘survivor’ (Boyd 2012; Gilfus 1999; Levett 2003), which may often de-legitimise the myriad ways and strategies that are developed to manage trauma (Burstow 2005). Radical approaches emphasise political as well as personal empathy acknowledging the role of oppression and social location (Burstow 1992), and the co-exploration of strategies for managing (Burstow 2003). However, importantly, radical approaches move away from deficit models to challenging dominant discourse which is unhelpful such as female beauty (Gibson 2012), and at the structural level, ‘redirecting some of the focus off controlling self and onto acquiring real power in the larger world’ (Burstow 2003, p.1311).
I began my project, with some rudimentary questions regarding the ways that older women might perceive professional restitution narratives and consequently, services. It led me to also consider the critical debates regarding dominant models of practice in counselling such as the processes by which the ‘self’ is constructed, and particular implications for what might constitute a ‘healthy self’, or indeed ‘wellbeing’. Throughout my discussions with the women, I discovered that they revealed journeys of managing that were very diverse, with varying expectations, attitudes and self-concepts. For example, most of the women reacted strongly to my use of the terms, ‘moving on’ and ‘letting go’ when I offered them as a prompt for discussion about counselling. Many of the women expressed reflections connected to their social and historical contexts:

*Women in this age come from a culture of ‘don’t complain’…’never talk about anything personal’…never… and ‘don’t cry’…you know* I’ve had women tell me the most horrendous things and a little bit of tear will come up and they say, ‘I’m sorry to be blubbing like this ’…no you’re not! I say, you know, cry! …I want you to cry and sob and stamp your feet. A psychotherapist needs to know that they’re not going to come of their own will unless they absolutely can’t stand it any longer. So if you find somebody who you think needs counselling and they’re over 65, don’t say come to counselling because they won’t do it. Because to them, counselling means going to some young person whose going to tell them what to do. And they’re not going to have that. (Jane, 76 years old)
When the women responded to my question about what had helped them, commonly they spoke about being able to talk to someone else who had experienced the same. Even when they had not spoken to another person in similar circumstances, they imagined that this would be the most helpful action:

“Well… probably the most beneficial thing for me is talking about abuse with people who have been abused.” (Susie, 66 years old)

“I think talking to somebody that has been there, I think is probably more helpful because they would understand. I know everyone’s experience would be different and in terms of what they take on themselves would be different, but it’s still something they’ve been through and they can still empathize with you, more than someone that hasn’t got a clue. (Ava, 65 years old)

“Well that’s why I wanted to know about what your group of women were saying...to know that this is true. (Fran, 57 years old)

“I have told a few friends, cousins and professional people, most don’t believe me, or make very unhelpful remarks. The odd few who do, have been abused themselves, so do understand. (Ruth, 72 years old)

“They didn’t have counselling and things then... now there’s a lot more recognition given. Maybe if my parents had have taken me to a professional maybe that would have helped but I’ll never know. (Hazel, 58 years old)
Ava (65 years old) felt that given she had experienced childhood abuse, then she would be able to help others:

*I’m going to do a course ... or you know, in the throes of signing up for a course to help others... You get alongside a woman who has been physically abused.... become like a sister sort of thing and walk with them through their pain and suffering...that sort of thing.*

I also asked the women about their journey over their lifetimes. All of the women expressed the sense of never ‘getting over it’ in different ways. Ava (65 years old) explained this sense in the following way:

*I don’t think you ever get over it. I think once a child is sexually abused, I don’t feel you ever really get over it. I believe there is healing but I always think there’s a residue that just doesn’t go away. I guess you learn to live with that. Yeah you just learn. You get coping mechanisms that help you to live with that. But as I say though, there’s still things like when a man will compliment me I think well ooh what does he want. I don’t think that will go away. I don’t know how to get rid of that part of it. I’ve had some healing, but that still stays there.*

Olive (70 years old) spoke in a similar way about her experience during her lifetime:

*Recovery is never complete, as the effects of childhood sexual abuse last a life-time. One can learn to cope a bit better, once the memories have been identified, but any abusive act from another, tends to send me back into the victim mode. I have learned to cope by disassociating...*
myself, either by thinking the person is not worth getting upset about, or by removing myself from that person’s contact.

Healing can partially happen, but never completely. I know from my volunteering for several months at a healing retreat that some help towards healing can be accomplished with ‘inner child’ work, but the victim remains vulnerable.

I don’t think I am “healed” of the effects.

In fact Olive was able to explain in detail how it felt for her and she tells about the lifelong effect and how she managed:

Moving on is something someone who knows nothing of the after-effects, might urge the victim to do. One can strive to live for the present moment, but then life throws some curve-ball at one, and the loss of self-esteem and trust surfaces again.

Getting over it is another thing people might say, similar to what is said when one grieves for the loss of a loved one. This is easily said by someone who had a happy, care-free childhood and life. People all have different levels of coping skills, different life experiences, different attitudes and values. For myself, I cope fairly well most of the time by trying to do the best I can with each moment of time that I have. I learned to escape the real world at a very young age, by imagining I was in another place or time. It angers me when someone urges me to ‘get over it’, as I didn’t choose to be abused, nor did I choose to have the emotional after-effects of the abuse, especially
since it changed the whole course of my life and destroyed my potential.

And Ava (65 years old) tells it a little differently:

*I liken it to ‘damage’ up here (pointing to head). When I was ten months old, my grandmother held my head in a bucket of water. Now I don’t remember that, but I have always been afraid of water. I won’t put my head under water. So I liken to that sort of memory that is there; I don’t let it rule my life but when it crops up, it’s just there.*

Bess (65 years old) too explains it another way from her life experience:

*It has dominated every decision, regarding the family... because I made a conscious decision to leave, become self-sufficient... get a profession, become self-sufficient... have the means to earn a living so I would never have to depend on others... I divorced myself in many ways for a long time. And when I think it became difficult with my family but I still kept a very big distance.*

Some women, however, did find counselling helpful when I asked about their experiences of seeing professional counsellors:

*Well the pain of not talking about it was more than the pain of talking about it. It wasn’t for a long time that I started to discuss it. And you’ve got to get to that stage.*

*I was lucky I had excellent practitioners and I even went to CASA at one stage and I was lucky there. But I have been to some places where*
you just think I could have done this myself sitting in the kitchen at home talking to myself.

They’ve got to be trained to pick up on what people are saying...some of them have the idea that all you’ve got to do is encourage the person to talk. And because you’ve talked about it, it’s ok, well, it’s not. (Jane 76 years old)

However, not all of the women had such positive experiences, such as Marjorie (71 years old) who spoke about some of her very painful experiences with psychiatry, something that still affects her:

I went to a psychiatrist for 27 years and he was convinced that I had a chemical imbalance in the brain. I spent a lot of time in hospital...I’ve got a record of the tablets, 20 different brands at a time. They didn’t do any good...

Go and see a doctor?...what the hell for?... if I go to a psychiatrist ...he’ll sit and smirk at me and I’ll tell him and I’ll think well, are you putting inverted commas around it? All those years of treatment...were they putting inverted commas around it? I want to say look...when I say something to you, it’s the truth... that’s psychiatry for you...

I don’t like people talking for me when I can talk for myself. This psychiatrist did an independent assessment ...I didn’t know till 2006 I’d been assessed! They’re obliged to tell you. And if he’d had told me, he’d never have had my husband present. I knew more about psychiatry than they did.
The women had varied views such as May (57 years old) who had seen a psychologist with whom she was very satisfied and had developed a sound relationship. This was in contrast to Edith (72 years old) who felt counsellors were apt to be narrow in their views and racially discriminatory.

\textit{Oh I did see a psychologist at one stage but I was ...I was a bit depressed after the marriage break up. And I did for a little while but no... I'm not that keen on counselling.}

...their attitudes and some of their biases.... because this is 20 years ago... they had racial biases. Whether that's changed in that area or not I don't know. And just their ... they were very narrow minded in their outlook and very conservative. ...well they look down on certain types of people... not down on me. I'd be thinking of their attitude towards other people.

More so than Edith, Bess (65 years old) held very strong beliefs about professional counselling:

\textit{My purpose in undertaking this, being part of this study... is to improve the type of counselling. I don't think it should even be called counselling. There should be a different terminology attached to it because counselling, as I say, has become a Mickey Mouse venture. There's no ... preparation regarding the execution of the skill of human relations with regard to whether you have the trustworthy environment...}
It doesn’t have the value of absolute trust attached to it. It can be seconded into a court room... it’s up for sale... up for grabs... there’s no defence against it... how it’s written down in a file is beyond your control...

File writing is to me like, the pen is mightier than the sword in so many ways, there’s no defence against it. It’s not foolproof in placing judgement. The record keeping serves a bureaucratic and career purpose and it doesn’t serve the purpose of truth. The truth is the first casualty of all these things...

We have the capacity to find information that is useful to us from elsewhere. This does make a difference. As a young person, you do talk to yourself because never in a million years would you speak about it to anyone else... never.

You can have a successful marriage and not have a professional life and still have that psychological makeup that allows you resilience. And that’s the key... it’s the internal capacity that is there within someone. And yet you will hear a lot of psychological waffle about how it can be very dangerous to internalise...

I think that’s a product of the education system that has created the counselling business. There has been an exponential increase and I suppose everybody has to find a reason to exist and to have an income. I believe we are like livestock in a system now... and we’re just there to be exploited in all the products we can produce, whether it’s psychological or whatever. Do you know what I mean?
Universities are busy, but there’re not places of learning necessarily. There are no longer any questions asked philosophically. And it has to be evidence related and who says what evidence is! I think everything’s become so cold. Because you haven’t got a piece of paper, then you are not qualified. Well I see that a lot of it is toilet paper.

There’s this junk science now but really it is science based on ideology. Getting through university now, if you don’t service the lecturers’ preferences, you won’t necessarily get a good mark.

This is something that, if I leave nothing else behind, and if I leave a little bit of insight into this issue, then I’ll be very happy. Basically we are livestock in an ideologically driven society. (Bess, 65 years old)

Bess was not the only one to shun the notion of externalising feelings with a professional. Edith (72 years old) and Rose (66 years old) held the view that one just needs to ‘get on with it’. I felt this perspective was linked to the expectations and values of their generation.

Of course I wished life had been different but it wasn’t so you just get on with it.

I asked Edith how she ‘just got on with it’ in order to clarify her sense of managing the abuse:

A few years ago I thought, I’m going to write down all this and I did and I had a good cry because I was at home in the house alone and I had good cry. And then I ripped up what I had done and I said to
myself, right that’s over with, you’ve got it now, you’ve had a cry now let it go...

But you know the idea of recovery, healing, moving on or getting over it, I cannot tolerate these words! It’s become like a catch phrase everywhere. You hear people say, oh they’ve been traumatized, they need counselling, and I think just get over it and get on with it.

Tina: So what do you mean by ‘get on and get over it’?

Edith: Just be stronger I guess. All this namby-pambying on, they’ve got to learn to get over things. That’s just me...

For me, you didn’t have time to namby-pamby. You had to sort of, get on with it and manage the best you could. I guess that’s where I’m a bit hard where I think people won’t help themselves too. But I feel if people feel they need help in that way then, go and get it. I’m not against other people going and getting help...

Tina: No obviously, because you work with people down at the mission so you clearly accept that help should be available to people.

Edith: Exactly. Yes that’s right. A lot of older people think like me I find. For example, this old man that I know, he’s about 90 now and his mother had to put him in a home for a while when he was a child. He also said to me, you had to get on with it in those days. He said he just had to get on with it and do what he could. And that’s interesting because he’s always been looking after other people too! He’s been
an animal activist too so perhaps that’s one way some of us have
coped with things.

Rose (66 years old) also spoke about managing on one’s own and described
how this was for her:

You learn to control your feelings and keep your emotions in check.
And that was the way you were brought up. It was part of the culture.
You were brought up that way. You were brought up to be, you know,
just get on with it, eat hard and look down, get over it sort of thing...

This was because life was tough. You got whacked at school and if
you didn’t get whacked at school, you’d get whacked when you came
home as well. It was a really tough life anyway, you just learnt to be
that way, you learnt to control...

Basically, in the kind of era that I was bought up in, anything you had,
if you had a big boil on your bum, you were told, get over it, get to
school...

I don’t know whether that would go down in this day and age. Because
we’re very pampered now. But when I was a kid, if I’d have told
anybody about the abuse, they would have said, what! What are you
talking about and that would be it. There wasn’t any counselling then,
not that I’m aware of anyway, there could have been but I came from
a working class family background.
In light of Rose’s strategies of ‘getting on with it’, I asked her about the idea of recovery and she provided a wonderful metaphor to describe her views and this somewhat clarified the process:

*I’m not sure that you recover. I don’t think you recover, how can you recover? You know if somebody knifes you and leaves a big scar in your side, you get over it but you don’t recover from it, you get through it. I think it’s more you get through it…*

*Ok this happened, what am I going to do? There’s a big hump on my back…am I going to do something with it? I appreciate that not everybody’s got the strength to do this. Maybe I was fortunate in some ways, coming from a tough background. I don’t mean rough, I mean tough. This is what you did. If you didn’t have anything to eat at the end of the week, nothing you can do about it. If we had a hole in your shoe, we used to mend them with leather from the mill. You had one pair of shoes…*

*That’s how it was and you didn’t know any different. But to do some of this stuff these days… I think we’ve become in some ways… it’s only my opinion…but in some ways namby pamby. I don’t know what you think about that.*

Clearly this was very similar to the views expressed by Edith, even using similar terminology.

*What I’ve found and actually this talk has been quite helpful because it has answered something for me when you asked about counselling.*
I thought I don’t feel like I need any. I know what I have to do and I may have moments when it’s not quite as clear and I may have to go through, you know squeezing the pimple again... then it clears up again and nothing... nothing I can do about it... my father’s dead... my mother is still alive and what am I going to do? I now stay out of the way of her. What am I going to do to her? Go tell her what my dad did? There’s no way I’m going to do that to an 87 year old. And what is that going to do for me?

You can’t go on whinging and going it over it time and time again...

I don’t mean that we shouldn’t be caring and compassionate and have empathy for people... but I think come on... get through it. Every day I have another idea of how to get through. It is knowing what it is you want to do before you go and do it. You’ve got to make up your mind; this is what I try and do first. (Rose, 66 years old)

Susie (66 years old) found she had issues with counsellors due to the dynamics of the relationships and the cost:

I look at it as kind of a privilege I guess, not the abuse, but the knowledge I’ve gained on the abuse. And that’s why counsellors are stupid because they don’t have the same knowledge unless they’ve been abused. And no counsellor ever tells you very much about their own private life so you don’t actually know who you are dealing with. And I think that’s terribly important. It’s a one sided thing. Anyone that’s been abused has serious issues of trust.
Therapists haven’t helped very much and they cost so much money and you do not get value for that money. One I went to was $180 for 45 mins...and for 10 mins she told me how good she was!”

There were other reasons why women did not gravitate to counselling including scepticism towards various styles and forms of therapy, including a lack of authenticity:

In many cases with counsellors... it just rolls off the tongue... it doesn’t have any depth... it doesn’t translate... it doesn’t have traction to real understanding it is not didactic in the way individuals feel... it doesn’t give them a feeling of choice in the situation. The reason why older women don’t want to come to counselling and perhaps they can’t explain why not, but mostly it’s because they don’t want to offend the counsellor and it is because the others (the counsellors) don’t want to really listen. (Bess 65 years old)

Tina: It sounds like you don’t feel a genuine connection is possible.

Bess: No I wouldn’t go to counselling... for the reason, it’s like a glass wall and it’s a very obvious construction that does not have a bridging empathy.

Counselling...well it’s so bantered around... It’s like putting people in a drafting race... you just open your mouth and talk about in that way then you’ll get on in that way... and if you want to get on in the world you’re supposed to talk about it. But they do have a much better understanding now of the brain function, and also the idea of writing
something down, there is an imprint on the brain that it’s been allocated a different location physically and mentally. Now people they tell you to keep a journal but ...but in relationships sometimes any written thing can be catastrophic because other people can be obtrusive and they want to know exactly what goes on. In counselling for abuse you don’t want any evidence.

I also asked Bess about the notion of recovery in light of her scepticism of counselling:

I don’t think the word recovery could really be a typical thing for most people. This is only because of the ongoing nature of the repercussions, the possible repercussions. Throughout my life, I’ve concealed everything from the kids, my children because, as I said, I wanted to preserve or try and preserve just the minimal conduit if they ever wanted to access some of their family ties. It’s not fair to them because then they grow up without a family background you know.

I thought well I couldn’t do that…. I did consciously choose not to tell the immediate family but it was necessary not to tell any of the others too.

Differently though, some women felt that counselling was very helpful and additionally, that one could not get through without professional help. For instance, Ruth 72 years old):

I have been to see a psychiatrist since I was 35.... I am very grateful to this doctor as he has continued to help me many times over the
years. I certainly would have suicided and I felt like it many times but for him, and his help, this has got me through.

I don’t feel anyone can cope without professional help, it’s such a guilty burden for a little child to carry, not knowing who to trust, or if this is what happens to all children, but it is not talked about.

Olive (70 years old) described a long journey of managing abuse in various ways and how counselling was a large part of helping her to manage:

After marriage, I sought counselling when I had problems with my children, then when my husband threatened suicide or to murder me. After my divorce, I recalled the abuse and began to realise why I was like I was – distrustful, fearful, lacking any wish to be touched by any male. With the help of counsellors and various courses I have undertaken, I have come to understand myself better. I studied psychology as a mature-age student, but had to give it up after completing the second year, to care for my terminally ill parents.

Fran (57 years old) also found counselling was helpful. Professional support has been the only support avenue for her especially since she had not disclosed to family or other close people in her life. She spoke about the counselling she received at CASA (Centre Against Sexual Assault) specifically, which assisted her to acknowledge that what had happened was sexual abuse:
Then I coincidentally fell into CASA... It’s like I tried talking to people and went to the DVIRC and they suggested I go to CASA and it all just went on from there.

The woman, I’m still seeing, said, it is sexual abuse. No-one had named it. You know I’ve had counselling off and on for years and no-one actually said this. Because I’m articulate and I could talk about things, they thought I’d got it but I didn’t get it at all. It’s because I was talking about things from my experience not from... well what actually happened in the family.

In terms of a perspective which took into account how it felt over a long period of time trying to manage the impact, Jane (76 years old) provided a metaphor which echoed what many of the women had also expressed:

Here it is... what do you think about the concepts, healing recovery, getting over it? I’ve written here... ‘Not much’. Maybe these words are better, dealing with, living with, learning from, continue to grow. Because those words, moving on and getting over it especially say to me... oh forget about it, you know, it’s all over. Done. Never done, not till the day you draw your last breath... It doesn’t work that way. So moving on and getting over it has connotations for me anyway. You don’t really. ‘Dealing with it’ is much better and ‘living with’ is better than ‘moving on’.

Tina: Yes I see.

Jane: Because you keep having to deal with it... ongoing.
Tina: Is that what you’ve found?

Jane: Yes, definitely.

Tina: I’m interested in what you’ve said about the timing also.

Jane: Telling it once is not going to cure it. I look at it this way… if I’m a tree. The tree was bent and it grew that way.

Tina: What a lovely metaphor.

Jane: Well that tree, it’ll never grow up straight like as if nothing had ever happened... but like with the wind you know, by the sea... all the trees are like this (bent). You need a strong stake… that means somebody who knows what they’re doing... much pruning, getting rid of all the excess stuff... fertiliser, the encouragement... water, our tears.... You cry a lot! And pain... until you can live with it and be the person you were meant to be. And then see the good things that came out of it. Not easy to do.

Tina: Thank you. That says it beautifully.

I was moved by this particular metaphor, chosen and explained by Jane, and it reminded me of a poem by Bertolt Brecht, entitled, *The Plum Tree*, which also speaks to my meanings for reconstruction:
A plum tree in the courtyard stands
so small no one believes it can.
There is a fence surrounds
so no one stomps it down.
The little tree can’t grow
although it wants to so!
There is no talk thereon
and much too little sun.

No one believes it’s a plum tree
because no plums do they see.
But it is a plum tree;
you can tell by its leaf.

Bertolt Brecht -The Plum Tree (Translation)

Likewise, Susie (66 years old) also alluded to the ongoing nature of the impact:

That word, lovely modern word, ‘closure’. I say bullshit. There is no closure. And ‘closure’ is used a lot, not about sexual abuse necessarily but say, when someone dies.

Sometimes, the manner in which the women engaged with others without talking about the abuse was the most useful:

Well as I say, I’ve been involved in groups like the bereavement walking group. And it’s a unique walking group and we have these marvellous social things that we do.... a lot of good repartee... and the library is involved as a secondary group ... activity group....for people who are incapacitated and can’t walk. And that’s in the library.
It’s completely unconditional… you do not have to tell anybody what your story is or anything… this is the thing…. Completely unconditional… it is a most welcoming environment… we have a little walk. We toss a coin which way we’ll go or how far…. If you can’t go the full distance then you can stop off and often we meet at a coffee shop and have a lovely cup of coffee afterwards…. We’ll have lunches and meals and we travel around different towns…

The guiding principle is complete unconditional acceptance. There’s no need to explain why you’re there and there’s no age limits… we don’t have any teenagers but there is a very broad spectrum…. And varying physical capacities and it doesn’t matter when you lost a partner… some people have been alone for 10 years…. But it is this wonderful concept that is works so well. …It is a therapeutic relationship for bereavement and every other thing but it is not an intimate relationship. (Bess 65 years old)

Sometimes the impact is not apparent until much later as explained by Ava:

I got married very young and I don’t think it affected me badly in my younger years like teenage years. I just got on with life and I think when I reached the age of 25, it started to affect me and you know memories would come about what had happened and I had a divorce at 25. I was 30 when I remarried. And everything was fine again for quite a while and then I got to my 40s and late 40s and my mother came to visit us because my step father died. And she lived in a granny flat at the back of our house. Somehow I think I transferred blame to
her like, why did she let it happen? Particularly too, mum and I went on a trip to Scotland together and my aunt, her sister, told me that mum knew that it had happened when I was 5 but didn’t stop me going to see this man, that did it. I don’t know how it happened, I only remember the one occasion and I don’t know if I blocked it out or whatever, there were more times. I imagine if I saw him, there may have been, I don’t know. So I sort of had a bit of anger towards my mother and like a love hate relationship. (Ava 65 years old).

Similarly to Ava, three women (Rose, Fran and Marjorie) spoke about issues arising at various times in their lives:

*I think I’ve thought more about it since I’ve stopped working. I’m finding it starting to intrude again.*

*I probably would have gone on forever... but there was a change... a whole sort of different structure and my job disappeared and I was given all this money and everything like that but it wasn’t me. It wasn’t what I started that job to do.....which was work with people.*

*And I was 65, I’m 66 now and I thought I’ve already reached past my retirement age now so I decided... and the health you know I was really tired so took a bit of a jump there. So that was less than twelve months ago now so I think dealing with that... because all of a sudden, whilst I’m feeling better in lots of ways, physically.... Mentally there were all sorts going on.*
I had grief and loss stuff and sitting at home and then I’d be reading a book and then say, ok what’s next? I’ve got plenty to do but I don’t want to do it. So I started thinking about things more and I’m thinking and writing about some things in my life. (Rose 66 years old)

What got me into therapy was the emotional abuse. And recognising that I was just so distressed and still am! You know I go into feeling very hurt and then I go into being full of rage and then... I just swing, it’s like this pendulum. (Fran 57 years old)

But at 60 it was still my fault. And it was my fault... oh look everyone tells me it’s not my fault. It is my fault in as much...no it’s not my fault. I know it’s not my fault. And I know you can’t abuse children. And I know it’s wrong to abuse children. ...“I have accepted the unacceptable” you know I was bought up it was my fault, I was to blame. I can’t get rid of that. Even though I know it’s wrong and I’m not to blame. I still accept that I was abused. Do you know what I mean? (Marjorie 71 years old)

Heathcliff, Rose and June described their experiences over her lifetime:

I see it as being normal and abnormal. I don’t see it as recovery. I see it as you may never have been particularly normal with what happened to you. So all your life you’re trying to move towards normality...This is the ‘basket case’. The basket case secretly saw itself as a jewel. It wanted to be a jewel. It wanted to be...hidden underneath was a star and really and truly...you can use it in
therapy...this really saw itself...it really wanted to be a jewel and there it is... a basket case (Heathcliff 67 years old)

Yes I think it might have had an effect on me in how I looked for needy characters. Always. That meant males and friends...people I actually help and do things for. I needed to build me up, make me feel good. Or just a way getting love...I've often thought about that. (Rose 66 years old)

I've been appeasing since day one as a child. The ramifications go on forever and they drift down to your own children because you can’t be the vehicle for bridging their life with family.... Because they do not understand why you behave the way you do with them.... In the perception of what the family is supposed to be ....and the family members not contacting and so on... and that’s when I say, it’s such a destructive element... it has been...I don’t know about other people but it certainly has been for me. It is an unrelenting reality. (June 75 years old)

Susie (66 years old) concluded that for her, there was never any end:

There is no getting over it. I feel guilty about the things that happened to my daughters. It’s hard.
Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how, via the subthemes of developing an inner life, support networks and helping others, creating relationships with gardens and the environment or animals, writing, knitting, work, and counselling, the women in my study demonstrated reconstruction of their lives and subjectivities by enabling self-practices that defend against pressures which arise from the social world. I have conceptualised this type of reconstruction as defensive, or a way that reflects ‘holding the line’ and thus engineering autonomy. In particular I have problematized the notions of therapy and counselling to assist in understanding the responses of the women and also my own observations in practice, and to make a start in considering what might constitute anti-ageist practice. Chapter 8 examines my final grouping of reconstruction in terms of how the women initiated transformational self-practices.
Chapter 8 Stories of Reconstruction: Living Outside the Box

Introduction

In mapping the, ‘possibilities that are open to modern individuals for constituting themselves as autonomous subjects’ (Karakayali 2014, p. 3), a third category, transformative self-practices, seeks alternative expressions to normative social identities and is linked to Foucault’s concept of ‘subjectivation’, where the self is actively engaged in ‘form-giving’ processes that constitute the self (Karakayali 2014, p. 8). Although derived from cultural norms, transformational construction of the self, gives form to one’s existence through active manipulation or administration, and is juxtaposed with ‘subjection’ to discursive and institutional governance. It may be described as an artisanal self-practice, somewhat like an artisan of the self, which, ‘not only allows us to become self-determining agents, but also provides the grounds for us to challenge and resist power structures’ (Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000, p. 150).

Living Outside of the Box (Transformational Reconstruction)

Transformative self-practices involve developing a specific relationship with the self via reflexivity and self-reflection. It is a process which attempts to produce self-identity within constraints of discursive social contexts (McNay 1992, p. 89). It characteristically involves self-mastery such as developing critical self-awareness (McNay 1992, p. 90), or questioning taken for granted
assumptions (Karakayali 2014, p. 9). It can also include a spiritual aspect such as conducting thought experiments and examining desires or anxieties from broader perspectives for example, externalising personal or collective concerns, issues and problems such as death (Karakayali 2014, p. 9). Exercising bodily control including attention to practices of the body such as eating, (Karakayali, 2014, p. 9) may also constitute a type of transformative self-practice. Two key aspects of a transformative identity politics are relevant in the context of my thesis and include problematizing regimes of power, and ‘the constitution of new ways of existence’ (Karakayali 2014, p. 10).

I have understood the women’s stories in the following section as giving new form to their lives, whilst acknowledging the constraints and tension associated with complete self-rule. The women did question imposed norms and explored new meanings for their lives which can represent, what Davidson (2011) has termed ‘counter-conduct’. Licona (2005, p. 104) presents a contemporary example of transformative identity reconstruction in ‘zines’ (self-published magazines) that, being non-academic texts, can represent:

(1) transformative potentials beyond gender binaries; (2) re-visioning of histories; (3) practices of reverso (critical reversals of the normative gaze); (4) deployment of (e)motion as embodied resistance; and (5) emergence of a coalitional consciousness and practices of articulation that have the potential to create and mobilize communities for social justice based on egalitarian social relationships.
Making a Life from Little

For the women in my study there were many examples of how they transformed their lives and their sense of self through self-practices which entailed reconstructing themselves. They found new ways of existing through being artisans of their own lives. One example comes from May (57 years old) who began her adult life with little prospect of reaching beyond normative expectations due to her gender and her difficult childhood experiences of sexual abuse. She spoke about how this was a challenge, the reasons for it and her response:

*I look at my family’s financial situation and I know it precluded me from finishing my education because of what happened. I was suddenly absolutely destitute. I had a tiny job that I could earn a living from. While it was a pittance, at least I could earn something.*

*I wanted to be in the health sector and nursing was the thing that was available to me. It was hospital based and you got a pathetic income while you were training.*

*I reconsidered turning around and retraining to do what I wanted to do when I was 30 and I thought well, what are my beliefs and what would I achieve? And I thought well, no, the years of study that I would have to do to move sideways and the power to influence health change would not have altered, primarily because I was a woman.*

*I feel sad saying that. Certainly some women can achieve enormous inroads into change in our society but we live in a patriarchal society.*
We can’t escape that. And I didn’t have the confidence that I could be one of those women. So I chose to stay in nursing and continue post graduate studies.

May (57 years old) felt she was constrained and restricted in her choices however nonetheless, she reached beyond those restrictions and achieved in other ways which still proved difficult being a woman. I interpret her actions as a self-transformative act whereby she made something from little but also transformed her identity for herself. Arguably too, women such as May have carved paths for other women to transform their views of themselves (‘critical reversals of the normative gaze’) exemplified by her comments below:

*I was on a low income and that restricted what I could buy. They were tight rules in those days. Nobody else was buying a house like that at my age, certainly not a single woman such as I was. So for whatever reason, I felt I would stand alone. I do what I believe.*

*I think at that stage I came out believing theoretically anyway and this came from my Dad and my formative educational environment, that you are not restricted because you are a woman. You could anything you wanted. Well I did things like I bought a car at a young age, a tiny little car. And I was paying a housing loan. This was at a time when single women were not considered worthy for having loans. I used to rewash glad wrap to save and I was the biggest recycler.*

*I recycle everything... everything. Anything I can recycle or modify, I recycle. That stood me in good stead but in those days back in the 70s, you were absolutely ridiculed for recycling. Now it’s the thing to do!*
Keeping Yourself Informed

Many of the women also kept themselves informed about the world around them and their place in it, quite often due to their own efforts and this is connected with the notion of building philosophical perspectives that give purpose to existence even within constraints of existing structures of power. Bess (65 years old) spoke about her life long journey of building a set of beliefs and ideas that served to counter old regimes (‘re-visioning of histories’):

_I’ve got to keep the brain working. It doesn’t work so well sometimes and if you’re not aware of the world you live in, then that can be catastrophic. I’ve had to make a concerted effort to live with what had happened, catalogue it away and create a very firm sort of environment around me._

Bess spoke further about how she exactly achieved this:

_I really wanted to just keep myself busy all the time. It didn’t matter whether I was working hard or whether I was doing reading, doing some sort of study for something. In that way you build up a large reservoir of information about a lot of things._

Jane (76 years old) returned to her metaphor of a bent tree by the sea to describe her transformation of self:

_Telling it once is not going to cure it... your tree... life... was bent...and grew that way... you will need a strong stake... much_
pruning... fertiliser, encouragement...water, tears... pain, until you can live with it to be the person you were meant to be.

Living Out Your Beliefs

May (57 years old) also specifically spoke about the notion of living out one’s own beliefs which I interpret as being ‘true to one self’. This was a theme that many of the women touched on:

I’ve always endeavoured to try to remain good friends with past partners because if you’ve truly been in love with someone then that’s an important relationship. You always go through that horrible pain of readjustment but if you can remain friends then that’s...being respectful of everyone. So that’s my belief.

Developing one’s belief system was a theme which branches out to being able to manage hard things in life:

I will come back to my comment there that as an adult, no matter what you experience, whether you are raped, whether you are tortured, if you make sure you know as much as you can about it, you have the ability to find a constructive pathway through it.

If you consciously know about it, you can walk through anything in life as an adult. As a child you are hampered. You are dependent on people around to help you make sense of the world. That’s the parents and the significant others around you, that’s their entrusted role. If that doesn’t happen then you are hampered throughout life in a maze
of confusion, low self-esteem and terror which is an excruciating life path to sort out as an adult.

An analogy of this is having built your house with foundations into sand rather than into bedrock. The house built into bedrock is resilient to life’s challenges whereas the house built in sand keeps cracking and crumbling under the rigors of its life despite superficial repairs. The repairs need to be addressed at its core faulty foundations. (May 57 years old)

Stella (68 years old) also discussed how transforming her own beliefs and moving beyond them has also had an effect on society and others as a whole:

I am encouraged that our society does now accept the truth about child sexual abuse. I am also encouraged that more work is being done to identify perpetrators and to assist children.

Black Humour

Developing transformative perspectives is varied, however, one aspect I found to be instructive was how all of the women had a sense of humour and consequently an ability to talk candidly. Bess (65 years old) in fact directly addressed the role of black humour in her life:

It allows you to get through things and handle circumstances. I had a friend who was a beautiful wordsmith. He could get these beautiful names for things and I learned a lot about how the way you describe something can change the way it is.
It gives a texture to living and that’s the problem with a lot of things now there’s no texture in living. You don’t have to waffle on. It’s just a sort of simple perspective.

We used to have a wonderful repertoire of friends. We had some magic nights down there. And my friend with his capacity for humour to laugh at things that were hard to take was a big teaching lesson to me. I learned how it does give a texture to living that you simply can’t buy.

I witnessed humour in many forms from the women in my study. It seemed to be a defining type of self-practice, aimed at transformation and a powerful way to create new perspectives, something akin to making life a work of art. Humour as a tool for critical thinking and its potential for ‘social, cultural and political transformation’ (Hynes & Sharpe 2010, p. 44) is, I believe, an underestimated force for connectivity, communication and personal or social change. It was often the way through which the women spoke their truths, removing pretence and revealing honesty. For me, when humour, ‘serves to ridicule oppressive powers or galvanize marginalized peoples’ (Hynes & Sharpe 2010, p. 45), it can function to transform social relationships, to speak openly at the level of the unconscious, and has the ‘power to disrupt’ (Hynes & Sharpe 2010, p. 50), normative forms of rationality and even historicity,

In the gesture of nay-saying we prove that we are not fooled by appearances, that we can strip away things-as-they-seem-to-be and restore the natural relationship between thought and the true. (Hynes & Sharpe 2010, p. 45)
Growing Older

Growing older was a key aspect of my research, and many of the women spoke about its significance in terms of managing sexual abuse in childhood but also in terms of their identity. Their comments signified something beyond what I had originally imagined for this work. For instance, I did not anticipate how in various ways, the women re-positioned and transformed normative constructions of growing old.

Much work has been written about the governance, management and regulatory systems which are prescriptive for later life identities in various social and political contexts (Aberdeen & Bye 2013; Angus & Reeve 2006; Biggs 2008; Calasanti, Slevin & King 2006; Cann & Dean 2009; Coupland & Coupland 1993; Cruikshank 2009; Freixas, Luque, & Reina, 2012; Gilleard & Higgs 2005; Gulllette 2004; Holstein & Minkler 2003; Krekula 2007; Liang & Luo 2012; Macdonald & Rich 1983; Powell & Biggs 2000; Ray 1999; Sandberg 2013; Sawchuk 2009; Segal 2007; Silver 2003; Tulle-Winton 1999; Twigg 2004; Wilson 2000; Ylänne 2012). For instance, Fealy et al. (2012) examined newspaper articles in Ireland to identify types of ageing/age constructions. They analysed the nouns and names which position older people in particular ways. Five identity genres were discernible. These include older people as victims, frail and vulnerable, radicalised citizens, deserving old and undeserving old. Such subject positions produce identities of older people as ‘the other’ placing them at the margins in society.

Irini (2009) also examines how midlife aged women (54-64 years) in the workplace are regarded as ‘cranky’ and ‘difficult’ as they age. Via an
analysis of gendering workplace practice, she considers the production of an identity that creates a version of ageing women as ‘cranky old women’. She contrasts this to the stereotype of ageing as being a time of wisdom and tranquillity. Irini also discusses the possibilities for resistance by older women workers such as raising issues that others dare not, choosing unemployment rather than a pathway to retirement to resist practices which are violating.

Maguire (2001) examines how seven older women as teachers, repudiate ageist discourse. In addition there is an interesting discussion about how, while the study begins with the spoken experiences of the women, there are dilemmas associated with the use of small snippets of conversation as representative of the lives of these older women. Maguire explores how ageism operates socially and culturally and while demonstrating the contradictory nature of the many social constructions in relation to ageing, she argues that stereotypes are gendered. Strategies of resistance to negative ageist constructions experienced by the women in the study include humour, the capacity to support one another, and drawing on well-established networks and skills.

In my study, growing older seemed to present opportunities for the women to express more fully their own ideas. The process of ageing has contributed to transformative reconstruction as well as resistance. The ageing process creates a greater sense of agency to challenge and contest normative expectations of older women. Recognition of the past, ‘telling the story’ and having it acknowledged contests practice paradigms that focus on brief/immediate/present concerns (Laub cited in Rossiter 2000, p. 154). Many
women in the study spoke about how with time and changed contexts, for example a parent passing on, has allowed opportunities to re-examine their identities (again, ‘critical reversals of the normative gaze’).

Fran (57 years old) specifically spoke to this issue:

> With my parents passing on, this allows people to look at the abuse differently. Not only this but the passing of the abuser.

She also spoke about how this threads with the negative social construction of older people:

> Well becoming invisible as an older person is very, very hard to come to terms with. I look around at our society and it is very much constructed around young people. Or getting a job or education in terms of young people... what about older people getting educated?

In problematizing prescriptive age identities, growing older can provide opportunities for the transformation of age identity:

Acting on their own behalf, people who have survived to late life can resist assignment to a narrow space and thereby express their sense of difference on their own terms. Age denial is fruitless; resistance to a proffered identity may be physically and psychologically healthy. In the space of difference, late life might be seen as inherently worthy, not requiring qualifiers like “positive” or “successful” to render it desirable. (Cruickshank 2008, p. 151)
June (75 years old) described starting to take control when she was 50 during a relationship she was in at the time:

_At 48 or 50 years I joined a tennis club. I was standing up for myself...making statements by going out there and doing it. And even though it caused a lot of arguments I held my ground from then on._

_Perhaps doing the tennis and ten pin bowling, perhaps I was thumbing my nose at him. Perhaps I don’t know. Because I knew I was going to be in big trouble. Hey wait, she’s getting away from me and meeting all these people and of course he’s saying... You’re only going there because there are men there and all that crap._

Stella (68 years old) was more philosophical:

_I think the natural process of ageing gives me a perspective of witnessing social dynamics change, party driven by the new technology and inspired by the ideas and aspirations of younger people towards a more socially equal future._

She expressed the view that as an older woman, there has been the opportunity for her to transform her self-identity:

_I think working on yourself after sexual abuse is a lifetime’s work, it never goes away. The most difficult part though is when you are young because you are compelled by nature to be a sexual being or participant which is where all the confusion and suffering is seated._

_I am looking back from 68 years and I am lots more at peace with myself than I was at 15 or 20 or 30._
Heathcliff (67 years old), who was 73 years old when I met with her again for a second follow up interview, spoke about some examples of many transformational changes in her life including extensive community involvement in groups and organisations, educating herself about generational social contexts through film, music and art, daily self-practices such as mixing blue and green colours together when she was told never to do so, taking on ‘male’ personas and embracing the feminine simultaneously as a protest to the instructional advice in childhood relating to gender, and finally, participation in a variety of research projects in addition to my own. She was well pleased to state:

*I’ve even made it now to Deakin University.*

Heathcliff told me how currently she used a wooden umbrella as a walking stick. The way she described her many uses of this specifically chosen aid is a wonderful and compelling metaphor for the many ways she has transformed her life. The ‘walking stick’, often a stereotypical signifier for old age, has become one of her tools for transformation.

*Photograph 2: ‘Umbrella’ (Heathcliff’s self-portrait)*
Her wooden umbrella was described to me as an item which shielded her from the sun and the rain. It has a rubber stopper at the end to protect against electricity/lightning strikes and prevent jarring with a sudden necessary stop. It is a device for defence, should it be needed, for example against dogs or people without assuming a defensive or aggressive stance. It enables easy walking in order to get around and can be used as a tripod for easily standing and looking at art in a gallery. The same use can be applied for leaning over to examine collections under glass at waist height in a museum without strain on the lower back. I listened and imagined that all her own efforts and actions in reconstructing and transforming who she was each day, were much like the wooden umbrella, that shields, protects, defends, enables and creates new ways of being in the world despite physical, emotional or spiritual boundaries.

When I offered various means of assistance to Heathcliff so that she could safely travel to my interview, she declined, telling me that she saw it as an opportunity for self-therapy, the chance to meet a new challenge by travelling adventurously to an unknown place, putting trust in herself to get there, enjoying the ride along the way, and seeing new sights hitherto unexplored.

In another story of transformational reconstruction, Heathcliff chose to select a nom de plume for herself at the beginning of my project explaining to me that she would like to be represented by a male persona, Heathcliff. The reference was not only an exercise in gender bending but told in order to relay another story about her connection to the fictional character, Heathcliff in Emily Bronte’s novel, *Wuthering Heights*. Specifically, she uses the moniker to speak to a theme in the novel, that of Heathcliff’s journey from an unwanted foster child to a ‘gentleman’ who prospers.
Having Children

Many women discussed how the process of having children provided an opportunity to ‘do things differently’, such as Marjorie (71 years old) who emphasised to me:

*Having children helped to right the wrongs.*

She explained this further:

*I had my children because I wanted to prove that you could have children in the family who weren’t sexually abused. That was the reason I had children… I’m very proud of them and I’m proud that I didn’t abuse them and I broke that cycle.*

May (57 years old) spoke in a similar way about the transformative power of her parenting experience:

*What helped me was the fact that I’d successfully had children. I’m surprised I did. I was in a wheelchair with the second. I had enormous complications with the second.*

Rose (66 years old) also spoke about the impact of having children:

*I think the children have been helpful. I’ve had to raise them. Plus the various furry creatures that I had to look after along the way… so you have to do it.*

Tina: *so being a parent…that was a helpful thing?*

Rose: *Very much so*...
I sit there and think, have I been too protective of the children? They all say, no Mum don’t start! Sometimes I think it you know. My daughter says to me... look at us all... we’re all alright. And she’s right there.

Bess (65 years old) ensured that the years of parenting small children were opportunities for creating a particular family environment:

The little friends of my children always loved to come to our place because I never gave up eating at the table. Would you believe that’s not necessarily what everybody does? At night time particularly but also, morning tea or afternoon tea when the kids came over we would sit down, the friends used to think it was wonderful. It’s different from the children’s point of view because I became extremely aware of the value of family... and so I thought I can’t deny the children that.

Three of the women spoke about grand-parenting:

I enjoyed being a mum and now a grandmother... and that’s what keeps me going. (Hazel 58 years old)

Finally, Ruth (72 years old) discovered that grand parenting provided opportunities to do things differently to when she was a parent:

I never learnt to play with my children, as I had never been played with. I would dig them a sand pit, shift sand, and always be outside gardening when they were outside, but didn’t know how to play.

Imagine my delight, after years of therapy, my first grandson came along, and I used to play with him, and along with my German
Shepherd! We would go down to the creek, feed horses, float leaves down the creek, and play with slaters. It made me sad knowing what I had missed with my children, but I loved those days.

Conclusion

Allen (2008) suggests a tension between agency and the possibility of transformation of the self, due to the reality of subjection and the patterns of power as a feature of social life. However, the development of new cultural understandings that broaden the ‘choices’ of the self as well as of notions such as ‘democracy’ and ‘equality’ can lead the way to social transformation (Allen 2008, p. 184). In addition to change that might emerge from the ‘social and cultural imaginary’ (Allen 2008, p. 183), Allen suggests that the presentation of narratives is also important in the process:

Such narratives can envision and make possibilities for recognition, patterns of attachment and identification, and ways of living together … We have no choice but to start from where we are, as gendered subjects who are constituted by power relations. (Allen 2008, p. 184)

Certainly the tension is arguable, and I will not attempt to resolve the debate. However, I argue that my subthemes of making a life from little, living out beliefs, humour, growing older and having children, represent something of a ‘minor revolution’ (Rose 1999) in transformational self-practice such that possibilities are created to constitute the self in ways which are self-determining and challenge existing regimes of power. For the women in my study this means the creation of unique and contextual approaches to managing the effects of childhood sexual abuse in their lives.
Chapter 9 Conclusion

Introduction

My research is a unique study of a small group of older women who share their insights in managing the impact of child sexual abuse over their lifetimes. Little research has explored the experiences of older women in this way. Significantly, my work foregrounds the subjective perspectives of these older women whose views are often marginalised in Western social contexts. I have represented their stories in order to highlight narratives from the women’s standpoints, and question ageist assumptions. Drawing on feminism and postmodernism as a theoretical basis, the lived experience of the women is featured, and although the women share commonalities, they also demonstrate a diverse range of outlooks. I see this work as a contribution towards redressing gender and age stereotypes. My thesis is also an important contribution in terms of understanding the issue of child sexual abuse in their lives. Ultimately, and perhaps idealistically, it is a small step towards addressing inequality for older women by contributing to anti-ageist practice in social work practice and research.

I began my work with aims of contributing to knowledge in the field of violence against women based on the lived experience of the women themselves. Since older women’s perspectives are not often the focus of research in this area, my research sought to affirm and acknowledge the complexity and nuance in their stories. This complexity in the women’s stories is underscored by their social and historical contexts and provides spaces for exploring how the women, at once, are constituted by, resist and
reconstruct normative discourses about child sexual abuse, their position in society, and their age and gender identities. During my interviews with the women, they not only spoke about child sexual abuse but also about topics such as growing older and in doing so provided clues about the development of alternative and wide ranging discourses for older women. My objective was to also inform and extend the knowledge base of social work practitioners who work with older women, particularly in relation to the issues emerging from child sexual abuse in order to develop anti-ageist practice frameworks. In a broader sense, I had hoped that my research may represent an explicit challenge to normative views about older women.

My study was focused with the following main research question:

*What do older women say about how they have managed experiences and long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse throughout their lives?*

I endeavored to respond to my research question via the following three sub-questions:

*What do the women say about how their experiences of childhood sexual abuse impacted on their lives?*

*What do the women say about what has helped?*

*How have they, as older women managed the long term effects of childhood sexual abuse?*

The proceeding section discusses how I have answered the research questions, followed by a section which considers the implications for anti-ageist social work practice.
Stories of Resistance and Reconstruction

The stories of the women who participated in my study represent the responses to my research questions. Based on the women’s narratives, I grouped their answers into two over-arching themes: resistance and reconstruction.

I understood the notions of resistance and reconstruction as illustrations of how, in their everyday lives, women can express resistance to and reconstruct dominant forms of subjectivity (Thomas & Davies 2005). The first theme of resistance was particularly salient in relation to my first research sub-question, ‘What do the women say about how their experiences of childhood sexual abuse impacted on their lives?’ The women, by positioning themselves in diverse ways subjectively, demonstrate their management of the relationship between the subject and society (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Pease 2014, p. 1) and how they enacted agency in difficult life circumstances. In Chapter 5, I discussed how the women enacted their agency, in adapting to, subverting and reinscribing (Thomas & Davies 2005, p 687) a range of oppressive patterns in their everyday lives, which I interpreted as embodying nuance and fluidity.

Reconstruction, my second theme, is relevant to the second and third research sub-questions, ‘What do the women say about what has helped?’ and, ‘How have they, as older women managed the long term effects of childhood sexual abuse?’ The stories from the women I interviewed, of managing the impact of child sexual abuse throughout their lives demonstrated to me the reconstructive possibilities of subjectivity and age
identities. I see their perspectives and actions as an explicit challenge to patterns of subordination and domination at the structural and personal level. Their ‘horizons of meaning’ (Benhabib 1999, p. 350) are constructed in this study by sharing the ways of making, adapting, defending and transforming meaning in their everyday lives. They represent only a portion of the possibilities for older women to manage the difficulties associated with child sexual abuse over their lifetimes. This aspect was indicated by the use of my earlier metaphor of Indra’s net, a representation of limitless potentialities. I have argued their meanings to be relational, layered and in constant revision.

In analysing the women’s stories, I adapted Karakayali’s (2014) three categories of self-practice being, adaptive, defensive and transformative reconstruction to understand some of the complexity in re-making the self. At times the women work within the confines and constraints of normative expectations, and at times they transform and ‘cross borders’.

By exploring the lifelong impact of childhood sexual abuse, I acknowledge that the research potentially reflects how the women have been ‘governed’ as a result of ageist and sexist discourse. I argue that in understanding agentic possibility, it is ultimately an unanswerable philosophical and intellectual debate to what extent the boundaries of dominant discourse exist and can be influenced. I prefer to analyse the impasse by understanding the nature of self and society as embedded in the ‘deep and necessarily mysterious limits to the knowledge we have of our own and others’ self-formation’ (Gatens 2014, p. 49). Consequently there are multitudinous ways in which transformation and existence can occur in concert with others, in particular moments of time and in rapidly changing
contexts. To me the better approach is a more complex and revealing one which hinges on the lived experience in particular social and historical contexts. For instance, my study explores the insights of older women regarding childhood sexual abuse and its impact, ideas on the self, society, their values, the roles of women and men, relationships with others and the natural world, as well as ideas on spirituality and various expressions of the self. It is a small representation limited by its own context, but nonetheless it attempts to acknowledge complexity, constraint, possibility and importantly, contradiction and limitation. I am comfortable with the uncertainty because I believe it to be redolent of the nature of our existence. I understand this position to be consistent with my feminist and postmodern framing, albeit one which is also in constant motion and revision. My metaphor of Indra’s net is my attempt to represent this complexity and Gatens (2014, p. 49) skilfully sums up a position similar to my own in the following way:

Part of the reason we cannot be the “master of our own house” is because we always dwell with others with whom we construct human possibilities for living against a pre-existing backdrop of a collectively constructed tapestry of ongoing meanings.

The subthemes characterise the various ways the women resist and reconstruct normative expectations and transform their ways of being. The women discussed how they recreated or reconstructed themselves in the present and how they have done so in the past. Similarly to the themes of resistance, these reconstructions are unique and differ from normative expectations associated with growing older and of being a woman. Many women did not see their contributions as significant in any way and yet I have witnessed the creation of lives that are extraordinary. Their stories consider
topics that range from child protection and social justice, growing older, social and advocacy related activism, sex, having children, the impact of the social age, as well as the lifelong impact of childhood sexual abuse. Perspectives were shared on feeling like a pariah or social outcast, or alone and of mistrust, speaking out and not being able to speak up, being strong and over-achieving. The women also shared insights regarding the importance of creating gardens, developing an inner life, support systems and helping others, how to make a life from little and live your beliefs, and keep oneself informed. Additionally, they spoke about the value of black humour, artistic expression and writing.

Almost all of the women felt that as a result of the abuse, they did not belong; they never belonged and would never belong. Sometimes, the feelings was expressed as a taboo, not ever being able to express it, not being socially acceptable. The expectation to be a ‘good’ citizen and person often outweighed the need to express a truer deeper dissatisfaction. Most felt that this feeling was impossible to shift and that their act of resistance was to become somewhat ‘socially unacceptable’. The ways the women resisted the sense of isolation and injustice during their lives varied. For one woman, now was a time to rectify the wrong by taking issue with authorities that had not believed the abuse had occurred. Speaking out against injustice was another strong theme in the narratives of the women. Many of the women were living life unafraid and strong in terms of their ideas and beliefs regarding the way life should be conducted. Many times, this feeling was linked to growing older and experiencing a ‘freedom’ from previous social constraints.
Despite oftentimes feeling ashamed and wanting to hide away from others, many of the women had found ways to express their views and participate in positive change within their social environments. This I see as a form of resistance in everyday life. Community activism and involvement with issues of social justice was also prominent and reflected the desire to transform themselves and society in fundamental ways. For the majority of women, this formed the motivation for participation in my study. Turiel (2003) advances the commonly held associations with the idea of resistance by incorporating acts in everyday life so that rather than being ‘anti-social’, resistance is conceptualised as a form of higher degree moral development.

Many of the women expressed their views regarding the ways they tackled the limitations in their lives and how they improved their lives from the little that they had, whether due to a lack of resources or support. Some of the women found that animals and creative activities were a source of solace, strength and inspiration. The development of an inner life and skills by which life could be understood was also a prominent theme spoken by the women.

Westerhof and Tulle (2007, p. 254) believe the individual reconstruction of identity can be seen as resistance, but add that this must occur alongside structural change in order to address inequitable power imbalance among older age groups. However, Krekula (2007, p. 163) argues that it is a simplification to assume dominant paradigms on ageing and women always prevail. The narratives of the women presented here demonstrate their dynamism, strength, will and passion and resist aging discourses of frail, weak, ugly and ineffective. Alongside their ideas, ideals and pursuits that are unashamed, angry, joyful and crushing, the women’s perspectives on their
experiences are instructive in terms of gender and ageing. A transversal politics incorporates ‘the complexity of the lived experience’ (Meekosha 2007, p. 172) and in working with the women, I witnessed the mundane become monumental, and the hidden become known. I begin with their voices, and attempt to foreground their insights. They demonstrate many possibilities for resistance and reconstruction as they reconstruct their subjectivities by interrogating, ‘the process of boundary-making’ (Meekosha 2007, p. 172). The women, through their stories are creating new possibilities for their identity and subjectivities. They are in the process of reconstructing gendered and aging subjectivities over and over in each moment. They enact agency for transformation of the self in spite of the self being constructed by patterns of power. The women, in transforming subordinated identities, resist conformity to age and gender norms.

Developing an Anti-Ageist Practice in Social Work and Research

Finally, my research has implications for how might we as social work practitioners, construct practices which are anti-ageist when working with older women and the issues related to experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Most knowledge and practice frameworks in social work about older women are based on bio-medical models and there is a need to build sound critical perspectives that question ageism and provide thoughtful challenge to assumptions about ageing. I argue that beginning with perspectives from women growing older themselves is one of the ways to begin this process.

Their views are an illustration of the perceptions of some older women in relation to particular issues for them in managing the impact of childhood
sexual abuse. In speaking with the women, I found that they challenged many normative narratives and values associated with counselling models and indeed ageing. In order to develop an anti-ageist practice, social workers must centralise the perspectives and lived experiences of older people since doing so reveals not only the resources and strengths that older people possess and use to resist oppressive social conditions that are linked to ageism and sexism, but also produces knowledge regarding how older people might construct and perceive social problems and needs. This includes attention to the reasons why many older people do not access existing services. For instance, Harbison (2008) argues that domestic violence responses which are considered appropriate for younger women fail to address different needs and social conditions for older women and that services are rarely constructed according to the ‘expressed needs of older people’ (Harbison et al. 2012, p. 99). In addition to practice and service responses, the creation of research approaches that include the voices of older people is another important pathway in developing an anti-ageist approach to practice. Social work practice which positions older people as ‘knowers’ has the potential to incorporate their perspectives into direct practice at the level of the individual regarding service provision such as group work (Duncan and Mason 2011) and at the policy and structural level where social workers may be influential more broadly, so that material change is relevant and transformative in the lives of older women.

There is support for the view that a social work qualification provides competence for work in a range of non-government social and community services compared to other human service degrees or vocational
qualifications (Cortis & Meagher 2012). The nature of changing global population demographics in the context of increased longevity highlights the importance of social work preparedness to understand emerging ecosystems, social environments and policy contexts that are altering the nature of lives for individuals, families and communities (Takamura 2002). Most certainly the work of social workers in the future will entail a greater involvement working with older people (Crampton 2011; Ferguson 2015; Hokenstad & Roberts 2011). New models of service delivery, theoretical perspectives, educational and research approaches as well as responses to policy arrangements will be required for the development of a critical social work approach to gerontology in light of changing demographics and there are already a number of emerging propositions.

A range of innovative approaches to teaching and learning that address the challenge of social work curriculum enhancement have been canvassed such as the provision of basic and advanced competencies in developing skill and knowledge in policy, health and human development acknowledging the diversity among older people, the multi-generational nature of families and the intersection of gender, race and class (Hokenstad & Roberts 2011; Mason & Sanders 2004; Scharlach et al. 2000). Also, opportunities for specialization in ageing studies (Cummings & Galambos 2002; Hokenstad & Roberts 2011; Wang & Chonody 2013), improved fieldwork opportunities (Cummings, Adler & DeCoster 2005; Mason & Sanders 2004; Gellis, Sherman & Lawrance 2003), student outreach, public education, recruitment of social work gerontologists in academia, and inspirational guest speakers to enhance positive interactions with older people.
(Holody & Kolb 2011) have been discussed. Inter-disciplinary practice approaches, involvement of key stakeholders including libraries and social work practitioners already working in the field (Holody & Kolb 2011), increased awareness of ageism by academic staff (Wang & Chonody 2013; Scharlach et al. 2000), a greater emphasis on or the establishment of social work research programs in gerontology (Wang & Chonody 2013), ongoing education for social work practitioners (Wang & Chonody 2013) and increased awareness regarding possible career pathways in direct practice, policy, program development, planning and management (Cummings, Adler & DeCoster 2005) are other ways that social work education can incorporate critical perspectives.

The inclusion of knowledge and practice approaches such as critical gerontology to theorize age in social work education and practice can provide many opportunities for social work as a profession to develop critical approaches in working with older women (and men) in policy advocacy in order to address age inequality at the structural level and to advocate for new programmatic initiatives for older women. Anti-ageist practice includes a critical engagement with the meanings attached to ageing and the normative constructions of age including questioning current prescriptive age identities associated with ‘successful ageing’ (Aberdeen and Bye 2013; Biggs 2001; Holstein & Minkler 2003; Katz 2000), as well as ‘decline’ narratives (Gullette 2004). Understanding how ageism can impact on the health, wellbeing, and social context of older women is particularly important for social work students and practitioners (Chambers 2004; McCormack 2008). However, addressing ageism for social work practitioners, includes understanding how,
in order to achieve social justice, social and cultural inequality as well as material and structural inequality (Fraser & Honneth 2003) must be interrogated. The incorporation of critical perspectives in social work curriculum that specifically challenges social work students’ attitudes and develops reflexivity is important, especially as the need for service providers in the ageing sector increases into the future. I argue for the integration of perspectives such as critical gerontology, for instance, as a helpful theory in understanding ageism and developing anti-ageist practice in social work.

For instance, as a result of improved health care, people who have been living with a disability since childhood or early adulthood will be living longer, and as a result of functional loss which may be experienced as a part of the ageing process, people living with a disability and growing older are a diverse group with disabilities being experienced differently across races, gender, class and geographical location (Bachmand & Gonyea 2012). As is the case with age, there is an increasing awareness of how dis/ability is socially constructed and may hold a variety of meanings depending on context. In light of this, Bachmand and Gonyea (2012) advocate for a strong voice from social workers and identify opportunities within the US health care system for change by social workers. This specifically includes a committed theoretical understanding of cultural and social difference and diversity for people growing older with disability, and also recognising inequality in terms of distributive and material justice. Similarly, Siverskog (2014) argues for a greater understanding of gender identities (especially from perspectives which problematise traditional binary norms) by social workers, specifically in terms of the ability to act and advocate for transgender
communities in addressing the challenges of growing older and accessing care services. Siverskog (2014) highlights how, at the social, cultural and material levels, simplistic and binary gender norm frameworks result in inappropriate, inadequate or discriminatory care services for ageing transgender communities. Finally, Harbison (2008) has also discussed how, in addressing the needs of older women escaping domestic violence, service providers might adapt existing resources to consider specific and diverse needs, but also to ensure that knowledge about ageing is an aspect of training. Harbison (2008) reminds social workers how oftentimes the profession, which works at the intersection of personal, community and institutional practice, is best placed to address ageism, not only at the individual level but at the structural level through policy reform, at the programmatic level through leadership, and at the cultural and interpersonal level by challenging ageism.

Older people of course, are diverse and incorporating perspectives which explore the intersections of age, gender, race, class and sexuality contributes to the development of an approach that recognises diversity and various historical contexts in order to appreciate generational difference. Social work as a profession can contribute to providing improved services for older women who are managing the impact of child sexual abuse by understanding the role of age discourse and how it creates disciplinary power, rebutting ageist scripts and contributing to reconstructions of age identities (Gullette 2004, pp. 135-7). This requires the capacity to recognize the diversity and range of narratives that exist and that are possible for older women. Engaging with critical perspectives that link the personal with the political, interrogate the relationship between the political and economic
contexts of ageing and understanding how they serve to constitute the material conditions of older peoples’ lives are key propositions for social work frameworks in practice aimed at addressing age oppression.

Anti-ageist practice in social work must also include reflective practice and reflexive thinking (Fook & Gardner 2007). Hence I argue that a reflexive approach in social work is important in understanding internalised assumptions that stereotype older people, particularly women. Critical gerontology, likewise, maintains a commitment to reflexivity as fundamental for theorists and practitioners in, ‘trying to age critically and consciously in a world that still fears and resists ageing’ (Ray 2008, p. 98). There is a symbiotic relationship between the shaping of knowledge and being fashioned ourselves by the very same concepts (Ray 2008). As practitioners ourselves growing older or working with older people, it is necessary, if we are to engage with a shared commitment to the values and ethics of social work, to adopt reflective processes that interrogate internalized ageism (Biggs 2008). Reflexivity requires a consciousness between generations that seeks, ‘a relationship of complementarity rather than dominance’ (Biggs 2008, p. 118), in order to build equality between generations (Biggs 2008). Wilson (2000, p. 4) is instructive regarding ageism and the social construction of age when she tells us that, ‘there is no universal old person.’ I discovered from speaking with the women in my study that my own views about ageing and direct practice were constantly challenged. I support the inclusion of theoretical perspectives from critical gerontology and feminism, and more specifically feminist gerontology (Ray 1996; Garner 1999b), to inform social work curriculum, as a tool to understand the intersection between age and
gender. As practitioners, educators and learners, such a framework would also enhance the ability to be reflexive and develop service responses which centre the perspectives of older women and are informed by critical theory frameworks. One benefit to adopting a critical approach to working with older women, includes a ‘critical engagement’ (Chambers 2004, p. 753) with the perspectives of older women that accounts for the possible multiple meanings of experiences in their lives (Chambers 2004). This is particularly relevant for understanding the impact of childhood sexual abuse.

Older women’s stories about their experiences of child sexual abuse are informative for social work practitioners in terms of direct service and public advocacy. Clearly, older women form a diverse group and primarily, recognition of the potential multiplicity of experience and context in older women’s lives, is, as I have argued, crucial in challenging dominant stereotypes and addressing inequality and marginalisation. My study, with a small group of women has highlighted some of this complexity which is instructive for social workers. Significantly, the women who came forward to participate in my study, shared experiences which, due to the number of years of living with those memories and experiencing change through a variety of social and historical contexts, distinguishes their needs and perspectives from younger groups. The women discussed how, for instance, having children and grandchildren, at times, mitigated painfulness associated with past child sexual abuse, but also how it was a source for further challenge, particularly if their children or grandchildren had experienced childhood sexual abuse. Also, it appeared that, for a variety of reasons, there were particular difficulties associated with counselling models (and sometimes not). Where
women chose not to access services, this may be a reflection of how the historical contexts of the women are not considered in current service models. Telling their stories may not necessarily be restorative, and counselling models may not be the only way that older women manage their challenges. It is salient to consider that identity, and a sense of self is constituted in social and historical contexts and for women in Western society those social scripts have been formed with the expectation that women may be ‘self-effacing rather than self-promoting; orientated toward private, rather than public life; responsive to others’ needs and desires before her own; more likely to emphasize relationships and subjective states over accomplishments; and anecdotal in her means of expression’ (Ray 2000a, p. 77). Thus the social location of older women’s narratives is a crucial consideration of how they may be constructed by discourse and how they may have resisted and reconstructed boundaries. The women in my study demonstrated self-practices of adaption, defence and transformation. Because we are all influenced to speak about ourselves and others in particular ways by the social scripts of our time and place, the way in which we tell stories about the past reflects our constructed expectations, desires and fears. For older women

A troubled past may make a women especially vulnerable in old age, and her refusal to tell a life story may be a healthy sign of self-protection. In certain situations, a woman may better gain a sense of control and personal empowerment by not telling her life story. (Ray 2000b, p. 60)

Older women’s stories are instructive in terms of what constitutes the nature of their experience in a particular social and historical context. Their particular views may share commonalities with younger women, and
certainly the women in my study did share stories of shame, fear, anger, institutionalised neglect and secrecy which has been discussed by many women across all age groups. Also, however, their stories include distinctions. Perhaps it is better to conceptualise empowerment, an important practice in social work, with attention to the complex ways that ‘empowerment’ can be experienced in old age. This is akin to the way Morell (2003), approaches the de-stigmatisation of the ageing body, disability, sickness or death through a dialectical approach to empowerment, so that talk and thinking about ageing encompasses, ‘bodies and consciousness and spirit’ (Morell 2003, p. 83). For the women in my study this equates to affirmation of vulnerability, fear and worry, as well as strength, passion and coming through the difficulties, all of which were expressed by the women in my study in relation to childhood sexual abuse. In order to resist discourses of ‘successful’ ageing, or decay, an empowering approach, ‘requires recognition of this fullness’ (Morell 2003, p. 84).

I have found that, in unassuming ways, the women in my study demonstrate activism in their everyday lives. By living out their beliefs, expressing their ideas through community involvement on issues important to them, connecting to the natural world, making lives from little, developing rich inner lives, and participating in research such as mine, they politicise the issue of child sexual abuse in their particular ways. Whilst it is important to focus on subjectivity, as I have done in this study, it is important to not then dichotomise and categorise ‘experience’ over the political. More broadly, I see this as an ongoing project to balance the theoretical positions of feminist activism and the postmodern exploration of the self in understanding and
addressing sexual violence against women. All these aspects constitute developments in anti-ageist practice for social work.

**Limitations**

I have already acknowledged the particularity of my study and therefore my modest claim to knowledge production. Suffice to say, the perspectives represented in my study are not necessarily indicative of older women more broadly, or specifically any particular group of women. Additionally, my topic is focused on one issue only; one aspect of the women’s lives, being childhood sexual abuse. Therefore, whilst my research focuses on a particular aspect in considering the intersection of age and gender, a limitation of my study is attention to other axes of identity such as race, class or sexuality. I believe that it is important to listen to and seek the views of older women, and I would further argue that this process should include the diverse backgrounds and contexts of many older women across a range of issues which impact on wellbeing and equality.

Further research, I suggest, should consider the complexity associated with axes of identity. My understanding, which attempts to be inclusive of the nuance and diversity in contemporary cultures and society, aims to conceptualise identity as ‘web-like’ (Gatens 2014, p. 44) rather than fixed categories which can be applied in analysis unproblematically. The potential discussion and debate regarding this aspect of limitation is beyond the scope of my thesis, however, I believe it is worth engaging with for future age related research.
Another limitation of my study is also its strength. The women in my study volunteered for a study which asked them about how they managed child sexual abuse over their lifetimes. Clearly, there will be women who did not respond to my call for participants based on the assumption that I was searching for women who had experienced difficulties. Are there women who do not perceive their ‘management’ of issues as problematic? If I were to revise my questions in light of what I have learned, this point would be explored to a greater extent. Conversely too, the women who responded to my research may have come as a result of reaching a particular point of strength in their lives whereby they could talk about their experiences. Future research might consider that women who are particularly ‘resilient’ may be more likely to come forward.

Based on how the women responded in conversation with me, I have often wondered, throughout the experience of single interviews with the women, whether I might have adopted a focus group style of research method or indeed, in-depth interviews rather than semi-structured singular interviews. My thinking has been influenced by understanding that in a sort space of time, the women spoke honestly, at length, directly and in complex ways about their experiences. I feel that, had I prepared for a greater immersion with them, either through in-depth discussion or via the women sharing their stories and perspectives with other women in the study, then perhaps the reach for greater clarity, depth and breadth would have emerged. Oftentimes, during the interviews, I could see the potential in the women having conversations with one another for their own sake. I believe it would have been instructive, uplifting and affirming for them to hear one another’s stories. I often heard
some of the women speak about their interest in hearing what other participants had told me.

Conclusion

My research is a unique study which has explored the struggles, insights, commonalities and the contradictions of a small group of older women and their reflections of the impact of childhood sexual abuse over their lifetimes. It is significant to hear from them and contest, in a small but powerful and important way, barriers which marginalise their voices and perspectives. I have been myself, entirely humbled by the strength and resolve with which these women enact resistance and reconstruct meanings in their everyday lives, often in formidable circumstances. Remaining open to the countless possibilities and research pathways that have arisen in writing about, meeting and speaking with the women who kindly volunteered for my project, has been an essential ethic at the heart of this work.
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Appendix 1: RMIT Website Recruitment

Volunteers are needed for research looking into the experiences of women who suffered childhood sexual abuse. Image © istockphoto.

July 17, 2009

Volunteers needed for research on abuse survivors

Older women who suffered childhood sexual abuse are needed to share their experiences as part of an RMIT University research project that aims to help develop better counselling and support services for older people.

RMIT researcher Tina Kostecki hopes to speak with women aged 65 and over to find out about their experiences of dealing with the pain of sexual abuse.

Ms Kostecki, a PhD candidate who has worked as a counsellor for 23 years, said most research on survivors of child abuse focused on younger women.

"There's very little information about women from older age groups, even though their stories could offer invaluable insights into the ways people cope with the experience of sexual abuse," she said.

"I would like to find out how these women managed through their lives, what meaning they have made of their experiences and what has been helpful to them over the years. "The voices of older survivors of abuse need to be heard so that we can identify how we can improve counselling and other services for older people, and develop better approaches to ensure this generation receives the help they need."

The research involves an initial hour-long interview, followed by a second meeting where Ms Kostecki will share the findings of her research and give volunteers an opportunity to comment and contribute further.

Volunteers will remain entirely anonymous and will be free to stop or withdraw from the study at any time, or to refrain from discussing issues that make them uncomfortable, including any details of the abuse they suffered.

The questions volunteers will be asked include:

- What meaning do you make of your experience of childhood sexual abuse?
- Has this changed over your lifetime?
- What meaning does this have for you?
- What has assisted you during your lifetime?
- What has not assisted you?

The research is supervised by Dr Susie Costello, Senior Lecturer in the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT.

To find out more about the study or to volunteer, contact Ms Kostecki confidentially on XXXX or email XXXX.
Appendix 2: ‘The Senior’ News article

Appendix 3: Letter to Agencies

DATE: July 2009

Dear

My name is Tina Kostecki and I am undertaking a research project called: "Insights from Elder Women: Learning from Stories of Elder Australian Women Who Have Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse" for a PhD course in Social Science at RMIT University.

Currently I work as a lecturer at Deakin University and I have worked as a practitioner for 23 years (12 years at CASA House and Barwon CASA combined).

I am hoping to interview women aged 65 years and older about their experience/s of the impact of childhood sexual abuse with the aim of contributing to counselling services and other general services for elder people about the best approaches for managing the effects of these experiences. Most research in this area has focused on the experiences of younger women.

I understand that services will receive many requests for assistance with research projects and that you will need to be clear about any involvement. Therefore, I have enclosed a description of the research project. I am hoping that you will make this information available to any women you might think would be interested in participating. Also I am able to come and speak in person with you if you wish.

I anticipate that there will only be a small number of women to which this project will apply. For this reason I have enclosed a general advertisement which asks whether people know of someone who might be interested.

The interview will be anonymous and voluntary and participants are free to only disclose and discuss issues to their level of comfortability.

I would be most appreciative if you could let me know whether you are prepared to display the advertisement and also send the material to potentially interested women.

My project has been approved by the RMIT Ethics Committee.

If you would like to contact me, my details are: XXXX

Thank you very much,
Yours sincerely,
Tina Kostecki
School of Global Studies, Social Sciences & Planning,
RMIT University,
XXXX,
Melbourne, VIC, 3001.

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Executive Officer, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001.
Details of the complaints procedure are available at:
http://www.rmit.edu.au/rd/hrec_complaints
Appendix 4: RMIT Plain Language Statement

DATE

Hello,

My name is Tina Kostecki and I am a student undertaking a research project called: “Insights from Elder Women: Learning from Stories of Elder Australian Women Who Have Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse” for a PhD course in Social Science at RMIT University.

If you are aged 65 years or older, I would like to interview you about your experience/s of the impact of childhood sexual abuse to help with developing counselling services and other general services for elder people about the best approaches for managing the effects of these experiences. Most research in this area has focused on the experiences of younger women.

I would like to hear about how your experience/s of childhood sexual abuse affected you throughout your life and how you managed this.

You do not have to discuss anything which makes you feel uncomfortable including any details of the abuse that you may have suffered. Your safety and comfort will be an absolute priority through the research process.

The interviews will conversational, informal and designed to give you the space to talk about your perspectives, experiences and ideas in the way you would like. With your permission, I would like to tape the interviews. After that I will invite you for another interview where I will share the findings of my research and give you the opportunity to comment and contribute further.

My questions will be:

- What meaning do you make of your experience of childhood sexual abuse?
- Has this changed over your lifetime?
- What meaning does this have for you?
- What has assisted you during your lifetime?
- What has not assisted you?

The interview is entirely anonymous and voluntary. You are free to only disclose whatever you are comfortable with and you can stop or withdraw at any time. I also welcome you to ask me any questions.

I would like you to read over your responses to check that you are comfortable with and you can stop or withdraw at any time. I also welcome you to ask me any questions.

I will provide a list of support/counselling services should you feel you would like to have ongoing support with issues that may have arisen during the research. I can assist with making a referral for you if that is what you would like to do or you may wish to contact a service directly yourself.

The research and what you tell me may be used to write articles for academic journals and may be used by counsellors in this field.
We will use a research name when taping and remove anything that could identify you.

If you have any concerns please contact me on XXXX or via email XXXX or my supervisor Dr. XXXX via email XXXX

If you agree I will give you a phone call to see if you still want to be a part of the research project.

Thank you for participating in this project,

Tina Kostecki
School of Global Studies, Social Sciences & Planning,
RMIT University,
XXXX
Melbourne, VIC, 3001.
PH: XXXX

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Executive Officer, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001.

Details of the complaints procedure are available at:
http://www.rmit.edu.au/rd/hrec_complaints
Appendix 5: Explanation of Interview

Preamble:

I am interested in talking with women who are aged 65 and over about their experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Mainly I would like to know about how they managed throughout their lives.

You do not have to discuss any detail/s of the abuse.

If you would like to join the study, I would like to have a conversation with you about this part of your life. Mostly I would like to talk generally, however I have some questions that I am particularly interested in asking.

You do not have to answer these if you do not wish. You can also ask to stop the interview or to withdraw from the research process at any time. You are also welcome to ask me any questions.

The interview is entirely voluntary and anonymous and we will use a pseudonym as your research name.

At the end of the interview I will type up the tape recorded interview. I will call you in a week time to ask how you are and whether you would like to read over your response so that you can change it if you want. Later, once I have collected information from other women, I will invite you to meet with me again so that I can discuss my results with you and any themes that emerge. I would like you to also contribute by commenting on these results if you wish.

Here are my questions:

- What meaning do you make of your experience of childhood sexual abuse?
- Has this changed over your lifetime?
- What do you think of the ideas associated with the words/concepts of ‘recovery’, ‘healing’, ‘moving on’ or ‘getting over it’?
- What meaning does this have for you?
- What has/does assisted you during your lifetime?
- What has/does not assist you now?
- Is there anything else that you would like to contribute?

To Finish:

I will type up the interview and call you in a week to see if you would like to go over your responses. Remember that some of the words you use may be used in academic writing and will be used in my thesis. We can change anything that you are not happy with or that could identify you.

Please have this list of support services that I am giving to all participants who can provide assistance with any ongoing concerns or issues. I can assist with a referral if that is what you would like to do, or, you may wish to contact a service directly yourself.

Thank you for your valued and valuable participation.

Tina Kostecki.
Appendix 6: Letter to participants
January 2011

4th January 2011

Hello everyone,

At last I have finished some initial preliminary summaries of all the discussions that I have had with everyone who generously agreed to participate in my research project. I thought I would write a group letter to keep you up to date with what I am doing.

Firstly I wanted to say how privileged I have felt to meet you all and to be allowed to discuss such difficult times and feelings with you. I am so entirely struck by the generosity, insight, humility, grace and humanity of you all. What a privilege for me. I have laughed and cried during the times when I have been reading back over what everybody has contributed. Thank you is not enough to say.

I had mentioned that I would send you all the themes as I see them, however my supervisors have suggested that I do this further down the track once I have worked on what I am actually going to say about each of the themes. So I will do this in the coming year now.

At that time I will be very interested to hear your reflections about them, if you feel you want to respond. Of course you don’t need to at all if you don’t want to. If you do want to respond, I am happy to meet with you again to talk about your reflections, or you can call me (I will call you back to save the phone call cost), or you can write to me or you can email (I know some of you are very into using the email and so am I!). I think it will be interesting at least to read what others’ have said. Some of it will be similar to your own sentiments and some of it will be quite different. That’s to be expected of course.

For the moment though, I am a bit delayed with my timing schedule. Mainly this is because I was unwell towards the end of last year. Thank you for all your support during this time and your patience!

I think I have mentioned to most of you that I have moved my enrolment to Deakin University from RMIT as I find it easier because I also work at Deakin University. I can still however meet people in Melbourne if you wanted to meet again when the time comes. We can arrange a place that suits you.
I am going to spend this year writing. I need to re-do my literature review plus work on the chapter which will discuss the themes. After that I will send you the entire discussion chapter so you can see what I am saying and how the themes relate to issues that concern older women and childhood abuse. Of course please feel free to contact me at any time to discuss any aspect of my work. I am more than happy to talk about that with you all.

As I have said to a few of you, I am slow because as you all know, life gets in the way and this last year I have had some illness which set me back some, in addition to the usual responsibilities of family, work etc.

Finally, after reading through and compiling the themes, I think the title of my thesis will be:

“Resistance & Reconstruction: older women talk about childhood sexual abuse.”

You’ll see why once you read through the themes and why I thought to call it this way. My title needs to only be 10 words long so I cannot include other words that I originally wanted to and I have had to shorten it to bare bones!

Thank you again so much for your continued participation, I really cannot express my gratitude enough. I think what you have all contributed and spoken about is so important and inspiring.

Here are my details if you have misplaced them:

Phone: XXXX
Email: XXXX
Address: Tina Kostecki
c/- Deakin University
XXXX

Take care all of you,

Kind Regards,

Tina
Appendix 7: Letter to participants
January 2015

Date: January 2015

Dear

I hope this letter finds you well. I know it has been some time since we last met and I am now nearing the completion of my project.

I am writing again at this time to invite you to attend a second interview with me as we discussed at our initial contact. This is completely voluntary and there is no requirement for you to attend. The purpose of the interview will be to provide an opportunity to share some of the outcomes from my project and to provide an opportunity for you to comment further in light of the themes if you wish to do so.

At this second interview, I will again tape any further contributions you wish to make to the study so that I can transcribe them and include them in the final discussion. Alternatively, you may simply like to hear about the themes and not make any further contribution in which case, I will not tape the conversation.

If you would like to attend an interview, or you may simply prefer that I send you a summary of the themes, please contact me on XXXX, which is my mobile number, the same as it was previously. You can also contact me via my email address: tina.kostecki@deakin.edu.au

We can then discuss the arrangement which is most suitable for you and I will then arrange for a space at Deakin University, or another private and convenient location to meet.

Thanking you again for your participation and I look forward to hearing from you,

Regards,

Tina Kostecki
PhD Candidate

Deakin University
Locked Bag 20000, Geelong, VIC 3220
Deakin Switchboard +61 3 52271100
tina.kostecki@deakin.edu.au
www.deakin.edu.au
Deakin University CRICOS Provider Code 00113B
TO: Participants – Australian women aged 57 years and over who have experienced childhood sexual abuse

Plain Language Statement

Date: 3rd February 2010

Full Project Title: Insights from Older Women: Learning from Stories of Older Australian Women Who Have Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse.

Principal Researcher: Prof. Bob Pease
Student Researcher: Ms. Krystyna Kostecki
Associate Researcher(s): Dr. Selma MacFarlane

1. Your Consent

You are invited to take part in this research project.

This Plain Language Statement contains detailed information about the research project. Its purpose is to explain to you as openly and clearly as possible all the procedures involved in this project before you decide whether or not to take part in it.

Please read this Plain Language Statement carefully. Feel free to ask questions about any information in the document. You may also wish to discuss the project with a relative or friend or your local health worker. Feel free to do this.

Once you understand what the project is about and if you agree to take part in it, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form. By signing the Consent Form, you indicate that you understand the information and that you give your consent to participate in the research project.
You will be given a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep as a record.

2. **Purpose and background**

The purpose of this project is to speak with Australian women aged 57 years and over about their experience/s regarding the impact of childhood sexual abuse during their lifetimes. In providing a space for the perspectives of this group, I anticipate that the research will assist with developing counselling services and other general services for people from older age groups. In particular I am interested in what might be the best approaches for managing the effects of experiences related to childhood sexual abuse for women in older age groups.

Much of the research conducted to date in this area is largely focused on younger women. Therefore there is little we know of the experiences for women in older generations (i.e. from 57 years and over). It is important for us as social work practitioners to be inclusive of many different groups of people when we are providing services, in this case, counselling and support services.

You are invited to participate in this research project because your experiences will assist to inform practitioners in the field about what you believe to be the best way or important elements in providing these services. As a researcher and practitioner, I am also interested in your views so as to make the perspectives of women from older generations more visible. This too is an area in the research literature where the insights from this group of people in the research are absent.

3. **Procedures**

In respect of your participation in this project, I would like to hear about how your experience/s of childhood sexual abuse affected you throughout your life and how you managed this. I will be conducting interviews to speak directly with you or you may wish to submit a written piece. It is expected that each interview will take around one hour, and will be conducted at a mutually convenient location.

A total of up to 20 people will participate in this project.

You do not have to discuss anything which makes you feel uncomfortable including any details of the abuse that you may have suffered. Your safety and comfort will be an absolute priority throughout the research process.

The interviews will be conversational, informal and designed to provide the space to talk about your perspectives, experiences and ideas in the way you would like.

With your permission, I would like to tape the interview. We will use a research name and remove any reference to identifying material. After that I will invite you for another interview where I will share the findings of my research and give you the opportunity to comment and contribute further.

My questions will be:

- What meaning do you make of your experience of childhood sexual abuse?
- Has this changed over your lifetime?
- What do you think of the ideas associated with the words/concepts of ‘recovery’, ‘healing’, ‘moving on’ or ‘getting over it’?
- What meaning does this have for you?
- What has/does assisted you during your lifetime?
- What has/does not assist you now?
- Is there anything else that you would like to contribute?
The interview is entirely anonymous and voluntary. You are free to disclose whatever you are comfortable with and you can stop or withdraw at any time. I also welcome you to ask me any questions.

Following the interview I will transcribe the interviews into a written format and omit any specific names and references which may be identifying. You may wish to read over your responses and check that you are comfortable with everything that has been recorded. You can ask for anything to be deleted or altered. You are also welcome to have a copy of your responses.

The research will be monitored through regular meetings with my two supervisors during the project.

4. Possible benefits

Possible benefit for you from this research will be to have the opportunity to have your views and perspectives heard in a safe environment. There is no guarantee however that you will receive any benefit from your participation in this study.

Beyond individual benefits, I hope that the outcomes from the research will influence the development of services, the skills and knowledge of those working in this field, as well as other women who may have similar experiences.

5. Possible Risks

Your participation in the research could cause some anxiety, stress or emotional pain as you recall your experiences of abuse.

If this happens during the interview, I am able to offer you a choice of several options: (1) a chance to take a short break during the interview and recommence afterwards, (2) a chance to discontinue the interview and recommence at another time suitable to you, (3) discontinue the interview altogether, (4) attend telephone counselling available through the provision of support/counselling services contact details and (5) provide you with details of services which can provide counselling assistance should you feel you would like to have ongoing support with issues that may have arisen during the research. I can assist with making a referral for you if that is what you would like to do or you may wish to contact a service directly yourself.

You are free to withdraw consent at any time throughout the research project and your participation in the study will cease immediately and any information obtained will not be used.

6. Privacy, Confidentiality and Disclosure of Information

Any information obtained in connection with this research project that can identify you will remain confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this research project. It will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law.

All data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office until the project is completed, then it will be transferred to a locked cabinet at Deakin University for a minimum of period of six years from the day of publication.

If you give your permission by signing the Consent Form, I plan to share, discuss and publish the results with other colleagues, organisations and practitioners provided the confidentiality arrangements are adhered to and I will inform you in advance of any publication of material in advance if you so wish.

The results of this research may be used to help myself as a researcher, to obtain a qualification. It will form the basis of my thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the PhD degree at Deakin University. The research and what you tell me may be
also used to write articles for academic journals and may be read and quoted by counsellors or other academics in this field.

In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. As mentioned, I will use research names in writing about the stories of any participant and in addition, I will check with you beforehand where I decide to use specific quotes so that you are aware of any exact wording that I will use.

7. Results of Project

You will be given the opportunity during the interview to indicate if you would like to receive feedback from the outcome of the research. The thesis will be available electronically.

8. Participation is Voluntary

Participation in any research project is voluntary. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage.

Your decision whether to take part or not to take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will not affect your relationship with Deakin University.

Before you make your decision, a member of the research team will be available so that you can ask any questions you have about the research project. You can ask for any information you want. Sign the Consent Form only after you have had a chance to ask your questions and have received satisfactory answers.

If you decide to withdraw from this project, please notify a member of the research team before you withdraw. This notice will allow that person or the research supervisor to inform you if there are any health risks or special requirements linked to withdrawing.

9. Ethical Guidelines

This project will be carried out according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007, produced by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia. This statement has been developed to protect the interests of people who agree to participate in human research studies.

The ethical aspects of this research project have been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Deakin University.

This research project may be stopped for a variety of reasons.

10. Complaints

If you have any complaints about any aspect of the project, the way it is being conducted or any questions about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact:

The Manager, Office of Research Integrity, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood Victoria 3125, Telephone: 9251 7129, Facsimile: 9244 6581; research-ethics@deakin.edu.au

Please quote project number [2010-037].
11. Further Information, Queries or Any Problems

If you require further information or if you have any problems concerning this project, you can contact me as the principal researcher:

- **Ms. Krystyna C. Kostecki**
  
  PhD Candidate
  
  School of Health & Social Development
  Deakin University
  1 Gheringhap St
  Geelong Vic 3217
  PH: XXXX
  Email: XXXX

The supervisors who are also responsible for this project and who may also be contacted are as follows:

- **Professor Bob Pease**
  
  Chair in Social Work
  
  School of Health & Social Development
  Deakin University
  1 Gheringhap St
  Geelong Vic 3217
  PH: XXXX
  Email: XXXX

- **Dr. Selma MacFarlane**
  
  Lecturer in Social Work
  
  School of Health & Social Development
  Deakin University
  1 Gheringhap St
  Geelong Vic 3217
  PH: XXXX
  Email: XXXX
CONSENT FORM

TO: Participant

Date: 3rd February 2010

Full Project Title: Insights from Older Women: Learning from Stories of Older Australian Women Who Have Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse.

Reference Number: 2010-037

I have read, or have had read to me and I understand the attached Plain Language Statement.

I freely agree to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Plain Language Statement.

I have been given a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep.

The researcher has agreed not to reveal my identity and personal details, including where information about this project is published, or presented in any public form.

I agree to be audio taped subject to the stated conditions to ensure confidentiality.

Participant’s Name (printed) ………………………………………………………………………

Signature ……………………………………………………… Date …………………

Name of researcher: Ms. Krystyna C. Kostecki
C- School of Health & Social Development
Deakin University
Waterfront Campus
GEELONG 3220
TO: Participant

---

**Revocation of Consent Form**

*(To be used for participants who wish to withdraw from the project)*

**Date:**

**Full Project Title:** Insights from Older Women: Learning from Stories of Older Australian Women Who Have Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse.

**Reference Number:** 2010-037

---

I hereby wish to WITHDRAW my consent to participate in the above research project and understand that such withdrawal WILL NOT jeopardise my relationship with Deakin University.

Participant’s Name (printed) ……………………………………………………..

Signature ………………………………………………………………………….. Date ……………………

---

Please mail or fax this form to:

Name of researcher: Ms. Krystyna C. Kostecki
C- School of Health & Social Development
Deakin University
Waterfront Campus
GEELONG 3220
PH: 0411 826 800