DOES IT COUNT?

Female Child Protection Workers’ Experiences of Workplace Violence

By

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ABSTRACT

This feminist qualitative study explored and described three female child protection workers' experiences of workplace violence. The phenomenon of workplace violence in the child protection field was set in the context of women's labour herstory in Canada, a review of current research on violence against women and violence in the social services field. The women in the study were recruited through snowball sampling. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher. The data was analyzed using narrative analysis methods described by Mishler (1986) and Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998). The women's narratives indicated they experienced violence as a traumatic event and their responses to violence were an expression of power/powerlessness within the child protection system. Themes that emerged from the narratives were: impact/consequences of the violence, ways of creating safety, power/powerlessness and differences in response to workers experiencing violence by the provincial and First Nation's child protection agencies in British Columbia. Implications for child protection social work education/training, practice and management are discussed, as are recommendations for further research on the topic.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The police officer’s hand shook as he read my client his rights before arresting him. I stood in his living room with two other police officers, my supervisor and a menacing rottweiler. It was my job to explain that I had removed his children from his care, at school that day. Thus began a year of being harassed, intimidated and threatened with death.

But she just comes and screams in my face, I know who you are, I’ve been checking you out and you are going to lose your, I’m going to get you fired from your job and she’s right in my face and this went on for, I don’t know, an hour?

She went right into rage, she said, I hate this government, they’re taking my baby away and I hate you and I’m going to kill you and she just lunged across the room and stuck her hands around my neck.

He said that if he finds out we are hiding her (his common-law wife), he’d get two other friends and they’d have guns and they’d come to our office and shoot everyone. First of all he’d kill her former boyfriend and then come to our office and shoot everybody.

The first voice you hear in this introduction is mine – a description of workplace violence I experienced as a child protection worker. The other voices are from the women I interviewed for this project. It was as a result of my experiences of being threatened and feeling afraid at work that I became curious about other women’s ‘stories’, their experiences of violence when doing child protection work and the impact it had on them.

Generally there has been an increased awareness of violence in a variety of contexts starting around 1970 with the issues of wife assault, child abuse, and elder abuse (Mooney, 2000 & Wiehe, 1998). Most recently the impact of bullying on youth and children in a number of high profile cases in British Columbia (BC) has been profiled in the media. Violence in the workplace is another area that is increasingly being
recognized as a legitimate issue with serious repercussions for employees and employers. Research on the topic of workplace violence suggests that some workplaces are more dangerous than others. A recent report found social workers are at higher risk than others of experiencing workplace violence and “women are especially at risk because so many are concentrated in the high-risk occupations particularly as teachers, social workers, nurses and bank and shop workers” (International Labour Organization, 1998, p. 1).

Significant research has been done in the areas of the gendered nature of violence; workplace violence and social services organizations; and gender and workplace violence – but I have found limited research on female child protection workers (CPWs) and workplace violence. It is this intersection of workplace violence and gender, particularly as it pertains to the child protection setting in which I am most interested. In assessing this issue as worthy of further study I make two assumptions: violence in the child protection setting is connected to the gender of the worker and women’s experience of violence is different than men’s.

The purpose of this research is to explore and describe how workplace violence is experienced and understood by female CPWs. This qualitative study provides recognition of a little studied dimension of violence against women and identifies violence in the child protection setting as a serious issue for female practitioners. It also suggests implications for:

1. social work education/training,
2. child protection supervisors and managers,
3. workplace violence prevention,
4. intervention strategies.
The Situation of Women – Patriarchy and Oppression

It has been well documented that, as a group, Canadian women have less power than Canadian men and that this difference in power is experienced in their homes, at work, at school, and in community and political life (Callahan, 1993, p. 179).

A basic premise of this project is the value and importance of inquiry into women's particular experience of workplace violence. I don't suggest that male CPWs are immune from workplace violence nor do I minimize the impact of such violence. However I do suggest that women have a different experience of violence related to their position in society that is connected to power and powerlessness.

Radical feminists explain that the situation of women in our society is a social construction, which has been named patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined as:

A familial – social, ideological system in which men – by force, direct pressure or through ritual, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. It does not necessarily imply that no woman has power, or that all women in a given culture may not have certain power (Rich, 1977, p. 57).

While feminists with different perspectives (radical, liberal, Marxist/socialist, women of colour and lesbian) may disagree on the roots and emphasis in analysis for women's unequal status there is agreement that women are oppressed because they are women. “Men are oppressed for other reasons but never because they are men” (Callahan, 1993, p. 175).

The effect of this oppression has only recently been examined in relation to research. Feminist researchers are asking questions about who is researched, who is a
researcher, what is researched, how the research is conducted and who benefits from the research. Problems identified by feminists are the gaps or silences in research about women in all realms of inquiry. For example, women’s experiences have until recently been virtually unexplored in the areas of medicine, psychology, sociology, and human development. Equally problematic was research done by men, on men, which would be applied to women. When women did not ‘fit the research’ they were deemed to be deviant (Gilligan, 1993; Roberts, 1981). These issues are introduced here to highlight the impact of patriarchy on all systems, including the academic research system.

This paper is divided into a number of chapters. This chapter provides an introduction to the topic, violence against female child protection workers, and discusses my personal connection to the area of research. Chapter Two develops the conceptual context further by looking at women’s movement into the paid labour force in North America, violence against women, workplace violence and violence in the social services field. Chapter Three provides a description of the methodology used in terms of sampling, data collection, analysis, ethical considerations and validity issues. My findings from the women’s interviews are described and analyzed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five provides a discussion of the women’s stories and their significance. Chapter Six highlights the implications for child protection social work and Chapter Seven provides a conclusion.
Herstory – Women’s Movement Into The Paid Labour Force in North America

Work – what it is, who did it, what it meant, and how it was done – has intrigued women’s historians. In fact the study of women and work constitutes the largest sub-field within Canadian women’s history (McCullough, 2001, p. 319).

There have been significant changes in the nature of women’s work in Canada over the last century. These changes can only be understood in the societal context in which they occurred. In particular, an exploration of the legal context is necessary because as women’s legal status changed so too did their increased participation in the education and paid labour systems.

During the settlement of Canada, women’s work was essential for the survival of the family. Women worked within the home, producing food, clothing and household necessities. However, women often worked outside the home, alongside their husbands on the land (McCullough, 2001). English common-law largely determined the legal status of women, “The husband and wife are one and that one is the husband” (English jurist Sir William Blackstone, cited in Schmid, 1991, p. 48). This quote reflected strongly held beliefs about women as property rather than people in their own right. In effect, the ownership of women was transferred from father to husband at marriage.

The advent of increasing industrialization and urbanization created a work environment transition that affected both men and women. The spheres of work and home – public and private became more clearly defined. Women were believed to be
better suited for work inside the home, while men laboured away from home for a wage. A woman who did work outside the home was often single, widowed, deserted by her husband or of a lower social status (McCullough, 2001). Perhaps as a result of these changes and women's gradual movement into the paid workforce there became increasing pressure from women for recognition of their rights in a variety of realms: to get an education, vote, run for political office, be recognized as persons and pursue labour choices outside the home.

Despite the development of a fledgling women's movement in the early 20th century, beliefs persisted that women should not work or receive a higher education, based on ideas about the female body, psychology and temperament that made women unsuitable for work outside the home. Opponents of higher education for women "argued that the rigours of a higher education would put women's health in jeopardy, even threatening their reproductive functions" (Neatby, 2001, p. 152).

Euro-Canadian women in Canada were entitled to vote in federal elections in 1919; however, their entitlement to vote provincially did not come until later, with Quebec being the last province in 1940 to give women the right to vote (Sangster, 2001). It is ironic that while women gained the right to vote, they did not have the right to enter politics, as they were not recognized as persons under the British North America Act. It was not until ten years later (after being able to vote federally) that Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy and Irene Parlby of Alberta successfully challenged the Canadian constitution and had it changed to recognize women as 'persons' (White, 2001, p. 216).
The First and Second World Wars provided unprecedented opportunities for women to work outside the home. In the First World War women had the opportunity to work in munitions factories and other non-traditional areas of work previously occupied by men, as “farm labourers, streetcar conductors, bank clerks and telegraph messengers” (McCullough, 2001, p. 327). However when the men returned from war, women largely vacated these positions and returned home. In World War Two (by 1943), over 10% of women between the ages of 18 – 45 were engaged directly/indirectly in work related to the war (Schmid, 1991). As well, women were participating once again in jobs previously filled by men. At the end of World War Two (as with the end of World War One) many women returned to work in the home. However, a significant difference from the First World War was the number of married women who continued to work in the paid labour force after the war concluded (McCullough, 2001).

Over time beliefs have gradually changed about women’s abilities to perform a variety of jobs. As a result of the struggles by Canadian women activists from the early 19th century to the present, women in increasing numbers are participating in the paid labour force. A survey by Statistics Canada, Women in Canada 2000, highlighted this increase. In 1976 approximately 42% of women in Canada worked outside the home; twenty-two years later in 1999 this had increased to 55%.

While women are now more likely to have paid employment, they also are likely to be employed in jobs in which they predominate – nursing, teaching, waitressing, sales and service, clerical/secretarial and social work. Today, as in the past, there is a division between what is men’s and women’s work. Women have moved their ‘private’ family work into the paid public domain but most often this is ‘caring for others’. Women’s
caring for others has never been work that is recognized as work. It has not been valued, considered prestigious, or well paid (Baines, 1991).

In the child protection field, it is generally recognized that 70% of front line CPWs are female (Callahan, 1993; Dane, 2000; Gold, 1998; Horejsi, Garthwait & Rolando, 1994). Their daily work involves working with adults and children who are often volatile, mentally ill, desperate, abused, poor and in involuntary interaction with them. Women are placed in the position of having to enforce child protection legislation but, despite being invested with power through delegation, they have limited power within the hierarchical child welfare system. However, their clients, primarily women and children, see them as having considerable power (Gold, 1998). Most practice decisions need to be approved by one or more managers who are usually male. Within this structural organization female workers are charged with the responsibility of ensuring child safety, while managers are shielded from the working-day realities and negative aspects of mandated child protection social work. These realities and negative aspects include the removal of children, court attendance, refusing financial requests despite being aware of poverty issues most clients struggle with, and the termination of support services.

While the very nature of child protection work puts all workers at risk of violence, the focus of this thesis is women CPWs. This is because CPWs are predominately female, their experiences of workplace violence have not been recognized and research suggests female CPWs believe their experience(s) of violence are different than men’s (Gold, 1998).
Violence Against Women

"Violence permeates women’s life experiences and sense of self" (Duffy & Cohen, 2001, p. 134). Women live in a world where violence and the threat of violence are ever present and a real possibility. Violence against women is not a random, but a gendered phenomenon, reflective of patriarchal beliefs about women’s ‘place’ in society. The mere threat of violence was enough to influence women’s responses to a 1999 survey on the topic (Some Facts on Violence Against Women in Canada, 2000). Of the women surveyed, 64% reported feeling somewhat or very worried while waiting for or using public transportation alone after dark and 42% reported feeling unsafe walking alone after dark. Violence is so central a feature of women’s experience, a study done by Stanko (cited in Devault, 1990, p. 99) looked at “women’s strategies for avoiding assault . . . not just learning self-defense, but choosing places to live, things to wear, routes for walking home, and times to go to the Laundromat.”

Violence against women is an issue central to much feminist research; especially issues related to “ending the silence” and “naming the violence” that women experience (Duffy & Cohen, 2001; Guberman & Wolfe, 1985; Mooney, 2000). There are a number of theories that attempt to explain violent behaviours. Wiehe (1998, p. 2) summarizes these theories into categories of: aggression as instinct or drive, aggression as a result of frustration, aggression as a learned behaviour and aggression as power and control (patriarchal theory). Violence viewed through the feminist lens reveals the nature of power relationships and recognizes the construction of patriarchy, where men have power
and control over women. Further analysis of power and powerlessness adds to an understanding that not all women are powerless and there is a socially constructed hierarchy that defines which women have more power (Burstow, 1992; Duffy & Cohen, 2001).

Three interconnected issues arise from the dynamic of unequal power and violence against women: defining violence, measuring violence and unreported violence. Understanding the problematic nature of defining violence is central to knowing why measurement is difficult and why women do not report many incidences of violence against them. The definition of violence varies depending on the context. It is widely accepted “there are four major components of violence against women: emotional, physical, sexual and verbal” (Desai & Saltzman, 2001, p. 36). What is less widely agreed upon is what behaviours are included in these categories. Definitions vary according to the purposes of the research, and can either be broad or narrow (Gelles, 2000). An example of a narrow definition would be one that only includes incidences where a woman is physically injured by a physical assault. A broader definition would include violent behaviours such as being spat on, threatened, stalked, made fun of, coerced to engage in unwanted sexually activity, threatened by gestures or looks, and forced into economic/financial dependency. These violent behaviours may not cause physical injury but can result in terror, humiliation and trauma for the victim.

The measurement of violence against women is identified as problematic because it is connected to definitional issues. Data on the incidence of violence against women is collected in a number of ways by a variety of researchers and agencies. Information on violence is primarily obtained from individuals through interviews, surveys and
questionnaires; and record reviews such as medical, criminal, and social services data (Desai & Saltzman, 2001; Gelles, 2000). The difficulty in measurement arises from three factors: language and wording when defining violence, minimization and denial of violence by women and the resultant problem of women not reporting violence that is directed toward them. The phrasing of a question and the language used, have an effect on whether women regard an incident as violence. An example of this comes from my own work with battered women; when women are asked if they have been physically abused, they will often say no. Their reasons are that they weren’t ‘hurt’ or beaten, just pushed, pinched or held. Consequently the language, particularly if it is narrow and prescriptive, eliminates many women’s experiences of violence. As a result, women’s experiences become invisible and are missed in the discourse on violence against women.

A review of the literature identified the issue of violence against female child protection workers as ‘missing’ in the discourse of child welfare knowledge and practice. Reinharz (1992) identified gaps in research as the study of what is missing. She highlighted this in relation to the example of wife abuse where until the 1970’s the literature was silent on this shared experience of many women and represented a significant gap in the research on violence against women.

The related concept of silencing arises in my analysis of violence against women. Silencing is also connected to definitional and measurement issues. In the area of violence against women, silencing occurs on many levels, most importantly it begins with the definitional question – What is violence? When a broader conceptualization of violence is not used ‘other’ experiences of violence are not counted or considered relevant (Hester, 1994; Maynard, 1993).
The second point related to the measurement of violence against women is the lack of awareness as well as denial and minimization by women of the violence they experience (Burt & Code, 1995). I have struggled with this issue on an ongoing basis, wondering if this was an important enough research topic. This was echoed in the stories of the women I interviewed for a pilot project and their questioning of me. They wanted to know if what they were describing of their experiences ‘counted’. They recognized they had been significantly impacted by what happened to them, yet it was difficult for them to name what it was. They were aware of the tension “between their own experiences of behaviour as abusive and the dominant beliefs, which define such behaviours as normal or inevitable” (Maynard, 1993, p. 105). One perspective on this denial and lack of recognition of violence by women is that it may be a survival mechanism to endure violent situations and relationships (Burt & Code, 1995).

The final issue related to measurement of violence against women is the problem of underreporting violence (Duffy & Cohen, 2001; Littlechild, 1995). Underreporting is connected to the previous factors: definitions of violence that don’t include many women’s experiences and denial that violence has occurred, through minimization or lack of awareness. Fear is another identified reason that women do not report violence, again contributing to the silencing of women’s experience. Fear in relation to the underreporting of violence has been connected to at least two issues: women are afraid they won’t be taken seriously (Duffy & Cohen, 2001) and that they (women) themselves will be blamed for the violence (Hester, 1994).
Workplace violence is an issue receiving increased attention by the media and researchers. Homicide is currently the leading cause of death on the job for women in the United States of America (Harlan, 1995). A report released in 1998 by the International Labour Organization was titled “Violence on the Job – A Global Problem”. The report is described as “the most extensive world wide survey of violence in the workplace (International Labour Organization, 1998, p.1). The report makes a number of points that confirm my decision to research workplace violence against women who are child protection workers:

1. Canada was one of five countries reporting the highest incidence of assaults and sexual harassment on the job.

2. Incidences of violence are greater in some workplace settings and occupations.

3. Social workers were found to be at a higher risk of experiencing violence.

4. Women were especially found to be at risk by virtue of being concentrated in high-risk occupations (teachers, social workers, bank and shop workers).

5. A growing recognition by workers and employers that psychological violence also is a serious form of violence.
Other research in the area of workplace violence has identified similar themes of these risks to women (Fisher & Gunnison, 2001; Harlan, 1995; Kedjidjian, 1996; Younger, 1993).

Four relevant issues arise from the literature on workplace violence: lack of inquiry into gender differences, gendered differences in experience of violence, 'hidden' violence and psychological violence.

Gender Differences – Lack of Inquiry

A review of the literature reveals a gap in inquiry into women’s experiences of workplace violence. Fisher and Gunnison (2001) reported finding only three studies on gender differences in relation to workplace violence. A separate article by Younger (1993, p. 131) described her study on the topic as “enlightening and frustrating” and “like taking a walk a moonless night; little data exists to clearly describe or understand the issues.” Both articles by these authors identified a need for further research in the area of workplace violence against women.

Gender Differences – Differences in Experience of Violence

Further inquiry is also found to be necessary because of preliminary research that “gender differences more than similarities are characteristics of workplace violence” (Fisher & Gunnison, 2001, p. 145). Their analysis of the 1992 – 1996 National Crime Victimization Survey found that the incidence of violence committed against females in
the workplace increased by 17% in this time period whereas there was a 34% decrease for males. A limitation of this research is that it is based on information from the United States of America; I have not found a similar analysis of Canadian data in the research to determine trends in the incidence of workplace violence for women. Research that has been done on the topic reinforces the findings from the International Labour Organization Survey. These are:

1. The risk of violence is greater in some occupations (Fisher & Gunnison, 2001).
2. Some workplace and worksites are more dangerous than others (Harlan, 1995).
3. Economic costs of workplace violence differ according to gender (Fisher & Gunnison, 2001).

Hidden Violence

The issue of hidden violence also arises in the literature. Hidden violence is defined as “usually not fatal, does not involve weapons or strangers, and is not even likely to be considered a crime by the victim or society” (Harlan, 1995, p. 1). The violence appears to be hidden for a number of reasons: difficulties with defining and measuring violence, minimization or denial of violence by women and their employers, societal acceptance of some violence against women and lack of visible evidence of an ‘attack’. In effect the silencing of women, previously discussed, is connected to the hidden violence experienced by women.
Psychological Violence

A further link can be made between the hidden nature of violence against women and psychological violence. The issues of definition and measurement arise again. Often research on the topic does not include the concept of psychological violence, because it is difficult to define and measure. Yet it is acknowledged as a significant problem specifically in reference to wife battering. Women have consistently described psychological and emotional abuse as being as, if not more significant for them than physical abuse (Duffy & Cohen, 2001; Mooney, 2000). I experienced a combination of verbal threats, intimidation and harassment as workplace violence and the women I interviewed also reported verbal threats as a form of violence. In particular, one woman described verbal attacks over a period of time as a traumatic experience, and an attempt by an individual to “destroy the social worker”.

Violence in the Social Services Field

The social services field has been identified in the literature as a high-risk workplace setting for violence. Women are at a higher risk because they are concentrated in this high-risk occupation. While there is a significant body of research on violence in the workplace, violence against social workers and violence against women, little work has been done to explore how these issues intersect. A further gap I’ve identified is the lack of research into violence in specific social work settings.
Of eight articles and a book I reviewed, two articles (Hester, 1994; Littlechild, 1995) explored the phenomenon of gender in relation to violence in the social work setting, and none explored gender in the child protection setting. This was surprising to me given that it has been identified that most front line CPWs are female (Callahan, 1993; Dane, 2000; Horejsi, Garthwait & Rolando, 1994). An interesting issue emerges in relation to the study of violence against women in the child protection role. That is, the issue of violence against women who have a role invested with significant power. Often feminists have studied violence from the perspective of powerlessness but less research has been done in regard to feminist analysis in understanding violence against women in positions of power (Hester, 1994.)

A contradiction arises from the notion of violence occurring in what is referred to as a caring or helping profession. Social work is described by the Canadian Association of Social Workers as a “profession concerned with helping individuals, families, groups, and communities to enhance their individual and collective well being” (CASW website). The contradiction is that, while the social worker has caring and humanistic intentions about their work, violence is sometimes the response to their intentions. When I became a social worker I did not anticipate I would be the target of violence from those I was trying to help. Nor do I believe my education or training prepared me for the violence I would experience.

Although social work is provided in a variety of voluntary and involuntary settings social workers in child protection and youth services are identified at a higher risk of experiencing violence than other social work areas of practice (Newhill, 1996). CPW in particular is most often done with involuntary clients (Scalera, 1995). This work
involves removing individuals’ liberty to make significant choices (Hester, 1994). This could be the parent’s liberty to parent (or make parenting choices), or a child/youth’s ability to determine where they will live and with whom. The nature of the intervention can increase the level of risk for child protection workers. The removal of a child from a parent’s care and the initial meeting of a child’s parent/caregiver have been identified as two of the most dangerous practice activities (Scalera, 1995). These activities most often occur outside the office environment, by female child protection workers who work in isolation.

Conclusion

... women are sexually harassed, discriminated against, verbally abused, physically assaulted and murdered in the workplace. However, we still lack an adequate description of the scope or frequencies of workplace abuse (Younger, 1993, p. 131).

The feminist movement has been instrumental in uncovering and naming the issue of violence against women. Inquiry has been directed at the issue of violence against women in the public and private realms of their lives. This has been both an evolutionary and revolutionary process as women have become aware of and challenged ideas about the nature of violence. We have moved from societal acceptance of a man’s right to beat or rape his wife to legal sanctions against such behaviours. Despite positive changes there is still much work ahead for feminists in uncovering other dimensions of violence in women’s lives. These include: previously unrecognized or unnamed forms of violence,
violence against women in positions of power, violence in the workplace, and violence perpetrated by women.

As women have moved into the paid workforce violence in the workplace is a topic that is beginning to receive attention from feminist researchers; however, much of the work has been quantitative and descriptive (Barrett, 1997; Fisher & Gunnison, 2001; Harlan, 1995; Lord, 1998; Younger, 1993). Quantitative research provides valuable information in order to understand the breadth of the problem, but is problematic in ascertaining the depth, or impact workplace violence has on women. Quantitative research is not an effective method to increase understanding of women’s lived experiences.

The literature is strangely quiet in reporting what women had to say about their experiences of workplace violence. Specifically when I looked at the field of child protection work, I was unable to find any research that addressed social workers’, let alone women’s experiences of violence doing child protection work. I saw a gap in the research that could be addressed by qualitative inquiry. This would provide an opportunity for the unique experiences of female CPWs to be described more fully, from their perspective.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines the experiences of female CPWs who have encountered violence in the workplace. Qualitative methodology is ideally suited for this purpose as the goal is “to understand the research topic from the perspective of the participants involved – their thoughts, emotions and first hand experiences” (Wiehe, 1998, p. 169). This study is exploratory and descriptive to gain a deeper understanding of the women’s lived experiences of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 1998). Further, the methodology is based on two main ideas: a feminist perspective incorporating narrative methodology. This approach is particularly suitable for research that seeks not only to understand the experience of a woman but the broader societal connections to that experience. In order to better understand the experiences of female CPWs I have chosen narrative methodology. A premise of narrative research is that “by studying and interpreting self-narratives the researcher can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller’s culture and social world” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). This approach fits nicely with the goal of most feminist research, which is to make the connection between the personal experiences of women and the political ‘situatedness’ of women within the patriarchal system.
Sampling

The sampling design suggested for most qualitative research is purposeful or criterion based. Purposeful sampling is described as the process of choosing “particular settings, persons or events . . . deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 70). Participants were selected based on their self-reported experiences of violence in the child protection workplace. It made sense for the purpose of my research to speak directly with women who had experienced violence in order to contribute to a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling through my network of female social work colleagues. (See Appendix A – Recruitment Letter.) Another sampling consideration was to determine how many participants were required for the purpose of this specific research. The case study is often the unit of inquiry in narrative methodology. This project is based on a collective case study, meaning multiple cases involving the same phenomenon, where the phenomenon, not the individual, is the focus of the inquiry (Cresswell, 1998). Narrative researchers (Riessman, 1993; Lieblich et al, 1998; Josselson & Lieblich, 1995) caution there is not a ‘cook book’ approach to narrative research so I was unable to determine a specific recommended sample size. A consistent theme was the recommendation of a small sample size (Cresswell, 1998;
Lieblich et al & Zilber, 1998; Sandelowski, 1995). I chose a sample size of three women to allow for the depth necessary in narrative analysis.

The criteria for female CPWs to participate were defined as: possessing a bachelors level degree in social work, being delegated by provincial government authorities and a self report of having experienced violence as a child protection worker. The rationale for these criteria is:

1. **Bachelors degree:** Social workers in BC who provide protection services for children are required to have a Bachelor of Social Work degree. For this reason it was chosen as a minimum level of education required. I also assumed that the completion of this level of education provides, at the least, an introduction to the topic of violence, the impact and incidence of violence in different contexts and feminist theory.

2. **Delegation:** In most jurisdictions the authority to practice child protection work is delegated by a governmental authority. In British Columbia (BC) this delegation comes from the Director of Child Protection. Participants had to have been fully delegated to provide child protection services. It is delegated workers who perform the most risky child welfare practices identified in the literature review: initial encounters with hostile family members and the involuntary removal of children from parental care.
3. Self-report of violent experience(s) in the child protection workplace:
The reason for this requirement is self-evident as the topic of inquiry is about women who have experienced violence in the workplace. The participants determined their own definition of violence.

I did not propose a required length of employment time in the child protection field. The rationale for this decision was because I assumed a violent incident could occur at any point in a child protection social worker’s career – beginner or veteran. Some might argue that experience could possibly defuse a potentially violent situation and I don’t dispute this. However, I also recognize that violence can occur despite worker experience and training, as evidenced in the women’s stories and my own experience. Another reason for this decision was a value judgment about not blaming the victim. Women should not be held responsible for experiencing violence, as the statement ‘if she had more experience/training, the violence would not have happened’ implies.

Data Collection

The individual interview is the method of data collection for this study. This choice is consistent with both feminist and narrative approaches to research (Reinharz, 1992; Riessman, 1993; Josselson & Lieblich, 1995). The interview “offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). This is especially important for the
study of women’s lives where a purpose of the research is to recover and examine unnoticed or ‘invisible’ experiences (Devault, 1990).

Each woman was formally interviewed once – for between one to two hours. In addition there were informal conversations prior to, during and after the actual interview. The purpose of these was to provide information, answer questions, clarify the interview transcript/research interpretations and provide support to the participants. In feminist research, a number of interviews are required to build rapport and build opportunities for clarification and feedback (Reinharz, 1992). In this study, however, there was only one formal interview, but this was supplemented with informal conversations and electronic mail contact. Interviews were arranged at mutually acceptable times and places with the option for telephone interviews due to geographic distances involved. Interviews were audio taped with the consent of participants and notes were taken during the interview as a back up data source.

The interview began with one orienting statement: I am interested in hearing about your experiences of workplace violence as a CPW. This is an example of open-ended interviewing which is particularly suited to female researchers “as women are socialized to ask people what they think and feel” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 20). Accordingly, women are also socialized to answer this type of question. Sandelowski and Pollock (1986, cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 21) set a precedent for this research decision in their work with infertile women, where they pose only one planned statement, “tell me what it’s like not to be able to have a baby when you want to.” My interview guide (Appendix B) had other probing questions if required: Was your employer/supervisor aware of these experiences? What support did you receive? What was/would have been helpful to you
at the time of the incident(s)? After the incident(s)? How have you coped with this experience? What impact do you think this experience has had on you (colleagues and family)? Do you think this experience has changed you in any way? However such probes were used minimally in an effort for participants to construct and tell their stories in a way that is meaningful for them. This is consistent with the radical feminist approach which is “concerned with how women themselves define violence” violence is that which women define as violence (Mooney, 2000, p. 93).

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis was selected as the mode for data analysis in this study because through the narrative “culture ‘speaks itself’ and it is possible to examine gender inequalities, racial oppression and other practices of power that may be taken for granted by individual speakers” (Riessman, 1993, p. 5).

A difficulty I discovered in using narrative methodology was around the issue of analysis; more specifically the “use and application of this research method seems to have preceded the formalization of a philosophy and methodology parallel to the practice” (Lieblich et al, 1998, p. 1). Narrative analysis can occur around “myriad dimensions, such as contents; structure; style of speech; affective characteristics; motives, attitudes, and beliefs of the narrator; or her or his cognitive level” (p.9).

Analysis of the women’s narratives was focused first on the content (what the woman says - personal) and the context (societal beliefs and values about women and child protection work – political). Initially I asked the question – in each woman’s
interview, what is she telling me about her experience of violence in the workplace? This method of narrative analysis was developed by Labov and described by Mishler (1986) specifically for this purpose, to answer the question, what is this story about? The researcher's interpretation of the answer is discerned by determining the core narrative in an interview. There is a prescribed structure for this form of analysis: orientation, abstract, complicating action, resolution and coda. Each of these features of a core narrative serves a different function. The orientation sets the stage, "as to place, time, character", the abstract summarizes the story and its points, the complicating action is the plot or movement of the story, the resolution reflects how the conflict was resolved and finally the coda brings "the narrator and listener back to the present" (Mishler, 1986, p. 236).

I also used the holistic-content model described by Lieblich et al, 1998. In brief, the process is to determine a focus or global impression from the interview material and then discern themes related to this, particularly those repeated in the narrative. Using this model I specifically focused on developing the themes arising from the women's interviews and connecting them to the core narratives.

Analysis also occurred on another level to situate stories in the context where they occur. This was done by asking questions not only about each woman's experience of violence, but asking what this experience suggests about women's place in society. That is, by shining the spotlight on social processes, which are embodied in narratives - "the relation between this instance of social action and the social world the narrator shares with others" (Chase, 1995, p. 20) the reader is offered an explanation of how individual
incidents of violence are connected to the broader issue of violence against women in society.

Analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing process. I kept a journal for my reflections, questions and observations as I began the research and throughout the research process. I provided each woman with a copy of her transcript and my interpretation for further feedback. As well I consulted with colleagues who have experience in working with women who have experienced violence and theoretical and academic knowledge of issues related to violence.

The question that needs to be answered when making methodological decisions is how will this contribute to answering the research question? The purpose of this research was to explore and describe the violent workplace experiences of female CPWs. Narrative analysis was congruent with this purpose as it could be combined with feminist analysis that makes a connection between the personal experiences of individual women and the patriarchal society we live in.

Ethical Considerations

A primary question posed in order to conduct ethical research is, could this research cause harm to the participant? This is an especially critical consideration for women and other oppressed groups who have been the objects of research to their detriment. Without a doubt, talking about previous experiences of violence has the potential to be emotionally upsetting for women being interviewed. Rosenblatt (1995) examined the ethics of causing pain to research participants and concluded that causing
pain is not in itself a reason to cease the research but each situation must be evaluated. There is however a tension between the “need to gather information and the possible revictimization of survivors” (Brzuzy & Ault, 1997, p. 3); they suggest guidelines for researchers to consult when interviewing women who have been traumatized. The principle points suggested are:

1. The interviewer should have basic training in crisis intervention.
2. The interviewer should be knowledgeable about supportive resources available to participants.
3. Participants should be advised prior to being interviewed that they may experience uncomfortable feelings during the interview; and specifically what the feelings may be; “anxiety, reduced concentration, flashbacks, and generalized anticipatory distress” (p. 3).
4. Participants should be given the option of withdrawing from the research process.
5. Participants should be given information on how to contact the interviewer after the interview.
6. The interviewer should contact the participant a day or two after the interview and then follow up with a written thank you note.

To reduce/eliminate harm the suggested guidelines were followed. As well, participants signed an informed and voluntary consent prior to being interviewed (Appendix C).
The issue of informed consent is more complex than it seems on the surface, particularly in qualitative research given the uncertainty of how the process could unfold. Processual consent is a way of addressing this concern. This form of consent is verbal consent that is sought from participants on an ongoing basis, based on the verbal and non-verbal messages they are giving (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Another ethical concern that arose was the tension between research and therapy. This dilemma is connected to a larger research issue, which is the relationship between researcher and participant that feminists and other researchers have struggled with. I only addressed the issue of research versus therapy. Participants were emotionally supported during the entire research process. This ethical decision was congruent with work done by other researchers (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992 and Rosenblatt, 1995).

The method and design of the proposed study received approval from the Behavioural Sciences Screening Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects at the University of British Columbia in January 2002. The Certificate of Approval is found in Appendix D.

Validity

There are considerable variations of meaning to the term validity as it applies to qualitative research (Winter, 2000). Questions also arise about the appropriateness of using this term in relation to qualitative research. Researchers point to the positivist scientific tradition inherent in quantitative research where validity is used to ensure the results of the research are the ‘truth’. In this process validity is built into the
methodology and tests are conducted to ensure the validity of the results. Qualitative research differs in purpose where the meaning of some phenomenon, situation or social interaction (Maxwell, 1996) is sought and there is no one ‘truth’.

The issue of validity in narrative analysis has been described as one of the “unresolved dilemmas for the field” (Riessman, 1993, p. 64). As there is diversity in the approaches and methods of narrative research so too there is diversity in determining if narrative research is valid or not. The approach to validity that I used was based on consensual (Lieblich et al, 1998) and processual validation. Just as the narrative interview is a construct of narrator and interviewer, the determination of validity is a construct of the researcher and reader. In this way validity is determined through consensual validation, “namely sharing one’s views and conclusions and making sense in the eyes of a community of researchers and interested informed individuals” (Lieblich et al, 1998, p. 173). Rogers (cited in Lieblich et al, 1998, p. 172) suggested the “fundamental criterion of validity requires that interpretations and conclusions follow a trail of evidence that originate in the text.” I refer to this description of validity as processual validity. It is validity that the reader can determine by the researcher providing information about the research process that led to methodological decisions, analysis and interpretation of the results.

I have provided much detail in the context and methodology sections in an attempt to convince the reader that the research decisions I have made are valid, beginning with the research question and design of the method to answer the question. In order to enhance the validity of my analysis and interpretation of the data I did the following: provided the participants with transcripts of the interview for their
clarification, sought clarification from participants of my interpretation of their stories and 'checked' my work (process and content) on an ongoing basis with my thesis advisor and colleagues in the field.

An important aspect of this research was my feminist perspective on the issues of violence against women, research values and methodological decision-making. Congruent with this was my own 'situatedness' in the research. My research question, like those of other feminist researchers, came from my own experience (Devault, 1999). Traditionally this subjectivity has been viewed as a liability in terms of research validity. However, I agree with other feminist researchers, that subjectivity, or personal experience enhances the validity of research (Devault, 1999; Reinharz, 1992. Therefore, I believe my own experiences as a female child protection worker added to the validity of the research.

In summary the purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of violence against female social workers in the child protection field. Three female CPWs were interviewed. Their interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the narrative method. The interviews were further analyzed from a feminist perspective to make connections between the personal experience of workplace violence and the broader experience of women within the child protection system. Core narratives and related themes were discerned from the process of analysis.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

The Women Tell Stories of Violence

In this chapter I present the stories of the women I interviewed. Each interview begins with a description of the woman, to enable the reader to develop an impression of her. I then provide the reader with the core narratives of the interview and an interview summary. This is followed by themes suggested in the woman’s response to my question about her experiences of workplace violence.

Emily

Emily\(^1\) is a forty nine year old, Euro-Canadian, mother of four and grandmother of two. She worked in the child protection field, for the government of BC, for about five and a half years, in the mid-late 1990’s, in a small city. She has a Bachelor of Social Work degree and moved from her fourth year practicum right into a full-time position in child protection. During this period of employment, Emily worked in the intake office (receiving child protection reports and conducting protection investigations) and in family support services. She said that she spent “lots of time in Court, lots of children that I’ve removed, lots of investigations over that time”. She said that she’s “been threatened lots, and threatened with violence”, and although she no longer works in the child protection field, she said she “loved the people . . . (she) worked with. Her reasons

\(^1\) Emily is not her real name. All names used are pseudonyms.
for leaving child protection work were, “part of it was feeling unsafe on the job . . . and that the workload wasn’t ‘doable’ . . .”

I met with Emily at her office where she continues to work in social work for the BC government, but in a different area of practice. It has been about two years since Emily left child protection work but her recollections of the violence she encountered were described vividly with much detail. Our interview lasted for just over an hour. The core narrative that I discerned almost immediately was in her first statement to me in response to my question about violence in the workplace. She started her answer by saying “well it sorta comes with the territory to a certain extent”. However, she moderated this response when she added “I have gotten to the point when I would then no longer tolerate stuff”. I have identified two narratives in the interview about Emily’s experiences of violence.

Core Narrative: It sorta comes with the territory.

The Threat Story

Orientation

Verbal threats yeah, the time I charged a client with threatening me.

Abstract

I had worked with the mom for a couple of years actually and it was a pattern that she had, you know, she would parent alright for a couple of months and then she would sort of fall off the wagon\(^2\) and go off on a drinking bender and her life would sort of crash and then I would be forced into removing her children for their safety.

\(^2\)‘To fall off the wagon’ is a colloquial term describing a period of sobriety that is interrupted by substance use.
Then she would be very abusive and she would be name calling and swearing and ranting at me and she used to quite often threaten me but I never ever had the sense she could follow through on the threats.

Plot

But then there was a removal and it actually moved towards a permanent order.

I had applied for a permanent order and part of that was so that either a) we would get on with it and the kids would become permanent wards or she would realize the seriousness of it and try and make her changes more permanent.

She did not get back on the wagon; she continued drinking and started threatening me and the foster parent. She would phone and say she was coming over to beat me up or to beat up the foster parent. One session she said to me that she was going to put a contract out on me, that I wouldn’t know when or where it was going to happen but that she would have me killed.

Resolution

I charged her with uttering threats.

She was convicted so she received a one-month conditional sentence and she stopped threatening me.

We continued to work together.

Coda

There were repercussions for me and I think that was probably the first time I really felt threatened personally that something like this could actually happen.

The repercussions were the effects on my family; it went outside of my work.

Emily’s interview began with this initial story of her being threatened with violence. She then makes a transition to her second violence story, which I call the assault story. She makes this movement between stories because she is trying to explain to me her physical and emotional responses to her experiences. She started by saying “I actually had an interesting experience in regard to that so I should probably tell you about
the second incident". In one narrative section she described two incidents that I have separated out for better understanding of the situation.

The Assault Story

Orientation

That was the assault because that had more of an impact on me

That occurred when I was working with a mentally ill mother who I didn’t know very well.

I had two incidents with her in two weeks.

Abstract

She came into the office for a supervised access visit but she started nursing the baby. That was one of the rules the intake worker had said she was not allowed to.

Plot

So I went in to intervene and the young mom became quite agitated. She picked up the baby and threw the baby down on the couch and started pacing the room and saying to allow her to just nurse the baby.

I went and picked up the baby because there was the threat that she would run with the baby because she had tried before to take the baby and leave.

All of a sudden she jumped and became enraged and took a full cup of coffee and threw it across the room

I just sort of flipped the baby up because the cup was coming in my direction and the cup shattered.

My client raged out of the office, went through another office and dumped a computer on the floor and stormed out of the office.

I heard later she then calmly walked up to my supervisor’s truck, knocked on the window and calmly asked to bum a smoke.

Resolution
That was the first incident that was reported to the police and essentially the advice I got from the police officer was that there was no point in charging her because she was mentally ill.

Ignoring it was the thing to do so I followed his advice and consulted with the area manager and that was the decision we made; we didn’t charge her.

Coda

So we stopped the visits with the baby and she wanted me to come meet with her in her home so she could find out whether it was an o.k place to bring the baby home to.

Now within this narrative there is the transition to the assault portion of the story.

Orientation

She at that point in time had been admitted to a psych group home; she’d gotten on some medication, stopped using pot and was working with a mental health worker which was major progress for her.

Abstract

I agreed to meet with her in her apartment and she had her mental health worker with her.

I thought that would be helpful because it would be 2 to 1 she would have a support worker with her and I then would be outnumbered so she would feel more comfortable.

I left my car open.

I had my cell phone on.

I followed all the procedures, I kept my back to the door and myself between the door and her so that I could get out if I needed to, which I didn’t think was really necessary.

I had it in the back of my head I should be following safety precautions because she had been violent.
I was trying to be low key and supportive of her.

Plot

She went right into rage; she said I hate this government they’re taking my baby away and I hate you and I’m going to kill you and she just lunged across the room and stuck her hands around my neck.

The mental health worker pulled her off of me and she just flipped again this time she pushed me backward over a dresser or something and grabbed me around the neck, pushed me backwards and sort of whipped me. This time the mental health worker managed to haul her off me again and said run, get out.

I made a tactical error and I turned to walk out the door, she got away from the mental health worker and decided at this point in time she didn’t want to kill me but she wanted to get me out so she hit me on the back kind of like a back check in hockey and shoved me out of the hallway.

I left the building and went up the street a little bit, a minute or two later the mental health worker came out and said she’s not going to settle and she’s asked me to leave.

Resolution

I was amazingly calm when I look back on it. I think it must be because you go into shock or something. I just moved into this other frame of reference and it just didn’t seem real.

I debriefed briefly with the mental health worker.

I hopped back into my car and proceeded with the day.

I was a little shaky. I thought, well I’m lucky I didn’t get hurt you know.

I sat and debriefed with one of my colleagues out on the lawn and of course I was so calm she was having trouble thinking it was anything major.

Next I reported to my supervisor what had occurred and he didn’t seem too concerned about it.

As the day proceeded my shoulder and my neck started seizing up. I made an appointment to see my doctor the next day and I had whiplash.

I charged her with the assault and the police officer that I talked with said I should have charged her for the original incident when she threw the mug.
At the same time she got charged for assaulting me she got charged for a separate incident. She had broken into the - store and taken a crap on the floor. It seemed the Courts took much more seriously the fact that she had broken into the - store than that she had assaulted a social worker - like well that's a social worker, what can you expect?

She was found unfit to stand trial and sentenced to an indeterminate sentence at the Forensics Psych Unit.

Coda

It was five months before I returned to work full-time. So it was a fairly long recovery period. I still have residual damage.

Interview Summary

My opening statement to Emily was, "I was wanting to hear about when you were threatened with or experienced violence in the workplace when you’re on the job as a child protection worker". She immediately responded with, "Well it sorta comes with the territory to a certain extent. I’ve been threatened lots and threatened with violence, most often I’ve just sort of blocked it away and ignored it". The impression I got from Emily was of an ongoing consciousness raising process on the issue of violence. Having said it comes with the territory, she determined she no longer accepts what she used to. However, throughout the interview she remained ambivalent about what violence is and whether violence is acceptable due to the nature of the child protection role.

After Emily’s initial response she began to elaborate on three incidents of violence she experienced. It was interesting that as she tried to recall them she became distracted by saying “it’s just sort of fogged away in my brain”. She trailed off and asked me “so what would you like to know about?” When I read her words I connected them to her opening statement and I wondered if this fog was a way of blocking it away as she
spoke of earlier in the interview. Her memory lapse seemed to be upsetting to her and put her 'off track' momentarily. After a brief orienting statement about how long she’d done child protection work she moved into talking about doing some workshops where she identified that she accepted stuff she didn’t even think was violence. The remainder of the interview was spent with Emily describing the incidences of violence she had experienced, which provided the core narratives of the interview described in the previous section.

Major Themes

In addition to Emily’s internal conflict about the nature of violence, four other themes were suggested in her recollections of violent experiences. These themes can be seen as, not separate from, but connected to the ambivalence she struggled with.

Awareness of her vulnerability

Along with Emily’s evolving awareness about what violence may or may not be, was her realization that the conflictual environment of child protection work made her, her children, and others vulnerable. Her first statement on this was in relation to threats made toward foster parents, “at that point I decided that and especially because the threats were ongoing with the foster parents I charged her with uttering threats”. It was interesting to me that although she had death threats uttered against her; it was when threats were made against the foster parents that she took action. She said it was the first time she really felt threatened personally, but having said that she realized, “I’ve had that occur before” and recounted a story when she worked with a sociopathic young man and
she changed her name “because I became aware that my family was vulnerable . . . so I
changed back to my maiden name to protect my family”. Again, her concern was
directed at the risk someone else (her children) faced and action was taken to protect
them. She concluded one statement by saying “you become kind of complacent with the
risks that you are taking and when something like that happens it’s a reminder that yes,
we are taking risks, and we are pretty vulnerable out there”. Vulnerability and risk were
connected to her reasons for leaving this area of work “it just sorta became too big,
because of the fear something could happen, that a client could hurt me, a recognition
that we’re not as powerful as we think we are, that we are pretty vulnerable”. The final
appearance of vulnerability emerged in relation to colleagues when I asked about her
colleague’s reactions to her being assaulted; specifically if her judgment or practice had
been questioned. Emily stated, “Actually almost the reverse was true. When I was
assaulted there was a real reaction amongst my colleagues in the office, that they felt
incredibly vulnerable that that would happen to me”.

The violence that Emily encountered at work left her feeling vulnerable and it had
a ripple effect on those around her. Her children became concerned for her safety at
work and co-workers questioned their own safety at work. The threats and violence
against her had an impact on her personally (fear for herself and her children’s safety)
and professionally (ultimately Emily left child protection work).

**Ways of creating safety**

Intimately connected with risk and vulnerability were Emily’s ways of creating
safety. The first expression of this was when she changed back to using her maiden name
“so he couldn’t find my number in the phone book and when I was known in the community I was known as a different person, as the parent of my children, and that gave me a little sense of security”. She reiterated this point and said “I felt a good deal of security after that”.

When Emily described the incident when she was assaulted there was a lengthy and vivid description of what she did to create safety – “the client had her mental health worker with her; I left my car open; I had my cell phone on; I kept my back to the door”. She did all this but said, “I didn’t think it was really necessary”. This statement suggested to me Emily’s ongoing ambivalence about violence – although it comes with the territory and she had a history of experienced violence with this client she questioned whether it was necessary to follow safety procedures.

Emily humorously recounted a story where she took a workshop on “working with hostile and difficult clients and I got permission to go off to this workshop”. What she discovered was that she could have taught the course “because I had dealt with incredibly more difficult and hostile clients than were being discussed in this workshop”. Her other strategy for physical safety was to take a five-week self-defense course through the local recreation society.

In Emily’s discourse on creating safety one phrase ‘jumped out at me’. It was when she said she got permission to go to the workshop. The word permission invoked in me an image of this experienced, professional, adult woman having to justify why she wanted to take this course, without recognition from those whom she’d sought permission, about the reality of the work she did as a child protection worker. This phrase spoke not only about her own situation but also about the position of women in
general within the child protection hierarchy. I recalled an instance when I made a request to attend a one-day, local child welfare conference, with a cost of twenty dollars to attend. A female colleague and I were prepared to pay our own costs and it was only after considerable advocating that we were allowed to go. A male manager attended with all his costs, including a government vehicle, provided.

**Consequences of violence**

Emily's descriptions of the consequences of workplace violence are vivid in details. "I have stomach problems, that is where I hold my anxiety; in my shoulders and my stomach, so um that condition has been aggravated by stress". This led to her talking about panic attacks and how she believed they were connected to the assault she suffered. Initially she minimized the assault by thinking she was lucky not to have been 'hurt'; but later in the day her shoulders and neck started "seizing up" and a doctor told her she had whiplash. She seemed incredulous "I got whiplash from this? So I did get injured but I didn’t realize it until later". Emily said she had a lengthy recovery that necessitated a gradual return to work.

Emily referenced other consequences in terms of this injury, especially her emotional reactions. For the woman who assaulted her, "it’s interesting I don’t feel angry towards her. I mean on a couple of occasions I was kind of resentful about what had occurred". The resentment came because her grandson was visiting and she could not pick him up. The relationship with her husband was also affected. Her husband liked to travel and drive; her injury made it uncomfortable to do this. She made an interesting comment in relation to her husband, "because the whiplash is not a visible injury, I think
it's harder to accept that someone is having pain". I wondered if this comment indicated a lack of acknowledgement and validation by her husband that her injury was real. I also thought this statement was a great analogy to violence that is not visible and therefore harder to accept as something real. The ultimate consequence of Emily's experiences of violence was withdrawal; she "got out of child protection work".

**Coping with and support after violence**

Emily talked about coping and support on a number of levels. She coped with verbal abuse by setting limits, hanging up on people, which was successful and "a little bit empowering for me to sorta feel that I'm o.k. I don't need to accept that kind of behaviour". Her experiences with the RCMP varied from successfully charging a client with threats to "essentially the advice I got from the police officer was that there was no point in charging her". She made an interesting point by comparing social workers and police officers. "I don't know whether we're expendable or what; it is one time, it was two police officers with bullet proof vests and their guns all drawn and they're at the side telling me to go knock on the door, you know, like I'm less important". Emily recognized the difference in status, hence value, between her and police officers.

She made clear distinctions about the support she received from colleagues and the lack of support by managers. Immediately following the incident of assault Emily debriefed with a colleague she also viewed as a friend. She said "nobody ever asked me, aside from my colleagues, nobody, no supervisor ever asked me how I was doing emotionally". When she reported the assault to her male supervisor "he didn't seem too concerned about it". After she saw the doctor the next day, her supervisor suggested
critical incident stress debriefing, however the female colleague identified as the de-
briefer had also been threatened by the same client and had a restraining order against
her, so Emily turned down the offer because she didn’t want to re-traumatize her
colleague. She said, “I didn’t feel supported and protected by my employer”. Her final
reflection on her employer was that she didn’t think violence was taken seriously. “If
these sorts of risks were being taken by workers in any other profession, and if assaults
like that were occurring then there would be more protection and support for the worker”.

In contrast Emily reflected positively on the support she received from colleagues
and women friends. In order to have more collegial support she spoke about the buddy
system she “instigated” to create more clinical support for each other.

Louise

Louise is forty-one years old, Euro-Canadian and lives with her partner in a
common-law relationship. She worked in the child protection field, for the provincial
government, for about four years in a large town in BC. She has a Bachelor of Social
Work degree and prior to working in child protection, she worked at Community Living
Services (children with disabilities).

I interviewed Louise over the telephone due to the geographic distance between
us. If we had not known each other I would have been concerned about conducting a
‘cold call’ interview. However, as a result of our existing relationship, rapport had
already been established. (As I found out though it is still necessary to have a transition
to the interview topic.) The interview with Louise was about ninety minutes long.

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3 I purchased a device that allowed me to record the telephone interview and I also took notes as we spoke.
Louise was on a medical leave from child protection work at the time of the interview. She did not elaborate on the length of time she had been off. She has since returned to work part-time, working with Community Living Services, a separate program branch of the same Ministry. As with Emily’s interview, Louise’s recollections of violent incidents were vivid despite time spent away from the field.

Initially I found Louise’s interview difficult to analyze. Despite our previous relationship, there was an aspect of guardedness at the beginning of the interview. When I asked Louise about “experiences when you were threatened with or experienced violence while you were working?” her response was to ask me what I wanted. In retrospect, I did not do enough preparatory work before moving into the topic area. Louise’s question to me was valid. Once I explained more clearly, she began by telling me when she started in the field, saying she needed to orientate herself. From there she moved right into a description of assault by a client and then into a second scenario. The core narrative of the interview came at the beginning of a description of emotional assault. Louise haltingly said,

Could it be with oh yeah, there was another incident that was um extremely, that was more significant (silences throughout this statement) and um that was with, that incident occurred over about two days, er a day and a half with a family I was working with and um their support, their advocate and some of their friends that came to support them and destroy the social worker. So would that count?

“So would that count?” is at the heart of Louise’s accounts of violence.

Core Narrative: So would that count?

The Assault Story

Orientation
I was given a case with this particular family.

Abstract

It was a pretty bad situation. Three small children and there was use of cocaine and this sort of thing.

We removed the children and ended up having to return them under a supervision order.

Plot

During the process of my first visit of enforcing the supervision order I went with another social worker; I went with a male.

We went in to see whether her partner was there because he was Court ordered not to be there. She was very surprised and acted as though he was there.

My co-worker went out and I was talking to her about the supervision order. She just escalated during this conversation and told me to get out.

She assaulted me. She grabbed me around the neck and was pulling me back and forth going toward the door and was screaming to get out of her house and somehow the door got locked.

I just remained calm and I repeated over and over again for her to stop and eventually she did.

(Louise changed the flow of the narrative by saying “and she stopped. And that was that for that” and then she laughed. I asked some questions to get more information about this incident – how long had she worked with the family, how did she decide to bring someone with her and what happened after the client stopped the attack.)

When my partner went outside, he went outside to call the police because she was getting escalated.

The police came and we could have removed the children again but we chose not to; I wasn’t going to get her back just for grabbing me around the neck.

Resolution

The police informed her about our right to be there; they enforced it and enforced the law of the supervision order.

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4 Escalate is a common term used in child protection work. It is often used to describe a client’s increasing level of problematic behaviours, most often those that are threatening and dangerous.
They (the police) asked me if I wanted to lay a statement and charge her and I said I’m going to think about it.

I decided that I would and they required the supporting statement of my co-worker and I had made arrangements to go it’s a bit of a drive but my co-worker failed to follow through and make time to support me at the police station. My supervisor didn’t support me either by making time in my schedule or giving me time to do it and so the charges were never laid.

Coda

I didn’t take time off and I failed to get or did not get out to the police station to make a statement.

I couldn’t do it by myself though because he was a witness and they needed his statement.

He just never did make the time.

Louise’s interview began with this story of a physical assault by a client.

She then makes a tentative transition into her second story, which I call the emotional assault story. This story is prefaced by Louise’s question “So would that count?”

The Emotional Assault Story

Orientation

That incident occurred over about two days with a family I was working with and their advocate and some of their friends that came to support them and destroy the social worker.

Abstract

I was working with a family back in 1998/1999 when I went to the home with another social worker; they refused to let us in to speak with the children, to see, view them.
It became a hide and seek game with this family, you know as to where they could hide their children and could we find them and they were very, anti-government and they got an advocate.

It came down to me having to get a Court order to remove the children and enter the home.

They hid them (their kids) but someone called in and gave us an anonymous message, “the children you are looking for are at and then the address”; that’s all they said.

Plot

We found the children.

They got the advocate involved, we had agreed to meet at my office.

I told my supervisor I’m very concerned about our meeting . . .
I said I don’t want to do it; we can refuse to do it. He said no let’s get this over with; we have to fulfill this Court order; we have to see those kids.

When they came (to the meeting) it was the husband, the wife, the advocate, a female friend of the family who had a video camera and during the meeting, which was very hostile, she didn’t take that camera off me.

She’s very loud (advocate) and she fights. She’s like a truck, like a semi and she’ll just ram right through if you’ll let her.

I was nervous inside but I had control. At one point I excused myself to go to the bathroom and I was exhausted. Like your adrenalin is pumping, you’ve got this camera on you and my supervisor is no help at all.

(Trina – How long did this go on for?)

It seemed like forever, probably about two and a half, three hours.

I got everyone to agree we’d meet the next day at this church without the advocate to interview the children with the male and female support person there.

I was nervous at work the next day before the meeting and I said I’m gonna need someone to come with me. He (supervisor) goes, no you don’t, what for? I said I’m not going by myself.

He said o.k take Sally. Well Sally is a twenty one year old young woman, nice person, she’s petite, new, not somebody I would see as much protection for me.
The child protection manager, knowing what happened the day before, directed my supervisor to go with me.

So we went to the church and they made us wait and wait. There were mothers, grandmothers, friends, the advocate and they all swarmed into this room.

We got into a discussion, while this was going on this was being videotaped so close to my face I thought that you know my nose would go through the lens.

She really put the camera right on my face and was yelling and screaming at me and at one point I just sat down.

She screamed right in my face, “I know who you are, I’ve been checking you out; you are going to lose your job, I’m going to get you fired.”

This went on for about an hour until we got it organized, I said what the hell are we doing here. My supervisor said “keep going, keep going”.

Resolution

Finally we got into an agreement about interviewing and I interviewed the children one at a time. I had the female support person sitting beside the child with audio recorder and the male support guy with a camera filming me.

Everybody talked to me as if I’m a piece of dirt, as if I have no feelings.

I asked a particular question in regard to spankings and the woman freaked. She screamed at me with the child there. I just kept going re-wording it and it went on like that for both interviews.

I was tired, emotionally exhausted and I felt so bad about myself because of the way those people treated me.

I went home for lunch and phoned a friend I went to school with. I just started bawling my eyes out.

I phoned the office and I said I’m not coming back this afternoon and I don’t know when and you tell (supervisor) and management I am very mad at them because they should have protected me.

I ended up off of work for two weeks with acute stress disorder and WCB covered it.

Coda

It took me a long time to get over it.
Interview Summary

The core narrative identified in Louise’s interview was the question about if a specific experience counted as violence. However, throughout the interview there is dissonance between what she experienced and if it was counted as violence. Clearly from her description and reaction to the incidents it does seem as if ‘it counts’. For those around her though, most often the violence does not count.

The first scenario was the enforcement of a supervision order where Louise was physically assaulted in the client’s home. She explained in some detail the circumstances of the case: family and RCMP involvement. However it took some probing to focus her on the issue of the assault. For example, when she explained calling her supervisor she said, “I didn’t call him to tell him about, well yeah that, and what had occurred for example, non-removal of the children”. Louise’s supervisor’s focus was also on the case, specifically his disagreement with her decision not to remove the children from the home. In fact, further pressure was placed on her by her supervisor and the child protection consultant to return to the home and remove the children. Despite having marks on her neck from the assault, and considering getting a tetanus shot she returned to work that day without any intervention into being assaulted. She said that her way of coping was to “push it to the back of her mind”. There were no legal repercussions for the woman who assaulted her because Louise’s male colleague (who attended the home with her as a safety precaution) did not make a statement to the RCMP despite her requests for him to do so.
The next incident was more significant for Louise but she questioned her own evaluation of it this way. This complex scenario made up half the interview. It was a story that spanned two days. She used powerful words to describe the violence towards her like – “destroy the social worker”, “exploit me”, “vulnerable”, “she’s very loud and she fights”, “exhausted”, “adrenalin is just pumping”, “not sleeping very well”, “traumatic incident”, ”very violated” and “betrayal”. The impact of this incident was profound. Louise was diagnosed by a psychologist as having an acute stress disorder and was off work for two weeks. When she returned to work her supervisor said, “I don’t know why you reacted that way”, which she described as “that betrayal one more time and it just adds up”.

Major Themes

In the interview with Louise I discerned four themes in regard to the violence she experienced at work. These themes are connected intricately with the core narrative – so would that count?

It’s not significant violence

A strong message throughout Louise’s story was that the violence was not significant. She got this from those around her: supervisors, management, co-workers and the RCMP. It was evident that she had internalized this message. In explaining why she didn’t remove a client’s child, despite being assaulted, she said, “I wasn’t going to get her back just for grabbing me around the neck”. When concluding the assault story she
stated, “And that was that for that”. When asked how she coped with the assault she replied, “I just pushed it to the back of my mind”. However when she spoke about the marks on her neck from the assault her voice seemed shaky.

Louise talked about being given a choice by the RCMP to make a statement. She decided she would proceed with a statement but experienced a lack of support from her co-worker, supervisor and the RCMP. Her co-worker needed to make a statement, which he never did, and her supervisor did not give her time in her schedule. An additional barrier was the drive required for her to make a statement. Louise thought out loud, wondering if the RCMP could have come to her, but she discounted that, saying “he wasn’t going to come to me for that. No, not for that type of thing”. The implication being that ‘type of thing’ was not serious enough to warrant an RCMP officer traveling to take her statement. Despite this lack of support she seemed to blame herself for charges not happening, “I failed to get, or did not get out to the police station to make a statement”.

There were times when others evaluated Louise’s experiences as significant. Specifically the woman friend she called after the emotional assault, her mental health colleague’s supervisor and the Workers Compensation Board (WCB). Her friend reframed the situation as systemic and not individual; the mental health worker quickly responded with a home visit and WCB “recognized stress related illness”. These responses to Louise’s obvious distress validated that the violence counted.
Power

Louise demonstrated an awareness of power on different levels: professionally, personally and within the child welfare hierarchy. The first indication of her professional use of power was when she refused to remove the children, after being assaulted, despite pressure from her supervisors. Her decision not to remove, despite having been assaulted, was an expression of power she did have. That is, in the midst of the powerlessness and loss of control in the situation, Louise utilized the professional power she had – decision making based on the ethical humanitarianism with which she entered the social work profession.

She talked about another situation where her supervisor was present during a hostile meeting and because he didn’t intervene or take a leadership role she “lost faith in him and I just said I’m gonna carry this myself and I just controlled the whole thing, like you know, took charge”.

Despite these power plays, her less powerful place in the system was made evident and reinforced in different ways. When Louise wanted her supervisor to attend a difficult meeting with her, he refused, but was eventually made to by his supervisor. Louise discussed a point she’d tried to make with the family’s support person. She realized these people were mad at the system, but taking it out on her. She recalled saying to him, “You know, having your voice heard through one social worker isn’t going to make the changes in the system that you want . . . coming after me isn’t going to make any difference”. Finally, when Louise was on a medical leave as a result of the emotional assault she’d experienced, she contacted the Regional Executive Director (the highest position in her regional area). Her intent was to discuss practice suggestions she
had in regard to social workers that might have a similar experience to her own. He advised her that her help would not be necessary; a manager’s meeting had been arranged to discuss the issue.

**Impact of violence**

Louise struggled with naming the impact of the violence on her. Her animated description of experiences gave voice to what she could not or did not say. The emotional assault had the most profound affect on her. She described herself as emotionally exhausted, and “I felt so bad about myself because of the way those people treated me; I didn’t feel good at all and I had to talk to somebody”. Louise’s reaction was manifested in emotional responses: crying, anger and racing thoughts, “can’t slow them down and can’t get them in order”. She talked about being violated and unable to leave her home. In fact she stayed home for two weeks and was diagnosed with a stress disorder. Louise said it took her a long time to get over it. When she saw people involved in the situation she got a sick feeling and her heart raced. She saw herself as more protective and wary about the people in her community. Despite saying that she got over it, Louise continues to be cautious about her movement in the community, “it’s really no harm to me, it’s actually better for me. I don’t have to experience that heart rush when I see the people”.

**Support**

The impact of the violence at work is connected to the theme of support. Louise was clear and emphatic that she did not feel supported by her immediate supervisor or
management within the organization. She felt very “set up, betrayed and let down by my employer; I was very angry”. She experienced some of her co-workers as supportive, but questioned their sincerity. “They were supportive to the sense that yeah, they’ll stand there and listen to you, and oh, make the boo boo sounds, you know, that sort of, sympathy sounds”. She was also frustrated by her male colleagues lack of action in supporting her decision to make a statement about being assaulted. Attempts by management to recognize Louise’s work were not seen as helpful or genuine because of the overall lack of support she experienced from them.

Louise found support outside her work system. She described her partner as “absolutely” supportive. A phone call to a friend across the country helped her to see she should have been protected and shouldn’t go back to work that day. Her feeling of not feeling good about herself was shifted to one of anger and focusing on the ‘bigger picture’. A friend from the Mental Health office coordinated a home visit by her supervisor, an experienced psychiatric nurse. Louise described this intervention, critical stress debriefing, as very helpful a number of times in the interview “she helped me a lot. . . I went back to work two weeks later and I felt really good”.

Bernadette

Bernadette is a forty six year old First Nations woman. She lives with her husband on a small Indian reserve in British Columbia. Her adult son no longer lives at home. Bernadette has worked for a delegated First Nation’s child welfare agency since 1994. This is the job she has had since graduating with a Bachelor of Social Work
degree. The agency provides child protection services for a number of Bands in the area, including the community where Bernadette lives.

I recruited Bernadette through a colleague we had in common. In our initial phone call she was enthusiastic about being interviewed and immediately made time to meet with me the following day. Arrangements were made to meet at a restaurant in a town near her community. I arrived first and was seated in a private spot; Bernadette arrived shortly after and immediately expressed surprise that I was non-native. This is a reaction I am accustomed to; having Redman as my surname and being employed at a First Nation delegated agency leads clients and community workers to assume I am a First Nations person, which I’m not.

In any case we continued on with the meeting and a one-hour interview. Before we began the interview I started by gathering general information: age, family situation, educational background and social work experience. The age question provided some levity when Bernadette tried to convince me she was twenty-nine years old. During the initial part of our meeting Bernadette also provided me with the context for the rest of the interview: the Agency development process as a reaction to government intervention in First Nations child welfare, the meaning of the name of the Agency, the stigma of the title ‘social worker’ and the Agency’s decision to choose a different name for their workers who provide child protection services. After this context setting phase of the interview process, Bernadette began to describe an incident of violence she experienced three years previously while on a home visit.

The core narrative in this interview was not voiced explicitly by Bernadette in a statement but came through repeatedly by her pointing out cultural differences in child
protection work, specifically that violence “doesn’t happen that much because they are native and we are native whereas I think if it was a white social worker there’s a greater trust issue there”. Bernadette’s interview presented one explicit story of violence that she experienced and introduced a narrative that suggested racism as a symbol for violence.

Core Narrative: Differences

The Threat Story

Orientation

So what happened is I went on an unscheduled home visit.

Abstract

I usually do home visits with my clients one to two times per month depending on the need. If they’re going through a hard time I do more visits, one time per week or more.

Plot

The place where this couple lived, they lived downstairs so there’s probably fifteen stairs that you go down and it’s a basement suite.

I knocked on the door and the man answered the door and he was drunk.

He saw me and he started getting angry because his common law spouse was not home. She had gone out the night before and never returned back. He was upset about that and because we have their son in our care.

He thought that we were hiding his wife.

He said that if he finds out we are hiding her he would come to our office. He’d get two other friends and they’d have guns and they’d come to our office and shoot everyone.

At one point he said he wouldn’t harm me because I was his former sister-in-law but I questioned that because I really believed he would carry it out.

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a pocketknife. I thought, oh no, you know, this is it, and he flipped it open and started cleaning his nails. I thought I’m really in for it and so I continued to talk calmly not to let him see I’m afraid.
Resolution

And I talked to him for a good two hours to calm him down and so he finally calmed down and I left.

His anger deescalated so I left and I let my boss know and so for safety I would never go to their home by myself. I’d always have another co-worker with me.

She (supervisor) was very concerned and together we agreed no social worker should go to that home alone and the whole staff were made aware of the situation because of the threat he may show up at the office and, you know, harm everyone.

I gave a statement to the R.C.M.P. and it was sent to the Crown Prosecutor, I believe, and they reviewed it. It took them quite a while to review it, and they decided not to press charges because it was his first offence; they didn’t believe he had firearms and they didn’t believe he’d carry it out.

He (threatening client) apologized to me and I explained to him the reason for another co-worker.

Coda

I really felt let down by Crown Counsel, their decision not to press charges.

He (threatening client) was furious with me and for some time after the incident I was really afraid that he’d carry out his threat and even if I’m up town and I’d see him on the streets and he’d just glare at me and you know so I was even afraid to be in my own home town doing my shopping.

I would be cautious right. I’d never be in a place alone with him. I was more cautious of who is around.

I think it’s always on the back of my mind you know. Is he going to come during the night?

Like the other participants Bernadette began with one story of a violent incident with a transition to what seems to be the more significant story. For the other women the stories were about the most impactful violence they had experienced. Bernadette’s second narrative was not about a specific violent incident and not told in a storied way,
but was about her experiences of racism by government social workers and the system. She illustrated this narrative with examples of her experiences. The form of this narrative cannot be constructed in the same way as the other narratives for this reason.

The transition to this topic began when I asked Bernadette about any training or preparation she’d had in relation to safety issues at work. Bernadette told me that she became aware of safety issues while doing her Bachelor of Social Work degree and later in core training. “We were taught for safety to have your desk near the door so that if anything happens you can get out . . . what to wear for example, no dangly earrings, clothing, park you car so that you can get away fast.” Bernadette explained a difficulty in the government training that First Nations agency workers were required to attend to become delegated for child protection. “I thought the training was more in relation to the Ministry you know, they have a lot of forms. So it was irrelevant to us and we needed it more aboriginal focused and they didn’t incorporate very much aboriginal into it.”

A feature of Bernadette’s stories was the setting of the context in which the story occurs – the background. After telling me that the Ministry training was irrelevant to her learning needs and experiences Bernadette began to educate me on the history of the Agency she worked for her. The Agency was one of the first in BC in the mid-1990’s to become delegated; as a result she was required to attend the Ministry core training. However, more significant than the differences in forms was the attitude of other social work participants.

The Ministry workers would tell us in core training, they’d say, we don’t have to involve you guys, we don’t have to involve the Band, you know, if we remove your children. And we’d say yes you have to let us know you have to involve us. And so we’d ask the instructors and sometimes they

5 Provincially mandated child protection training in BC which all CPWs are required to complete prior to becoming delegated to do child protection work.
didn't even say oh yes, you have to involve them. They were, I think, uncertain themselves.

Bernadette’s recollection of core training was similar to my own. I attended core training as a government social worker in 1995 when First Nations workers were attending for the first time. I remember the divisiveness of groups, the questioning of the First Nation’s participants qualifications and derision outside of class by some non-native participants.

Bernadette’s examples provided evidence of racism expressed covertly by the delivery model of child protection training and more blatantly by the comments of some social workers. I had not previously thought of racism as violence except in the extreme manifestation of hate crimes. However, Bernadette’s interview broadened my definition of violence to include racism.

Bernadette recalled another interaction between herself and a Ministry worker in core training. The worker was explaining how she had involved an aboriginal grandma in the planning for her grandchildren.

The grandma was involved with the children and she (the worker) found it a nuisance and she said fortunately the grandmother died and she no longer had to deal with her. I was just furious with her, how dare her. So I wasn’t too happy with her.

In any context this worker’s comments are crass and ignorant. However, given the value placed on the role of grandparents in raising aboriginal children, this worker’s comments were particularly troubling for Bernadette.
Bernadette’s interview was different from the other women’s in that her connection to the work of child protection comes explicitly from a personal place; her own experiences as a child and her connectedness to her community. The interview process was also different than with the other two women; the barrier of being non-native added to the strain of meeting someone for the first time with the purpose of talking about a difficult time in their life. Throughout the interview Bernadette and I discussed cultural differences pertaining to child protection practice. She was open to discussing her experiences as a CPW and part of her narrative was to educate me about the cultural context of these experiences.

The interview with Bernadette began differently than the other two because we had never met. There was an initial information gathering and rapport-building phase. When I asked a question about her experiences of workplace violence she immediately began a narrative about threatened violence by a male client. As I’ve previously described, Bernadette’s core narrative was characterized by differences. The other two interview participants presented themselves as ambivalent about the violence they experienced. Bernadette was very clear that violence toward her was not acceptable. She immediately reported it to her supervisor and gave a statement to the RCMP and “really felt let down by Crown Counsel and their decision not to press charges”.

As with the other women, Bernadette presented two stories of violence – an initial story and then a second story, which seems to be more profound in the meaning the participant makes of it. In essence the impact of the second story seems greater.
Major Themes

The message that Bernadette delivered in our interview was about cultural differences in child protection practice. This core narrative was reinforced by three themes in the interview: connections to community, creating safety, and support. Two of these themes, creating safety and support, are named as themes in the other women’s interviews but there are substantive differences in experience.

Connections to community

The first theme that became apparent was Bernadette’s sense of connection, to her culture, community and child protection. Also evident was her sense of being a part of a larger collective. In fact Bernadette often spoke in terms of “we” rather than “I”.

Bernadette’s experience of child protection practice was in small rural reservations. As she is a member of one of the reservations, it is not surprising that often her work is connected to people she knows well. In Bernadette’s story of being threatened the issue of relationships emerges. The angry client who was threatening her was her stepsister’s ex-husband and at one point he said to Bernadette that he wouldn’t harm her “because I was his former sister-in-law”. Although Bernadette did not believe this relationship was enough to prevent the client from harming her, she does believe that generally relationships provide a preventative factor in regard to violence at work. She expressed this belief when talking about trust between worker and client.

I think for the most part it (violence) doesn’t happen that much. I think because they are native and we are native, whereas I think it if was a white
social worker that there's a greater trust issue there. I believe because most of the social workers know the clients because most of us are from the Bands and we know our people.

Connections to community were also apparent after Bernadette’s experience of being threatened with death. As Bernadette seeks to ensure her safety she was able to utilize her connections. She described that on her reserve there was a large map at the entrance with the resident’s names and locations. She approached the Chief of the reserve; who is a close relative, and a decision was made to remove the map entirely - rather than just remove Bernadette’s name and location. Another issue of vulnerability in the community arose with the posting of a Band membership list at the Band hall with all members’ phone numbers listed. Bernadette stated she was “paying for my name to be unlisted and you guys, are you know, publicizing it. If this guy came to the office he could see my name on that list and harass me. So they took it down”. An interesting aspect of connections was the role it played to both protect and make Bernadette more vulnerable and visible in the community.

Not only did Bernadette express this ongoing theme of connections to culture, family, and community it was also apparent in relation to her choice of becoming a child protection worker. Bernadette stated “when I was growing up no one was there for us, right, and there was always the threat of the Ministry coming and taking us away forever so I’d like to think that I’m making a difference with my people in stopping abuse”. Bernadette eventually wants to make a transition “to get more training and knowledge to be a therapist, to move my people, you know, past the pain and help them move on”.
Creating safety

The theme of creating safety emerged in Bernadette’s interview as it did in the other women’s interviews. The first instance where Bernadette mentioned it was when she was describing the scenario with the threatening client. She said that she “continued to talk to him calmly not to let him see I’m afraid”. By remaining calm Bernadette believed she ‘saved’ herself.

Once she escaped from the situation, a number of other strategies were put into place to enhance her personal safety, as well as her co-workers’. The creation of safety for Bernadette was not an individual pursuit but developed and supported by those around her. Immediately after the incident, visitation between the parents (mother and step-father) and child was stopped while the RCMP investigation was underway. Once it was determined that charges were not proceeding, it was agreed that Bernadette would never go to that home by herself, she’d always attend with a co-worker. Another decision was that no social worker could go to that home alone.

Bernadette was conflicted when deciding whether to make a statement to the RCMP about the threats against her. She was very clear that what happened was unacceptable; however, she was concerned about the impact of this action on her working relationship with the client. She spoke with a female co-worker, who had also experienced a violent incident, about involving the RCMP. The co-worker determined she would not press charges and jeopardize her relationship with the client. Bernadette considered this approach but determined that she wanted the client to know his behaviour was not o.k. and she made a statement to the police. Once the RCMP investigation was complete and charges did not proceed, Bernadette continued to work with the client,
accompanied by another co-worker. The client was told why Bernadette was not working alone with his family and he apologized to her for his actions.

In the aftermath of the incident “the whole staff were made aware of the situation because of the threat he may show up at the office and, you know, harm everyone”. Prior to this incident clients were able to move fairly freely between offices. Changes were made within the office to offer greater protection to all employees. A half-wall was added near the reception area and a secure door was installed that was always locked. Anyone who was not an employee needed to be ‘buzzed in’ to get past reception. Bernadette was satisfied with these changes and had thoughts about other safety features she’d like to see. These included a type of panic “button for a direct line to the RCMP” and training for the whole staff on a variety of safety measures.

There were a number of other strategies that Bernadette used to create personal safety; but again it was apparent that Bernadette was not in this alone. Community political leaders supported her by having a community map and membership phone list taken out of public places. The personal strategies Bernadette used were: being more cautious about who was around, never being alone with him (client) anywhere even in public places, and having a good guard dog to let her know if strangers were around.

Despite these strategies and the passage of time (it has been about three years since Bernadette has worked with this family) Bernadette stated “I think it’s always on the back of my mind, you know, is he going to come during the night?”
Support

The issue of support was the final theme that emerged from this interview. It was evident that Bernadette experienced support from those around her after the violent incident occurred and as the process unfolded. Immediately after the incident Bernadette returned to the office and let her supervisor know what happened. She said “together we agreed no social worker should go to that home alone and the whole staff were made aware of the situation”. There was the sense once again that Bernadette was not in this alone, confirmed by the usage of ‘we’ as opposed to ‘I’.

Bernadette was supported in a number of ways already described in the themes of connections and creating safety. Other forms of support she described were: family, a personal counselor and co-workers. Bernadette’s husband was supportive of her and also very worried about her safety. At one point he wanted her to quit her job. At the time Bernadette was going through this experience she was seeing a counselor on separate personal issues. She was supported by her counselor especially in relation to deciding whether to proceed with making a statement to the RCMP. Finally Bernadette was supported by those she worked with. When I asked if she believed the violence was taken seriously by her co-workers and the RCMP she was adamant that it was.

The only time Bernadette felt unsupported in this situation was when Crown Counsel reviewed the information provided by the RCMP and determined they would not proceed with charging the man. This decision was made because “it was a first offence, they didn’t believe he had firearms and they didn’t believe he’d carry it out”. Bernadette’s family connection to this man provided her with information about his history of violence toward other women, including her stepsister. However, this
information didn’t seem to be relevant to the Crown Counsel in relation to the current incident of death threats made toward others. Bernadette said she really felt let down by this decision a number of times in our interview.

In her second story, the story of her experiences of racism, lack of support was evident as she prepared for practice as a new social worker. While attending training to become a CPW the program “was irrelevant to us and we needed it more aboriginal focused and they didn’t incorporate very much aboriginal into it”. Not only was the content of the material problematic, it did not appear that instructors were knowledgeable about critical issues for First Nation’s communities, especially the importance of involving these communities in planning for children in care. This was not entirely surprising to me because provincial legislation at the time did not require social workers to do this. It was not until 1996 with new legislation that the importance of recognizing and preserving the culture of aboriginal children was mandated. Social workers became obligated to involve family members and communities in planning for children.

Not only was there a lack of support in meeting aboriginal social worker’s learning needs there was evidence the learning environment was not conducive to discussing cultural issues as they arose. Bernadette became furious with a MCFD worker’s description of a grandmother’s involvement in planning for a child in care; that it was a nuisance and fortunate when the grandmother died. These strong feelings could have provided a rich opportunity to discuss differences in child welfare approaches; however, it seemed that conflicts were not addressed and participants were divided along cultural lines and left with negative feelings toward each other.
Emily, Louise and Bernadette offered three different perspectives on the experience of violence as a CPW. The common feature of their interviews was the experience of violence and from this starting point similarities and differences emerged. Each of the women experienced violence as a traumatic event. The common themes related to their experiences of violence were: ways of creating safety, the impact of violence and support after violence. Significant differences in experience emerged in regard to which child protection agency the woman worked for. Emily and Louise’s, (both MCFD workers), interviews were expressions of powerlessness within that system. Bernadette’s interview clearly told a story of being valued and powerful within the First Nation’s child protection agency. However: outside the Agency system, within the legal system and particularly with Crown Counsel’s decision not to proceed with charges, it was clear that Bernadette’s experience of violence was discounted.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE STORIES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Emily, Louise and Bernadette each offer valuable insight and perspective into the experience of workplace violence. While there are striking similarities in their experiences there are also significant differences. In this chapter these women’s experiences of violence will be compared and contrasted, and connections made between their personal experiences and women’s positions within the child protection workplace and society.

These similarities and differences will be explored in the form of the interview, within the framework of trauma theory and along themes identified within the interviews. The initial similarity was in the form of the interviews. Although each woman told two stories of violence, the first story, while significant, seemed to be the prelude to an incident or experience that was more profound and meaningful.

Trauma

These women experienced a wide range of violence situations. In their work with the MCFD it was not uncommon for Emily and Louise to be shouted at, sworn at and threatened by clients. Indeed Emily’s first comment to me was that “it comes with the territory”. Bernadette’s experience was different in that threats, shouting and swearing were not regular occurrences. She attributed this difference to having First Nations workers working with First Nations clients who they often know well, so there is more trust between worker and client. Within their interviews the women reported the
following violent behaviours: being yelled at, sworn at, threatened with job loss, intimidated, physical assault, death threats, verbal assault and racism. Racism was experienced as the devaluing of cultural knowledge and beliefs by other social workers. It should not be surprising that these experiences created fear and upheaval in each woman's life.

These incidences of violence are examples of traumatic events. "Traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (Herman, 1997, p. 33). The impact of a traumatic event varies between individuals but there are three common responses: hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction which are differentiated by specific symptoms. Louise recognized she had experienced a traumatic event and used the term when she described some of her reactions, "You know how after having a traumatic incident your head races, you can't slow the thoughts down and you can't get them in order?" Louise also experienced problems with sleeping, frequent crying and an initial inability to leave her home. Louise's symptoms are classic examples of hyperarousal: an extremely heightened state of physiological arousal. Not only did she experience hyperarousal, she was troubled by symptoms of intrusion. Over a week after being emotionally and verbally assaulted, Louise saw an article in the newspaper related to child welfare issues. She said, "I saw that and I just started crying. I felt like it all started over again". Ultimately a psychologist diagnosed Louise with acute stress disorder. She took two weeks off work, which was covered by WCB.

Bernadette and Emily do not connect their experiences to trauma but their descriptions suggest they have experienced traumatic events. Emily was physically
assaulted by a client and got whiplash, and she also began to experience symptoms related to anxiety in situations that were not unsafe. She described having “panic attacks at pretty weird times”, as well as stomach and shoulder problems.

Bernadatte, Emily and Louise shared one common reaction to violence and that was constriction. Constriction is described (Herman, 1997, p. 42) as “a state of surrender” sometimes characterized by “detached calm”.

It was surreal and I think it must be because you go into shock or something. I just moved into this other frame of reference and it just didn’t seem real.

Emily

She’s screaming and I just remained calm. (While being physically assaulted.) I just repeated over and over again for her to stop and eventually she did.

Louise

I thought I’m really in for it and so I continued to talk to him calmly, not to let him see I’m afraid. I talked to him for a good two hours to calm him down. I think by remaining calm I saved myself.

Bernadette

The function of constriction is to allow the person to detach from the threatening situation and is in effect a form of self-preservation as Bernadette recognized.

Creating Safety

Emily, Louise and Bernadette’s responses to traumatic violent workplace episodes fell into all three categories: hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction (Herman, 1997). In the context of trauma their attempts to create safety make sense. Each woman had a variety of strategies for recovering her sense of safety. Emily became more aware of her vulnerability as a CPW and focused on ways of creating safety. The theme of creating safety echoed in Bernadette’s interview and to a lesser degree with Louise. Emily began
using her maiden name to create a separation between her private and professional life — so clients could not track her down. Bernadette and Louise took precautions within their communities to minimize the risk of ‘bumping into’ a client who’d threatened them. In their efforts to create personal safety Louise and Emily were left to their own devices whereas Bernadette was completely supported by management and her co-workers. The re-establishment of safety is a crucial feature of recovery from a traumatic event.

Support

Support was another theme that emerged from each woman’s interview; however there are vast differences in experiences of support. A critical component of support is the aspect of being taken seriously – that your experience matters. A common social work term used in this regard is to ‘validate’ someone’s experience. In child protection work the validation of a child’s abuse story is an important component of support for the child, from those around her. Not being believed is seen as detrimental to her recovery. Logically this argument should be applied to CPWs who experience violence. Emily and Louise’s male supervisors did not make this connection.

Emily and Bernadette experienced support from within the work environment. Bernadette felt completely supported by colleagues and management whereas Emily’s primary support came from other female colleagues. Both women saw debriefing with colleagues as helpful. Emily described a ‘buddy system’ that she developed with colleagues for peer debriefing and consultation on high profile cases. Emily was not as positive about manager’s and supervisor’s support, “No one ever asked me, aside from colleagues, nobody, no supervisor ever asked me how I was doing emotionally”.

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Louise's experience of support was dramatically different. Louise did not feel supported by colleagues or management. The theme of lack of support was consistent throughout the interview. She remained angry toward management, her final comment was, "I felt very set up, betrayed and let down by my employer. I was very angry and I think that's the biggest thing that comes to my mind when I think of these two incidents". Consistent support for Louise came from outside her work environment: a friend she'd gone to school with, a mental health worker and her partner. Each of these individual's validated her experience as meaningful. This was particularly important for Louise considering her core narrative of questioning if her experience 'counted'.

Power

While I have noted many similarities in experiences of the three women, it was around the issue of power where there is significant divergence. The most striking feature of the women's stories was the symbolism of their core narratives as expressions of power or powerlessness. This theme was explicit in Louise and Bernadette's interviews. Bernadette spoke of not showing her fear in the face of death threats, about not giving "him the power". Louise did not use the word power but implied it when she told a client, "having your voice heard through one social worker isn't going to make the changes you want . . . coming after me isn't going to make any difference". Louise knew where her position was in the larger scheme of the organization and it wasn't in a position of power.

Louise's experience of workplace violence, summarized by the core narrative: so would that count? poignantly demonstrated the powerlessness of her situation. When I
heard this comment by Louise I immediately connected it to a quote by Maynard (1993, p. 105), which referred to the dissonance between women’s experiences of violence and the societal view of these experiences – the tension “between their own experiences of behaviours as abusive and the dominant beliefs which define such behaviours as normal or inevitable”. Louise was a frustrated narrator. She was traumatized not only by the violence but also by her experience that it really did not matter much to anyone else within the system. Of the three women, Louise seemed the most oppressed, with the least power, within the workplace and as a result suffered the most harm from the experience. (It is important to note that by saying Louise was most impacted by her experience the intent is not to diminish Bernadette or Emily’s experiences as significant violence.) Oppression manifested itself by the decision-making constraints placed on Louise. Louise had minimal opportunities to make significant practice decisions she would have to implement. Decisions were made by male supervisors, which Louise either implemented or struggled against implementing. Overall the impression left was of a woman who had very little power within the workplace.

Emily’s core narrative was that violence comes with the territory. The tone of this interview was of resignation and acceptance, that violence and child protection are a ‘package deal’. She accepted this but also revealed that her tolerance for violence lessened as she experienced and learned more about it. Like Louise, Emily experienced significant time away from work recovering from violence. Unlike Louise, Emily experienced much positive feedback and support from colleagues and friends immediately after the incident and as she went through the recovery process. She was not supported by male supervisors but did not seem unduly concerned about this; it was as if
she did not expect their support. Her recovery from violence seemed less problematic than Louise’s. Emily continued to report positive feelings about child protection work, saying she loved many things about the work. However, like Louise, Emily no longer works in the child protection field.

Bernadette’s core narrative was about differences. These differences were significant and emerged in a number of ways. My initial feeling about the interview was that Bernadette was not in ‘this’ alone. Her work in child protection was an extension of her place as a citizen of her community. Child protection work in this context was connected to the past, present and future. It was this sense of connection that resonated in Bernadette’s interview. The only time she expressed a ‘disconnect’ was in regard to her exposure to mainstream systems: the ‘justice system’ when Crown Counsel decided not to proceed with charges against the client that threatened her and the provincial social work system. With this sense of connection comes a feeling of personal power undiminished by violent or racist experiences. In the face of racism by government social workers Bernadette remained firm in valuing her cultural beliefs about maintaining family involvement in the lives of children in care.

This sense of connection is intimately related to the theme of power. Bernadette’s connections to family, colleagues, supervisor and executive director demonstrate her value and importance within the community and workplace. As Bernadette was valued, so she valued herself. There was no expectation by anybody in her environment that she should put up with violence at work. At one point Bernadette said that violence ‘comes with the territory’ as Emily did; the difference is that Bernadette did not believe she must accept the violence. As a result of Bernadette’s different experience, the aftermath of the
violent incident was not as negative; she did not require time away from work and has worked in the child protection field, in the same Agency, for nine years.

“Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless . . . traumatic reactions occur when action is of no avail” (Herman, 1997, p. 33 & 34).

A pattern emerged from the findings of this study that made links between the violent experience, relationship connections and traumatic response of each woman. A caution is made, however, that this pattern cannot be generalized to all female child protection workers who have experienced violence, due to the limited sample size of this study. Within the parameters of this study I have found that when a female child protection worker experienced violence she was more likely to be traumatized:

- if she was powerless within the workplace environment,
- the violence was unrecognized,
- there was limited or no support from those around her.

A further finding was that the structure of a child protection agency has an impact on a female worker’s sense of value and power within the organization. More specifically the design of the Agency structure was empowering for Bernadette whereas the MCFD organization was disempowering for Emily and Louise. There are a number of reasons to explain this finding:

- The organization of MCFD is hierarchical, with many levels of management whereas the Agency structure is ‘flatter’. Front-line
workers within the Agency have direct and immediate access to management.

- The supervisor and executive director of the Agency were First Nations women, it is not unreasonable to assume they have had direct experience/exposure to violence and issues of violence and would therefore be more likely to take reports by other women seriously.

- The supervisors, managers and executive directors described by Emily and Louise are male; implicitly and explicitly they demonstrated through attitudes, behaviour and statements that what these women experienced was not violence and not significant.

- Bernadette chose to be a child protection worker and viewed it as important work; those within the Agency and larger community beyond supported this belief.

- Louise and Emily’s reasons for choosing child protection were not stated but the question must be asked about their internalization of negative sexist beliefs about the value of child protection work.

The concept of power in relation to these women’s experiences also highlighted the different ways in which women conceptualize power. In her research with women child welfare workers Callahan (1993, p. 179) found that women reported feeling powerful when:
• They “had the resources and skills to help and knew what should be done”.

• “Clients benefited from that help and usually acknowledged the worker”.

• “Workers felt that they and their clients were in an authentic as well as a caring relationship”.

In this context the definition of power differed from a more traditional, male perspective, that views power as an act of aggression – ‘power over’. In contrast, a significant finding of this study was the sense of – ‘power with’ - how a sense of personal power was related to relationship connections, the ability to make practice decisions and feeling valued within the organization.
CHAPTER SIX
IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD PROTECTION SOCIAL WORK

Emily, Louise and Bernadette's stories have provided valuable insights into the experience of workplace violence from the perspective of female CPWs. Their narratives provide a starting place for female CPWs to reflect on their own experiences of workplace violence and to raise questions about the situation of women in child protection work. Women are the majority of CPWs in BC and across Canada and they will continue to experience the impact of this work on their lives. Emily, Louise and Bernadette have taught us much through their stories of violence, not only to raise our consciousness, but to consider the implications for social work: education/training, the child protection workplace, social work management and social work research. This chapter discusses these issues.

Education/Training

There is a significant gap in the current education and training of CPWs. Very little attention is given to the issue of violence in child protection work. This is shocking given that violence toward workers is acknowledged as an inherent risk of the work (Callahan, 1993; Gold, 1998; Horejsi, Garthwait, & Rolando, 1994; Horwitz, 1998; Scalera, 1995).

Within the BSW and protection training curricula, it is understandable there are competing demands to include a variety of course topics. However decisions about what to include are determined by deciding what is a priority. Addressing the issue of violence
directed toward CPWs, mostly women, has not been a priority. Currently in BC a child
care specialization is offered by a number of BSW programs. This provides an
opportunity to introduce the topic of violence against workers – not what or what not to
wear and how to set up your office – but an introduction to theories of violence,
definitions of violence and the impact of violence. This need not be a full course but
could be developed in a workshop format over a number of modules. The value of this
approach is that it delivers a message to students that violence in child protection work is
taken seriously. It also provides a starting place for discussion as students move from
child protection practicum placements to employment in child protection agencies. A
responsibility of social work educators is to prepare social workers as practitioners in the
profession.

Employers share responsibility to prepare social workers adequately for child
protection work, and the other component of education is workplace training. In BC,
child protection training is provided for government employees by MCFD, and
employees of First Nations Agencies receive training from the Caring for First Nations
Children Society. Although the training, content and process, for new child protection
workers has been evolving the focus has been inconsistent. There has been a lack of
priority placed on preparing workers for the violent realities of the work.

In the Workplace

Within BC, child protection workers are protected by WCB regulations on
workplace violence. Regulation 4.27 (Protection of Workers From Workplace Violence,
1998, p. 6) clearly defines workplace violence:
Violence means the attempted or actual exercise by a person, other than a worker, of any physical force so as to cause injury to a worker, and includes any threatening statement or behaviours which gives a worker reasonable cause to believe he or she is at risk of injury.

Regulation 4.31 outlines the procedure to be followed when violence occurs:

- Incidents of violence must be reported and investigated.
- The employer must ensure that corrective actions are taken in response to incidents of violence.

Although these regulations are part of the legal framework of BC they were not adhered to when Emily and Louise were assaulted. If safety of workers is to be a priority then the culture of the workplace must support this. This begins with education and a 'true' zero tolerance policy on workplace violence which includes threats, screaming, swearing and psychological violence. A 'true' zero tolerance policy would include features for violence prevention and intervention when violence occurs. Prevention could come in the form of office safety plans developed by the workers in each office. Correspondingly, an intervention plan, which includes immediate action, should also be developed in-house. In this way workers play an integral role in creating a safer work environment that meets their needs.

Two other avenues of advocacy for the rights of female social workers were noticeably absent from all three women's interviews. Provincial employees' rights are ostensibly protected through membership in British Columbia's Government Employee Union; however, neither Emily nor Louise mentioned the union in their interviews. In addition, none of the women referred to professional associations and the role they might play in advocacy or support for women to work in a safe environment.
Management

While child protection workers can play a significant role in developing plans for a safer workplace, ultimately it is the employer’s responsibility to provide a safe work environment for employees. Management must begin to recognize that child protection work is complex and conflictual and requires highly skilled practitioners. Clients are often emotionally distraught but it is not acceptable to believe women should bear the brunt of this frustration.

This study suggests a number of implications for supervisors and managers of female CPWs:

- Those in management positions must be educated about violence against women and violence in the workplace. Information should include: definitions of violence, prevention of violence, intervention after violence, as well as current WCB and workplace violence policies in BC.

- Management must recognize that violence has a ‘different’ significance for women given research into the incidence and experiences of women affected by violence. This suggests that female workers should be believed and supported when they report a violent incident.

- Supervisors should be knowledgeable about the process to follow when violence occurs. This means an intervention plan focused on supporting the worker.
• Accountability through adequate consequences for managers and supervisors who do not comply with WCB regulations and Ministry procedures around the issue of violence against employees.

• Women should be encouraged, supported and mentored to move into management positions.

Directions for Future Research

There has been minimal inquiry by researchers into the violent workplace experiences of female CPWs. This preliminary study provided only a starting place for this exploration. The value of this study was the opportunity to hear directly from women about their experiences. There are a number of areas identified for further research. Despite the recognition of violence as a risk to CPWs there is very little research on the incidence of violence. While conducting this study I talked to female CPWs who reported their own and other’s experiences of violence, including male colleagues. In order to begin to address the problem of the violence it is necessary to establish the incidence. In this way the problem becomes legitimized. What is hidden becomes visible. The difficulty in conducting such research has already been addressed in this paper. Previous research into the topic of violence against women recognized problems of underreporting violence, due to definitional and measurement issues. The research needs to be done in a way that ensures women’s experiences are not hidden.

The data from Bernadette’s interview suggests that valuable insights could come from research into child protection practice in First Nations Agencies. The philosophy
and structure of the First Nations Agency offers a vision of a child protection work environment where female workers are valued.

Other directions for future research identified in this study were: violence against women in positions of power, gender differences in experience of violence, and feminist conceptualizations of power. These areas were identified because so little research exists on these topics and they would contribute to understanding the complexities of violence against child protection workers. A final area suggested for future research is the financial cost to society by not providing a safe work environment for all child protection workers.

Challenging the Current Model of Child Protection Practice

Implementing these suggestions will begin to address violence against female workers in the current child protection delivery model in BC. However, the most significant implication is less easily implemented. That is, challenging the current philosophy and practice of child protection in BC. The system as it currently exists is problematic from a feminist perspective because it divides women. One group of women (CPWs) is charged with the responsibility of policing other women (clients) who are seen not to be fulfilling their parenting responsibilities despite the inadequate resources available to both groups of women to ensure child safety and well-being. In this structure there is little possibility of solving the substantive problems in child welfare. Two of these are poverty and societal acceptance of violence against women and children.
The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of female CPWs who have experienced violence. Initially, because of my own experiences I was interested in other female child protection worker's stories of violence. I was especially interested in the impact of this violence on their lives. As the research progressed my questions moved to another level, specifically to wonder how gender, child protection work and violence were linked. In order to make these connections it was necessary to explore the movement of women into the labour force, violence against women and violence in the social services field.

While women pioneered child protection social work it is now a field dominated by men within the management structure. Women occupy positions with the least power (foster mother and child protection worker) and continue to provide the caring work that traditionally has been devalued as women's work. In child protection this caring work is often conflictual because it is combined with a policing role. Women are put in a position to make sure other parents, mostly mothers, are fulfilling their parenting responsibilities. A situation Emily described most profoundly illustrated this dilemma. As a CPW, Emily, a mother and grandmother, was required to stop a mother from breastfeeding her fussy infant on a supervised office visit. This significant intervention into families' lives not only divides women from each other, it puts female child protection workers on the front line to bear the brunt of the frustration and anger of those who are also oppressed.
Initially a surprising finding in my study was that two of the women identified other women as the perpetrators of violence against them. I had anticipated that men would most often be identified as the aggressors against female CPWs. However, after further reflection and analysis it was not so surprising a finding. When oppressed clients (mostly women) are further oppressed by a loss of liberty to parent or make parenting decisions there is the potential for extreme conflict if not violence. Within this construction it made sense that the CPW would be the target for this anger and frustration.

The crux of the problem in addressing workplace violence is the denial and minimization by workers, managers and supervisors of the role violence plays in child protection work. These attitudes and beliefs are indicative of more widely held societal beliefs about women and violence that are often unquestioned. While it is no longer politically correct to be blatantly sexist, sexism still exists. Subtle sex discrimination is persistent and institutionalized within the child protection system, as a result, “other processes [are] not immediately visible because men and women have been socialized to practice and accept subtle sex discrimination” (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995, p. 116).

The process that is made visible in this study is the acceptance of a significant level of violence against MCFD female child protection workers by individual workers, management and society. This acceptance is symbolized in the core narratives of Emily and Louise’s interviews – it comes with the territory and does it count? Bernadette’s experience counters these narratives. While she stated that violence comes with the territory the difference for her is that violence was not acceptable or tolerated at any level within the Agency and her community.
The child protection agency’s responses to worker violence had a significant influence on each woman’s experience of violence. Bernadette’s value and worth as a worker was confirmed by the swift response of support from all those around her as she went through the difficult experience of a client making death threats toward her. Bernadette’s story had a happy ending; she continued working in child protection, uninterrupted and saw herself making future contributions to her communities’ wellness. Responses by supervisors and managers to Emily and Louise’s experiences were quite different. Quite simply their experiences were ignored, except for support from colleagues and friends they were on their own. The fall out of the violence combined with apathy was manifested by significant symptoms of trauma. Their lack of value to the child protection organization was made clear – they were expected to tolerate being grabbed, yelled at, videotaped at work, shaken, demeaned and threatened. Their stories had a different ending, they got out. Emily has come to a place of acceptance and Louise remains angry about the poor treatment she received by her employer.

The memories of a violent experience are not easily forgotten. Despite the passage of time Bernadette said, “I think it’s always on the back of my mind, you know, is he going to come during the night?” Louise is now “a little more protective and wary about the people in this community”. Emily is reminded of her experiences by panic attacks which “come at pretty weird times, not related at all to what I am doing, but something is triggered”. I am reminded of threats made against me when I receive updating phone calls from the RCMP and restraining orders that come in the mail.
References


APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Central question – I am interested in hearing about your experiences of workplace violence as a child protection worker.

Probing questions –

1. Can you tell me what happened to you when you were threatened with/experienced violence while you were working?
2. What impact do you think this experience has had on you?
3. How have you coped with this experience?
4. Do you think this/these experience(s) have changed you in any way?
5. Was your employer/supervisor aware of these experiences?
6. What support did you receive?
7. What was/would have been helpful to you at the time of the incident(s)? After the incident(s)?