MAKING CONNECTIONS: INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE,
WOMEN, AND LEARNING IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

by

Mary Marjorie Curran Brooks

B.Ed., University of Saskatchewan, 1976
B.A. (Honours), University of Alberta, 1998
M.Ed., University of Alberta, 2001

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Educational Studies)
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

April 2008

© Mary Marjorie Curran Brooks, 2008
ABSTRACT

Interpersonal violence against women is a prevalent and often accepted part of North American life. Statistics from both Canada and the United States indicate that one-half of North American women have experienced at least one incident of sexual or physical violence that affects their physical, emotional, and/or mental health. Governments and institutions, including educational institutions, minimize the prevalence of violence and the often debilitating effects it can have on women, silencing the voices of women who have experienced violence, and obscuring the need for intervention and prevention.

The primary objective of this study was to examine the connections between women's experiences with interpersonal violence and their educational experiences in graduate school. More generally, I hoped to add to the limited information about how violence affects learning. I interviewed 11 female graduate students who had experienced interpersonal violence about their experiences in graduate school. The research revealed that the participants connected their experiences with interpersonal violence to their graduate school experiences through the effects of unequal relations of power and of silencing on their self-confidence and self-determination. They also recognized graduate school as a place where they were sometimes able to recover a sense of voice and personal authority that they felt was "lost" in their violent interpersonal relationship(s).

The study findings point to the need for university policy makers and administrators, faculty, and students to understand the effects that experiencing violence may have on women's learning. At the most basic level, policy makers and administrators must think about the gendered implications when creating policies and suggesting strategies for implementation. In addition, pedagogical policies and practices, including the graduate supervisory model, need to be examined from a gendered perspective for issues of power and the possible abuse(s) of power. Through recognizing the prevalence and effects of interpersonal violence against women and addressing how relations of power in graduate school programs may reflect those experiences and affect women's learning, institutions of higher education will increase opportunities for female students and others affected by violence, to be successful, and will strengthen the learning of all students.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>.................................................................</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: IN THE BEGINNING: THE STORY OF A RESEARCH PROJECT</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Research</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Motivation</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Standpoint</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary Ideas about Violence, Women, and Learning</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation Structure</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: THINKING ABOUT WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND GRADUATE SCHOOL</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against Women</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories of Violence against Women</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as Masochists</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as Victims</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as Survivors</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Feminist Theories of Violence against Women</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in Graduate School</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Supervision: Roles and Relationships</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Trends Affecting University Policies and Practices</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Pedagogies</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and Voice</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY: THE ETHICS OF RESEARCHING WOMEN'S STORIES</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Inquiry: Telling Stories to Facilitate Understanding</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: MAKING CONNECTIONS: RELATIONS OF POWER</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is this “Thing” Called Power?</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power at Work</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Work: Unrecognized Relations of Power?</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worn Down and Disempowered: The Effects of Power Over</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Oh my god! That’s so it!”: Finding a Sense of Power</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Comments</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: MAKING CONNECTIONS: THE POWER OF VOICE</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Silenced/Being Silent</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to the women in my study—Carolyn, Claire, Emma, Edith, Esma, Jane, Lynn, Molly, Ramona, Svele, and Zoe—who joined me in my exploration of how interpersonal violence affects learning in graduate school. I feel honoured that they were willing to share their stories with me and greatly value their comments and support as I have worked on this research and dissertation.

Thank you to my research supervisor, Dr. Deirdre Kelly, for her guidance and support and to my committee members, Dr. Mary Russell and Dr. Michelle Stack for their valuable feedback on my dissertation drafts. Thank you, also, to Dr. Allison Tom who served as a committee member for two years and who was always available when I needed to talk through the many questions and worries I had as I started my research.

A special thank you to my Study Sisters—Dr. Janice Murphy, Dr. Romee Lee, Deborah Prieur, Betsy Alkenbrack, Lisa Moy, and Debra Sutherland—without whom finishing this dissertation would have been difficult, if not impossible. Their continued support, both personal and academic, has been invaluable.

Throughout the process of researching and writing my dissertation, many people provided support through their willingness to listen to my almost continual discussions of my research and writing. My thanks to all of you for your patience and support. Our discussions helped me clarify my thinking throughout my PhD program. In particular, I would like to thank Linda Brooklyn who has stood by me throughout both of my graduate school programs. She has never known me when I was not a student and her willingness to be part of my educational explorations has sustained me on many a “down” day. Thanks, too, to Sally S., who was instrumental in helping me understand the importance of power in abusive relationships of all kinds.

Finally, but always, I am grateful to my daughters, Janine Klaas and Krista Gilliland, for their love, their ongoing support, and their unwavering belief that I can achieve any goal I set for myself.
DEDICATION

For my mother

Barbara Elizabeth Curran Brooks
CHAPTER ONE:

IN THE BEGINNING: THE STORY OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

Introduction to the Research

Interpersonal violence against women is a prevalent and often accepted part of North American life. According to Statistics Canada’s 1994 survey, one half of Canadian women have survived at least one incident of sexual or physical violence (Ogrodnik, 2006). In the United States, a report issued jointly by the National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 52 percent of surveyed American women said they had similar experiences (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). World-wide, violence against women is widespread. According to the United Nations Population Fund (2005):

Gender-based violence is perhaps the most widespread and socially tolerated of human rights violations. It both reflects and reinforces inequities between men and women and compromises the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims.

Violence affects women’s physical, emotional, and mental health, undermining their sense of self-worth and self-confidence and leaving them feeling isolated and without support. In addition, societal attitudes toward women who have experienced violence often intensify these women’s feelings of self-blame, shame, and loneliness by blaming the victim and treating violence against women as a personal matter that does not deserve public exposure and attention. Governments and institutions, including educational institutions, downplay the prevalence of violence (Eyre, 2000) and the often debilitating effects it can have on women, silencing the voices of women who have experienced violence and obscuring the need for intervention and prevention.
Although violence against women is prevalent in North America and around the world and the effects of violence on physical, mental, and emotional health are well documented, the effects of interpersonal violence on women's learning are often not recognized or addressed. What are the consequences for women's educational experiences of this lack of awareness? What is the role that universities can play in recognizing the problem and challenging the status quo?

**Researcher Motivation**

This research is one result of the many questions I have had throughout my life about the importance of education to me and how my experiences have affected my learning. As a student—child and adult—and a teacher—of children and adults, I have continually questioned the effects of experience on classroom behaviours and academic learning.

When I taught elementary school, I felt an affinity for the children in my classes who were labelled “bad”—the ones who couldn’t sit still, who questioned authority, who lit fire to garbage cans, who wore Madonna-type clothes, who stuck to themselves, and/or who drew pictures of bloody battles instead of taking part in classroom activities. Often, after talking with their parents, I learned that many of my students had difficult lives outside of school. I had no question that what happened to the students outside of class greatly affected what they were able to accomplish in school and how they behaved in class. My own childhood, including my school life, was less than ideal and, when I looked at the “problem children” in my classes, I recognized some aspects of myself. In my case, violence and the threat of violence greatly affected my behaviour and participation in school.
After teaching elementary school for many years, I took my first Women's Studies class at the community college in the small city where I lived. My entire way of thinking changed as I learned about the prevalence of violence against women and the effects on women of being in abusive relationships. As a result of my continuing participation in what became an undergraduate degree in Women's Studies, I left my abusive marriage, moved from the city where I had lived for 20 years, and went back to university. In my Women's Studies classes, I met other women who had experienced, or were experiencing, violence and abuse in their interpersonal relationships. They sometimes revealed their stories in class but, more often, during informal gatherings.

In addition to my studies, I worked as a teaching assistant with a Literacy/Community Integration Project (CIP) and volunteered in a classroom in a women's prison. In the literacy program, the immigrant women who attended were encouraged to write about their experiences, both recent and past, and to share their journal writing with others. During these journal writing times, the women would often end up in tears, and if they were able to talk about their writing, they revealed terrible stories of violence and abuse. Some women had seen their families murdered in front of them. Many had been raped by soldiers, police, or military officials. Some had escaped their countries and come to Canada in small boats. Many had husbands who beat them, raped them, or abused them psychologically, financially, and emotionally. Many lived in unsafe buildings in neighbourhoods where violence was commonplace. When they talked (or wrote) about their experiences, they cried, apologized, and then became silent. The teacher of the class did not seem to know what to do with them. She did not talk about violence or engage in any kind of dialogue with the women about their lives.
During class, some of the women exhibited behaviours that I did not understand. For example, some women became very violent and would shout at or hit other women with seemingly no provocation. Some women were very uncomfortable if the door was left open and would move to the furthest corner of the room. Other women were very uncomfortable if the door was closed. They would look fearfully at it from time to time and would open it now and then. Some women would not engage in classroom activities, especially if addressed personally. They would be fine on the bus or in informal work situations, but reacted fearfully if addressed directly. As part of the program, we often brought community speakers in to talk to the women about different aspects of Canadian life. One week we discussed bringing in a police officer to talk about law enforcement. The women reacted with horror! The police were bad. They were afraid. They said they would not come to class even if the police officer were female. These incidents made me reflect on how the women’s past and present experiences and their fears and worries were affecting what they could accomplish. How could I help them achieve their learning goals?

In the women’s prison, the 10 to 30 women who attended school were working at individual educational programs. The teacher was there to help anyone having difficulties and to keep order, while I was there to help by assisting individual women. Depending on their academic level and their assignments, the women would often write personal stories of their lives and their feelings about their lives. During these projects, women would cry, curse, stop working, and/or put their heads down on their arms. Sometimes they were unable to continue for the rest of the class time. Women were also called out of class to be patted down (perhaps to check for drugs?) in the hall. They returned to class swearing or crying and could no longer work on their assignments. I wondered about their lives and
how the violence they had experienced and were still experiencing was affecting their
learning. Certainly it was a huge interruption. Certainly they wrote about it. How else did
their past and present experiences affect what they were learning?

In my Women's Studies program, I was finding learning very difficult. Not only
did I have difficulty adjusting to being back in school, I was unable to feel comfortable
taking part in class discussions. I sat in class, enjoyed the discussions and readings, learned
about myself and the world, and said nothing—absolutely nothing! I was afraid I had
nothing to say—that I was too stupid; that no one wanted to hear what I had to say; that it
(I) was hopeless. Class readings and discussions included theories of violence against
women and the effects of patriarchy and hegemony, and although I found myself thinking
about the relationship from which I had escaped, I was afraid to add to the discussion—I
was afraid that my experiences were too weird or unusual or that the other students (and the
professor) would look upon me with disgust or denigration because I had stayed in a
violent situation for so long.

During the two years it took me to finish the degree, I earned honours marks but
that did not affect how I felt. I often wondered at my feelings of incompetence and fear of
engaging with other students. I wondered if other women ever felt the way I did.
Reflecting on my work with women in the CIP and prison and the stories of my colleagues
and friends, I began to wonder if the violence I experienced was affecting my learning. I
started to read more about the effects of violence on women and to talk about my findings
with women I met.

By the time I started a Master's program in adult education, I had decided I wanted
to research the effects of trauma on women's learning. My idea was to interview women
who had experienced trauma of any kind and talk with them about their experiences of learning, especially in formal settings such as the university. I talked about my future research with the women in my classes, and many of them volunteered to be part of my study. However, my advisor at the time suggested that my intended topic was too big for a Master’s thesis and would be better researched in a PhD program. When I had time, I continued to read about the effects of violence against women while I finished my Master’s. Then I applied to enter a PhD program.

My interest in violence against women and how it affects their learning was influenced to a great extent by Jenny Horsman’s (1999) work with immigrant women in literacy programs. In her book, Horsman discusses the many challenges faced by women who have been traumatised by violence when they enter literacy classrooms. Her work helped me understand that the many behaviours I observed in the literacy class might be reactions to the violence the women had experienced in their lives. My thinking was also informed by the writing of researchers who worked with women in prisons (see, for example Coll, Miller, Fields, & Mathews, 1998; Heney & Kristiansen, 1998; Phillips & Harm, 1998) and my reflections about my experiences volunteering in the women’s prison. As I read these works, I wondered if my educational experiences were being influenced by the violence I had experienced. My informal discussions about the effects of interpersonal violence, with classmates and friends, reinforced my belief that experiences with interpersonal violence and experiences in formal educational settings were connected.
Personal Standpoint

My personal standpoint\(^1\) (see Frank, 2000; Smith, 1987) during this research was influenced in part by my White, middle-class, abled background, my teaching experience, the feminist perspective that I developed after I returned to university, and the interpersonal violence I experienced. Because of my background with male/female violence—as a child and as an adult—my first instinct was to see violence against women as gendered—something men do to women. This belief that gender was the most important aspect of violence kept me from seeing structural/systemic violence, the violence women do, and the relationship of violence to power. My readings and discussions about feminism and other anti-oppression work, together with my personal experiences of coming out as a lesbian during my doctoral work deepened my understanding of violence and oppression and helped me develop a critical feminist analysis.\(^2\) Discussions with members of groups and individuals who work with women who have experienced violence in both same and differently-gendered relationships (for example, Battered Women’s Support Services and lesbian counsellors) and my experiences with and observations of women’s violence toward other women, increased my understanding of the complex nature of interpersonal violence.

I have returned to university during periods of crisis. I look to education to help me understand my experiences and to help me plot the next journey in my life. When asked by my advisor to limit my research to a “manageable group,” I immediately thought of women

\(^1\) Frank (2000) states that “a standpoint [is] a political and ethical act of self-reflection: To take a standpoint means to privilege certain aspects of what your biography shares with others. Taking a standpoint requires self-consciousness about how the fate and choices in your life have positioned you in the world and with whom you have been positioned” (p. 355).

\(^2\) In chapter 2, Initial Literature: Thinking About Women and Violence, I discuss the meaning of critical feminist analysis.
who may have had similar experiences and questions to me—women in graduate school who have interpersonal violence in their backgrounds. In addition, the power imbalances, both structural and personal, intrinsic to the university setting, and the interpersonal relationships that develop between students and faculty, as advisors, supervisors, committee members, and research and teaching guides and employers, have the potential to remind women of their interpersonal relationships outside the university.

**Preliminary Ideas about Violence, Women, and Learning**

Because of my own experiences with interpersonal violence, the experiences of other women who revealed their stories to me, and the reading I have done about interpersonal violence and about education, I developed a number of beliefs or ideas that guided my study plan. These assumptions included the following: (a) women’s experiences with violence affect them in different ways, some of which they may not be aware; (b) women who have been victims of violence would like to understand how it has affected/is affecting them outside of their relationship or encounter; (c) the attitudes of faculty and students toward discussing violence and toward the women who talk or write about it will affect the educational experiences of women who have experienced violence; (d) women’s attitudes toward themselves (e.g., whether or not they feel they are to blame for the violence) will affect how much they are willing to take part in discussions that relate to other oppressions; (e) women’s attitudes toward themselves will also affect whether or not they are willing to talk to their instructors/professors or other students about their classroom behaviour and feelings; (f) the length of time between when a woman experienced violence and attended school and her efforts to work through her experiences may make a difference to how much the violence she experienced will affect her learning;
and (g) many women will not have made the connection between the violence they experience(d), their experiences at the university, and violence against women in society. These preliminary ideas provided the foundation for my research questions and possible exploratory questions. I recognized that just as women’s experiences of interpersonal violence are unique to each of them, so too will be the connections between those experiences and their experiences of learning in graduate school (see Horsman, 2006).

Research Questions

This research addresses the following questions: 1) Do women who have experienced interpersonal violence recognize this violence and their perceptions of it as relevant to their educational experiences in graduate school? In what ways are women’s experiences with interpersonal violence and their graduate school learning experiences related? 2) What beliefs do women who have experienced interpersonal violence associate with their experiences of violence? In what ways are these beliefs associated with their beliefs about themselves as graduate students? 3) Do women relate the contexts of the interpersonal violence they experienced and their graduate school experiences to the larger societal context of violence against women? How are these experiences related?

Because I planned to conduct narrative interviews, allowing the participants to tell their stories in their own way, I designed my initial question to reflect my belief that the women would tell me what was important to them about their experiences, if given the opportunity. I began the interviews by asking participants to tell me about their graduate school experiences and any possible connections these experiences might have to other

---

3 See chapter 3 for a more detailed look at narrative methodology.
experiences in their lives. Because I was asking about personal and sensitive issues, and because I was not certain that the participants would have thought about the relationships between the interpersonal violence they experienced and their experiences in graduate school, I anticipated that I might need a few questions to help the participants explore their ideas. I planned to develop these questions as a result of the interview context (Scheurich, 1995), but also created a few exploratory questions that I thought might be helpful. These questions, in random order, included:

1. Have any of your instructors' identities (e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ableness) affected how you approached your classes or how you thought of yourself as a student? If yes, please tell me about how these identities made a difference.
2. Tell me about any experiences in your classes or at the university that made you feel particularly powerless.
3. Tell me about any experiences in your classes or at the university that made you feel particularly powerful.
4. Tell me about a professor/instructor that you especially liked or disliked. For example, what was it about them or what they did that made you enjoy or not enjoy their classes?
5. Tell me about any class or personal activities that professors/instructors/other students have done that have made you feel valued or appreciated.
6. Tell me about any class or personal activities that professors/instructors/other students have done that have made you feel inadequate, shame, or fear.

---

4 See also Appendix C.
7. Tell me about any times when you were at the university (in class or out) when you were reminded of the violence you experienced.

8. Thinking about when you have been at the university or thinking about graduate school, tell me about any feelings you have had or things you have done that you think are a response to experiencing violence.

As my interviews progressed, my exploratory questions changed to reflect more of what the participants were saying and less of what I had been theorizing before I began the study. Questions about specific identities were dropped as the women indicated that personal characteristics such as empathy, intelligence, and a sense of humour were more important than identities such as gender or ethnicity. Questions of power and powerlessness took on more importance as the participants continually talked about experiences and ideas related to power (I address ideas about relations of power in chapter four).

**Significance of the Study**

Because this was an exploratory study, the findings are not intended to be generalizable to other groups of women, other kinds of violence and trauma, or other educational settings. However, the participants’ stories may provide insight into personal, group, and societal experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Frank, 2000; Mishler, 1986; Richardson, 1990). Other women who have experienced/are experiencing interpersonal violence may recognize their own experiences in the participants’ stories, thus reducing their feelings of isolation and/or alienation, and may see new possibilities for their futures (for example, additional education). Insights provided by the participants’ stories may also influence societal beliefs about women who have experienced interpersonal violence, for
example, that they are helpless victims (see Walker, 1979), and increase understandings of
the effects of violence on women. Educators and educational institutions may become
aware (if they are not already) of the possible existence in their classes of women who have
experienced/are experiencing interpersonal violence, appreciate the efforts needed to
overcome obstacles to learning that are a result of violence, and take steps to address the
concerns of female students. In addition, students, faculty, administrators, and policy
makers may recognize that interpersonal violence is not only a personal problem but the
result of systemic violence against women, and may be motivated to address this violence
at the university. The findings of this research may indicate the need for more extensive
research with different groups of students and with faculty in a variety of educational
settings. This research was also intended to give women with “silenced lives” (see
LeCompte, 1993) a forum in which to talk about parts of their lives that they may have
been unable to speak. Interpersonal violence against women is part of gendered
“systematic and legitimized” violence that is often hidden (see Young, 1992, p. 193). The
silence around this oppression leads to overlooking and disregarding the effects of violence
on women’s lives.

**Dissertation Structure**

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. In this chapter I have introduced
my research by discussing the motivation for, and background of, the study, my personal
standpoint, preliminary beliefs that guided my study, the research goals and questions, and
the significance of the study. In chapter two I discuss literature that initially informed my
study, including theories of violence against women, statistics on, and ideas about, women
in graduate school, current trends affecting university policies and practices, and theories
that address violence against women in educational settings through the use of feminist pedagogies. Although I briefly discuss theories of power and voice, I address these theories in more detail in chapter four and chapter five because the relevance of these theories became more apparent as the research progressed and because I wanted to use these theories to frame my chapters on power and voice. Chapter three outlines my methodology including recruitment, a group profile of my participants, narrative inquiry, and analysis. In chapter four, I detail the participants' ideas about relations of power, both in their interpersonal relationships and in graduate school. I include theories about power that were helpful to the participants' and my understandings of relations of power. In chapter five, I explore the concepts of voice, silence, and experience, from the points of view of both feminist theorists and the participants who used these ideas when talking about their experiences of interpersonal violence and their experiences in graduate school. Chapter six places the participants' comments about the connections between their experiences of interpersonal violence and their experiences in graduate school in the context of violence against women in society and the world. In the concluding chapter, chapter seven, I review key points from the study and suggest implications for policy makers and administrators, faculty, and female graduate students in institutions of higher education. I conclude the chapter with suggestions of areas for further study.
CHAPTER TWO:

THINKING ABOUT WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND GRADUATE SCHOOL

In this chapter I discuss the literature and theories that informed my research. I begin by exploring my understanding of the meaning of violence against women; then I examine theories of violence against women and the effects that these theories may have on women who have experienced violence. Thinking about women in graduate school, I include statistics and theories about female graduate students, an exploration of graduate supervision, global trends that affect university policy and practice, and an overview of feminist pedagogies—theories and practices that address the political nature of teaching and learning. I conclude the chapter with a short look at power, including the closely related concepts of silence and voice—issues that my participants talked about in depth during my research. These concepts will be examined in more detail in the data chapters—chapter 4, “Making Connections: Relations of Power,” and chapter 5, “Making Connections: The Power of Voice.”

Violence against Women

When I first thought about conducting research exploring the connections between women’s experiences with violence and their learning in formal educational settings, I chose the broad topic of the effects of experiencing trauma—everything from earthquakes and car accidents to rape and emotional violence—on women’s learning. However, researchers have found a difference between how people react to violence that is the result
of personal actions toward them and how they react to violence that is the result of natural disasters or accidents (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; McFarlane & De Girolamo, 1996). Personal acts of violence are taken more personally and often cause the person to question themselves and their role in the violence (e.g., Did I cause it? Could I have prevented it? What did I do wrong?) more so than they do in the aftermath of accidents or natural disasters. In addition, interpersonal violence against women is of epidemic proportions, meaning that in any classroom, there will be a number of women who are experiencing or who have experienced interpersonal violence and who may be facing challenges because of their experiences.

The United Nations, in their 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted the broad definition of violence against women as, “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (United Nations, 1993). The emphasis in this definition on the results of violence is important and reflects my belief that what is often termed “abuse” is, in fact, violence because of the effects on the women to whom it is directed. Therefore, I use the terms violence and abuse interchangeably or together to mean violence that is perpetuated by human actions (either individual or institutional) rather than natural disasters or accidents. When I talk about “interpersonal violence,” I am referring to the one-on-one violence and abuse that the women in my study experienced in their familial and intimate relationships or with other individuals in their lives. Interpersonal violence is physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, or verbal exploitation/abuse of women by a person or persons who do such
actions with the intent to control the women. Individual women may or may not recognize these actions as violence at the time they are occurring but often don’t talk about them because they feel “something is wrong.” Over time, this violence restricts the woman’s actions, attacks her self-confidence, and isolates her from friends and other support. Women who have experienced interpersonal violence and abuse are silenced around the world, including in Canada, by social stigma which portrays abused women as weak, helpless individuals who are often the cause of their own victimization, and by the risk of experiencing more violence after speaking out. These concerns of revictimization, beliefs about women who have experienced violence, and the shame and self-denigration that women feel because of these beliefs, lead to their invisibility in society. In Canada and around the world, only a small proportion of the violence that women experience is reported to police or other officials (Ogrodnik, 2006; United Nations, 2005) or made public in other ways. As a result, levels of violence against women are greatly underestimated (United Nations, 2005).

Theories of Violence against Women

Theories and beliefs about women who have experienced or who are experiencing interpersonal violence affect how individuals and institutions think about, and behave toward, women who have experienced violence. Institutional policies and practices and individual beliefs and actions are the result of specific ways of thinking about violence against women.

Traditional research on interpersonal violence against women—sometimes referred to as woman-battering or domestic violence—looks to women for the “causes” of violence, or suggests that there is a cause and effect relationship between, for example, drinking or
unemployment and battering or abuse (Hoff, 1990). The focus is on the individual, and solutions are aimed at solving individual problems. For example, women's shelters, when considered as a "solution" to the violence women experience in intimate relationships, reflects the idea that helping individual women escape violence addresses the problem of violence against women. Although women's shelters are essential for many women who are trying to escape violent situations, they do not address the underlying causes of the violence or suggest ways to eliminate the need for shelters. The history of research and beliefs about interpersonal violence against women illustrates a continuum of thinking that ranges from women as masochists, to women as victims, to women as survivors. Current thinking and writing reflects one or more of these perspectives (Kirkwood, 1993), although these attitudes are slowly changing due to work done by groups and individuals who work with women who have experienced violence and who critically examine the causes and effects of violence against women. Critical feminist perspectives on violence against women allow for a much more complex and inclusive picture of women and violence, taking into account, for example, the systemic nature of violence against women and the role of intersecting oppressions due to race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, homophobia, socio-economic class, and so on.

**Women as Masochists**

Theories that explain interpersonal violence against women as being a consequence of women's natural masochistic need to suffer originated with mental health professionals (Caplan, 1984). Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing coined the term masochism at the beginning of the 20th century, defining it as "the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force" (Caplan, 1984, p. 130, quoting von Krafft-Ebing, 1901, p. 131) particularly with reference
to being humiliated or abused by someone of the opposite sex; but he did not specifically connect it to women's behaviour. Freud looked into the causes of masochism and, as a result of his work with women who had been sexually abused, theorized that masochism was a feminine quality even if exhibited by a male (Caplan, 1984; Kirkwood, 1993). From equating masochism with the feminine, masochism came to describe women's behaviours. Although feminist theorists including Juliet Mitchell, Judith Bardwick, and Ruth Moulton looked beyond the women themselves for the causes of masochism, pointing out the social origins of behaviour that was considered masochistic, they did not deny that masochism was a female characteristic that could account for women continuing to stay in violence relationships (Caplan, 1984; Shainess, 1987). Focusing on the battered woman as masochistic—as having a personality disorder—reinforced the belief that battering is an individual problem, with individual solutions; women need therapy to overcome their natural tendency toward masochism. This belief draws attention away from the perpetrators of violence and from societal conditions that condone violence, so the right to use violence as a method of control is left unquestioned. Looking at women who experience interpersonal violence as deviant also prevents mental health professionals, the public, and the women themselves from recognizing the strengths that many women in violent relationships develop to help them survive (Caplan, 1984). The myth of women's masochism persists and is still recognizable in conversations about women in violent relationships that include comments such as, "It can't be that bad or she'd leave."

**Women as Victims**

In the late 1970s, studies revealing the extent and gravity of violence against women, the lack of provocation, and the inability of women to prevent such violence
questioned theories of masochism. Instead, women were viewed as victims, helpless at the hands of violent men (Kirkwood, 1993). The view of women as victims often hid the blame that was attached to women who stayed in violent relationships.

One of the most well-known advocates of the view of battered women as victims is Lenore Walker who, drawing on Seligman’s work with dogs in the 1970s, portrayed battered women as suffering from “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 1975; Walker, 1979, 2000), “a condition in which a subject does not attempt to escape from a painful or noxious situation after learning in a previous, similar situation that escape is not possible” (Gerow, 1989, p. 193, as quoted in Barnett & LaViolette, 1993, p. 103). Women learn they are helpless in battering relationships from the “cycle of violence” (Walker, 1979, 2000) that became evident to Walker during her case study research with hundreds of women. The three phases of this cycle—a growing tension, episodes of violence, apologies and remorse—are repeated over and over again in an abusive relationship. The difference in power between the abuser and the victim in addition to the intermittent nature of the violence can lead to “traumatic bonding” (Dutton, 1995) in which the woman feels dependent on her abuser for support and love, while retaining hope that she will be able to “reform” the abusive behaviour. As this cycle repeats itself, the woman feels more and more helpless. She becomes passive, is unable to believe that any strategies she uses will work, cannot think of viable alternatives to the tactics she has already tried, and becomes susceptible to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. She may generalize her feelings of helplessness and lack of control and transfer them to situations other than the battering relationship (Walker, 1979, 2000).
Walker grouped the combination of responses that women exhibited as a result of being in an abusive relationship together to form what she called “Battered Woman Syndrome” (Walker, 1984, 1989, 1991, 2000), “the group of psychological symptoms often observed after a woman has repeatedly experienced physical, sexual and/or serious psychological abuse” (1991, p. 21). These symptoms included, in addition to the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) core responses of “arousal, avoidance, and intrusive cognitive memories” (Walker, 1991, p. 21; see also Astin, Lawrence, & Foy, 1993; Herman, 1992/97), a variety of mental health conditions: they had control and manipulation issues, suffered memory loss due to dissociation, hid their anger under sarcasm, passive-aggression, and passivity until it became rage, confused emotional and sexual intimacy, and used compliant behaviour that often resulted in resentment (Walker, 1991). Other researchers documented additional responses to battering including chronic pain, stress-related disorders, depression, and low self-esteem (see for example Campbell & Soeken, 1999). Because of the range of “symptoms” experienced by battered women and their similarity to those of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as listed in the DSM-III, Battered Woman Syndrome became a sub-classification of PTSD (Walker, 1989). Unlike the idea of women as masochists or the label of self-defeating personality disorder, PTSD recognizes that the traumatic events, not the victim’s personality, cause the reactions to violence, allowing mental health professionals to focus on the battering circumstances rather than the woman’s pathology.

The understanding of women who experienced interpersonal violence as victims as opposed to masochists appears to eliminate blaming women for the violence they experience. Walker proposed that the “deviant” characteristics of abused women were not
the cause of the battering they experienced, but the result (Walker, 1979). However, looking at women as helpless individuals who “believe they have no influence over the success or failure of events that concern them” (Walker, 1979, p. 48) continues to blame women’s “flaws” as the reason why they stay in violent relationships. It also promotes “stereotypes of helplessness and dysfunctionality” (Piispa, 2002, p. 890) which may be applied to all women who are in violent relationships regardless of the contexts. The use of violence to control a woman’s behaviour is not questioned, and solutions to the problem of violence against women are still understood to be changing the women’s behaviours instead of those of the perpetrator of violence or of addressing systemic violence against women.

Although the use of the word “victim” to describe women who have experienced interpersonal violence is an improvement over thinking of them as masochistic because it lessens the view of women as deviant, it continues to focus on women as passive and unable or unwilling to actively work to change their relationship and ignores the social structures that legitimize violence as a means of control (see Lamb, 1999). However, women who talk about themselves as victims may use this word to describe how they felt when they were unable to change the circumstances of their abuse because, for example, they were physically weaker. The term, “victim,” may also be used to describe their behaviour while they were being abused from the perspective of being free of that relationship. This naming allows some women to understand how the abuse affected their behaviours and their beliefs about themselves and realize how they changed when they were free from the violent situation. At the same time that abused women talk about being victimized by their abusers, they also talk about the process of survival (Kirkwood, 1993).
Women as Survivors

Feminist studies that look at battering from the women's point of view and take into account gender socialization and the reactions of society to violence against women suggest that women's coping strategies are normal reactions considering ideas of women as nurturers and the lack of support women receive. In this light, abused women are seen as survivors who seek help whenever and wherever they can find it and who survive in spite of violence and depression (Davis, 2002; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Kirkwood, 1993). Viewing abused women as survivors may allow people outside the violent relationship to recognize the strengths and coping abilities necessary for abused women to survive. As a result, women may have more respect and credibility when talking about the violence they experience and may find it easier to seek help. But abused women may not feel like survivors and may feel that their violent experiences are being discounted when others do not recognize them as being victimized by violent partners or others with whom they have an interpersonal relationship.

The theory of abused women as survivors focuses attention on the experiences of individual women and ignores the continuing use of personal and systemic violence. This leaves the abuser free to go on to other violent relationships and society free to ignore violence against women. Nothing is done about the systemic causes of violence against women and the functions of power and control in suppressing women. As a society, if we view abused women as survivors, we can feel good about the services we provide that help women leave or change their relationships. We can feel complacent and ignore how we are implicated in the continuing violence women experience.
It is appealing to think about battered women as survivors as compared with being either masochists or victims, as the idea of survivor seems to address the strengths the women possess to function within an abusive relationship and actively seek to change it. Understanding women's behaviours as methods of coping and surviving in spite of being physically, sexually, emotionally, and psychologically abused, can change negative stereotypes of abused women as passive victims. Perhaps it is useful to think of women who have experienced interpersonal violence as being both victims and survivors, at the same time, as the processes of victimization and survival portray two on-going aspects of the woman's relationship, one that is perpetrated by her abuser, the other that is enacted by herself (Kirkwood, 1993).

The literature and research on violence against women use the terms victim and/or survivor to label women who have experienced interpersonal violence. Some feminist analysts and many of the women in this study question the use of these terms because they resist the “blame the victim” mentality that often results from the personal telling of their stories or media coverage of violence against women, and wonder what is involved in “surviving” violence. For example, does a woman have to leave a violent/abusive relationship to be a survivor? If a woman leaves a violent relationship but then is killed by an abusive partner, is this woman a survivor? The term, victim, also negates the many survival strategies that women use to stay alive mentally and physically in a violent relationship. Some feminists have suggested using the term “resister” (Russo, 2001), noting that the label of resister emphasizes “that women can and have changed, escaped, fought back, critically analyzed, created change and thrived” (p. 29). None of the participants in my research were aware of this term. However, they all agreed on the
unsuitability of the terms survivor and victim, whether they used them or not, and talked about the need for new terminology to talk about their experiences with interpersonal violence.

**Critical Feminist Theories of Violence against Women**

Critical feminist perspectives on the causes of, and solutions to, violence against women shift the focus from individual women to societal and institutional systems and structures that allow, encourage, and perpetuate violence against women. These perspectives allow for the intersection and overlapping of gender-based violence with other forms of oppression, including those due to racism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, and so on, and emphasize the systemic and structural oppression of women (Kirkwood, 1993, Young, 1990). Young (1990) illustrates the systemic nature of violence against women by pointing out the universal fear women have of being raped, simply because they are women (p. 62). This knowledge, that as women they could be subjected to violence at any time because of their gender, limits their freedom and choices.

Fear of physical, sexual, and psychological violence limits many women’s lives (Morris, 2002, p. 3), and systemic violence increases the vulnerability of specific groups of women, for example, women who are part of a visible minority, or who are disabled, lesbian, or poor (Morris, 2002; Russo, 2001). The often negative responses to women who experience violence affect how women see themselves personally and as a group because “they reinforce the messages that women are to blame, that women deserve to be abused, that women accept oppression, and that women are unworthy of social justice” (Russo, 2001, p. 5; see also Leskela, Dieperink, & Thuras, 2002). Viewing violence against women as a mostly personal problem with solutions directed at helping individual women
escape from or change violent situations or helping perpetrators of violence to change their thinking and behaviour, or both, ignores the systemic causes of violence against women caused by patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and racism. What are needed are social and political solutions that "recognize the multiple identities and experiences of women arising from interlocking oppressions" (Russo, 2001, p. 9; see also Young, 1990). Patricia Hill Collins, in her discussion of African-American women's experiences with violence in the United States (1998), states that "definitions of violence depend not only on the specifics of any given situations . . . but more generally on who has the power to define both group identity and social context" (p. 920). She emphasizes links between violence and social hierarchies, and the implications these links have for anti-violence work.

Many feminist theories of violence against women ignore or downplay violence perpetrated by women (Renzetti, 1992; Ristock, 2002; Russo, 2001) and may ignore the way positionalities affect the violence that women experience. Using a gender-exclusive framework to discuss violence against women prevents an examination of the ways that race, culture, sexual identity, (dis)ability, and other systems of oppression and privilege intersect and affect the power and control inherent in any hierarchical relationship (Russo, 2001). In order to effectively address the underlying bases of violence against women, the broader questions of power and control need to be examined with respect to multiple oppressions. Although education and support services are necessary components in addressing violence against women, changes to the fundamental causes of violence and the institutional, social, and political processes that allow its continued existence are essential. For example, examining institutional, social, and political policies, procedures, and customs for gender, racial, and other intersecting biases may reveal how the lack of
available and affordable child care affects poverty rates among women, increasing the violence some women are exposed to and feel they must endure in order to take care of themselves and their families.

Using a critical feminist framework when planning and implementing my research design allowed me to explore, with the participants, our diverse and expanding ideas about violence against women and the effects of experiencing violence on learning. Going beyond seeing violence against women as a personal problem that some women have with some men to include the systemic nature of violence against women—that is connected to issues of power and control and that is further complicated by the intersection of systems of power and privilege—allowed us to increase our understandings of our experiences with violence and to see connections between different parts of our lives.

**Women in Graduate School**

Why is it important to understand the effects of experiencing interpersonal violence on women's graduate educational experiences? In Canada, 52.8% of master's students were women in 2004 (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, 2006, p. 20). Women enrol in doctoral programs to a lesser degree than in master's programs. In 2004, 45.8% of doctoral students were women (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, 2006, p. 20). Considering the prevalence of violence against women, there will certainly be a number of women in graduate classes who have experienced or are experiencing interpersonal violence and who carry those experiences or the memories of those experiences with them. It is important to note that the majority of both master's and doctoral students in education (often considered a "women's" occupation) were women (70% and 73% respectively), while women were only 27% of master's students and 19% of doctoral students in the field.
of engineering and architecture (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, pp. 29, 37).

Since none of my participants were enrolled in male-dominated disciplines, more research is needed to determine whether and/or how female graduate students in male-dominated classes and faculties experience graduate school differently from female students in female-dominated classes and faculties.

Grace and Gouthro (2000) suggest that the smaller number of female doctoral students compared with master's students might be the result of the incongruency of doctoral studies with the "complexities of [women's] identities, needs and desires" (p. 7). If institutions of higher education are interested in attracting and retaining female graduate students, they need to examine the reasons why women are not entering and/or completing doctoral programs. Although researchers have studied questions of graduate student perseverance in, or withdrawal from, their programs (see for example, Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Grosjean, 1995; Kerlins, 1997; Schinke, da Costa, & Andrews, 2001), these studies do not include questions about female students' experiences with interpersonal violence or how experiencing interpersonal violence may affect their education. Grace and Gouthro discuss "situational barriers" (family responsibilities, need for financial support, childcare concerns, lack of time and money), "dispositional barriers" (low self-esteem, low self-confidence, fears about going to graduate school), and "institutional barriers" (safety, "degree and residency requirements, academic standards, program designs, and faculty demographics") to women's commitment and success in graduate school (Grace & Gouthro, 2000, p. 12). How might having experienced interpersonal violence interact with these barriers and further complicate female graduate students' learning? And, although it is recognized that "the stress inherent in the graduate experience" may increase the
intensity of any emotional, physical, or psychological challenges students are facing (see Caple, 1995), “survival guides” for graduate students (see for example, Rittner & Trudeau, 1997; Rossman, 2002) do not address the possible implications for women of experiencing interpersonal violence.

Graduate Supervision: Roles and Relationships

Students entering graduate school face a number of challenges not present in their undergraduate education. In addition to smaller class sizes, which increase visibility, and a seminar format with the expectation of greater participation (compared with the often assumed anonymity of larger undergraduate classes), graduate students face the often overwhelming task of choosing a research supervisor and committee that they will be able to work with throughout their program. In graduate programs, the supervisor/graduate student relationship is pivotal to students’ success in their programs, their desires to continue their education, and, often, their career opportunities (see Manathunga, 2007). The UBC Faculty of Graduate Studies, in their Handbook of Graduate Supervision (2001), available to all graduate students and faculty, states in its section, “Being a Research Supervisor,”

As a research supervisor (also called a research advisor), you are the key person in a graduate student’s program. Experience and research have confirmed that the nature of supervision and the quality of communication between graduate students and their supervisors are critical elements affecting graduate education. (p. 24)

Chapman and Sork (2001) describe the student-adviser relationship as being “at the heart of the graduate education experience” (p. 95).

The graduate supervisory model that all of my participants made reference to when they talked about their supervisors and committee members is based on the apprenticeship
model of supervision—a “transmissive approach to education, where students want to be filled up with their supervisor’s knowledge” (Manathunga & Goozee, 2007, p. 309; see, also, Burnett, 1999). The unequal power relationship in this “apprentice master model” (Yeatman, 1994, quoted in Burnett, 1999, p. 1) is open to abuses of power as graduate students often rely on their supervisors to guide them through their graduate education, seeing themselves as less knowledgeable academically, as researchers, and in understanding university protocol and procedures. Supervisors who are concerned about the hierarchical nature of the supervisor/student relationship may take a mentoring role, believing that mentoring will overcome some of the problems embedded in this supervisory model. The mentoring role may include providing guidance, support and encouragement, “facilitating access to resources and opportunities, providing information, protection, and sponsorship, stimulating the acquisition of knowledge, and serving as a role model” (Burnett, 1999, p. 2, citing Jacobi, 1991; see, also, Manathunga, 2007). Female graduate students, especially, may search out female graduate supervisors, expecting them to be mentors and role models (Acker & Armenti, 2004; see, also, Heinrich, 1995). Manathunga (2007) emphasizes “the role of neoliberalism in giving the mentoring discourse such influence” within debates about supervision (p. 208). She maintains that literature that draws on neoliberal discourses “positions both supervisors and students as equal, autonomous and rational adults and suggests that the operations of power no longer exist between them” (p. 208; see, also, Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000). However, Manathunga suggests that supervisors who see themselves as mentors may provide their students with more than academic and research advice. She states, “By mentoring our students we also give ourselves permission to regulate their identities. The boundaries become blurry. As
supervisors, we are helping students to develop disciplinary-based and other self-regulatory
behaviours” (p. 210). She cautions that mentoring, as a form of graduate supervision, may
increase power differentials due to supervisors crossing professional boundaries and
becoming involved in students’ personal lives. Students in these relationships are in danger
of “losing parts of their identity that are normalized out during the process of socializing
them into appropriate disciplinary subjectivities” (p. 219). Women who have experienced
violence in an interpersonal relationship that involved the misuse of power, or who,
perhaps, feel that they have already lost part of themselves, may view this kind of
supervisory relationship as another example of the powerlessness they have experienced
previously.

The apprenticeship model—with graduate students positioned as autonomous,
authoritative learners or willing apprentices—is one of a number of models that are used in
Western universities, including Canada, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom,
and New Zealand. However, alternate forms of graduate supervision have evolved which
seek to address the quality of research supervision, in addition to concerns about graduate
student completion rates. The “Collaborative Cohort Model” is one such model that was
developed in Australia with a cohort of ABD\(^6\) doctoral students in a guidance and
counselling program (Burnett, 1999). In addition to a designated supervisor “who was
responsible for guiding the student through production of their dissertation” (p. 3), students
belonged to a cohort that met with a coordinating faculty member to discuss their
dissertations and related matters (for example, ethics reviews and data analysis) and to

---

\(^5\) For an interesting discussion of one supervisory relationship using personal narrative methodology to
explore understandings of power dynamics embedded within this relationship, see Chapman & Sork (2001).
\(^6\) ABD stands for All But Dissertation and includes students who have completed all of their doctoral
requirements except writing their dissertations.
receive training and practice in editing and providing critical feedback. To increase support, students were buddied up with other students who entered the cohort at the same time. In addition, having a “rolling cohort membership” (p. 3) allowed students further along in the dissertation process to share their insights with new ABD students. Students who took part in this cohort detailed many advantages to the model including feeling less isolated, having more support to finish their dissertations, and gaining a greater understanding of research design and methods. Disadvantages included an increased workload for some faculty members and the potential for conflict between the coordinating faculty member and the individual supervisors.

In addition to the above model, Neumann (2007) reports that, in response to government policy focusing on government investment in doctoral education in Australia, there has been a change in the way graduate supervision is conducted. There is a “tighter and closer monitoring of doctoral students’ progress” (p. 465). Especially in some humanities faculties, supervisors aim to build cohorts of students, through the introduction of coursework requirements, in order to encourage students to support each other. Students attend group sessions to explore topics of interest and, in addition, have individual meetings with their supervisors.

Graduate supervision, as a close, interpersonal, pedagogical relationship, is open to the same misuses of power that occur in classrooms and in other interpersonal relationships. Women who have experienced interpersonal violence may view relationships involving obvious power differentials with caution. Tom (1997) calls on faculty “not to reject our authority and power, but to use them carefully” (p. 4), working with students (and others) to decrease the likelihood of the misuse of power. She suggests “deliberately
creating a relationship” (p. 12, italics in the original) to ensure the responsible use of power. Tom explains the “deliberate relationship” as one that is “built on a certainty that the relationship involves a power differential and that the person in the position of power has a responsibility to be careful about the sources and the limits of our power and authority” (p. 14). She suggests that faculty need to build, and reflect on, a set of principals that will help them respond appropriately in each situation and with each individual.

Global Trends Affecting University Policies and Practices

This research was conducted in the context of overlapping global trends including neoliberalism, corporatization, and globalization, which combine to affect university policies and practices. Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to talk in any detail about these trends, it is important to note how they affect institutions of higher education. Marathunga (2007) describes neoliberalism as

the ideologically driven agendas of governments and others to create self-disciplined, competitive and individualistic workers who have the illusion of being autonomous but are actually formed to serve global economic markets. These neoliberal agendas tend to focus on the role of the rational individual and deny the subtle operations of power, desire, difference and the emotions in practices such as teaching and learning. (p. 208)

In combination with the “restructuring [of] education to better meet the needs of the national economy” (Blackmore, 2002, p. 420) and “the commercialization of all aspects of university life” (Hornosty, 2004, p. 48), neoliberalism threatens academic autonomy, encourages competition among universities, faculty, and students, increases regulation and demands for accountability, increases the use of on-line learning to attract international students and their money (Blackmore, 2002) and technology, in general, to reach more students in a cost-effective manner (see Hornosty, 2004; Maher & Tetreault, 2007), and
turns faculty and students into “marketable commodities for commercial ends” (Hornosty, 2004, p. 48). The discourses of neoliberalism, corporatization, and globalization affect issues of access, diversity, and equity at the university with regard to both faculty and students, influence the pedagogy of arts and humanities courses, especially (see Blackmore, 2002; Brule, 2004; Feigenbaum, 2007; Hornosty, 2004), and affect the type of research that is suggested and funded by the university, research councils, private corporations, and other funding agencies (Blackmore, 2002; Maher & Tetreault, 2007). At The University of British Columbia, the influence of these discourses is obvious in Campus 2020: Thinking ahead: The report (The Report) (Plant, 2007). This report, commissioned by the provincial government, outlines the future of post-secondary education in British Columbia. In response to the report, Metcalfe, Mazawa, Rubenson, Risher, Macivor, and Meredith (2007), focus on The Report’s emphasis on excellence, stating, in part, “Excellence . . . runs counter to equity and replaces discourses of access with discourses of competition” (26). Because the “discourse of competition” is often assumed to be “neutral,” its effects on female faculty and students (and other marginalized groups) are often hidden. Feminist faculty and students who seek to challenge the male-centred policies and practices of the university and address the concerns of women and other marginalized groups, may be prevented by new concerns about accountability, “excellence,” and competition. Valerie Hey (2004) states, “The conditions of the contemporary academy put the ethical practice of feminism in extreme contradiction with the contrasting ethical practice and moral regulation of audit and accountability. Feminist academics live between these spaces” (p. 37). The emphasis on competition and accountability—spending more time publishing, applying for grants, conducting research, presenting at conferences, and so on—leaves little
time for working collaboratively, with colleagues or with students, even if that is the preferred way of working. Faculty who desire to “mentor” the graduate students they supervise may lack the time and energy to support their students in a manner consistent with their feminist beliefs.

**Feminist Pedagogies**

Pedagogy—“the nature of knowledge and learning” (Kenway & Modra, 1992), including what is taught and how it is taught—is a political endeavour (Britzman, 1991; Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Lewis, 1992; Tisdell, 2000). Too often the political nature of the education process is hidden, and teaching and learning are presented as value-free or neutral endeavours. Thinking of teaching as “neutral,” allows “new” approaches (such as feminist pedagogies, anti-racist education, multicultural education, anti-oppressive education) to be considered biased and pushing a not-so-hidden agenda (Harding, 1991).

Feminist pedagogy, as defined by Crabtree and Sapp (2003), is “a set of classroom practices, teaching strategies, approaches to content, and relationships grounded in critical pedagogical and feminist theory” (p. 131). Grace and Gouthro (2000), referring to Fraser’s work (1994), state, “In graduate education, inattention to gender and its intersections with other differences has created an uneven social playing field that tends to favour the existing dominant-male/subordinate-female relationship.” This leads to “unethical and inequitable treatment of women students. . . . Feminist pedagogies offer diverse insights to help us think about graduate education in transformative and, as necessary, transgressive terms” (p. 13). Insights and strategies gained from feminist pedagogies may help educators and institutions recognize and address challenges faced by women who have experienced interpersonal violence, while benefiting all students. Goals of feminist pedagogies include
the promotion of social change, providing a language and space for social critique and analysis in order that students can examine forms and practices of domination and subordination including sexism, racism, classism (see Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Manicom, 1992). Feminisms assume a white, middle-class male bias in the education system and a gendered/raced/classed nature of curricula and texts. They emphasize the importance of addressing pedagogy from the points of view of women and other marginalized groups (Maher, 1987; Tisdell, 2000). Although there are different feminist frameworks that influence pedagogy in different ways, generally, feminist pedagogies are about recognizing the power and oppression inherent in current practices of teaching and learning and encouraging personal and societal transformation through “expand[ing] consciousness, capacity for voice, and self-esteem” and “inviting knowers to be actors in the world through participation in social change movements and public policy discussion that keep the interests of women in mind” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 156). Thus feminist pedagogies are not teaching techniques but political philosophies guiding educational practices (Britzman, 1991). They include “the whole process of knowledge construction, in the classroom as elsewhere” (Maher & Tetreault, 2001, p. 10).

Considerations of relationships of power in society often begin with an examination of power relationships in feminist classrooms. Feminist educators may support a more flattened hierarchical structure in their classrooms (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Maher & Tetreault, 2001) by encouraging students to call them by name, inviting students to have input into course curriculum and evaluation, and encouraging discussion and other forms of dialogue. This is not an attempt to deny the power and authority that educators have as part

---

7 See, for example, Tisdell (1998), for a discussion of psychological, structural, and poststructural models of feminist pedagogies and Maher (1987), for a discussion of gender and liberatory models of feminist pedagogies.
of their legitimate roles, but is intended to lessen the hierarchical dichotomy of the
teaching/learning divide and encourage students to recognize their own authority. Faculty
and students consider power relationships between students and among groups of students
with the purpose of making relationships of power and domination, including those
involving violence, in the classroom, in society, and in the world visible and open to
analysis and critique. These discussions may include the roles of “hegemonic masculinity”
(Eyre, 1997, p. 243) in male violence, information about and practice in conflict resolution
(Bickmore, 1999), an examination of how subject positions, including those that are
gendered, raced and classed, affect and are affected by power relationships (Koikari &
Hippensteele, 2000) and the causes and prevention of violence in schools and in society
(see Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). The establishment of “ground rules” for classroom
behaviour (see Briskin, 1998b; Hoodfar, 1997; Tom, 1997) may address the possible
misuse of power in classrooms, challenging privileged students’ understandings and uses of
oppressive behaviours, and encouraging less privileged students to question pedagogical
practices (see Hoodfar, 1997; Tom, 1997). Feminist educators may encourage group work
in order to foster cooperation and collaboration and lessen competition. They may lobby
for the use of a pass/fail system of evaluation to promote a classroom environment
conducive to participation, reflection, questioning of beliefs, policies and practices both in
and out of the university, and “developing student independence from traditional roles as
passive consumers of education and encouraging students to take more responsibility as co-
constructors of knowledge and instigators of social change” (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003, p.
132).
Grace and Gouthro (2000) state that feminist pedagogies “can help to frame issues and set possible directions in graduate education” (p. 6). However, putting feminist pedagogy into practice may be a difficult or risky process in institutions of higher education, especially with the influences of neo-liberalism, corporatization, and globalization. With the new emphasis on university education as job-preparation, courses which emphasize reflection and critique may be seen to be outdated or of little value. Students, viewed as clients who must be satisfied, may object to taking classes which focus on relationships of power including gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and so on. Because of the increased value accorded to student evaluations of faculty and their courses, universities may drop courses deemed unpopular or irrelevant by students (see Blackmore, 2002). Feminist educators may hesitate to develop or teach “controversial” courses or ones that critique the current political climate and economic disparity or that do not serve corporate interests, for fear of affecting their job or advancement opportunities (see Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Hornosty, 2004). In addition, standardization of content, assessment, and evaluation as a way to make institutions and faculty more accountable, limits “alternative” pedagogies and content requiring alternative types of evaluation (Blackmore, 2002).

**Power and Voice**

Throughout the interviews, the participants made reference to their experiences of “power over” both in graduate school and in their violent interpersonal relationship(s). They explored how the power imbalances they experienced led to them feel silenced or to silence themselves. However, many participants recognized that graduate school was also a place where they met with success and were able to recover their “voice.” They
uncovered more compatible (for them) forms of power. In order to present the literature contextualizing my participants' ideas about power, voice, and silence closer to their words, I have included that literature in chapters four and five. In chapter four: Making Connections: Relations of Power, I explore the literature on power that gives context to my participants' ideas about power. In chapter five: Making Connections: The Power of Voice, I explore the literature on voice, silence, and the use of experience as knowledge, topics closely related to ideas about power but often addressed separately by the participants.

In this chapter I have defined some key concepts used in my research and have identified fields of study that have oriented my thinking about the connections between violence against women and their learning in graduate school. Theories about violence against women demonstrate a variety of ways of thinking about, and acting toward, women who have experienced violence. The women, themselves, in addition to institutions and other people in their lives, may take up these theories. Literature on women in graduate school shows the increasing numbers of women who enter master's and doctoral programs but, in their analysis of women's experiences, neglect the possible effects of experiencing interpersonal violence. The supervisory relationship is an integral part of graduate students' experiences and can affect how female students feel about themselves, their work, and their learning. This relationship and university policies and programs are affected by global trends including neo-liberalism, commercialization, and corporatization, which influence how universities are structured and the relationships of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Feminist pedagogies examine, among other issues, the political nature of teaching and learning, including the nature of power relations and the importance of personal and
political change. These topics may help to shed light on, and address, the effects of violence against women on women’s learning. Although I barely touch on ideas of power and voice in this chapter, throughout my data analysis chapters (chapters four and five), I discuss, in more detail, the theories and theorists who informed my thinking and writing about these concepts.
CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY: THE ETHICS OF RESEARCHING WOMEN’S STORIES

Methodology must develop from a preoccupation with ethics.
(Frank, 2000)

Protecting the interests of the research participants, including myself, has been of paramount importance throughout this study. Women’s stories of interpersonal violence are often silenced and hidden. Individual and institutional reactions, including horror, disbelief, blaming the victim, and pity, combine with feelings of shame, self-blame, and fear to keep women from talking about their experiences. In addition to the participants and me, this research may affect women who have been victims of violence who are not participants. Everything from my assumptions as I set up the research, to the people I chose to interview, my analysis, and how I write up the study, could directly or indirectly affect how women who have experienced or are experiencing interpersonal violence think about themselves or how others think about women who have been victims of violence. For example, narratives about the effects of interpersonal violence on educational experiences may reduce the isolation felt by women who are not part of this study and who are or have been victims of violence, and may empower them to reassess their beliefs about themselves and their futures. At the same time, these stories may reinforce societal ideas about women as being helpless or to blame for violence that is directed toward them (Alcoff & Gray, 1993). In addition, women struggling with their responses to violence may compare themselves negatively to some of the
participants of the study, and feel disempowered. Throughout this research I have been conscious of who may read this research and the possible uses that may be made of it (Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). In this chapter I discuss how I conducted my research to enable both the participants and me to feel safe enough to talk about experiences with violence and abuse. I include information on recruitment, the participants, research methodology, ethical questions and concerns, and analysis.

Recruitment

Because I wanted to hear from the women, themselves, about their experiences, I decided to use personal interviews as a method of collecting data. My awareness of the sensitive nature of my research, and my concern for my participants, led me to use recruitment strategies that would allow potential participants to reply anonymously to my call for participants if they required more information before committing to the research. I sent out emails introducing the research to the Graduate Student Society (GSS) for posting on their listserv and to graduate listservs of all faculties at the University of British Columbia (UBC), posted information in the Women's Students' Office and graduate student lounges, and encouraged people I knew to mention my research to their friends and acquaintances. The emails and posters stipulated that the participants needed to be female graduate students at the time of the research, have experienced interpersonal violence as an adult, and be willing to explore possible connections between their experiences of interpersonal violence and their learning experiences in graduate school. I provided my email address, regular mail address, and phone number to allow potential participants to choose how anonymous they wanted to be. I waited six weeks after sending out my first

---

8 In this instance, I am using “safe” to mean physically, emotionally, and psychologically comfortable.
emails; then sent out another set of emails to the GSS and graduate listservs. My hope was
to attract more and perhaps more ethnically diverse participants. Sixteen women answered
my invitations to participate, all by email. I answered their emails with information about
the research and a request to set up an initial interview in which we could explore further
whether or not they wished to be part of the research. Of the original 16 replies, six women
decided not to take part in the research. Three of these women did not answer my email.
Two of the other three decided they did not have enough time to take part in the study. A
third woman replied, asking if I was providing a monetary incentive to take part in the
research. She declined to take part when I replied that I was not. One other participant,
recruited through word of mouth, contacted me six months after I began interviewing.

Participants

I am including a group profile instead of individual profiles because of the sensitive
nature of my research and my desire to protect my participants’ anonymity and shield them
from any negative repercussions. The 11 women who took part in this research ranged in
age from 25 to 58, with a relatively equal representation in each decade. At the time of
recruitment, six participants were enrolled in a doctoral program, and five in a master’s
program at the University of British Columbia. Nine participants were either in the Faculty
of Arts or Faculty of Education. Two were in the Faculty of Science. Five women had
taken a degree in Women’s Studies or had taken a number of Women’s Studies courses
during their undergraduate degrees. All of the participants had experienced interpersonal
violence or abuse as an adult, and nine of the 11 participants talked about the childhood
violence and abuse they experienced while growing up in addition to the violence they
experienced as adults. Eight of the women had received counselling of some kind as a
result of the violence they experienced. Of the other three, one woman said that the work she had done in community organizations that address violence against women had been therapeutic for her. Ten of the 11 women were taking full-time studies, and only one participant had young children (between the ages of 5 and 17) at the time of the study. Ten of the participants were residing in Vancouver at the time of the interviews, allowing me to interview them in person. One participant lived at a distance and was interviewed by phone. Three of the women identified as either lesbian or bi-sexual, no woman had an observable disability or identified as having any kind of disability, two women talked about their class background as “blue collar,” “working class,” and/or “poor,” and all women were of white European ancestry.

I can only speculate as to the reasons a more ethnically diverse group of women did not reply to my call for participants. The marginalization of women—and especially women of colour, Black women, and First Nations women in universities—is well documented (see, for example, Ng, 1993). Experiences of racism, sexism, and colonialist attitudes may have kept women from responding to a call from a woman with an obviously British name. Also, non-white women on campus may be experiencing the violence of racism, sexism, colonialism to an extent that talking about their personal experiences may be too painful (see Marie, 2004). Lack of trust in an unknown researcher may have also influenced their decisions.

Violence against women is often believed to be synonymous with “domestic violence,” usually assumed to be male violence against women in a heterosexual relationship (Price, 2002). Seven of the participants talked about this kind of violence but only five talked exclusively about the interpersonal violence they experienced as being part
of a heterosexual, intimate relationship. Six participants included violence by parents, male or female or both, three talked about experiencing violence at the hands of male or female siblings, one talked about the violence she experienced from her landlord, and one talked about violence at the hands of law enforcement officers. Most participants mentioned experiencing interpersonal violence from more than one abuser.

Because I believe there is no common "women’s experience"—that women are affected by and react to violence differently due to their positionalities and prior experiences—I was happy with the diversity of the participants. However, as I mention in my suggestions for further research (p. 162), I believe that exploring the experiences of women who are differently positioned from the women in this study may shed more light on the connections between experiencing violence and learning.

The participants had varied undergraduate experiences and reasons for coming to graduate school. Of the eight women who talked about their feelings about their undergraduate education, only one was overwhelmingly positive, describing her experience as "stunning" (Molly, 1/57).9 Four participants described their undergraduate experiences in negative terms, citing the impersonality of large classes, the lack of recognition of their intelligence or experience, or both, and the lack of sensitivity by faculty and students when talking about issues of class, race, and violence. Three women talked about specific parts of their undergraduate education in negative terms—for example, one woman talked about her "shitty undergrad experience with [her] thesis" (Emma, 2/10)—while not commenting on the experience as a whole.

---

9 When citing my participants, the numbers in parentheses indicate the interview number and the page number(s) of the quote. That is, Molly, 1/57, means Molly, interview #1, page 57.
When talking about their reasons for entering a graduate program, only one participant talked about a professional goal she had before she came into the program. Another participant talked about being encouraged during her undergraduate work by a "mentoring" faculty member to continue her education. One participant talked about getting a graduate degree as a way for her to address her debt problem by putting off having to pay back her student loans until she was able to earn more money in the future, and as a way to earn back the respect of her family. The remaining eight women included the following reasons for deciding to go to graduate school (some women mentioned more than one). Four women talked almost exclusively about their love of learning and the personal satisfaction they get from engaging with others who could discuss and debate with passion about a given topic. Five women talked about coming to graduate school as a way to take themselves physically and mentally away from a violent relationship and/or as a way to do something for themselves that would expand their ideas and their options in life. These explanations of why the participants returned to school are remarkably similar to those mentioned by Horsman (2006, p. 178) as to why women who have experienced violence start literacy programs. Although more research is needed, the similarity of women's motivations to continue their education points to the need for educators to take into account the possible effects of violence on women's learning in a variety of settings.

Method

Researchers studying women's experiences with violence often use surveys and structured interviews to gain descriptive and statistical data (e.g., Barnett, Martinez, & Keyson, 1996; Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco, & Barnes, 2001; Horton & Johnson, 1993; See Hey, 2004, for similar comments by female faculty as to why they enjoy their jobs at the university.)
Launius & Jensen, 1987; Renzetti, 1989; see, also, Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Although I briefly considered using a survey or short, structured interviews for this research, I quickly rejected those methods in favour of in-depth, semi-structured interviews because I was interested in the participants’ beliefs and understandings about their experiences. Surveys and structured interviews would provide descriptive or statistical data related to interpersonal violence rather than the women’s understandings of, and connections between, their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Reinharz, 1992). For example, a survey could show that interpersonal violence is more (or less) widespread than is currently thought or document the different types of interpersonal violence and their prevalence in a variety of relationships.

As part of the rationale for my research, I used findings from research on battered women that used surveys in addition to questionnaires, and short, structured and semi-structured interviews to collect this kind of statistical data (see for example Astin, Lawrence, & Foy, 1993; Barnett, Martinez, & Keyson, 1996; Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Horton & Johnson, 1993; Launius & Jensen, 1987; Renzetti, 1989). What was missing from the research were the women’s understandings of how this form of violence affected other parts of their lives, including education. It was my conviction that it is the women themselves who must explain these connections as they are the experts on their experiences (Burstow, 1992; Laidlaw, Malmo & Associates, 1990) and that they would need the relatively uninterrupted time that in-depth interviews allow. In addition, researcher-designed questions may reflect the conclusions that the researcher hopes to find and not allow participants to talk about what has importance and meaning for them. Lack of feedback from participants in many studies allows the researchers to interpret the
findings from their own perspectives and come to conclusions to which the participants 
would not agree. As a feminist, I believe that women and other marginalized groups are 
well suited to talk about issues and concerns that affect them. Rather than impose my 
questions and labels on the participants of my study, I wanted, instead, for the women to 
talk with me about whatever they thought was relevant to the study topic. I hoped to have 
a guided conversation with participants in which they felt free, within the general confines 
of my research questions,\textsuperscript{11} to talk about their experiences, ideas, and feelings. I wanted, as 
much as possible, to lessen the power and control that many researchers exert over their 
participants, and invite participants to share their stories with me.

I structured the interviews to create a balance between my need and desire as the 
researcher to exercise some control over the interviewing process and to encourage the 
participants to talk about their experiences using “their own terms, at their own pace” 
(Bernard, 1994, p. 209). Although I had a vision of a conversation between equals, I 
realized that, as the researcher, I would need to maintain control over the interview. This 
would be more than a conversation, as I would provide the focus question or questions for 
the interviews and would encourage participants to explore their thoughts, feelings, and 
beliefs about those questions. At the same time, I left room for the women to expand on 
their ideas and follow unexpected areas that came up (Bernard, 1994; Marshall & 
Rossman, 1999). As the data-collecting instrument (Kvale, 1996; Stacey, 1988), I had 
some control over the environment and set up what I hoped was a relaxed, collaborative 
interview environment that would minimize the usually hierarchical relationship between 
interviewer and interviewee and invite participants to take a more active role in the

\textsuperscript{11} See p. 9.
The interview process (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ibanez, 1997; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992).

I conducted a pilot interview to test my ideas about interviewing and my possible exploratory questions. This interview confirmed the usefulness of having a set of prepared exploratory questions and pointed out flaws in my thinking about researcher/participant relationships. Although my participant for the pilot interview knew me and was acquainted with my research, the presence of the tape recorder and my role as a researcher (instead of as an acquaintance) inhibited our usually energetic conversation. When I discussed this change with her after the interview, she admitted that she was worried about what she said and how she was saying it. She did not want to “get anyone into trouble” or paint situations to be “worse than they were.” She suggested that I might discuss issues of confidentiality in more depth with my participants in order to counter the concerns they might have in these areas.

After analyzing the pilot interview, I realized that I was so concerned about using my power as the researcher, that I sabotaged the interview. For example, my pilot interview participant requested that we conduct the interview in a rather noisy environment. Although I suggested other, quieter locations, she was quite adamant, and in order to “share power” and conduct the interview in a relaxed manner, I agreed. As a result, the quality of the recorded interview was quite poor. In addition, I hesitated to ask Edith¹² direct questions about some of her experiences in graduate school because I was concerned about her, as a participant. We had discussed, during the consent process, her ability to decline to answer any questions at any time if she wished, but my worry about my power as the researcher, kept me from believing that she would actually refuse to answer.

¹² All participants' names are pseudonyms, chosen by the participants.
any question. So, if she hesitated to talk about any area of graduate school, or any other
topic, I hesitated to ask an exploratory question in case she felt uncomfortable. This
strategy did not work well, either, as Edith told me later, when we debriefed the interview,
that she would have been willing to talk about at least some of the topics I was reluctant to
pursue. She reiterated that she was quite able to speak for herself if she wanted to refuse to
talk about a topic (see Burstow, 1992; Laidlaw, Malmo & Associates, 1990). I realized that
in my concern over the imbalance of power in the research relationship, I was refusing to
acknowledge my needs and responsibilities as the researcher. I resolved to talk with my
participants during our first interview about the researcher/participant relationship, our
beliefs and feelings about power differentials between us, and any concerns they might
have about discussing potentially sensitive topics. I also determined that, although I would
encourage the participants to suggest a location where they would feel comfortable talking
with me, I would put some restrictions on the location, if necessary.

Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, I anticipated that participants would
want to question me about my background as a researcher and also as a person
knowledgeable about violence against women. Many victimized women are still met with
shock or disbelief when they talk about their experiences, and I expected that my
participants would need to know that I would be respectful and willing to listen (see Etter-
Lewis, 1993; Matsumoto, 1996; Thompson, 1995), so I included time during the interviews
to allow for the growth of mutual respect and trust. As a result, I scheduled three
interviews with participants (see Seidman, 1998), leaving open the possibility for more if
required. The first interview, of about half an hour’s duration, allowed me to clarify my
research goals, discuss issues of confidentiality, and answer any questions participants had
about my qualifications as a researcher (see Matsumoto, 1996; Thompson, 1995). Some potential participants used this time to make sure that I thought they were suitable participants by explaining the kinds of interpersonal violence they experienced. For example, three of the women were concerned that they would not qualify for my research as they had “only” experienced psychological and emotional violence. I also used this interview to talk about issues of power (see Fine et al., 2000), confidentiality, and any other concerns the participants or I had.

One of the concerns I had about my research was the possible emotional harm talking about their experiences might have on the participants. I initiated a discussion about possible harm during the first interview and had available a list of feminist counsellors, psychologists, family therapists, and other mental health professionals who work on a sliding fee scale or as part of university student services. No participant asked for a copy of this list, but two participants added the names of counsellors or organizations that they thought might be helpful to other women. Although I did not audio-tape this first interview, I took notes with the participants’ permission.

The second interview, which lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, allowed time for the participants to tell me about their experiences and reflect upon the meanings of what they had said. I took no notes during this interview in order to focus on what the women were saying; instead, I audio-taped the interviews with the participants’ permission. I also used a back-up tape recorder so that I would worry less about equipment failure. I began this interview by asking the women to tell me about their graduate school experiences—why they came to graduate school, the high points and low points, and their

---

13 The feminist counselors on my list used non-hierarchical, power-sharing methods of counseling that acknowledged that women are the experts on themselves (see, for example, Laidlaw, Malmo & Associates, 1990).
general impressions of being a graduate student. As the women talked about their experiences, most of them mentioned the research they were working on or hoped to work on, their enjoyment of reading and talking about topics that interested them, and their frustrations with the university system and with other people—students and faculty. I took my cue from them, and asked them to tell me more about different aspects of their university experiences—things they emphasized or ideas they indicated they wanted to talk more about. I also asked them if any of their experiences reminded them or, or made them think about, the interpersonal violence they had experienced. Since the participants knew I was exploring possible connections between their graduate school experiences and their experiences of interpersonal violence in this research, they often made connections without me asking. Only one participant had difficulty getting started. She admitted that she was not used to talking about herself and was concerned that anything she said would not be relevant. Because she had mentioned her cultural background in our first interview, I asked her to tell me more about the importance of her ethnicity and/or culture to her education. As she talked about her childhood and her reasons for coming to graduate school, she seemed to feel more confident about speaking with me. Talking about her reasons for coming to graduate school led naturally into a discussion of her graduate school experiences.

Ideas about feeling powerless emerged almost immediately in this interview as participants related their beliefs about themselves in graduate school to their beliefs about themselves in their violent relationship(s). Exploring their ideas about power and powerlessness led to discussions about the meanings of power, stories about positive experiences in graduate school, and a growing acknowledgement, at least in this interview,
that there were times that they felt confident and perhaps a sense of power that was part of the reason they were able to enjoy their graduate school experience and continue their studies. I seldom used the exploratory questions I had prepared, especially after the first few in-depth interviews, because many of the questions were not relevant to our conversations and because I became less concerned with issues of control and trust (see p. 46) due to getting to know the participants better and feeling more comfortable with the narrative process.

Between the second and third interviews, I transcribed the second interview and sent it to the participants for their comments. Six of the participants added comments, made corrections, or wrote questions they had to themselves as they read the transcript. The third interview, about an hour long, provided time for a discussion of the second interview, allowed the participants to include addition information, and permitted both of us to clarify anything that was unclear. I audio-taped this third interview, also. This interview turned out to be a time when many participants talked more about the connections they were making between their experiences with interpersonal violence and their graduate school experiences. One participant mentioned that she was using the third interview to remind her of the connections she was making and to help her “stay in the present” while she was at school. In this interview, many participants asked about what I was learning, either from other participants or from the reading I told them I was doing. They expressed their interest in reading the dissertation when it was complete. I talked about some of my initial assumptions (for example, my idea that the identities [gender, ethnicity, and so on] of instructors may have an influence on how they think of themselves as students) and how these possible exploratory questions were not relevant. I also shared
more about the ideas about relations of power that were emerging from the interviews. Most participants took an interest in what I was learning and discussed possible implications for them. Although I sent transcripts of the third interview to the participants, only one of them gave me feedback on this interview. It is possible that the participants felt the transcriptions were accurate or that they were too busy to reply. Four participants, including the woman I interviewed by phone, combined the first and second interview as they indicated to me that they had limited time or they were acquainted with me from activities and events at the University and felt relatively comfortable with taking part in the research, or both. All interviews, including the pilot interview, were conducted between December 5, 2003 and April 28, 2005.

One of my methodological goals was to make my research process, including my analysis, as transparent as possible in order to ensure quality, rigorous research (see Anfar, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Asking participants for feedback on the transcripts; clarifying the meanings of terms, ideas, and statements during interviews; clarifying my ongoing analysis of what participants were saying during the interviews; and encouraging participant stories based on their understandings (not my presuppositions) of their experiences were all part of being accountable and credible (see Anfara et al., 2002; Fine et al., 2000). When analyzing the interviews, I constantly compared and contrasted what participants said within one interview and across my interviews with them, taking note of similarities and differences in their discussions of their experiences and in comparison with other participants. Instances where participants disagreed with the norm were also noted and used to enrich the analysis (see Silverman, 2001). In addition, in my discussions about my research with participants, my committee, and my peers, I talked about my biases and
encouraged feedback as to the extent that my beliefs, ideas, and experiences may have been influencing my research (see Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). By making my research process and analysis more public (see Anfara et al., 2002), I hoped to increase the integrity of my research.

**Narrative Inquiry: Telling Stories to Facilitate Understanding**

Narrative inquiry is a method that “assumes that people’s realities are constructed through narrating their stories” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 122; Seidman, 1998). These stories and the realities that are constructed through them are what my research is about. I wanted to know the impressions, remembrances, and understandings that my participants had about their lives as graduate students and as victims of interpersonal violence (see Widdershoven, 1993). I hoped that by telling their stories, participants would have the opportunity to voice their ideas and feelings about their lives (see Cruikshank, 1990; Etter-Lewis, 1993; Frank, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999), perhaps for the first time, because oppressed groups, including women who have been victims of interpersonal violence, are often silenced (Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Herman, 1992/97; Read, 1988).

Thinking of interviewing in terms of listening to and telling stories allowed me, as the interviewer, to encourage participants to tell their stories in whatever way made sense to them. The women in this study used recognizable storytelling devices such as dialogue, metaphors, flashbacks, foreshadowing, and contradictions (see Cruikshank, 1990; Denzin, 2000; Etter-Lewis, 1993; Thompson, 1995). They often told their stories in what appeared to be a rather disorganized, fragmented manner, rather than in chronological order (see Etter-Lewis, 1993; Thompson, 1995; see also Herman, 1992/97). This open story-telling style allowed the women to tell their stories “in their own way” and led to interviews that
were rich in data, including understandings and connections the participants felt free to explore during the interviews. At the beginning of my research, I felt anxious about not following a set interview schedule, fearing that I would “miss something.” However, as I began to trust my participants more (in terms of telling me what was important to them) and they began to trust that I could and would listen to their stories, we were able to relax and let the interview proceed as it would. All participants welcomed the opportunity to talk about their experiences. They put this down to feeling silenced at school, at home, and in society in general. They were relieved to finally talk about their experiences in a setting where they were legitimized. Only two participants asked, specifically, if I would keep them “on track.” They were concerned that they would talk about anything and everything given that they felt they had little opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas.

**Ethical Considerations**

Despite the prevalence of violence against women, talking about this violence and women’s responses to their experiences is still taboo in most places, including educational institutions (Herman, 1992/97; Read, 1998). Exposing these “inconvenient facts” (Frank, 2000, p. 9, citing Weber, 1958) has been part of my ethical work in this research (see Frank, 2000). Although I believe it is essential for women who have experienced/experiencing violence to “voice” their experiences and make visible the effects that

---

14 Weber used this term to refer to the facts that “useful” teachers teach his (sic) students—“facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions” (Weber, 1958, p. 147). Frank adopted this term to refer to the unheard stories that the “ill and their families, physicians, nurses, and administrators” can tell to illuminate the experiences of ill people and medical workers. I use this term to talk about the unheard and often untold stories of violence that women experience and the effects of that violence on their lives.

15 I am using the metaphor of “voice” in several ways here: First, I am thinking about political processes, including patriarchy, racism, and colonialism, that silence women—practices of domination which suppress voice. Women’s voices—their stories—are acts of resistance that challenge dominant male paradigms. Second, finding one’s voice or hearing the voices of women is a way to challenge the “truths” of oppressors and present new truths. Also, for some women in this study, “finding their voice” seemed to indicate that
violence has had on their learning (see Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Bury, 2001; Frank, 2000; Lamb, 1999; for a critique of “finding one’s voice,” see Lamb, 1999), I am aware that doing so could have undesirable effects on the participants, on other women who have experienced interpersonal violence, and on myself (see below).

Questions of anonymity were ongoing (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and were discussed during the first interview and at various times throughout the research. It is often assumed that participants will want and agree to use pseudonyms to protect their identities, but three women in this study wanted their names used, at least initially. Research suggests there may have been many reasons for the women to want to be recognized in this research:

They may, for example, have felt they were collaborating with me and wanted to be able to answer questions about their part in this research (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Duneier, 1999). They may have wanted to give their words authority by using their names. They may have felt pressured to use their real names because they believed this would help diminish power differentials in the researcher/interviewee relationship or because others who knew they were part of this research encouraged them to be “out” about their experiences. Or, they may have been resisting the stigma attached to being a “victim” of interpersonal violence by using their name instead of keeping “silent” through the use of a pseudonym.16

Although three participants said they simply were not concerned about people knowing who they were and one woman stated that, as a feminist, she felt it was important

---

16 Deirdre Kelly suggested this last reason to me, based on her experiences interviewing young mothers (see Kelly, 2000). When thinking more about the participants who wanted their names used and rereading their comments in the transcripts about the use of pseudonyms, this possible reason rings true for these three participants.
that readers of the study could ask her about her experiences and her part in the research, 
part of my ethical work throughout this study was to talk with my participants to help them 
understand the possible consequences of using their names or remaining anonymous. As a 
result, I asked questions such as, "Do you want others to know about the violence in your 
life and how it has affected you? Are you prepared for the possible use of your stories by 
unethical people who see violence against women as the fault of the victim?" (see Fine et 
al., 2000). I also discussed with them the possibility that the people they referred to when 
discussing issues of violence and abuse might be identifiable if the participants did not use 
pseudonyms. If so, that would be a breach of University ethics. In that case, to protect 
them and the people to whom they were referring, I would have to use a pseudonym for 
their name. After thinking about their decisions in light of my questions and comments, all 
participants decided to use a pseudonym. Before I submitted my final draft, I contacted all 
participants again, to confirm their decisions (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

After each interview, I emailed the transcribed interview to participants for their 
feedback. I incorporated their changes and notes (if there were any) into the transcriptions 
and, if I had questions or concerns, talked with the participants about them at the next 
interview or by email. I made any verbatim sections of the transcripts that I used and my 
analysis available to the participants and invited their input (see Chase, 1996; Duneier, 
1999; Ristock, 2002; Stacey, 1988). Although I sent emails to the nine participants whose 
quotes I used in my dissertation, asking if they would like to have copies of the quotes and 
my analysis, only five participants returned my emails and only three of those asked for a 
copy of the quotes and analysis. One participant said she was overwhelmed with work and 
"trusted my judgment"; another said she that while she had been happy to be a participant,
she did not feel comfortable even thinking about her own quotes and asked for a summary of the research after everything was complete. Just one participant replied to the email, letting me know that I had represented her fairly. I can only speculate as to why more participants did not reply. At least two participants had graduated and moved away. They (and perhaps others) may have felt that their part in this research was over. Although no participant mentioned feeling disturbed or upset by taking part in this research, perhaps once they were away from the research and the relative trusting relationship that was established with the researcher during the interviews, they did not want to return to thinking about instances of violence in their lives. One participant withdrew from her program, something she often talked about wanting to do during the interviews. Perhaps she did not want to be involved in activities related to UBC. Other participants may have felt (like one participant who did return my email) that I could be trusted to represent them fairly. My main reason for involving the participants to this extent was to assure them that any potentially identifying material would not be used without their permission. Although I asked participants for their input into various aspects of my research and took their comments and suggestions into consideration, the final document and all decisions made about this document are mine. Confidentiality concerns were the only areas in which I deferred to the participants.

My positionalities—the multiple overlapping systems of privilege and oppression that affect my identities (see Tisdell, 2000)—informed my beliefs, values, and biases and had an effect on all aspects of my research, including the way I phrased my research questions, my methodology, my analysis strategies, and how I represented the findings. A recognition of, and reflection upon, how my experiences and beliefs were affecting my
research and how my research was affecting me, has been an ongoing part of the study. Through journaling, discussions with my Study Sisters,¹⁷ memos and meetings with committee members, and meetings with a professional counsellor, I examined how I was affecting my research and my participants and how my personal characteristics, including my position as an insider—a woman who has experienced interpersonal violence and who is in a graduate program—were affected by and affecting the research (see Collins, 1986; Matsumoto, 1996; Narayan, 1993; Rosaldo, 1984; Thompson, 1995 for more in-depth discussions of “insider” and the effects on research of being an “insider” or “outsider”). For example, my identity as a woman who has experienced interpersonal violence gave me insights into my participants’ experiences that researchers who have not been victimized in this way may not have. During our first interview, most participants asked, either directly or indirectly, whether I had experienced interpersonal violence. A brief disclosure on my part seemed to have a relaxing effect and offered reassurance, according to two of the participants, that I would believe them and understand their stories (see Thompson, 1995). However, this same insider status sometimes kept me from exploring their statements in more depth, either because I assumed I understood what they meant, or because I transferred my concern about the topic to them. In addition, I sometimes lost sight of the boundaries between my research and my life or my position as researcher and the women’s positions as participants. For example, at times it was very tempting to talk with my participants about my own experiences in graduate school and how I related them to my experiences of interpersonal violence, especially when my experiences were similar to their experiences.

¹⁷ “Study Sisters” is a group of PhD and Master’s students created for the purpose of giving each other support—both academically and personally—as we journeyed through graduate school. As members graduated, quit, and/or moved away from Vancouver, we continued to meet every couple of weeks—in person and by phone—giving each other encouragement and assistance in whatever endeavours members were involved. My Sisters have been instrumental in keeping me going throughout my PhD program.
own. My journaling and discussions helped me be aware of how my insider status may have affected the interviews, the participants, and myself.

I was also concerned about how my age, ethnic background, social class, sexual orientation, or other factors might influence the interviewer/interviewee relationship or what my participants would feel comfortable talking about. However, any hesitations I felt from the participants during the first interview disappeared after we talked about violence against women, the reasons I was conducting the research, and our “common” experiences with interpersonal violence. For example, one participant, who very hesitantly came into my office (where I was holding the interview) and who spoke very softly and cautiously during the interview, became much more forthcoming after our discussion about the meaning of interpersonal violence. She was concerned that she did not fit my participant profile because she had experienced “mostly” verbal and emotional violence. When I included some of my experiences as my rationale for including more than physical and sexual violence, she sat up in her chair, maintained eye contact when she was talking to me, and spoke in a clear, straightforward manner. My Study Sisters and committee members were especially helpful in recognizing and pointing out assumptions I made because of my positionalities.

These ethical considerations were an ongoing part of my research. By continually monitoring the effects I, as the researcher, was having on my research and the participants, and by considering the effects the research might have on the participants, myself, and others, I was able to accomplish my research goals while protecting the interests of my participants and myself.

18 Not that our experiences were the same but that we all had experienced what we agreed was interpersonal violence.
Analysis

Coding and analysis occurred throughout my research. From my pilot interview until the completion of my final draft, I continually revised my coding categories and re-analyzed my data, guided by my reading and re-reading of the transcripts and my reading of the literature. My analysis strategies were guided by the work of qualitative researchers and theorists, in particular, those who work in the area of narrative analysis (see, for example, Mischler, 1995; Polkinghorn, 1995; Riessman, 2002). Polkinghorn (1995) describes two different approaches to analyzing narratives that he calls “analysis of narratives” and “narrative analysis” (p. 12). In the first type of analysis, researchers look for “themes that hold across stories” (p. 12). In the second type of analysis, researchers bring together “descriptions of events and happenings” (p. 12) and put them together into a story by means of a plot. In other words, “analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements, while narrative analysis moves from elements to stories” (p. 12). I used the first type of analysis, looking ahead to the writing up of my research; in order to protect the anonymity of my participants, I decided to use a thematic approach rather than telling each individual’s story.

As I transcribed the tapes from the interviews, I mentally did a preliminary analysis, taking note of continuities and contradictions in what the participant said throughout the interview and, later, similarities and differences between an individual’s interviews and then, among participants (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Silverman, 2001). The very brief notes I made alerted me to ideas, words, and sections of the interview to watch for as I read through the transcripts. I transcribed all but the last two interviews
myself,\textsuperscript{19} taking notes on issues of importance (for example, contradictions) and emerging themes. After I finished transcribing an interview, I read over the transcript at least twice before I conducted the next interview. The first time I underlined and coded information the participants emphasized or repeated in different parts of the interview, participant answers to direct questions I asked all, or most, participants, and anything else that appeared compelling and relevant. When I completed a preliminary coding of most of the interviews, I looked for similarities and differences in what participants said and noted the comparisons. For example, I wrote “check Jane’s interview,” when I read something in a transcript of Ramona’s interview that reminded me of something Jane said. The second time I read the transcripts, I checked for discrepancies between what the participant said in different parts of the interview, made notes of when participants cried (what was being said), or became particularly emphatic (as I transcribed, I underlined words and phrases that were emphasized or wrote them in all capital letters if the participant raised her voice while emphasizing a word or phrase), or when I thought pauses, word repetition, or hesitations were important (for a more detailed discussion of this approach, see Gee, 1991). For example, one woman hesitated every time she talked about herself as a survivor. When I checked this with her, I discovered that she had difficulty applying the word “survivor” to herself because she thought that being a survivor indicated that she had been a victim. She did not want to think of herself as a victim, either. I marked these to check later on the tapes.

I sorted and compiled data around headings and sub-headings related to my research questions and any exploratory questions I asked. My initial codes and validating

\textsuperscript{19} I was diagnosed with “repetitive stress injury” and was advised to rest my right wrist as much as possible during the latter part of my transcribing. For the remaining two interviews, I hired a professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement.
quotes included the following: codes signifying positive and negative experiences and relationships with faculty, colleagues, and important others; beliefs and attitudes toward graduate school; attitudes of self and others (friends, colleagues, faculty) toward victims of interpersonal violence and toward violence against women in society; experiences of feeling powerful and powerless; and specific identities of self and others that have an influence on, or are influenced by, educational experiences. Rather than using a computer program for data analysis, I used different coloured highlighters and post-it notes so that I could have a visual, hands-on approach to analysis. As many of my categories overlapped and some changed, this method allowed me to make changes easily and “see” how my analysis was progressing. I kept track of my analysis in Word files, dragging and dropping the data from the interviews. As my reading and writing progressed, I began to recognize that many of the specific codes and data, although interesting, were tangential to my argument about the connections between interpersonal violence and women’s learning. My post-it notes shifted again, as did my thinking about the shape of my dissertation.

As I started writing about my findings, my categories—and then my approach to analysis—changed. At one point I felt I was losing touch with each participant’s individual story because of my strategy of grouping participants’ responses together. At that point, I reread the interviews again and wrote a summary of each woman’s story (see Polkinghorne, 1995). Getting back in touch with each participant’s story reminded me of the context of their words, the importance to them of different parts of their lives, and how they connected personal, educational, and societal violence against women. It reminded me that it is the women’s stories that were the focus of my research and of my analysis.
In this chapter, I have explained my recruitment strategy, methodology, ethical concerns, and analysis strategies. I have also included a group portrait of my participants in order to facilitate easier understanding of my participants’ words later in the dissertation. Throughout this chapter, I have tried to convey the importance of ethical questions and concerns I had throughout the entire research process.
I did not begin this research with the intention of focusing on power relationships or ideas about power, even though I recognized the importance of the effects of abuses of power in relationships of many kinds. I viewed power in a rather one-dimensional way—as domination or control. As the participants talked about their experiences, I realized that they were mirroring my thoughts. They (and I) were thinking about power in a very limited and limiting way—power as authority or domination; a "thing" that is used to suppress or oppress; something you have or don’t have; a negative quality. My participants (and I) equated power with control and made connections between the powerlessness they experienced in their interpersonal relationships and the powerlessness they felt in graduate school and in their lives in society in general. This humanistic notion of power soon became limiting as we tried to understand more about the participant’s experiences in graduate school. As the women explored their graduate school experiences during the interviews, their ideas (and mine) about power expanded and became more nuanced. For example, they realized that the legitimate power faculty possessed could be helpful and supportive. Also, when the women talked about some of their relationships with faculty and students in which they felt valued and appreciated, they recognized a kind of positive power at work. Sometimes they were able to say, however hesitantly, that they felt powerful. I recognized that I needed to expand my conception of power in order to more thoroughly understand how the women were talking about their experiences. My expanded
ideas about power and relations of power allowed me to explore in more depth how the participants understood their educational experiences.

In this chapter I explore, through the lens of power relationships, selected experiences that the participants recounted about being in graduate school. Surrounding these positive and negative experiences are the ways in which their educational experiences were related to their experiences of interpersonal violence. Although ideas of “voice,” “silence,” and the use of personal experience as knowledge and authority are closely linked to relations of power, I have addressed them more fully in the next chapter (chapter five) in order to more clearly show how the women in this study used these concepts when talking about their experiences of interpersonal violence and their experiences in graduate school. Issues of power and voice were often intertwined in the women’s stories but were also addressed separately, as if they were not connected. I believe that an understanding of the ways power and voice are related is essential for women who have experienced interpersonal violence in order for them to understand how this violence affects them. It is also essential for educators and educational institutions in order to address issues of violence against women that affect their learning.

What is this “Thing” Called Power?

When I first explored ideas of power and powerlessness with the participants, they reflected back my view of power as a thing—good or bad—that faculty and students in graduate school possessed. They saw themselves as powerless much of the time and were unable to conceive of themselves as being powerful because they equated power with domination (often masculine) (see hooks, 1984; Miller, 1982; St. Pierre, 2000). When I asked for their definitions of power, the humanistic idea of power as a masculine,
authoritarian characteristic prevented them from seeing themselves as powerful. However, as they continued to talk about their experiences, the women recognized times when they felt confident, strong, and knowledgeable. “Perhaps,” they asked, “this could be seen as powerful?” They also talked about graduate school as a place where they were able to see themselves as smart and successful in spite of feeling powerless much of the time. I decided a more comprehensive exploration of the meaning of power would help me understand the complexities of their experiences (see Skeggs, 1997). The following theorists, among others, allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the kinds of power the women in my study referred to—Foucault because he expanded my narrow concept of power as being situated in a specific person and allowed me to see power everywhere, and feminist theorists because they addressed gendered dimensions in power relationships and shed light on the kinds of situations where the women recognized a kind of positive experience with power. Lesbian feminist theorists, for example Ann Russo (2001), Claire Renzetti (1989, 1992), and Janice Ristock (2002), helped me further refine my ideas about power relationships between and among women, important because the majority of my participants had mainly female instructors and committee members and were in classes in which women greatly outnumbered men. In addition, some of my participants had experienced interpersonal violence in which the perpetrator was a woman.

Although there are many feminist critiques of Foucault’s work (see, for example, Deveaux, 1994; Hartsock, 2006; McLaughlin, 2003a), I value his work for helping me think about power in a more diverse way than I had when I began this research. Foucault (1997/1994) theorized that power is not a “thing,” either positive or negative, but exists in relations. Therefore, he speaks of “power relations” or “relations of power,” meaning that
“in human relationships, whether they involve verbal communication, or amorous, institutional, or economic relationships, power is always present” (pp. 291, 292). He further asserts that in relations of power there is always the possibility of resistance, otherwise there would be no power relations, and contrasts this with states of domination in which no freedom exists. Foucault resists the idea of power as only evil or repressive and proposes that power can also be productive and liberating. He describes “disciplinary power” based on Bentham’s figure of the panopticon. This model of a prison in which prisoners are always exposed to surveillance, results in prisoners beginning to discipline themselves, whether or not anyone is watching. Foucault expands this idea to describe a “disciplinary society” (Foucault, 1977/1995) in which the state (or state institutions, including schools) no longer has to physically discipline its subjects but rather, relies on self-discipline for control. In addition, he states that “power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, or any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 27). In an education setting, this suggests that “power is very much implicated in the production of knowledge. What can be said? Who can say it?” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 496)

Feminist theorists further explore ideas about power by suggesting that there are different kinds of power relations. To Kenway and Willis (1998), power in schools can be thought of as running “around and through everything in schools—success, knowledge, emotion, responsibility” (p. 98). They and others (e.g. Bishop, 2002; Heinrich, 1995) discuss many often conflicting meanings of power. These include “power (invested) in” institutions or roles (Kenway & Willis, 1998, p. 98), “power over,” which is power as
strength, authority, force, might, or domination (Bishop, 2002, p. 42; Kenway and Willis, 1998, p. 98), and seemingly positive aspects of power—“power through,” for example knowledge and ability, “power with,” shown by working collaboratively with others (Bishop, 2002, p. 42; Kenway & Willis, 1998, p. 99), and “power-within” (Bishop, 2002, p. 42; Heinrich, 1995, p. 450), that is, power resulting from “one’s own centredness, one’s grounding in one’s own beliefs, wisdom, knowledge, skills, culture, and community” (Bishop, p. 42). In contrast to the authority often used to express “power over,” Bishop suggests that authority can also be “the wisdom, creativity, or expression of a group’s energy by an individual that is recognized and agreed to by others as right at a certain time” (p. 42). Some participants questioned whether, as students, they had any authority at the university. When comparing themselves to faculty, they felt they lacked “the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals tend to have” (Young, 1990, p. 57). They felt powerless due to their lack of autonomy and their need to defer to faculty and university policies.

My expanded ideas about the meaning of “power” allowed me to explore the women’s descriptions of incidents and interactions in their graduate school experience in more detail. They and I began to see relations of power everywhere.

**Power at Work**

It soon became evident during the interviews that most participants thought about issues of power and control and battled with feelings of powerlessness on a continuing basis. The women described feeling intimidated, not smart enough, paralyzed, disrespected, afraid, less than, under-confident, delegitimized, and powerless. They talked about “giving away” their power, others “having power over” them, and second-guessing
themselves. As opposed to their feelings of powerlessness, they saw faculty as having control over them, "calling the shots," being intellectually intimidating, and being "power brokers." Other students, also, could be a source of feelings of powerlessness, especially in a group situation where a colleague was seen as trying to control group processes, interactions, or outcomes. I take up these themes below.

Although the women readily admitted to feeling powerless, most of them shied away from talking about themselves as feeling powerful, perhaps because they associated feeling powerful with limiting the power of others (see Miller, 1982). Instead, when I questioned them more closely they admitted at times to feeling confident of their abilities, feeling "empowered," and "in charge," although they weren't sure this meant they felt powerful. As they talked about these experiences, the women recognized patterns in their behaviours in graduate school that were similar to those in their personal lives. A major theme that emerged was the effect of power and control, either perceived or real, on their behaviour and their self-concept, both in their relationships at the university and in their interpersonal relationships. Through the interview process, many of the participants realized that there was a direct relationship between how they handled conflict and feelings of powerlessness with "superiors" in graduate school (e.g. graduate advisors, faculty, "brilliant" colleagues) and how they handled conflict and feelings of powerlessness in their violent interpersonal relationships. For example, at one point Lynn decided she had to quit her program in order to recover her self-esteem. In comparing trying to quit her program with trying to leave her abusive relationship she said,

'It was like being in a bad marriage that you can't get out of. Just so worn down and disempowered that you can't get out.' (Lynn 1/20)
During the interviews, the participants explored different ideas about the power that they felt was inherent in their graduate experience. They expressed their understanding of power as “power over” (Bishop, 2002; Kenway & Willis, 1998), power as invested in the university and faculty (Kenway & Willis, 1998; Young, 1990), and “disciplinary power” (Foucault, 1977/1995). These mostly negative views of power fit with their experiences of violence and abuse in their interpersonal relationships and with the authority and domination they felt they were subjected to in graduate school. As a result, they described themselves as feeling powerless much of the time—in class discussions, in one-to-one meetings with their supervisors or other committee members, and as women navigating through the university’s official requirements or public spaces, or both.

As we talked more about power and explored positive aspects of graduate school, the participants recognized times when their feelings of confidence, pleasure in their work, and enjoyment in their interactions with others led to feelings and beliefs about themselves that could possibly be thought of as having power or feeling powerful. Contributing to discussions, helping other people understand concepts or ideas, recognizing they had something to say, feeling competent, receiving recognition for their work, working successfully with others, and understanding difficult concepts when working alone all increased the participants’ confidence and “empowered” them. These positive ideas about themselves and their skills and abilities were seldom thought of as “having power” but rather as developing confidence or a belief in one’s ability to do things. Although the women hesitated to admit they had power or felt powerful, they often talked about “being empowered.” This notion of “being empowered,” although never defined by the women who used it, seemed to indicate that the women felt a kind of inside power when they were
able to contribute to the knowledge of others or if they were able to increase their self-confidence or self-knowledge (see Deveaux, 1994; Miller, 1982). This idea of power was in contrast to the participants’ ideas of power as authority over and domination.

**Group Work: Unrecognized Relations of Power?**

One part of graduate school that all of my participants mentioned was participation in groups—either speaking in groups (classes were often considered groups because of the small size of graduate classes) or working on class projects within a smaller group. For a variety of reasons, the majority of the participants found group work to be a challenge. They related these challenges to their experiences of interpersonal violence and the way they learned to relate to the person with whom they were in that relationship or to the way they have learned to change their behaviour since leaving the relationship. Throughout these stories, relations of power were ever present but rarely mentioned directly.

Claire, whose relationship with a male family member was violent and abusive, talked about her response to other people in her small graduate seminar and how it related to her interpersonal relationship.

*When people talk in a really loud manner and in [a] very imposing [way], it makes me feel sick because [abuser] was like that. And it's pretty silly that it affects me still in this way but I can't stand to see someone yelling... So even if they're not necessarily saying something threatening but if they're very loud and imposing the way that they say it, it really... disturbs me and makes me shut down. I just want to turn away from it, rather than respond to someone who behaves like that.* (Claire 1/14)

Ramona, who since leaving an abusive relationship had learned to value herself and to recognize that part of her authority as a speaker was related to the relevance of her experiences, had difficulty being part of groups where theory was the only legitimate form of knowledge. Because she worked full-time and attended graduate school part-time, she
sometimes did not have as much time as she would have liked to prepare for class. These two issues—the importance of her experience and her part-time status—combined to make some group-work problematical for her because she felt delegitimized and silenced. She stated,

> Because I think there’s a real theory elitism in grad school and often times I feel like because I’m a [profession] who cares about [her work] in relationship to theory, that already, I’m not seen as a true academic. And I think the other time that I don’t feel like I have the power to participate is when it’s pure theory. . . . And so, I feel like those are the kinds of discussion where I end up being . . . . . silent. (Ramona 1/31, 32)

Ramona connected this to the emotional abuse she experienced in an interpersonal relationship that resulted in a loss of self-esteem and a feeling of not being smart enough or good enough.

> And so, moments like that, for me, are really difficult. Those are the ones where the wind gets knocked out of me. It’s the ones where I go, “Oh my god. I’m a fraud, again.” (Ramona 1/33)

Lynn was part of a team doing research on (she vehement denied they were working “with”) a vulnerable and oppressed group of women. Because of her social class background and experiences with interpersonal violence, Lynn felt she had some understanding of some of the difficulties some of the women in the group might be facing while taking part in the research. When the other members of the research team seemed oblivious to the distress experienced by some of the research participants, Lynn was reminded of the silencing she had experienced and was experiencing because of her background. She felt ashamed and powerless. She said,

> And there was no debriefing with the team. And this is a very sensitive issue with sensitive people who are, in some respects, fragile and really . . . vulnerable. And, there didn’t seem to be any need for anyone except me to
discuss what was going on; the dynamics, the pain that people might be experiencing. I started to feel . . . powerless and lose whatever steam I'd gained throughout my life. I found myself crying a lot. Crying a lot! I felt a lot of shame because I even saw what I saw going on. They didn't have emotion. They didn't have any response to what was going on. It was pretty . . . academic. (Lynn 1/7 – her emphasis)

Lynn was also pointing out the traditional rational/emotional dichotomy that is constructed and supported in most university programs and settings and the need for researchers to take a non-biased or “neutral” stance. For Lynn, this was neither possible nor desirable.

Esma, whose experiences of violence and abuse had included public violence at the hands of members of the justice system learned to take care of herself through education and becoming an expert at martial arts. Through her work with abused women, she also learned to be an advocate for herself and other women. Class/group discussions were difficult for her because she empathized with women (she did not mention men) who were being oppressed by other students. Although she felt she could stand up for herself, when she heard a student making racist, sexist, homophobic, or other oppressive remarks that appeared to silence another student, she was reminded of the violence she experienced, became extremely angry, and wanted to lash out at the oppressor.

So my response to violence is violence. But you know, the thing is that the sense of my body wanting to do something is a very difficult thing. . . . It feels discrediting 'cause actually what you want to do is do some violence. Now I haven't actually done anything violent for years but coming close to that need in myself is painful. The confrontation for me is not actually with my fear of anybody else’s violence, it’s actually with the fear of my own, and my need to contain that. And my need to protect myself from that. (Esma 1/14-16)
Esma spent much of her time in class battling with herself to remain calm and to focus on the comments and questions of other students. She said she did most of her learning at home as, often, her “rage” was too great to let her concentrate at university.

_I think that my learning has been interrupted many times by the moments of feeling... where I had to get a grip on myself: where I had to sort of sit and, and get my blood pressure back down._ (Esma 1/20)

At the same time that power relationships in group work reminded participants of their lack of power in their interpersonal relationships, group work also illuminated a more seemingly “powerful” side of the women's experiences. Esma, while reflecting on the rage she sometimes experienced in class (see above), also recognized that when she was angry, she felt like she was dangerous, an experience that part of her enjoyed because it reminded her she was not powerless in the face of abuse. She admitted,

_There's a part of me that likes being dangerous. There's a part of me that really wants to be taken seriously and to not be taken for granted. Like, just don't fuck with me! And that comes from my experience of violence._ (Esma 1/15)

Ramona was one of several women I interviewed who, partly as a response to being in a violent relationship, had worked as an activist in organizations concerned with violence against women. These participants spoke about their frustration in groups where other group members were hesitant to speak out or express their opinions. Through their activism, they had learned to speak up for other women and for themselves. They enjoyed a good discussion, which to them meant frequent interactions with people who challenged their ideas and who were knowledgeable both from a theoretical and life experience perspective. For example, Ramona said,
There were some classes that I took that I found were really, . . . intellectually stimulating. There were the kind of critical debate and the kind of . . . fierceness that I wanted. I went back to grad school because I wanted to be in a room with people who were really passionate. And wanted to do a lot of reading and get into good debates. And I'm not someone who has difficulty with people expressing opinions or with disagreement or with any kind of those kinds of discord. And, that's really what I was looking for. In a lot of classes I found that that wasn't encouraged. And, furthermore, that once that kind of debate started happening, a lot of people got freaked out. (Ramona 1/2)

Ramona looked forward to, and learned well from, the kind of confrontational style of classroom interaction that some feminist theorists, including hooks (1989) and Hayes (2000), recognize as beneficial to developing critical and engaged speakers, thinkers, and writers. Ramona's disappointment with the lack of passionate, critical engagement made her rethink continuing her graduate studies.

Jane, also, recognized that she did not always feel powerless in group situations. After many years of counselling related to being in a violent relationship, she had learned to assert herself. She talked about her difficulties in a group where the lone man presented himself as a "typical [ethnic group] male" from a culture where women are expected to be relatively quiet and subservient. Jane perceived the man as trying to control the group, which included two other women. As a result of her experiences with interpersonal violence and her desire to assert herself, she questioned and argued with the man continually. Jane admitted that her behaviour resulted in meetings that lasted twice as long as they should have and group members who were not happy as a result. Jane recognized her response to this person as being a result of her experiences of interpersonal violence.

It was REALLY interesting for me to see. I always think I've worked through a lot of it and then I get confronted with these things and I go, "Wow! What am I doing?" I guess I could have acquiesced, which is what I did in, in my violent situation was I always just acquiesced. It was just easier. So I really feel, since I've left that situation, I have this need to sort
of . . . stand up for myself constantly. And that makes my life problematic sometimes, I think. (Jane 1/9-11 – her emphasis)

At the time I interviewed her, Jane was part of another group—all women this time. She also was taking a conflict resolution-type course. When I questioned her about this she said with a wry laugh,

*After talking with you, I recognized that, in this [present] group, I probably am that man.* (Jane, 1/13)

Jane stated that she began to acknowledge her role in the group after recognizing that one of the women in the group was reacting to her the same way she had been reacting to the man in her former group. She was taking steps to learn to handle conflict in a more supportive and collaborative manner.

Working in groups was challenging for many of the participants because they were often reminded of the abusive interpersonal relationships they had experienced, the steps they had been taking to change their responses to abuse, and/or the advocacy work they had been doing on behalf of abused women, including themselves. Like Jane, some of the women did not immediately recognize the reasons behind their behaviour and only later realized that they were still being affected by past violence and abuse. Because experiences of abuse and violence are rarely discussed in an educational forum, participants may have been unable to transfer their understanding of the effects of their interpersonal experiences into their experiences in a university classroom.

I was intrigued by the more or less opposing ways that the women in my study approached working with other people and the rather depreciating way in which they talked about women whose approach to group participation differed from their own. I asked both groups—the women who backed away from what they saw as conflict and the women who
enjoyed a challenge—if they ever thought about the large numbers of women who have experienced violence and that their colleagues—both those who were quiet and those who appeared assertive or aggressive—might be participating in discussions and activities in ways that were responses to the violence they had experienced. Not one of my participants, including the ones who worked in violence prevention, had considered that the behaviours of their female colleagues could be a learned coping mechanism. Often they were surprised to realize why they behaved the way they did in groups and appreciated this insight into the possible reasons for their colleagues’ behaviours.

Ramona was an example of a participant who had not thought of connecting the behaviours of women in her classes to their personal experiences as a way to possibly understand group dynamics. Although she had been an activist and recognized that many women are or have been in abusive relationships, Ramona had not connected those women’s experiences to the ways they behaved in the classroom. She confessed,

Like, I don’t think I’ve ever looked across the classroom and gone, “I wonder if she’s not engaging because of (laughs), you know. Not once. (Ramona 1/38)

After reflecting on her statement for a few minutes she said,

I wonder if that’s part of an internalized sexism in that my perception of how I felt when I was in that relationship was that I couldn’t manage much else. Dealing with the relationship and maintaining the appearance of things being okay took all I had. And so I guess I sort of have that idea that women who are in those relationships aren’t going to be in grad school. The fact that I haven’t put it together is probably indicative of some sort of internalized sexism. (Ramona 1/38, 39)

Ramona’s insight reflects some common ideas about and by women in abusive relationships: first, they must try to appear “normal” (see Horsman, 1998) so that no one will know something is wrong; second, women in abusive
relationships often think they are responsible for the relationship (see Russell & Hamilton, 2005) and, therefore, are probably to blame for their own abuse; third, women, especially those in abusive relationships, are weak and unable to be successful in demanding, stress-producing situations such as being a graduate student or working in a professional capacity; fourth, talking directly about violent, abusive relationships is difficult and is often referred to obliquely ("you know") or must be couched in more "acceptable" terms ("those relationships") (see Heald & Horsman, 2000). These beliefs contribute to the invisibility of women who have experienced abusive relationships and make addressing any concerns they may have more difficult.

Worn Down and Disempowered: The Effects of Power Over

As long as there’s the possibility for abuse of power, there’s the possibility for abuse. (Ramona 2/42)

To the women in this study, advisors, committee members, and other faculty had power invested in them by way of being a faculty member at the university and "power as authority" over them, as students. This feeling of being at the mercy of someone with "power over" them may have been intensified by the type of supervisory relationship the participants described. Most of the women talked about being in a kind of "apprenticeship" relationship with their research supervisor in which the supervisor not only guided their research process, but also influenced their access to TAships and RAships as well. Although they recognized and respected the legitimate authority of faculty, they often equated this authority with a kind of punitive "power over" (see Ng, 1995, for a discussion of the difference between authority and power in a university setting). They
attributed their feelings of powerlessness, in part, to being exploited, having little autonomy or opportunity to be creative, and being treated with disrespect at the hands of those with power over them (see Young, 1990, pp. 56, 57). Because they understood power as being “in control,” and felt they had little control over their graduate school experiences—including the application and acceptance process, receiving funding, thesis/dissertation topic choice, writing style, manner of personal interactions, choice of career—they believed themselves to be powerless. These feelings of powerlessness as a result of another’s power over them reminded the women of their experiences in abusive interpersonal relationships where they also felt as if they had few choices.

Claire experienced feelings of powerlessness when she first applied to enter graduate school. Because of her background of violence and abuse, she had had difficulty finishing one of her undergraduate years due to a nervous breakdown, so did not have exemplary marks for that year. It had taken a long time for her to get up the courage to apply to graduate school. Her meeting with the faculty member who would need to recommend acceptance of her application did not go well. The “fairly intimidating woman” was not impressed with Claire’s marks, did not want to discuss the situation, and “tossed [the application] aside.” Claire stated,

*She was that sort of authoritarian non-emotional kind of person that really shocked me. And I felt so completely powerless in that situation, you know, because she held the key to letting me into grad school and all. Basically, ’cause, you know, if my application didn’t get past her, I didn’t have a chance.*” (Claire 1/25)

Emma, speaking about her reaction to a faculty member who hit her “fairly hard on the side of my arm” in order to get her to move said,

*Inside, I turned around and was like, ’What?!’ But I didn’t feel like I could respond to her in any way. She, well, she’s the friggin’* [position of
institutional power] so she controls, like, basically, my access to funding, um, to TAships, to everything, right? (Emma 1/12-13)

Not only did Emma believe this faculty member controlled her access to the university, she also had experience with her as an instructor of a class in which students were “terrified” of her because of her angry tirades.

She literally said to several of the people in class, “Shut up!” She BLOWS up. And, you never know what the hell’s going to make her blow up. (Emma 1/13 – her emphasis)

Emma realized, through talking about these incidents, that this faculty member’s behaviour and her reactions to it reminded her of the interpersonal relationship she had left shortly before.

It’s just fascinating how similar some of my reactions were and how I just really had not realized how I was falling into those patterns—of cowering, of . . . you know, trying DESPERATELY to please. Of just being totally afraid of a blow-up. (Emma 1/15 – her emphasis)

As we talked about her reaction to this particular faculty member in more detail, Emma recognized just how much her experiences with interpersonal violence had affected how she thought about many people with power/authority. She admitted,

In fact, sometimes it even takes me a while to register that people are supportive. I mean, in this conversation with you, I’ve really registered just how supportive [a faculty member] was. And I don’t think, I mean. I kind of knew that but, I never, I’m so not used to recognizing support. Whereas I’m really tuned into when people are critical (laughs) and I know exactly when they’re going to be judgmental. (Emma 1/27)

Like Emma, Molly recognized that she had difficulty recognizing or understanding the support she received in graduate school and in her relationships with helping professionals. She said, “When you’ve been abused and someone’s kind to you, you can’t figure it out.” (Molly 1/42)
Svele, a woman who experienced domination at the hands of a family member, recognized that she approached authority figures with caution. She had difficulty accepting criticism and so strove for perfection. She confessed,

*I am now overly sensitive to criticism. I can argue it’s because [abuser] constantly did it to the point where I can’t stand it anymore, so I often strive for perfectionism.* (Svele 1/9)

She also felt that the criticism she had continually received in her interpersonal relationship affected her ability to defend her work.

*Interestingly, my supervisor said during my defence that I need to learn to talk more, explicitly tell people how I rationalize my findings. I am just not used to talking more than it’s absolutely necessary.* (Svele 1/9)

Jane suspected that her feelings of powerlessness were stronger than those of other students because of her experiences in a violent interpersonal relationship. University policies and the power of faculty to deny her funding left her feeling defeated and powerless. She said,

*I was feeling pretty defeated when I found out I didn’t get my funding. I was feeling pretty much like my voice doesn’t matter. . . . I had a couple of days where I was thinking, you know, what am I doing here? What am I doing? Why am I doing this?* (Jane 2/25)

However, she admitted,

*I might get shut down more easily than a lot of other people, too, because I have had those experiences [with interpersonal violence], right. I can get feeling quite defeated by the whole process.* (Jane 2/32)

Jane’s feelings of defeat appear to stem from her experiences with interpersonal violence in which she was often shut down and silenced. Rather than seeing the lack of funding as a structural problem that many students face, she reacted as if it were a personal problem in which she was the target of “power over” by faculty and/or the university. Perhaps more in-depth conversations with faculty about
funding policies would have helped her recognize the structural nature of this challenge.

The women in this study often felt defeated and powerless in the face of the many instances of "power over" that they experienced in graduate school. When thinking about their reactions to what they considered unjust situations or abuses of power, some of the women realized that their reactions were similar to those they had used in their interpersonal relationships to cope with the violence they experienced. In their eyes, the faculty member or student who had power over them became a kind of proxy abuser. Associating violence and abuse with a specific person in their past and a specific person at graduate school meant that the women often ignored the differences between these situations. For example, they did not recognize the power they had to resist or change their graduate school experiences. They recognized abuses of power as personal problems but did not see the structural inequities that were present in both situations.

Feeling powerless also affected some participants' experiences where they exercised a certain amount of legitimate power. For example, as part of her Teaching Assistant (TA) duties, Claire taught part of a course that included a discussion about gendered perspectives to a group of 80 undergraduate students. She met with resistance from many of the "white middle class" boys in the class and recognized that their comments had a negative effect on some of the girls as well as on her. She remarked,

*The boys are fairly vocal. They felt, you know, the privilege to be able to say fairly sexist and racist things, not realizing, or not really, I don't know, realizing what they were saying, hopefully, and you can see students shut down. Often girls won't talk. Or, if there is a minority in the classroom, they'll be fairly distanced . . . And it's, especially being a young woman in this course, I definitely feel that, if I was an older male professor, they...*
wouldn’t try half the stuff they do. I’m really finding it tough and I’m finding it emotionally exhausting. I just wanted to cry. (Claire 1/18)

As a result of these experiences and some with students who challenged her expertise in the subject matter, Claire was “thrilled” when her job as a TA came to an end. She stated,

I’m going to do everything to avoid it. I just don’t enjoy being the punching bag for these students. . . . Just constantly fighting back feelings of intimidation from the students. (Claire 2/8)

Her feelings of being intimidated mirrored those she felt in her interpersonal relationship when her knowledge and expertise were continually challenged and delegitimized. Partly because of her experiences with interpersonal violence she had difficulty claiming her legitimate power as a TA with expertise in her field.

“Oh my god! That’s so it!”: Finding a Sense of Power

Although the women in this study readily acknowledged and talked about times when they felt powerless, they had difficulty thinking about times when they recognized they had power or felt powerful. The participants, themselves, had some theories about why this was so. One woman suggested that women are not encouraged to think of themselves as having power, so it is difficult for them to recognize the power they have. Another felt that the powerlessness she felt in her interpersonal relationship affected her ability to see herself as having power—she was often concerned about “being a fraud” or “not being smart enough.” In addition, the women I interviewed tended to think of power in terms of “being in control,” something they wanted to stay away from. However, as they explored the parts of graduate school from which they obtained pleasure, they recognized times when they felt increased self-confidence, or the ability to thrive in spite of the
discouragement and oppression they sometimes experienced. They acknowledged times when they did, indeed, feel powerful.

Many of the women talked about the importance of working with others to their feelings of increased self-confidence and authority. Esma enjoyed being part of a cohort during part of her graduate schooling. Working together with the same group of people over time, allowed her expertise, and the expertise of others, to be recognized. Power dynamics were also explored more fully than in non-cohort classes. She explained,

*And I think that in a cohort process you actually get it that the other students are important. I think what happens in a lot of the [classes is] there’s no recognition of the power of the group—that the group itself has a kind of . . . identity—that the group is made up of a bunch of people. That there are people with different kinds of authority. But that they come in with this and that we all walk around with it and expect it all to be recognized. And, sometimes they’re in competition with each other. In a cohort, that’s actually acknowledged.* (Esma 1/11, 12)

Ramona, a woman who had worked in women’s anti-violence organizations, recognized that she felt powerful when she worked together with others and was able to contribute to whatever was happening. She contrasted that power with the kind of power that is often recognized at the university—the individualistic power of competition. She said,

*My sense of power is really involved in collective process. Like, because that’s how my politics were developed; as part of a collective. . . . So if I go to a meeting and there’s a discussion going on and I have the savvy to stand up and ask a question that informs the discussion, that’s when I feel powerful. So, as opposed to winning the debate or, you know, having more to say than anybody else. It’s not about that. It’s about sort of . . . being able to participate in a way that furthers . . . things.* (Ramona 2/11)
Claire recognized she felt powerful when she was contributing her knowledge to a group, in contrast to being an authority figure. She said, somewhat apologetically,

_This might sound cheesy or prosaic, but situations where I feel really powerful is when I’m with friends and we’re having a really great conversation or something . . . and you make some sort of epiphany, or, I don’t know, you’re just having a really good time and a story that you’re telling is really touching someone else. That’s moments where I feel really powerful. But it’s not that sort of egotistical, authoritarian kind of powerful. It’s more like, . . . I know who I am. I’m cool with who I am. And, I’m really making a contribution to this person that I’m talking to._

(Claire 1/25, 26)

In addition, Claire felt powerful when she was working as a research assistant (RA). The faculty member she worked with treated her as a colleague, giving Claire a sense of working with her, not for her.

_So, it [being an RA] is quite a bit of work but it’s great because I’ve got my head in all kinds of projects and she really gives me a lot of responsibility and really trusts me. And it’s great because it kind of boosts my confidence. [It] really gives me a really good sense of being a colleague, not just a student, but a colleague. Yeah. It’s exciting!_ (Claire 2/9)

Svele, a woman who believed that having power meant that people depended on her or asked her for information or direction in their work, initially thought that as a student, she had no power. However, after reflecting on her ideas of power and her experiences working as an RA with her supervisor, Svele recognized that she was being encouraged to think of herself as powerful because of her knowledge and expertise. She was not sure how she felt about the power she had in the project she was working on. She admitted,

_I think my, my supervisor kind of pushes me to feel like I have more power, sometimes. Because I’m in charge of managing a lot of things in the project. . . . I don’t know if I want that power, though. . . . But, no, I guess I enjoy it. I guess I enjoy people having to say, “Well, you decide. I’m sure_
you’re going to decide well and you know what you’re doing” So, I guess I felt powerful then, in that sense that I could contribute to... major decision about the project. (Svele 1/19)

Jane hoped to get funding so that she could conduct research as part of her program but was concerned because her topic was based on her experiences with health care professionals and was not addressed in any literature she could find. She wondered if it was a “legitimate” topic. A chance meeting and discussion with a faculty member, allowed her to see that she could contribute to knowledge that would be recognized as useful. This was a boost to her self-confidence. She explained,

So I talked to her a little bit about my idea. [She said] if I didn’t get the funding and I still wanted to do a directed study, she would really like to help me be published because she thought I wrote really well. And after all these months of being here and sort of struggling and beating my head against the wall and getting quite depressed, I felt really like I could contribute to this community. And that was pretty reinforcing. It was very validating. (Jane 1/23 – her emphasis)

Svele, Claire, and Jane highlight the role that faculty can, and often did, play in encouraging and fostering many of the women’s self-confidence. Most women in this study either had, or were looking for, a faculty member who was able to take the time to work with them and appreciate the contributions they could make. Although many of these faculty members were women, the participants did not necessarily choose these “mentors” on the basis of gender. Instead, they looked for faculty who were supportive, understanding and respectful, interested in their graduate work, not too controlling, open to questions and creative projects, and who had a sense of humour. Claire spoke for many of the participants when she summed up these characteristics as, “Everything [her abuser] is not.” (1/21)
participants changed faculties in order to work with a faculty member whom they felt would recognize the value of their work.

Feeling "powerful" could also come from the participants recognizing the importance of their own knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. This realization often brought them joy. Svele recognized the power she had to do things for herself in spite of the emotional, verbal, and physical abuse she experienced as a result of deciding to go to graduate school. She maintained,

But it was always sort of a thing that I did on my own. People knew I was coming to do my [degree] but nobody really knew about what I was going to do here. Nobody really has a clue. I don’t think anybody knows really what I do now. So it was something that I did on my own, by myself, for me. (Svele 1/23 – her emphasis)

Ramona talked about how empowering it felt for her when she understood a concept. Although she recognized the importance of these moments to her, personally, she didn’t consider them as contributing to her power in the world. She exclaimed,

Of course, it’s empowering when you get something—when something really clicks for you or when somebody says something in a way where you’re like, “Oh my god! That’s so it!” Those are really powerful moments but I think those are more about . . . with myself. They aren’t moments when I actually feel like I have a lot of power in the world. They’re moments when I’m really pleased, you know. But I don’t know if I would call that powerful. (Ramona 2/10)

Esma used reading and learning as a survival technique when she was being abused and after she was out of the violent relationship. After reflecting on the times in class where she had to control her anger because of the actions of other students, she admitted,
I trance out a little bit when I’m triggered. But, you know, I make up for it the next day. And anyway, I would probably learn more from reading than I would from being in the class. (Esma 1/20)

Although class discussions or the actions of class members might trigger her, she said,

Reading never does. I can keep enough distance on any kind of reading. And... discussion... sometimes it’s valuable. A lot of the time it’s not. I know this is sounding really arrogant but it’s really true that... learning has been how I survived. (Esma 1/20)

Lynn equated power with control. “Power is when someone gets to call the shots,” she said and pointed out that she didn’t ever feel powerful. However, immediately after she denied feeling powerful, she recognized that her abilities as a researcher gave her power. She confessed,

I’m a good researcher. I’ve been told, “How do you find that?” I have research skills that I know are above some of my professors’. And they acknowledge that. Like, the ability to find things. And that’s tenacity. So, in that case, I have a strength. And that’s powerful. I have capital there. I have something to offer. (Lynn 2-7)

During the year when I interviewed her, Jane began to realize how much she enjoyed teaching, a career she had never considered before she came to graduate school. She was amazed at how empowered she felt when she was able to teach a seminar and collaborate with her colleagues. She sounded surprised when she said,

I taught my very first seminar session. It was very empowering to be in charge but to be collaborating. It was this great feeling. So it was really good to get everyone’s feedback and to guide those discussions and to sort of rein everyone back in and continue on. It was a really good feeling. (Jane 1/15 – her emphasis).

Emma compared the feelings of power, energy and joy she felt being in graduate school with the fear and silencing she felt in her violent relationship. She said, enthusiastically,
"And just often [I] say, "Wow!! I'm smart!! I can do this!! I'm strong!! Look at me, I'm doing this alone!! All by myself!!" And that's, of course, so different from my energy pattern in that relationship where I just had to check every single thing with him and was always afraid of what the reaction might be. And I hadn't really made that connection to the relationship. Like, I definitely felt like school, despite the fact that it has NOT been easy and I have NOT always had supportive professors, still just being able to READ exciting things that interest ME, and write things that matter to me, has just really made me feel better and better about myself. (Emma 1/11, 12 – her emphasis)

Upon rethinking their ideas of power as an individual quality possessed by authority figures and others who wanted/needed to be in control, the women in this study recognized an individual and collective power that was the result of having one's own authority or contributing to a collective process, or both. For some of the participants, naming feelings of satisfaction, self-worth and self-confidence as "power" was difficult because of their belief in power as control and authority. However, upon further reflection, many participants acknowledged that going to graduate school was a way for them to prove to themselves (and, perhaps, others) how smart and capable they were in contrast to the feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness they experienced within their violent relationship. For example, Edith stated, emphatically,

I think going back to school was a life-saver for me. Number one, it proved my courage to myself. Number two, it proved that I wasn't a stupid bitch to all those people who thought I was or dared to say I was. (Edith 1/24)

Concluding Comments

Although each participant in this research thought about and experienced power differently, for most of the women in this study, questions of power and powerlessness were on-going throughout their graduate school experiences—in their relationships with faculty, colleagues, students in the classes they taught, and institutional bureaucracy—and
reminded them of their experiences with interpersonal violence. They often felt intimidated, unintelligent, silenced, angry, disempowered, defeated, and powerless. And, as with their experiences with interpersonal violence, they felt they had nowhere to talk about their experiences and no way to safely challenge the imbalances of power they felt. At the same time, the women in this study acknowledged the often empowering feelings that were associated with recognizing the relevance and importance of their own knowledge and experience and their ability to add to or influence the knowledge of others. Although many of their experiences led to feelings of powerlessness, the skills and knowledge they acquired, often with the help of interested and supportive faculty and colleagues, increased their feelings of self-confidence and gave them a sense of power. In addition, the discussions we had during the interviews perhaps allowed them to think about power in a different way. During the interviews, at least, they were able to expand their ideas about power from power as domination and control to include as power the increased self-confidence and authority they felt as they acquired new knowledge and expertise, and the enjoyment they felt sharing their knowledge and learning with others.

As the participants talked about their experiences of feeling powerless and powerful in graduate school and in their interpersonal relationships, they included the concepts of “voice” and “silence” as part of their discussions. In chapter five, I look at these ideas in more detail in order to shed light upon the importance for the participants of being able to recognize and use their experiences as a legitimate form of knowledge.
CHAPTER FIVE:

MAKING CONNECTIONS: THE POWER OF VOICE

Theory is theory until you live it.
(Ramona 2/21)

Does my experience count?
(Emma 1/1)

The women in this study closely connected issues of power and control to concepts of voice, silence, and using experience as knowledge. They talked about losing their voice, finding their voice, having no voice, using their voice for others, and the empowering feeling of speaking with authority about their lives. They talked about feeling silenced by not being able to talk or write about their life experiences, and remaining silent in groups and with individuals when they felt threatened and/or when they were resisting the kind of talk that was occurring. When they talked about their graduate school experiences, they often compared their feelings of being silenced or of not “having voice” with similar feelings in their violent interpersonal relationships. However, they also talked about coming to graduate school as a way for them to “find their voice” and speak with confidence. They acknowledged the supportive faculty who helped them develop the authority of their voices as academics. In addition, talking with me, the researcher, about their experiences, helped them understand and make connections among experiences in their lives.
In this chapter, I argue that the “loss” of voice that women experience in interpersonal relationships affects the voice(s) women are (un)able or (un)willing to use in graduate school. Women’s experiences in graduate school may reinforce the silencing that they have experienced by discouraging them from talking or writing about their life experiences or using their experiences as a basis for understanding or for building theory. For example, women who have experienced interpersonal violence may feel silenced or remain silent to protect themselves from, or to resist, oppressive situations or people. As a result, women may believe that their experiences with interpersonal violence are irrelevant anywhere other than the “personal” space where they were abused. The self-blame and loss of self-esteem they experience may continue to affect their learning in graduate school. Experiences in graduate school may also allow women to regain and use their voice(s), choose from the multiple voices they possess, or create the voice(s) they would like to use (see Kramer-Dahl, 1996). “Developing a voice” (Hayes, 2000; see also Kramer-Dahl, 1996) in this way may occur when experience is seen as one legitimate form of knowledge that helps inform theory and when experience is critiqued to shed light on power relations and oppression. When women use their experiences as knowledge in a space of acceptance, discovery, and critique, they may be able to make connections between/among themselves and the other women sharing that space, between/among their learning in different spaces, and between/among their experiences and the experiences of women in society and the world.

While my participants talked about “losing” their voice, I agree with Lamb (1999) who suggests that the voices of women who have experienced interpersonal violence may be suppressed or silenced, but are seldom “lost.” When women “find” their voice, they are often reclaiming the voice that they have purposefully kept silent in order to protect themselves (see also Kramer-Dahl, 1996, who writes about women “fashioning a voice”).
My thoughts about my participants’ uses of voice, silence, and experience as knowledge are guided by the following questions that arose for me when I transcribed the interview tapes, read and reread the transcripts of the interviews, and listened to the interviews: 1) How does the process of being silenced or remaining silent affect learning? 2) How does talking about our experiences affect our learning? 3) Is it necessary to give “voice” to our experiences in order to see them as knowledge? 4) What purpose(s) does voicing our experiences serve? 5) Is it possible to separate our experiences from our learning? 6) Do we recognize how our experiences affect what and how we learn? 7) Do we recognize how our social positions and identities affect our experiences? 8) When and how can our experiences be considered knowledge and by whom? 9) Is it possible (or desirable) to expand our understanding of our experiences past a “personal happening” to encompass how our experiences are situated historically, politically, and socially? How can we accomplish that goal?

I have often expressed my belief that theory saved my life—specifically, the theory I encountered in Women’s Studies courses.21 I was introduced to Women’s Studies during an introductory course I took at a community college in a small city in northern Alberta; a way to pass the time while I waited to be well enough to return to teaching, and to engage with other women who were interested in reading and talking about the lives of women. I had no idea at the time that finding a place where I could think about my life in relation to the lives of the women and to theories of patriarchy and oppression, would completely change my life. Although I never spoke about the experiences of violence I was going through at the time, through listening to the stories other women told about their lives and reading about the experiences of other women in my course texts, I began to recognize that

21 See hooks, 1994, for her thoughts about theory as “liberatory practice.”
I was not alone in experiencing interpersonal violence—it was not simply a personal
problem that I had brought on myself. As I continued my courses by distance education, I
was told to “write from my experience” and to use my experiences and the readings to
think and write about my life. Particularly helpful to, and eye-opening for, me were the
writing and theorizing about the “Montreal Massacre,”22 which had occurred a short time
before. Thinking about violence against women in a broader context than specific
incidents or lives allowed me to stop blaming myself, to ask for help, to leave my violent
partner, and to return to university.

When setting up this research, I recognized that I was asking the participants to do
what I had not done myself—to talk about their learning and how it relates to their
experiences of violence. I also realized that as part of my belief in feminist methodology, I
would need to be open to disclosing, to some extent, the violence I have experienced
(Matsumoto, 1996; Thompson, 1995). I believed that the participants might question my
ability as a researcher to listen to and hear their stories of violence without being
judgmental (see Thompson, 1995). They might also ask what made me want to do this
research. Revealing my personal experiences with violence would help answer the latter
question and would, perhaps, help build the trust that would be needed during the
interviews (Matsumoto, 1996; Thompson, 1995). In addition, setting up the study and the
interview questions involved reflecting on my own experiences. Not only were my
experiences the basis for my interest in this research (see Skeggs, 1997; Clandinin &
Connelly, 2000), I also felt it was essential that I answer my interview questions in order

22 The “Montreal Massacre” refers to the gunning down of 14 female students at Montreal’s Ecole
Polytechnique by a male engineering student on December 6, 1989. Women were specifically targeted in the
attack, which, for many, symbolizes the prevalence and intensity of male violence against women. The
anniversary of this attack is officially designated as a day of remembrance and action on violence against
women.
that I understand my beliefs and biases so as not to project them onto my participants. As I struggled through thinking about and telling my stories, I was able to anticipate the difficulties some of the women might have participating in this research.

Throughout the above paragraphs, I have emphasized the importance, to me, of using the voice of my experience, in combination with theory, as knowledge and connection (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982/1993). The concepts of “voice,” “silence,” and “experience as knowledge” have a long, complex, and contested history in feminist and critical theorizing, research, and pedagogies. I was introduced to these ideas in my beginning Women’s Studies classes through the work of Carol Gilligan (1982/1993) and Belenky and colleagues (1986). At the time, the idea of “women” having a common, specific (read “special”) voice and common experiences appealed to me and helped me see myself and my experiences as part of the larger picture of violence against women in society (see Lamb, 1999). As I continued to read and talk about “women’s experiences,” I started to question which women I was talking about and which women I was leaving out. Whose voices was I hearing and which ones were silent? I wondered what experiences “women” have in common and began to trouble and critique ideas of voice, experience, and knowledge.

The concepts of “voice,” “silence,” and “experience,” like the concept of “power,” are multifaceted and are often called into question by theorists and others seeking to understand their meanings. The participants used these concepts in multiple ways both individually and as a group. To help me understand the participants’ notions of voice, silence and experience, I turned to feminist and critical theorists—especially, although not exclusively, those interested in pedagogies—who trouble and critique how silence, voice,
and experience are part of classroom environments and interactions. I realized that although the women in this study often talked about feeling silenced as a result of their experiences of interpersonal violence and in graduate school, they were also able to use these experiences to reclaim their voices and use them to help other women and themselves understand and change their lives.

I have structured the rest of this chapter to address the concepts of silence, voice, and experience separately even though they are usually thought of in terms of each other and in connection to relations of power. Thinking and writing about these concepts separately as well as in relation to each other, was helpful to me when trying to understand the women’s experiences in more depth.

Silence

More than the absence of voice (see Belenky et al., 1986), concepts of silence—being silent, being silenced, and silencing—have been expanded to include the silence of absent voices, possible meanings behind not speaking (for example, silence that protects or maintains privilege and silence used as resistance to oppression [Briskin, 1998b]), and assumptions surrounding the meanings of silence. Especially in educational settings, where dialogue is often considered an essential part of participation, women’s silences have been located within a deficiency framework, the result of a system of patriarchal power (Lewis, 1993). Women’s silences may be seen as the result of growing up and living in oppressive relationships where girls and women are told by male authority figures and partners that they must be quiet and that their words have no meaning (see Belenky et al., 1986). This discourse of silence leads educators to develop strategies to “empower” women to speak, or to make space for women in the curriculum and in classroom discussions and activities.
(Lewis, 1993), and may lead to the privileging of speaking over silence (see Briskin, 1998a).

Assumptions about women’s use of silence as a “protectionist strategy” (Grace & Gouthro, 2000, p. 6) often ignore other possible meanings and values of silence. Silence may be used as a form of resistance—a way to ensure a woman’s safety in a situation where adding her voice to a discussion or asking a question would leave her open to attacks or critiques from others (see Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Lewis, 1993; Orner, 1992). This use of silence is closely related to the power relations that are manifest in the classroom—among the students and between the instructor and students (Orner, 1992). Remaining silent in the face of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression may be seen as a form of self-empowerment as opposed to a sign of powerlessness (Grace & Gouthro, 2000).

Discussions of voice and silence also must address questions of who is allowed to speak, who speaks for whom, who is listening, what is heard, and who has the power to decide which experiences are relevant or “correct” (see Briskin, 1998b; hooks, 1989; Kramer-Dahl, 1996). The use of dialogue and group work in educational settings often assumes the desirability of speaking and the ability of all students to speak from a “level playing field.” The social positions of the students and issues of power and control are somehow thought to disappear in an educational setting (see Briskin, 1998a; Ellsworth, 1992) where educators view their classrooms as “safe” spaces. Emphasis on student voice may also ignore that voices and identities are plural, continually changing, and affected by the context in which students are asked to speak (Orner, 1992). Orner (1992) suggests that students may keep quiet about their experiences for fear of being interrogated (see, also,
Kramer-Dahl, 1996). Important to the women in this study was being silenced by attitudes that blame the victim in situations of violence against women. Not only did the attitudes of others deter them from talking about their experiences; their attitudes toward themselves and other women who experience interpersonal violence kept them from talking about their experiences or using them to inform theory (see Heald & Horsman, 2000).

The women in this study talked about silence from many different perspectives—from actually not being able to speak, to remaining silent as a way to resist what they perceived as meaningless talking. They connected being silenced and being silent in graduate school with their experiences of interpersonal violence.

**Feeling Silenced/Being Silent**

Claire talked about a time in her life when she was getting counselling for the violence she had experienced.

*I lost my ability to articulate myself. I suppose because I was going into areas that I hadn't articulated before—areas of my experience that I had buried or justified. So there was a point there where I really lost my ability to articulate, and that was compounded by... the attitudes a lot of my professors had to delegitimize what women had to say and delegitimize, say, if I tried to bring in a feminist analysis of the text. And I suppose that sort of hit/resonated with experiences of... violence and control with my [abuser].* (Claire 1/3, 4)

When thinking about her inability or unwillingness to talk in some classes, Claire reflected on the role of the instructor and possible classroom dynamics that might have added to her silence. She said,

*We don't really link teachers to this but certainly if you're a teacher who is sensitive to students, you might have a bit of insight into why that might be. Because there are lots of reasons why people struggle with studying or in classrooms or who are afraid to talk in class. It's not just that they're perhaps shy by nature. But certainly I've been thinking more about how classroom environments can trigger experiences and memories, and CAN*
reproduce forms of violence that strike nerves like that with students. 'Cause it certainly did with me but I didn't get it at that point. Like I didn't understand really why I couldn't talk in class beyond what I was going through at the time. So I didn't see the power dynamics of the class paralyzing me. (Claire 1/37, 38 — her emphasis)

This inability to speak that Claire associated with talking and thinking about the violence in her life, and with her experiences in university, lasted for a few months and resulted in Claire dropping out of school and, finally, changing programs and universities.

Lynn felt silenced by an advisor she had who disapproved of her actions in setting up a project and who insisted she not talk to anyone else about the work she was doing on her thesis. Although Lynn tried to make amends, she did not really understand what she was doing wrong and was unable to find out from her advisor. This behaviour reminded her of the violence she had experienced and the threats made to her to keep silent about it. She remarked,

It's like a sexual secret or something. You've done something that's wrong, but who knows what. There again, it's not spelled out. And the tone was . . . there was no further discussion. I tried to make it up to her in whatever ways I could because I thought I must, for someone of her calibre to disapprove of something, it had to have been wrong. I started to shut down to the point where I stopped working on my degree. And I was sleeping all the time. But she phoned me at home one day and I couldn't even get my breath to talk. I couldn't speak. My heart was beating so fast I couldn't even talk. (Lynn 1/34 — her emphasis)

Ramona talked about being silenced by class discussions of “pure theory”—something she felt had few implications for her life. Because she wanted to connect the theory she was learning to her work experiences, she felt she was not seen as a “true academic.” Theoretical discussions not connected to “life” reminded her of the emotionally
abusive relationship she had been in and the need for women, in general, to prove they are intelligent. She explained,

*I always try and persevere with the personalization of material or the practical applications of it or anything like that regardless of the fact that people don’t generally like it. But sometimes I find that when the discourse is not doing that, or when the class discussion is just kind of going along at a really low level, or at purely a theoretical level, I just feel like there’s no place for me to engage with it. And so I feel like those are the kinds of discussions where I end up being . . . silent. And I think that’s a lot again about . . . you know, our, women’s ideas of ourselves and what constitutes smart and are we smart enough, and how do we demonstrate that we’re smart enough. The relationship that I was in, the abusive stuff was mostly emotional stuff. And so it was really about getting my self-esteem back; getting to the place where I felt like I was smart enough and strong enough and good enough. And all of those things. And so, moments like that, for me, are really difficult. They’re moments when . . . I find that I . . ., those are the ones where the wind gets knocked out of me. It’s the ones where I go, “Oh my god, I’m a fraud, again.”* (Ramona 1/33)

Svele, who seldom spoke in groups and felt relatively inadequate in group settings, said she thought her behaviour was the result of being told repeatedly in her interpersonal relationship to keep quiet and to speak only if asked a direct question. She also thought this might be the reason why she found it difficult to be part of a group or class where, in her opinion, people “spoke to hear themselves talk” or to “score points” with the instructor and/or other students. She said,

*I guess I’m the last person who, I would have to say, would contribute something to the group. And they have to, like, ask me what, what do you have, you know, how can you contribute? Or, not how can you contribute but, but, what do you think?* (Svele 1/11)

After leaving an abusive relationship to return to university, Edith sometimes felt uncertain about her ability to take part in class. The abusive comments she grew accustomed to hearing, returned to attack her self-confidence. She explained,
I think my experiences with violence tended to challenge my self-esteem and my confidence. And so, because when I was experiencing violence I was frequently told, "You're a stupid bitch," ... I was very tenuous, if that's the right word, about my intelligence and my ability to understand what was going on. If a professor [was] so professional that their humanity never shone through, then I felt inferior in their presence. And I therefore felt reluctant to ask them questions about the topic being studied or discussed. I needed to feel that I was accepted. I, perhaps the same as others, but perhaps more than others, feel a little strange. A little eccentric. A little like I don't belong. (Edith 1/5)

Edith recognized that being called "stupid" was a trigger for her because of her experience with interpersonal violence. She worked with several other students on a directed study in which the students often worked on and discussed their projects without an instructor being present. Although Edith enjoyed a good argument, she was silenced when her peers referred to her as "stupid."

If someone starts to shout at me ... and tell me ... that I'm stupid because I make the point that they disagree with, I guess, it pisses me off but I'm still sensitive to somebody calling me stupid. Then, instead of fighting back, I shut down. (Edith 1/10)

The silencing she experienced in this course affected her desire to continue in graduate school.

Svele reflected upon her use of silence as a way to keep from having to defend herself and her research from the critiques of others. In her violent relationship, she had to defend herself and accept criticism continually. She used silence at school and in social situations to ward off any potential critical comments and as a way to resist engaging with people who denigrated her work.

And I always have to kind of let people know right away that I'm not, not scientific or, you know, ... an important person. That I'm just doing things because of my circumstance, really. (laughs) I'm here by circumstance. I hate having to defend myself. I hate having to prove anything (laughs) to anybody. And even with people, I don't want to say I'm doing qualitative research. And, you know, I carry on the research and stuff but I can't really
talk about it outside of school, because it's probably not good enough. I'm probably - - what I do is probably just silly to people. So, I think that's what my [abuser] would say. And I think that's why I don't tell [them] what I do. I just kind of keep it to myself. Yeah, I would have to defend myself... and accept criticism because that's all I would hear. (Svele 1/24, 25 – her emphasis)

Svele also talked about intentionally remaining silent when she felt she, and perhaps other more talkative group members, had little to say.

*And that's the reason why I wouldn't contribute in a group; that if I don't have anything really... that's going to contribute to the group, to say, that I'd rather not say it. Because people are just sort of chatting and then just saying anything that's on their mind, and some people think that's helpful. I don't really think that's helpful. I feel it's a waste of time if I don't say anything intelligent; it's a waste of everybody else's time so I'd better not say it.* (Svele 1/20)

When I sent the transcript to her for review, she returned it with the comment,

*This looks like my 'conversations' with my [abuser] have had an effect here at school, maybe for the better, maybe not.*

Her comment reflects her growing understanding that her violent relationship has had an effect on her behaviour in graduate school, something she questioned during the first interview. She is also reflecting on her tendency to be silent, which she understands as positive when there is little to say, but negative when she has something to say and remains quiet due to fear or defensiveness.

**Feeling Silenced by Attitudes toward Women who have Experienced Violence**

As discussed in chapter two, women who have experienced interpersonal violence, whether they are considered “victims” or “survivors,” may be blamed for inciting the violence, not leaving a violent situation, and/or not being smart enough to recognize the violence they are experiencing as being damaging to themselves. These attitudes silence women who have experienced violence and may be incorporated in the women’s beliefs
about themselves. The majority of the women in this study did not talk or write about their experiences with violence partly because they were concerned about how their experiences would reflect on them. Interestingly, spaces that included feminist theory, discussion, and research (for example, Women's Studies and feminist organizations), were considered by some of the participants to be at least as “unsafe” for disclosures as spaces where gendered perspectives were not presented (see Skeggs, 1997).

Jane was aware that the women around her might have experienced “something odd” in their lives; however, she was concerned her experiences were too strange to talk about. She admitted,

"It’s not something I, I talk about a lot, I don’t think. Not in my classes or with my classmates all that much. I think because some of it was pretty out there and I don’t . . . necessarily want to be stigmatized by it even though maybe I have been, you know. In my own world I don’t necessarily want to put it out there which is, is maybe, I don’t know, had I guess. But I still think people would be judging me or, I don’t want people to necessarily feel sorry for me or change in any way. But I am very aware of the women around me. I’m sure everyone’s experienced something . . . odd. You know." (Jane 2/28)

Emma felt particularly silenced by discussions of violence against women in some of her Women’s Studies classes. Her self-reproaching thoughts were triggered by the judgemental attitudes of her classmates. The anger was apparent in her voice when she explained,

"Well, you know, people always “other” survivors. [They emphasize] “them.” THOSE survivors. THERE WOULDN’T BE ANY IN THE ROOM! And, of course, you’re certainly not going to say anything then. It just makes me so . . . In Women’s Studies classes, of course, people talk about domestic violence. But always in a, you know, context of, “those people that I help” or “that I work for” or “that I work with.” None of “us” would be so unwise. Well, you know, I’m so judgmental of myself, too, right. It just sets off those self-judgmental voices even harder. Like, really, what the hell WAS I doing? You know. How COULD I not have seen? (Emma 2/2 – her emphasis)"
She continued,

And seriously, in some ways, I wonder if it's even less safe in Women's Studies than it is in other places because it's assumed, well, you're there because you're a good feminist, right? And if you're a good feminist, you're not going to get stuck in a fucked-up relationship. (Emma 2/11)

Emma points out the contradictory experiences that some of the participants had in Women's Studies. Although women's experiences were more readily accepted as part of their construction of knowledge and theory in Women's Studies courses (see, Grace & Gouthro, 2000; hooks, 1994), feminist theories may also have imposed a hierarchy of what experiences counted as knowledge (see Fuss, 1989). Women's Studies courses may also be places where women feel coerced into “confessing” their experiences in the presence of authority figures such as faculty and “knowledgeable” students with the power to interpret or legitimize those experiences (see Alcoff & Gray, 1993, Orner, 1992).

Ramona worked in an organization that sought to address violence against women, where she used a feminist perspective to talk with and advise women who had experienced interpersonal violence. Although she encouraged women to talk about their experiences, she didn’t disclose her own. She explained,

When you're working in a crisis centre safe house, you're supposed to know better. And so there's that sort of thing about when you expose it to people that this is something that you did, even though you're smarter than that and you're, you know, you're better than that. And you still did it. And so there's all of those kinds of things about the assumptions about who women are who are in relationships that are violent. So, I think it's protecting all of those kinds of things. And it makes me sad. Because it's terrible to do that, to be not sharing those things about our lives. We're not learning from each other. We're protecting the patriarchy. (Ramona 1/10)
Ramona’s feelings about herself when she was in a violent relationship prevented her from talking about her experiences in graduate school and also kept her from thinking about the possibility that her classmates could also have experienced interpersonal violence. She said,

*I mean, dealing with the relationship and maintaining the appearance of things being okay took all I had. And so I guess I sort of have that idea that women who are in those relationships aren’t going to be in grad school. You know what I mean?* (Ramona 1/38)

Claire was concerned about the effect that talking about her experiences would have on other people’s opinions of her. She acknowledged that the opinions of others might also affect how she thought about herself. She said,

*I guess it’s something that I keep fairly close to my chest because I think... there’s always the fear, like, some people don’t understand at all. I think when you bring that up in a context where people don’t understand, you expose yourself, which can be, I don’t know, fairly dangerous in terms of feeling ashamed about it or somebody thinking you’re a freak if you were talking about it in whatever context.* (Claire 2/18, 19)

Many of the women felt they were alone in experiencing interpersonal violence even though, intellectually, they recognized that many of their female classmates could have had similar experiences. Esma described the feelings of isolation that many of the participants experienced in class when they felt their experiences were unknowable by anyone else.

*How is it going to be possible for you to sit in that chair long enough, and for you to deal with all of the old scripts and all the old ways of self-defeat—the ways that you sabotage yourself, never mind being discredited from the outside. And the INCREDIBLE isolation of sitting there thinking there’s nobody else in the room that knows anything about your life. And, you know what? Chances are, for most people, there are more people in the room but they’re all hiding. Because, it’s a discourse that’s impossible to have in that environment. It’s truly silencing.* (Esma 1/33, 34, 35 – her emphasis)
Institutional Silencing

Two women made reference, directly, to feeling silenced by the university as an institution as seen in what they were able and not able to talk or write about. This structural violence was reminiscent of the interpersonal violence they experienced and was in contrast to the work they had done since leaving their abusive relationship to address their experiences with interpersonal violence. Ramona had learned through her advocacy work to speak up for herself and talk about issues directly. She found the emphasis on getting along and not talking about what was important to her reminiscent of what was expected of her, as a woman, in her abusive relationship.

*It’s just that, the thing about don’t say what you think, don’t be outspoken, don’t challenge people directly, you know, appreciate everyone’s point of view—all of those real liberal ideas about what women are supposed to be like—it always looks to me like... the patriarchy. And so every time I find myself not asking for 100 percent of what I want, I feel like I’m giving in.* (Ramona 1/20)

Lynn believed that her experiences in counselling and her blue-collar background had taught her to speak directly about what she perceived was happening in her life. However, when she tried to do that with committee members in her graduate program, she was told to be quiet and fit in. She explained,

*I’m really identified with my blue-collar world. And advocacy and standing up and being vocal is really a big part of it. The thing that’s admired is to SAY WHAT YOU THINK! And to raise shit! And that’s just NOT OKAY at the university. And so, I have learned to not do that. This one wonderful male professor said, “Look, just jump through the hoops, okay.” And I just learned, you can’t raise a stink out here. You get blacklisted.* (Lynn 2/31 – her emphasis)
As a result, she spent time and energy trying to understand how to talk about the difficulties she was experiencing in her program. This reminded her of the abusive relationships she had experienced. She said,

*It's like the sleeping dragon. It's really familiar. You have to CALM the person down. Or don't draw attention to yourself. I turn into this weak little timid downtrodden person.* (Lynn 37, 38 — her emphasis)

**Breaking Silence**

Although most of the women did not talk about their experiences with violence while they were at the university, two of the women mentioned their experiences of interpersonal violence to faculty or staff in graduate school in order to help explain their actions or to keep themselves safe. Svele talked about her supportive supervisor as someone who was accepting of her hesitation to speak out and who gently encouraged her to take more responsibility in the projects they worked on together. When I asked her if she ever talked with her supervisor about the violence she experienced and how it was affecting her interactions with others, she said,

*I think with my supervisor, I probably have mentioned it. She probably has an idea of what my [abuser]’s like. Because I would have mentioned, well, [I couldn’t] do these things with [him]. Or, laugh it off. Or those kinds of things. So I think she kind of has an idea that my [abuser] has been violent, in a way.* (Svele 2/22)

Molly lived in fear that her abuser would find her and continue to terrorize her and her children. As a self-protection strategy she talked briefly with the graduate secretaries about her experiences with interpersonal violence and asked them to help her remain hidden from her abuser. She explained,
He'd make known that he knew where I was, that he could get me any time. Okay, the message here, when he sends you flowers, it's not that he loves you, . . . [It's] "I can get you any time I want. I know where you are." Everywhere I've been, even UBC, all the secretaries knew not to answer any questions about me. Not to tell anyone whether I was there or not. Not to tell people whether I actually worked there or not. (Molly 1/32, 33)

Silencing Others

Perhaps because they experienced being silenced, some women in this study expressed concern about silencing others (see Hayes, 2000), especially if during their work as activists or through their experiences in counselling, they had learned to speak for others or for themselves.

After talking with me about the difficulties she was having with the power dynamics in a group in which she felt silenced, Jane recognized that she might be the problem in another group she was in. Her concern that she was silencing another group member led her to attend a conflict resolution workshop. In our third interview she confided,

So, I think just being aware of that I've approached groups maybe a little . . . I've been . . . maybe tippy-toeing into groups a little bit more. I sort of haven't been sort of pushing my way in as much. You know, all my group work this term has turned out really exceptionally well, so . . . (Jane 2/9)

Esma recognized that as a result of her work and the activism she had done, she had learned to speak knowledgably and with personal authority in classroom situations. She was concerned she might silence students who were not as outgoing or sure of themselves. She said,

I worry about taking up too much space in the class at any time, because I talk too much. And, I do worry about the kind of authority that I throw around when I do talk, too, because when I do talk about something that I've read a lot about or I care about, I'm worried that I do that dominant
thing. So, I try and be quiet as much as I can for most of the time, for the beginning part of a class anyway. (Esma 1/18, 19 – her emphasis)

The women in this study talked about their experiences of feeling silenced or being silent as not being able to talk, as a means of self-protection when they were feeling like a “fraud,”23 and as a form of resistance when they felt attacked by other students or objected to what they considered the irrelevant talk of their colleagues. They recognized that societal attitudes, including their own beliefs, toward women who have experienced violence, influenced their decisions to remain silent and, perhaps, their ability to recognize that other women had experienced interpersonal violence. Some participants also felt silenced by an institutional environment that discouraged what they thought of as straight talk about issues and concerns or suppressed discussions that linked their life experiences to theory (see Grace & Gouthro, 2000; hooks, 1994). Regardless of the topic about which they remained silent, most of the participants connected this silencing to their experiences of interpersonal violence and their feelings of self-worth.

However, most of the women in this study did not see themselves as only being silenced by their experiences in graduate school and their experiences of interpersonal violence. They also had a lot to say.

23 “Feeling like a fraud” has been associated with “impostor syndrome” (see, for example, Yates & Chandler, 1998), that is, as being “exposed as ‘not belonging,’ or as having ‘gotten in’ under false pretences” (McIntosh, 1985). However, McIntosh (1985, 1989) suggests that women who feel fraudulent may be reacting to their feelings of reluctance to take part in “oppressive hierarchies” (1985, p. 2). Remaining silent or “feeling like a fraud” in situations where one is expected to be an expert may reflect the participants’ questioning of the relevance of “experts” to the discussion (see McIntosh, 1985, 1989).
Voice: Beyond the Spoken Word

Closely connected to being silent or feeling silenced, are ideas about “having voice.” Belenky and colleagues, in their book, *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind* (1986), recognized, by examining interviews with women, that voice was used by the participants as a metaphor “that can apply to many aspects of women's experience and development” (p.18). The women in this study used “voice” in a variety of ways when talking about the connections between their graduate school experiences and their experiences with interpersonal violence. As I read through the transcripts and tried to understand the participants’ words and meanings, I realized that I needed to expand my understanding of how they used “voice.” I turned to feminist theorists and educators for possible insights.

According to Sharon Lamb (1999), a feminist psychologist, voice can suggest the idea of a “political agenda—as in raising voices together” (p. 128; see also, Lewis, 1993). This discourse incorporates the suppression of voice by dominating forces (e.g. colonization) and the belief “that acts of resistance begin with self-expression” (Lewis, 1993, p.128; see also, Ormer, 1992). The women in this study use “voice” to talk about speaking out for themselves and for others as an act of resistance and education. Hayes (2000, p.101) refers to this use of voice as “voice as power.” Closely related is the use of voice as a metaphor for “talking back,” when, for example, students challenge or reject the voices of teachers and students who are oppressive (see hooks, 1989).
Hayes (2000) suggests that the metaphor of voice may give insights into women’s identities. For example, “giving voice” may be thought of as using the power of words to name and discuss experiences that are usually silenced. Giving voice may help women express who they are. “Developing a voice” may be used to show how women express their identities differently as they learn and change or, perhaps, how they use different voices at different times. “Reclaiming a voice” is premised on the idea that women suppress or deny their voices because of oppression (for example, male domination, racism, sexism, classism) and cultural expectations (Hayes, 2000, pp.91-96). “Finding one’s voice” or hearing the voices of oppressed groups may suggest the idea of “truth or authenticity”—that old ways of knowing are replaced by new “truths” (Ellsworth, 1992; Lamb, 1999). Finding one’s voice may also be a way for women who have experienced violence to demonstrate that they no longer accept blame for the violence and abuse in their lives (Lamb, 1999). Many of the participants talked about returning to graduate school as a way for them to escape an oppressive relationship, to (re)discover options and choices, and to enjoy discussing their ideas and beliefs with like-minded and challenging others. Grace and Gouthro (2000) suggest that a safe space is not a requirement for “coming to voice” (p. 19) but that many female students “often find coming to voice in academe to be an unsafe, uncomfortable and unsettling experience” (p. 19). In spite of the silencing that was part of their graduate school experiences, many of the participants were able to reclaim their “lost” voice as they worked toward their graduate degrees.
Important, also, is the recognition that people have and use a variety of “voices” depending on the context in which they are speaking or writing (see Orner, 1992). Ideas of “finding one’s voice” or “developing one’s voice” may raise expectations that a woman has one “authentic” voice that reflects her identity. This assumption does not take into account the many “identities” that people have, the social construction of all identities, and the continually shifting power relations, subject positions, and conscious and unconscious thought processes that influence identities and the importance of any one identity at any given time (see Orner, 1992).

The “Political” Voice: Using One’s Voice for Others (and Self)

Several of the women I interviewed said they took part in this research because they thought their words and experiences might help other women who have experienced interpersonal violence. Claire differentiated between talking about her experiences during the interviews as a way to learn about herself and using her voice to help others.

*I mean, it’s not so much a cathartic thing for me any more because I’ve worked through a lot of these issues. So it’s not just about being able to sit down and, and voice my experiences to you for my benefit. I was more interested in being part of your study for how the things I had to say might have been a benefit to other people: to you, to people who read this research, to whatever use it’s put to. Because I hope that somehow that this study or me talking to you about my experiences is going to affect someone else. And it’s going to produce research that is going to matter. And if the things that I relate to you or tell you, . . . that get analyzed and put down on paper, can touch someone else and validate someone else, I want to be part of that. And I want to speak about that.* (Claire 1/27; 2/35, 36 – her emphasis)
Jane saw taking part in this research as a way to partially fulfil the “activist” part of her definition of feminism and work toward making a change for women.

*I think this is part of my activity to have something to say and maybe help other people or to change things for other people. This is, you know, my version of standing on a corner with a sign (laughs)—that maybe if there’s something that you find useful to your study that I have to say, then it might help people in the future or make a difference for women. And I think if you don’t participate in these things, then that can’t happen.* (Jane 2/29, 30)

At least three participants had worked or were working as advocates for women who had experienced violence. In this work, the participants helped women understand their violent experiences, escape from violent partners and others, counter the violence of the justice system, and begin a new part of their lives. As they spoke out to help women, the participants experienced positive benefits to themselves as well. Esma talked about her advocacy work in answer to one of my questions about whether or not she had received counselling for the violence and abuse she had experienced. Although she had received counselling for a time, she found that the work she did on behalf of other women was the most beneficial to her in helping her work through her experiences with violence. She said,

*And in that time I worked as a feminist, working on behalf of people who had battering and sexual abuse and violence and working with the feminist community developing ideas about why that happens, how it happens, what helps, what doesn’t help. And that helped. My help was in being a part of a movement about violence and sexual violence and helping to identify the language that we could use for talking about why people weren’t responsible for their own harm. And then working that around kitchen tables and reading it up and going to meetings and going to, you know, protests, and yelling and screaming and writing policy and whatever over 10 years. I changed a lot.* (Esma 1/5, 6 – her emphasis)

Ramona was in a violent relationship at the time she worked in an organization that addresses violence against women. Afraid to talk about her
experiences of interpersonal violence in her workplace, she tried to make sense of her abusive relationship when she went back to it each night. She explained,

*While I was still in the relationship and afterwards, I worked at this crisis centre. . . . And I worked in a transition house and we did a lot of political advocacy and, while I was in the relationship it was really difficult for me because I was doing this, like, feminist/activist by day and then, you know, trying to make sense of why I was still in this relationship that was clearly abusive during the evenings or, you know, my weekends, or whatever.*

(Ramona 1/7)

It wasn’t until the relationship ended that Ramona was able to talk about her experiences with the women with whom she worked. After talking with her co-workers, she recognized that her personal life was related to the violence other women experience, and began to use her experiences as a way to help other women. She said,

*They [co-workers] gave me a criticism about the fact that, by withholding that information [about violence in her life], not only was I selling myself short because I didn’t . . . get empathy from them, as my peers, but that I also was denying [women] my experience. And so, all of a sudden, the whole thing just came crashing—like, I got it. I got the personal is political in that moment in a way that I don’t think I would have got in any other way. And so it was sort of that thing where this is something that, that what happened to me, is something that I can actually use to not only make theory about (laughs), but it’s also something that I can, by talking about it and by mobilizing on the basis of my own experience, I can make the world safer for other women.*

(Ramona 1/7, 9)

Emma worked as a solidarity activist, with women who were using their stories as survivors of trauma to help American activists influence government policies. Many of the women she helped had experienced domestic violence and used these experiences as part of their presentations. She also worked as a court-appointed translator for women who had experienced violence. At the time she was working in this movement, Emma was experiencing violence in her intimate partner relationship. She did not connect what she was experiencing with the experiences
of the women with whom she worked until the violence in her relationship became physical. She explained,

Well, as an interpreter, I interpreted for a lot of domestic violence cases. And I interpreted for a training program to train women who had been through that process how to be advocates and help other women go through that process. And I didn't get it that what I was going through was related; was part of this whole cycle, until it started getting . . . Because I only thought it, I only heard, in court, the physical stuff. So all these CRAZY-ass threats and control and manipulation, I just didn't get that it was related until he shoved me and then I was like, . . . Oh! Oh!! (Emma 1/7 — her emphasis)

Because of the work that Edith had done to address and work with the violence in her life, she believed that she was now at the point at which she could help other women who had had similar experiences. She used an assignment in one of her classes as a way to get her message out.

There was one [assignment] where we had to post it somewhere. I didn't have any qualms about posting that I had been in a violent background. That was my experience. I didn't cause it. It's not about me, really. I played a part in it, but I've moved on. I don't go around boasting about the fact that I've been in a violent relationship or survived a violent childhood, but, at the same time, I refuse to keep it a secret. Because, if I keep it a secret, it keeps me sick. And it keeps other people, particularly younger people or children who have lived through a similar experience from knowing that you can survive and you can THRIVE. (Edith 1/19 — her emphasis)

As these women used their voices and their experiences to help others, they were also able to help, or get help for, themselves. Through talking about and reflecting upon other women’s experiences as well as their own, they were able to theorize the broader picture of violence against women and understand the political nature of what they had considered “private” violence.
“Finding” or (Re)claiming Voice as a Form of Resistance and Self-affirmation

For some of the women in this study, coming to graduate school was a way for them to change their lives and reclaim and develop the voice that was silenced in their violent relationship(s). Graduate school was a place to which they could escape from their oppressive circumstances and talk to interesting, and interested, others.

Jane credited her violent relationship for the fact that she was in graduate school. In reaction to the oppression she felt in her interpersonal relationship, she decided she would explore her options. She said, emphatically,

*I think the fact that I’m in grad school (laughs) has a lot to do with my experience before. I was in a very... it was my marriage that was getting violent and oppressive and when I left that, I left it with this sort of renewed idea that I was going to be all that I could be and I was going to get a science degree and I was going to, you know, get my PhD and teach university, and do whatever. I do kind of feel that I’m driven a bit by the memory of kind of not having those options. I always need to feel like all my options are available. So I kind of feel this need to keep my horizon as wide open as I possibly can.* (Jane 1/14 – her emphasis)

For Claire, coming to Canada to go to graduate school was a way to escape the violence she experienced in her home country. She likened graduate school to a “strong rope” that saved her from being dragged down and that gave her a sense of empowerment.

*So, getting into the Master’s degree had a lot to do with safety and staying away from [her home country], physically. But my relationship with him was, you know, a dead weight in many ways and left me very unhappy, which is one of the major reasons why I left it, right, because I didn’t want to continue that. Especially now that I had this strong rope that I could climb up, which was grad school. I had to let that go because it would have pulled me down. ... I don’t want that disempowering experience again. I want to stand my ground, so to speak, which is what my study helps me do.* (Claire 2/14, 15 – her emphasis)
Several of the participants mentioned Women's Studies courses or programs as places where they learned to reclaim their voice through developing a language with which to talk about their experiences. Claire, who lost the use of her voice when trying to understand her experiences of interpersonal violence (see above), credited Women's Studies with changing her life. She exclaimed,

\textit{Women's Studies CHANGED MY LIFE! It gave me language. Because I'd never, actually, I'd NEVER called my experience domestic violence because it was justified by [the abuser]. So the abuse was . . . this is normal. Or, you know, you deserved it because you did this, sort of thing. So I didn't have a language to articulate it until I got to grad school. And that's why grad school was SO important to me. And especially Women's Studies because it gives you a space to . . . to speak from experience and to legitimize your experience. And it also gave me the theory to understand a lot of things that went on in my life that were not deviant; that were not abnormal.} (Claire 1/5 – her emphasis)

Coming to graduate school was a way for Svele to tell her abuser that she was able to make decisions that were positive for her and that she could survive without his support. She declared,

\textit{Well, maybe subconsciously it is power because, in a way, I can prove to my [abuser], well, you know what? I was able to do my Master's. You know what? I'm able to be working on my PhD. So what you were saying, that I can't do it, is not right. So, it was, it was kind of a way for me to show him that he was wrong. That I was doing the right thing. Yeah. That I can do things. It feels good!} (Svele 1/27 – her emphasis)

Even while they were in a violent relationship in which they felt silenced, some of the women in this study were speaking out as advocates, joining others who were working to address and end violence against women. Many women participated in this research for the same reason—to talk about the violence they experienced in order to benefit other women and to make a difference. Their

\footnote{However, see Emma's comments on pages 104 and 105 about the silencing she experienced in her Women's Studies class.}
experiences advocating for others often increased their understanding of themselves and the violence they were experiencing or had experienced. In addition, coming to graduate school was one way some of the women chose to empower themselves and reclaim the “voice” they had suppressed in a violent relationship.

The Knowledge of Experience

Recognizing experience as the basis for knowledge has a long and complex history in feminist theorizing. It may be argued that feminism is based on women sharing their experiences in order to understand the oppression they, as women, experienced at the hands of dominant relations of power, for example, patriarchy and capitalism (see Skeggs, 1997). Recognizing one’s self in the experiences of others has been one way for women to understand that they are not alone in their feelings of subordination and oppression and to recognize that “the personal is political.” The idea is that “common” experiences of sexism and misogyny give women a different knowledge and understanding of the world from that which men have. Feminist standpoint theories developed from feminist interest in Marxism, the feminist movement, and feminist critiques of science (McLaughlin, 2003b), to highlight the importance of women’s experiences in creating the knowledge necessary to challenge oppression (Collins, 1986; McLaughlin, 2003b; Skeggs, 1997; Smith, 1974). They put “women” at the centre of the production of a legitimate knowledge that was developed because of their social, economic, and political positionings (Skeggs, 1997).

As standpoint theory developed, it focused more on the political nature of the standpoint (for example, a feminist standpoint rather than the standpoint of women). However, some theorists equated having an experience as being a prerequisite to being able to speak about it, implying that only those who claim a certain identity are able to speak
about it. This would mean, for example, that only women who have experienced violence can speak "the truth" about violence against women. Having the "knowledge of experience" about a topic becomes equated with knowing "the truth" about it (Skeggs, 1997). "Experience' emerges as the essential truth of the individual subject, and personal 'identity' metamorphoses into knowledge. Who we are becomes what we know; ontology shades into epistemology" (Fuss, 1989, p. 113). As a result, some women's experiences and identities are validated more than others, allowing only specific women to speak while others are silenced. Arguments based on the authority of experience may get in the way of a political analysis of such experiences (Fuss, 1989).

The importance of using experience as knowledge is one of the most challenged aspects of standpoint theories (McLaughlin, 2003b). There is a danger of ignoring the diversity of women's experiences and focusing on a common set of experiences that women supposedly share. In addition, experience may be taken as "the" truth instead of "a" truth or a "partial" truth that is constrained by time and place and produced by social and historical practices (Fuss, 1989; Kramer-Dahl, 1996; Scott, 1991). Voices of conflicting experiences may be given less credibility or silenced. Some standpoint theorists (see, for example, Harding, 1991; Haraway, 1988) point to the common problems marginalized groups share rather than their common viewpoint. They reject the idea that women share a common set of experiences and point to the role of social and political relations in shaping experiences and understandings (McLaughlin, 2003b).

Fuss (1989) concedes that using the authority of experience may encourage usually silent students to take part in discussions and debates that they perceive as relating to them. She suggests that talking and theorizing about the use of experience can lead to an
understanding of how knowledge and experience are constructed. With Skeggs (1997), I understand experience as a “way to understand how women occupy the category ‘women,’ a category which is classed and raced and produced through power relations and through struggle across different sites in space and time” (p. 27). Although I do not equate experience with knowing or understanding “the truth,” I see a place for experience in building theory and knowledge, and in helping to create a subject with continually shifting identities (Skeggs, 1997). For example, exploring my experiences and different theories about violence against women throughout this dissertation process has allowed me to look at how my experiences and my positionalities are situated historically and materially. I have a better understanding of how I came to be where I am at this moment. Many of the participants spoke about the importance, to them, of sharing their experiences with others. In addition, they recognized the importance of having the language and theoretical tools necessary to critique experience, producing a greater understanding of their own lives and the ability to create new knowledge. In the next section, I explain how the women talked about using their experiences as knowledge and how, often with the help of supportive faculty, they came to recognize their growing authority and expertise.

The Authority of Voice: Experience as Knowledge

As the women in this study progressed through their programs, some of them were able to recognize the importance of their experiences to who they were and, when combined with theory, to the production of knowledge. One of their reasons for returning to school—to recover the self-confidence they lost—seemed to have been at least partially realized; they began to feel more confident about
speaking and writing with authority about their experiences. Helpful, mentoring faculty often played an important role in this development of a voice of authority.

Claire acknowledged and appreciated the role faculty played in helping her recognize her growing expertise. She said,

_Certainly the women that mentored me as my Master's committee were wonderful because they were sort of with me as I went through this personal journey when I was writing about [thesis topic]. [They] constantly showed me that what I had to say was contributing to knowledge, was important, was interesting. So in that sense, they really validated my voice when I was just sort of developing the confidence to use it. At this point, certainly, my supervisor, the relationship that I have with her . . . she treats me like a colleague, you know. She sort of takes me under her wing and she never talks down to me. Just the relationship I have with her—it’s very respectful and she just assumes always that I’m up to the task. Or that I’m beyond even where I am, right? So kind of that reversal of assumptions. That I do know more. That I am up to tasks. Whereas before, which really tears away your self-esteem, and you’re assumed not to understand or not to know certain things. So certainly that reversal, I think is probably the biggest thing._ (Claire 2/11, 12 – her emphasis)

Jane recognized the effect of female mentors on her ability to feel self-confident and speak with authority. She contrasted these positive role models with those in other parts of her life. When talking about the faculty member who encouraged her to write about some of her research, based on her personal experiences, even though she did not get any funding, Jane acknowledged,

_I think she’s really encouraging. She’s inspired me to look at things in a different way. There are some really good role models for women standing up for themselves and trying to have a voice. I find when I interact with those people I feel a lot more self-confident; a lot more sure of standing up for myself. (laughs) Whereas you know, when I’m just sort of out in the world, I don’t feel so confident with that. I think it really is [important], especially because my role models from my childhood and from my life weren’t all that . . . positive._ (Jane 2/26 – her emphasis)
Svele, who entered her graduate program feeling she had little to offer and that she could not speak within or in front of groups, gave her supervisor credit for helping her recognize her expertise and knowledge. She admitted,

*It's a big project and it's a lot of responsibility. I guess I enjoy it. I guess I enjoy people having to say, "Well, you decide. I'm sure you're going to decide well and you know what you're doing. And you're going to do well."
So, just in terms of that, in terms of working on the project and with my supervisor being very supportive of my independent thinking. She has a co-investigator on this project, that she's working with, who's in Halifax. And she came over. And I was the only one invited to their meetings. And that felt really good. (laughs)* (Svele 1/19)

Esma talked about the importance of a mentor who understood her life history in addition to her academic potential. She stated,

*I got a lot of encouragement from the person who was, at the beginning, my advisor, and she was wonderful. So, it was actually because of her that it was possible for me to even think about going on. And, and I think that's a really, really important element—the kind of recognition and acknowledgement that we can get from people that see themselves as mentoring. And if the mentoring is based in a kind of understanding of the complexity of the history as well as the eventual or academic capacity, so that it isn't either/or, so it's not divided out, then I think that it makes a little space for people to be credible for their life knowledge as well as their academic life.* (Esma 1/37)

A number of the women in this study talked about the ways they used their experiences in assignments or presentations or the way they would like to use their experiences to influence other women. Jane realized that she could use the authority of her voice to write about her experiences and, perhaps, influence others. This was the action component of her feminist beliefs.

*I think having that sort of stuff [her research] published . . . I'm not active in a sign-waving yelling on the street corner way. But I think my voice can have a lot of power if I have an opportunity to present it to the world. And I think it's important for people to hear those things in a really calm, well-educated sort of way. I think that makes a difference in how people perceive it. I like to think that because I'm a woman in a male-dominated*
In addition, she discovered while at graduate school that teaching could be a way for her to use her voice with authority. She said, emphatically,

*I think I have something to say. And I think teaching is a great venue where I get a glimpse of what it would be like to be that strong role model for someone else. If I was doing that all the time I could be that strong role model and that would be fantastic.* (Jane 2/26, 27)

Lynn was more than cautious about using her experiences as knowledge in writing assignments after an embarrassing experience with one of her instructors. She was asked to write from her personal experience of growing up and, although she discussed the paper with her instructor before she wrote it, was left feeling powerless and isolated by her instructor’s reaction. She confessed,

*And then when I wrote my paper for this class, I wrote about my family and the generations of poverty and different ways of being with physical activity, based on class. And she[instructor] was mortified because it was so personal, I guess. Well, she knew what I was going to write about. We talked about it. But it made her very uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. And once again I internalized that right away. Like I gave my power over again. I said, “Okay. I feel embarrassed. I’m sorry that I . . . did this.” I felt . . . probably I didn’t belong here, and the feeling of constantly being wrong. Of being taken apart as a person.* (Lynn 1/17)

When considering how the violence in her interpersonal relationship affected her life, Emma seemed to regret her inability to use that part of her identity as knowledge in graduate school. After attending a conference at which she looked carefully for evidence that her abuser might be present before she paid the registration fee, she said,

*It’s in moments like that, that I really am more conscious of myself as sort of still recovering from this big thing that happened in my life. But I don’t go around every day thinking of myself like that, right. Like, it’s not like I go around wearing this badge, "Yes, I’ve survived this f**ked-up relationship!*
But that is who I am!” It’s not a, an identity that I... claim very often. It’s not a BIG part of my sense of self. But it is part of who I am. It is. And it’s one that’s not... really honoured here. There’s not a lot of space for that identity in my life here. So, it’s part of the reason I feel so weird to say it. I guess. (Emma 2/18 – her emphasis)

However, Emma was able to feel self-confident enough to tell a story about another kind of violent experience in her life. At an end of term presentation, students were asked to present a paper or talk about the kind of work they had been doing. Because Emma had been working with narratives, she decided to tell a “difficult” story about her experience with gendered structural violence. She explained,

excitedly,

I did start out by contextualizing the thing and looking at stories, so, at how people use and receive stories so I think it’s important to tell my own difficult story and basically asking people not to be judgmental. And, people really were just so open and grateful and moved by my sharing my experience and then said, “I want to tell you want it’s like in India, in Bangladesh, in China.” It was really moving and reaffirming. But it was definitely really related to my academic work because it was learning about how I tell stories and that’s what I study. So it was academic. But it was also personal.

She added,

I’m really proud of myself! [laughs] Actually, I’m still sort of stunned now that I think about it. I can’t believe that I did it—I told my story! (Emma 1/22 – 25)

Connecting their experiences and the experiences of their colleagues to theory and critiquing each in light of the other was important for several of the participants who sought to understand themselves and the world. For Claire, the environment of Women’s Studies was conducive to helping her recognize her own authority and to use her experiences, in addition to the theory she learned, to understand society. She explained,
So I didn’t have a language to articulate [the violence] until I got to grad school. And that’s why grad school was SO important to me. And especially Women’s Studies because it gives you a space to speak from experience and to legitimize your experience. And it also gave me the theory to understand a lot of things that went on in my life that were not deviant; that were not abnormal. I’m very lucky to be in the environment I was in Women’s Studies with the kind of women that were around me to encourage me to have the courage to speak about things that were previously silenced. So, yeah, grad school’s been absolutely foundational for me [in] rebuilding my confidence and believing in what I say and being able to articulate myself amongst other people even with that fear of being delegitimized. And, you know, we looked at theory as well and how society is structured in certain ways. We could relate our experience to those structures. (Claire 1/5,6 – her emphasis)

Ramona, who enjoyed discussions and debates that included her experiences in addition to theory, talked about the difficulty one of her instructors had when she tried to encourage students to include their experiences and positionalities when talking about theory. She explained,

So in one class that I had there [were] some real clear camps—some people had some opinions on things and other people had other opinions, based on their life situations; based on their histories and who they were in the world, some of which they disclosed and some of which they didn’t. When the instructor started sort of trying to bring out debate or to bring out people’s location, to try and get people to sort of locate themselves within their arguments, to flesh out the discussion and to sort of broaden the debate, what ended up happening was that people got . . . scared of being exposed. We all suffered as a result of the individuals in that class not being able to actually see that the personal is the political. Or to be able to be in the debate in a way that didn’t come at the expense of creating new theory or creating new learning, or helping each other to get to new learning, or sharing things that were really important in terms of their own theory-building. (Ramona 1/4, 5)

Two participants recognized that using the authority of positionality or experience could effectively shut down a conversation (see Fuss, 1989). Esma talked about her recognition that she came back to university with a strong sense of the authority of her experience. Although she was careful not to use this “voice”
too often for fear of silencing other students, she realized using her experience in combination with theory gave her an advantage when it came to class discussions and debates. She said,

*I think it’s difficult for any of us who have come back to school as older people. At some point, we have kind of gained a kind of credibility or a kind of authority that we’re used to. I’m used to, when I speak, that somebody sort of pays attention. Not everybody bends over, you know. But, they kind of pay attention. And I use the double part of whatever my reading is and my personal authority of experience and I kind of roll that together and come on pontificating and people generally give it up.* (Esma 1/10)

Edith recognized that when colleagues used the authority of their experience in a group of which she was a part, she felt shut down and unable to participate. She questioned whether or not she should continue with her program. She explained,

*But, those people put themselves out there as so intelligent and so important that I tended to assume my old role of, “Oh, I’ll just not say anything about this. I’m entitled to my opinions but what’s the point of talking about it? They’re so opinionated. Nothing I say counts. I just don’t think that just because someone’s [oppressed], they’re right. And I’m not going to stand down from that. I have no problem with [their identities]. But that doesn’t give them privilege in my world. And that’s how it unfolded in that class. I almost gave up getting my [degree]. I almost quit because of that class.* (Edith 1/10)

Using their life experiences as part of their voice of authority was important to the women in this study. They valued the role that faculty, by recognizing the relevance of their experiences to their education, played in helping them develop their recognition of, and confidence in, their growing expertise. Although the women appreciated sharing experiences with their colleagues as a way to expand their knowledge and understand theory, they recognized that arguments based primarily on experience could also limit participation by themselves and others. Most of the participants had felt silenced by being excluded from the “insider”
circle of students who believed they shared the same or similar experiences (see Fuss, 1989). However, many participants realized that their ideas about their experiences could shift or be enriched through interaction with others and enjoyed debating the role that “social and historical practices” (Fuss, 1989, p. 118) played in producing their experiences and their stories about their experiences (see Fuss, 1989; Scott, 1991). Using their voice(s) of experience was one way into a more in-depth exploration of complex ideas and theories and a way to more fully understand the shifting nature of their identities.

Voicing Experiences in Research

You don’t know what you think until you say it.

(Esma 2/1)

As the participants talked about their experiences in graduate school and their experiences of interpersonal violence, they often expressed surprise at what they were learning about themselves and how their experiences were connected. Sometimes, their new knowledge about themselves led them to change their behaviour.

In our second interview, Emma recounted an experience at graduate school during which a female faculty member hit her (see Emma’s comments in chapter 4). As she talked about this experience, Emma connected her reaction to this faculty member—backing off and apologizing—with how she reacted to violence in her intimate relationship. During our third interview, when I asked her if she had any questions or comments about the transcript of the second interview, she talked again about her experiences with this same faculty member.

Partly because she’s playing these games that I think I’m used to, I get sucked into them. And it’s funny. I mean, I think I had a big “Aha” in
talking to you about it and how it was related to the stuff with [abuser]. It’s funny how you sort of forget that, and I sort of forgot about it again and sort of got sucked back into that again with her. And then when I got the transcript from you, I was like, “Oh, right!! Yeah! That’s what’s going on with this woman!” (laughs) And so I started having more conversations again about it just lately with friends that have helped, actually. (Emma 2/4)

From talking about her experiences in the interviews, Molly learned how different parts of her life were connected and the importance for her, of recognizing that connection. She explained,

*In fact this whole process has made me think . . . a lot and in a new way about . . . the whole process in my life and what it’s meant in my life. What the abuse has done in my life. Yeah. And I had, as I think I told you that first interview, never put the two together. I was abused while I was doing graduate work. You know I just had kept them in separate compartments. And then I sort of questioned my own success in that separate department and then looked at my own survival and the survival of my family as if they were 2 sort of parallel universes. Keeping them separate allowed me to survive but bringing them together has been a strengthening thing and a relief.* (Molly 2/1, 2)

Molly’s reflection may indicate her need to keep her “homeplace” and her work at the university separate in order to feel successful in both places (see Grace & Gouthro, 2000, p. 10). Female graduate students who must juggle the demands of family and “private” relationships with the demands of graduate school may feel it is necessary to demonstrate their commitment to both of these “greedy institutions”25 by behaving as if their activities in both places do not infringe upon each other (Grace & Gouthro, 2000, p. 10).

Jane recognized, while talking with me during the second interview, that some of the difficulties she was having working in groups might be the result of her

---

25 Grace & Gouthro (2000, p. 10), quoting Edwards (1993), use this term to apply to the institutions of the university and “homeplace,” both of which “demand complete loyalty and allegiance.”
behaviour. And, she decided to take steps to change the way she approached group work. She stated,

*It just kind of occurred to me, just now, talking to you that I could be that difficult person now, which doesn't just make me feel great but, (laughs) it's a good realization, I guess. I'm also, you know, taking some effort to change that dynamic, so I guess that's all you can do. (laughs)* (Jane 1/13, 14)

During the third interview, Jane revealed that rereading the second interview transcript had affected how she was approaching her work and other experiences in graduate school. As a result, she realized that her inability to get grant money and continue her education at the University of British Columbia might not be as devastating as she thought it was.

*It was interesting to read it again. I'm thinking that's exactly where I was then. It's kind of funny to have this script of my moment in time. I've been sort of thinking about that conversation a lot ever since I saw the script and you know, I think I've approached this whole term with more of my feminist antenna on, which is always good. I've been just being a little more aware of things. I've started looking at, because of some of the things we talked about, realizing how much I like teaching. So I've been looking at getting into positions [that] will actually have an instructional role. So, I haven't totally given up hope.* (Jane 2/4, 5 – her emphasis)

She concluded,

*It's so incredible, you know. This whole shift in where I think I might go in my life has been really, really good.* (Jane 2/17)

After reading the transcript of the second interview, Claire, also, decided she was happy with where she was in her life.

*Reading it is fairly enlightening, you know, even when you think you know your experience. Just revisiting and how I felt revisiting [it]. Some of the things that we talked about, some of the things that I said, were quite moving. Because I guess, you see where you've arrived in certain places. And I suppose I feel I've arrived at a pretty good place. So it was really nice to get, I suppose, that kind of validation or feedback from that [second] interview.* (Claire 2/1 – her emphasis)
When talking about their experiences as part of this research project, many participants were able to recognize, some for the first time, how their experiences of interpersonal violence and at graduate school were connected. Some were also able to recognize and appreciate a change or shift in how they thought about themselves and their lives.

The Voice of the Researcher

Some of the women in this study believed that my voice, as the researcher, might give their words the authority needed for others to listen. As many of them had not talked with others (excluding their counsellor) about their experiences, they may have also been using my voice as a safe way to tell their stories.

Throughout this study, my voice and my experiences are continually present although not always acknowledged or recognized. The reasons why I chose to conduct this research, the questions I asked, the type of research and analysis used, and the sections of the interviews I chose to reproduce, are all influenced, to some extent, by my experiences and are written in my (academic) voice. Sharon Lamb (1999) talks about how researchers use their power as analysts and writers to make the voices of the participants say what the researcher wants to hear and present. In my concern for representing the women fairly, I looked for differences as well as similarities among the participants, wrote about dissenting points of view, and checked the connection between the quotations and my analysis with the women, my Study Sisters, and my committee members. However, although I listened to the voices of my participants and took what they said into consideration, there is no question that this dissertation was written from my perspective and in (one of) my voice(s).
Concluding Comments

In this chapter, I have explored, using a combination of theory and the participants’ stories, how the women in this study talked about silence, voice, and using their experiences as knowledge. Closely connected to ideas of power and powerlessness, concepts of voice, silence, and the ability to speak with authority about their experiences were important to the participants’ ideas about themselves in their interpersonal relationships and in graduate school.

Many of the participants talked about the silencing that had been part of their experiences in violent interpersonal relationships and that sometimes continued into graduate school. They also discussed how they silenced themselves, due to fear of societal attitudes toward women who have experienced violence and to their own internalized sense of shame. Graduate school was seen by some of the participants as a way for them to prove to themselves and others that they were not voiceless but were intelligent, capable women who were able to take control of their lives. Several of the women mentioned Women’s Studies as a “safe” space, whether in theory or in practice, where experience was considered a valued and valuable part of knowledge production. They also talked about the importance, to them, of learning to combine the knowledge of their experiences with those of other women to critique larger systems of oppression and to use theory to critique both. However, for a few women, feminist spaces such as Women’s Studies, felt at least as unsafe as other spaces inside and outside the university in which to talk about their experiences because of the perceived judgemental attitudes from others that
would result and the belief that they would reveal themselves to be “poor” feminists.

Although many of the women felt silenced and “voiceless” in their violent interpersonal relationships, at least three of them had been speaking out about violence against women while they were still in abusive relationships. In addition, many of the women participated in this research with the hope that reading about their experiences would help other women change their lives. Coming to graduate school was another way in which some of the women in this study sought to (re)claim the voice they felt they had lost in their violent relationships. Many participants learned to recognize and trust their knowledge and use their experiences, combined with the theory they learned and the experiences of other students to critique oppressive structures (including the university) and to understand themselves better. Talking about their experiences as part of this research increased this knowledge.

Reclaiming their voices through learning to think about, talk about, write about, and critique their experiences and the experiences of others using theory and dialogue was an integral part of the participants’ success and enjoyment in graduate school. It was one of the reasons they came back to university and it greatly enhanced their abilities to understand themselves and the world. Of importance, also, was the ability to work with supportive, understanding faculty who encouraged the women to explore and critique the importance of their experiences. A number of participants had not connected their experiences with interpersonal violence and their experiences at graduate school. After talking about their experiences with me for a short period of time, they were surprised to
discover how their actions in graduate school were often informed by the violence they experienced in their past. Because experiences of abuse and violence are rarely discussed in an educational forum, even in a general way, participants may have been unable to transfer their understanding of the effects of their interpersonal experiences to their experiences in a university classroom. The significance of reclaiming and using voice to the women’s beliefs about their success in graduate school point to the importance of addressing concerns about power relations and the related issues of voice and silence in graduate courses.\footnote{I return to this point in the final chapter, chapter seven. See p. 148.}

Theorists who talk about using experience as knowledge emphasize the importance of situating experiences and recognizing the socio-historical and political influences on experiences and our beliefs about them (see Bannerji, 1995; Fuss, 1989; Scott, 1991). For example, Bannerji (1995) states, “It [experience] is not the end point, but the beginning of an exploration of the relationship between the personal and the social and therefore the political” (p. 55). Many of the participants used their participation in this research to talk about and explore the meanings of their experiences—in their interpersonal relationships, in graduate school, and in the context of violence against women in society. For Nancy Hartsock (2006), this is one aspect of standpoint theories: “They are not about individuals reporting their experience but groups coming to understand the social relations in which they are involved” (179).
CHAPTER SIX:

MAKING CONNECTIONS: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SOCIETY

[The] range of violence in learners’ lives is vividly present in the classroom, affecting the possibilities of successful learning for large numbers of students. (Horsman, 2006, p. 180)

So, I don’t think there’s any part of my life that’s not affected by that history. (Esma 2/29)

I conducted this research in order to explore the possible connections between women’s experiences with interpersonal violence and their experiences in graduate school. I also wondered how living in the context of a society where violence and abuse against women are everyday occurrences would affect women’s ideas and beliefs about the violence they, and other women, experience. During our first interview, many women in this study expressed curiosity about the possible connections between their experiences with interpersonal violence and their experiences in graduate school. For example, Ramona mentioned

people’s response when I told them about your research—the fact that nobody was aware that there was even a possible connection, myself included. (Ramona 2/44)

As they talked to me about their graduate school experiences, many participants were surprised to discover how their violent interpersonal relationships had an influence on their graduate school experiences. However, when I asked whether they saw any connections between the violence they experienced in their interpersonal relationship(s), their experiences in graduate school, and violence against women in society, most participants had little difficulty recognizing connections. One participant looked at me blankly at first,
and after I rephrased the question, she asked me, rather impatiently, what I thought she’d been talking about throughout the interviews. To her, and many of my participants, the connections were obvious; the experiences they had were part of the violence that many, if not all, women experience. They thought that their experiences with violence, often throughout their lives, made them more conscious of the prevalence and “everydayness” of violence against women. At the same time, some of the participants talked about their experiences with violence as being not “normal,” perhaps not connecting what they saw as “individual” experiences of violence with the very pervasiveness they had just mentioned.

The women discussed the connections they were making in terms of how violence against women affects them personally in their lives, and in a more general way: how violence against women affects all women.

The participants indicated that they had made connections between the violence they experienced and violence against women in general by talking about their experiences. Most of them had been in counselling; three of them had been in organizations that address violence against women and encourage the women who work there to share their experiences; and some had been in classes at the university where they were encouraged, or at least allowed, to talk about their experiences as part of the process of acquiring knowledge. For example, Claire credited Women’s Studies with giving her the tools to help her understand her experiences and the experiences of other women in the context of violence against women. She explained,

*I think in Women’s Studies, we have access to, I suppose, theories that have helped me make sense of my experience and see it as pervasive—violence against women as pervasive in the world—physical, emotional, symbolic. Even just flicking through TV channels and seeing the representations of women there, I mean, I call that violence against women to a certain degree.*

(Claire 2/26 – her emphasis)
Claire went on to describe talking with students who dismiss the idea that there is violence against women in Canadian society by citing evidence of “real” violence against women, for example, female genital mutilation, in other countries. She said, angrily,

\[\textit{Which, to me, totally obscures the forms of violence that occur here, in our own backyards that aren’t necessarily thought of as violence. I mean, you can think about things like cosmetic surgery as forms of violence. And the pressure on women to have breast implants.} \] (Claire 2/26 – her emphasis)

It is possible that the normalization of violence that women experience prevents an understanding of how violence intersects with, and has an impact on, everyday experiences, including learning.

**Childhood Violence as Violence Against Women**

Many participants saw violence against women as part of a larger picture that begins with violence against girls. Statistics Canada, in its profile of family violence in Canada, reports that “children and youth are more at risk of physical and sexual assault than adults” and that “girls are at greater risk of family violence than boys because of the higher prevalence of sexual assault against girls” (Ogrodnik, 2006, pp. 29, 31). Nine of the eleven participants reported experiencing childhood violence and abuse, and when they were talking about how they connected their experiences with interpersonal violence and in graduate school to violence against women in society, they began by talking about violence against (girl) children.

Claire described the isolation she felt as a result of having nowhere to talk about the childhood violence she experienced. She insisted,
That sort of experience for a child is so damaging; and it’s so unfair. And you just remember when you’re a kid and you felt so alone. There was no one there to help you. And certainly no one outside my family knew what was going on. My teachers didn’t know. And even at that age, I didn’t know how to identify it. Because your parents would justify it. You’d be told not to talk about it. (Claire 2/39, 40).

This silencing around childhood violence and abuse is perpetuated into adulthood and keeps women from talking about and reporting the violence they experience not only in their interpersonal relationships, but also in other settings, such as the university.

Jane talked about the violence she experienced as a child and how it was not only related to the partner she chose, but also to her fear of certain types of people.

She said,

*My childhood was really physically very violent. Which I think really carried [to] who I chose as a partner. He wasn’t physically violent at all. He was very verbally and emotionally and sexually abusive in a really more of a passive-aggressive kind of abuse way. It felt like it was so much better than my childhood was. When I recognize it now, I think just in the last couple of years I’ve gotten really to be aware of why I don’t like [a certain] person. And being quite afraid, physically afraid of some people. And, it’s a state of fear that was brought through that I still can’t quite fully shake.* (Jane 2/10)

When talking about women’s feelings of being unsafe—in a relationship, in a profession, in general—Molly connected the child abuse she experienced with the interpersonal violence she experienced with her partner.

*We’re never safe because the people that are supposed to protect us performed a double betrayal. Not protecting us . . . not keeping us safe . . . and abusing us. And getting away with it. And those are big beliefs out of which we live our lives. And that’s sad. And I guess it’s unrecognized, isn’t it.* (Molly 2/13 – her emphasis)

The participants’ comments about the effects of experiencing childhood violence point to the importance of recognizing the pervasive effects of child abuse throughout the
lives of girls and women. When considering the effects of a student’s (both adult and child) home life on her educational experiences, educators and administrators need to include the possibility of childhood violence and its effects.

**Societal Attitudes as Violence Against Women**

Many participants discussed their experiences in the context of violence against women in society and the world. For most, their understandings came from talking with other women about the violence in their lives and/or advocating for the rights of all women (and children) to be free from violence.

When talking about her own sense of powerlessness, Claire expressed her belief that women are taught to feel powerless. She maintained,

*I think you can generalize. I mean, we’re so used to being delegitimized in so many contexts—in the classroom, in the home, in public spaces—that you almost make a habit of second-guessing yourself. And I certainly do that chronically still. I think a lot of us have that sort of built in feelings of discomfort claiming power or naming power or even trying to be [powerful].* (Claire 2/6 – her emphasis)

Ramona believed that the interpersonal violence she experienced and her experiences in graduate school were connected to violence against women in general by the silencing that surrounds those experiences. She said,

*I think there are always links. Like in how it keeps happening—how it keeps going on as that we’re not ever invited or encouraged or supposed to talk about it. And I think that’s the major perpetuation that I see happening that’s across the board.* (Ramona 2/31)

Ramona also emphasized that the misuse of power is an important component in violence against women in any setting. The possibility of abuse is present in any relationship in which there is a power differential. She stated,
I think it's always about responsible use of power. Like, if you're in any sort of relationship—as a member of society or as a member of a class. It's always about responsible use of power. And as long as there's the possibility for abuse of power, there's the possibility for abuse. (Ramona 2/43)

Emma saw connections between the violence she experienced in an interpersonal relationship and in graduate school and the lack of support that society gives girls and women for developing strong self-esteem. She said,

I just think in society, in general, there's very little structural support for women to HAVE a strong sense of self-worth and self-love and self-acceptance. That if society did give us more support for that, I think it would be harder for us to get stuck in these relationships. I mean, again, not to blame us for getting in them. Just to say that structurally, I see that that was one of the things that sucked me into it was that I wasn't valuing myself. And so I was with someone who didn't value me either. And, in academia, I think it's easy, too, if we see ourselves as though I'm so nothing as compared with this AMAZING professor, then maybe you'd be more likely to put up with the kind of bullshit that [faculty member] puts out.

She continued,

I mean, women's sense of self-worth and self-love starts going down the tube, . . . what is it, by like age 8 most girls are dieting? There's ALL the screwed up messages we get from an early age about you must be this way or that way and just how we learn to be girls. Girling the girl is just so screwed up and it's not at all about loving ourselves or accepting ourselves for who we are or as we are. (Emma 2/20 – her emphasis)

For Molly, the violence she experienced was connected to the violence that female public figures endure. Her experiences of being dismissed and silenced appeared to be mirrored in the way female politicians are treated. She attributed this denigration to society's attitudes toward “strong” women. She contended,

There's a sort of hostility and aggression to women succeeding in some places. So I think when we step out, publicly, we are transgressing. We are breaking those codes of silence. We're breaking the behaviour of how we're supposed to behave. Why do we get shut down? Why do people look how
Joy McPhail27 dresses? Or how [she] speaks. These kinds of things have focus. Whereas no one's looking at guys. (Molly 1/8, 35)

Jane equated the denigration she felt from her partner and her family in the issue of pay equity. When catching the news at various times, she was surprised to learn that women's pay was actually decreasing in relation to that of men. She felt that was society's way of telling women that they were not important. She argued,

*I was watching something on TV and women's equality in pay has actually decreased in the last 3 or 4 years. And that makes me kind of a little crazy. Even though they've legislated in pay equity they're arguing it in the courts. I'm not sure about the exact details of it, but they're going to win some appeal in the Supreme Court so they actually—even though women deserve equity—they don't actually have to pay it to them because it would be too expensive. And so I think that's our society telling me that I'm still not quite . . . worth [it]. And, you know, you can't reach your full potential if you're not being treated with [respect].* (Jane 2/22 – her emphasis)

In addition to societal attitudes and behaviours toward women which the participants recognized through their own experiences and the experiences of other women as violence toward women, some participants had direct experiences with institutional violence.

**Institutional Violence as Violence Against Women**

Several women recounted being retraumatized by their experiences with the health care and justice systems. They understood these experiences as being more than personal experiences but rather, as evidence of structural violence against women. For example, Jane and her violent partner went to a marriage counsellor to talk about the violence she was experiencing in their relationship. Rather than

---

27 Joy McPhail was the leader of the opposition party in the British Columbia provincial legislature at the time of this interview.
recognizing the violence Jane experienced, the counsellor suggested that Jane was
the person who had the problem. Jane commented,

\[ I \text{ do think there's that perception that men can be really aggressive or really} \]
\[ \text{strong-willed and that's kind of acceptable. And that there's something} \]
\[ \text{wrong with the woman who can't accept that. And I think that's not just my} \]
\[ \text{personal experience. That's society. That's saying that he's okay. There's} \]
\[ \text{something wrong with me for not just taking it.} \]  

(Jane 1/28 – her emphasis)

Lynn had dealings with the justice and medical systems in the course of
leaving a violent partner. She compared those experiences with the feelings of
powerlessness she experienced when trying to resolve concerns she had about a
faculty member. She declared,

\[ I \text{ thought the law would be on my side. And I learned that it isn't. And I've} \]
\[ \text{experienced it lots of times with institutions—medical institution, legal} \]
\[ \text{institution, educational institutions—that don't feel any responsibility to the} \]
\[ \text{individual. They're powerful! The church will support the priest. The legal} \]
\[ \text{system will support that lawyer. The medical institution will support the} \]
\[ \text{doctor. It's that kind of banding of brothers that I feel. I'm not just dealing} \]
\[ \text{with this woman [a faculty member]. You're taking on the institution. I} \]
\[ \text{mean, they have tenure! So, I know I'm dealing with that. Nobody [is on my} \]
\[ \text{side].} \]  

(Lynn 2/11, 12)

These women recognized the institutional violence they experienced as part of the
accumulated violence in their lives. In addition, Lynn included educational institutions in
the same category as other large, bureaucratic institutions, like the medical and judicial
systems, that perpetuate violence against women rather than taking steps to alleviate it.

**Violence against Women as Pervasive**

Many participants felt that violence against women is pervasive and encouraged.

For example, Claire explained why she had difficulty, at first, answering my question.

\[ I \text{ am having difficulty with this question because I can't separate what I do in} \]
\[ \text{grad school to how I think, generally. It [violence] affects everything. It} \]
\[ \text{affects the way that I read a film. You know, the way I go to the movies and} \]
\[ \text{watching a film I'll look for certain things, be disturbed by certain things} \]  

142
that other people just don't see. [Also] conversations with people, acquaintances or friends of people that I don’t know very well, on certain topics, say, domestic violence or whatever. I see it everywhere. Everywhere. Even to the kind of physical ways I react to someone on the street that I see as potentially an aggressive person. I always watch my back. I always want to know what's going on. Because I also have a fear of being hurt. (Claire 1/27, 28 – her emphasis)

Claire also saw her experiences in graduate school as a continuation of society’s disbelief in the prevalence of violence against women. She explained,

You experience that constant questioning of that reality [of experiencing violence and abuse] even within the university. So I suppose I even see graduate school as part of the challenges that you experience outside of graduate school; not being believed; violence not being seen or not being legitimized as violence that’s damaging. (Claire 2/28)

Esma, in making connections to violence against women internationally stated, tearfully,

I think that the “war against women” just won a big battle in the States. And I think it’s going to show up in the school systems before anywhere else. Actually, in health. It’s already going to show up in health because it’s going to be in choice issues. But very quickly after that, it’s going to be obvious in education because, if women have less . . . choice, first of all about whether or not they have babies, there’ll be fewer women who actually have the financial ability and the time to go to school—older women. It condones violence against women. It supports violence against women. (Esma 2/31, 32 – her emphasis)

Jane described how her experiences with violence affect her view of the world, but she also recognized that it was not only her own experiences with violence that affected how she saw and experienced the world. She said,

The statistics are that the vast majority of women have been abused in some way throughout their life. And I do think that really influences our attitudes and our perceptions of everything. My perception of why do I feel the campus is unsafe. That comes from somewhere much deeper than just [my experiences with violence]. I do think society’s told me it’s unsafe. So

---

28 She is referring to George Bush’s “Unborn Victims of Violence Act” in 2004, which some groups, including the National Organization for Women (NOW), believe is a step toward making abortion illegal in the United States.
there’s that greater structure that’s affecting that in addition to my own personal experiences which affect my interpersonal skills. I have this great sense of fear just in moving about the campus. I think it’s affected me in just about everything I do, whether it’s positive or negative. (Jane 1/28)

Jane went on to talk about the lack of lighting in some areas of campus, the scarcity of “blue phones,” especially around the new bus loop, and the lack of visibility of Safewalk literature that added to her concerns about being on-campus.

Jane was not the only participant who talked about her concerns regarding her safety on campus. While Lynn was living on campus with her children, a stalker was bothering single parents who were living in her area. When he tried to break into her home, Lynn phoned campus police. However, her fears were “totally downplayed” by the police who told her “peeping toms don’t hurt people” (Lynn 2/24). This kind of discounting of experience and fear had been part of Lynn’s experience as a child and adult before she came to the university and increased her worries about her safety.

Svele, also, mentioned her concerns about working on campus at night because of having to take the bus home. Not only did she have to walk across campus in order to take the bus—a safety issue for her as a woman; if she missed the last bus, she was afraid to go home by herself. She said, “I try not to be here at night” (Svele 2/16).

The concerns these participants mentioned are part of the “chilly climate” that affects female students, staff, and faculty. The term was created in 1982 (see Prentice, 2000) to describe the combined effect of a number of “cultural and

---

29 At UBC, campus security has provided a number of security phones located in boxes on blue poles. Safewalk is a student-run security program that provides a two person, co-ed team to accompany students and faculty on campus.
architectural factors” that make the university an unfriendly place for women (Currie, 1994, p. 24). These factors, which may include sexual harassment, physical and sexual intimidation and assault, and safety issues, including a lack of lighting and visible security (see Currie, 1994; Eyre, 2000; Kelly & Torres, 2006), may have an effect on how women move about campus, the classes they take, and their perceptions about the campus as a safe place to be. For some of the women in this study, their experiences with violence before they came to graduate school and their belief in the pervasiveness of violence against women, increased their sense of the chilly climate while they were on campus.

Esma had been active in the violence against women movement for many years. When thinking about why violence against women is still not being addressed, Esma said,

*The violence against women movement has been co-opted enough so that it’s no long even the flavour of the month. Everybody knows it happens so they don’t have to pay attention. They don’t have to pay attention. It’s like, “Oh come on. You’re just saying that shit again? Don’t bother me with that.” Some of [us] that started with the rape response stuff believed that one day we were going to work ourselves out of a job (laughs). It’s never going to happen. We’re never going to work ourselves out of a job. We have to go back to that dangerous knowledge that I’m talking about [knowing that violence against women happens in spite of anything that is done to eliminate it]. We’re going to be moppin’ up for generations. And nobody knows how to fix it.* (Esma 2/36 – her emphasis)

Only one woman focused on the violence she experienced throughout her life as a personal problem that she had to solve herself. Svele grew up in a country in which women are expected to be subservient to men and to defer to men in most matters. Her questions and opinions were not valued when she was growing up and she had learned to rely on herself. Svele commented,
If you have a way of ignoring it (violence), [that] is what I try to do. I try to say, well, he’s [abuser] not right. I know what I’m doing is right. And just push yourself. I know a lot of women can’t probably do that if it’s physical violence or if they can’t get away from it, so I guess I was one of the luckier ones that I could say, I’m just going to do what I want. (Svele 1/26)

When suggesting that women who experience physical violence may have a harder time escaping than she did, Svele is downplaying the physical violence she did experience and the years she planned and saved for her escape. She also seems to be accepting an attitude that suggests that women who experience violence can manage the situation if they just try hard enough.

The participants recognized that the violence they experienced affected many different areas in their lives apart from graduate school. The way they viewed movies, their attitudes toward people they saw or met, the partner they chose, their feelings of safety, their beliefs about their self-worth, and their attitudes toward institutional authority were all influenced by their experiences in violent relationships. When talking about the violence they experienced in the context of violence against women, some women intermingled the use of “I” and “me” with “us” and “you,” perhaps indicating that they were seeing an on-going connection or that some parts of violence against women were more difficult for them to talk about personally. Many participants understood the violence they experienced in the context of a society in which violence against women and girls is permitted and even encouraged by various institutions. They did not see a time when violence against women will be eliminated and most depended on personal strategies rather than institutional protections, to keep themselves safe.

See Gee, J.P. (1991), for an interesting discussion of a linguistic approach to narrative analysis.
Concluding Comments

How do the women’s beliefs about and attitudes toward violence against women in society affect their learning in graduate school? Women who have experienced violence and abuse throughout their lives and who see violence “everywhere” may be more aware of the abusive and/or violent behaviour of others. Horsman (2006) states,

In the medical model prevalent in North America, the heightened perception of ‘minor’ violence by those who have experienced major violence tends to be judged as a symptom of pathology, rather than an indicator of how each experience of violence increases fear, decreases a sense of safety, and adds a new layer of experience that shapes the self and affects attempts to learn in educational programs. (p. 180)

Women’s feelings of safety in classrooms, on campus, and in their relationships with faculty may be influenced not only by their personal experiences with violence but also by the violence they see around them, making them more likely to be aware of, and feel threatened by, the words and actions of others. In addition, women may recognize the increased sensitivity they have and struggle to hide the impacts that violence and abuse have on them out of embarrassment or fear of being humiliated. The added energy it takes to pretend they are “normal” takes away from their ability to focus on their learning (see Horsman, 2006, p. 183). When university policy makers, administrators, faculty, and students recognize how violence against women is perpetuated in university policies and practices and take action to address all forms of violence against women in educational programs and on campus, women will feel more comfortable claiming a larger space in graduate programs and will be able concentrate on their learning experiences.
CHAPTER SEVEN:
CONCLUDING COMMENTS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

When you’ve been in an abusive relationship, it’s something that’s with you always. Even though it’s not present all the time and it’s not in your face all the time and it’s not obvious to you, it’s always there.
(Ramona 2/29)

I conducted this study as a way to research and understand how women’s experiences with interpersonal violence (including my own) are connected to graduate school experiences. More generally, I was interested in how violence affects learning and wanted to add to the small amount of research that has been done on this topic. In this final chapter, I summarize the findings of the research, present implications for policy makers, administrators, faculty, and graduate students, and suggest areas for further study.

Women, Violence, and Learning

I mean, education’s great! The institution isn’t. (Lynn 2/53)

Violence against women is pervasive in Canada and around the world, affecting all parts of women’s lives. One area that is under-researched and poorly understood is how experiencing violence affects women’s learning. In this study, I interviewed female graduate students who had experienced interpersonal violence in order to, in a small way, increase the information that is available on how violence affects women’s learning, specifically, women’s learning in graduate school.
The women who participated in this study recognized that the interpersonal violence they experienced affected their graduate school experiences in many ways—both positively and negatively. The impact on their learning of experiencing violence was different for each participant. Experiences of interpersonal violence were sometimes the reasons why the women enrolled in graduate programs; some participants used their love of learning to separate themselves from an abusive relationship or anticipated that by going to graduate school they would be able to prove themselves to be capable, intelligent people, and to expand their life choices. As they tackled academic course work, teaching, and researching, many participants, often with the help of supportive faculty, began to recognize their growing expertise and resulting increase in self-confidence. As a consequence of working alone or with supportive colleagues, many women were able to increase their sense of personal authority (some might call it power) and recognize a change in their attitudes toward themselves and their lives. However, the women’s graduate school experiences also reminded them of their violent interpersonal relationships and influenced how they engaged in their graduate studies. When they interacted with faculty, university bureaucracy, and other students in a situation where they experienced feelings of powerlessness or worthlessness, many of the women reacted with fear, silence, aggression, anger, or a combination of these behaviours—reactions they recognized as being similar to their reactions to violence or that were the result of learning how to change those behaviours. They often felt powerless, defeated, and isolated as a result of those interactions and because they felt there was nowhere they could talk about their experiences.
The participants also discussed the importance to them of being able to talk about, and therefore learn from, their life experiences. This “voicing” of their interests, concerns, and experiences was in contrast to the silencing they experienced in their violent relationship(s) and to societal attitudes toward women who are or who have been in abusive relationships. Although some of the participants had been advocates for themselves and for other women who had experienced violence, many of the women chose graduate school as a place to “reclaim their voice” while using theory, their experiences, and the experiences of others to help them understand their lives and explore future possibilities. However, many felt that their experiences were discounted at the university and that they were often silenced by power differentials and a dismissive attitude toward using their experiences as part of their knowledge base. They welcomed the opportunity presented in some courses to connect their experiences to those of other women, while using theory and critical reflection to contextualize those experiences. While they recognized the increased confidence and personal authority they acquired through conducting research, teaching, and increasing their knowledge and understanding, they also recognized institutional barriers they had to overcome.

As the women in this study talked about their experiences with interpersonal violence and their experiences in graduate school, they recognized that living in the context of violence against women in society and the world had an effect on their thoughts about themselves and the violence they experienced. The pervasiveness of violence against women in society affected their beliefs about their abilities to succeed, their feelings of safety on and off campus, and their confidence in their power to help make the world a
better place for themselves and other women. They recognized the university as a part of the larger problem of violence against women in society.

**Implications**

Although violence against women is prevalent in North America and around the world and the effects of violence on physical, mental, and emotional health are well documented, the effects of interpersonal violence on women's learning are often not recognized. In addition, attitudes toward women who have experienced interpersonal violence must change in order for faculty and administrators to recognize that there are women in graduate school who have experienced, and are affected by, interpersonal violence. Before I began my research I was cautioned by a faculty member that I would have difficulty finding participants. When I asked why, she explained that "women like that are weeded out before they get to this level." Several other faculty members and graduate students made similar comments. This attitude assumes that all women are the same and react to experiencing violence in a similar way, an assumption my participants dispel. It also shows a lack of recognition of the pervasiveness of violence against women and prevents an understanding for the need to address the effects of violence against women in the university. Because the systemic and pervasive nature of violence against women is often hidden, increasing the already challenging experience of being a graduate student, the university, as an institution, and members of the university community need to acknowledge the numbers of women who may have experienced interpersonal violence and who bring the effects of these experiences with them to graduate school. In fact, many of the women in this study came to graduate school in order to distance themselves from the violence they experienced. Grace and Gouthro (2000) talk about the "homeplace" as a site
of learning about oneself and one's place in the world. They state that the learning that takes place in the homeplace "affects how a person engages in life ventures including learning in formal education settings" (p. 9). Can the university afford to overlook the importance of homeplace learning to women's graduate school experiences? What is the role of the university, as a publicly funded institution, in supporting the learning of all the students who enrol? What can the university do to help improve the learning experiences of women who have experienced interpersonal violence?

Policy Makers and Administrators

At the most basic level, policy makers and administrators must recognize, understand, and address the gendered implications of policies at the system level. To ignore the ways that policies and procedures will differentially affect faculty, staff and students depending on their gender (in addition to other factors, including race, ethnicity, class, and so on) is to perpetuate or even increase systemic power imbalances that disadvantage women (see Grace & Gouthro, 2000). The Campus 2020 document is an example of the complete disregard that policy makers have for the differential effects of policy; references to possible gendered outcomes are absent from the document. It is now, when the policy is being debated, that university administrators, faculty, and students must raise questions about and consider the significance of this policy for women. How will the increased emphasis on "excellence," competition, and accountability affect female faculty, especially those interested in challenging the traditional male-centred bias in teaching and learning and those with family responsibilities? How will the stratification of institutions of higher education into research-intensive universities, regional "teaching" universities, and institutions targeting specific areas of learning affect funding, the kind of research that
is undertaken, and job opportunities open to graduating students? Will female and male students be affected differently? Research has already been done on these questions and others about the gendered impacts of restructuring of higher education and the effects of neoliberal policies and globalization (see chapter two). Are policy-makers and administrators consulting this research and considering the effects it may have on female faculty and students? When designing the physical layout of the campus, the needs and concerns of female staff, faculty, and students must be taken into account during the planning stages for new buildings, recreational spaces, and transportation hubs. Recognizing, understanding, and addressing the concerns of female faculty, staff, and students, is the first step to addressing violence against women in the university.

Grace and Gouthro maintain that the university must change “policies, program designs, the constitution of standards and other infrastructure that maintain systemic relations of inequality in terms of gender and its intersections with other relationships of power” (2000, p. 13). There are specific areas in which the university could directly address the effects of violence against women. In the application process, universities could acknowledge the numbers of students who may have experienced interpersonal and other violence and who may be suffering from post traumatic stress disorder and other trauma-related disabilities, by including a list of these possible disabilities and conditions on their Access and Diversity: Disability Resource Centre website (see, for example, Athabasca University- Access to Students with Disabilities site: http://www.athabascau.ca/asd/services/index.htm). Students who are anxious about being able to complete their programs while trying to deal with their responses to interpersonal
violence may be reassured to see that the university understands the possible effects that violence can have and takes steps to accommodate them.

Universities could acknowledge and help address the effects of violence on learning by hosting conferences and other forums that explore the connections between violence and learning in institutions of higher education. I was recently a participant in an on-line conference sponsored by Literacy BC entitled, *Violence & Learning: Research to Practice*. This conference was a place for literacy practitioners and other interested people to meet and talk about the relationship between violence and learning and the kinds of research literacy practitioners (and others) are doing on this topic. Universities could be putting on similar conferences if they recognized, like Literacy BC, that violence affects learning. Faculty, researchers, administrators, staff, and students would all benefit from an understanding of how violence may affect their learning and the learning of other people at the university, and in other educational settings. Participants in such conferences may be able to suggest changes to university policies and practices which might benefit students and other members of the university community.

Several participants talked about feeling unsafe at the university, especially at night. Two participants cancelled night classes or rearranged their schedules to take classes only during the day in order to alleviate their fears. They mentioned the necessity for better lighting in some areas, particularly where people park their cars or catch buses, the need for more “blue phones,” especially around the bus loop, and the need for a more highly visible SafeWalk program. One woman talked about not being taken seriously when she reported harassing behaviour. Their personal experiences and the knowledge that campuses across
Canada are still unsafe for female students, affected where women went on campus, the courses they took, and their beliefs about their own safety. They felt they needed to protect themselves rather than count on university officials to address the seriousness of violence against women. The university must work in conjunction with the rest of society to fight sexism (in addition to other “isms”) and to educate all faculty, staff, and students (male and female) about violence against women and about campus safety (Kelly & Torres, 2006). It is essential that the administrators in charge of student affairs recognize and address violence against women in all areas of university life.

Power differentials and the abuse of power were areas that all participants mentioned. The university could take a more proactive role in talking about the possibilities for abuse of power and addressing ways for students to deal with their concerns. For example, during graduate student orientations or in their information sheets for students, the university can emphasize that no one should have to experience any kind of violence or abuse. Examples of what different kinds of violence (e.g. physical, emotional, psychological) “look like” could be included to help students recognize the kinds of behaviours that may be disempowering. The Faculty of Graduate Studies or other campus-wide groups could hold a series of workshops for faculty and students on supervisor/student relationships and the possible abuses of power that may be part of graduate supervision. Suggestions of what students can do if they experience violence or abuses of power in their relationships with faculty and students should be included, taking into account that students may not feel they can turn to faculty in their department. The

---

31 See, for example, a recent article in University Affairs, by Rosanna Tamburri (November, 2007).
32 For example, at UBC, the Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth (TAG) has held workshops on the student/supervisor relationship and has produced a video for staff and students entitled, “Supervision scenes: Identifying keys to success” (1999).
university must also have a confidential, non-confrontational process in place to address student concerns about violence and abuse of power, and to hold faculty and students accountable for their actions.

The importance of faculty/student relationships suggests that the university could put more emphasis on the importance of understanding alternative types of power relationships and encouraging collaboration. The pressures on faculty, especially female faculty who are often trying to balance work and family responsibilities, limit the amount of time faculty have to work with the graduate students they supervise, leaving graduate students, who are already feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of graduate life, with a lack of support. The emphasis on competitiveness and one-upmanship that is prevalent in graduate departments, especially in areas of funding, including finding TAships and RAships, discourages collaboration and encourages a blame the victim mentality in which students who are not successful in acquiring grants and other forms of financial help are considered less intelligent and competent, often blaming themselves or feeling they will be blamed by others. Processes of awarding grants and other monies need to be more transparent and more equally available to all.

Grace and Gouthro (2000), in their examination of how models of feminist pedagogies can help improve access to graduate education for women state, “Women students have to conform to a university learning culture in which men and women experience graduate education differently” (p. 11). Citing Isaac, Pruitt-Logan and Upcraft (1995), they continue, “Female students are more likely than male students to perceive disconnection and alienation from the university.” Recently, The University of British Columbia closed the Women’s Student Office and merged it with the Office of Access and
Diversity. Many women in this study believed this move to be one way that the university was ignoring their needs. The university must provide a space where female students can go and a person or persons with whom students can talk, away from their departments, about their experiences in graduate school. These services must be advertised widely so that graduate students are fully aware of their options. One participant mentioned the lack of information about 12-step programs on campus. In the past, she had found these programs very helpful when she needed a supportive space to talk about the effects of violence and abuse. Perhaps this information, if available, could be part of student help or emergency numbers. Student and faculty services, TAG (The Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth) or other university departments can also play an important role by presenting workshops and courses on recognizing and examining relations of power and on teaching, working, and researching with students and all members of the university in more cooperative and non-oppressive ways.

The current trends of neoliberalism, corporatization, and globalization increase competition, regulation, and accountability. With the emphasis on "excellence," autonomy, and the student as consumer (see Brule, 2004), issues of equity and diversity may be overlooked or considered unimportant (see Maher & Tetreault, 2007). In order for policy makers and administrators to address the effects of violence on women's learning, they must recognize, understand, and address the ways policies and procedures affect women and men differently. They must be willing to address violence against women as a serious societal problem with which universities are complicit.
Faculty

University faculty played a large role, both positive and negative, in how the women in this study viewed their experiences in graduate school. The participants looked to faculty for support and guidance in addition to academic leadership. Faculty must recognize and be willing to examine their own positionalities, including their experiences with violence, and acknowledge how their positionalities affect their ideas about teaching and learning and the ways they interact with students (Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Tisdell, 1998). They must accept the authority and responsibility they have as faculty to explore power disparities, including those embedded in texts, evaluation, and teaching methods (Grace & Gouthro, 2000).

Faculty must acknowledge the prevalence of violence against women and the effects of such violence on women’s learning in order to effectively work with female graduate students. When women enter graduate school, they are not able to leave their life experiences and compartmentalize their lives into “school” and “other” (see Grace & Gouthro, 2000). Women who have experienced interpersonal violence may be influenced by their experiences whether they realize it or not. The pedagogical frameworks faculty use, in class and out, may interact with out-of-university experiences to positively or negatively affect women’s learning. The participants’ focus on the power differentials they felt at graduate school, the ways in which these power relationships reminded them of the interpersonal violence they experienced, and their sometimes paralyzing reactions to what they understood as being in a position of powerlessness, point to the need for faculty to recognize the importance of relationships of power to graduate students and the effects that abuses of power differentials may have. It is essential for both faculty and students to
recognize the possible disastrous effects on the students and their programs if power differentials are not carefully examined and addressed.

Not only can university faculty examine their individual relationships with students for abuses of power, they can also analyse classroom interactions and intercede when power differentials due to overt or covert threats of violence involving sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, or other reasons threaten members of the class. Many participants talked about their dislike of their undergraduate experiences because of the impersonal nature of huge classes, the inattention to power relationships, and lack of in-depth discussion. They looked forward to the smaller classes where topics of interest could be theorized and discussed. At the same time, some of the women were apprehensive about the extra exposure that small class size brings. Application of feminist and anti-oppressive educational theories and practices will allow educators to understand the effects of pedagogical policies and practices for women who have experienced violence and to take steps to make classrooms a more welcoming place. For example, several participants mentioned that it would be helpful for faculty/instructors to include the systemic nature of violence against women and its effects when they talk about different kinds of oppressions. They suggested the use of basic “groundrules,” formulated and discussed at the beginning of a course and referred to as needed, as a way to help make students aware of possible abuses of power (see Briskin, 1998b, Hoodfar, 1997). Faculty can also question the meaning of participation in their classes and explore how power relations affect the students’ involvement in classroom activities and discussions (see Ellsworth, 1992; Hayes, 2000). In order to make discussions and group activities more conducive to learning, participants suggested that at the beginning of class instructors should talk about the
possibility that some discussions could be difficult for some students and that removing
themselves or remaining silent were both acceptable strategies for taking care of
themselves. Instructor initiated discussions about the reasons why students may not feel
comfortable talking about certain topics should include experiences with violence and
abuse in addition to heterosexism, racism, ableism, classism, and other power imbalance
situations. Several participants emphasized the need for faculty to be aware that even the
most innocuous activities may be triggering and that understanding and support are helpful.
A more open discussion of classroom dynamics may allow all students to understand their
use and abuse of power and may alleviate some of the difficulties the participants
experienced with group work.

Thesis and dissertation advisors must be willing to explore and negotiate their roles
in helping graduate students discover and use the skills and knowledge they have in order
to increase their self-confidence. Many participants commented on the importance, to them
and to the completion of their program, of having a supportive faculty member, usually
their supervisor or a committee member. Graduate supervisors are well-positioned to help
students recognize “power with,” “power through,” and “power within,” (see Bishop, 2002;
Kenway & Willis, 1998; Heinrich, 1995) and to talk about their positive experiences
working with others and by themselves as evidence of the positive power that they have.
With the increased pressure on faculty to prove their “excellence” and the increasing
numbers of women entering graduate school, many desiring female supervisors, faculty
may need to explore alternate forms of graduate supervision. If the numbers of graduate
students increase while the number of faculty do not, the current “apprenticeship model”
may no longer be feasible. In addition, a more collaborative cohort-type model (which
includes discussions of power dynamics may offer students more support while diffusing the intense one-to-one supervisory relationships.

Many participants talked about their desire to use their experiences as knowledge, to be critiqued and informed by, as well as to inform, theory. Faculty using this strategy need to be aware of the implications of asking, or requiring, students to participate in this way and the reasons students may have for giving voice to their "stories" and for remaining silent. They must ask themselves why they are using this strategy and the benefits and risks for their students and for themselves. Discussions with students about using and critiquing personal experiences to help build theory and increase knowledge may help students understand the limitations and benefits of using their experiences as a form of knowledge.

**Graduate Students**

Female graduate students who have experienced interpersonal violence need to recognize that violence against women is prevalent in society and that they are part of a number of female students (and faculty) who have experienced violence and who are affected by their experiences. They can learn to recognize their reactions to many of their experiences in graduate school as connected to the interpersonal violence they experienced. Talking about their experiences of interpersonal violence and their graduate school experiences with understanding, non-judgemental people (professional and non-professional, including other students) may help them recognize the connections between their experiences. Understanding the role that power differentials play in their reactions to abuses of power, whether personal or structural, may allow female graduate students to more easily recognize when and why they are feeling disempowered and to take steps to
identify the power they have and advocate for themselves. Students must make themselves aware of the help that is available to them on-campus and be willing to make use of the services that are available. Students can also form support/study groups to help each other through their graduate programs. These groups can support members in their academic work by offering expertise and a sounding board for student work, giving encouragement and helpful hints during difficult times, and providing feedback on written and oral work. These groups can provide a forum for members to discuss and address challenges related to being in graduate school including relations of power, and dealing with the university as an institution. In addition, some groups provide support for members in their lives outside of graduate school and provide examples of how sharing experiences can end silencing and help inform new knowledge.  

Suggestions for Further Research

Although I recognize and honour the diversity represented by the women in this study, I am aware that many women’s experiences are not represented. Studies with differently positioned women may shed more light on the connections between violence and learning in graduate school. The women I interviewed were still in graduate school at the time of the interviews and were meeting with a degree of success in their graduate studies. They all felt they would be able to talk about their experiences without a great deal of personal distress. Women who had dropped out of the university or who decided not to participate in the research may have far different stories to tell about their experiences. Women from traditionally male disciplines, for example, engineering, are missing from this research. It is possible that the interpersonal violence that women experience may affect

---

33 Study Sisters (mentioned in chapter 3) is an example, for me, of this type of supportive study group.
their perceptions of these disciplines and help account for the noticeably fewer female graduate students in engineering, mathematics, and physical sciences. Women from minority groups are missing from this research. Violence against women is experienced differently by women from diverse ethnic and racial groups, women of diverse religions, and differently-abled women. These differences may be reflected in different learning experiences in graduate school. The socioeconomic class and sexual orientation of women who experience violence may also have more effect on their learning in graduate school than is evident in this research.

Throughout the United States and Canada, it is estimated that about 50 percent of doctoral students do not complete their programs (see Grosjean, 1995; Kerlins, 1997). The last date for which the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies included a gender differentiation for graduate completion rates in Canada was 1994. At that time, women’s rates of withdrawal were somewhat higher than men’s, except in the social sciences. Research that included a gendered breakdown of students who do not complete their programs and an exploration of how violence and the fear of violence affect experiences in graduate school, may shed light on reasons why some students (female and male) fail to complete their degrees.

The prevalence of violence against women and the increasing numbers of female graduate students, many of whom become academics, implies that a number of female faculty members will have experienced violence and could be affected by their experiences. Female faculty who have experienced interpersonal violence may be able to

---

34 See Burnett, 1999, for information on numbers of Australian doctoral students who do not graduate.
35 See Kerlin, 1995, for a more complete discussion.
shed light on how their experiences affect their teaching, learning, and research at the university, and how conflicts within the supervisor/student relationship affect them.

Research with other groups of women and girls would increase an understanding of how interpersonal violence against women affects their learning in institutions of higher education. Most of the participants described their difficulties in undergraduate classes where large classes and very little room for discussion left them feeling isolated, silenced, and enraged. Research with female undergraduate students may increase an awareness of the difficulties they face and the changes universities could make to ensure students are not “weeded out” before they reach graduate school. Research with women in different types of educational institutions—for example, colleges, technical training institutions, and apprenticeship programs—may increase our understanding of the effects of violence on learning in those institutions. Research, either formal or informal, with high school girls about dating and other violence they have experienced may allow teachers and the girls, themselves, to see the connections between violence and learning and to recognize the need for intervention and prevention before women come to institutions of higher education.

Research on the effects of experiencing violence on women’s learning in a variety of settings will broaden our understanding of how violence against women affects women’s life experiences outside the abusive relationship. Knowing how violence affects learning will allow educators in all educational settings, to more effectively help women achieve the goals that are important to them.36

36 Although I have talked about the connections between women’s experiences of interpersonal violence and their learning experiences in graduate school, I also believe that the connections between men’s experiences with violence and their learning experiences should be researched.
REFERENCES


In the Aftermath of Violence: Women, Learning, and Higher Education

October 20, 2003

This letter has two purposes: to introduce myself as a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies and to ask for your participation in my doctoral study of the connections between the effects of violence against women and their learning in graduate school.

I have a long-term interest in equity and education for women, which I have pursued as part of my undergraduate and Master’s degrees. My research focuses have included the experiences of mature female undergraduate re-entry students and women’s choices and decision-making processes. In my research assistant positions, I have been involved in interview studies of part-time teachers in Alberta and the effects of the feminist movement on education in Ontario. I am currently working with Dr. Deirdre Kelly in a study exploring beginning and experienced teachers’ ideas of teaching for social justice.

My current research examines the questions: How are women’s graduate school learning experiences affected by their experiences with violence? How do these experiences reflect the larger societal problem of violence against women? The prevalence of violence against women in Canadian society and the large numbers of female students who attend graduate programs makes this research timely and important to the futures of all women interested in enrolling in institutions of higher education. I intend that this research will increase understanding of the effects of violence against women and suggest changes to pedagogical practices and administrative policy in institutions of higher education.

If you agree to participate in this research, I will schedule two or three interviews with you of about one hour each at a time and place that is convenient for you. I will also encourage your feedback during the research process. The interviews will take place during the spring, summer, and fall of 2004. My dissertation is scheduled for completion in the fall of 2005.

Your consent to participate in this research will contribute to a greater understanding of the effects of violence against women and the need to address violence in our society. If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact me by phone (604-525-4647),
email (mmbrooks@shaw.ca), or snail mail (#1701, 737 Carnarvon Street, New Westminster, BC, V3M 5X1) for more information. For more information, you can also contact the principal investigator, Dr. Deirdre Kelly, at 604-822-3952 or by email at deirdre.kelly@ubc.ca. I will send you a letter of consent to sign and return, then schedule interviews at a time and place convenient to you.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Brooks

Principal Investigator
Dr. Deirdre Kelly, Professor
Department of Educational Studies
Phone Number: 604-822-3952
E-Mail Address: deirdre.kelly@ubc.ca

Student Researcher:
Mary M. Brooks, PhD Candidate
Department of Educational Studies
Phone Number: 604-525-4647
E-mail Address: mmbrooks@shaw.ca
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

In the Aftermath of Violence: Women, Learning, and Higher Education

October 20, 2003

Dear ____________________.

This research is for a graduate degree in Educational Studies and the information will be used as part of a thesis which will be a public document.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to explore how violence against women affects their learning in graduate programs in order to increase knowledge about the effects of violence on women’s learning. Because of the prevalence of violence against women and the numbers of women who enter graduate programs, this research is timely and important to the educational futures of women interested in enrolling in higher education and to addressing violence against women on campuses and in society.

The Interview Process:
You will be one of up to ten female graduate students whom I will be interviewing. The interviews will be informal and conversational, guided by your stories of your educational experiences in graduate school and how these relate to your experiences with violence. I would like to schedule two or three interviews of about one hour each with you in order for you to have time to feel comfortable talking with me about this topic and to explore your ideas and educational experiences in depth. With your permission, I would like to audiotape the interviews.

Confidentiality:
I will transcribe all tapes myself and will keep them and the transcripts in a locked filing cabinet. Computer files will be password protected. You will have a choice either to be identified by name in my dissertation or to have your identity kept confidential through the use of a pseudonym. You can revisit your decision to use a pseudonym at any time during the study. I will make transcripts and sections of your interviews that I plan to use
available to you for your comments and will not use any of your interview quotations without your permission. The only people who will have access to the interview data are the Principal Investigator (Dr. Deirdre Kelly) and the Student Researcher (Mary Brooks).

Potential Risks:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. I acknowledge that you are the one most capable of knowing whether or not you are able to discuss this sensitive topic with me. If, at any time during the research process, you feel unable to continue your participation in this research project, you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardizing yourself or the research. If you experience distress while dealing with thoughts or emotions that are a result of this research, I will make available to you, at your request, a list of feminist counselors, psychologists, family therapists, and other mental health professionals who work on a sliding fee scale or as part of university student services.

Contacts for information about the study:
If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Deirdre Kelly, at 604-822-3952 (e-mail: deirdre.kelly@ubc.ca) or the Student Researcher, Mary Brooks, at 604-525-4647 (e-mail: mmbrooks@shaw.ca).

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:
If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

Please indicate your consent to being interviewed by signing the original of this letter, returning it to my attention in the enclosed self-addressed envelope, and keeping the copy for your own records.

Mary M. Brooks, Ph.D. Candidate
Co-Investigator
Dept. of Educational Studies
TEL: 604-525-4647

Dr. Deirdre Kelly,
Principal Investigator
Dept. of Educational Studies
TEL: 604-822-3952

[ ] Yes, I consent to being interviewed.
[ ] Yes, I consent to the interviews being tape recorded.
[ ] Yes, I have received a copy of this consent letter for my own records.

__________________________  __________________________
Signature                       Date

__________________________  __________________________
Print Name                     Telephone Number
APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have any of your instructors' identities (e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ableness) affected how you approached your classes or how you thought of yourself as a student? If yes, please tell me about how these identities made a difference.

2. Tell me about any experiences in your classes or at the university that made you feel particularly powerless.

3. Tell me about any experiences in your classes or at the university that made you feel particularly powerful.

4. Tell me about a professor/instructor that you especially liked or disliked. For example, what was it about them or what they did that made you enjoy or not enjoy their classes?

5. Tell me about any class or personal activities that professors/instructors/other students have done that have made you feel valued or appreciated.

6. Tell me about any class or personal activities that professors/instructors/other students have done that have made you feel inadequate, shame, or fear.

7. Tell me about any times when you were at the university (in class or out) when you were reminded of the violence you experienced.

8. Thinking about when you have been at the university or thinking about graduate school, tell me about any feelings you have had or things you have done that you think are a response to experiencing violence.
APPENDIX D: UBC RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services and Administration
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Approval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</th>
<th>DEPARTMENT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly, D.M.</td>
<td>Educational Studies</td>
<td>B03-0702</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT

UBC Campus

CO-INVESTIGATORS

Brooks, Mary, Educational Studies

SPONSORING AGENCIES


TITLE:

In the Aftermath of Violence: Women, Learning, and Higher Education

APPROVAL DATE  TERM (YEARS) DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL


CERTIFICATION

The protocol describing the above-named project has been reviewed by the Committee and the experimental procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board by one of the following:

Dr. James Frankish, Chair,
Dr. Cay Holbrook, Associate Chair,
Dr. Susan Rowley, Associate Chair

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the experimental procedures.