THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING PROCESS:

WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

by

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ABSTRACT

While childhood sexual abuse is of major societal concern, given the well documented long term psychological effects and trauma on women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, there is a scarcity of empirical data in the literature concerning the role of spirituality in their process of healing. Spirituality is a major component of the human identity. A wholistic understanding of humanity assists in illustrating the importance of spirituality. This exploratory descriptive study researches the role that spirituality has on the healing journey for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, exploring significant aspects and benefits or hindrances to the healing process.This study has relevance to social work in that it addresses a vast population of individuals within our society who have been sexually abused. Seven women survivors of childhood sexual abuse were interviewed to explore the role of spirituality in their healing process. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and the data was analyzed using grounded theory. The findings were organized into four categories: Defining Spirituality, Responding to Abuse, Struggling to Heal, and Searching for Meaning. These categories, augmented by their properties and elements were assembled into a conceptual framework. The conceptual findings revealed that religion was a complex and mixed blessing for these women: sometimes it was a complicated hindrance, or it became a beneficial contributor to the healing process. Spirituality on the other hand, became very important in their healing journey of growth, transformation and restoration. It allowed them to identify a sense of meaning in the midst of their pain and struggle, while providing resources and hope, strength and purpose. Through listening to women's stories about the place of spirituality in their lives, effective therapeutic interventions and knowledge pertaining to healing from childhood sexual abuse can be enhanced. Implications arising out of the data include understanding how religion and spirituality may be different, acknowledging the importance of spirituality for survivors and comprehending the nature of anger and forgiveness in the healing process. Further implications include discerning perceptions of the image and gender of God, establishing proper protocol for religious institutions in dealing with the ramifications of childhood sexual abuse, and increasing awareness of the healing power of spirituality for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Out of profound darkness comes light, and inherent in it all is meaning. Therein lies hope.
(Poling, 1991, p.48)

A cocoon contains a beautiful butterfly desperate and eager to emerge from its frothy white home. While the struggling activity and process of transformation occurs, a curious bystander, desiring to assist the creature in its struggle, cuts away the encasing. The unfortunate reality is that the butterfly thus emerges with weak and feeble wings, leaving it unable to fly. The winged beauty was thus forfeited of the opportunity to develop strength and power, which turns out to be a result only of the struggle to emerge from the cocoon. The chance to fly with strong new wings, and therefore experience all the fullness of potential and wonder, is made possible only by the journey of pain. (metaphor, author unknown).

During the last few decades we have seen a growing awareness of the reality, prevalence and impact of childhood sexual abuse (Briere, 1992). In "Treating Child Sex Offenders and Victims" (Sage Publications, 1988), Anna Salter summarized 14 American and Canadian studies and found that incidence rates ranged from 11% to 38% for females and 3% to 11% for males. Many adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse have broken the silence, and are courageously facing their once hidden pain. This violation of power constitutes a breaking of personal boundaries and results in a breach of trust, while damaging the victim's sense of identity. Abuse is a misuse of power. Victims are abused for the gratification of someone more powerful; the trauma creates fear, anger and mistrust, which can then dominate their interior life, interrupting their

development and attention to their own perceptual world (Poling, 1991).

The abusive sexual assault that survivors face, affects both body and soul; survivors speak of their spirit or soul being "bruised" (Bass & Davis, 1988). Spiritual confusion abounds among many survivors who may alternate between anger toward "God", feeling abandoned, believing they are being punished or feeling forced to forgive prematurely (Sgroi, 1989, Heggen, 1993). Kritsberg (1993) states that most survivors he has worked with have reached some form of spiritual understanding of their trauma, some being confused about their beliefs or angry at God, but generally they believe in the existence of some kind of Higher Power. It has become apparent to therapists and clinicians working with survivors of sexual abuse, that various religious issues and/or spiritual concerns are a part of the experience of healing for some women. As such, further discovery about the specification of these concerns is warranted, and is the focus of this research study.

In addition to the relational implications and need for healing on a multi-dimensional level, this topic has further relevance to social work in that every survivor is a reflection of the statistics on child sexual abuse. The abuse not only has far reaching repercussions, it also affects a large segment of society. Estimates of the prevalence of sexual abuse vary. Russell (1986) found that 38% of nine hundred women randomly surveyed said that they had been sexually abused prior to the age of eighteen. American estimates demonstrate that one in three females and one in five males have been victims of one or more unwanted sexual acts during childhood (Gillham, 1991). Herman, Russell and Trochi (1986) report two large scale surveys of non-clinical samples that estimate the risk of

victimization for girls may be greater than one in three. It is assumed that these estimates may be low, as they are based on reported abuse, and Johnson (1992) states that "most abused children decide not to tell anyone".

Although exact numbers and statistics vary somewhat, what is clear is that a large number of children have been and still continue to be sexually abused. How the sexual abuse survivor's specific symptomatology is understood, depends on the assumptions of the theoretical stance maintained. Developmental theorists study the life cycle of human growth and development. Abuse of any kind can alter the healthy progression of development in the life of a child, resulting in coping mechanisms which, although necessary at the time, are often carried into adulthood with devastating consequences (Heggen, 1993). The predominantly current trend in the literature tends to pathologize women's abuse-related symptoms, rather than looking at the totality of their experience. The feminist perspective assists in establishing an overview of society and it's history of patriarchy, gender power differential and concealment of the abuse of children. Perpetrators and society as a whole need to be held accountable for their actions, while a greater understanding of the dilemma of sexual abuse is required.

Only twenty years ago, sexual abuse (or even abuse in general) was seldom spoken of and still less acknowledged. Resistance to the concept of child sexual abuse has permeated throughout history; it has now finally arisen as a major concern. In studying this issue, the anticipated benefits are for survivors, their families and friends, as well as for practitioners and social workers who work with survivors and the intricate network of their relational lives. Spirituality

appears to be an integral part of who we are. Understanding how it plays a role in the healing journey, would be useful since spirituality has provided some women survivors with a source of strength and a sense of meaning (Kritsberg, 1993). With more knowledge of the issue, survivors can more fully grasp possible blocks of interference in their healing, or be enabled to move forward in their developmental journey. Given the statistics on sexual abuse, any additional insight or wisdom pertaining to the healing process would be advantageous. Bass & Davis encapsulate some of the challenges and inspiration that survivors have faced regarding spirituality:

> *The whole point of getting in touch with your spirituality is to enhance your healing, not to escape it. Spirituality is not a shortcut through any of the stages of the healing process. It's not an alternative to feeling your anger, to working through the pain, to fully acknowledging the damage done. Rather it should be an enrichment to healing, a source and inspiration (Bass & Davis, 1988, p.159).*

While the topic and statistics of childhood sexual abuse have been studied in great detail, there has been less emphasis placed on the role that spirituality has played in the healing process for survivors. This research study provides a forum for women survivors to elaborate on the specifics of their spiritual journey as it relates to their recovery from childhood sexual abuse.

Therapeutic interventions and implications flow out of research design. Effective therapy with survivors is promoted by further learning and discovery about aspects pertaining to the healing process. By listening to women's stories and experiences about child sexual abuse, the silence of the abused child is broken and the secrecy is dispelled. Validation and acknowledgement of women who for so long have felt disempowered, is an important and critical aspect of

healing. Carol Gilligan (1992) writes:

> *To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard.*

This research study was designed to facilitate listening - to voices of struggle and pain, triumph and healing, and through this process gain conceptual clarity concerning spirituality and its place in the healing process.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of sexual abuse and the long term effects of psychological trauma

Childhood sexual abuse cuts across all barriers of class, race, education, economic status and religion (Kinnear, 1995; Briere, 1992; Kritsberg, 1993). Sexual abuse is defined as any unwanted sexual contact, ranging from exposure to penetration, between two parties of unequal power differential (Gillham, 1991; Kinnear, 1995). According to Kritsberg (1993), "child sexual abuse exists when a child is used by an adult or more powerful child for the purpose of sexual gratification". It occurs whenever anyone with less maturity or power is manipulated by being tricked, trapped, coerced, or bribed into a sexual experience, and usually involves some form of misrepresentation of the activity (Gil, 1983; Gannon, 1989). Coercion is usually fueled by the perpetrator's desire to maintain secrecy, which prevents intervention and allows the perpetrator continued access to the child (Heggen, 1993). Childhood sexual abuse can be forced and violent, or it can accompany caring behaviour. It can be blatant or disguised in play. It can begin in infancy or occur in middle childhood or adolescence; it can be a single event or it can be ongoing. The perpetrator can be a family member, a trusted friend or a stranger (Briere, 1992; Courtois, 1988; Gillham, 1991; Kinnear, 1995). Children are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Sexual abuse is a betrayal that can crush a child's innocence and sense of trust.

As part of attempting to survive the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, defenses and coping mechanisms may result such as denial, rationalization,

dissociation and repression (Gillham, 1991; Gil, 1983; Courtois, 1988; Finney, 1992). These survival defenses often carry on into adulthood as protective stances against the underlying pain and trauma. Symptoms or effects of child sexual abuse may include intimacy dysfunction, sexual difficulties, depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness or helplessness, shame, self-esteem problems, emotional blockage, addictions, flashbacks, eating disorders or self-destructive behaviours (Kinnear, 1995; Feldmeth & Finley, 1990; Engel, 1989; Briere, 1992). The type and severity of effects on the child depends on many factors surrounding the abuse, including that of age, duration of abuse, the relationship of the abuser to the child, initial reactions when the abuse was revealed and the developmental status of the child (Flaherty, 1992; Briere, 1992; Bass & Davis, 1988; Kinnear, 1995). The effects of child sexual abuse can thus range from short-term to those that endure throughout adulthood, according to variations on characteristics surrounding the trauma (Kritsberg, 1993; Sgroi, 1989; Finney, 1992).

The healing process differs among individuals, however, key components comprise the various stages of growth and change. The decision to heal, believing the abuse occurred, remembering, breaking the silence, correcting perceptions about allocation of blame, grieving, confrontation and expression of feelings are all part of the tasks in the spiral of healing (Allender, 1990; Kritsberg, 1993). The work of therapy includes validating the reality of the original injury, identifying survival skills and dismantling them so that the injury can be healed and the arrested process of development completed (Courtois, 1988; Kinnear, 1995). Healing includes emotional processing, cognitive restructuring and integration of new ways of being, incorporating a renewed sense of personal power. This process of healing is described by Kritsberg: "coming back to

wholeness is a multifaceted process, simultaneously puzzling, painful, and deeply beautiful. It is nothing less than the miraculous unfolding of all that you can become" (1993, p90).

Why explore the role of spirituality in the healing process?

Childhood sexual abuse can often have severe long term effects, with a wide range of manifestations. In addition to the various possible effects, spirituality has been referred to as a factor in the healing journey (Allender, 1990; Courtois, 1988; Sgroi, 1989; Gannon, 1989). Women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse may struggle with issues of self-esteem, trust, expression or awareness of feelings, body ownership, sexuality, intimacy and/or spirituality (Bass & Davis, 1988; Courtois, 1988; Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996). In the theoretical literature, Courtois states that the emotions deriving from sexual abuse, particularly shame, can block personal and spiritual growth (1988). She further indicates that when the layers of anger, pain and fear are dealt with in a healthy manner, survivors are then much freer to develop emotionally and spiritually. Ganje-Fling & McCarthy (1996) concluded from their clinical experience that sexual abuse tends to arrest spiritual development, and that many sexually traumatized clients experience questions and conflicts regarding their spirituality. They found that clients were conflicted about relating to a powerful force, struggled with feelings of hopelessness, lacked a sense of purpose, and were ambivalent about connecting to a community of believers (Ganje-Fling, 1996). Spiritual dimensions for survivors of sexual abuse vary according to the individual (Kritsberg, 1993; Poling, 1991). They may include struggles with anger, control, or images of God, or conversely, their spiritual belief system may include a provision of positive healing imagery (Heggen, 1993; Briere, 1992;

Manlowe, 1995). Heggen addresses some of the confusion when she states:

> *Profound spiritual damage occurs, however, when the abuser and victim are religious people. If the victim called out to God for protection during her time of abuse, yet the abuse continued, she may subsequently view God as uncaring. She may see God as aloof, disinterested in both the human condition and her personal well-being, impotent to intervene in human matters...Many survivors report having felt abandoned by God. Many see God as unfair and unfaithful...or decide God isn't the problem- they are. If an all- powerful God allows bad things to happen, it must be punishment they deserve for being bad (Heggen, 1993,p.44,45)*

Certain questions arise out of this discussion - how specifically does the blocking of spiritual growth occur, and what can survivors do to overcome this block; how is it that religious messages complicate the healing process? An aspect as to why spirituality might need further exploration and understanding pertaining to childhood sexual abuse issues, is that some survivors were abused in the context of a religious environment, which may have contributed to a sense of spiritual quandary (Kritsberg, 1993; Gannon, 1989; Tessier, 1997). Thus, "for many survivors, religion is a mixed blessing" (Poling, 1991, p.21). Whitman speaks about some of the complications resulting from this when he states "the church has long been silent about, or has denied the fact that sexual abuse occurs in the church"(1991,p.2). Victims questions may include "why did God let this happen?", "is this God's punishment?' or "how will this affect my life?", questions that are an integral part of the healing process of comprehending and sorting out the experience. Whitman states that "these theological and philosophical issues can be either a stumbling block to health if not appropriately worked through, or a substantial support in the emotional, psychological and spiritual healing of the victim (1991, p.54). Poling (1991) describes how incorrect allocation of responsibility and focus, has sometimes occurred as a result of the church's denial or lack of awareness: "often the victim was blamed for

exaggeration or lying, and the perpetrator was protected to maintain the good name of the community" (p.151). The process of healing can be quite complex and difficult for victims abused in religious settings such as church schools, religious homes, or churches, when the perpetrator represented spiritual authority or articulated religious faith (Heggen, 1993, Sgroi, 1989). Survivors have reported that to the extent that parents were abusive, abuse became a part of their images of God as well, that it was difficult to separate the two images (Sargent in Sgroi, 1989; Poling, 1991). One's God-image is thought to be largely formulated in early experiences with one's parents or authority figures (Manlowe,1995; Sargent in Sgroi, 1989; Hancock & Mains, 1987; Heggen, 1993). Clinicians have reported and noted client's confusion in various areas, including that of spirituality, although the specificity of this struggle needs to be further clarified.

Religion has been defined as a system of beliefs in a divine or higher power, including practices of worship or allegiance to that power (Fowler, 1991, Peck, 1998). Spirituality can be seen as the working out of that belief, but not necessarily restricted to the framework of organized religion; this could be manifested via the relationship one has with the meanings of one's life (Misner et al, 1998; Brussat, 1998, Peck, 1998). The Judeo-Christian heritage, as a predominant Western religion, forms a basis of spirituality for some survivors, whether historically, societally or personally (Sgroi, 1989; Heggen, 1993). This particular religious framework may be a component of the larger umbrella of spirituality for some survivors, while others have gathered strength from other religious belief systems. For purposes of clarification regarding this paper, religion and spirituality are not used interchangeably, rather, they are seen as

having a difference. According to the literature on this topic, "religion" may or may not be a part of one's spiritual experience; "spirituality" is understood to be broader and more encompassing (Peck, 1998; Kritsberg, 1993; Brussat, 1998; Tessier, 1997). Benner (1991) speaks of the differences and overlap in defining the terms "religion" and "spirituality":

> *human spirituality is a multifaceted and complex matter that defies precise definition and seems to elude rigourous analysis and understanding. One of the first problems encountered in any attempt to define spirituality is the ambiguity surrounding the concept. For some, the term spirituality is used as a synonym for religion. For most, however, it is used to refer to something much broader and it is this that introduces much of the confusion associated with the use of the term (p.3)*

Because spirituality is about "a striving for meaning, purpose and knowledge of the transcendent that has personal, communal and public aspects", it can appear to be inexhaustibly mysterious (Misner et al, 1991,). Spirituality helps us to discover our sense of meaning, our identity, why we are here and what our values are. It involves a process of becoming, of transformation within relational connection. Originating from the word "breath", it bespeaks of an incorporation of the total person, infusing purpose and goals to one's hopes and endeavours or thoughts and actions (Fowler, 1981). Furthermore, it appears that spirituality concerns the experience of striving for self-transcendence, which can be affiliated with, or go beyond religious belief systems. For some individuals, it is through the beauty of nature that they encounter spirituality most powerfully. Spirituality ideally helps individuals by initiating a process of growth in our lives and calls for an ongoing response and commitment to live whatever is encountered on our particular journey, emerging with a sense of connection, understanding and meaning. It is expressed in the attitudes, beliefs and practices which empower people's lives and appears to help them to experience hope and

healing, to trust, and embrace community. Spirituality can be seen as the life force which awakens us to wonder. (Misner et al, 1991).

> *The quest for meaning and purpose is central to our existence. This search for meaning launches us on a journey in which all aspects of life-joys, sorrows, struggles and successes can become avenues to deeper understanding and purpose. Everything we experience along the journey plays a part in forming and fashioning our lives. It is within these experiences that we discover the key to becoming all that we were meant to be (Misner et al, 1991)*

Bass & Davis (1988) write that having a sense of power greater than yourself can be a real asset for survivors in the healing process, that it is a uniquely personal experience and can be found through various modes. Sargent (1989) refers to the premise that one's spirituality is significant in the healing process. Her words describe the historical scenario for survivors regarding this topic: "there is an area of the adult survivor's life about which there has been a deafening silence: his or her spirituality"(Sargent in Sgroi, 1989, p.167). Kritsberg notes that "in spite of their suffering and pain, most survivors come to a new, or deeper, understanding of their spirituality. When this source of inner power and strength is tapped, there is a dramatic acceleration in healing and personal growth (1993, p.225). Heggen (1993), notes her observance that many women survivors have utilized spirituality as a source of strength and healing. Various factors converge as to why examining the role of spirituality as part of the healing journey is relevant. The literature demonstrates that struggles with spiritual issues may be a part of the symtomatology and if the sexual abuse occurred within a religious context there are often struggles with confusion and negative after effects. Yet the resources, strength and hope that spirituality provides for some survivors are also demonstrated in the literature. Spirituality, in the context of the healing process for survivors of sexual abuse, thus appears

to operate on multiple dimensions.

An understanding of some of the prevalent thinking pertaining to the topic of sexual abuse assisted in the development of this study. The following overview of some of the predominant theoretical concepts establishes a rationale for exploring the role of spirituality as part of the healing process for women survivors of child sexual abuse. Theories articulate and provide distinct perspectives on the understanding of an issue; treatment approaches are shaped and derived from theoretical frameworks. Although it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss specific treatment modalities arising out of these theories, these underpinnings and concepts guide the formulation of the research question, and as such, guide implications for assessment, intervention and practice. Following this will be a description on anger and forgiveness, as two key areas of struggle for women survivors of abuse, especially for those with religious backgrounds. Lastly, the empirical research data todate which focuses on issues pertaining to spirituality and sexual abuse will be reported. An emphasis will be made on what is known about the topic, and thus what still needs to be further understood. One of the questions of this study is to examine how spirituality helps or hinders the healing process, to question what the struggle with spirituality looks like, and if utilized as a resource, how then does it interact with healing from childhood sexual abuse.

Theoretical Foundations for examining spirituality and sexual abuse

A Systemic Perspective

General systems theory underscores the importance of viewing life in its interrelated wholeness (Freeman, 1981). Centuries ago, Aristotle was the first to

postulate the concept that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Chess & Norlin, 1988). This idea has thus emerged within the theoretical framework of general or ecological systems thinking, as founded by von Bertalanffy, and carried forward in social work practice as a belief that a holistic approach is helpful in understanding human behaviour (Chess & Norlin, 1988). Compton & Galaway (1989) define a system as usually referring to a whole, a unit, composed of people and their interactions, including their relationships. A systemic theoretical framework provides a broad understanding of the complexities of a person's life, whether intrapsychically or externally (Freeman, 1981). According to this theory, human beings are part of a systemic network of relationships and connectedness. Conceptual thinking derived out of these systemic implications includes an acknowledgement of the multi-dimensional quality of our humanness, an understanding that includes the spiritual component of our humanity (Bass & Davis, 1988; Heggen, 1993). "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent" wrote John Donne, a sixteenth century poet. A general systems/ecological perspective offers an understanding of spirituality as a piece in the systemic reality of humanity. One's spiritual component, as well as the mental and physical, appears to be an important dimension for some individuals. Spirituality and religion overlaps to the extent that religion is a system that attempts to define the development of relationships with God, self and others. The origin of the word "religion" comes from "religar", which means "to connect". Inasmuch as general systems theory is an approach that considers the relationships between subsystems and the organization of the whole system, the manifestation of that part of us that is spiritual is thus worth examining.

Compton & Galaway (1989) present the importance of understanding one's cultural experiential background as not only a part of the larger system surrounding the individual, but as a part of the individual. One's culture may include religious or spiritual aspects that intersperse with beliefs and attitudes about life. If spirituality and/or religion is a part of a person's past or present reality, it is also a part of the systemic cultural heritage that needs understanding in order to fully grasp an individual's life journey (Kritsberg, 1993; Gannon, 1989). Some of the questions included in this research study will explore how the survivor of childhood sexual abuse struggled with, was impeded by, or learned from their religious background, and/or their spirituality.

Compton & Galaway (1989) suggest that general systems theory, incorporated as a base for social work practice, informs us of the nature of the person-environment and person-situation interrelatedness. It offers a conceptual framework that focuses attention on the person as an interrelated part of a whole network of systems. In attempting to understand a particular problem, such as childhood sexual abuse, this can only be achieved if we "strive for a full understanding of the complex interactions between client and all levels of social systems and the meaning the client assigns to these interactions" (Compton & Galaway, 1989, p124). As most definitions of spirituality include an aspect of struggling to find meaning, to the extent that the spiritual component plays a role in healing for the individual, would be a key factor to explore. A "system", as viewed as a constantly changing whole that is always in process of movement towards its goals, can be seen as attempting at some level to achieve its goals (Compton & Galaway, 1989). A sexual abuse survivor's goal may be to experience healing. How this role of spirituality is manifested in the healing journey for the

women interviewed, will also be explored in this research study.

Alienation Theory

The dimensions of alienation theory also present a useful framework with which to further assess the multi-dimensional topic of sexual abuse and the role of spirituality. Alienation refers to a relationship between a person and his/her environment, including with the self. This environmental factor may be tangible or unseen, including social structures, humanity, nature or God. The theme of separation from aspects of this environment forms the undercurrent of the tension. The development of a sense of personal identity is potentially impeded by alienation. Seeman (1959) as quoted in Alienation Theories, developed some of the contemporary aspects of alienation theory, which has vast historical roots. His key concepts include: powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement (Geyer, 1980, p. 10).

According to Geyer (1980), powerlessness refers to the expectation held by individuals that their own behaviour cannot affect the outcome or reinforcements that they may seek. The lack of power is seen in the context of relationship, with expectations playing a major role. For example, the survivor of sexual abuse who continues to be unable to say "no" into her adulthood, even after the immediate threat of childhood abuse has been removed, is still living with the perception and effects of ongoing powerlessness (Gannon, 1989). Marx himself distinguished powerlessness as exemplified by the worker having no say over the products or the means of production (Poling, 1991). Without a sense of power, the whole process becomes meaningless to the individual. Meaninglessness pertains to a low expectancy that satisfactory predictions about

future outcomes of behaviour can be made (Hampson, 1990). According to Geyer (1980), isolation refers to a breakdown or disconnectedness between the individual and their environment. The isolated system's environmental interaction thus becomes minimized. Geyer (1980) states that self-estrangement bespeaks of the degree of dependence of the given behaviour upon anticipated rewards (ie/ upon rewards that lie outside the activity itself). In systems terminology, self-estrangement connotes a lack of internal communication within the self (Geyer, 1980). Sexual abuse survivors often experience feelings of estrangement within themselves (Kritsberg, 1993). They may experience numbness, dissociation or repression of feelings, and have possible bouts of anxiety, depression, fits of rage, fear, or other manifestations of pain (Courtois, 1988; Engel, 1989; Finney, 1992). Self-alienation is one of the most profound effects of childhood sexual abuse for the survivor. They may feel powerless as a result of the abuse, or within the patriarchal dynamics restricting them. The search to regain a sense of power may encapsulate much of the survivor's healing journey (Courtois, 1988). A persistent search for meaning in spite of the horror of the abuse (or even because of it) may be undertaken (Bass & Davis, 1988). Often the effects of the abuse are like an internal agonizing as to whether one's life makes any sense. Feelings of isolation are common in the midst of a society that maintains sexual abuse secrecy (Flaherty, 1992, Poling, 1991).

An examination of alienation theory provides an understanding for humanity's undercurrent of anxiety and detachment. The lack of "feeling connected" may catapult individuals toward a place to repair that lost sense of connection, whether with one's self, others or with God. Striving for healing is thus about reclaiming one's self, a reshaping of one's unique identity. The sense

of powerlessness, search for meaning, and feelings of self-estrangement inherent in alienation have historically been addressed in various ways by different religious frameworks. These varying modes of religious expression are united by the fact that they are all concerned with inevitable forms of alienation (Geyer, 1980). Issues such as meaninglessness are attempted to be addressed by the belief in life having a purpose and in the existence of life after death. The following of certain rules which dictate group solidarity attempts to provide a sense of purpose and a relief from isolation. A belief in a supreme being may be very comforting.

Another aim of this study is to attempt to understand specifically how spirituality can play a role for women survivors of sexual abuse in their struggle to live with and overcome alienation and estrangement.

The Feminist Perspective

Throughout the literature, a recurring theme among survivors is that of feeling a loss of control (Gannon, 1989; Gil, 1983). The violation of sexual abuse encompasses a misuse of power, perpetrated by someone with more power over another who is more vulnerable. Given that feminist theory so aptly addresses issues of power and control, it appears to be an appropriate perspective in sorting through the issue of sexual abuse and the role of spirituality for women survivors. Addressing the power differential in our culture needs to be attempted in order to have a more complete understanding of the nature of the dilemma of sexual abuse (Greenspan, 1983; Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990). Feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, as outcomes of the abuse, can serve to continually repress the victim of sexual violation (Gannon,1989). As well, the

cloak of secrecy enveloping events of victimization serves to perpetuate the cycle. It is as though maintaining the secret is metaphorically illustrated thus: that just as dangerous viruses thrive in certain unhealthy environments, sexual abuse thrives in the environment of secrecy. The feminist framework successfully decodes the power differential inherent in the secret. This research study aims to further explore how spirituality played a role in the process of healing and reclamation of empowerment for the seven women survivors interviewed.

A feminist analysis looks at the nature and dynamics of female oppression. As a theoretical model which guides the understanding of sexual abuse, the feminist framework provides a distinct perspective on violence against women. Many victims of violation previously enshrouded in the pain of their isolation have been given a voice as a result of feminist ideologies. The feminist perspective extends beyond the individual and family unit to grasp the societal overview and its influence on incest and abuse (Courtois, 1988). Feminism also mandates social workers to focus on "alleviating and transforming the conditions in which oppressed clients find themselves" (Mullaly, 1993, p71). As a result of control being so "definitely negated through the incest, treatment is geared to helping the client reestablish a sense of personal power" (Courtois, 1988, p120).

As long as patriarchy and male dominance are supported as societal norms, the sexual abuse of children will continue (Heggen, 1993). Unfortunately, the Western church has historically accepted and promoted a patriarchal agenda, which some theologians see as unhelpful in eliminating abuse (Heggen, 1993;

Tessier, 1997; Foote, 1994). Religious belief systems adhere to a faith and trust in God, while victims of abuse personally experience a lack of trust in their relationships. Partly because this shattering of trust occurs within a patriarchal society, it seems plausible that God as "authority and father-figure", could become the focus of survivor's rage. Interestingly, Freud first posited that the notion of God was an exaltation of parental images (Poling, 1991). Heggen states that:

> *Because most sexual offenders are male, the dominant image used in Christian churches of God the Father becomes problematic for many women abused by their earthly fathers. One survivor says, 'It has been hard for me to trust and love the heavenly Father when I can only feel fear and distrust and disgust for my earthly father because of all the years he violated and abused my body and spirit.' (Heggen, 1993, p.46)*

Kane et al (1993) propose the possibility that children in predominantly patriarchal Western religions may easily transfer "father the abuser" who misused his power, to "God the Father" being yet more powerful and also abusive. Given this hypothesis, that "transference" might easily occur within the victim's mind from a human father to God as father, turning against some forms of organized religion or spirituality may make sense to the victim abused by a father figure or person in authority. A survivor quotes aptly: "I learned of a God, who was also called father, and I wasn't sure that I could trust him either... I *was* sure that what Dad and I did in secret was dirty and wrong" (Kane et al, 1993, p. 229). Feminist thinking illustrates that an alternative approach is possible. The debate over the gender of God is ongoing and addressed extensively among feminist theologians. Kane et al (1993) suggest as well that women who feel angry or distant from God as a male or Father, may find the Biblical concept of God as the Holy Spirit or *Sophia* (Greek feminine noun), to be a source of

comfort and strength. This research study will explore how or if the quandary regarding the gender of God presents itself, and how the women survivors come to terms with this dilemma.

Feminist theologians propose radical changes in thinking in regards to the predominantly androcentric understanding of God. While many prefer to address God as female, some propose that to limit Him/Her to any specific gender would be to lose truthful reality. Van Leeuwen suggests that "God is neither male nor female nor neuter, but incorporates both 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits into an irreducibly social nature"(1990, p40). Indeed, "the Bible does not limit God to masculine images" writes Clanton (1991), a southern Baptist pastor. She reminds us that the Old Testament books of the Bible, such as Hosea and Isaiah contain references to God as a loving Mother who agonizes over her children's awkwardness and pains over Israel's difficulties, while crying out like a woman in labour. Like the English language, Hebrew has no singular personal pronoun form that includes both male and female (Clanton, 1991, p.23). Young (1992), a feminist therapist, states that by questioning any premise which undercuts or exults the humanity of any group of people at the expense of others, we may all begin to claim the dignity and legitimacy of our whole selves. Van Leeuwen (1990) further illustrates that a main feature of a feminine perspective of God is a concern for relationships. Thus, a model of spirituality, would include that:

> *women and men might then be free to express the full spectrum of emotions and feelings without judging or being judged. This freedom would also apply to God, who would then be free to grieve with us at tragedy and rejoice with us in our growth and maturity. Released from the patriarchal model of an untouchable and removed power, this would be a God who would be in relationship with us, touched by us, as indeed we are touched. It would look and feel more like the God revealed by*

Jesus as he openly laughed, wept, lashed out, and loved everyone equally (Young, 1992, p.88).

Whereas most theologians have focused on God as a hierarchical authority, feminist theologians have emphasized a need for a balancing of imagery. The images of dominion need to be balanced by an understanding of "God" in more emotional and relational terms: God as a concerned parent who weeps over wayward children and nurses and shelters them under wings like a mother hen. These metaphors are found throughout Biblical writings. For the purpose of the survivor's healing, a different option from predominant Western religious thinking may be helpful to their spiritual growth. This appears to help in releasing them from a pervasive sense of patriarchal bondage, especially if this resonates with their own particular struggles. How and if the survivors come to terms with or resolve the spiritual dilemmas presented within feminist thinking, will be explored as part of this research study.

Trauma Theory

Sexual traumatization can be devastating to a child. A trauma is defined as "a catastrophic emotional/physical event that is outside the normal range of experience" (Kritsberg, 1993, p46). Sexual abuse of any kind is without doubt, beyond this normal healthy range of childhood experiences. Figley, as quoted in Courtois (1988), offered a definition of trauma and traumatic reactions: "an emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of a catastrophic experience which shattered the survivor's sense of vulnerability to harm"(p.120). She goes on to say that child sexual abuse is potentially an experience of this magnitude. The logical developmental inability of the child to resolve this trauma often leads to an emotional overload or blockage, physical

numbness or cognitive distraction, as part of the shock affect. "A child's immature and emotional structure is not equipped for a sexual awakening, and sexual abuse can damage him or her for life" (Engel, 1989, p.38). However, "like the feminist model, trauma theory posits that traumatic symptoms are not in and of themselves pathological; rather, they develop as natural and 'healthy responses' to out-of-the-ordinary catastrophic events (Courtois, 1988, p.123).

The dimensions of trauma theory appear to assist in undertanding aspects of the role of spirituality in the healing process for survivors of sexual abuse. Janoff-Bulman (1992) proposes that at the core of our assumptive world are three fundamental beliefs: that the world is benevolent (people are basically good), the world has "meaningfulness", and that the self is worthy. She postulates that "we typically moved through life without considering or examining these fundamental assumptions" (1992, p. 51). Though it may be true that as a result of inconsistent treatment or abuse in the early years individuals may be prone to feelings of powerlessness, this basically positive belief system may not apply to everyone. In Janoff-Bulman's studies on trauma, she continually discovered that victims of traumatic events had these basic guiding paradigms about life destroyed; the survivors would then somehow attempt to find meaning, purpose or hope either within, or beyond their tragedy. Survivors of sexual abuse, in having to face their trauma and devastation, often struggle with their shattered assumptions or expectations of life, and may get stuck in the healing process. Those who are victims of sexual abuse face unique psychological challenges in restructuring their sense of self, safety and power. To face the truth that one human being is capable of victimizing and terrorizing another, is to face the existence of evil, which can be quite difficult to face (Janoff-Bulman, 1993).

It is likely that attempts to reconstruct safety by women survivors of sexual abuse, or quests to make sense of their experiences, have sometimes occurred within the context of religion or spirituality. In their struggle to find meaning or healing, an environment that poses answers to the issue of evil and suffering may be alluring. A hope for the future and a belief in a God or Higher Power who loves and heals may be a magnetic belief for some survivors. Even if not part of an exclusively religious perspective, spirituality has been seen to offer strength and resources (Bass & Davis, 1988; Kritsberg, 1993; Heggen 1993). There is no prescribed universal pattern of individual response to abuse, but through their healing process, survivors have emerged as stronger individuals. Indeed, in the process of facing the pain, a new strength often surfaces. How this strength connects with spirituality is part of the research question posed in this study.

Developmental Theory - Stages of Faith

Developmental theories elaborate and bespeak of the dynamics of change and transformation (Haugaard & Reppucci, 1988). Aspects of life such as striving for balance and equilibrium, the inevitability of growth and continuity, and the dilemma of crises foster a need to grasp and understand the human developmental processes (Fowler, 1981, Kinnear, 1995). Faith development research and theory emerged with greater clarity and focus during the late seventies and early eighties of this century (Peck, 1998).

Scott Peck speaks about stages of spiritual growth, that our "unique human capacity for change and transformation" is reflected in our spirituality (1993, p.119). He articulates that spiritual growth is rarely linear or static. Life is seen as a continually evolving process. "This process involves mystery at it's

core, but it also encompasses a journey of change, of healing, and of the acquisition of wisdom". On this journey, "we may experience a sense of epiphany-those flashes of insight where many things that seemed quite complex begin to make more sense when viewed from a spiritual perspective (Peck,1998,p.241). Peck illustrates that a healthy aspect of spiritual growth lies in questioning everything, until you can move from a religion that is taken on simply because it is handed down, to a fully mature, personal sense of spirituality. He states that indeed, the healthier we are, the more we will be "in process".

> *And if we see ourselves or our organizations suffering, struggling, searching this way and that for new solutions, constantly revisiting and reviving, our tendency will not only be to give ourselves or them the benefit of the doubt but to suspect that we may have stumbled upon a particularly Godly phenomenon (Peck, 1998, p.282)..*

Developmental theories provide a descriptive format with which to understand the human process of growth and development. Structural developmentalists such as Piaget or Kohlberg have contributed decisively to the research and theory in the area of moral development (Fowler,1981). Both theorists have integrated concepts of structural stages with descriptions of cognitive and moral reasoning components. In terms of understanding survivor's struggles, it is important to note that when sexual abuse trauma occurs in the life of a child, internalization of blame is common to children at their respective stage of development, as children are egocentric in their level of thinking (Fowler, 1981). Survivor's rights, trust and personal boundaries were thus violated at an emotionally vulnerable time in their lives, a time when egocentricity prevails in the cognitive developmental level of a child (Forward,1978; Heggen,1993). An awareness of this concept explains why the

sexually abused child frequently takes on an incorrect and distorted allocation of personal responsibility. How the women survivors sorted out this dilemma will be explored in this research study.

James W. Fowler (1981) conducted extensive research to document data with which to postulate a series of stages in the development of faith throughout the lifespan. Helminiak (1987) commented that, among those he studied, Fowler presented the most comprehensive articulation of spiritual or faith development. These proposed stages of faith deal with varying domains of growth as different from either the cognitive stages of Piaget or the moral stages of Kohlberg. In addition, faith stages emerge out of integration of modes of knowing and valuing which other stage theories have avoided. Peck credits Fowler for his work on faith development, and utilizes his theories as well to enable further comprehension of spirituality (Peck,1998,p.246). Faith is understood dynamically as "involving the search for meaning, the construction of beliefs and commitments, and includes both explicitly religious expressions and enactments of faith, as well as ways of finding and orienting oneself within a non-religious environment" (Fowler,1981,p.17). Research into issues regarding faith or spirituality focuses on discussions around centers of value, images of power, and guiding stories of people's lives; how meaning is constructed and maintained appears to form an important underpinning of faith. Fowler's stages of faith development process a cumulative hierarchical structure, and carry forward the operations of all the previous stages, thus meeting the structural-developmental criteria for stages. "They provide generalizable, formal descriptions of integrated sets of operations of knowing and valuing" (Fowler, 1981).

Incorporating the developmental dynamics of faith, Fowler's formal stages constitute seven levels. During the infancy stage, trust is a key factor based on the mutuality and care from primary caregivers, to offset the anxiety inherent in the inevitable separations that occur during infant development. During early childhood, imagination stimulated by stories, gestures, and symbols, not yet controlled by logical thinking, combines with perception and feelings to create long-lasting images that represent both the protective and the threatening powers surrounding one's life. Representations of God take conscious form in this period and draw, for good or ill, on children's experiences of their parents or other adults to whom they are emotionally attached in the first years of life. During the middle childhood years, the developing ability to think logically assists in the ordering of the world into categories of causality, space and time, to enter into the perspectives of others and to capture life's meaning in narrative and stories. Ideally, during adolescence and beyond, new cognitive abilities enable mutual perspective-taking and require integration of diverse self-images into a coherent identity. Reliance upon abstract ideas and concepts to make sense of the world begins. Reflection on past experiences and searching for meaning is possible during this fourth "synthetic-conventional faith" or adolescence stage. Ideally, upon reaching young adulthood, the fifth level of "individual-reflective faith" occurs, with its critical reflection upon one's beliefs and values while utilizing "third-person perspective-taking" and understanding of the self and others as part of a social system, while internalizing authority and assumption of responsibility. Stages six and seven, ("conjunctive" and "universalizing" faith), if reached, are usually during mid-life or beyond, and involve the embracing of polarities in one's life, an alertness to paradox, and the need for multiple interpretations of reality. Symbol and story, metaphor and myth (from one's

own traditions and others') are newly appreciated as vehicles for expressing truth. Persons in the last stage are grounded in a sense of oneness with the power of being or God (Fowler, 1991). Fowler suggests that these stages of faith development are ways of describing revolutions in consciousness or shifts in paradigms, that persons in our society seem to experience in their journey from childhood to adulthood. He goes on to state that evidence indicates that the majority of adults in our society arrest or equilibrate in either the middle childhood ("mythic-literal faith") or the adolescence ("synthetic-conventional faith") stages. Fowler admits that his research does not account for cross-cultural variation and is somewhat culturally specific in its assumptions.

Fowler (1981) uses the term "faith" to encompass spirituality. He defines it as a mystery. Faith is discussed as a human universal, requiring community, language, ritual and nurture. Questions of faith or spirituality are seen as aims to assist in getting in touch with the dynamic patterned process by which we find life meaningful. His proposed stages occur in fixed order and represent successively more complex ways of organizing meaning in one's life (Reinert & Smith, 1997). The stages of faith appear to progress through personal experience and affiliations, questioning and reflecting, moving toward a full and rich ownership. A difficulty with stages of faith development, at least as it has been observed in adult survivors of sexual abuse, is the expectation to which stages are experienced in a linear fashion. For these women, life has often not followed normative developmental progression; it has been demonstrated that arrested development often occurs as a result of early trauma (Briere, 1992; Lemoncelli & Carey, 1996).

An awareness of these stages of faith development may be beneficial in understanding the role of spirituality for adult survivors of sexual abuse. Fowler's theory and research demonstrate that many individuals do not progress to more advanced stages of faith development in general, and we know that often survivors of childhood sexual abuse arrest at various levels of development. Some of the questions arising out of this are thus: how do they move beyond arrested developmental stages? How does healing from sexual abuse enable the survivor to become "unstuck" in her spiritual journey? How does spirituality play a role in the healing process for these survivors of sexual abuse? Implications for working with survivors of sexual abuse are implicit. Norah Sargeant in Vulnerable Populations (1989), discusses how survivors' images of God which were initially constructed at an early age, have either positively or negatively impacted the healing process. It appears that spiritual belief systems are affected and shaped by abusive trauma, it appears as well that the specifics of one's spirituality play a role in how the trauma is interpreted, demonstrating the possible reciprocal nature of the role of spirituality. Thus, there are some questions that flow from this: how did spirituality play a role in the healing journey for women survivors of sexual abuse, which beliefs were not conducive to healing and what were the belief systems that were helpful. What part did spirituality have in the healing process?

Anger and Forgiveness

Various issues that survivors of sexual abuse struggle with are presented in the theoretical literature. Among the wide range of possible components, Bass & Davis (1988) mention that two key factors in the healing process for adult survivors of sexual abuse are those of anger and forgiveness (Gannon, 1989; Gil,

1983; Kane et al, 1993). These are also issues that manifest somewhat contradictory stances among religious frameworks (Heggen, 1993). Bass and Davis state that "most religious or spiritual ideologies encourage us to forgive and love...as a result, many survivors have suppressed their anger, turning it inward" (1988,p.122). Traditionally, women have been forbidden to express anger. Anger is not always embraced as a potentially positive healing force, especially in certain religious circles "nor is it understood that acknowledgment of anger is necessary to reach true healing and forgiveness" (Kane et al, 1993, p. 229). Cummings says "it was very difficult for me to allow myself to get angry as I started into this healing journey...after all, I'm a nice girl and a minister"(1994, p.45). Often anger becomes internalized and may manifest as self-hatred, leading the survivor to various coping mechanisms and self-destructive behaviours:

> *Anger is an important emotion, a natural defense reaction when someone or something violates us. Many survivors were never allowed by their abusers or their families to express anger. Often, they turn this repressed anger back on themselves in a self- destructive manner (Kunzman, 1991, p.50).*

Bass & Davis (1988) write that certain religious or spiritual practices encourage survivors to avoid emotions, particularly anger and proceed to push forgiveness prematurely, both of which they deem to be attitudes that do not promote healing. Kritsberg discusses the overlap with anger and forgiveness, noting that spirituality, as a source of strength and power enables "true forgiveness" to occur. He states that:

> *it is a spontaneous and powerful manifestation of this spiritual connection...to forgive those involved in your abuse requires a spiritual courage that comes from a deep love of self and of God. But for most survivors, forgiveness is a state that occurs gradually over time. As the work of recovery and healing takes place, anger and hurt are often replaced by forgiveness and deep spiritual understanding* (1993, p.225).

McCullough et al speak of the benefits of forgiveness on one's mental health, quoting from Gassin, a psychologist, who found that across a wide variety of studies and groups of participants, forgiving appeared to be related to slightly better mental health (1997, p191). While they also refer to other research which supports the hypothesis that forgiveness is beneficial, forgiving also often appears to be a process for women survivors of sexual abuse. Heggen (1993) describes this process as rarely moving in an efficient, tidy, linear fashion. She notes that more often forgiveness moves in a "spiraling kind of way". Struggling with forgiveness is a common theme for these women; confusion often sets in as to whether or how they can forgive or be forgiven. Premature or forced forgiveness may also create ambivalence or confusion among survivors struggling for healing within a religious framework. Heggen refers to this when she says "Sadly, many victims report feeling reprimanded by church professionals for their inability to promptly forgive and forget" (1993, p.122). She goes on to state that one of the most complicated issues for victims of sexual abuse is forgiveness:

> *In general, the responsibility for reconciliation between perpetrator and victim of sexual abuse has been placed on the victim. It has been assumed and communicated by many pastors that if she will forgive her abuser and cast off bitter feelings, the relationship can be restored. While survivors of sexual abuse report varied responses, a consistent concern has been to assess whether the victim has 'really forgiven' the abuser (Heggen, 1993, p.123).*

It appears that forgiveness and anger present unique challenges to the survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and that an undercurrent of confusion regarding a healthy approach in dealing with them, has often been the experience for survivors. Further exploration to clarify this quandary and struggle forms a part of this research study.

Prayer

The use of prayer as a spiritual resource to assist in healing from sexual abuse, is spoken of in the literature. Bass & Davis (1988) acknowledge that for some survivors, prayer offers a place of comfort, connection and regeneration in the midst of painful healing. They speak of it as a way to find clarity and centering in an oasis of calm. Finney states that although she is not writing "a religious book, I would be doing you a disservice if I did not include prayer among the techniques for self-help. . . it may be the most powerful technique ever discovered for changing your life" (1992, p.300). She goes on to say that she cannot explain what happens, only that it works. Prayer is seen to be potentially helpful for survivors of sexual abuse, who may have felt the terror of abandonment. Praying to God, and believing that someone cares who will help if asked, can help barriers begin to break down, assisting survivors to start to trust, to accept help from others, and to allow themselves to enjoy relationships (Finney, 1992, p.301). Prayer is noted to help survivors face the painful and difficult issues of their abuse, help them to understand that they are not alone, that they are connected to everything, and that somewhere there is a loving power that cares. Recently, Dossey (1993) studied the efficacy of prayer and found scientific evidence to that effect. He collected studies which proved not only that prayer works, but that the most effective prayer is simple and heartfelt. Hardy writes that whether from primitive tribes or from Western society, the person who has communicated with their God is usually a stronger person, feeling the power to endure the trials of life or to conquer them (1979, p.54). The aspect of prayer as a relational process is referred to by Foote (1994), who decribes it as an opportunity to speak honestly about what it means to be human and to be hurt. It is seen to be a reflective exercise in personal growth and relational healing.

Prayer seems to offer an opportunity:

> *for 'thinking about' abuse issues in ways that can heal and transform us. Prayer can be a forum for searching for meaning, exploring questions, stating newly discovered truths, and experimenting with a different reality than that in which we have been constrained to live (Foote, 1994, p.3).*

Prayer does not take away the struggle, but it seems to help ease the pain. Flaherty (1992) cautions that although at times very comforting, faith and religion can also be used as an escape from painful feelings. "Prayer can be helpful when joined with the honest expression of feelings, but should not be used as a way to overspiritualize or sidestep the pain of the remembering process" (Flaherty, 1992, p.37). Applied in this way, religious beliefs could complicate, not clarify or assist the healing process.

In the midst of all the confusion and struggle, as discussed in the literature on sexual abuse, it appears that prayer can contribute to the restorative process. As part of an overview and exploration regarding the role that spirituality plays for women survivors, it appears necessary to explore the role of prayer as part of the healing pilgrimage.

While these various theoretical foundations and perspectives lay the groundwork for an understanding of the problem of child sexual abuse, the following discussion examines the empirical research on the subject of sexual abuse and spirituality, highlighting what is not yet clearly known and what still warrants further study.

Empirical Research Connecting Spirituality and Sexual Abuse Issues

While the sexual abuse of children is a major societal problem, there has been a minimum of research on the relationship between spirituality and childhood sexual abuse. Ganje-Fling & McCarthy (1996) state that relatively little published research has examined the effects of sexual abuse on the victim's spiritual functioning. They continue by saying that "despite the paucity of empirical research, the spiritual issues of sexually traumatized clients constitute an important and relevant area of concern for clinicians (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996).

Russell (1986) found that sexually abused women were more disillusioned with religion than their non-victimized peers were. These findings showed how survivors of sexual abuse had abandoned their religious upbringing, disappointed with the religious framework. As part of my research study, Russell's observations of women survivors will be revisited, with an exploration as to the possibility of whether, why and how do the seven women respondents interviewed have any similar feelings regarding religion?

Kane, Cheston and Greer (1993) researched "an aspect of the relationship between religion and incest"(p.228). They compared women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, perpetrated by a father-figure, and non-abused women regarding their views of God. They discovered a significant difference between the two groups. The results indicated a more negative view of God on the part of survivors of sexual abuse, compared to women who were not sexually molested. The responses indicated that survivors experienced more anger at God and a feeling that God was distant, when compared to non-survivors. The authors

make the statement that "it appears quite plausible that a person's religion and the subsequent internalized view of God would be affected by childhood incestuous experiences" (1993, p. 229). "However, while many of the abused women did report anger at God, and while they may have left their churches, some still seemed to have faith and hope" (Kane et al, 1993, p.235). The researchers go on to say that whether the women surveyed returned to their original denominations, left and joined others, or were religiously inactive, many of the respondents voiced a need for a spiritual dimension in their lives. Among their comments were "spirituality is more important to me now than religion" and "faith is very important, religion is not". The subjects in their study responded to religion in both of these ways: either with anxious aversion or it became a resource for the sexually abused woman. The conclusions of these researchers will be reexamined within my research study. Some of the questions to be asked are thus: how was religion a hindrance or how did it become part of the healing process? If the respondents views of God were affected by the sexual abuse, how were they affected? How was spirituality different from religion and what did this difference mean?

Elliot (1994) examined the impact of religious faith on the prevalence and "long-term sequelae" of childhood sexual abuse in a sample of almost 3,000 professional women. She found that if the sexual abuse was perpetrated by the father, and the women were raised in conservative Christian backgrounds, they were more likely to be religious nonpractitioners as adults. They hypothesize that this finding reflects that because the view of God was intertwined with their view of father, God may have become associated with the perpetrator. These incest survivors were less willing to move toward God in their adult life.

However, the women survivors who were raised in other religious persuasions where God was not as predominantly viewed as Father, turned to a relationship with God in an attempt to deal with the negative impact of the incestuous relationship. As well, subjects completed the "Trauma Symptom Checklist-40", which is a brief, abuse-related instrument used to measure the traumatic impact of child abuse. This resulted in finding that overall, women who adhered to a religious belief system were less symptomatic than the women who did not practice any religion. The findings also indicated that religious women who were sexually abused by someone other than their father, reported the least amount of psychological stress of any group of survivors. These researchers hypothesized that spiritual confusion is greater for women who were abused by their father or a father-figure, if the image of God and that of father are seen as intertwined. For these women, the resultant distrust in their perception of reality, increased anger at the hypocrisy, and subsequent rejection of their faith, combine to elevate the level of trauma and stress. For the purposes of my research study, further understanding of the complexity of the impact of childhood sexual abuse on one's spirituality will be strived for, as well as the role of spirituality in the healing process for survivors.

Smith, Reinert, Horne, Greer & Wicks (1995) tested the hypothesis that "a spiritual attitude of acceptance" would help lessen the effects of childhood emotional, physical or sexual abuse. The results of their study indicated that helplessness and lack of power over one's life, is prejudicial to the healing and spiritual growth of abused women, and that for women whose development has been affected by childhood maltreatment, promoting a sense of control and empowerment may have therapeutic value for their psychological and spiritual

development. A similar study to Smith et al (1995), was a study conducted by Reinert & Smith (1997) which assessed the influence of childhood sexual abuse on the development of religiously involved lay women. They concluded that one's relationship with God may serve as an anchor. The system or structure experienced in religion may serve as a constant and reliable source of support. One's relationship with God was seen as something that cannot be taken away and it was seen to be a relationship marked by safety and security. Reinert & Smith (1997) noted that "the sexually abused may turn to their faith and spirituality for support", however, they do not clarify or differentiate between religion and spirituality. Valentine & Feinauer (1993) interviewed 22 women survivors of childhood sexual abuse and found that "spirituality, religion or one's relationship with God", was seen to be a source of strength for the majority of the women, who "called for the hope, reassurance, and sense of purpose that faith or spirituality can provide" (1993, p.223). Almost all of the interviewees reported the importance of religion or spirituality in their lives. Religion provided a supportive network for these women and assisted them to make meaning out of their experience. Their spirituality was stated as one of many intertwined resiliency factors that assisted them in their healing and developmental growth. This study as well, invites questions as to how spirituality specifically helped, however, it is somewhat confusing in that it speaks interchangeably about religion and spirituality. My research study will further explore the role of spirituality and its connections to healing, while exploring as well how religion and spirituality are respectively defined.

Summary

It is intended that these prior empirical findings, will be further explored

within this research study. The present data on the topic of spirituality in the healing process for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse is not extensive. However, what is demonstrated and known about the topic at present, prompts and leads this research study in a process of further questionning. The theoretical and anecdotal literature, as well as the current empirical research findings, support the fact that spirituality appears to be a factor in the healing journey. However, the specificity of this role needs to be further studied and explored, thereby equipping survivors, clinicians and the community with more understanding about the complexities inherent in the important issue of childhood sexual abuse. It is hoped that my research findings will enable further clarity regarding the struggles, blocks and confusion that survivors may face, and that the findings will offer greater understanding for individuals about the immense resource of strength, hope and healing available through spirituality.

The term "spirituality" conjures up a variety of imagery. An overview of theoretical underpinnings related to spiritual dimensions is important in understanding the topic. A systemic understanding of humanity assists in addressing and assessing the aspect of spirituality, as an "under discussed" area of attention. Theoretically, as systemically connected beings, the striving for the resolution of that lack of connection may be sought for in spirituality. The feminist framework provides a valid comprehension of the undercurrent of struggle for power and control. Alienation theory postulates humanity's pain of aloneness; the religious or spiritual quest for connection and meaning beyond ourselves is an extension of this. The survivor's shattering of security and trust, and the pain that emerges, may catapult a search for answers within a spiritual framework. Belief appears to have therapeutic efficacy. Personal strength can

come from a strong religious or spiritual philosophy, providing meaning, hope and inspiration in the midst of adversity. What appears to occur, during stages of faith development, is that survivors of sexual abuse often either turn away from God and religion completely, or embrace a faith which necessitates denial of certain aspects of healing, such as facing the pain and acknowledging the anger. A feminist theology may be a viable option for the survivor with spiritual concerns to sort through. While it is true that many survivors "balk at the idea of God or a higher power, feeling as though they were long ago abandoned by a cruel and uncaring God" (Courtois, 1988, p. 202), the patriarchal aspect of our society may play a role in this outlook. Encapsulating a view of God beyond gender specificity seems to open the door to a greater understanding of spirituality for some women. It has been seen and documented that spirituality can be a contributor to the healing process, as well as a product of it (Bass & Davis, 1988; Courtois, 1988; Flaherty, 1992). Further research on the specifics of this stance comprises the basis of this thesis. The exploration process of this research study, based on what is not yet fully known, will include asking questions pertaining to: what does spirituality mean, is religion the same or different than spirituality, and if so, then how would that look; how has spirituality been a part of the healing journey, what aspects of it have been hindrances or negative, and what aspects or factors have been positive or beneficial; how has spirituality provided a possible resource? Thus, this research study focuses on the qualitative research question: what is the role of spirituality in the healing process for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Rationale

The research design utilized in this study was qualitative in nature and exploratory-descriptive in design. Qualitative research design has been more prevalent and having a stronger impact upon psychological and social work research in recent years. This qualitative approach to data collection and analysis provides an alternative to historically predominant forms of quantitative methodology. Qualitative research is defined by Miles & Huberman (1994) as the source of theory, well grounded in the data and illustrated with rich or thick description and explanations of processes that occur in an identifiable local context. The intent of qualitative research is to discover in depth meaning, understandings, and quality attributes of phenomena studied, rather than to obtain quantitative measurable outcomes (Morse, 1994). Essentially, qualitative research methods place their emphasis on how social experience is created and assigned meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Given that the majority of studies on the effects of sexual abuse have used surveys and questionnaires, a qualitative design allowed for the gathering of a rich depth of data pertaining to the research question, and informed my rationale for a broad based exploratory study. Furthermore, there has been little qualitative research done on the role of spirituality in the healing process for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. This research study explores and inquires about the role of spirituality in the healing process for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Interview Guide

For my particular area of study, the interview guide proved to be the most appropriate option for several reasons. Patton (1990) suggests that the advantage of using an "interview guide" is that it ensures that the interviewer has carefully decided how best to use the allotted time in an interview situation, and it allows for individual perspectives and experiences to emerge. The interview guide is also designed to foster a conversational tone within the interview whereby the women are invited to share their experiences in a meaningful, narrative form. Soundness was attended to through developing the form and content of the interview guide in collaboration with other therapists working in the field of sexual abuse, as well as consulting relevant literature as a means of providing a guiding outline from which to operate.

The general interview guide approach was utilized, involving a set of issues to be explored with each respondent in the interview process. These issues were identified in the literature as relevant to further our understanding of the role of spirituality in the healing process for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The interview guide begins with an introduction that states the researcher's interest in the topic, thanks the respondents for their interest, and frames the interview as a discovery process. Open-ended questions were posed to the respondents, enabling them to freely respond without constraint. This also enabled the interviewer to be flexible with the structure of the interview, adapting "the wording and sequence of the questions to specific respondents in the context of the actual interview" (Patton, 1990, p280). The interview guide served as a basic checklist to keep the researcher on track and ensure all relevant topics were covered. The outline also increased the systemic data collection of the

respondents. The inherent flexibility within this approach could reduce the credibility of the research; important topics may be inadvertently omitted, the researcher needed to watch for this. The use of an interview guide facilitated a conversational tone, while addressing general topic areas (Patton, 1990). A copy of the interview guide is located in the Appendix.

The development of the questions in the interview guide was influenced by the known literature on the topic. The interview guide follows specific questions that emerged out of the experiential, theoretical and empirical literature. The development of the interview guide evolved from the literature review, into a series of questions that would be raised with the research subjects. The interview guide was comprised of six main questions, with several probes following each question in order to expand and enhance the description of the particular area of research interest (Patton, 1990). The questions were designed in the form of a "funnel", beginning with an open-ended framework. The first question "could you tell me about how spirituality has played a role in your healing journey?" was open-ended and broad based to set the stage for the respondents to freely answer as they wished, and allow the women to tell their story. Miles & Huberman (1984) support the rationale for not beginning with closed-ended devices in exploratory-descriptive designs, as broad based open-ended questions attempt to elicit a rich story that is completely directed by the participant herself. The first question represented what I wanted to know about most (ie/ my central research question) and it was designed to remove as much of my own personal bias as possible, which was inherent in the questions I chose to ask (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first question had further probes asking about the meaning of spirituality or religion. The second question naturally followed

the first by way of further exploring the healing process..."could you tell me your story about your healing journey?" This elicited and honoured their narrative stories about the healing process as experienced by the respondents. Some of the women answered this in question one, so I proceeded to question three, which addressed the significant aspects of the healing journey that may have stood out for the women. Fourthly, how the women dealt with their abuse through the use of spirituality was asked. Fifthly, it was asked whether there were any changes in how spirituality or religion was viewed, as the sexual abuse issues were dealt with. The sixth question asked specifically how spirituality influenced the healing process, with chosen probes addressing the possible interferences, hurdles, benefits, and positive aspects. Through the acknowledgement of each woman's personal knowledge and insight pertaining to their spiritual journey, this placed them in a position of expertise based on their own experiences, thus closing the interview on a note of strength. Overall, the questions were designed to invite openness and choice for the women to respond, and decidedly ended on a positive note.

Data Collection

The sampling design used for this study was purposeful and homogeneous. Purposeful samples refer to the ability to select information-rich cases of central importance to the purpose of the study (Patton, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Purposeful sampling is not random or condusive to generalizability and statistical aggregation, as sample sizes tend to be small, however, when sampling strategy utilized is purposeful, this enables the data to be focused and provides for information-rich cases to be studied in depth, illuminating the questions under study (Patton, 1990, p.169). This in-depth

information was sought from a group of seven participants, located through the therapist practitioners who had agreed to assist in the research process. Selection criteria of the seven women participants included that their involvement be of their own choice. As part of the purposive nature of qualitative sampling methodology, it was decided that the women be able to clearly articulate their experiences in such a way that provided me with information-rich data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). As well, it was important that the participants were well connected to their therapists, to enable debriefing opportunities should the need arise after the interview process. For purposes of this study, exclusion criteria consisted of clients for whom the healing journey for sexual abuse had just begun, and for those who were substance abusers, so as to not complicate my study unnecessarily by having to consider additional factors in the analysis. Thus, those included were a part of the research process by choice, had therapeutic support, and ideally had processed the majority of major issues relating to the childhood sexual abuse.

Regarding specific recruitment procedures, letters of introduction (see Appendix) were given to the therapists who agreed to be involved, whereupon they decided who of their clients fit the selection criteria and offered the letters with a brief explanation pertaining to the research. The participants themselves had freedom of choice as to participate or not, and were told that they could withdraw at any time if they so chose to. Those that chose to be involved in the research, were then able to contact the researcher directly or call the faculty advisor. This recruitment process ensured that confidentiality on the part of the participant would be maintained, as the therapists had no means of knowing which of the clients became involved in this study. Seven women came forward,

choosing to participate in this research study, all of whom met the selection criteria. It was then decided, at the convenience of the respondent, when and where the interview would be conducted.

Each of the seven women who participated in this study were given a choice as to where they felt most comfortable conducting the research interview. Some of the participants chose to meet at the particular agency where they were attending therapy, others chose their own home, and one of the women chose a private office space that she had access to. Through providing the women with such a choice, it was acknowledged that the setting was important within the data collection process. As well, by honouring the personal choices of the participants, this provided the women with the necessary sense of familiarity, safety and comfort around telling their stories of pain and healing.

At the start of each interview, a consent form (see Appendix) was given to the participant stating that the interview would be audiotaped, that confidentiality would be ensured through the removal from the data of all identifiable information, and that participants could withdraw from the study at any given time without penalty of any sort. As well, it was mentioned that the audiotapes would be erased upon completion of the research project. Each of the seven women willingly signed this form, which authorized me to proceed.

Providing the context of the interview to the participants is an additional form of standard practice, as a beginning part of the interview process. The natural subjectivity of the researcher may shape the research; given this possibility, I derived the credibility of the research from the data itself, by

focusing solely on the participant's experiences. My agenda was clearly put forth, and my relatively non-interactive role was identified, as was the importance that each participant tell their story in their own language and style. As such, this served to illustrate that the women themselves were in control of the process, thereby decreasing their anxiety level and heightening their sense of personal safety.

The time alloted for the interviews was approximately one and a half hours; four of the women spoke for that length of time, one of the interviews was just under the alloted time, and two of the women spoke for two hours. The varying lengths of time were determined by the women themselves, the interviews ended when the participants felt that they had answered all of the questions to their satisfaction. Upon completion of the interview itself, an approximately thirty minute debriefing period followed, during which time I asked the participants about their experience of the interview process. Feedback about the interview questions was invited; the women commented that it had been an enlightening, interesting and affirmative experience for them. They found the questions and probes to be provocative, and in no way invasive to their sense of self. During this phase of the interview, process notes were taken as a means of ensuring thorough documentation of both the participant's responses in addition to any thoughts that I might have about the interview. This record keeping process was helpful in terms of sorting through the data and also provided a way of attending to soundness by enabling replication of the process if so desired. After gathering the data from each interview, the audiotapes were transcribed and carefully edited and matched to the original tape in order to ensure complete accuracy.

Glaser & Strauss (1967) discuss the issue of theoretical saturation, as the criterion for deciding when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category. They state that "saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967,p.61). Thus, when similar instances are seen over and over again, confidence can be felt that saturation has been reached. Regarding this research study, during the process of conducting the interviews and analyzing the data, saturation was reached at the point of the fourth interview, and the interview process continued until the seventh interview had been completed. In the following section, the data analysis process will be outlined.

Analytic Method

The constant-comparative method of analysis, or "grounded theory"as it is commonly referred to, naturally lent itself to the analysis of the data. Grounded theory was derived from the study of the phenomenon represented in the data and was utilized as a means of formulating a conceptual framework of the research findings. The purpose of grounded theory is to build theory that is faithful to and illuminates the area under study (Strauss& Corbin, 1990).

The first transcript was chosen because of its intense interest level to me, and I thought it might be a very depth filled "information rich" interview. Initially, the process of analysis consisted of a line by line open coding of every idea and thought represented in each line of the first transcript. These codes are defined as labels or abstractions of the presented phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Each code was then written beside the corresponding line on the right-hand margin of the page. Upon completing the first page of open

coding, the codes thus far emerging out of the data were reviewed and placed into columns which were categorized into a conceptual framework that progressed in an ongoing, theory building manner. While this process of coding continued, I kept a list of "running memos" on the left hand margin of the transcribed pages, which were important thoughts or ideas generated by the interviews. The purpose of these memos was to assist in developing the formulation of the theoretical framework; they served as reminders of pertinent thoughts that emerged while analyzing the data. These pieces of information were written in the form of either inductive, deductive, connective or methodological memos, and highlighted observations that occurred during the theory building process. Upon writing each memo, I would consult the data to ensure that there was existing evidence to support my memo. In doing so, I was able to stay true to the participant's experience and avoid the potential risk of adding to the data. Thus, as my developing theory continued to be grounded within the data itself, I specifically addressed the issues of credibility and soundness. (Patton, 1990).

Throughout the coding process, which moved from being a line by line process to a paragraph by paragraph one, I found it helpful to code a few pages at a time, and then add to the building of the conceptual framework. The codes continued to be placed respectively in terms of their degree of abstraction (categories being the most abstract): types, circumstances and conditions (elements); properties; and categories. The emerging framework incorporated the codes according to commonalities between and amongst them. A creative and interesting process was thus engaged in, as a result of constantly comparing the data to a working conceptual framework, which in turn fostered the natural evolution of my theory building process.

When the number of elements became too great, I had to determine whether they could be collapsed into a property, and thereby shift to the middle column. This same process continued as I clustered the various properties into categories, all the while constantly comparing the framework with the data itself, making sure the language used therein was reflective of the participant's own language and ideas and that it was comprehensive of each of the women's experiences. If an in depth description is filled with the complexities of factors and interactions within the data, its validity is increased.

The above method was incorporated for each consecutive interview, until all the interviews were coded. As I progressed to each interview, the process became easier on the one hand, while more information with which to process appeared. However, saturation was reached by the fourth interview, and afterwards, repetitive ideas emerged throughout. Beyond the first interview, the codes from the rest of the interviews needed to all find a place in the conceptual framework, which meant modifying, constantly comparing, and continuing until all ideas had a place. in the emerging theory.

The aim of this study was not to generalize the findings, but rather to design a study whereby the method could be replicated if desired by other researchers, and to generate hypotheses for further research. As well, questions or hypotheses can be generated to help guide practice.

Credibility and Soundness

In addition to the previously discussed factors that pertain to credibility and soundness, this section includes some final thoughts on the methodology of this research study. Given the qualitative design of this study, credibility and

soundness can be tested through the criteria of rigor (Guba & Lincoln in Sandelowski, 1986). The first concept introduced to measure rigor is "truth value". It refers to the degree to which "truth" in the study is defined by the participants, rather than the researcher. In this study, the use of open-ended questions and an interview guide were chosen in an effort to enhance this aspect of "truth value".

Credibility has also been offered as a criterion by which a project can be measured. "A qualitative study is credible when it presents such a faithful description or interpretation of a human experience that the people having the experience would immediately recognize it from those descriptions" (Sandelowski, 1986, p30). One of the ways that the researcher attempted to enhance credibility was in sharing the results chapter of this study with four of the seven research participants. They were shown the research findings and the conceptual framework in process, and feedback was requested. The women confirmed and agreed that their experience was inherent in the theory.

Applicability is yet another criterion on which the rigor of the study can be assessed. Applicability refers to the issues of sampling, inclusion, and applying the research results to a population. Given the qualitative design of the research study and the small sample size, applicability is limited other than enabling further hypotheses and questions for further research. Rather than designing research to apply to a wide population, the aim was to build knowledge in an exploratory way regarding the role of spirituality in the healing process from childhood sexual abuse, from the perspective and experience of seven women survivors.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The Comprehensive Qualitative Findings

INTRODUCTION

The importance of examining issues pertaining to the sexual abuse of children, has become more clear as society increases their awareness of the evils of abuse and misuse of power. The multiple factors and long term effects are being open to debate in both the church and society in general today. The long and short term effects on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, have become a topic of discussion for both academia and the popular media. While some of these issues are dealt with by the participants interviewed, the focus of this study is on the role of spirituality in the healing process , rather than on the details of the actual abuse.

The main element of discovery illustrated in the data, is how seven women, themselves adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, have used spirituality to facilitate their healing journey. Powerful uses of words were chosen by the participants as they explored how spirituality helped or hindered them in their struggle for healing. It is the aim of this chapter to honour these words and give a voice to these women so they may be heard and perhaps further understood.

In an attempt to protect the identity of those involved in this study, the participants' real names were not used, but rather each woman is referred to by one of the following pseudonyms as specifically chosen by themselves: Renee, Ann, Sophie, Betty, Michelle, Bianca and Ruth. For each of these seven women, what follows is a brief contextual overview:

Renee is a single woman in her late twenties who was sexually abused by her older cousin for a number of years while she was under the age of ten. She was raised in a Christian home, attended church regularly until late adolescence, at which point she stopped. After a period of almost ten years she resumed attendance sporadically, with very different views about spirituality. She has been in therapy for her abuse issues for approximately five years.

Ann is a single mom in her early thirties who was raised in a religious home and was sexually abused by her father when she was very young. She has been attending counselling for about two years now, and has experienced positive results in confronting her parents regarding the sexual abuse.

Sophie is a single woman in her late thirties who experienced abduction and rape by a stranger at the age of seven. The perpetrator was charged and spent time in jail. It is amazing that Sophie lived to tell her story. She has been in therapy periodically over the span of nine years. Sophie was raised in a Pentecostal background; the complicated factors surrounding her abuse and treatment, and how spirituality was interwoven throughout, will be illustrated.

Betty is a married woman in her late forties with four children, who was

sexually abused over a period of a few years by a church pastor during her adolescence. She has since taken up the charges with church council, and has been in therapy for about three years.

Michelle is a divorced woman around the age of thirty with two young children. She was sexually abused by her stepfather from the age of nine throughout early adolescence. Her stepfather was in training to be a pastor at the time. He is presently serving a sentence for the sexual abuse of Michelle and her younger sister. Various spiritual components factored into Michelle's story, she has been attending counselling over the period of the last four years.

Bianca is a woman in her late thirties who was abused by her father as a child, and raped as a teenager by her cousin. She was raised by parents from a Sikh background, and as a young adult, began searching for spirituality in her life. She has been attending therapy for approximately two years.

Lastly, Ruth is a married woman in her forties, who has two teenage children. Several years ago she was struck with the reality of her childhood sexual abuse by her grandfather, and has been in therapy dealing with this for four years now.

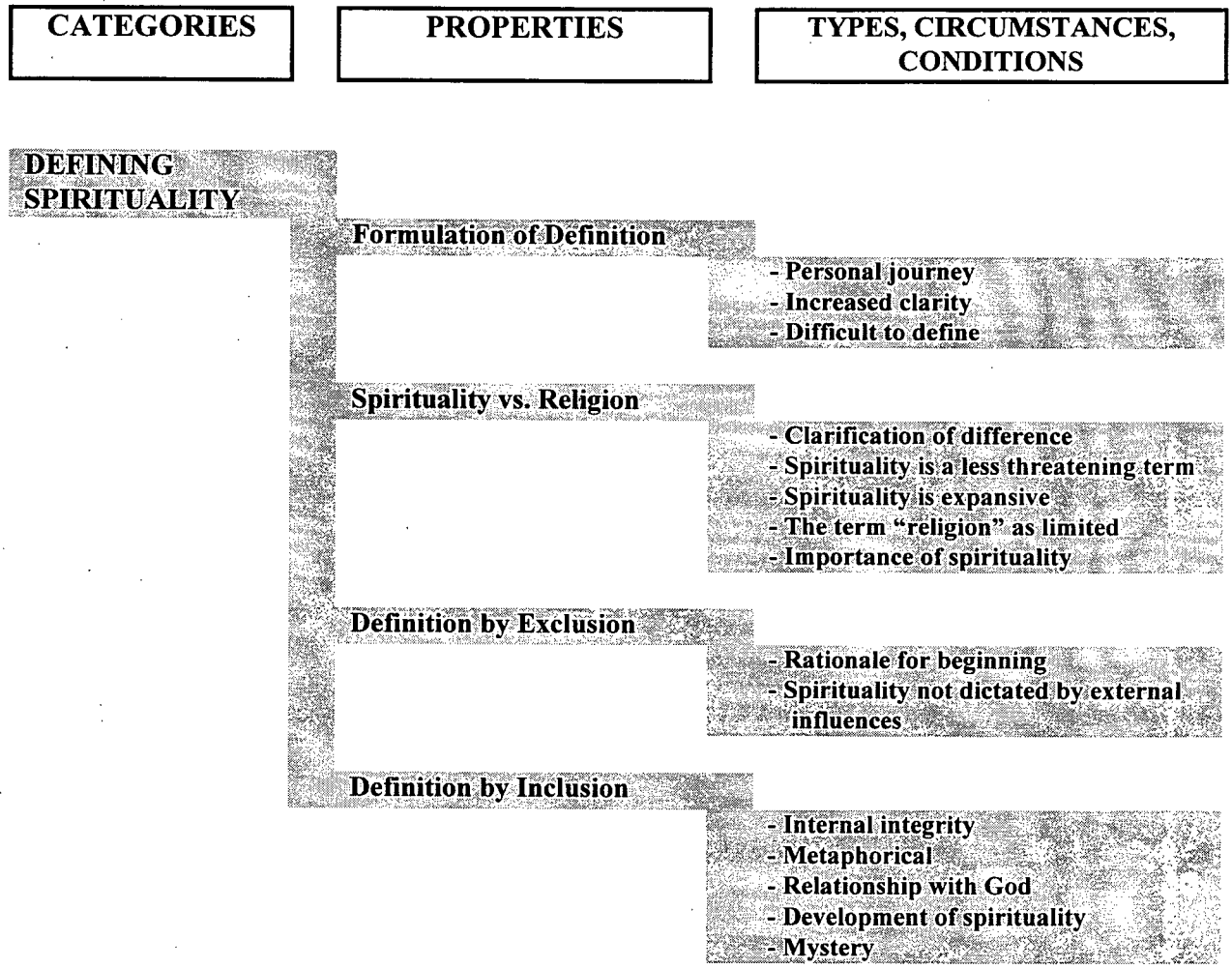
On analysis, the role of spirituality in the healing process for the women in this study was organized into four major categories: Defining Spirituality, Responding to Abuse, Struggling to Heal and Searching for Meaning. These categories, together with their respective properties and the types, circumstances and conditions, comprise the interrelated framework and the emerging theory.

In addition to providing a composite picture of the experiences of the participants involved in this study, this theory supports, adds to, and/or refutes the existing sexual abuse and spirituality literature, and further provides implications for practice, policy and further research, all of which will be discussed in the final section of this report. The role of spirituality in the healing process for adult survivors of sexual abuse is herein examined, beginning with an understanding of the first category, Defining Spirituality.

1. DEFINING SPIRITUALITY

The first category so well articulated by the women participants was Defining Spirituality. It appeared essential to the women to initially **formulate the defining** of the term, as a beginning towards a clearer understanding of their process of healing. Upon articulation of how the definition was formed, most of the women interviewed proceeded to **clarify the difference** between spirituality and religion. Thereafter, the participants defined the concept of spirituality by **exclusion**, ie. "what spirituality is not", followed by defining the concept by **inclusion**, ie. "what spirituality includes." What is interesting in each of their stories, is the extent to which the women struggled for an understanding of meaning to their experiences, all the while moving amidst "blocks and break throughs", toward greater healing and empowerment . Evidence of these ideas will be shown throughout the illustrations that follow. Thus, the four properties that emerged from the data with respect to Defining Spirituality are: Formulation of Definition, Spirituality vs. Religion, Definition by Exclusion, and Definition by Inclusion. (See Figure # 1; for the complete framework, see Appendix A: The Conceptual Framework).

FIGURE #1: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING PROCESS:
WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE



Formulation of Definition

The first identified property emerging from the data, consists of three elements: personal journey, increased clarity and difficulty in defining the term "spirituality". Together, they encompass the internal dynamics of the construction process for the understanding of the concept.

PERSONAL JOURNEY

The women participants emphasized the fact that formulating a definition of the term"spirituality", encapsulated a very personal journey for them. They focused attention on this realization in various ways throughout the interviews. Each of their stories are unique, with common ideas elaborating the deeply personal nature of their journey.

> *"It's a deeply personal experience. It's personal. It's very intimate (M,p1)."*
>
> *"I think spirituality is different for different people (A,p1)."*

Devising individual decisions about their own sets of beliefs assisted the interviewees in sorting out for themselves the direction of their journey and how they formulated their understanding of spirituality.

> *"What it does mean to me is devising my own set of beliefs that are congruent with my sense of what spirituality means (R,p1)."*
>
> *"It's not really something that's open to other people's opinions or criticisms or rules or any type of regulations (M,p1)."*

Upon listening to the women speak of their personal journey towards defining the understanding of spirituality, it became evident how growth and discovery about spirituality can be a circuitous and tangential route. The path

that leads to a deeper grasp of the levels of meaning in the midst of tragedy and pain is an interesting and personal one. The increased clarity that often results from this path is the next element emerging from the data.

INCREASED CLARITY

The experiences shared by the women evolved around a sense of increased clarity regarding what "spirituality" meant to them. A relationship became apparent between the learning that resulted from their healing journey, and the greater clarity that was then revealed pertaining to spirituality in all its meaning. This greater sense of awareness about spirituality as connected with growth and learning, was clearly articulated by Renee when she illustrates it thus:

> *"Spirituality seems more clear to me right now as a result of what I've learned through my journey (R, p1)."*

Inasmuch as this increasingly clear understanding of spirituality was important to the women as they acquired wisdom, it occurred in an enmeshment of struggle.

DIFFICULT TO DEFINE

As the participants were asked about their definition of spirituality, they moved very quickly to speaking about the difficulty inherent in the comprehension of the concept. The women found that defining the term "spirituality" was not easy to articulate, however gratifying it appeared for them to grapple with the meaning of the concept. Resolving the inherent struggle to formulate what spirituality meant, was a task the women attempted to do in the

initial part of the interview. Renee referred to this struggle when she said:

> *"It's still very difficult to define though. It's really difficult to define! (R, p2)."*

In response to being questioned about what spirituality meant to them, the participants presented aspects pertaining to a very uniquely personal journey, one which brought increased clarity and understanding as they grew and experienced healing, while also being difficult to define.

> *"Everybody's spirituality is their own, and it's very qualitative and it's very much based on personal experience . And it's not something that anyone can judge or anyone can really explain even. It's one of those very internal things that's hard to explain and yet it's so vital to a person's life (B,p1)."*

The formulation of the definition of spirituality, while challenging to articulate for these women, appears to be of a very personal nature, one which brings greater understanding as the women themselves experienced healing and growth.This difficulty and the intrinsic struggle with defining spirituality, was a beginning for the women and led to a discussion of their perceived differences between religion and spirituality.

The importance of this personal journey, will be further illustrated at the end of the next property entitled "Spirituality vs. Religion", after a discussion clarifying the difference between the two terms.

Spirituality vs. Religion

The second identified property consists of five elements: clarification of

the difference (between spirituality and religion), spirituality being a less threatening term than religion, spirituality as expansive, the term "religion" as being limited, and the importance of spirituality. The need to clarify that there seems to be a definite difference between the two terms "spiritual" and "religious" was a resonant idea among the women interviewed. The second element illustrates how the term "spirituality" is a less threatening term than "religion" for the participants. The third element discusses how "spirituality" is seen as expansive. Fourthly, "religion" as an exclusive term delineating the definition of spirituality, as seen by the women to be limited, will be explored. Lastly, the importance of the concept of spirituality will be illustrated.

CLARIFICATION OF DIFFERENCE

When questioned about their understanding of spirituality, the women indicated that clarification of the difference between "religion" and "spirituality" was important. Upon an analysis of the data, four polarized notions emerged with respect to this difference. It became apparent that these three polarities illustrated the ideas that Renee, for example, refers to as "flip sides" of each other (R,p1).

The first polarity discussed was that of external vs internal. The idea was expressed that organized religion, for these women, focused on an external structure rather than on an internal focus.

> *"Religion is organized, and it's external. You can be religious without being spiritual, you can do all the things, go to church, and show people how religious you are. Spirituality is much deeper. There's a depth and a real sense of connectedness that you get from spirituality that you don't get from just being religious. There's a lot of people who can be religious, but so what? That doesn't mean anything compared to spirituality, on the*

other hand, which is very internal (B,p28)."

Secondly, polarized thinking around the notions of **static vs. dynamic** was illustrated.

> *"Religiosity suppresses you, whereas spirituality allows you to express yourself. It allows you to grow (M,p36)."*

Thirdly, the polarity of **structured and formal vs. unstructured and informal** was discussed. Michelle says of the church structure:

> *"my family was very legalistic, so was the church I went to (M,p3)."*

Betty speaks of her experiences, shedding light on the fourth polarity of **impersonal vs. personal,** when she says:

> *"spirituality is about a sensitivity to how God is working, speaking, interacting in my life, It is different from just a particular faith or religion (E,p1)."*
>
> *"But even in my frustration with the church and my rebelliousness to it, God was always a very important personal, spiritual part to me (A,p2)."*

Betty further illustrates this idea of impersonal vs. personal when she goes on to say:

> *"It's different from just being instructed, perhaps, in a particular religious framework, it's that relationship aspect (E,p1)."*

It is important to note that it appears that **sometimes there is an overlap** regarding religion and spirituality; for some of these participants, religion was a beginning basis for spirituality while simultaneously also understood to have a unique difference. Ann speaks of this:

> *"For me there was probably an overlap, actually that's probably been a*

confusing issue for me of what spirituality is, and what religion is, because I grew up in a very religious home (A,p1)."

For these women, religion was seen to be externally focused, static and structured in it's formality. An impersonal factor was attributed to their experiences with religion. If the participant had earlier exposure to a religious structure, there was sometimes an overlap found between spirituality and religion, however even if there was, it was a confusing issue for them. The need to clarify that there was, for the women interviewed, a clearly articulated difference between spirituality and religion was demonstrated.

The next three facets of the property "Spirituality vs. Religion", will further illustrate specific ideas about these two concepts and highlight unique distinctions.

SPIRITUALITY IS A LESS THREATENING TERM

The term "spirituality"seemed to be less evocative to the women participants regarding a sense of threat, than the term "religion", possibly resulting from their past experiences. In discussing their evolving belief system about spirituality, the respondents elaborated that "religion" presented to them a sense of threat that they did not feel with the term "spirituality".

This idea is presented by Renee:

"well, spirituality is actually a less threatening a term to me than religion (R,p1)."

Possibilities as to why religion may have posed a threat, will be discussed

throughout further sections of the theoretical framework.

SPIRITUALITY IS EXPANSIVE

The expansive nature of spirituality was alluded to by the respondents. This increased breadth is implied by Renee when she says:

> *" spirituality opens up a far greater...there's a lot more possibilities when you say spirituality (R,p1)."*
>
> *"Now I'm recognizing that spirituality isn't just my religious beliefs. It is a far larger picture than that for me now (R,p2)."*

The word "spirituality" appeared to connotate a vast, individual and limitless understanding as compared to the connotation from the word "religion", which was seen as limited, and will be further elaborated on as follows.

THE TERM "RELIGION" AS LIMITED

In an attempt to sort out what spirituality meant to them, the participants illustrated that the term "religion" was limited in that it does not encapsulate the concept in its entirety. The idea was presented that religion may be a *part* of spirituality, but that examining an understanding of spirituality solely in the context of religion was limited.

> *"Spirituality is a term that I'm far more comfortable about recognizing in my own life than I have been, because I used to get blocked around thinking about my spirituality because it used to denote the religious components, and that was all it brought up for me (R,p2)."*

Moving beyond thinking about spirituality as only specifically linked to

religion as they experienced it, seemed to be of benefit to the women in that it freed them and lead them to a greater understanding of spirituality. The great level of significance attributed to a sense of spirituality will be expounded upon as follows.

IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUALITY

The concept of spirituality was vastly important to the interviewees. Renee says:

> *"Spirituality is the really important part of who we are (R,p1) ."*

Betty delineates this further:

> *"I so much wanted to know if there really was a God, there really was a God that worked in people's hearts, God became real and I was just so terribly excited. because I thought the spirit of God could work in my heart some more (E,p3)."*

The role of spirituality was described as that of a guide in the women's lives:

> *"It's a guide to me. It's where I go when I need to get focused, when things are confusing and out of control, it's where I go to get centered (M,p1)."*
>
> *"I think the role that it has for me right now is that's it's more of a guideline of different ways that I want to direct my life (S,p2)."*

An interesting idea that emerged from the findings regarding the importance of spirituality was the discussion of how moving beyond an understanding of religion to spirituality meant moving from rules to relationship. This discovered relationship factor, whether with God, self or others, seemed to embody the importance of spirituality for these women.

Sophie speaks of this when she says:

> *"what spirituality means to me is a relationship with God, an interaction with God, at whatever level that might be...religion is following rules and regulations in whatever way that may be (S,p1,2)."*
>
> *"The relationship part has helped but the religious part has been a hindrance . The true spirituality has definitely helped me (S,p5)."*

For some of the participants, religion began as a somewhat complicated basis for their spiritual journey. The seemingly paradoxical relationship between the fixed structure and discipline of the church community, and the personal relationship with God, provided the underlying support structure for an understanding of spirituality for some of the women. As illustrated, the two concepts of religion and spirituality have a distinct difference. Four separate polarities pertaining to this difference were highlighted, with an understanding that sometimes there is a confusing overlap between the two terms.

Religious dogma seemed to get "in the way" for some:

> *"religion only, would make it so much worse, all the ideas of what you are supposed to do and not supposed to do without the understanding that God brings into that, and so you have all the rules and regulations without any understanding ...in a religious framework (where) you don't have a relationship with God, you have all the feelings of 'I'm a terrible person if I do this',without ever understanding God's grace and compassion for where you are at (A,p11)."*

The addition of a relational component appeared to elucidate the meaning of spirituality; this concept of relationship will be discussed in the property entitled Definition by Inclusion. For some women, religion evoked a sense of threat. Comparisons were illustrated between the expansiveness of spirituality and the limitations of the term "religion" as an exclusive route to understanding

spirituality. The immense importance of spirituality for these women became evident through their spoken words. The difficulty in defining what spirituality was in context of its obvious importance to the women, was examined initially by discussing what it was not.

Definition by Exclusion

The second identified property consists of two factors: developing a rationale for beginning using exclusion and secondly, spirituality *not* being dictated by external influences.

RATIONALE FOR BEGINNING

In an attempt to articulate their own definition of spirituality, the women initially began speaking about what spirituality was *not*. This appeared to be important in laying the foundation for delineating what the concept *did* mean thereafter.

"I think I'll start by telling you what it doesn't mean to me (R,p1)."

Beginning the process of defining the concept by what it is *not* rather than by what it *is*, appeared to be an attempt to deal with the difficulty inherent in sorting out the meaning of spirituality. This process of elimination helped them encapsulate what spirituality meant to them.

Continuing with this deletion process, the next element presents an overview as to other negated factors.

SPIRITUALITY NOT DICTATED BY EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Renee presented the idea that spirituality is **not about family of origin values exclusively,** that her internal beliefs are not based solely on the family values by which she was raised.

> *"What it doesn't mean to me is, it doesn't mean a strict set of beliefs that follow simply because I've been brought up to believe that that's what I should be following (R,p1)."*

It appears that there is not a simple causation here, that "simply following " without internal processing and personal decision making about one's own values would be seen as inadequate.

The idea of spirituality being **not about unquestioning acceptance of other's religious beliefs** was presented. Rather, being open to questioning and learning was an underlying idea that was emphasized:

> *"I always asked a lot of questions. People couldn't answer my questions and they didn't want to say they couldn't answer my questions. To hear and believe 'simply because it was', or because it is written, was expected. But that's not how learning happens, my inquisitive nature wants to know not just what you see but what's underneath it (R,p7)."*

The idea was presented that the establishment of individual spiritual beliefs was **not about static acceptance of external influences:**

> *"I went from accepting a set of norms and beliefs just for the sake of doing it and very begrudgingly so, to feeling free enough to throw those beliefs out the window and start hauling in the ones that I wanted to look at. Again, looking at them and incorporating them into my life if they fit and throwing them back out the window if they didn't. And feeling okay about that (R,p19)."*

The women defined their own personal spiritual belief system by initially clarifying what components they did not find integral to them. After examining what spirituality was not, the participants were then better able to define what it was. They thus moved from Definition by Exclusion to Definition by Inclusion.

Definition by Inclusion

This last property under the category "Defining Spirituality", includes five factors that encapsulate the defining of spirituality for the women participants. The encompassing factors in this process are: internal integrity, the use of metaphors, a relationship with God, the development of spirituality, and the mystery inherent in the essence of spirituality.

INTERNAL INTEGRITY

For the women interviewed, spirituality is about believing in and following one's own internal belief system. An internal clarification of values assisted them in their striving for integrity. This internal commitment reflects a holding true to beliefs that are unique to the individual. Having such a belief system allows one to be integrated and consistent.

> *"I am striving to have more congruence for what goes on inside of me and what I speak. There needs to be more congruence in my life, more balance between what I know to be truth in here, and what I speak. And the way to that congruence in my life is , would be to increase my understanding of me, and the way that God can be involved and manifest Him/Herself in my life today. And bringing my understanding of God into a more tangible relationship, something I can draw strength from on a daily basis (R,p13)."*

Spirituality was seen by the participants as central to their core values. They considered their spiritual values to be an integral part of who they were.

The women used metaphorical illustrations to describe this internal identification with spirituality.

METAPHORICAL

Uses of symbolic imagery were described by some of the participants interviewed, when they articulated what spirituality meant to them. Bianca speaks about an umbrella, a river and her tears in a poetic way:

> *"And I imagine spirituality as an umbrella. As if you have a big umbrella and the word 'spirituality' is written over top of it. And the spokes underneath the umbrella, if you imagine them to be of an infinite number, that is what spirituality is. So it's infinitely defined. I mean, it means so many different things. And underneath this umbrella are all these different people that have one of these spokes belonging to them...or if you were to say 'What does spirituality look like?' To me, it looks like a very peaceful river that ebbs and flows, ebbs and flows. And it's a place where I can go all by myself and know that this is where I feel very comfortable. It's probably made of all my tears and it's made of all my feelings and all my experiences that I can really express. But it's all there in this undisturbed form that nobody can judge or explain or understand. And it's me.This river is just mine. It's a place that's just mine. It's very safe. It's okay to be me there because it belongs to me. That's what it looks like to me. And it's a place of tranquillity and real harmony and balance (B,p2)."*

The choice to use metaphor and symbolism in attempting to expound on spirituality and its multiple levels of meaning, was eloquently described by Bianca. In the following quote, Michelle speaks of opening a door:

> *"I guess once you are free to be real, it opens the doors, it throws the doors open to spirituality; to me that is the key in the lock. You be honest and then it opens up a relationship with God (M,p36)."*

In continuing their elaboration regarding spiritual concepts, the

participants quickly moved to the inclusion of a relationship factor.

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

As previously mentioned in the element entitled "Importance of Spirituality", a very important aspect of spirituality for these women, was the feeling of a **personal relationship with God.** This sense of relational connection seemed to be an essential vehicle by which the women defined spirituality. Betty and Michelle described this relationship:

> *"It's where we're at in relationship to God. So that what's spirituality means to me (E,p1)."*
>
> *"Spirituality for me is a relationship between me and God (M,p1)."*

Ann and Bianca discuss their experience of communicative connection in relationship with God:

> *"God is a part of my every minute. I don't think about him all the time, I'm terrible at spending time reading scripture, but it's like God is always there. People talk to themselves all the time, I think I talk to God more than I talk to myself (A,p10)."*
>
> *"Religion has a lot to do with people, whereas spirituality has to do with me and God. that's all there is, just you and the Higher Being (B,p29)."*

Spiritual values do not define only a relationship with God but also a **relationship with others and self:**

> *"Our spirituality is connected with our emotions, and our sexuality. How we relate to people and ourselves, what I mean by interconnection is that as I'm being healed in my sexuality it gives me a greater ability to have a deeper spirituality and as that happens, relationships can be deeper. Spirituality is about intimacy. Intimacy with God, yourself, and with others. It's all interconnected with each other (S,p10,11)."*

Experiencing a relational connectedness with God was an idea that was reflected in various ways throughout the interviews. The following element will illustrate certain aspects pertaining to the development of spirituality in the women's lives.

DEVELOPMENT OF SPIRITUALITY

The idea that during their upbringing, the participant's **exploration of spirituality was initially discouraged,** was illustrated by Renee, who experienced having limits imposed on her exploring spiritual questions. For her, the church's rigid structure made her feel constrained in her ability to freely explore and ask questions.

> *"I think that a large part of spirituality in our society is defined by our religious norms and beliefs. We aren't encouraged to explore beyond that. I certainly in growing up, was not encouraged to explore it. I think that I was discouraged from exploring it (R,p2)."*

Renee continues by saying that as she gained **increased comfort with questions,** she was able to move beyond these constraints, whether perceived or real, toward further discovery.

> *"the crux of it for me is that I've come to a place where I'm comfortable questioning beliefs that I had up until this point I had taken for granted(R,p3)."*

> *"I think as I get stronger too, being able to be connected to that part of myself as a little girl who had a very questionning spirit, I appreciate my inquisitive nature now (R,p8.)."*

The idea that developing spiritual awareness is about a **constant questioning process,** is illustrated:

"And I think that spirituality is a constant questioning of what the bigger picture really is (R,p4)."

Spiritual growth is seen to be a ongoing discovery process:

"It's always a process of discovery (U,p3)."

The developmental journey that the survivors of abuse described, proceeded from a place of initial discouragement to a place where the women felt an increased comfort level with the internal questionning process. This continual and ongoing enquiry led them to a place where they were comfortable with the unknown. This mystery of spirituality is the next element elaborated upon.

MYSTERY

The idea of spirituality as a mystery was discussed by Renee as she illustrated her comfort level with learning, in the midst of the unknown:

"It's sort of a mysterious element, but it's an okay mysterious element. I'm really comfortable with being able to say that there are things I don't know. But that doesn't mean that I'm going to just stop, and say 'okay, there are things that I don't know, and I'm never going to know them'. I don't feel that way. I feel there are things I don't know, but I believe that time and reflection and exploration will open windows into the areas that I don't have a lot of knowledge about (R,p3)."

"What I'm hearing as I speak, is echoes of my own not knowing, not knowing about...is there life after what we know here and is that life in another dimension? Do we come to this world with a specific purpose in learning specific lessons? I guess what I believe is that life here and life hereafter in whatever form that takes, there is always learning happening. I don't think that God, and whatever my understanding of Him is, or of the entity is, that once I leave this place and if I move to a place where I'm in more accessible relationship with God, that I will be told,'Well, here it all is, everything you never knew'. I think we just keep learning all the

time and that's one of life's blessings, one of the blessings about living, is that it is a continual learning, whether it's here or the hereafter (R,p4)."

This mysterious aspect of spirituality and it's inherent challenge to understanding, enabled this woman to feel a comfort with exploration of new, more complex ideas.

The enigma that is spirituality led to the idea of a need for **moving beyond black and white thinking:**

"Life is not as black and white, it isn't black and white, and that I'm comfortable with grey.There are times when it is, and I would be inauthentic to not respond to a situation when I feel it needs a black and white response. But by and large, life is not black and white, and when there are situations of greyness and fog, that is perfectly acceptable and legitimate. And seeing grey in my life and seeing grey in other people's lives, doesn't bespeak at all to me of a lack of theirs, or a lack of spirituality in my life. But rather, bespeaks more of the truth of where you are. (R,p16)."

Renee spoke of the discovery that she made concerning **circular vs. linear thinking** about spirituality; this realization about how to think about spiritual concepts expanding her understanding:

"It was through meeting this really Christ-like person, through meeting him and realizing that there was another way to look at this, that it wasn't, you know, I didn't have to just look at it from straight ahead, but that I was able to look at it from around... I think we're all trying to move in the same direction and struggling in our ways, and struggling in finding a way to get there that is truest to who we are (R,p10)."

This element of mystery led to an expansion in the ways of thinking about spirituality. There seemed to be an intrinsic struggle in describing something which cannot be seen in black and white terms, while embracing the notion of mystery.

Although spiritual values develop over time through a process of discovery or spiritual journey, internal integrity is maintained through devotion to underlying principles.

Spirituality is the embodiment of the belief system an individual formulates in the journey from infancy to adulthood. Unlike religion, which for these women appeared to be defined by a somewhat fixed belief system established through centuries of church structure and hierarchy, spirituality is as individual as the person it embodies. Although religious beliefs and family values may be the base for spiritual development, the journey to spirituality is personal and follows no fixed guidelines. Spirituality defines a person's core beliefs about meaning and value. It is almost a window to the soul.

> *"Spirituality, I guess for me, is very entwined with my relationship with God, in that for me at least, I've come into an understanding that's very apart from any religiosity or the church. My relationship with God is separate from that, whether I go to church or not, whether I'm involved with religious so to speak activities or not, God is still part of my life and who I am. Spirituality gives me meaning. That somehow I am unable at this point, to separate myself from, not that I would want to, but it's become so much a part of who I am, that I can't even separate it any more (A,p2)."*

> *"To me, an authentic human being is a human being who is in touch with their spiritual side of themselves, someone who can live in the moment, and attend to the moment is someone who is living in a spiritual way. And that's what I strive for. I strive for authenticity, and for that level of engagement in my life, to be fully engaged with life from moment to moment and not living in the past or living in the future, but living in the present and being able to react to the present and respond to the present in an authentic and real way (R,p16)."*

Inasmuch as it encapsulated meaning to them, spirituality enabled the victims of abuse to disentangle themselves from a web of negativity and pain without hope.

2. RESPONDING TO ABUSE

The second category that evolved from an analysis of the data, was Responding to Abuse. This category is divided into three properties, that of Own Response, Parent's Response and lastly, Church Response. The first property encapsulates the individual responses by the sexual abuse survivor, including both intellectual or cognitive, emotional and behavioural. This is followed by the responses of the survivor's parents, which impacted the women. Lastly, the religious, or Church Response, includes the impact on the participants as they staggered through the aftermath of the abusive experience. (See Figure # 2; for the complete framework, see Appendix A: The Conceptual Framework).

Own Response

For the survivor, this property is made up of several facets: the cognitive reaction by the survivor as a result of the abuse, their emotional reaction, and thirdly, the specific behavioural and relational consequences regarding personal relationships with men.

COGNITIVE REACTION

The intellectualized reactions as set forth in the interview process for these women, included denial, minimization, the use of well-developed masks, and low feelings of self-worth.

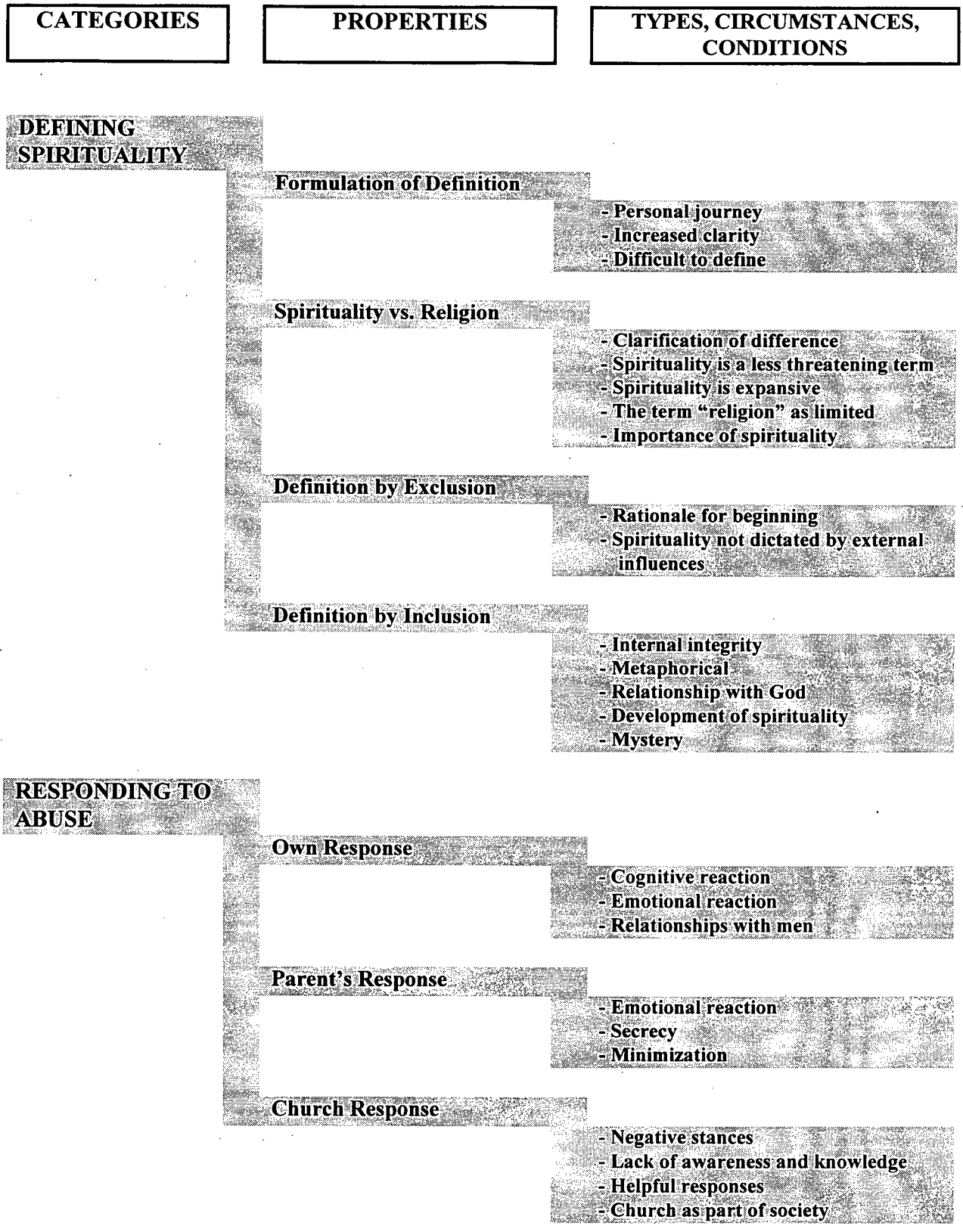
An initial response to the sexual abuse was denial:

"What I found was that looking back now in retrospect, that I was in denial a lot (S,p5)."

Minimization was used by the women to deny the impact of the abuse:

"I minimized it. You think 'it's your fault', you think it must be worse for somebody else. There's so many reasons why it wasn't legitimized (M,p11).

FIGURE #2: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING PROCESS:
WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE



The participants spoke about the use of **well developed masks,** possibly to protect themselves from the intensity of the consequences of the abuse.This concealment of real feelings and thoughts was evidenced in these comments:

> *"I think that as long as you pretend that everything is okay and wear your plastic face, then they don't have to deal with it either (B,p17)."*

> *"I learned really well how to put on the pretense of being together and being competent, and that's not what was going on for me a lot of the times. I've worn some well developed masks (R,p6)."*

> *"I could not put a smile on my face, but I stuck a paper one on top of it, as though I was, my whole face, my whole body reflected how I was feeling, it was so unbalanced, so I was unbalanced for a long time. People wanted me to be balanced, and I couldn't be (M,p24)."*

Low self-esteem was an aspect that was mentioned as well:

> *"The choices I made were based on my past experiences, and based on a really nil level of self-esteem. I was so programmed, conditioned, to be that way. And so I had to undo all of that (B,p4)."*

The initial cognitive responses were to deny or minimize the impact of the abuse. Included in the reactive stances by the women interviewed, was the use of well developed masks worn as protective coping mechanisms. Low self-esteem seemed as well to be indicative of the response profile for these women.These cognitive responses appear to be tied into the emotional reactions as discussed in the next element.

EMOTIONAL REACTION

The range of emotion that accompanied the aftermath of sexual abuse included loss and grief, anger, shame, and guilt. In essence, these emotions can be seen as different aspects of a **loss and grief response** to the occurrence of abuse:

> *"I was a little girl who lost her childhood...because of what happened to her. And no child deserves to lose their childhood and no child deserves to be treated in a way that I was treated (R,p12)."*

> *"I remember the first time he touched me. I thought I was conscious but I*

wasn't, I don't know how to describe it, it was like I thought that my innocence was completely taken away from me. It was like some veil had been taken away from my eyes and I was in this awful world, and everything was kind of grey after that. I saw everything differently (M,p5)."

One of the women interviewed spoke of her intense anger felt toward the perpetrator:

"I knew that if I would have had a gun and (the abuser) was there, I would have shot him without even considering it. The anger I felt was so intense sometimes I wish I had (M,p10)."

Another woman commented on the shame she struggled with:

"I've lived with guilt and shame all my life, until the last couple of years, I felt I was dirty, I had this deep, dark secret. If anybody ever found out who the real me was...Its affected my entire life (E,p20)."

Betty spoke of the feelings of guilt she lived with for many years, Michelle adds to this by saying:

"It was really hard to talk about it because there was so much guilt. I blamed myself and the whole thing was on my shoulders (M,p10)."

The broad spectrum of emotions encountered by these women included those of loss and grief, anger, shame and guilt. The management of these pain-filled emotions took on many forms. Some of the ways in which they unfolded were amplified within the context of relationship difficulties with men.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN

This section describes the " behavioural reaction" that occurred among the women interviewed, specifically referring to the difficulties encountered in relationships with men. The participants experienced a difficulty with trust in their relationships with men:

"There's the trust issue, trust towards God and towards men (S,p12)."

"It's a lack of trust. I've had a really hard time trusting God and trusting

men. Trusting my husband to make the right decisions for our family,'how am I going to trust you?'. Trust has been a really big issue for me (U,p36)."

Difficulty with trusting men appeared to mirror a difficulty in trusting God. This aspect of the women's experience will be further discussed in the property entitled "Image of God".

Having a **difficulty with boundaries** was described as an inherent struggle in relating with men:

"I have had a hard time sometimes with boundaries, being clear about my limits (E,26)."

"I put myself in unsafe situations, I had absolutely no boundaries, I had no boundaries with my husband (M,p19)."

Unresolved issues or **unmet needs with their own father** affected how relationships with men were viewed:

"I've been looking for men to play out what I haven't finished with my own father (R,p9)."

Ann further elaborates on the unhealthy dynamics with her father, who was the abuser:

"It's been interesting to look at it in my relationships with men, I've had a really hard time ending relationships, so even if I broke up with somebody and the guy was a real jerk, I'd still maintain a friendship with him. I think that was very indicative of what my relationship was with my father because there were some really bad things about it, but I couldn't let go of it, because I really loved him. I just kind of buried the bad things and I would do that in relationships too, I would bury the things about the person that were really bad and still maintain the relationship (A,p8)."

The use of sexual involvement, sometimes in the form of **promiscuous behaviour,** was mentioned as a coping mechanism:

"I was very promiscuous and you know, very wild. I drank a lot ,

and...substance abuse, I think that was my way of escaping the pain (S,p5)."

"Probably one of the most difficult things for me is that a big coping mechanism for me was sexual involvement (A,p11)."

The repetitious cycle of abusive relationships was part of a pattern of **revictimization:**

"It's a continuous cycle. I get into abusive relationships, and then I find that that's not really what I want (S,p12)."

"What he had done to me was set me up for other men to victimize me as well. It was as if I had a neon sign that flashed above my head (U,p4)."

"Then I became involved with him, which was just another cog in the same wheel that kept spinning around and around, I was continuing to stay in a relationship that was, in many ways, very abusive. And I didn't seem to know how to get out, and I didn't know that I wanted to get out. And that scared me. And of course, the roots were in the sexual abuse. I mean, in many ways I was a victim again in being with him (R,p14)."

Although the idea was presented that these victims of childhood sexual abuse had difficulties forming and building healthy relationships with men, Renee and Ann spoke of the **positive effects of close and healthy connections with safe men** which had a positive impact on their lives. Renee experienced relational healing in the midst of a close friendship with a male, that changed her outlook on men. It is interesting to note that she has also referred to him as someone who embodied spiritual principles:

"He really epitomized for me what I perceived the message and the truth of Christ's life would have been. I think that he came as close to that as I've ever seen, and yet, I mean, as far as living his life by religious expectations, he did not necessarily do that. And yet, I've never known a more loving, compassionate human being in my life. He was really Christ-like. And it was through meeting him and realizing that there was another way to look at this, that I learned (R,p10)."

Sadly, this friend has since died in a car accident.

> *"He was the one person I could speak to about the circumstances in my life and he was able to find the silver lining to the point where I could laugh about it, some absurdity of it. And I think that if I never had a relationship like that, I think it would have been very hard for me to get to trust men and to believe that men are really struggling as much as we are, as women are, and find the humanness about men. Because so much of my life I've dealt with men where there has been a power differential. With him there was none. We were equals in every sense of the word, and it's in reflecting about my relationship with him that it always allows me to move forward (R,p10)."*

Ann also spoke of a safe and healthy relationship with a male (who was a church pastor), that was therapeutic for her:

> *"Being a part of his family circle helped me to have a new view of what family was, who God was in the midst of their family and how they related to each other, and how they related to me, there was certainly a lot of unconditional love and acceptance of who I was and especially with the man of the house, our relationship was kind of backwards and forwards, because trust is such a hard thing for me, that I learned a lot of what a father- daughter relationship should be like in that relationship, so that was very significant (A,p14).*

The women interviewed demonstrated examples of their own personal responses to the actual abuse and it's aftermath. Cognitively, they grappled with denial of the abuse and it's reality, minimizing it's impact, while sometimes using masks as camouflage. The effects of low self-esteem were noticed. Emotionally, feelings of loss and grief, anger, shame and guilt were unfolded. For these women, behavioural implications in developing relationships with men were factors. Issues emerged from the data, such as difficulty with establishing trust with men or setting healthy boundaries. Promiscuous behaviour was described and recurrences of revictimization in the midst of unhealthy relationships with men were aspects that were elaborated upon. The following property will illustrate the parental responses as experienced by these women.

Parent's Response

The parent's responses upon discovering that their child was abused, is illustrated in this property. The parental responses, as experienced by the adult survivors of abuse, and recounted by them in the interviews are as follows: emotional reaction, secrecy, and minimization.

EMOTIONAL REACTION

There was a sense of **emotional distance** by the parents of the interviewed women, experienced by this individual as a lack of compassion:

> *"Lack of compassion. I can't remember a time in my life where my parents, either of them, really just held me when I was a child. I don't remember being nurtured in that way, having that kind of closeness, that kind of physical closeness, that kind of emotional closeness. I guess, this aloofness that there was that hindered, for sure hindered me from being able to move on (R,p18)."*

One of the women told of how her mother considered the relationship with her husband more important than being emotionally there for her own daughter:

> *"My mother had no natural affection, she was willing to shut up and let the abuse go on for the sake of preserving the relationship with her husband that she deemed was valuable. I think she was afraid of being alone (M,p39)."*

A lack of allowing authenticity of response by the children who had been abused, was illustrated by this woman:

> *"hindrance is where pretense, having to be something that I really wasn't, having to feel things that I really didn't feel, I mean, being asked to feel things that I really didn't feel (R,p17)."*

The lack of emotional closeness with parents seemed to hinder further growth, keeping a survivor stuck. Feeling discouraged from expressing genuine feelings to the parents about the abuse was an apparent concern. The parental responses

included an atmosphere of secrecy and silence, which leads us to the next element.

SECRECY

Secrecy seemed to take the form of silence regarding the abuse, of not talking about it and of minimally handling it:

> *"At the time the abuse occurred and I told my parents what happened, their attitude was: 'well, we'll stop you from seeing this person, but we won't talk about it or deal with it', I was so lost (R,p14)."*

This lack of awareness on the part of the parents as to how to deal with the abuse scenario or the child victim, was commented on by Renee in the above quote, and further discussed by Michelle:

> *"I wasn't allowed to be real, I was really angry at my stepfather. I wasn't very nice. It wasn't considered very nice to be angry or feeling hateful, it was unacceptable for me to be the way was, my mother freaked out at my disrespect for my stepfather, while all the while he had been molesting me and she knew it (M,p5)."*

Another woman described this unawareness:

> *"I needed my Dad to tell me how awful a thing this had been, how sorry he was that it happened, and that he'd have wanted to hurt whoever did this to me, but he said 'it's a good thing you didn't tell us then, because we couldn't have handled it' (U,p9)."*

The emphasis on silence and secrecy was upheld sometimes to the point of protecting the abuser instead of the abused:

> *"They were more focused on the abuser and his family's potential destruction if the truth came out, than they were aware of my pain and hurt (R,p6)."*

> *"My mother did not want me to speak of it, she was more concerned with her husband and his reputation than with me or with my feelings (M,p20)."*

This skewed focus of protection and concern was not helpful for these women. The atmosphere of secrecy, silence, and lack of awareness regarding how to deal

with the abuse permeated the experiences of these women that were interviewed. Another aspect of parental response included that of minimization, which was already alluded to above, and will be further elaborated on as follows.

MINIMIZATION

Some parents tended to view the abusive experiences in a way that minimized their impact on the children involved. Michelle speaks of this:

> *"Then my mother told me that she'd known that it had been going on but she thought we were asleep and so why bother us (M,p8)."*

When this response occurred, it appeared to demonstrate a discounting of the impact and down playing of the effects on the child of the actual abuse.

The following individual recollects how it was for her in the aftermath of the sexual abuse. Her story underscores the extent to which there was emotional distance, secrecy and unawareness of how to respond, with the focus of protection being on the perpetrator and his family, although perhaps well intentioned, rather than on the molested child:

> *"When I told my parents that I'd been sexually abused, what they did do is, as best as they could, they limited the contact I had with the individual who was molesting me. But in terms of bringing the truth to light, that never happened. They didn't talk about what happened with me. They didn't talk about what happened with me to other people. They just believed that to talk about it, especially with the family of the perpetrator, would potentially destroy his family. And they thought it was their Christian duty not to say anything. Because of the potential that this information had to destroy his family (R,p5)."*

Renee reflected on how detrimental it was that concerns about the abuser's family overruled the importance and healing aspects of talking through the traumatic events, even if it meant facing some uncomfortable issues. She noted that the truth being brought to light would have been much more helpful.

Church Response

This third property under the category "Responding to Abuse", refers to the women's experiences of how the organized church, if applicable, responded to the sexually abusive scenarios. There are several factors discussed here, as suggested by the qualitative data collected. These factors are: negative stances, lack of awareness/knowledge, helpful responses and the connection between church and society.

NEGATIVE STANCES

These were behavioural and cognitive stances, as experienced by the participants to be detrimental, that the religious organizations appeared to maintain in the midst of the occurrence and aftermath of sexual abuse. They include lack of authenticity, the imposition of silence and minimization.

The experiencing of a **lack of authenticity** in the midst of the religious network was expounded upon by these women:

> *"The big part of the problem I think, is the masking of the feelings I was forced to do (M,p25)."*

> *"I remember having volatile arguments on Sunday morning before church, before going to church and then having to plaster on that happy face because you're not supposed to, God forbid, be real at church. God forbid that you should look anything else but content when you walk through the doors of the church (R,p6)."*

To be disallowed honesty of expression or to not see genuineness modelled, was a hurdle for these women. Renee goes on to describe the quandary she felt being caught in a vicious circle:

> *"The truth of the matter is in reflection, that even if we had not been okay, I don't know if people in the church knew what to do, you're in this vicious circle because you're playing into it and yet if you didn't play into it I wonder how much acceptance and tolerance there would have been if you hadn't. So I don't blame my parents for that, I really blame the way that the church was set up (R,p6)."*

The experience of having silence imposed on them, was a dilemma for these participants:

> *"Something I'm realizing now that played a role in my resistance to spirituality earlier, is the role that the church played in silencing me, I had built up so much resistance around the church, because of what I perceived to be the role it played in silencing the people who knew about my having been sexually abused (R,p5,6)."*

> *"The church had put all these 'shoulds' on me, all these 'rules' of how it was for me to forgive. When I finally left the church, I found out they were not interested in me, they were just interested in shutting me up (M,p20)."*

Minimization of the impact of sexual abuse perpetrated with the children was discussed. When the abuse was revealed to the church pastor by Michelle, the effects of the abuse were denied, and the victim was encouraged to pretend everything was immediately all right:

> *"I was shamed into forgiving and then we had this "whole big cry session" He (the abuser) drops into instant tears, and the pastor declared him repentant, prays over him, and sends us all back home to be one big happy family , he never asked us about it again...(M,p13)."*

This denial of truth of the consequences of the abuse and expectation that recovery would be instantaneous was not helpful for the abused child. A sense of awareness or knowledge as to how to deal with the abuse in a healthy way was non-existent, at least at this time.

LACK OF AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE

Lacking a realization about abuse issues or knowledge about how ro respond to the situation, impacted the participants. A lack of awareness and no real understanding of how to deal with abuse issues, even to the point of denying it's reality or effects was difficult for these women:

"They had no understanding where I was coming from, why I have lived the kind of life I have in the past, judging me, unable to really understand (S,p7)."

"I got into situations with well meaning people that thought that I was into self pity and just wallowing in these feelings and that if I really chose to, that I could just get on with things; I think that's very incorrect and shallow thinking and can be very damaging. It's been damaging to me in the past (S,p3)."

Discounting healing as a process, was an aspect of lack of awareness that emerged from the data:

"Sometimes religion can seem very spiritual, but I think you're denying a part of yourself a lot of the times, denying the pain, denying that you have hurts, just by saying God help me or 'I forgive you' that it should be gone. An attitude that healing is an instant process rather than a process that comes through time (S,p3)."

"Religion meant a quick fix, that you could just, God would just ZAP you. I truly believe that He touches and heals us, but something that has had that deep of an effect on you, cannot be healed overnight (S,p3)."

The church's **attitudes toward sexuality** were seen to be a contributing factor to the occurrence of sexual abuse:

"I think one thing that had to do with the sexual abuse in my case probably is that I was raised in a home where anything that had to do with sexual issues was very, very much, ah, not talked about (E,p1)."

Another women spoke of the discomfort the religious environment had with sexual issues or sexualization behaviours, which were seen by Michelle as connected to the abuse and needing more than an imposition of judgement :

"I mean if I, am promiscuous for example, the church comes in and says 'stop that, or marry that man', or whatever, they have this pat answer to deal with this problem, let's make it look nice, rather than get to the bottom of it (M,p26)."

The experiences these women had within the context of a religious organization, were seen as unfortunate and disadvantageous responses. Renee made a comment on how there is an increased realization today regarding how little the church knew about abuse issues:

> *"Well, my Dad was involved in dealing with some abuse issues that came up in the church almost 10 years ago. He's realizing how many mistakes they made in dealing with the perpetrator, or perceived perpetrator and the family. Now, they have more information, there's more openness to hearing about abuse, but sometimes I wonder about if there's a lot of compassion (R,p7)."*

HELPFUL RESPONSES

Instances of helpful responses from the church community were noted. Betty talks of the healing value for her when a church leader acknowledged the wrongs inflicted on her as a childhood victim of sexual abuse by a church pastor:

> *"He would never know how important his words were. He looked at me full in the face and he said 'Betty, on behalf of the clergy of which I am a member, I want to ask for your forgiveness and I want to apologize'. He hadn't done anything to me but he was a member of the clergy. No one had ever asked for my forgiveness or apologized. I wept and wept and wept. Those were the most healing words anybody could say. No one had ever said they were sorry (E,p23)."*

When acknowledgement was forthcoming regarding the lack of awareness, and the negative stances about sexual abuse was admitted to, this women felt a tremendous sense of release and healing.

CHURCH AS PART OF SOCIETY

The women spoke of a general lack of understanding in society as well, pertaining to sexual abuse issues at the historical time period during which the abuse occurred.

"Twenty and thirty years ago when the abuse occured, we had no opportunity. Maybe it was only seven to ten years ago that society was just dealing with it. We never knew that you could talk about it.We never knew that it happened to anybody else. We didn't know; there was no place to go. Do you think that you would have been believed then? You'd have been a slut, I mean, it would have been all your fault (E,p18)."

One of the women interviewed spoke of the realization that perhaps it was that **society taught the church about abuse:**

"I think what's happened in fact is that the rest of society has become a role model for the church in terms with it's dealings around sexual abuse. I think that's it's been, for lack of a better term, secular society that has really made, has broken ground around sexual abuse and the church has had to learn from people outside of the church (R,p8)."

The idea was presented that there was an expectation that the church should be a role model for society:

"the church has an obligation to be, because of it's nature, has an obligation to be a role model to the rest of society (R,p8)."

It was noted that there is an **increased knowledge today in both church and society:**

"I think that today there is more tolerance for people who are telling their stories than there ever was (R,p7)."

It was of benefit for Betty to hear a psychology professor, who had at one point been a church pastor himself, acknowledge to her that the way both the church and society handled sexual abuse twenty or thirty years ago was detrimental:

"He said to me: 'You protected yourself, it's a good thing you didn't tell. You wouldn't have received any help, it probably would've been poorly handled then' (E,p18)."

The church was seen as systemically connected to the society which it was a part of. In the midst of this societal and historical context, they were both seen as lacking awareness of sexual abuse issues and how to deal with them. Perhaps part of the reason that the women were so disappointed in the church responses, is that they had an expectation that the organized church would know better.

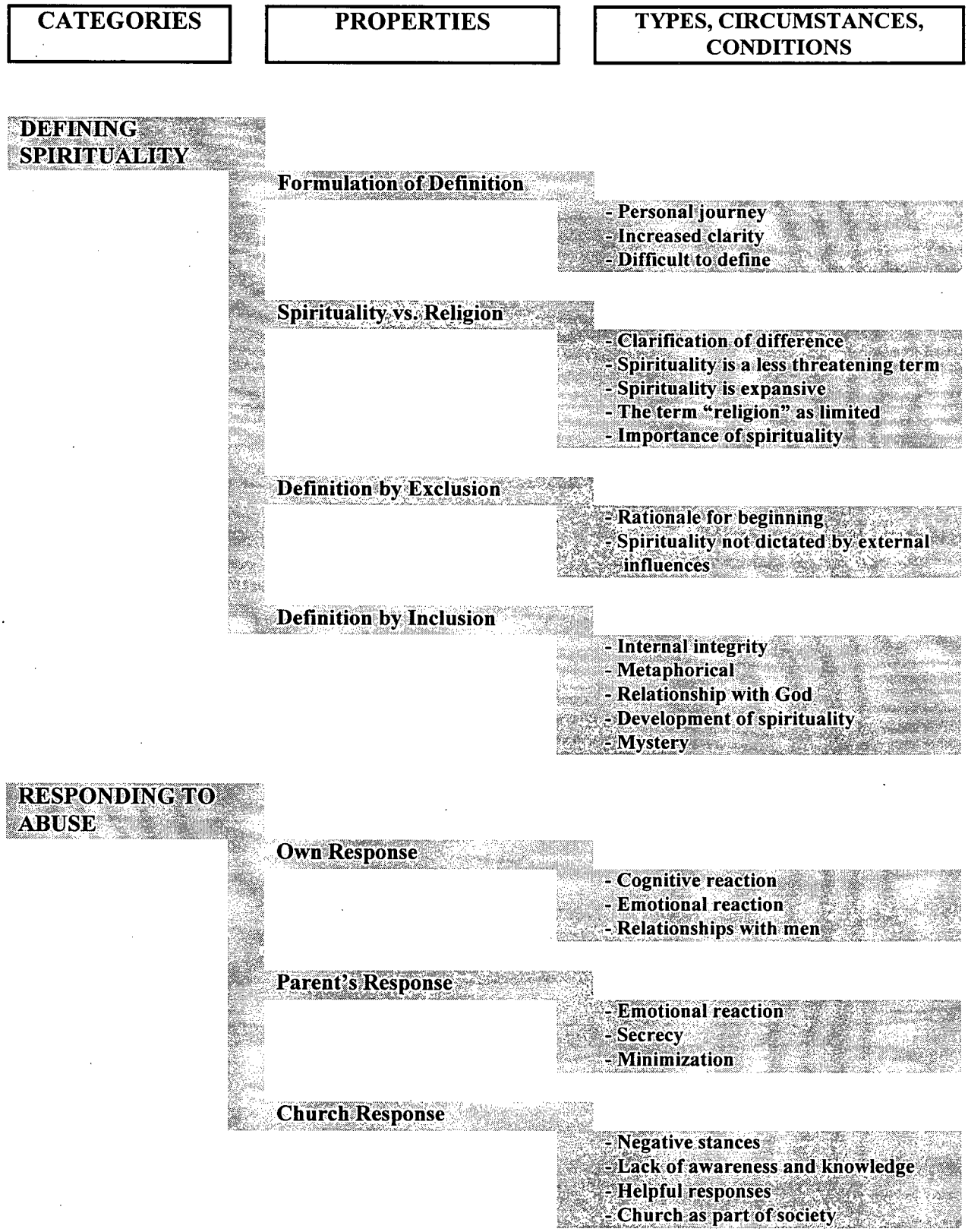
Renee concludes this property on the church's response, by stating the importance of continual openness to learning by the religious organizations:

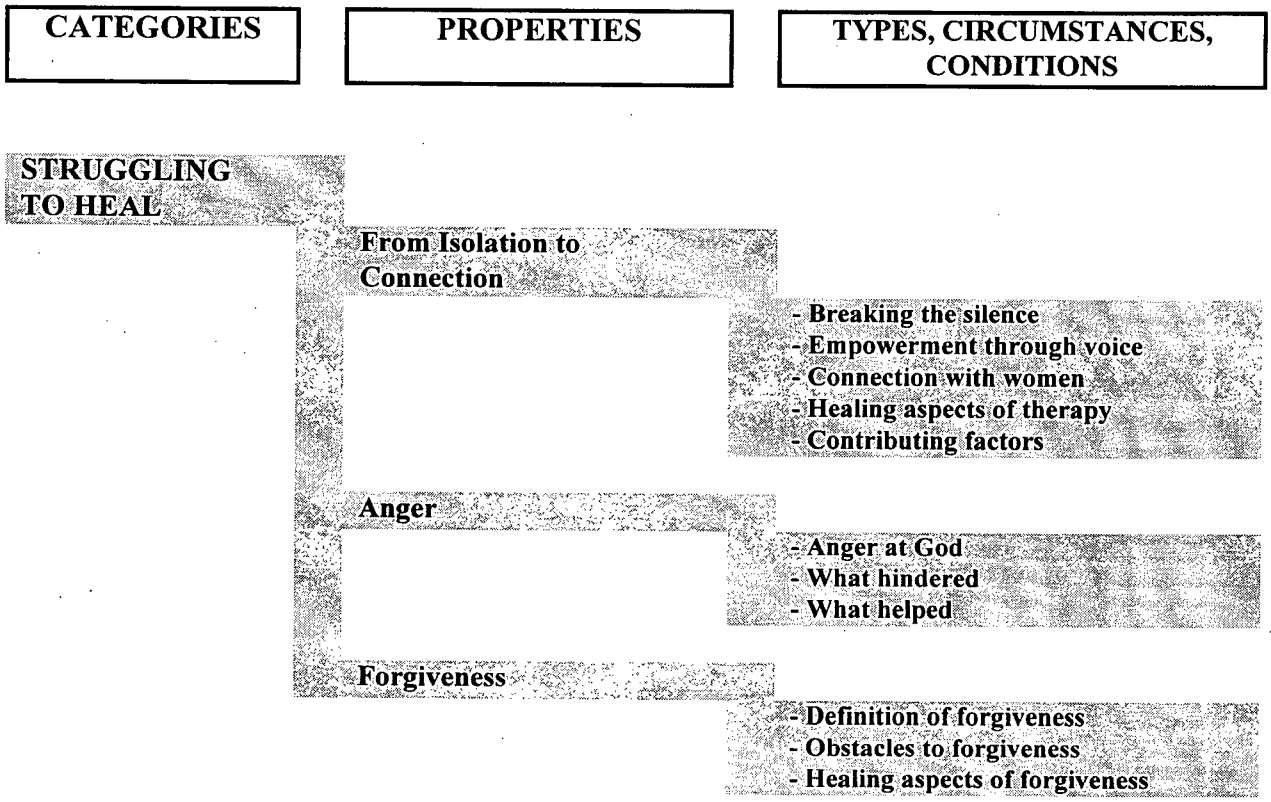
> *"And I think that the church has been resistant to looking at it. I mean, it's got to a point where they had to look at it, it became absolutely in their best interest to look at it. Because if they want to continue growing and being accepting of the way that people are, it has to look at these issues. They are such big issues today, and to not do so, to minimize the importance of these issues would be, well, it would give the people on the outside, it would only continue the perception of people outside the church, that the church is an archaic organization, not open to change, and not progressive (R,p9)."*

3. STRUGGLING TO HEAL

This third category of the framework, "Struggling to Heal", was approached from three view points: **From Isolation to Connection, Anger** and **Forgiveness.** Moving "From Isolation to Connection", speaking out and thus experiencing healing is the first property. Secondly, various aspects relating to anger as part of the healing journey are examined. The third property consists of assessing factors pertaining to forgiveness as part of the healing process. (See Figure # 3; for the complete framework, see Appendix A: The Conceptual Framework).

FIGURE #3: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING PROCESS:
WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE




CATEGORIES
PROPERTIES
TYPES, CIRCUMSTANCES, CONDITIONS
STRUGGLING TO HEAL
From Isolation to Connection
- Breaking the silence
- Empowerment through voice
- Connection with women
- Healing aspects of therapy
- Contributing factors
Anger
- Anger at God
- What hindered
- What helped
Forgiveness
- Definition of forgiveness
- Obstacles to forgiveness
- Healing aspects of forgiveness

From Isolation to Connection

For the survivor of abuse, this property is made up of several different facets: that of moving from isolation to connection, the empowerment attained through voice, the power of connecting with women around the issue, the healing gained through therapy and a discussion on contributing factors.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

The first step in breaking the silence and thus enabling healing from the effects of the abuse is that of confronting the reality of the actual abuse:

> *"I began to accept the idea in my own head that it was true and I think I probably went on for three years wondering what had happened and kind of subconsciously hearing God say to 'do something about it, to confront it '(A,p13)."*

Revelations of the abuse in terms of confronting the abuser was also seen to be a turning point in healing. This step was taken by Ann and seen to be a difficult one:

> *"Confronting my father was a very big step for me (A,p13)."*

Another woman recounts how the initial telling of her story to someone other than her parents years ago, was of great benefit to her in that this person gave her a supportive, validating response:

> *"And so, when I first spoke to Don about it, and he reacted by, in a very angry way, angry at not only the perpetrator, but also that I had not been validated and that my experience had been shunned, I was then able to start connecting with the loss that I had incurred by being a victim of sexual abuse. And he was the first person I cried with about it. I mean, I was able to share with him all of the confusion that I felt around it. But I didn't get a wall, you know. Instead, he was a sponge, and he just soaked it in and held me when I needed to be held, and beared with me amidst all of the confusion. And he was completely supportive of me. And so it began there (R,p14)."*

The validation of her anger, loss and confusion was very helpful for this women as she ventured forth into her journey of healing, beginning with the **courage to speak out.** The empowerment gained through this speaking out about the feelings, events and impact of the sexual abuse will be illuminated in the next element.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH VOICE

One of the woman described how she had metaphorically felt a 'loss of her voice' in the aftermath of abuse, eventually regaining it through the therapeutic aspects of art and music:

> *"I have some pictures that I've drawn about the masks I've worn. And at least two of the masks are masks that have no mouths, are masks that have no voices. And to be told by a First Nations woman that it's through being heard that I'm reaching out to people, is really telling me of how far I've come. Being a voice of my experience is more musically , I think, how I'm able to be a voice for other people and their experience (R,p12)."*

Renee then continues by elaborating how her **voice is a vehicle for strength,** empowerment, and healing, both for herself and others:

> *"My voice, speaking my truth, singing my truth, is very much connected to my strength. Speaking the truth means self-empowerment. It would mean that finally I am living my truth and that what is going on, you know, that I am living with authenticity, and that being real is part of who I am (R,p12)."*

The **importance of having a voice** and thus speaking out in honesty, is herein further illustrated:

> *"without speaking the truth, children continue to be hurt and victimized in the way that I was. And, so my truth would have been a plea for me to be understood and at the same time it would be a plea for other children who were being victimized, or children who were potentially in the position to be victimized, to be heard (R,p12)."*

The concept of empowerment through the use of voice, through sharing honestly about one's experiences, whether via the use of creative arts, music,

writing or speaking, is presented here. The next element will address the additional healing gained through connecting with other women.

CONNECTION WITH WOMEN

The idea was raised about the **therapeutic aspect** of female support and the strength that this brought to the women in their healing journey:

> *"I think often about the strength that I see women have (R,p10)."*

> *"I think that surrounding myself with women who are strong and assertive and able to question things themselves has been very important in my own accepting of women as an entity that I can become stronger by and with and through, because women are traditionally socialized to compete with each other. And so it's been really good for me to see women as my confidants rather than my competitors. And in my journey around women's issues, it's really made me aware of the strength that women have (R,p8)."*

Renee made reference here to the change in her thinking about women and their influence in her life. She moved from seeing them as competition, to viewing them as allies in healing.

Sophie speaks of a woman who helped her to choose to heal:

> *"A very good friend of mine who initially confronted me with the issue that I had not dealt with the sexual abuse, or the effects of it, and I had denied it for a long time, but it was her persistence that really helped me (S,p6)."*

The sense of strength that emerged out of connecting with other women became apparent. The recognition that women could be allies of support rather than competitive rivals, was an eye-opening revelation that led to changes in perception. As well, an increased awareness of the assertiveness and questioning nature amidst other women, contributed to the acceptance and appreciation of one's own personal ability to be strong. This mirroring of fortitude assisted in the healing process.

The women who participated in this study chose the route of therapy to help them deal with the ramifications of abuse, which thus leads into the next element.

HEALING ASPECTS OF THERAPY

One of the benefits of therapy that the women discussed, was that of learning to not carry the blame any more for the sexual abuse being perpetrated on them. This letting go of personal responsibility for the abuse was important:

> *"Every little piece of information I've learned just helps gradually relieve the guilt. And to realize that it wasn't my fault (E,p19)."*

Ann illustrated that it was important for her to differentiate between what was not her responsibility and what was. She realized that she was responsible only for her own responses to what happened, and clarified that she now knew the actual abuse was not her fault:

> *"It took me a long time to sort out what I was responsible for and what I wasn't, the abuse I know now was not my fault, I had no control over it, that there was nothing I could have done to stop it, and then, further in my life, understanding that part of the healing process is learning to make good decisions, learning how to have healthy coping mechanisms (A,p21)."*

The therapeutic alliance was seen to provide a sense of support, while encouraging changes in perception:

> *"She gave me permission to see it in a different way...She said that what he had done to me was legally wrong. And that he could go to court, and maybe go to jail for it (U,p34)."*

Therapy was experienced as an environment wherein a sense of personal validation and realization of self-worth was fostered:

> *"In my counselling, again walking through a lot of anger and learning to feel like I had rights, to feel that I was important and that I had the right to stand up for myself (A,p14)."*

> *"What I feel has changed for me is much more of an acceptance and understanding of myself through counselling and through dealing with these issues, that this is not a quick fix, that it's a process and I can accept myself a lot more in the midst of having the pain, that it's not unusual to struggle with these things (S,p4)."*

To understand the therapy relationship in the context of **healing as a dynamic process,** as opposed to a static event, was seen as a contributor to growth and change:

> *"healing is a process, it takes time, is gradual, sometimes hard work, and not instantaneous (S,p7)."*

> *"Well, what I have learned is that things do not change overnight, just because you want them to, I really have had to work at gaining an understanding of why I do the things that I do, why I repeat patterns and pull away from people, then accept and learn about myself, and make changes (S,p13)."*

Therapy thus led to increased awareness, learning and growth and was conducive to healing and restoration for these participants. In their discovery process, these women then set forth their perceptions as to some contributing factors regarding the actual abuse.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The participants expressed ideation about the realization of precipitating factors as they saw them, which appeared to contribute to an increased possibility of the occurence of sexual abuse during their childhood. While the survivors realized that they themselves were clearly not responsible for the abuse, there appeared to be certain reasons as to why these particular children became targets for sexual abuse. For example, the idea was presented that an **emotionally needy background** "set the stage" in a sense:

> *"You come from an emotionally needy background and someone pays all that attention to you, I understand now how you can become so hooked that you...your reason and your everything, go out the window because*

you're so needy (E,p7)."

"This man was offering me attention...and I really, really needed that (U,p4)."

This lack of having emotional needs met by parents, was seen as a precipitating factor to Betty. The following quotes illustrate the belief that a dysfunctional relationship with the father did not help. The first woman, who was raped by an older male cousin. discusses her understanding of this dysfunctional upbringing:

"I think the abuse happened because of the way I was brought up. Because of my dad, the way he was. He was a very abusive person. I was brought up to believe that I didn't really matter. And so whenever anything happened, whenever I was abused, which happened numerous times, although I knew it was wrong, I couldn't tell anybody about it. Or I could never say no. Because all of a sudden I had no voice. I couldn't say anything if I wanted to. It just, I became paralyzed, feelingless. And so, I was this person who went around with a big neon V around her neck for Victim. And, well, there I was and I was just the victim, ready to be had (B,p9)."

"The dysfunctional relationship as I perceive it to be with my father, really, I think, laid the groundwork for the abuse to occur (R,p8)."

This dysfunctional family of origin environment appeared to foster a lack of belief that one mattered, or that feelings mattered, and impeded the development of a healthy sense of self:

"I wasn't raised to think that I was important, let alone, you know, my body or anything about me. So I never thought of it that way. Or even in the sense that this is my body and you're not allowed to violate it. Because I had no sense of self (B,p21)."

Throughout their healing process, the participants gained an increased awareness of the possibility that there were certain precipitating factors that seemed to be precursors to the sexual abuse. In a sense, these women were attempting to resolve part of the "why me" question, while realizing that all of their personal pain was not only abuse related, as it was seemingly

interconnected with contributing dysfunctional factors.

Bianca went on to say that for her, the healing power of spirituality taught her a new attitude towards self:

> *"Spiritually speaking, looking at my body from that perspective, enabled me to realize that my body is something that's important. It is something that may not be violated and used by people. Because it's special. It's mine. It's me. And it was given to me not to be abused by other people (B,p21)."*

This property entitled From Isolation to Connection, included illustrations which emerged from the data pertaining to the participant's courage to speak out and reveal the truth about the abuse, while gaining empowerment and healing through this revelation and narrative. The interviewees gained strength and self-awareness by means of connecting with other women and as a result of therapy. Clarification of the correct allocation of responsibility was set forth. The need to see healing as a process was underscored, while certain precipitating factors were illuminated that increased the chances of abuse occuring. The next property will address the aspect of anger, as part of the restorative stages of healing.

Anger

This second property under the category entitled "Struggling to Heal", refers firstly to the initial response of anger at God, followed by a discussion of what the women participants found to be hindrances regarding anger, and lastly, includes an overview of what helped the women in their healing process concerning anger. Thus, herein are three elements: anger at God, what hindered and what helped.

ANGER AT GOD

The concept of feeling angry towards God for the occurrence of the abuse arose as a viewpoint amongst the women in various ways:

> *"There's been times when I've felt I've been in a good relationship with God and times when I didn't want anything to do with it, because I was so angry and times I didn't know why I didn't want anything to do with God, which I think was a lot of internalized anger (A,p3)."*

> *"When I came to this realization, I was so angry with God, I don't know how long, but easily a year, I was really ticked...there was so many times in the beginning when I could not pray. I was so angry I could not pray (U,p2)."*

> *"I would spend a lot of time yelling at God, 'Where was He?', 'Why did He leave?', 'Why didn't He stop this?' (M,p6)."*

For these women, the inner rage resulting from the abuse was focused at one point or another, on who they saw God to be. As an entity believed to have the power to stop the abuse, God became the focal point for their anger. Certain specifics contributed to a hindrance in their healing journey as it pertained to anger. These hindrances will be discussed in the next element.

WHAT HINDERED

The idea was presented that certain religious beliefs about anger such as **"anger is a sin"**, prevented these women from being able to acknowledge and work through their anger:

> *"Growing up for me, anger was something in my family that was bad, I shouldn't be angry, so I grew up thinking that I should never be angry, that it was a bad thing to be angry. I was sinful if I was angry (A,p3)."*

> *"Well, I think that in the Christian community, there's a real problem with anger.They don't like you to be angry...they really missed the boat! (U,p34)."*

"Well, I think you have to admit your anger and really look at it, and see that it is justified. I was brought up in a religion where there were a lot of misconceptions about anger and that you shouldn't ever be angry or show anger and you don't have the right to be angry (S,p9)."

Not being allowed to be angry, having anger suppressed, even to the extent of being specifically told to not be angry, was difficult. Ann elaborates on this, and how her creativity and joy of living got blocked as well, as she tried to "contain this foreboding force" of anger:

"So for me that was a really confusing, difficult thing because there was so much anger inside me, that I just stuffed it down, and looking back now, I can see how it buried a lot of who I was. My creativity, my spontaneity and my joy of living got shoved down as well because I had to push down the anger. I wasn't allowed to be angry because it wasn't good and it even extended into my relationships, especially with my father, who was the perpetrator, that I shouldn't be angry with him either, or with myself or with anybody really, and so that was such a foreboding force that I had to contain it (A,p3)."

Bianca discusses the messages about anger and the repercussions of it's suppression regarding abuse issues:

"I was taught it's a horrible thing to be angry. I don't think I was sat down and told 'Don't ever get angry', it was just messages given me. And when you don't get angry about things that you rightfully need to get angry about, then you carry all this crap inside of you that really mixes you up (B,p16)."

Renee commented on being told she shouldn't be angry and how her parent's lack of angry response at the abuse affected her:

"Not being allowed to be angry, and being told that little girls don't get angry. Little girls are supposed to be nice. And not having evoked an angry response from my parents for what had happened, was precedent-setting for me. I mean it set a precedent for me not to get angry about it myself. Because it didn't make them angry, so why should I be angry? So that really hindered me from getting in touch with the anger that I needed to feel around it (R,p18)."

The setting of a precedent for this woman to not feel angry about the abuse, became a hindrance in her healing process, a journey which she saw as necessitating a moving through and beyond the anger, as opposed to a denial of it. Certain religious beliefs about anger seemed to block the participants from moving on with, and possibly beyond, their angry emotions. The suppression of anger was a struggle for these women. How significant others dealt with this challenging and sometimes intense emotion, was illustrated to have an immense effect. The following element illuminates what helped these women in their healing journey around the emotion of anger.

WHAT HELPED

The women interviewed discussed various aspects of how the validation of their anger helped in their healing. Getting in touch with their anger, having it acknowledged and permitted was seen to be helpful:

> *"I wasn't allowed to feel anything, so it was quite a relief to be angry finally. I mean, I had been angry all along, I just wasn't admitting it. I was stifling it basically, but anger was important for me (M,p23)."*

> *" She gave me permission to be angry. Because up until then I felt I couldn't be angry. I wasn't allowed (U,p34)."*

> *"As I walked through my healing process, I've realized that anger isn't always a bad thing. Sometimes it's really important in that allowing myself to be angry was an important step in allowing myself to heal (A,p3)."*

The realization that it was okay to be angry, even if at God made a difference in being able to move beyond the rage, to a comprehension of the intense sadness and pain that lay buried underneath the anger:

> *"God was big enough to take all my anger, He wasn't going to be hurt by how angry I was, and in fact it didn't matter how angry I was, God was not*

going to leave me (U,p32)."

> *"Once I realized that it was okay to be angry, and that to not be angry, at least at some point, would be unhealthy and suppressive, I talked with God about it quite intensely for awhile, including my anger towards Him, then, after awhile, I realized that God was mad too at what had happened to me as a lost and vulnerable little girl. I could actually sense God's pain and sadness at what happened, at how wrong it was for this man to do, that he had made the wrong choice to misuse his power and abuse me, that was wrong, and I felt really sad then. It was as if the lid had been peeled off my large container of sadness (A,p20)."*

> *"It's been a really good release, it's been good to understand that it's okay to be angry about it , and that I can move on from there. I started to really grieve then, to feel a lot of sadness about the abuse and all the loss (A,p3)."*

Ann thus found that clarifying her anger at God helped her to move through it, and connect with a deeper sense of sadness and loss. The idea was presented that acknowledging the anger at the abuser enabled correct allocation of blame, enabling them to make progress and not inaccurately blame themselves anymore:

> *"I needed to be angry before I could really understand that it wasn't my fault. That I really couldn't come to that understanding that it wasn't my responsibility until I allowed myself to be angry about the whole issue (A,p4)."*

The realization of God's anger at abuse was found to be helpful:

> *"In terms of my spirituality, if I look in the Bible, I see that God got angry, and that Jesus got angry, and that was okay because it was righteous anger, I don't understand how people can say 'Oh, you shouldn't get angry'. That's a ridiculous notion because anger is part of a natural emotion for people if violation or abuse occurs, which if not expressed manifests itself in other ways that are not too healthy...Christ got angry because He realized that people were abusing the holy temple...And He took steps to ensure that His anger came across to other people, that they got the message. And the temple is our body, spiritually and symbolically speaking. So 'let's see now boys and girls', if Christ got mad about that and my body was violated and abused, how do you think He's going to feel? I think that God is really angry, Christ is really angry about what happened to me. And do you think if I got angry God's gonna say 'No, you're not*

supposed to do that'? (B,p16,18)."

The idea expressed here that anger at abuse has a righteous component, emerged as a helpful understanding, one that was described in Biblical accounts such as the story of Christ getting angry when the temple was violated and used for ungodly means. This awareness led to a change in self-perception, a new understanding of self and abuse:

> *"In a spiritual sense that is a very holy place, my body, as Christ would see it, and He doesn't want it to be violated. Like He didn't want the temple to be violated and abused by people who were using it for their own ends and their own twisted kind of means. They were ripping it off. Not bringing glory to the temple...And if I think in terms of my body having that high a regard, in God's eyes, then anybody who abuses it, anybody who uses it for their own ends, is violating it. And, it becomes something that is not whole anymore, it becomes a place of corruption and wrong-doing. That's not right (B,p20)."*

Bianca goes on to describe other scriptural aspects regarding anger:

> *"Well, I don't think it says anywhere in the Bible 'Thou shall not be angry', but rather, to not let the sun go down on your anger, which gets twisted, people need to resolve things before they put themselves to rest on it, so they don't carry on the anger always, which means having to look at it, which means having to deal with it and face it. Because that's much healthier than staying mad. Things like abuse, those are larger issues having to do with years of unexpressed emotions that have impeded your life (B,p18,19)."*

Ann made note of the fact that while anger may be important to acknowledge and accept, that to move through this emotion and to not get stuck in the anger, was important as well:

> *"It's amazing how much of a key accepting anger is , and I don't know if that's true for other people or not, some people seem to be angry all the way along, and quite happy to be angry about their abuse, and I wonder if it's almost the other side of the coin that they are so blinded by anger that they cannot see anything else (A,p13)."*

She refers here to the possibility of being blocked from getting past the emotion

of anger. It appears that attaining a balance between denial or suppression of the anger and being stuck in continual intensity of rage for years, is significant. For these women, moving beyond anger after embracing it, owning it and working it through, is seen as healthy.

The feeling, acceptance, and exploring of anger allowed them to move towards true forgiveness and thereby move on with their lives:

> *"I think that anger has to come before you can really forgive, at least that's been true for me, which I think a lot of people don't realize, that they want the forgiveness to come first...to some degree the forgiveness did come, but there was a lot of inner anger that I was not aware of, that I couldn't be aware of and that had to be dealt with before forgiveness could really be there (A,p6)."*

> *"anger and forgiveness are definitely connected. There has to be the first in order to move to the second.(S,p8)."*

The idea that anger was legitimate concerning sexual abuse appeared to be helpful. Lack of understanding of anger or acceptance of it's inevitability hindered these interviewees. There appeared to be a clear linkeage between anger and forgiveness for these women. Moving through anger first, before genuine forgiveness could occur, became an evident need for the survivors of sexual abuse. This issue of forgiveness will be further addressed in the next element.

Sophie addresses in this final quote on anger, the Biblical instruction to "be angry, but <u>not sin</u> in your anger", as opposed to religious interpretations which see the actual anger as being the sin:

> *"I really truly believe there is a misconception about anger not being allowed, I think there is a time when we should be angry, abuse against anyone is a reason to be angry, I think God is angry. Through counselling and also through learning about God, I think that righteous indignation is possible. If we are made in God's likeness and we are to be like Him, then why can't we also be angry when we see injustice? I think we have a right to be angry when it's against us, and I think it's so much more acceptable*

to be angry for someone else but not for ourselves when injustice has occurred toward us. God gets angry too. It says in the Bible that God got angry, and Jesus got very angry when the temple was violated. We are told in the Bible to 'be angry, but do not sin in our anger'. We have to be careful not to be wrongful in our anger or it's expression, but to never be angry is wrong too (S,p9)."

Forgiveness

There were three aspects regarding forgiveness that emerged from the data. They are: definition of forgiveness, obstacles to forgiveness, and the healing aspects of forgiveness. This last property. as part of the category "Struggling to Heal" for these women, is as follows.

DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS

The definition of forgiveness changed over time for these women, as they struggled through their healing journey. Forgiveness went from being an activity you were told to do, without grasping underlying feelings and thoughts, to an internal process of acknowledging and letting go of the anger, which then lead to and enabled true forgiveness. The interviewees spoke about what it meant then:

"To forgive meant saying words, saying 'I'm sorry' or 'it's okay you did that, I'm sorry I got mad when you did that', that's probably what forgiveness was, really, it's kind of funny, but that's what it was, 'I'm sorry I got mad at you when you did that' (A,p8)."

"forgiveness was a pretty dirty word because it was shoved down my throat (M,p17)."

The participants then proceeded to describe what it means now:

"It's letting go of the past, moving on without letting it be the focus of who I am, forgiveness is letting go (A,p8)."

"forgiveness is for my benefit, forgiveness is something that I choose to do so that I don't become an emotionally cripple (M,p14)."

"forgiving them does not mean what they did was okay. Forgiving them means letting go. It means you will no longer allow them to have that control over you (B,p20)."

The difference between forgiveness and reconciliation was noted:

"forgiveness and reconciliation are two completely different things. Reconciliation can only happen when the perpetrator has been repentant. Forgiveness does not mean that I continue a relationship with the perpetrator at all (M,p14)."

As the women worked through their healing journey, a process of forgiveness occurred, during which time they were given permission to acknowledge and release the deep anger and resentment they had regarding the abuse:

"It means coming to a place after having been through the process of dealing with your losses and acceptance of what happened and realizing that you're okay, you're not a bad person for whatever happened to you by somebody else. It's only after all that , that forgiveness comes into the picture (B,p11)."

"Forgiveness is a very natural process, it is as natural as being mad at it, going through the denial and going through the tears...(M,p19)."

The women seemed to be clear that their definition of forgiveness was that of a process. This contrasts vividly with the church definition of forgiveness being an event. The women made it clear that in order to forgive they first had to feel the emotions of anger and rage. The data gathered from these interviewees illustrated some obstacles to forgiveness. These will be illuminated in the following element.

OBSTACLES TO FORGIVENESS

Initially, the idea emerged that certain religious beliefs such as denial of impact created a blockage for these participants:

"I really hid behind religion and didn't really deal with the actual abuse and didn't really look at the effects of it on my life ...so I can 'just forgive this person', not realizing and denying to myself that it really had a deep effect on me (S,p2)."

Invalidation of emotions such as anger was seen to have a blocking effect regarding forgiveness:

"It was through, out of "Christian love for my brother", I was told by my parents I had to forgive Sam for what he did to me. And I've been told that for a long time, that I had to forgive Sam. And I have had a real problem with that. Because I'm being asked to forgive someone for something that I haven't even been allowed to feel anything about. Like, I haven't been allowed to feel angry about it, I haven't really been allowed to feel a whole lot about it. And now I'm being asked to forgive this person. And so that's really hindered me (R,p18)."

This last quote leads into the next key concept expressed pertaining to forgiveness, that of **forced forgiveness.** These words were quoted by Michelle, referring to the initial time she told her mother of the sexual abuse by her stepfather:

"She told me that I had to forgive him. That's the first thing she said. She knew the abuse was going on, but I had to forgive him. This is what I would have to do. As soon as she said that she might as well have slapped me across the face (M,p9)."

Ann speaks of being forced to forgive:

"Yeah, forgiveness was an important thing , but forgiveness was a forced thing in my family a lot, that wasn't a good thing, so you weren't allowed to be angry and you had to forgive whether you wanted to or not (A,p7)."

The idea was raised that sometimes **forgiveness was oversimplified:**

"It's all these 'buts' coming up. 'But how come I don't feel great if I'm supposed to have been over this and dealt with it just by saying I forgive him?' Like that can't be all there is to it. I'm really realizing this now as I talk about it. What happens when you're dealing with the abuse, is that you start coming up with all these feelings and how you felt. And so your feelings are almost blocked. It's like giving them extra voltage. So when

you have to do this 'I forgive him' stuff and you don't buy it, your feelings are sort of at the surface going 'But I don't feel like I forgive him and I ...' It just doesn't happen. It just doesn't work, because you're so into those feelings . It's like all this pressure builds up, like in a pressure cooker. And then, you explode with rage. Which was new to me, Because I was brought up not being allowed to feel anything really , especially being angry (B,p9)."

A discussion about the **lack of understanding that sometimes forgiveness is a process** ensued:

> *"Okay, let's start with forgiveness. I think sometimes, in a religious sort of way people are misguided in how the healing process works. All you have to do is say, 'Okay, I forgive them', and then it's done, and I think there again, I don't think you can forgive someone that quickly who has fucked up your life, overnight. I think it's a process (S,p8)."*

Elaborations were introduced during the interviews about the healing aspects of forgiveness, which is the next element to be described.

HEALING ASPECTS OF FORGIVENESS

One of the positive aspects of forgiveness appeared to be that of **forgiveness of self:**

> *"I think that being able to forgive myself was the biggest step.That was just enormous for me. To forgive myself (E,p26)."*

> *"And finally, she had listed all the power the abuser had, and the vulnerability of the abused. And I said 'Why is it I still can't forgive myself? 'And this woman who is very wise, this leader, she looked at me, and she said. 'Why is it that you can't show the love of charity towards the person that you were then?' I started to sob and sob and sob. And for the first time, I knew, that I did have to forgive myself and have some love. And so, I've had a very hard time forgiving myself. I was not guilty, I knew that now, and yet I had such a hard time. And the breakthrough in forgiving myself was just enormous relief (E,p26)."*

It appears as if a large weight had been released from Betty's shoulders when she

forgave herself. Her earlier thinking around self-blame and her faulty sense of guilt, seemed to initially block her. One of the ideas that arose out of the qualitative data regarding the healing aspects of forgiveness, was that of **letting go of the hold the abuser still has on you:**

> *"It's about accepting what happened to you, instead of denying it or fighting it, dealing with the losses, moving on, getting in touch with the anger, processing the feelings, getting beyond the numbness. You eventually get to a point where you realize that if you do not forgive - only after having gone through the whole process of course, that that person still has a hold on you. So forgiveness is about letting go of that (B,p12)."*

> *"It is <u>not</u> letting the other person off the hook. I have found, more in the secular community, a very big misunderstanding of what forgiveness means. Somehow they feel that if they forgive them, then what they've done is okay. I do not mean that at all. Forgiveness is me releasing him and the hold that he has on me. And the power that he has on my life. Letting him go. And giving God permission to do what he needs to do (U,p33)."*

Provided that previous acknowledgement and working through of anger. grief and loss took place, the next step of letting go of the past pain via the route of forgiveness, appeared to assist the healing process for these women. There was an understanding amongst these women, that to *not* forgive was to *not* let go.

The **peace of mind** at the end of it all is mentioned by one of the participants:

> *"At the end of it all, the grieving, the anger, the working through, you do have peace such that you can forgive really from your heart , that you are then able to do something that humanly you wouldn't otherwise have, the ability to forgive and let it go. You miss out on so much if you get stuck at the door of forgiveness and don't walk through. (M,p18)."*

This last quote refers to forgiveness not always being humanly possible. Michelle speaks of **the power to forgive originating from God:**

> *"You need a power greater than yourself, a Higher Power, I don't have what it takes, I don't know if I could ever have forgiven him on my own. I would never tell anybody they had to forgive, but I think that with*

spirituality it plays a role. It shows you grace and compassion for your humanity and other people's. M,p37)."

The respondents did not say that they should not aim for forgiveness, but rather, that certain important factors were lacking in the dealings of abuse that blocked the process of forgiveness. When a "quick fix" type of forced forgiveness was created, it left them feeling once again denied and hindered in their healing journey. It appeared that with the acceptance and acknowledgement of feelings such as anger, grief and loss, the women experienced a feeling of validation, of being heard and understood. This in turn led to a moving towards forgiveness in a more authentic way. For these women, when anger was disallowed and forgiveness forced, the result was that the forgiveness was not genuine or authentic, and actually more, not less anger was experienced. Denying the validity of these uncomfortable feelings, ironically kept them from being able to truly forgive and move on, and in fact kept them locked in these very feelings.

While struggling to sort out the therapeutic issues inherent in healing from childhood sexual abuse, these women moved from revealing the abuse to empowerment and restoration through speaking out, connecting with other women and the use of professional therapy. Being accepted and understood in the midst of their anger enabled them to experience a moving towards forgiveness as they were ready to do so. Within the context of this struggle, they searched for a sense of meaning and purpose to it all. The fourth and final category which arose out of the data analysis is thus entitled: Searching for Meaning.

4. SEARCHING FOR MEANING

This category of the framework entitled "Searching For Meaning", consists of the emerging data pertaining to the purpose and sense of meaning derived from an initially negative experience of sexual abuse. The learning and growth occurring despite pain and suffering, is reflected upon by the participants, as they strive to "make sense of it all". This fourth and last major category includes three properties: **Image of God, Gender Issues Pertaining to God,** and the **Healing Power of Spirituality.** The women began discussing initially about how an understanding of who God is to them may be formulated, moving then to an elaboration of their struggle with gender issues, and lastly, ended the interview by consolidating their sense of power and restoration. (See Figure # 4; for the complete framework, see Appendix A: The Conceptual Framework).

Image of God

The first property as part of the category of Searching for Meaning, includes two elements or facets. They are: how God is perceived, and struggles with the image of God as father.

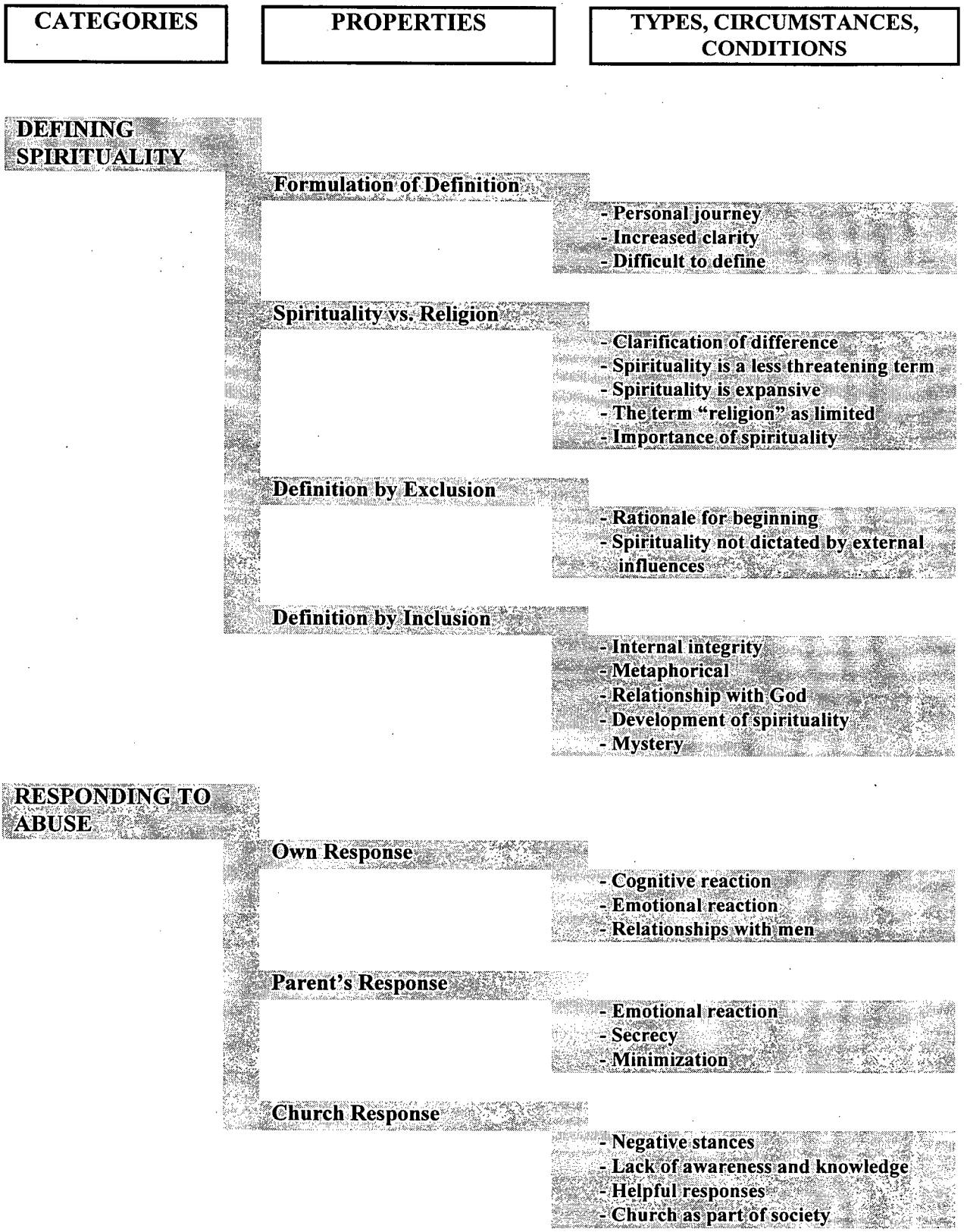
PERCEPTIONS OF GOD

The specific ways in which God may be perceived, or **concepts of God,** are included in this property. Conceptual thinking as to who God was seen to be, was illustrated by the participants:

> *"I guess in a way a hindrance for me is that because of how I believed that God was good, and I truly believed in a God who would only allow good things to happen, then for the abuse to happen made me really question God's ability (S,p4)."*

> *"I think I grew up with a lot of misconceptions about who God is (A,p4)."*

FIGURE #4: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING PROCESS:
WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE



CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	TYPES, CIRCUMSTANCES, CONDITIONS
STRUGGLING TO HEAL	From Isolation to Connection	- Breaking the silence - Empowerment through voice - Connection with women - Healing aspects of therapy - Contributing factors
	Anger	- Anger at God - What hindered - What helped
	Forgiveness	- Definition of forgiveness - Obstacles to forgiveness - Healing aspects of forgiveness
SEARCHING FOR MEANING	Image of God	- Perceptions of God - Struggles with image of God as father
	Gender Issues Pertaining to God	- Feminine attributes of God - Duality of gender - Patriarchy predominant in church
	Healing Power of Spirituality	- Meaning - The power of prayer - Strength and tenacity - New hope

Perceptual shifts in an understanding of God were noted:

> *"God does accept us and forgive us and His love is unconditional (S,p6)."*
>
> *"There are different parts of God. He's my friend, He's my confidante, He's my protector (B,p23)."*
>
> *"I'm starting to see God as somebody who is compassionate and patient and willing to take me on my own time, as I am ready (M,p33)."*

What was illustrated herein, were the initial struggles some of the women had with their understanding of who God was to them. The data demonstrated that these concepts were not static, but rather, changed over time into a reframing of their perceptions. The renewed thinking included conceptualizations about a loving God. Part of the dynamic healing journey for these women, comprised of struggles with the image of God as father.

STRUGGLES WITH IMAGE OF GOD AS FATHER

Struggling with the image of God as a father figure, as traditionally seen within religious contexts, was apparent for the women who had issues with their own fathers. There was a strong aversion and resistance to references to God as father:

> *"I think God is both male and female, because when I first heard people referring to God as father, that would give me the weebee-jeebies, because there was no way I was going to call him father ! Are you crazy? Because that only reminded me of my own Dad. It took me years to get to the point where I could. I think it only made things worse because relating to God as father had too many weird attachments for me, really negative attachments I couldn't deal with. So initially, I never thought of God as father (B,p23)."*

If they had unresolved negative issues with their own father, it impacted the view of God as father, and meant that this exclusively male gender perspective

impeded an aspect of their spiritual growth. The desire to see the feminine aspects of God will be examined in the following element.

For these women, it helped to move beyond this struggle by developing a relationship with God. Some examples of how a **relationship with God brought about a change in thinking** are illustrated here:

> *"But I do think that's changing. I think that I am able to now recognize the idea, especially in my realizations about not having had a father who embraced me unconditionally, and grieving that I didn't, that I do have a Father like that who is able to do that for me. And so it makes approaching God from the position of being a daughter or of Him being the father that makes Him far more approachable because I feel like I may be able to , in my relationship with God as father, compensate for what I did not get from my earthly father. So I think that now I'm more comfortable about talking and reflecting on God as father, and with Him having male myths around Him (R,p9)."*

Grieving the losses and lack of unconditional love from her own father, somehow helped this woman embrace a relationship with God that was healthy. Moving beyond the grief and loss inherent in her relationship with her father, was seen to pave the way to new thinking about God. Another woman describes it thus:

> *"Through growing in my relationship with God, and through working out all my stuff, and realizing that He...I could think of God as father in a healthy sense. Unlike the very unhealthy father that I had. And, as I matured in my spiritual walk, in my journey, I was able to ...really accept that part and make it okay...it took me a few years, to when I was able to shed the negative aspects of what the word 'father' meant to me. The word "father" is what turned me off. And only because of my own experience with my own father. When I was able to understand the positive aspects of thinking of God as my father, and dealing with why I had negative feelings about calling Him father, then I could accept Him as father in a really positive, healthy, life-long sense. And get from Him what I never got from my own father. Because of screw-ups in his own life. And realizing that God is not...someone who would harm me, someone who would abandon me, rather someone who would love me. After I*

established a relationship with Him, I realized that He was going to be there forever. It's a very comfortable place, that acceptance. But I also grew to accept Him as a mother. Which is harder, because people don't...you don't hear that...Which doesn't mean that I can't think it. (B,p23)."

The initial perceptions of God were that He appeared to be distant. Much like the refining progression from religion to spirituality that the women described, their perceptions of God began to evolve. God became seen as supportive and loving rather than diconnected. The women began by decribing difficulties in seeing God in the image of a father figure. There were instances illustrated wherein the participants moved beyond this struggle via their spiritual journey. The embracing of a growing and healthy relationship with God resulted in a change in the perception of God as father. However, the predominant viewpoint of the maleness of God, and the attempt to resolve the repercussions of that perspective, leads into the next property on gender issues relating to God.

Gender Issues Pertaining to God

This second property elaborates on the specific struggles the participants had in sorting out the gender issues pertaining to an understanding of God. The three elements included herein are as follows: feminine attributes of God, duality of gender and patriarchy as being predominant in the church.

FEMININE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

This element overlaps with the prior one entitled "struggles with image of God as father". As "father" traditionally refers to "male", the inclination became evident in the data analysis, that the choice to view God as having female traits appeared to ease the quandary.

It became apparent that to see God as being exclusively male, presented a dilemma for these women:

> *"Having had a male perpetrator and having had a very dysfunctional relationship as I perceive it to be with my father, that connection with the whole idea of seeing God as a male entity, it's been hard for me to get close to a God that is a male because I'm having so much trouble getting close to men, period. So thinking about God as a male is really blocking me from getting close, I think before, from getting close to God and allowing God to get close to me (R,p8)."*

Even if the perpetrator was someone other than the victim's father, the fact that the abuser was male in combination with that of having had a dysfunctional relationship with the father, was a difficult combination.

Additionally, if the perpetrator was not just male but also the father of the survivor, this appeared to present a great difficulty in viewing God as male, as illuminated by these quotes:

Bianca made reference to the fact that if the abuser was a male, there may be blocks to embracing a God who is exclusively seen as male. She comments on how feminine attributes may ease the struggle:

> *"It would be helpful for some people to think of the female attributes of God. Because that was such a big hurdle, that was such a big block for me. I used to physically cringe when I heard God referred to as father, as a male(B,p24)."*

The women unfolded their understanding of the femaleness of God as they see it:

> *"I sense that there is a lot of female mother energy in the world, and I think that's how I connect with the femaleness of God (R,p11)."*

> *"On some days I often feel like I'm being nurtured. That God knows what I need. And part of God is to comfort and console us...feminine attributes, I think (B,p25)."*

For these women, conceptualizing a God who encompassed feminine characteristics was a helpful component both in their spiritual journey and in their healing process from sexual abuse. Following these illustrations which amplified the choice to embrace the feminine attributes of God, the participants moved to further describe the concept of God as having a duality of gender.

DUALITY OF GENDER

There appeared to be a link between struggling with seeing God as father, which was discussed in a previous element under "Image of God", and the need to see God as more than exclusively male in gender. The idea thus emerged of the possibility of duality of gender:

> *"God is sort of all encompassing , He fills my needs for a mother and a father. I couldn't even talk to my father. I can do that with God (B,p24)."*

The possibility of neutrality of gender pertaining to God was also presented:

> *"As far as the male aspect of it now, I don't really think of it as more male or anything. I just think of it as an all-knowing, an all-encompassing, an ever present (B,p30)."*

The Biblical belief that we as humans were created in God's image, and the resultant gender related questions around that belief, was amplified by an interviewee:

> *"I think you can't limit God. If you think of Him...not if you just think of Him as father but if you refuse to allow yourself, if you feel like it, to acknowledge Him as Mother. You can't sort of put God in a box and say, just because everybody says that He's supposed to be male, and has male attributes. No, I think God's much bigger than that. You know, much more... way beyond our imagination...And to assign God certain roles and attributes and gender, I think you're jipping yourself. Also, if the Bible says we're created in His image, or the image of God, then does that leave women out? (B,p25)."*

Allowing themselves to see God as having both male and female genders helped the women to feel better able to relate to God. The idea of God being gender neutral was set forth. Seeing themselves as being 'created in God's image', also helped to view God in terms of having female attributes. In the next element, the problems created by patriarchy will be examined.

PATRIARCHY PREDOMINANT IN THE CHURCH

A reference was made to the male dominated aspect of the organized church structure:

> *"Often in the church, which is to this day, very male dominated and very hierarchical, very male dominated, I have a real problem about the role of women in the church. Because women see all these men calling the shots, and when it's time to have a cookie sale or something, then the women can come along and do that. But I think women really need to have more places of leadership in the church (B,p26)."*

The desire was expressed to have more women in leadership positions in the church, that the male dominated aspect was difficult sometimes. The issue of a power differential in the church hierarchy between men and women was referred to:

> *"Women still don't have the same kind of status as men do in the church, they still don't have the same kind of power in the church that men have I guess, essentially (R,p8)."*

However achieved, whether through increased female leadership or other means, the wish that the power differential was not as prevalent as it is at present still, was noted. These women appeared to have difficulty with these facts.

> *"So I think, that never quite feeling that I could live up to my father's expectations was really hard. But God is father now. I have terribly much difficulty with the Bible all written toward men...So I find the feminine*

side that's neglected in the scriptures to be very painful. But my whole Bible is written with a 'W-O' in front of every 'man' in the Bible. I mean, I have transcribed my entire Bible written to the feminine (E,p27)."

By seeing God as encapsulating both male and female characteristics, the women were more able to build a personal relationship in their spiritual journey.

Healing Power of Spirituality

The final property emerging from the data, under the category entitled "Searching for Meaning", contains four elements or factors. They are: meaning, the power of prayer, strength and tenacity and the participant's discovery of new hope. What was interesting to note was how the spiritual connection underscored for the women the emergence of strength and hope.

MEANING

Spirituality was spoken of in terms of meaning by the participants. In responding to questions about what their spiritual journey or sense of spirituality looked like now, they responded with **statements about meaning:**

"Well, I guess just that, despite my see-sawing back and forth between being aware of incorporating spirituality into my life and being unaware of spirituality and it's role in my life, I don't discount that it was always present and always a fundamental force in my moving beyond where I was at...there are reasons for all of this happening, and that there is a plan at work beyond my own comprehension of what that plan or meaning is, there is meaning to all this. And I'm getting little windows into that plan the more I grow and become aware (R,p19)."

Thus, spirituality enabled these women to somehow make sense of all their pain, helping them to find meaning not just in their personal struggle but also in their personal story.

Renee speaks of a desire to live beyond mediocrity, and to **embrace authenticity** in her life:

> *"It means that I'm discarding the masks and ways of being that were counterproductive to living a life which is filled with, is now filled with richness and fullness. That I will believe that I am worthy of a life that brings happiness and fulfillment and joy, and that I won't continue to accept a nominal way of being (R,p13)."*

Bianca reflects on the healing aspect of relationship, and about a **positive sense of power:**

> *"Spirituality is not about religion as much as it is about relationship. In my healing journey, it's that relationship which enables me to be truthful and honest and have a feeling of acceptance. Spirituality is something that's , it's forever. It's you and that Higher Power. And when I think of power, I think of all kinds of lights that go on, like in an amusement park. The voltage is...you could never run out of this power. It's not connected to Hydro or anything. It's just this infinite, endless, ongoing, forever power that lights up everything and makes it so visible. No pretending, no pretense, no falsehood, only truth. The kind of 'power' of spirituality, and as in 'Higher Power', gives power a very positive connotation. It's about safety. It's a power that gives rather than takes away, not as with sexual abuse, which is misuse of power. It's a power that's always there, the light doesn't go out. It's like coming home late at night and always knowing there's a light on and someone's waiting for you. Because they care. This power is something that I can use in order to empower myself (B,p29)."*

She speaks of the empowerment she felt when she examined the positive relationship between herself and God. In contrast to the negative power differential between the abuser and the abused, this relationship portrays a positive view of power.

There was found to be a **link between suffering and spiritual growth:**

> *"It was actually in the middle of a very painful and tormenting time in my life that spirituality was discovered (B,p3)."*

It was thus in the midst of pain that spirituality was discovered for this woman. The reverse also seems to be true, in that Sophie's sense of spirituality enabled her to face the isssues regarding her abuse and the painful memories she had previously been unable to face:

> *"Growing and developing my sense of spirituality helped me to start to look at the pain (S,p5)."*

For these women, developing a sense of a spiritual connection with God included praying, which leads into the next element on the benefits of prayer.

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Prayer was seen to be a relational building opportunity with God in that it incorporated a communicative style that was an evolving process. Prayer also became redefined according to their perspective of God and where the women were in their healing journey.

Prayer was illustrated to be a way to connect and communicate with God:

> *"I think prayer plays a great part in it because that's how we communicate with God.The way I look at prayer now is different than I may have before, I think there are different types of prayer and it really can be very casual communication, just thinking in your mind (S,p13)."*

Prayer seemed to change in how it was understood, moving from a structured activity for Sophie, to include a casual internal interaction. This connection is spoken of by others:

> *"prayer is just a very deep connection that enables me to feel like I've got God's attention (B,p31)."*

> *As I have been doing some work and dealing with my issues lately, and coming up with my conception of God as I understand that to be, I've been able to access God more freely. And so, what is commonly called prayer, I've been spending more time on, feeling free and comfortable about going to God with really heavy shit. It's beyond my control to work*

out, I'm feeling more freedom about approaching God to intervene, to take care, to work, to manifest Him/Herself in a situation (R,p15)."

Prayer was seen to provide a calming, peaceful influence:

"There are aspects of prayer that, throughout my journey, have enabled me to be really quiet and stop the confusion for the moment. Stop the roller coaster ride (B,p31)."

"prayer gives you that sense of peace and God gives us the ability to accept ourselves (S,p13)."

The activity of prayer seemed to promote a sense of quieting oneself, of internal tranquility and ordering. These self-described healing effects of prayer included a provision of an increased sense of self-acceptance.

Connection with God through prayer was found to provide new insights:

"Another really significant step for me was that I spent a day praying through all the issues with myself, and God showed me a lot of things that day, God has given me a lot of promises and validation all the way through my process, I got a lot of learning that day, a lot of understanding of my process, it was a very significant day for me, I don't think I really started dealing in and with the anger until after that (A,p14)."

"God gives us insight into the reasons why we do the things we do, the patterns we develop, especially if we do our part in the work, through therapy or so (S,p7)."

Sometimes, the insights gained were painful ones, emerging in the context of safety:

"And I would have my worst memories when I was in church praying. When, I guess because it was the safest place for me to be (U,p2)."

Prayer was seen to bring about a sense of connection with God for these women, it was seen as a two way relational connection. Prayer allowed them to experience a comfort zone within which they could learn and grow. These

women believed that prayer makes a difference and helped them to make clear decisions both in times of crisis and joy. The participants were able to access renewal and strength. The following element will addresses the concept of strength and tenacity.

STRENGTH AND TENACITY

Spirituality led to the **discovery of strength** for these women:

> *"I really believe that God gives us the strength to look at the pain and to be there for you and to comfort you. He really truly does and I think that can be very difficult on your own (S,p11)."*

Spirituality enabled this woman to discover the strength to have a voice, to speak, and to help others heal:

> *"I'm able to speak now, I'm able to be a voice for other people and their experience, I think that the transition could only have happened through the embracing of the spiritual part of me because I think it's the spiritual part of me that connects with my voice, the voice that in the past has been far too afraid to speak, has been far too afraid to tell her story. I could not have found the strength to do that without the spiritual connection to God, and the strength that I have, the relationship that I'm discovering and building on that gives me the strength to have that voice (R,p12)."*

One of the women presented the fact that while there was **provision of strength,** it did not negate the importance of personal responsibility and decision making:

> *"I think God is there to walk through things with you, in my own process that God certainly gave me a lot of guidance, a lot of strength and endurance, but I still had to wake up every day and get out of bed and decide to do what I needed to do (A,p19)."*

Bianca speaks of it in reverse in that for her, strength enabled her to be in touch with spirituality, giving her a sense of connection and authenticity:

> *Spirituality is something that no matter what happens to me, I'll always have that connection. It's not a crutch. Some people might think 'Well if*

you need that, because you're too weak or something...', No, I think it's the opposite. I have strength, which enables me to be spiritual, whereas I could be only religious. And that wouldn't take any strength. I could sort of go along with the crowd and follow in everybody's footsteps (B,p28)."

Discussions ensued about courage and perseverance, as an essential aspect in facing the sometimes painful process of healing:

"I met some women who had the courage to face some really tragic life circumstances, and watching them move through their processes, sort of drew me into desiring that for myself (R,p15)."

"There's definitely a link between spirituality and healing from sexual abuse, for me, the spiritual relationship with God gave me the courage to start that process. But I think that the willingness has to come from inside yourself, a lot of times people avoid healing because they don't want to walk through the process (A,p17)."

Ann bespeaks of the link between spirituality and healing from sexual abuse, which provided her with the courage to heal. Other women spoke of the strength that spirituality endowed them with; the idea that it also takes strength to claim and discover spirituality, however that would personally manifest, was presented. Personal strength appeared to be important in connecting with spirituality, whether originating from that connection, or from the internal choices the survivors made to face and engage in the healing process. The last and final element will address the new sense of hope as expressed by the participants, that they felt a connection with.

NEW HOPE

For these women, the hope that spirituality illuminated in their healing process, was seen thus:

"Spirituality gives me hope in the sense that I see light at the end of the tunnel, that I have a connection with God who loves me, gives me hope in the sense that I'm acceptable, I'm okay where I'm at, hope in the sense that there are answers that He does help me with, even though it's not

packaged, as if I open a gift and 'poof' I'm better, or healed, that it's something that God is always working with me on at my own pace, He's not shoving and pushing me into anything (M,p50)."

The sense of connectedness with God was expressed here, which contributed to this woman's self-acceptance and personal identity. The "light at the end of the tunnel" appears as a metaphor of hope and meaning as seen from the midst of shadow. Michelle notes that the honouring of individual pace in the healing process was helpful.

In addition to the growth and learning as evidenced in the interviews by these women, some specific insights for other survivors of abuse were mentioned:

"I think it is so important that the person senses acceptance and understanding from their counsellor. And I would say to encourage the spiritual aspect of the healing process if they are open to it (S,p17)."

Viewpoints were presented regarding hope in the midst of struggle:

"It's sort of like an addict's need for that Higher Power to get through their struggle with their addiction. God gives us the strength and hope to get through it. The relationship aspect , the discipline, and the ability to forgive, there's a real lack of stability when you have been abused, there's sort of a feeling of being lost and directionless, and I think God gives us direction in many ways (S,p17)."

"But there in your struggle and weakness, you'll find the wings on the wind. If you're scared, God will be there, you'll never walk alone, you're safe beneath His wings (U,p2)."

One of the women described a story they had heard about the inherent struggle the butterfly faces when attempting to emerge from his cocoon. This wonderful butterfly story presented a metaphor of hope and healing:

"I read somewhere about a scientist who wanted to understand the uniquely transformative experience the butterfly undergoes. He wanted to help the butterfly in it's emerging out of the cocoon. As the fight to be free began, the scientist took a razor blade and gently cut open the cocoon to enable the butterfly to emerge more easily. Sadly, the end result was that

the butterfly could not fly at all, and died. The wings so desperately needed for flight, were simply not strong enough, and the discovery was made that the very painful and difficult struggling and wrestling to emerge and fly away, was exactly what empowered the butterfly to develop the strength to fly and be free! Isn't that powerful? From a vulnerable caterpillar to strong wings of flight! (A,p17)."

Despite the pain and suffering repercussing from childhood sexual abuse, these women, with the addition of spirituality as an integral part of their healing process, were able to move beyond the victim label, while experiencing growth, transformation and the discovery of meaning:

"Spirituality gives me hope. Hope and meaning to my life and all the pain I've experienced (S,p11)."

Perceptions of God were key in the women's journey of growth and self-acceptance. Because they were able to incorporate feminine imagery of God, this intensified the closeness they felt and communication improved. Thus, the sense of their safety net broadened. This became part of the ongoing process of increased strength and courage which helped the women involve themselves in the spiral of healing, mystery, and meaning.

The following section will present a discussion on the "themes related to the findings", followed by the last chapter, which will address the implications of these conceptual findings.

THEMES RELATED TO THE FINDINGS

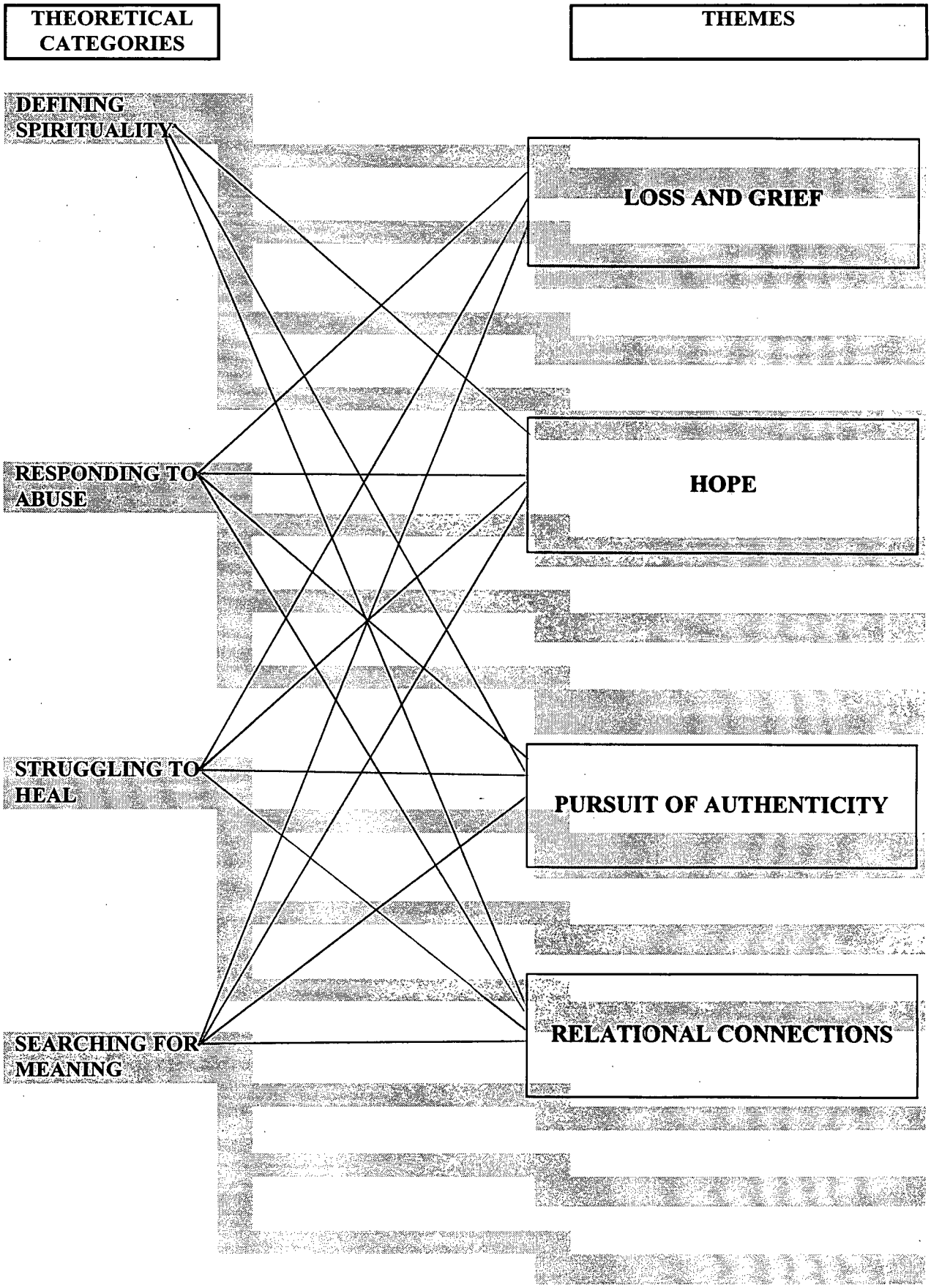
The conceptual framework provides us with a comprehensive overview of the role of spirituality in the healing process for these women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. As part of the emerging theory, and inherent within the research findings, are four main themes. A theme is an idea that repeats itself, with variations in different parts of the theory. These four common threads weave throughout the four major categories, and will be identified, described, and illustrated. They are as follows: loss and grief, hope, pursuit of authenticity, and relational connections. These four themes are woven throughout various parts of the theoretical framework, and provide a further understanding of the role of spirituality in the healing process for women survivors. As well, these themes relate directly to the implications for practice that are derived from these theoretical findings. (See Figure #5 for a graphic representation of how the themes intersperse their way throughout the framework.)

Loss and Grief

The theme of loss and grief was evident and presented itself throughout the conceptual framework. The women spoke of the need to grieve their losses, that grieving was an integral part of the healing process. Loss and grief manifested itself in various ways as a natural and painful process that was an essential factor in their healing:

> *"I was a lost little girl who lost her childhood...and no child deserves to lose their childhood and no child deserves to be treated in the way that I was treated (R,p.12) ."*

FIGURE #5: FOUR INTER-RELATED THEMES
THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING PROCESS:
WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE



"At the end of it all, the grieving...the working through, you do have peace (M,p.18)."

Childhood sexual abuse involved aspects of loss and grief that the women spoke about - loss of safety, of a sense of control, of life assumptions, of self-esteem, or loss of innocence. Sometimes the loss and grief was expressed in anger, sometimes it was expressed in confusion. This theme of loss and grief was interwoven throughout all aspects of the theoretical framework, and it was important for the women that it be acknowledged, understood, heard and supported.

Hope

The second theme emerging out of the data, was the hope that the survivors felt throughout the healing process. A sense of hope drew the women survivors forward in their healing. The pain of suffering was interspersed with rays of hope; the survivors demonstrated a resilience of hope amidst the struggle of healing:

"Spirituality gives me hope in the sense that I see light at the end of the tunnel (M,p.50)."

"Spirituality gives me hope and meaning to my life and all the pain I've experienced (S,p.11)."

The women's spirituality encompassed hope, as an underlying essence that propelled them towards healing; when the healing process was further along, a sense of new hope arose within them connected to a belief in purpose and meaning.

Pursuit of Authenticity

The women survivors spoke in different ways throughout the conceptual framework about the pursuit of authenticity and how important that became to them. They expressed a desire to be true to themselves, real with others and honest before God. The survivors moved from a place of being disconnected with their emotions and their identity, to a place of feeling internally authentic, present, and fully engaged with life:

> *"I wasn't allowed to be real...I guess once you are free to be real, it opens the doors, it throws the doors open to spirituality; to me that is the key in the lock. You be honest and then it opens up a relationship with God (M,p.5, p.36)."*

> *"To me, an authentic human being is one who is in touch with the spiritual side of themselves...I strive for authenticity, to be fully engaged with life from moment to moment, not living in the past or the future, but living in the present and being able to respond to the present in an authentic and real way (R,p.16)."*

During their sexual abuse experience, the survivors could not be fully emotionally present and had to separate their emotions and themselves from their circumstances in order to survive. Spirituality, as interspersed with the healing process, allowed these women survivors to reach a place of internal integrity, wherein their emotion paradigm could be experienced fully in the present, and a genuineness and striving for authenticity could prevail.

Relational Connections

The women survivors illustrated the importance of relationships throughout the conceptual framework. Views of God were reworked, and images of self were reconstructed only after a lengthy process of healing. This multi-faceted ongoing

process encouraged the development of a renewed view of God, self and others. This change process was understood to be greatly enhanced by the relational connectedness experienced by the survivors in various ways. Within the context of a supportive, trusting, therapeutic relationship with a therapist, as well as support from other women, certain religious leaders, or healthy relationships with men, these women found healing. The women spoke about relating to God in different ways as a component of their healing. They also developed healthier ways of relating with, and viewing themselves and others, as part of the healing journey, all the while redefining themselves and their experiences. Breaking free from the isolation that sexual abuse often creates, and connecting with others, self, or God while rebuilding the ability to trust, was fundamental to the healing process for these women. Speaking to one another meant sharing the pain and sharing the joys of healing. The invitation to spiritual growth was seen as an invitation to connectedness. Spirituality was spoken of by the survivors as connecting them in profound ways to God, other people and with themselves:

> *"Spirituality for me is a relationship between me and God" (M,p.1)."*

> *"Spirituality is about intimacy. Intimacy with God, yourself, and with others. It's all interconnected with each other (S,p.11)."*

Restorative factors were seen to be intermingled throughout the context of healing within relationships - in the midst of a sense of connectedness, either with self, others and/or with God.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter the findings of the research will be discussed with respect to four main areas: firstly, how the findings support, add to, and/or refute the existing literature. Secondly, implications for both social work practice and religious professionals will be addressed. Thirdly, the implications of the results of this study will be viewed in terms of policy determination. Lastly, the implications for further research will be presented. Before these implications are addressed, the limitations of this research study will be examined in terms of scope and accuracy, and a discussion will be included on the strengths and weaknesses of the research project.

Limitations of the Study

The strength inherent in this exploratory-descriptive research design is that the qualitative nature allows for building a theoretical basis from which further research can be carried out. The theory, as developed and tested with the seven women participants, contributed to conceptual clarity and a theoretical viewpoint. One of the limitations of this study pertains to the sample size which may limit the conclusions of the research. It cannot be definitively established that other childhood sexual abuse survivors would be assisted in their healing process through spirituality. The rationale behind this qualitative research

design was to construct an in-depth study in order to develop a conceptual framework which creates emerging theory concerning the role of spirituality in the healing process for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. It must be noted that these research findings cannot be generalized except through hypotheses or assumptions. The objective for this type of research design differs from that of quantitative methodology, in that the findings are theoretical and the resultant hypotheses must then be tested using other methods, or raised as questions to help guide practice. Exploratory studies are theoretical in nature and are an early step in the process of scientific inquiry; they assist in building a reference knowledge base and as such, provide implications for further testing of theory.

The point of saturation was reached by the fourth interview, leading to the conclusion that the results should be considered to be accurate in the context of the interview guide (see Appendix). The women interviewees are all of a fairly homogeneous background. Six of the seven women interviewed where caucasian, while the seventh was Indo-Canadian. The women are all middle class at present, and have at least grade 12 education, with the majority having some college or university level schooling. The women all identify a Judeo-Christian faith background. They do not all regularly attend church, and some admit to struggling with religious affiliation. The realities for survivors of different cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds may differ.

Further limitations to the methodology may include the length of time required to carry out such research. There was only one interview conducted with each research subject, and it is possible that a follow up interview may have yielded further results. The interviewees were selected from women who were

receiving counselling, so it is assumed they would have a level of comfort with the interview process; their feedback confirmed a high level of ease with the interview procedure. Although the feedback from the participants clearly revealed their comfort level, time restraints are an important limitation that needs to be considered.

The researcher's background and biases should be noted and examined for any limitations they may create. Like most of the women interviewed, the researcher's religious background is given as Judeo-Christian. The inclusion of other perspectives is thus somewhat limited. However, it must be noted that the researcher's education is secular, and that her background as a social worker and teacher in secular workplaces should serve to constrict any biases. All efforts were made to avoid personal bias in the analysis of the results.

Integration of the Research Findings into the Existing Literature

The current literature was divided into two main streams: that of theoretical literature, and that of empirical research literature. These will now be explored in light of the particular findings that emerged from this study, with an aim to compare and contrast the findings with the existing literature on the subject. How the results of the research study support, add to, and/or refute the literature on the subject will thus be addressed.

Theoretical Literature

In the literature review, there were a number of areas that were reflected and demonstrated in my research findings. Bass & Davis (1988) discussed how spirituality could provide resources and strength for the sexual abuse survivor,

that it is a uniquely personal experience. My research findings support this, the women referred to their sense of spirituality as being individually unique, providing a source of strength and support to them in their healing journey. Sargent (1989) and Heggen (1993) presented the premise that one's spirituality is significant in the healing process for survivors of sexual abuse, my research findings support this, they indicate that spirituality was very important to the women in their striving towards a sense of healing and wholeness. In the theoretical literature, there is some mention made of the differences between religion and spirituality (Peck, 1998, Benner, 1991). However, in much of the literature reviewed, the differences are not noted or expanded upon; often the terms "religion" and "spirituality" were used interchangeably. My research findings add to the existing literature by further illustrating the importance of the difference between the two terms. It was helpful for the women interviewees to differentiate further between religion and spirituality, and clarify those differences, especially if the religious experience was negative for the women. The participants, especially those who had negative experiences with religion, experienced negative feelings associated with the term "religion", while they expressed positive connotations about the term "spirituality".

General systems theory underscores the importance of viewing life in its interrelated wholeness (Freeman, 1981). Although von Bertalanffy did not specifically address spirituality and the healing process, in terms of systemic thinking, religion can be seen to be a component of the whole for some individuals. The research findings from my study suggest that religion may not have always been helpful in the healing process for survivors of sexual abuse, whereas spirituality was seen to make positive contributions to the process of healing.

Alienation theory (Geyer, 1980), speaks of the effect of trauma as creating a sense of self-estrangement among survivors. The findings of my study show that the women felt alienated from their families of origin, and from themselves, as well as feeling isolated from the church community they had grown up in. For many of the women, the response of the church had been to negate or ignore the sexual abuse they had suffered, this served to further alienate them. For these women, spirituality was seen to provide a broader, more encompassing, gracious and relational connection than religion exclusively, and appeared to serve in the healing process towards a greater sense of connectedness with self, others and God.

The struggles with the predominant male imagery of God is discussed in the feminist literature (Kane et al, 1993; Courtois, 1988). The findings in my research study support and add to the existing literature in that they suggest that for women survivors, exclusively male imagery of God may actually not just hold them back, but may also revictimize them. The women participants in my research study found that an understanding of the feminine characteristics of God, along with the maternal metaphors illustrated in Biblical scriptures, were helpful in their healing journey. Feminist theory suggests that the patriarchal nature of the Western church leads to the protection of male abusers (Young, 1992; Poling, 1991; Heggen, 1993). This research study supports this notion, in that the women felt that the church not only negated their concerns, but in many cases chose to protect the abuser instead. However, for some of the respondents, support and validation by a male pastor and the admonishment of wrongdoing by another male clergy member was extremely healing. The findings in this research study seemed to suggest that the women participants were sometimes

able to move towards an ability to identify positively with male imagery of God, as they progressed in their healing journey, experiencing instances of healing in the context of male interaction. This contrasts with feminist theory which suggests that traditional male images of God could not be helpful for women survivors of sexual abuse. Feminists speak of the problems created by the patriarchal structure of the Western church. My findings suggest that patriarchy did create some feelings of isolation and alienation from the church community, given the fact that these women had been abused by male authority figures, some of whom held positions within a religious structure.

Trauma theorists speak of the deleterious effects of a traumatic experience on a victim as creating a long term set of consequences (Kritsberg, 1993). Illusions of God were seen to have been shattered and a loss of trust in God resulted (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This research study suggests that while the traumatic effects are supported, the respondents speak of gaining strength through loss. As well, as the women progressed in their healing journey, their images of God changed from those of negativity to images of positivity. Janoff-Bulman (1992) referred to the discovery that victims of traumatic events often attempt to find meaning, purpose or hope within, or beyond their tragedy. My research findings support this in that the participants found a sense of meaning, growth, strength and hope despite their earlier trauma.

Fowler (1981) and Peck (1998) suggest that victims of sexual abuse are developmentally stuck with their childhood images of God. Survivors were seen to be held back from developing age appropriate images of God. The results of Fowler's study would seem to suggest that abuse survivors would have problems moving through their spiritual journey. The findings of my study demonstrate

that although survivors seem to have blocks toward their spiritual development, they were able to experience a personal journey of faith and healing. Peck (1998) discusses that spiritual growth is not a linear progression, but rather, it is a circular or spiral process. He speaks of it as an evolving journey of transformation, change and mystery; my research findings confer with and support this analysis of spiritual growth. Fowler (1981) defines spirituality as a mystery, a faith journey by which individuals may seek to find a sense of meaning to their lives. My research findings support Fowler's description of faith development.

Inherent in the struggles that survivors of sexual abuse often experience, are two of the key factors in the healing process: that of anger and forgiveness. The theoretical literature addresses these struggles, acknowledging that certain religious or spiritual practices have inadvertently contributed to confusion in the healing process, through fostering attitudes that are not deemed to promote healing, such as discouraging or minimizing anger, or forcing premature forgiveness (Bass & Davis, 1988; Gannon, 1989; Gil, 1983; Kane et al, 1993; Heggen, 1993). My research findings both support, and add to these theoretical stances. The data suggests that for these women participants, the process of acknowledging and being permitted to voice their righteous anger at the occurrence of sexual abuse, enabled them to actually work through and move beyond the blocks that developed when emotional expression surrounding the abuse and its consequences was discouraged, minimized, or suppressed. The benefits of forgiveness were more fully experienced as the participants were given permission and support to authentically express their true feelings and thoughts. The women spoke of this pursuit towards authenticity as leading them

to a sense of freedom in their healing process.

The theoretical literature presents the use of prayer as part of the healing process for survivors of sexual abuse (Finney, 1992; Dossey, 1993; Foote, 1994; Flaherty, 1992; Bass & Davis, 1988). My research findings support and add to this; the data suggests that prayer provides a calming, peaceful influence, can lead to new insights, and was illustrated to be a way of communication and connection with oneself and with God.

Empirical Research Literature

The empirical literature connecting spirituality and sexual abuse issues presented some interesting information with which to examine in light of my findings. In the empirical research literature, the terms religion and spirituality are used interchangeably, however, for the respondents of my study, there were huge differences between the two terms illustrated. This adds to the empirical research results in the literature, in that it reveals a piece of new information. Clarification of the differences between "religion" and "spirituality" may be important and helpful for some survivors of sexual abuse, thereby assisting them in moving forward in their healing process.

Russell (1986) found that sexually abused women were more disillusioned with religion than non-abused women were. My findings support this idea. Kane, Cheston and Greer (1993) found similar information, that survivors of sexual abuse had a more negative view of God, this research supports my findings, which add to and present further exploration as to the differences between spirituality and religion, offering the women opportunities to still maintain connectedness to the spiritual component in their lives. As the women

in my study were able to differentiate between the two concepts, they were able to make sense of the unhelpful aspects of religion, embrace the helpful aspects, and move on to a greater appreciation of the depth and breadth of spirituality for them.

Elliot (1994) examined the impact of religious faith for sexual abuse survivors over a long term. This empirical research found that if the sexual abuse was perpetrated by a father or father figure, the survivors were more likely to be religious nonpractitioners as adults, especially if they had been raised in religious homes wherein the image of God and father were intertwined. If the survivors were not raised with the belief that God was predominantly a father figure, they were more able to embrace a relationship with God as adults. My research findings support and add to this discussion, the women participants spoke of their struggles in relating to an image of God as father when the abuse was perpetrated by a father or father figure. The data further demonstrated how these women found ways of exploring the issues regarding the gender of God, feminine aspects of God and various perceptions of God and spirituality in order to evolve and grow in their healing journey.

The empirical research literature presents results pertaining to the importance of faith and spirituality as a source of strength, support, hope, reassurance and sense of purpose (Smith et al,1995; Reinert & Smith, 1997; Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). My research findings concur with these concepts; the women participants discussed how these characteristics described their understanding of spirituality as well, albeit for some of the women, the positive and healing aspects of faith became more apparent as they differentiated between religion and spirituality. For the seven women interviewed, religion was

sometimes a source of support, yet more often was experienced in unhelpful ways, while spirituality was consistently seen as positive, helpful and enlightening.

Implications for Practice

The implications of this research for clinicians and religious professionals will be discussed in order to see how they may best be used to support and facilitate the recovery and healing process for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Based on the findings conveyed through this particular research study, a number of practice implications were identified and will be highlighted.

Practice Implications for Clinicians

Terms such as therapist, counsellor, social worker or clinician will be used interchangeably in this section pertaining to practice implications. As demonstrated in the findings, spirituality is an important part of the individual, and can contribute positively to the healing process. Therapists need to look at the client as a whole person, they need to realize that for many clients, spirituality is part of a "big picture" with multifaceted aspects; strengthening client's abilities to develop healthy strategies may include an embracing of spirituality. The spiritual perspective requires looking at the meanings of life; clinicians need to look beyond the fears and limitations of the immediate problem with the goal of discovering something meaningful instead of focusing on perceptions of pathology (Sermabeikian, 1994). The findings illustrated the need for therapists to allow and encourage survivors to explore and/or probe their religious and spiritual values and questions. My findings suggest that it may be helpful to explore with the client whether they perceive any differences between spirituality and religion, given that for the seven participants in this research project, clarification of any differences enabled them to sort out specific

hindrances or benefits, while reevaluating their spiritual beliefs, values and hopes. Clinicians need to realize that for many survivors, spirituality may be a resource. Prayer, as a way of crying out in communion with God or a way to meditate and become calmed, was seen to be effective for the women that were interviewed. The inherent resources and strength that spirituality can provide, are not to be ignored for the client who desires to explore this connection. For therapists who are not religious or spiritual themselves, they need to be careful not to negate the role of spirituality or to impose their own non-religious values on clients who may be religious. It would be helpful if the therapists themselves had internal clarity regarding their own sense of spirituality and were cognizant of the impact their spiritual values may have in the therapeutic environment. As well, it behooves therapists to be aware of their own level of comfort or discomfort with the subject of spirituality in general. Further, clinicians need to be prepared to refer clients who have spiritual questions to appropriate resources, if required. There needs to be a continued recognition that spirituality plays a role in the healthy development of individuals. Furthermore, effective counselling attends to all aspects of human functioning, including the spiritual dimension.

Forgiveness is an area of much misunderstanding in the healing process, as illustrated and evidenced in my findings. Forgiveness needs to be seen as not the same as forgetting, and not a precursor to minimization of the abuse. As beneficial as my findings illustrated forgiveness to be, it was also demonstrated that focusing primarily on forgiveness when there is unacknowledged, unresolved or repressed anger, is not helpful in the healing process. Anger is a common and healthy response for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and clinicians need to help clients accept, understand and learn from their anger,

thereby enabling them to move forward in their healing journey. As evidenced in my findings, therapists need to be careful not to impose forgiveness onto their clients, but rather, allow the client to explore the idea of forgiving at a pace that they are comfortable with. Therapists need to be aware that some religious clients may have been taught that anger itself is a sin and that for these clients there is a need for them to be able to explore their anger in a non-judgemental and supportive environment. The women in this study needed to express the truth of their reality: that they were angry with and disappointed in God. When this was allowed to be felt and admitted, only then were the women able to move on past the anger, anger that remained with them as long as it was disallowed and negated. The data demonstrated that for some women, being able to be angry at God enabled them to access deep sadness which had been kept locked away, or it led to the discovery that sometimes the anger was misplaced. Being able to tell God about it directly helped them clarify the core of their intense feelings, and assisted them to understand more fully the impact of abuse in their lives. Clients need to process their anger, accept it, then move beyond it, in order to heal. Kane, Cheston and Greer (1993) found that survivors have a need to work through anger not only at abusers, but also at God and need an accepting environment within which to do so. My findings also suggest that working through anger and hurt at God, self or others is a vital process piece in being able to truly forgive and move on. The research findings presented that it was often the unacknowledged anger and hurt that blocked the survivor from moving forward in their healing process.

For clinicians working with parents, there are some implication suggestions arising out of the research findings. It is important that parents provide an environment of safety for their children. Survivors of sexual abuse,

whether an adult or a child, need to feel safe, listened to and supported in the midst of their multitude of intense feelings surrounding the sexual abuse. My research findings highlighted that survivors of sexual abuse need to be able to honestly process their pain without having it minimized, in order to embrace all aspects of wholeness and healing. The findings indicated that for survivors of sexual abuse, a feeling of emotional closeness and authenticity would be advantageous and help foster a supportive environment. As well, the findings suggest that when children feel close to their parents and open lines of communication with children are maintained, they would be more likely to reveal sexual abuse, especially if it is extrafamilial. Parents need to increase their awareness of sexual abuse issues, and abuse prevention needs to be talked about, including discussions on what is appropriate touch. They need to be aware that there are resources available to them and their children if they are in need.

Practice Implications for Religious Professionals

The research findings indicate that there is an importance for the church community, especially those in leadership, to take survivors seriously and to heed their concerns. A need to acknowledge the effects of abuse was demonstrated; the study suggested as well that the victims had felt silenced by the church organization. Anderson (1992) discusses the need to allow abuse survivors to deal with the wounds of sexual abuse by allowing victims and their families time to go through the sometimes lengthy process of healing, as opposed to the "quick fix" attitudes that the respondents experienced. Whitman (1991) states that the church needs to take steps to address and understand the problems of childhood sexual abuse, specifically, the church needs to continue to learn how to counsel survivors and help them in their healing process. Based on

the findings conveyed through this particular study, the church did not provide a supportive environment for the victims in the midst of their struggle. If anything, the results indicate that the church response made the effects of the sexual abuse worse, rather than better. What was apparent in the findings regarding church response, was that it was helpful when church leaders acknowledged and admitted their limitations and/or lack of awareness. The findings support a need for the church community to provide a place where survivors can feel safe. Hancock & Mains (1987) speak of the need to work with other agencies such as sexual assault centres and professional counsellors, in order to provide services that are beyond the scope of expertise. Pastors and pastoral counsellors need to immerse themselves and deconstruct the legal aspects, the gender politics, the psychology, as well as the theology of the issues surrounding sexual abuse and its prevention. Presented in my research findings is the need to create and instigate proper and legal church policy regarding sexual abuse issues. The findings suggest that the church organization must not protect the perpetrators, even if they are church leaders, and must instead concentrate their primary resources in meeting the needs of the victims, ensuring that appropriate legal actions are taken. Finally, the findings in this study indicate that in order to fully communicate the breadth of God's character, it may be important to select gender neutral or feminine references to God with survivors of sexual abuse. Referring to God as a loving parent rather than Father may be helpful to certain survivors in the midst of their struggle to heal. There are certainly some rich Biblical metaphors and imagery around the feminine aspects of God's character that may be of great benefit for some women survivors.

Policy Implications

Important considerations for policy were derived from the research

findings pertaining to working with sexual abuse survivors.

Policy Considerations for Religious Institutions

Religious institutions need to have policy manuals to deal with sexual abuse in professional, legal and appropriate manners. Religious institutions need to be aware of sexual abuse prevention strategies and ensure that all staff members are informed, educated and aware, while encouraging individuals that work with people to gain knowledge in order to understand and cope, and to know about what the proper protocol is regarding the revealing of sexual abuse. Pastoral leaders who encounter sexual abuse survivors need to be aware that there is no such thing as a "quick fix" that can be applied to the problem of sexual abuse, they need to know that healing is a process. Religious leaders need to be aware of the ministry mandates regarding the reporting of sexual abuse, and respond accordingly to any and all sexual abuse scenarios, whether past or present. It behooves them to support the need for professional intervention and support if needed, and guide their parishioners to raise their awareness of sexual abuse prevalence and effects, providing professional ongoing education and awareness of the problem of sexual abuse. Religious leaders or spiritual directors need to create a supportive and welcoming atmosphere wherein victims feel safe to share their stories, and can feel validated and listened to. Pastors or pastoral counsellors need to immerse themselves and deconstruct the legal aspects, the gender politics and inherent power differential, as well as the theological aspects of the issues surrounding sexual abuse. Religious institutions must not overly or unduly protect abusers, and make an effort to screen and/or "weed out" sexual abusers in positions of leadership. They need to refer abuse issues to appropriate legal authorities. It was demonstrated in the findings that the women did not always feel believed, heard or supported by religious authority figures or those in

position of leadership. While this is changing, as demonstrated in the findings, what became clearly evident was that this lack or awareness or support was very deleterious.

Policy Considerations for Agencies

Social workers need to be taught about spirituality, and develop an awareness about spirituality and the role it can play in the healing process. However, it is imperative that spiritual values not be imposed upon social workers in training, but rather an openness to the concept must prevail. Therapy needs to be used in a nonjudgemental way, and the therapist needs to be careful not to impose their values on the client. Clinicians and agencies need to be open to hearing about their client's spiritual values, journey and process, and to support and allow expressions of anger and other emotions in the midst of possible spiritual struggle.

A second policy consideration is in relation to the findings which exemplify the women's need to be allowed to express their anger as it relates to any spiritual blockages or even anger at God. The findings suggest that this was beneficial, agencies need to allow for the client's varied spiritual needs and beliefs to be honoured.

A policy consideration is in regards to the support and time women require in order to heal. It was generally demonstrated in the findings that time was required, an aspect that agencies need to be aware of in their dealings with women survivors of sexual abuse.

Implications for Further Research

This research study focused on the specifics of the role of spirituality in the healing process for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Although the findings are conceptual in nature, they are by no means conclusions, rather, they can be used to facilitate further hypotheses and suggest ideas for quantitative research. Thus, the findings in my study reveal several areas that may be explored in future research.

The findings illustrated that spirituality can be source of resource and strength for these women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. As part of the applications for future research, questions could be asked pertaining to the further exploration of this role, and/or how the sexual abuse may block or impede spiritual growth. Specifics regarding the nature of one's spiritual journey could be explored, and definitions of the term "spirituality" could be pursued. Clarifying that there was a difference between religion and spirituality appeared to help the women survivors in their healing, it would be beneficial to examine this further. Questions pertaining to what the makeup of the individual nature of a person's spiritual journey looks like, would be interesting to explore.

The women participants highlighted that for some of them, especially if the abuser was a father or father figure, they were helped by the discovery and experiential knowledge about the feminine characteristics of God. If women survivors of childhood sexual abuse were taught about the feminine characteristics of God, how might that be beneficial in their healing journey or their spiritual development, what would the results be for other women survivors?

This research study focused only on women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Questions can be raised as to what the similarities or differences would be for men survivors of sexual abuse. Further research on how the role of spirituality may be different for men would be interesting. Regarding women of different cultural or religious backgrounds than the predominantly Judeo-Christian background of the seven women studied, it would be interesting to examine various cultural perspectives on spirituality as connected to healing from sexual abuse issues.

A central idea presented in the conceptual framework regarding struggles with anger and forgiveness, was that as the women survivors were able to process their anger in healthy ways, have it validated, understood and listened to, they were able to move towards forgiveness more easily. More research on the process of anger and forgiveness as essential pieces of the healing puzzle, would be advantageous. For example, further research could examine the various ways that anger is dealt with in religious circles and how that impacts the survivor of sexual abuse. Questions could be asked regarding the attitudes that are helpful and not helpful or conducive and not conducive to moving towards forgiveness. Explorations on the linkage piece between suppressed anger and blocks or resistances to forgiveness would be interesting. The women revealed that to forgive, was to more fully experience healing; further research on this stance would be beneficial for other survivors and clinicians. Research investigating the process of forgiveness and its specific benefits would be interesting.

Religious institutional abuse was referred to by the women in my study. More research needs to be done in this area, what are the effects of sexual abuse

by religious authority figures on women's spiritual and religious values, and how much more damaging is this than perpetrations of sexual abuse outside of the religious institutions?

As evidenced in my theoretical findings, the women spoke about what they considered to be contributing factors to their childhood sexual abuse. These factors such as family dynamics or dysfunction, religious background or ideologies, lack of closeness to parents or emotionally deprivation, could be further examined as contributors, precursors, or complicating factors to the trauma experienced by sexual abuse survivors. Although self-reported, they seem to produce the background for an interesting idea of study. By exploring some of these contributing factors, it would be hoped that helpful information could be gathered to help prevent future child sexual abuse. Given the devastation that can be caused by this problem, any preventative intervention or further knowledge would be advantageous. Knowledge is power, and empowerment is healing. Studying, exploring and thus learning more about the role of spirituality in the healing process for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, has been interesting, rewarding, and enlightening.

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APPENDIX A

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING PROCESS:
WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

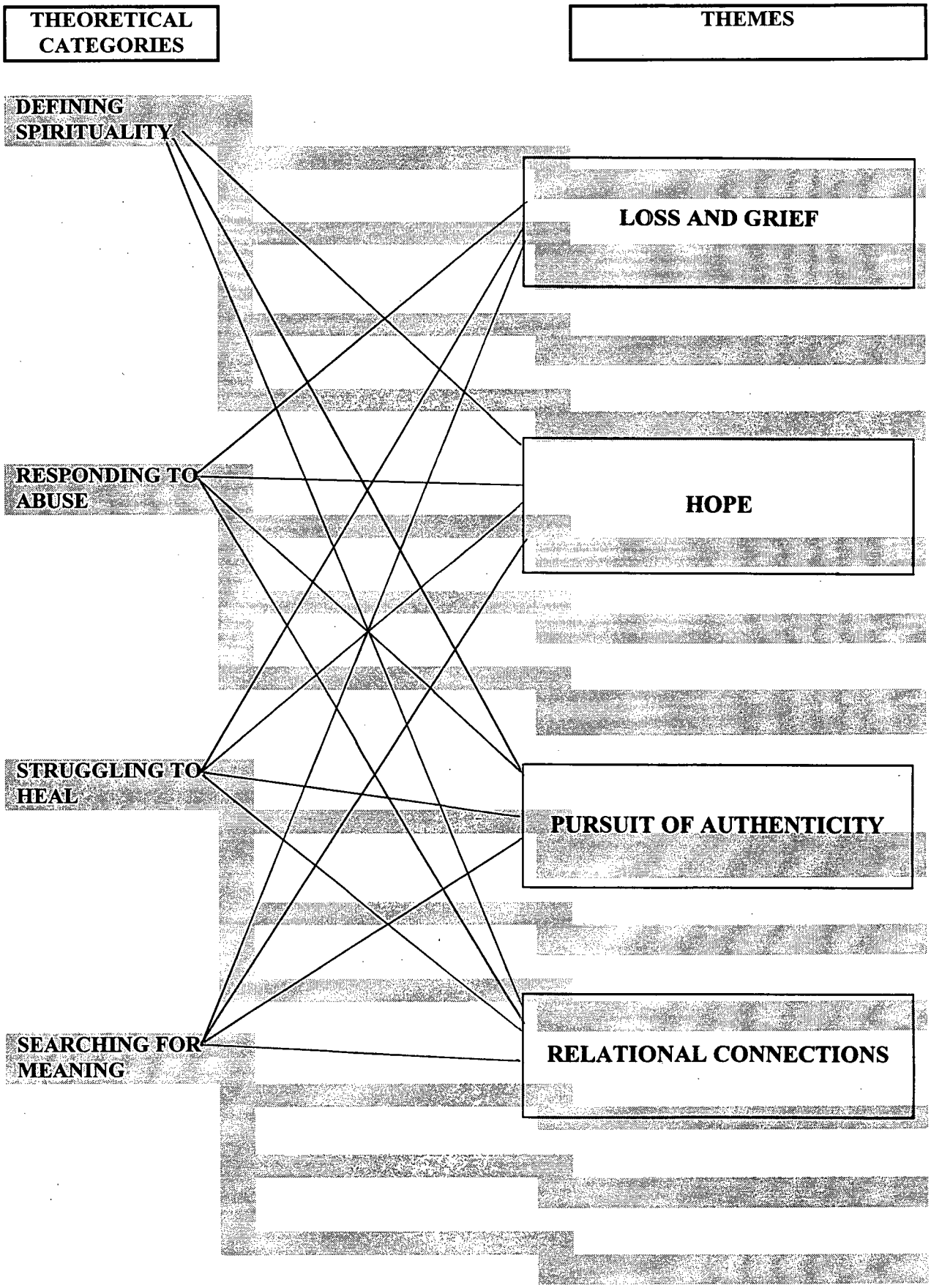
CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	TYPES, CIRCUMSTANCES, CONDITIONS
DEFINING SPIRITUALITY	**Formulation of Definition**	- Personal journey - Increased clarity - Difficult to define
	Spirituality vs. Religion	- Clarification of difference - Spirituality is a less threatening term - Spirituality is expansive - The term "religion" as limited - Importance of spirituality
	Definition by Exclusion	- Rationale for beginning - Spirituality not dictated by external influences
	Definition by Inclusion	- Internal integrity - Metaphorical - Relationship with God - Development of spirituality - Mystery
RESPONDING TO ABUSE	**Own Response**	- Cognitive reaction - Emotional reaction - Relationships with men
	Parent's Response	- Emotional reaction - Secrecy - Minimization
	Church Response	- Negative stances - Lack of awareness and knowledge - Helpful responses - Church as part of society

CATEGORIES	PROPERTIES	TYPES, CIRCUMSTANCES, CONDITIONS
STRUGGLING TO HEAL	From Isolation to Connection	- Breaking the silence - Empowerment through voice - Connection with women - Healing aspects of therapy - Contributing factors
	Anger	- Anger at God - What hindered - What helped
	Forgiveness	- Definition of forgiveness - Obstacles to forgiveness - Healing aspects of forgiveness
SEARCHING FOR MEANING	Image of God	- Perceptions of God - Struggles with image of God as father
	Gender Issues Pertaining to God	- Feminine attributes of God - Duality of gender - Patriarchy predominant in church
	Healing Power of Spirituality	- Meaning - The power of prayer - Strength and tenacity - New hope

APPENDIX B

FOUR INTER-RELATED THEMES

FOUR INTER-RELATED THEMES
THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE HEALING PROCESS:
WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE



APPENDIX C

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

School of Social Work
2080 West Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z2
Tel: (604) 822-2255 Fax: (604) 822-8656

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Title: The role of spirituality in the healing process for adult survivors of sexual abuse

To whom it may concern,

My name is Wynnae Huizinga Bliss. I am a graduate student at the University of British Columbia's School of Social Work. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study exploring the role of spirituality in your healing process. I am interested in discovering how spirituality or religion has influenced your healing journey. The purpose of this study is to better understand your experiences, which will help improve our knowledge in this area.

The research will be conducted through in-person interviews, which will take approximately one and a half hours of your time to complete. Interviews will be audiotaped to ensure accuracy and will be erased upon completion of the project. Your anonymity will be protected by the removal of any information from your responses that may identify you.

Your decision to participate is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time and/or not answer questions, which will in no way affect services you are receiving now or in the future at the agency from which you are recruited.

If you would like to participate, or need any further information to make a decision, you are invited to contact me directly at 688-3198 or my research advisor, Dr. Garry Grams at 822-5704. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Wynnae Huizinga Bliss, B.Ed., BSW, MSW (candidate)

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

School of Social Work
2080 West Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z2
Tel: (604) 822-2255 Fax: (604) 822-8656

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Title of Research Project: The Role of Spirituality in the Healing Process for Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse.

I am interested in the role that spirituality has played in the healing process for survivors of sexual abuse. I really appreciate your time, energy and experience. Thank you for being here and for willing to assist in a discovery process together. As we progress, feel free to ask any questions if you don't understand what I'm asking.

1. Could you tell me about how spirituality has played a role in your healing journey?
   - what does "spirituality" mean to you?
   - the role of spirituality in your life?

2. Could you tell me your story about your healing journey?

3. What stands out the most for you as you reflect on your healing journey? - significant aspects?

4. What has been your unique way of dealing with your abuse through spirituality?

5. Have there been any changes in how you view spirituality or religion as you have dealt with your abuse issues?

6. How has spirituality influenced your healing process?
   - if it interfered, what specifically interfered?
   - the most difficult hurdles?
   - if it helped, what specifically helped?
   - the positive aspects?

Thank you for your time and knowledge. It has been very much appreciated. Sometimes talking about our experiences leaves us wanting to talk further about issues that may arise. I encourage you to explore any of those with your therapist.

APPENDIX F

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

School of Social Work
2080 West Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z2
Tel: (604) 822-2255 Fax: (604) 822-8656

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Sex:
4. Present Religious Affiliation (if any):
5. Any history of religious/spiritual involvement?

(Note: This information will be destroyed upon project completion)

APPENDIX G

AGENCY LETTERS OF CONSENT

APPENDIX H

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL