Family Violence and Family Identity

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between family violence and family identity. Specifically, it looks at the effects that having lived in an abusive relationship have on the intergenerational transmission of family identity through family history, traditions, intergenerational contact and material culture. Participants were ten women who self-identified as having previously lived in an abusive intimate relationship. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Generally, the results illustrated the pervasiveness of violence in the families of origin of both the respondents and their abusive ex-partners. Results were organised into six thematic categories: myth and reality of the happy family, the tradition of abuse, silences, isolation, preservation of material culture, and creation and maintenance of a historical record. Results are discussed in the context of relevant concepts from the literatures on both family violence and family identity.

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I wish to extend my gratitude to the women who participated in this study by sharing their lives with me. Sometimes what they said was heart-wrenching to hear and must have been difficult to talk about. To all of them, I wish you success in ending the tradition of abuse within your families. May your insight and determination bring about the change you desire.

Family Violence and Family Identity

This thesis explores the relationship between family violence and family identity. Specifically, it looks at the effects that having lived in an abusive relationship have on the intergenerational transmission of family identity through family history, traditions, intergenerational contact and material culture.

The idea for this work represents a melding of two aspects of my own life, my personal and academic interest in material culture and family history, and my professional experience working with a transition house for women who have been abused. Women who accessed the transition house told of family heirlooms and items of sentimental value being destroyed, often deliberately, by their abusive partners, and of the necessity of leaving behind such items when departing the relationship, sometimes with little or no time to pack. Further, these women frequently identified isolation from family as a key means of control used by their partners. Such anecdotal evidence suggests that living in an abusive relationship may affect family identity, a woman's sense of connectedness to her family of origin and by extension, her children's sense of identification with a family beyond their siblings and parents.

This introduction provides a brief overview of the current study and discussion of how the study originated and its early stages. Additionally, this chapter presents relevant research findings from two fields, family violence and family identity. The Methodology chapter explains the methods guiding the current study, with specific attention to the ethical issues involved in doing this work. The demographics of the research sample, the interview data and analysis of that data are presented in the Results chapter. The

Discussion chapter provides a summary of the current study's findings, further analysis, an examination of limitations, and suggestions for further study.

A Review of the Literature on Family Violence

According to a 1993 Statistics Canada survey commissioned by the federal Department of Health and participated in by 12,300 women, 51% of Canadian women had experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual assault since the age of 16. For 10% of women, this had occurred in the previous twelve months. In 45% of the cases, the assault had been carried out by a man known to the woman[1], usually a partner, ex-partner, or date (Johnson, 1996). While incidence rates vary among studies according to such things as definitions of abuse and questions asked, they nonetheless indicate that violence is or has been a part of many women's lives. Statistics relating to psychological abuse are difficult to separate as they are usually combined with overall statistics on abuse, but since most women who report physical abuse also report psychological abuse, one can assume the numbers are higher than those for physical abuse alone.

For the purpose of this study, a relatively broad definition of family violence will be used. While the current research has been limited to women abused by male partners, the nature of the relationships involved includes married, common-law, dating, and ex-partners. The term *abuse* in the present study extends beyond physical abuse to include those forms of abuse variously labelled elsewhere as verbal, emotional, financial, sexual, and psychological. I have simplified the terminology, however, to physical and

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[1]While the violence in lesbian relationships is worthy of study, it will not be discussed here because all participants in the current study identified their abusive partner as male.

psychological, with psychological abuse forming a key focus of the current study.

According to DeKeseredy and Hinch (1991), while much research has been conducted about physical and sexual abuse, psychological abuse needs further study. Smith, Tessaro, and Earp (1995) point to the importance of recognising the chronic effects of psychological "battering". They suggest that living in a relationship where one is psychologically abused, (characterised by chronic anxiety, disempowerment and diminished self-esteem) has mental, medical, and behavioural consequences as severe as physical abuse. Psychological abuse includes: isolation from family and friends, humiliation, criticism of appearance or values, attacks on one's self-esteem, threats of physical violence or of taking away one's children, belittling, ridicule, destruction of cherished personal possessions, and the withholding of money (NiCarthy, 1997; Smith et al., 1995; Wiehe, 1998). Such an existence can have a significant effect on a person's behaviour and their perceived ability to exercise control over their own lives.

Living in an abusive relationship (Why women stay). Much has been written about why women remain in abusive relationships. The existing literature sheds some light on the topic but general conclusions are hard to draw because different authors analyse each new finding in the context of widely divergent theories that tend to stress different factors. One subset of the literature focuses on the individual psychology of the abuser and the victim. Often, especially in early studies, abused women were seen as having intrinsic personality flaws that predisposed them to participation in abusive relationships. However, in looking at three decades of research, Rhodes and Baranoff McKenzie (1998) found that it may be the psychological effects of abuse, not pre-existing personality traits, that cause a woman

to remain in an abusive relationship. Living in a relationship where one is constantly put down can have a significant effect on a person's self esteem (Kaufman Kantor & Jasinski, 1998; Wiehe, 1998). Similarly, in a review of studies conducted between 1977 and 1994, Giles-Sims (1998) found that having witnessed violence in one's family of origin was a greater contributor to participation in abusive adult relationships than was low self-esteem. These findings suggest that, even if variables are limited to the psychology of the individual woman, the reasons for staying in an abusive relationship are more complicated than a single trait. Black and Newman (1996) in their review found women frequently tended to blame themselves for the abuse. Further, they found that women experienced shame and humiliation about the abusive relationship, attempted to keep it a secret, and experienced a feeling of entrapment, brought about in part by the hidden or supposedly hidden nature of the abuse. The effect of these factors was, frequently, to prevent women from seeking outside support (see also Smith et al., 1995).

Other contributing factors to a woman remaining in an abusive relationship can include depression and anxiety (Wiehe, 1998). More women living in abusive relationships experience depression and post-traumatic stress disorder than do their non-abused counterparts (Rhodes & Baranoff McKenzie, 1998). It has also been shown that depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress can hinder a woman's ability to leave an abusive relationship, affecting her self-efficacy and her world view (Giles-Sims, 1998). The prospect of leaving the known for the unknown can be an additional stressor, regardless of how abusive the relationship has become, preventing a woman from making a decision and finding the energy to leave. It is not uncommon for women to understate the

seriousness of the abuse in which they are living, partly as a coping mechanism and partly because, having grown up in an abusive home, they do not recognise it as anything other than normal. The latter is especially true in the case of psychological abuse, which some women do not understand as abuse, and therefore may remain in the relationship until it becomes physically abusive.

Sometimes women stay in an abusive relationship out of fear or perceived threat, for themselves, their children, or their family. An American study of twenty-two women who had been or were currently involved in serious dating relationships involving violence, found that almost all the women were pursued by their ex-boyfriends after the relationship ended (Rosen & Stith, 1997). The women employed various strategies to stop the harassment, including moving away, going to the authorities, and having family and friends act as a buffer.

Rhodes and Baranoff McKenzie (1998) and Giles-Sims (1998) point to the scarcity of studies examining the behaviour of abusive partners as a determinant in whether women leave abusive relationships. The existing literature indicates that abusive partners may engage in a number of strategies, such as apologising for their behaviour, pleading for reconciliation, and promising to change or to seek counselling. If these are unsuccessful, they may become depressed, tell the woman they can not live without her, and threaten or attempt suicide. Finally, they may simply refuse to accept that the relationship has ended, choosing instead to stalk or harass the woman, sometimes threatening to injure or kill her, the children, or members of her family of origin (Black & Newman, 1996; Bowker, 1993). A particularly effective threat, which can paralyse a woman and prevent her from leaving

an abusive relationship, is the threat of losing her children. An abusive partner may claim

that she is a bad mother and convince her that he would get custody should she leave, or

tell her that if she leaves she will never see her children again (Rhodes & Baranoff

McKenzie, 1998). There is substantial risk in even making an attempt to leave; should she

be unsuccessful, the woman may find that the level of violence escalates (Bowker, 1993).

Other reasons for remaining with the abusive partner are equally complex, for

example, the belief that the abuser will change (Black & Newman, 1996). Love and guilt

are both powerful factors in this belief, especially when the abuser is begging forgiveness

and pleading with her to stay. Even if this is an ongoing pattern, as is frequently the case, it

can be difficult for a woman to persevere in her decision to leave (NiCarthy, 1997). Some

women may have a strong need to establish intimacy with the abusive partner which is

encouraged by his promises to change which may follow an abusive incident (Smith et al.,

1995). Certainly, the abusive partner is likely to have learned what to say to manipulate her

and convince her to give him just one more chance. Many abusive persons are very good

at what they do and have developed multiple techniques, having practised over the years by

intimidating and threatening numerous people in their lives (Bowker, 1993). Frequently,

they have learned specific techniques to control their partner. These techniques may not be

threatening to an outsider because the abuser lacks the information necessary to control or

intimidate that person. In their abused partner, however, they may be able to provoke

feelings of dread which can virtually paralyse her (Smith et al., 1995).

In addition to these direct pressures, women face more subtle social influences to

remain with their partner. They may feel responsible for the abusive relationship and

believe it is their job to repair and maintain it. Family members or religious affiliations may

encourage the belief that one must stay, no matter what; to do otherwise would be

admitting failure (Bowker, 1993).

Black and Newman (1996) found financial hardship to be an additional factor

causing women to remain in abusive relationships. Women reported that abuse affects

their income-earning capacity; they may be late for work, distracted at work, or their

abusive partners may prevent them from working or going to school (Wiehe, 1998). In

some instances, the abusive partner shows up at the woman's workplace, harassing or

intimidating her, customers, and/or clients until she loses her job. Further, even if the

couple own property, a vehicle, or a bank account, they are not likely to be in her name,

preventing access to ready cash (Bowker, 1993). This inability to be financially

independent, and the lack of options associated with it necessitate remaining in the abusive

relationship longer than she might otherwise (Rhodes & Baranoff McKenzie, 1998). In

fact, cultural norms dictate that many women initially enter a relationship expecting to be

financially supported by their male partners, and leaving that relationship can necessitate a

complete shift in values (NiCarthy, 1997).

If a woman does make the decision to leave an abusive partner, her options may be

limited not only by financial hardship but also by a lack of personal and community

resources available to assist her in this transition. Even where resources such as women's

shelters exist she may be hampered by a lack of information about their existence or may

have been given false information by her abusive partner. All these factors can serve to

further increase her feeling of entrapment (Black & Newman, 1996; Smith et al., 1995).

Bowker (1993) suggests that women sometimes remain in abusive relationships due to the potential loss of social identity and indeed of their entire way of life should they leave. In spite of the violence, an abusive relationship can provide some semblance of security and familiarity, even social standing in the community.

Leaving an abusive partner. While leaving an abusive relationship can be difficult and painful (Rosen & Stith, 1997), many women ultimately do make that step. In their review of the literature, Black and Newman (1996) found that a "last straw" event was frequently the catalyst which caused women to ultimately leave the relationship. Often, these events involved the children of the relationship. Leaving could be engendered by a new understanding of the effects that witnessing the abuse has on children reinforced, for example, by abusive behaviours on the children's part, either towards the mother or others. Other women were motivated to leave when their partner began to direct abuse at the children, especially where this had not been the case previously; or by increased threats of abuse to themselves. Rosen and Stith (1997) further suggest that the last straw event is accompanied by a shift in perspective from: *"I need this relationship"* to *"I need to get out of this relationship"*. The changes which can lead to this point of preparedness include: an increase in the amount or severity of the abuse, a new knowledge of available resources, a lessening of the degree of remorse expressed by the abusive partner, an end to the hope that things will improve, the violence becoming visible where previously it had been hidden, or a change in the level of concern or anger expressed by family and friends (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983, as cited in Rosen & Stith, 1997).

The last straw event often leads women to seek outside assistance, a significant step to ending the violence in their lives (Rhodes & Baranoff McKenzie, 1998, Rosen & Stith, 1997). Becoming aware of community resources, for example a place to go such as a shelter for abused women, significantly increases a woman's options. Some women access private counselling while others choose to participate in support groups for abused women or enlist the support of family and friends. Even after leaving the relationship, the process of healing and moving forward can take years.

Bowker (1993) suggests, after 146 in-depth interviews and 1000 questionnaires and voluntarily submitted case histories, that the lack of self-esteem so often indicated as a reason women remain in abusive relationships is "curvilinear". Her theory proposes that while living in an abusive relationship takes a toll on a woman's self-esteem, causing it to sink lower and lower, "when all seems hopeless, a spark of innate health ignites" (p.157), creating an upswing which enables the woman to begin the process of change. Bowker suggests this process can be a long one, as a woman struggles to rebuild her self-esteem, to summon courage to leave, and in many cases, to financially prepare to be on her own. The process may not be visible to outsiders who would be unable to differentiate between a woman who might never leave and one who was very close to saving up enough money to support herself. Bowker concludes then that many women presently living in abusive relationships are actively working toward change both through personal and community resources, a factor which is rarely considered when examining the self-esteem of such women.

Effects on children. Attala et al. (1995), in reviewing 14 studies of the effects on

children of witnessing domestic violence, found that children from abusive homes generally

have more difficulties than those from non-abusive homes. These included but were not

limited to: developmental delays, cognitive deficits, behavioural problems, increased

aggression, attachment problems, and depression. Some children resort to fantasy or

'disengagement' (dissociation) as coping strategies. They may report more psychosomatic

complaints, have lower self-esteem, show signs of post traumatic stress syndrome and have

less empathy for others than do children from non-abusive families (Black & Newman,

1996).

Effects are age-specific, as highlighted in two review articles (Black & Newman,

1996; Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998). Even before birth, abuse of the pregnant mother affects

the child; this can take the form of developmental delays caused by physical abuse of the

mother. As early as infancy, children have been found to exhibit distress when exposed to

anger and hostility. In addition, children from abusive homes may show signs of neglect or

have health problems. They may be underweight, have poor sleeping habits, or cry

inconsolably. They are especially vulnerable to the risk of injury because of the violence in

their environment.

Toddlers and preschoolers may experience developmental delays or regress to

earlier levels of functioning in behaviours such as toilet training. Their anxiety may be

exhibited as being whiny and clingy, or they may experience fear, even terror, manifested

as nightmares, yelling, hiding, or shaking. Because they interpret the world in relation to

themselves, children may blame themselves for the abusive behaviour while feeling

sympathetic toward their mother and angry at their father.

From ages 6 to 12, children feel less responsibility for the abusive behaviour of others but may also develop resentment toward their mother because she does not stop the abuse, or because they feel she is responsible for it. Because the child is now in school, behavioural and developmental problems become more apparent. Interventions may be recommended by school officials. Children may experience academic difficulties due to anxiety or to sleepless nights. They may exhibit low self-esteem or depression and be emotionally needy. Difficulties with peers may begin to emerge as a result of not having learned appropriate socialisation at home; further, some children may not want to invite peers to their homes because they are ashamed of their family, choosing instead to isolate themselves.

Black and Newman (1996) and Wolak and Finkelhor (1998) further note that adolescents may also experience anxiety out of fear for their own safety or that of other family members. Further, the lack of appropriate socialisation at home may now mean they have begun imitating their parents' behaviour and using aggression to solve conflict in their lives. Teenagers may assault their peers or their parents. They may become manipulative, or may run away. As their peer group begins to play a larger role in their lives, it can either provide an opportunity to learn more appropriate coping strategies or reinforce the inappropriate roles learned at home (Burgess & Youngblade, 1988).

In the early teen years, gender related differences begin to emerge with the majority of studies suggesting that boys become more aggressive and disruptive. They may begin to associate more closely with their fathers and may even become abusive to their mothers.

Girls may become passive and withdrawn and experience more somatic complaints than do either girls from non-abusive homes or the boys from abusive families.

Intergenerational transmission of family violence. The effects on children of violence in the home are especially important because of the proposed link between being abused or witnessing violence as a child and being abused or abusive as an adult (Besharov, 1990; Breiner, 1992; Levinson, 1983). Repeatedly, studies have shown violence in the family of origin to be the best predictor of individuals becoming abusive themselves (Giles-Sims, 1998; Kaufman Kantor & Jasinski, 1998; Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998), leading to a cycle of violence that can continue for generations if not stopped. Egeland (1993) cites several studies which concluded that children growing up in abusive homes learn to be abusive. The majority of these studies examined abusive adults and found they were abused as children.

An opposing theory suggests that the intergenerational transmission of abuse has been overstated. Kaufman and Zigler (1993), after reviewing the literature, suggest that the majority of adults who were abused as children do not become abusive partners or parents (also see Burgess & Youngblade, 1988). In the studies reviewed, non-abusive individuals had characteristics different from the abusive parents and included larger proportions of those who had sought therapy, who had gained an awareness of the abuse and were determined not to repeat the pattern and who had extensive social supports.

What is not addressed by either of these opposing arguments is whether children who grow up in abusive homes are more likely to end up in relationships where they are abused, rather than abusive. There has been considerably less written on this issue. This

can be explained in part because abusers have been more visible; especially those whose violence, within and outside of the home, leads them into the justice system. Much of the existing research is limited in its findings because it does not control for variables such as parenting ability, general stability of the home environment, poverty, genetic links, alcoholism, or mental illness. Numerous studies look at abuse within the family and its relationship to one or another of these variables, such as alcoholism (Kaufman Kantor & Jasinski, 1998), with which there seems to be a particularly strong correlation, but there is little indication as to how several might act together.

One significant factor which seems to help children cope effectively with family violence is the existence of supportive peers or adults outside the family (Black & Newman, 1996; Burgess & Youngblade, 1988). This kind of extra-familial support appears to act as a buffer and provides an opportunity to learn alternative coping skills from those modelled in the home, thus, allowing maladaptive behaviours to be unlearned and the intergenerational transmission of abuse to be stopped. The child's personal characteristics, adaptability, intelligence level, and outside interests or talents also have an effect although this is difficult to measure as each of these can be affected by the home environment (Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998) . In addition, there are studies, although a lesser number, which found only limited support for the theory that witnessing violence in one's family of origin is a significant risk marker for being in an abusive relationship as an adult (Simons, Wu, Johnson, & Conger, 1995). Certainly, it is evident that any study examining the intergenerational transmission of abuse must take into account relationships outside of the family.

A Review of the Literature on Family Identity

Family identity, herein defined as a sense of connectedness to one's family of

origin, involves a range of factors including intergenerational contact, a knowledge of

family heritage, traditions, rituals, material culture, and the sense of being part of

something beyond one's immediate self. According to Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity

(1988), "Family identity is the family's subjective sense of its own continuity over time, its

present situation, and its character. It is the . . . qualities and attributes that make it a

particular family and that differentiate it from other families" (p. 213). The means by

which family identity can be represented and reinforced are discussed below.

Family stories, oral history and myths. Our lives are filled with events and stories

of things that happen to us and around us every day. From all of this we choose just a few

stories to hold on to. Zeitlin, Kotkin and Cutting Baker (1982) suggest these may be the

funniest or the most telling. As they are told and retold, sometimes altered in the retelling,

they become a part of our family heritage - our inheritance - and knowing them connects

and orients us with a world beyond ourselves. The stories that are told, how and in what

situations they are told can tell us much about a family. They provide insight into the way

family members think of themselves. For Stone (1989), they are one of the ways the

family unit bonds and lets its members know they are special and different from other

families because they have a shared sense of meaning. For most families, it is stories of the

past that encourage the preservation of the present (Bennett et al.,1988). And yet for all of

this, a family's stories are often "thoroughly invisible" to outsiders; what may be visible is

the effects of these stories, the way they influence how individuals within the family

interact with one another.

Family stories are especially significant to researchers because they afford insight into intergenerational relationships and provide a forum for the relatively spontaneous emergence of family themes (Martin, Hagestad, & Diedrick, 1988). The benefit of this to researchers is that themes emerge from interviews about which no direct questions were posed providing an opportunity to learn what is of most significance to the family. Such stories allow a researcher to examine how life experiences are handed down through the generations. In their research into the family stories of university students, Martin and his co-authors found that personality descriptions were central to many of the stories, with central characters generally being portrayed favourably.

Traditions and rituals. Just as stories and an awareness of our past connect us to our families, so too do our rituals and traditions, providing a glimpse into a family's sense of shared identity. Meske, Sanders, Meredith, and Abbott (1994), in a study of elderly people's perceptions of rituals and traditions, found participants understood these as important to building successful families because they provided a forum to maintain family contact, share memories, and promote intergenerational communication thereby strengthening relationships. As with stories, rituals and traditions work to reinforce a collective sense of identity for family members (Allen, 1982) providing an opportunity to remember and celebrate the family, not only through the action but also through the process of preparing for it (Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992). Minute details take on great importance (Lofgren, 1996). Each time a ritual is reenacted, it calls up memories from previous years (Zeitlin et al, 1982). Family gatherings are a part of this, giving individuals

an opportunity to see and reinforce for themselves that they are part of "something larger than themselves" (White, 1994, p. 16) and to "enact" the family identity (Bennett et al., 1988). Lofgren speaks of a "lust for ritual" (p. 115).

A family ritual is defined as:

> . . . a symbolic form of communication that, owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in a systematic fashion over time. Through their special meaning and their repetitive nature, rituals contribute significantly to the establishment and preservation of a family's collective sense of itself (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 413)

Not all rituals, however, are necessarily positive and some go through a period of revision and renegotiation before settling into a comfortable place. Family crisis or dissolution, even positive and anticipated change such as an adult child starting a family of her or his own can alter a family's traditions. In an examination of the impact of late-life divorce on family ritual keeping, Pett et al. (1992) found significant disruption. Keeping family rituals was found to be hindered by family members' feelings of sadness, anger, hurt, and loss after a parental divorce. Some family members found it too painful to continue family traditions; others attempted to do so but found the traditions significantly altered by the absence of not only the divorced parent but extended family members as well, and by the inclusion of "new" people such as a parent's new partner. This confusion led frequently to the creation of alternate ways of doing things which then developed into new family traditions. Some respondents reported that the opportunity to let go of some of the old traditions and create new ones was a positive experience signifying a new beginning. It has been suggested that a family's ability to adapt its rituals in times of chaos or crisis is crucial to its successful functioning (Wolin, Bennett, & Jacobs, as cited in Pett et al., 1992).

Family celebrations present opportunities to act out unresolved conflicts, to publicly exclude specific family members, or to create new, inclusive traditions which respond to the evolving nature of the family unit (Whiteside, 1988). As mentioned above, every family needs at some time to adapt its rituals and traditions to acknowledge the blending of families, as in marriage. Managed successfully, this can strengthen and consolidate the institution of the family, ensuring its continuity through time (Bennett, et al., 1988).

In a study of rituals in early remarriage, Whiteside (1988) found that even the rules of everyday family life needed to be altered, through a process of examination and negotiation, to fit the new family unit. Additionally, traditions may be adopted directly, adapted to fit the new family, or constructed anew; while this entire process may occur with ease, respondents indicated that it is frequently fraught with tension. Children, caught in the middle, find themselves moving between "two separately organised, minimally overlapping household organisations" (p. 282) which may be in competition for the children's time and emotions and which may have conflicting rituals. Children of unhappy or chaotic families may welcome the opportunity as young adults to alter or completely discard the rituals and identity of their family of origin in hopes of creating a future vastly different from their past (Bennett et al., 1988).

Many of a family's rituals and traditions centre around calendar celebrations such as Christmas, birthdays, Thanksgiving, and life cycle rituals such as marriage and birth. How these are organised, who is included or excluded, and indeed whether they are celebrated at all can give clues about a family's sense of identity. The emotional investment in our rituals can be great. Furthermore, they may entail much responsibility

and work; this is perhaps especially true of holiday festivities such as Christmas which brings with it "expectations and obligations, demands and wishes . . . and although Christmas is a festival of fun and mirth, it is also a festival that is taken in dead earnest" (Lofgren, 1996, p. 104). There is the necessity of shopping, baking, cleaning, wrapping, visiting, concert-going, etc; "preparations become demands, the things that must absolutely be done if the true Christmas atmosphere is to descend on the house on the 24th" (p. 106-107). This vision of the perfect Christmas becomes the vision of the perfect family, influenced increasingly by media portrayals of happy, organised, festive nuclear and extended families. What is frequently not shown is the complications and difficult choices present in separated and divorced families at holidays. With whom will the children spend Christmas Eve? Christmas Day? Will there be two, or more, Christmases, complete with turkey and gift exchanging? None of this is part of the dream of the perfect family (Lofgren, 1996).

Intergenerational contact. Another aspect of family identity closely related to both stories and rituals is intergenerational contact. Many of the stories that survive from generation to generation are told by the older members of the extended family, grandparents, for example. Celebrations provide an opportunity for the younger members to see their extended family and to learn their role in the family. In a study of the quality of the relationship between young-adult grandchildren and their grandparents, Sanders and Trygstad (1993) found that the large majority of the grandchildren indicated that their grandparents kept them informed of family heritage. According to di Leonardo (1987) contact across households, both inter- and intra-generational helps to ensure a satisfying

family life.

 <u>Material culture</u>. Material culture, the things people save, is included in the current study as an aspect of family identity. Many cherished items saved and handed down through the generations are in fact symbolic and help us to hold fast to a memory of family or an experience we have had within our family. Other artefacts connect us through the stories associated with them to people, places, and events of a more distant family history. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1993), such objects "give concrete evidence of one's place in a social network" (p. 23). For Tuan (1980), they "have the power to stabilise life" (p. 463) because of their enduring qualities, their permanence. Tuan shares with Csikszentmihalyi the view that material possessions are somehow crucial to our images of ourselves, forming a link between ourselves and a sense of immortality:

> Our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess . . . . We value genealogical trees, grandfather clocks, and cluttered ware of a local museum because they suggest that our identity far from being a transient and elusive thing, is fixed in extensive time and space . . . . Recognising that the past is slipping to oblivion, we wish to rescue what we can. In the process we not only reclaim the people and the culture of an earlier time but also enlarge and enrich our general conception of the world - and thereby, inevitably, though perhaps unintentionally, a sense of ourselves (p. 472).

Material items "stand for the ties that link a person to others" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993 p. 27) and serve as evocateurs helping us to recall events, people, and our place in the family (Zeitlin, et al., 1982). The examination of material items, especially in combination with oral history interviews, provides an opportunity to retrieve 'forgotten' information. Weigert and Hastings (1977) refer to the family as having a "special archival function as a repository of identity symbols which compose a biographical museum or even a hall of

fame for an individual's personal and social identities" (p. 1174). Often those cherished

objects that bind us with our family are not of great monetary value (Csikszentmihalyi,

1982); some are practical or utilitarian, others are purely sentimental or symbolic. All

represent a tangible connection to one's past. Examples of material culture, of items saved

and handed down through the generations, include quilts, recipes, dishes, locks of hair,

furnishings, baby bracelets, diaries, and perhaps most widely, photographs. What is saved

provides insight into the lives of families both through its designation as something of

significance to retain and through the stories which are frequently attached to the items.

The destruction of these items represents a significant loss for both the individual and the

family as "a whole period of our personal and collective life will vanish without a trace"

(Tuan, p. 470)

Photographs are one example of material culture and are frequently used to

document the traditions and rituals described above. In fact, Zeitlin et al. (1982) suggest

that the taking of photographs at celebrations has become a tradition in itself. Photographs

capture forever a single moment making it possible "to record the past at the moment of its

occurrence, to record the present at the moment of its transformation into the past" (p.6).

They then become a permanent part of the family record with their "promise of eternal

life" (Kildegaard, 1985, p. 73). Interestingly, however, this image is not necessarily

representative of a reality beyond the moment. In fact the reality is that most photographs

today are taken of special, happy times, of celebrations, and are not indicative of a family's

daily life (Tuan, 1980; Walker & Kimball Moulton, 1989). While photographs serve as

links with our past, over time they serve to augment and sometimes replace our memory of

events. Kildegaard refers to a photograph as a "synthetic memory". "[B]etween one

scene of the beach and another of a Christmas party - memory is blank" (Tuan, p. 469).

Thus, whether consciously or not, they allow the manipulation of reality, of our memory.

In essence, then, photographs, as consciously formed images, may be used, consciously or

unconsciously, to distort the truth. The popular perception of photographs as images of

reality makes this problem more difficult; we tend to believe what we are seeing forgetting

that the photographs are simply representations of a moment in time. The advance of

technology has meant the availability of cameras allows ordinary people to create images of

themselves and their world, to record not simply how they look but how they would like to

look, and what they want to show others (Mahan, 1991). This illusion or potential for

illusion in photographs is a topic of research in itself and makes the use of photographs for

historical research dubious; nonetheless, because they record what was considered of

importance, they are an important tool for researchers studying cultural and family values,

and customs, particularly festive occasions, such as weddings, birthdays, and holiday

gatherings (Kildegaard, 1985; Sinisalo, 1987). As with other items of material culture,

photographs are useful in combination with interviews; the information supplied by each

supplements, sometimes supporting, sometimes contradicting, the other. Greenhill (1981)

has examined the interconnections between one family's photograph album and that

family's stories concluding that looking at a family album is "more than a visual experience,

it is a multi media evocation of the family" (p. 3).

    Women's customs. What all of the above methods of reinforcing family identity

over and through time have in common is that they are generally viewed as women's work

(Pett et al., 1992; Stone, 1989; Weigert & Hastings, 1977; Zeitlin et al. 1982). Women become the "kinkeepers", the "archivists", and the "preservers of family lore", having the significant role of maintaining traditions and links with family, their own and their partners' (Sherman, 1990). Women send the birthday cards, buy the Christmas presents for both sides of the family, record the births and deaths, organise the photographs in family albums, and decide what items to save for future generations. Thus, any examination of material culture is, in large part, the study of what women considered significant to keep. Di Leonardo (1987) divides women's work into three categories: housework and childcare, paid work, and the work of kinship which she defines as:

> . . . the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household
> kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin;
> the organisation of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of
> quasi-kin relations; decisions to neglect or to intensify particular ties; the
> mental work of reflection about all these activities; and the creation and
> communication of altering images of family and kin (p. 442-443).

Often, the frequency, and indeed the occurrence of this work, the contact among households and between generations, and the family celebrations, depends on the presence of an adult woman in the family. Where there is no woman to do this work, either because of death or divorce, traditions frequently fall by the wayside. Where there is more than one woman able to fill this role, negotiation may see the responsibilities, especially those of holiday celebrations such as hosting and food-preparation shared or alternated, amongst the households (di Leonardo, 1987).

In couple interviews, Stone (1989) found that women frequently knew not only their own family history but knew more of their husbands' family stories than did the husbands, having learned them from their mothers-in-law. Another study found similarly

that in three of eight families interviewed, the husband could not remember a story about

his childhood or a family identity story until prompted by his wife (Sherman, 1990). The

findings in both of these studies echoed the work of di Leonardo (1987) who also found

women to have more accurate and extensive knowledge of their husband's families than

did the husbands themselves.

The Current Study

While family violence has been studied extensively and family identity to a lesser

degree, the relationship between the two and its effects on the family need further

examination. The current study, then, is at the intersection of these two fields of research,

and represents exploratory work grounded in the lives and experiences of the women

interviewed. There is no body of literature about how family violence affects the

intergenerational transmission of family identity. This study, then, draws on more general

research from those two fields, family violence and family identity, in search of context.

The initial focus of the research centred on five interview topics which developed out of

the literature. These were: material history or culture, i.e., the artefacts we save to hand

down to future generations such as quilts, jewellery, locks of hair, recipes, and

photographs; oral history and family stories; rituals and traditions; and intergenerational

contact. The fifth topic, introspection or self-analysis on the part of the interviewee, was

included as a means of ensuring the inclusion of the women's own voices and is tied to the

feminist framework which guided the research. The exploratory nature of the study

provided an opportunity to learn whether and how the topics were relevant to women in

abusive relationships. These topics evolved throughout the interview process, as will be

discussed in the methodology chapter of this paper.

The exploratory nature of the current study suggests that no specific theory of family identity or family violence is being tested. However, aspects of feminist theory fundamentally inform this work both in its analysis and methodology. Firstly, much feminist theory is rooted in women's oppression within the family. This thesis recognises the nuclear family as only one possible cultural construct among many and as having a patriarchal past. In particular, it explores women's participation in maintaining this model of the family. Secondly, women's experiences of the family are examined in the first person. Drawing on the feminist conviction that women be allowed to speak for themselves, this study explores family violence and family identity through the subjective experience of women.

Methodology

Participants

Data were collected through interviews with 10 women, all of whom had lived in

an abusive relationship in the past. Some of the women had lived in more than one

abusive relationship. None of the women defined herself as currently living in an abusive

relationship. Interviewees came from one source and were past clients, current staff, and

volunteers of a local transition house[2]. I had the support and co-operation of the transition

house's executive director for this project. All data came from face-to-face interviews; no

women's files or confidential shelter documents were accessed. All participation was

completely voluntary. Some women volunteered when they learned of the research

through the transition house; others were approached directly.

I did not use a specific definition of abuse to select participants, rather I interviewed

women who themselves named their experience as abuse. This was not limited to physical

abuse. To ensure minimal emotional risk for the women, I included as part of my selection

criteria that all of the women interviewed must have been out of the abusive relationship

for a minimum of six months. It was my intention that this time period would have

allowed their emotional wounds to have at least begun healing.

Interviews

Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours; all but one were audio-taped.

Women were given the option of where they would like to be interviewed. Most

interviews occurred in women's homes; two took place at the transition house.

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[2]To ensure confidentiality, the transition house will not be named in this paper.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions or topics were used to gather data. Relevant parts of the interviews were transcribed and the material was then organised thematically. This method of information gathering is popular in feminist research because it allows for ample discussion and exploration of topics and provides opportunity for clarification (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Edwards, 1993; Minister, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). Further, and of most significance to this research, this style of interview allowed me to learn about women's experiences and memories in their own voices.

Similar oral history style interviews have been used to record the stories of people less likely to be included in the written record (Reinharz, 1992). Traditionally, this has included women and disadvantaged or "powerless" groups and individuals, such as those of lower socioeconomic status. Oral history provides a forum for these voices. I would hesitate to call the women I interviewed "powerless"; after all, somehow they found the strength to survive and ultimately to leave the abuse (see discussion of this issue in the literature review section). Nonetheless, however they are labelled, women in abusive relationships do belong to a group whose voices for years were not heard. In a discussion of her own research, Buss (as cited in Reinharz, 1992) commented:

> On the whole, the women whose stories appear in this book are survivors, and they are often not the desperately poor. For each of these women who have somehow made it through all the barriers of class, racial, and sexual discrimination, there are those who did not survive. Those women's stories tend not to be told, because they are not very visible, because they are so vulnerable that publicity would be dangerous, or because thy have died or have been too "beaten down" to discuss their lives (p. 141).

Buss's experience was not inconsistent with my own. In fact, I made a conscious decision to interview women who had succeeded in leaving and remaining out of an abusive

relationship rather than women currently in abusive relationships. This I did for the women's safety, my own safety, and for ease of access, fully aware that this omitted the voices of women who still lived in abuse, some of the most oppressed. The data in the Results chapter would seem to indicate that the women I interviewed had a sense of self-awareness around the issue of violence in their lives.

Feminist Framework

As discussed above, both the research topic and the interview method chosen to gather data are indicative of the feminist framework guiding the study. Further, in keeping with that feminist framework, I encouraged participants to analyse and interpret their own experience (Reinharz, 1992). This serves to involve women in the process more than does simply "taking" their stories from them. There are at least two perspectives on this idea. In her review of oral history research, Reinharz found that some researchers deliberately and consciously refrained from any analysis of their own so as not to speak for or transform the data, believing instead that interviewees are quite capable of commenting on their own lives. An alternate perspective encourages researchers to use their academic knowledge to analyse what is being presented (Elizabeth Hampsten, as cited in Reinharz). In this research, I have attempted to combine the two perspectives, encouraging women to offer reflection and analysis of their own experience, as well as providing my own analysis. I have included women's introspection and analysis in their own words to a great extent, in an effort to have their voices heard. Realistically however, due to the bulk of data collected, it becomes necessary to be selective. Because of the vast wealth of information given to me by the women I interviewed, deciding what to include and what to omit

becomes a tremendous responsibility as one endeavours to give sufficient voice to each

woman's experience. Regardless of the amount of space the women's voices receive, as

the researcher, I undeniably have a hand in shaping the work, from choosing the topic and

the informants to ultimately determining which data are included and in what format. Thus,

a researcher's voice is evident regardless of whether she choses to analyse the text.

Ethical Concerns

In spite of the selection criteria discussed above, i.e., women must have been out of

the abusive relationship a minimum of six months, many of the topics likely to be raised

during the interviews were potentially emotional issues for many, if not all of the women.

As the researcher, I was aware of the sensitive nature of the topic. According to Lee and

Renzetti (1993), sensitive topics are those which involve "potential costs to those

participating in the research . . . beyond the incidental or merely onerous" (p.4) and include

research which "intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal

experience" (p.6). It is not at all uncommon for feminist researchers to find themselves

working with sensitive topics as uncovering the hidden or oppressed in women's lives is a

common theme in feminist work. Certainly, my research examines the private and

personal aspects of women's lives, asking about their families and their intimate

relationships.

In my initial contacts with women, I stressed the sensitive and potentially emotional

nature of the research topic. Further, I emphasised that all participation was completely

voluntary; this I reiterated when calling to confirm appointment times and at the outset of

each interview. In addition, each woman signed a consent form which I first read to her

and which highlighted the fact that she could withdraw her participation at any time.

Additionally, because I knew all of the participants through my work at a local transition

house, I was aware that some might feel obligated to participate, or in the case of ex-

clients, might feel that their participation was tied to the quality of service they could expect

should they need to access the transition house in the future. Therefore, I attempted to

address these issues with each woman during our initial contact and stress that this work

was separate from my job at the transition house.

While some interviewees may be more comfortable opening up to a researcher who

is a stranger to them (Reinharz, 1992), I found the opposite to be true. Every woman I

approached agreed to be interviewed. Women welcomed me without hesitation into their

homes and into their lives and their memories precisely because they did know me, albeit

not well, and knew of my background working in the field of violence against women.

Further, this allowed me, as it has other researchers to have "shorter, more focussed

interviews than researchers in unfamiliar terrain" (Segura, as cited in Reinharz, 1992, p.

26). For me, the relationship of trust - the groundwork - was already established. Indeed,

I do not believe that I could have obtained the same depth of information from strangers.

Reinharz found that for some researchers the existence of such a relationship encouraged

interviewees to raise additional topics beyond those the researcher presented. This was

also my experience and it ultimately had a major impact on the direction of this study. The

previously existing relationship of trust between the women interviewed and myself

allowed them to feel safe participating, but also enabled them to feel comfortable taking the

lead in the interview at times. An obvious benefit of this was that it enabled me to learn

what was of significance to the women; in this way new themes emerged which became key pieces of the study. These themes will be discussed in the Results, below. Thus, the experience of trust works both ways; an interviewer also trusts participants to move the interview in a significant direction. This is not a tremendous leap of faith on the part of a researcher since the interviewee is, after all, the expert of her own experience. What initially might appear to be simply a digression might, as in the case of the current study, generate valuable and previously unexplored data.

Results

Demographics

Demographic information was gathered which related to the two existing areas of study. Women were asked to identify the nature of the abuse experienced in the relationship and the relationship's duration to place the discussion within the context of family violence. In order to facilitate the discussion of family identity, they were further asked to describe their family unit, i.e., marital status, number and ages of children, custody arrangements. Discussion pertaining to intergenerational transmission of family identity was especially pertinent because all of the women interviewed had children. Questions such as age, length of time in relationship, and socioeconomic status were included to demonstrate a range across these variables. A conscious attempt was made to gather no superfluous demographic information simply for the sake of creating statistics. Therefore, a minimal amount of information was requested.

As discussed above, all of the 10 interviewees self-identified as having lived in an abusive relationship. All were psychologically abused by their ex-partners; 8 also identified some level of physical abuse.[3] Of the women interviewed, 1 was in her twenties at the time of the interviews, 4 were in their thirties, 3 in their forties, 1 in her fifties, and 1 in her sixties. The abusive relationships they discussed began when they were from 18 to 25

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[3]One woman explained that while the abuse was physical and psychological during the relationship, now that they are separated it is still psychological but no longer physical. Others expressed similar sentiments about the abuse, especially control aspects, continuing beyond the relationships in the form of stalking, harassing phone calls, repeatedly driving by the women's home, sending inappropriate messages through the children, etc.

years of age, and ended when they were 21 to 57[4]. The relationships had a duration of from 2 to 34 years, with 7 of the women living in abusive relationships for less than 10 years and the remaining three women in relationships of 20 or more years. Two of the 10 women talked about two abusive relationships each. Of the 12 relationships discussed by the interviewees, 7 were marriages, 4 were common-law, and 1 was a dating relationship. At the time of the interviews, the women had been out of the abusive relationships anywhere from 9 months to 21 years.

All of the women had at least one child. Six women had 1 child each[5]; 3 had 2 children, and 1 had 3 children; 3 of the 4 women with adult children also had grandchildren. All but one of the children was born into the abusive household - and that one child was born prior to and therefore lived in the abusive relationship. Two children were infants (less than 1 year of age) when their mothers left the relationships; 7 children were 5 or under; 2 were between 5 and 10 years; 2 were late teens / young adults[6], and the remaining 2 were adults with children of their own when their parents' abusive relationship ended.

For the 3 women whose children were 17 or older at the time of separation, custody and access arrangements were not an issue. For one woman who had 2 children,

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[4]This refers to when the married or common-law relationship ceased; several of the women expressed that the abuse continued, especially the psychological abuse, albeit in a different form, once the partners were no longer co-habiting. Examples were stalking or harassing phone calls.

[5]Unsolicited, three of these women expressed regret at not feeling safe to have more children because of the volatility and instability of their relationships.

[6]Two women made the decision to remain until their child had reached an age of independence. One of these women had been told by her partner she would not see her child again should she leave.

custody was divided with her ex-partner with each parent having custody of 1 child and visitation with the other. The remaining 6 women[7] all had full custody of their children, and the children spend the bulk, or all of their time with their mothers. The 7 corresponding fathers all had or have had access. For one of these men, the Family Court had ordered that his visits with his child be supervised. While most of these men apparently fought vigorously through the Court process in order to gain access to their children, none were consistently exercising their right to access at the time of this study.

Socioeconomic status of interviewees covered a fairly broad range. Two of the women had completed some highschool; 2 had graduated from high school or completed GEDs; 2 had at least some college or trade level education; and 4 had at least some university education.[8] The 12 male ex-partners covered a similar range: 4 had some highschool; 3 had graduated high school; 3 had college or trade; and 2 had some university. In 6 of the 12 relationships discussed, the women had the higher level of formal education; in 4 relationships, educational attainment was the same for the partners; and in 2, the man had the higher level. Four of the women stated that their current family incomes were higher than when living with their ex-partner; 4 were lower; and 2 were the same. Table 1 presents these figures broken into income while cohabiting with the abusive partner (Previous) and income at the time of the interview (Current). Of the 6 women who stated that their current family incomes were greater than or the same as when living with their ex-partner, 4 had incomes which decreased immediately following the separation or

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[7]One of these women had one child by each of two fathers, therefore there were 6 women and 7 men.

[8]Three of these women returned to or began university after their relationship ended.

divorce, then rose again. Several women volunteered that they have more available income now because they are no longer supporting their ex-partners some of whom did not work or worked only occasionally or seasonally.

Table 1

Incomes While Involved in Abusive Relationships and Subsequently

Income Range	Previous	Current
under 10,000	3	1
10,000-20,000	3	5
20,000-30,000	2	0
30,000-40,000	1	3
40,000-50,000	2	1

Note. One of the 10 women interviewed lived in two abusive cohabiting relationships, therefore the numbers in the Previous column total 11.

The Emergence of Themes

As mentioned in the introduction, this work is exploratory. The five original topics that organized the semi-structured interview format emerged from the literature on material culture and the transmission of family identity. Their role was to act as broad categories in which to gather facts and concepts as they emerged from discussion with the interviewees. From the interviews, six themes emerged. The emergence of these themes was reflective of the grounded nature of this research and, while there is overlap, they do not follow closely the five topics initially identified.

The six themes became the focus of attention and analysis because they were repeatedly addressed by different women, although not all women discussed all themes. As themes began to emerge, the interviews changed slightly in an attempt to take into account these new directions. The central themes to be discussed below are: myth and reality of the happy family, the tradition of abuse, silences, isolation, preservation of material culture, and creation and maintenance of a historical record.

Myth and Reality of the Happy Family

An important outcome from interviewing women for this study was that for many of them the experience of growing up in their families of origin was generally not a positive one. This reality came to light very quickly in the interviews and will be discussed further in the section, The Tradition of Abuse. Repeatedly women spoke of abusive and disconnected families. Alcoholism was mentioned often, as was undiagnosed mental illness. Criminal activity was not far behind in frequency. Not one woman reported her own or her ex-partner's families of origin or extended families to be without at least one of these problems. Alcoholism seemed especially prevalent and many of the interviewees spoke of more than one alcoholic in their own and their ex-partners' extended families.

Again and again, women used negative language when speaking of family members. From one woman, "My [maternal] grandmother was a nasty old woman; my mother took after her . . . . My mother's family was cold . . . . She had two alcoholic brothers . . . . My brother is a male chauvinist pig". The majority of the other women used similar, often stronger language in discussing their families of origin. Of her paternal grandfather, one woman remarked, "he was very abusive, he was domineering, he was a

true patriarch and he ruled with an iron fist". From another woman whose grandmother, mother, and self were all abused in their adult relationships:

> My father was a nightmare of a person to live with and my mother put up
> with it. I think he was mentally ill and he was never diagnosed; he'd get
> very depressed and sort of paranoid, absolutely sure she was having an
> affair with just about everybody in the world.

One major outcome of living in these families for most of the women interviewed was that for most of the women interviewed it was not possible to rely on their families for support either on a day-to-day basis, or in times of crisis. This is especially important because support is exactly what most of the women would have liked when leaving or preparing to leave their ex-partners. While one woman reported her family to be very supportive of her when she left her abusive relationship, the majority found themselves quite literally on their own. One woman explained that her mother believed she was making up the stories of abuse and continually told her to go back to her husband. She did not. A number of years later when he physically assaulted a new girlfriend and found himself facing criminal charges, the interviewee's mother finally believed she had been telling the truth all along. Another woman summed it up this way, "The reality of family is that they are not always there when you need them." Instead, this woman turned to friends and to professionals for support.

According to the women interviewed, the families of their ex-partners did not fit the ideal or perfect family mould either. One woman, in describing her ex-partner's father painted an interesting picture of a man who had lost the family home in a poker game and who encouraged criminal activity by his children. "As for [ex-partner], his father would pat him on the back and say 'good job' when he stole something." This woman's ex-

partner came from a large family and according to her, most of his siblings were "abusive, in trouble with the law, drinking, and doing drugs . . . . If we had everyone over, I'd carry my purse from room to room and I'd worry about things getting broken or stolen, and usually a fight would break out." Another woman described her ex-partner's family this way: "his father drank and I think he drank quite a bit but he was very, he was funny . . . . When he wasn't drinking he was extremely cold because he wouldn't speak to anybody". Of her ex-partner's mother, she said "she's like a smiling steam roller . . . . She ruled the roost and she still does; he [ex-partner] is afraid of her". The same interviewee described her ex-partner's uncle as "very abusive" to his wife. Of his aunt, she said, she "was an alcoholic and died an alcoholic". Descriptions of this nature were the norm in the interviews.

The family the woman and man formed together was obviously one with problems, otherwise they would not have been included in the current study. Unfortunately, children become the casualties in such families. Sometimes they are not welcomed or wanted, as was the experience for one woman who said, "When I was pregnant, [partner] decided it was an inconvenience for him and went around telling everyone it wasn't his." From another woman, "I wish when the kids were small that they had a decent father. He never took them to a beach, picnic, or fairs, or anything"; and from the same woman, "He made it a scary place to live . . . . I feel bad for what they [children] saw; I know they saw things they shouldn't have". There were also stories of children being deserted in the immediate and extended families of both the interviewees and their ex-partners. "The first time my dad met his mother, he was 13 and he hitch-hiked to Halifax and knocked on her

apartment door and said: 'I'm your son'."

Some of the women talked about the necessity of protecting their children from family members, including the children's fathers. Others discussed how the family dynamics affected their children. One woman spoke of her baby crying whenever the woman's then-partner and the woman's mother were in the room together because the child was sensitive to the animosity between the two. This, then, is the experience of the children who quickly learn the reality of life in their immediate and extended families. They pick up on negative emotions, hear arguments, learn who to avoid, and know who will be drunk at family gatherings.

One woman said of her child, he "has had to deal with so much turmoil". This child's father rarely called or visited him anymore and had taken back toys that he had bought for him in order to give them to a second child by a different woman. Yet another woman commenting on the maturity of her young child said, "She knows all about drug use, hot knives and things like that . . . . She is a much more worldly girl [because of the parents' relationship and subsequent separation]; she understands abuse, homelessness". A third woman speaking of her adult daughter's view of her father explained: "[She] doesn't expect anything of him that he can't provide like being nice or kind or a good father or a good grandfather or anything."

The consequences of life in abusive families, then, can be long lasting and affect children into adulthood, even into future generations. The women interviewed for this study and the literature both state clearly that children do not outgrow the effects of such upbringing; instead it forms one of the primary factors in the intergenerational transmission

of abuse as will be discussed further in the following section.

Most of the women did not enter their relationships expecting the abusive situation they ultimately found themselves in. Instead, they believed the myth about happiness ever after. "I always expected [ex-partner] to be nice." Despite story after story of abuse from their family of origin experience, most of the women interviewed looked to their relationships to be different, better, special, not to be a copy of the homes they had been reared in. This expectation points to the power of the myth of the happy family. Some women described going to considerable lengths to perpetuate this myth.

There are indicators that some women interviewed may have been naive about the dynamics of abuse and that this may have contributed to their being surprised by their ex-partners' abusive nature. One woman said her parents were not abusive: "I only ever saw my dad once push my mother." Another woman, commented that she "never expected to have that kind of life" because her father was not abusive; instead her "mother was the one who hit".

The tendency to expect everything to be rosy despite their experience to the contrary is a learned behaviour which was modelled in the home. One woman explained that her parents "liked to make it look like a perfect world" despite their own past and current experiences of abuse. One woman perhaps best summed up this when she said of her own parents (her father was "quite abusive" to her mother): "they had a really strong desire to make family despite their difficulties and their ineptitude at it". Another woman expressed that she wished her mother and grandmother had talked about their abusive relationships and dealt with their issues because she grew up with unrealistic ideals.

For the women, the net result of the tension between myth and reality was considerable ambivalence towards their own family of origin and to a lesser extent, their ex-partners. Their children apparently experienced the same emotional contradictions, especially where their fathers were concerned; after all, despite their anger at him for his lack of involvement in their lives, he was still their father. The children believed that their fathers who neither visited nor called them for months at a time loved them dearly. They made excuses for the fathers who did not acknowledge their birthdays or Christmas, and kept what they had that reminded them of their fathers - photographs, gifts, fishing rods - in places of honour. At the same time, women expressed the sentiment that increasingly their children were forgetting paternal relatives but they themselves were sometimes ambivalent about the significance of this. "He [child's father] doesn't visit his parents much anymore; he used to go weekly; so [child] never sees them. Of course, this is probably good overall. [His] father drinks heavily". One woman, through a comment about her own experience, alluded to the origins of some of the ambivalence experienced by the children of abusive homes:

> I believe that most of my issues regarding self-esteem and my inadequacies
> in that regard stem from my mother's criticism and must have begun before
> I was born. I couldn't do anything right and yet I was wonderful on the
> other side you know it was both messages coming across at once which is
> very confusing.

It is important to note that women also spoke of positive aspects of their families. One woman who found her family supportive when she was starting over on her own remarked, "I'm thankful that my family is such a good and strong family like they are because I don't think I would have come through as well as I did if it wasn't for it 'cause

they stuck by me through it all". This represents the ideal that the other women had

expected. From another woman came this comment about her family's strength:

> Our family is all about you know when anyone is in need of anything we're
> all there to help whether it's financial or support or if someone's sick type
> thing if someone needed this if they had it they'd give it . . . . It's the time
> the love the support you know to still be together after a dysfunctional
> upbringing.

Another woman spoke of the generosity of her ex-partner's family of origin saying that

they would buy things her child needed because they were aware of her own limited

budget, this in spite, or perhaps because of the fact that the child's father rarely visited,

called, or contributed financially to his son. Other women spoke of fond memories of

family members, especially grandparents:

> Mum, Dad, and my brother and I would all go to visit my grandmother for
> supper, baked beans and hash. Then my grandmother, me, and my brother
> would all go for a walk about one mile to the beach and pick up beer and
> pop bottles and keep them for money. We'd go in a side road to a waterfall
> and go fishing, then we'd go back and play Parcheesi. I want to find the
> waterfall and take [child].

The "Tradition" of Abuse

When I asked women about the existence of traditions in their families, one thing

that emerged, beginning with the first woman interviewed, was the "tradition" of abuse in

the family of origin. While this was not necessarily an anticipated answer, it is not

inconsistent with the literature on family violence as discussed above and represents the

reality of many women's lives. While the majority of the literature discusses the effects on

abusers of having been reared in abusive homes, the effect on women of having been

abused or of witnessing abuse in their homes as children is less well documented.

In the current study, interviewees spoke about abuse experienced by generations of women in their families. Younger women spoke about the abuse of their mothers and grandmothers by their fathers and grandfathers; women with adult children spoke of the abusive relationships of their mothers and of their daughters. "She [interviewee's mother] was one of the ones who said well I'll stay in the relationship, what else could I do, what would I do, and so she stayed." This interviewee went on to explain the transformation of her mother after her (interviewee's) father's death:

> She blossomed after he died and she was probably in her late seventies and she was like a new woman completely all her. She'd laugh and she'd tell stories and you know she had some cheeky sense of humour that was really buried for all those years. She could barely speak her mind because he would pick on that and you know find some problem so she was housebound, isolated . . . . If she developed any friendship with women it would very definitely be controlled, limited.

Another woman who described her mother's and grandmother's relationships as abusive suggested that, after much introspection, she believed this family background meant her own abusive relationship was "inevitable":

> My mother . . . sees me as being different from her and that . . . my mistakes are different from what hers were and she had different reasons for hers and so she doesn't recognise the pattern . . . and yet now that I see sort of where I've come from and how I grew up and what their [mother's and grandmother's] relationships were like I can see the abuse and the pattern and I see where I've fallen right into the same sort of things that they did but yet she [interviewee's mother] doesn't recognise that as being the same.

This tradition of violence existed not only in the women's families of origin but also those of their ex-partners. It permeated every aspect of the family; their relationships with one another and with outsiders, their rituals, their family stories, and their gatherings and celebrations. One woman painted this picture of Sunday dinner at her ex-in-laws:

> His [ex-partner's] father was extremely abusive . . . . Sunday dinner was
> the thing I guess and it was always very stressful you know there was
> always a, [ex-partner's father] always had at least one temper tantrum while
> we were there; he was very volatile and acted like a child and that kind of
> thing. That was the standard.

Another woman whose ex-partner rarely visited his child explained that he was "following the pattern" as his own mother had not seen him either as a child.

While it needs to be noted that certainly not all women in the interviewees' extended families were in abusive relationships, nor were all men in their families abusive, this was a recurring theme and one that had a tremendous effect on the family as a whole. From the women's own words, it is clear that this is one tradition which comes with a hefty price tag. Of her own relationship, one woman remarked: "I'm angry at staying in a bad relationship for so many years and I was surprised at how long it took after I made the break to feel good again." The same woman said she felt as though she had "lost years and years" of her life. Another woman commented, "If I was to meet me before I married [ex-partner] and now, I wouldn't know who I was; it took a lot away from me . . . self-confidence . . . when I finished with [ex-partner] I had none". From another woman:

> It's been a struggle but I think that I've gotten back most of my self-esteem,
> most of my dignity, and I'm not just talking about my two partners, I'm
> talking about what my father did to me day in and day out because he was
> extremely verbally abusive you know every day that I was a youth or teen
> he would say you'll never amount to anything, that kind of thing. You'll
> never be nothing but a, a washer woman and those words stay with me
> more than anything my partners could have said to me 'cause often when
> I'm doing housework, cleaning up the mess, I think oh my God he's right.

Another woman summed up the effects for her of growing up in an abusive home in the following way:

> I think that I would have been a much more out in the world kind of person
> with my skills and talents than I have been had I not been raised in an
> abusive environment, had I not sought out what I knew unconsciously,
> perpetuated it and spent most of my life having the single most important
> thing in my life be my relationship.

From the same woman, "what I'm working on is learning to re-pattern myself and my relationship dynamic in my new relationship . . . to practise what I've learned".

In addition to the replication of abuse, the intergenerational transmission of abuse can have other unforeseen and long-term consequences. One woman explained that she was not surprised to find herself as a single parent; both her mother and grandmother had been single mothers after their abusive relationships ended and she had received the message that it was something a woman goes through to become a stronger person, a rite of passage, so to speak. For another woman, the opposite was true; she could not imagine herself as a single parent. Having seen no positive role models of single mothers and feeling anything was better than raising her children alone, she stayed in an abusive relationship longer than she might have otherwise.

Some of the factors that may underlie the intergenerational transmission of abuse have been illustrated above. Of paramount importance to the women interviewed, all of whom had children, was the necessity of breaking this cycle, of ending the tradition of abuse. The mothers of young children spoke of their hopes and attempts to ensure that their sons are not abusive and their daughters are not abused in their teenage and adult relationships. Their comments echoed one another's: "I hope I can break the pattern by keeping her away from abuse, work on her self-esteem and tell her she's special." "The whole reason I left [ex-partner] was so that my kids wouldn't grow up that way." "I hope

by bringing him up the way I am that will break the pattern." From a woman whose

mother, daughter, and herself were all in abusive relationships:

> I stayed in the relationship for many, many years too long knowing that it
> was never going to get better and perhaps that's why my daughter just
> wouldn't put up with it for a very long time. Maybe she realised that
> staying for a long time was not good . . . . It's something else I feel guilty
> about; I think that my daughter has inherited this bad choice of men . . . .
> All I wanted for her was for her not to go through anything that I'd gone
> through.

And finally, one woman summed it up this way, "if you don't stop it, you pass it on".

Women's strategies to end the pattern of violence in their families naturally

included their male children, as well as females, but some women were already noticing

negative effects of the abuse their own children had witnessed or experienced growing up:

> I tried to work on equality in the family . . . but you can't ensure it. My son
> at times has been abusive . . . and I'm happy to say that I don't think that
> he's abusing his girlfriend because I keep close tabs on that.

From another woman with similar concerns about her son:

> I think that the most obvious thing that being in the [abusive] relationships
> has meant for [son] and he's expressed this, you know - 'what I know of
> men is that they're not to be trusted' - which impacts on his own self
> identity as a male.

A third woman discussed her adult children who have chosen to distance themselves to one

extent or another from their parents and from one another. Of her son she said, "we were

extremely close when he [son] was growing up . . . [now] it's just like two strangers

talking". Seemingly her son "has made a whole fantasy life and he doesn't want any of

us to come and disturb it". Her daughter although she attempted not to be drawn into her

parents' separation had told her father, "don't make me choose because you know who I'll

choose". The consequences of abuse, then, are far-reaching and long lasting. The pattern

needs to be broken and the women interviewed expressed a commitment to that for their children's sakes, as well as their own. At the same time, their experiences would seem to indicate that this is a persistent tradition, the virulence of which was shown to be already evident in families with adult and adolescent children.

Silences

The existence of gaps in the family record - silences - was a theme which surfaced regularly in the interviews. It was not infrequent for the women to voice that there was a person or persons, or an entire branch of their own or their ex-partner's family that they knew little or nothing about. When probed, most women expressed that they felt the information gaps, whether in their own or their ex-partner's families, represented deliberate omissions, not merely oversights. Women repeatedly, without prompting, told of histories of alcoholism, violence, mental illness, premature deaths, divorce, crime, children being deserted and extramarital affairs, in their own and their ex-partners' families of origin and extended families. Sometimes women speculated about the things that were not being said. In other instances, there was no doubt as to why someone was not discussed. "My mother's brother . . . went to jail for a while [for] molesting [a young boy] . . . so that was hush hush." Another woman told of being sworn to secrecy by her mother at age 11 when her mother informed her that her [interviewee's] father was having an affair, apparently, one of many.

Several women spoke of learning about relatives they had not known existed. Commented one woman:

> My father, there were so many relatives he didn't get along with. It was
> only when my father died I found out he had a particular brother who lived

not too far away . . . [recently] a first cousin of my father's died . . . . I had never heard of her, nor had my sister, nor had my brothers, another branch of the family that we didn't know about . . . . It wasn't a tightly knit family . . . and that's the sad thing about this woman who just died . . . . She lived in the same town as us; she lived probably a twenty minute walk away . . . . We don't know what she did; we don't know what kind of occupation she had.

From another:

There are lots of relatives down there that he [father] would know that we don't know and I don't care if I ever get to know them to tell you the truth . . . probably because I wasn't really brought up with that the need to bond . . . dad's got a sister . . . he hasn't seen in 30, 40 years . . .something happened I don't know what it was and they lost contact.

The same gaps in the family record existed in the families of the women's ex-partners as existed in their own.

His [ex-partner's] family history was a history of family violence so there wasn't a lot of information passed on . . . so I found that it was really hard to know much about any of them; some family members didn't get along with others; it seemed to me that most of them didn't want to talk about their family; they just wanted to pretend that none of them existed . . . once I became involved with them and got to know the family . . . you got to know the tension and all the things you don't talk about.

One woman who knew little about her ex-partner's family surmised there was something about his father that no one in the family wanted her to know. "You [speaking about her ex-partner] don't just out of the blue become emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive; something has to happen to you." One woman pointed to an interesting imbalance in the oral history of her ex-partner's family:

It's very patriarchal; they have a good recollection of the male side of the family . . . . his step-grandmother they knew little about her . . . . She wasn't important; she was just there . . . . She wasn't significant at all.

Still other silences were perpetuated by the women themselves who talked about not wanting others, especially their parents, to know they were living in abusive relationships, whether out of embarrassment, a desire to handle it on their own, or fear. "My first marriage was bad but my [parents] wouldn't have known it from me until they came to visit." From another woman:

> [when he learned of the abuse], dad was just I think angry at the way [ex-partner] was treating me . . . dad was gonna run up and break his neck . . . but I just kept saying mum it'll just make it worse for me.

One woman explained she was "offended" when her father offered to pay her fare to leave the relationship and return home:

> I thought he had no right to interfere. I figured it was troubles that would sort themselves out, that I could manage it, that it would get better . . . . I said no thanks but they [parents] meant very well but I also felt I didn't have the right to take a child away from her father . . . . He wasn't abusive to her. Oh, [in retrospect] I think it would have been healthier to have got away with her, you know, it wouldn't have been good for me to go back to live with my parents. I couldn't stand my father to start with; that's why I wanted to get away you know so going back to live with him would have been a disaster I think . . . . That wasn't the answer for me.

Interestingly, a woman speaking not of herself but of her mother voiced similar sentiments. Also living in an abusive relationship, the interviewee's mother did not want others, especially her own mother who had cautioned her against her choice of husband because she "could see that he was going to be a problem", to know about her predicament. But her attempt at secrecy was ill-informed:

> Then, of course, all the years that my mother was married to my father she didn't dare tell her mother what was going on but my grandmother knew; you had to be a fool not to see it.

While some silences were intergenerational and some were self-imposed (both are

aspects of the tradition of abuse), others were actively maintained by abusive partners.

Women spoke repeatedly of being silenced; about the process of learning what things were

acceptable to discuss in front of others. One woman explained how she was always

"getting in trouble" for saying things in front of her then-partner's family that he did not

want said:

> I used to go home and they must have thought I was a lunatic because we'd
> go in and we'd be gabbing and everything else and he'd say '[woman's
> name], honey, come here, come here I need you for a minute' and they all
> thought he was calling me in to give me a hug or something and he'd say,
> 'Jesus Christ what'd you say that for' . . . and I'd be like, 'God, you didn't
> tell me I wasn't supposed to say it' and then I would go out and I'd be like
> silent from one minute to the next and they could never figure it out.

Others spoke of "walking on eggshells" and of the need to "watch what you said" at family

gatherings for fear of saying something that might upset someone since people frequently

did not get along and many topics were off limits.

For some of the women, uncovering whatever information they could about their

own and their ex-partners' families became a priority with the birth of their children

because of their desire to pass on a historical record. Given that many ex-partners were

defensive and controlling of information about their families, this was a difficult task. One

woman reported that much of the information she eventually learned about her partner's

family came to her from other sources, including his siblings, to whom she sometimes

snuck information and photographs for forwarding to her child's paternal grandparents.

Another woman, trying to unravel a history of her ex-partner's family for her child, said

"everything has come from his [ex-partner's] grandmother"; her ex-partner had rarely

spoken of his family.

For other women, breaking family silences was an important factor in ending the intergenerational tradition of abuse in their families:

> I went into relationships that just fit right in that pattern so I think what that's changed for me is that now I, now it's forced me to look at my family, to look at the history of our family. I'm interested now in knowing more about my family where a lot of that wasn't talked about; a lot of people in my family weren't talked about and I never understood why . . . . I get more answers now than I ever did . . . I guess because, maybe because I've been through these struggles that they now think it's okay to talk to me about, about the bad things. They figure I'm old enough now that it's okay to tell me . . . . It comes out in little bits and I'm piecing it together myself because one person will tell me a little thing and another person will tell me a little something else and then it's like oh, okay, and it makes sense . . . But I think for me because I want to break that cycle for [child]. I'm exploring more and more about my family and about why we went thorough those sort of relationships and what made me become involved with those kind of people and that's, I think that's why I want so much to preserve things for [child] so when she's older she has a sense of history and even though some, you know, some of it may be a little vague because I don't have all the history at least I can build from it for her . . . and some of it may be negative I think it's important to know the negative too . . . . I don't think we can learn unless we know the negative.

Isolation

The theme of isolation appeared throughout the interviews in a myriad of ways. There was the forced isolation from family of origin imposed on women by abusive partners, isolation by choice from abusive family members, children isolated from fathers and fathers' families, and isolation from family caused in large part by poverty and circumstance, including geographical isolation. According to the research on abuse as discussed in the literature review, isolation from family and friends is a form of psychological abuse. The experiences of the women I interviewed were consistent with the literature. From one woman, "When you're in a relationship like that, well first of all they [abusive partners] alienate you more or less from your family and friends. You don't have

a lot of people around". From another woman:

> [Ex-partner] didn't like my family period; he didn't like any member of my
> family because basically he, as an abusive person, didn't like sharing me
> with others and thought his family should be more important.

From a third woman:

> Socially it was so difficult . . . because the man I was married to was an
> alcoholic. He was unreliable. I just didn't want to be seen in public with
> him and I don't think people invited us because, because he was so sort of
> unsociable.

The other interviewees echoed these sentiments: "He didn't like the fact that my family

and I were that close. I was close to my family and spent time with them." "He was

happier if I didn't have a lot of contact with my family." "He didn't want me talking to my

family on the phone." About visiting her grandmother, one woman said, "I had to ask him,

'can I go?' like a child would ask a parent, 'can I go here and do this?'". One woman's

parents and her ex-partner had a mutual dislike for one another. He did not want her to

have a relationship with them and she found it became easier not to call them or tell them

things. She became estranged from her own family but he encouraged her to have contact

with his. Another woman speaking about visiting her family, commented "I was on a tight

leash, he'd say 'be home at this time' and if I wasn't home . . . I'd get the third degree".

And finally, "My mother said she felt like she had to make an appointment to come over. I

used to tell her to call first. That was because of him and the drugs."

This isolation imposed on the women by their abusive partners meant many missed

family gatherings and celebrations which the women spoke of with regret. One woman

commented, "I've missed a lot of weddings because at the time I was with him my self

esteem was low, and I couldn't go, right. He wouldn't let me go basically . . . or he'd

knock me down so low then say I could go but he knew I wouldn't; so I missed a lot".

Another woman told about being forbidden by her abusive partner to attend a baby shower

being held by family and friends in her honour. The shower went ahead without her. And

from another woman, "We [family of origin] have a gathering once a year; people from the

States come down but my kids are always away . . . . We had a reunion there but my kids

were at their dad's [for court-ordered visitation]. . . so they don't really know my

[extended] family".

Other factors come into play to keep women isolated, a key one being

socioeconomic status, or more bluntly, poverty. One woman spoke of not having a car to

visit her mother who lived thirty minutes away, and outside any existing bus route. By far

the majority of the women interviewed had little access to extra money when still living in

an abusive relationship, whether this was because the family had little money or because

their partners did not permit them access to it. One woman who lived a distance from her

family and rarely saw them commented, "We didn't have the money and if [ex-partner]

decided that I wasn't going home then I wasn't going home and that would be it because it

would have to come out of his pay cheque." From another woman, "There was money,

but he drank it." Poverty can be very isolating.

Over and over again, women spoke about another form of isolation, that of their

children from the children's fathers and fathers's families. Most, if not all, of the fathers in

question had court approved access of their children; for some this represented a lengthy

and not particularly pleasant Family Court experience. Nonetheless, many of these fathers

chose not to exercise this access consistently, if at all. This usually meant the children not

only did not see their fathers; they also had little or no opportunity to see relatives on their fathers' side since it was generally the responsibility of the fathers to facilitate this.

One woman told that her child had mementos on display in her bedroom to remind her of her father's family, although she rarely saw any of them anymore, "She has forgotten most of them [relatives on her father's side] . . . and I don't have much contact with them anymore, and she doesn't remember." The child's father rarely sees her. Another woman's ex-partner continued to take her back to court because he was unsatisfied with existing access arrangements, yet at the time of the interview, he had not seen his young child in almost one year, nor had he acknowledged Christmas or any other holiday during that period in spite of an existing court order granting him "regular and frequent" access. The mother speculated that the frequent visits to court were more about harassing her than seeing the child, and expressed concern that her daughter could come to imagine the absent father as the ideal dad and resent her for what the child saw as the mother's role in keeping the father away. Thinking it better the child know the reality, she had tried to encourage contact. Another mother explained that her son was very angry because his father had not called or seen him in more than three months. Again, regular access had been spelled out in a court order after the child's father had repeatedly taken her back to court for more access. Other women also spoke of their children lashing out at them when the fathers did not show up for pre-arranged visitation. One woman echoed others when she said her son's behaviour changed depending on whether he was having regular visits with his father. Another woman told of her child eagerly planning and purchasing gifts for her father for Christmas and speculating what he would give to her.

Despite court orders granting him visitation with his child, Christmas came and went with no contact from him. At the time of the interview, six months after Christmas, the gifts sat in a closet waiting for him to reinitiate visits.

A woman whose children spent a significant amount of their time with their father discussed her own sense of missed experiences, "Your kids are only five once and they're only six once and they're only babies once and you can't reinvent those years and my son was with his dad for all those years and I missed his first day of school you know".

Children can not comprehend all of what is going on. They may lose contact with half of their extended family; usually this is their father and his relatives. Where children have little or no contact with a family member because of distance or animosity, there is "no common shared experience of growing up with this person in their lives" which is how one woman described the lack of connection her children feel for their uncle, her only sibling. Memories are not created and no pictures can be taken to preserve a record that never existed. As will be discussed in the subsequent sections, women have put much energy into gathering and creating what they could, including photo albums dedicated to their children and their children's paternal relatives, in order that there be some link for the children with that half of their heritage.

Isolation, as well was sometimes voluntary. Some women chose not to see certain members of their own families, or let their children be around them, because there had been nothing positive about the relationships, which were frequently abusive. (For a more detailed discussion of this, see the section Myth and Reality of the Happy Family.) Family gatherings, if they happened at all, were frequently unpleasant and were "something that

you wanted to avoid." Clearly, there was a degree of ambivalence about continuing contact with certain relatives.

For some families, however, contact continued and lines of communication remained, if not open, at least in existence. Some children visited regularly with relatives on their father's side, sometimes in spite of the fact they rarely if ever saw their fathers anymore. This was often facilitated by the mothers, although in many cases the mothers' contact with the ex-in-laws was limited. One woman said her child visited his paternal grandparents regularly; "he gets along with everyone in the family on both sides . . . . He looks forward to seeing his grandparents and helps his grandfather out with his tools and stuff". Another woman explained that although her son's father no longer sees him, they have a positive connection to that side of the family through her son's great grandmother: "She is actively, physically in his life. She couldn't go a day without at least talking to him and she has to see him at least once or twice a week".

Preservation of Material Culture

Prior to beginning this study, I had heard much anecdotal evidence through my work in a transition house from women telling of the loss of tangible parts of their family record as a direct consequence of their abusive relationship. Certainly, relationship dissolution and the division of property it brings are increasingly common in our culture. From one woman whose possessions were divided between herself and her ex-husband by the court, "I had saved a few things [for my children] but they're in the cedar chest and the cedar chest isn't here. I could only take seven things so I had to choose very wisely." The items she had put aside throughout her adult life and marriage intending to hand down one

day to her children remained with her ex-husband after the divorce, and she doubted the

children would ever see them:

> I can't see him handing things down. He has things from his family and
> he's going to give them to his brother-in-law but his family is [son] too and
> he wouldn't give them to [son] . . . . [Ex-partner] doesn't think about them
> as his children . . . . He told [daughter] that she'd never get anything of his.

This woman went on to explain that her ex-partner "was jealous I think of the kids which

has always boggled my mind" and didn't see them as his family in the same way as he did

his family of origin.

Other women spoke of leaving things behind in their haste to leave a relationship,

things that they wanted and under different circumstances would not have left. Some

requested of their ex-partners after the separation to return the items but to no avail. "He

kept one quilt that my grandmother made for my daughter. I tried to get it; he liked my

grandmother so I think he's taking care of it. I hope it's on her [daughter's] bed; hopefully

he'll give it to her some day. He's also got [child's] baby book . . . and photos of me from

when I was younger that he won't give back." From another woman:

> I don't have [child's] baby bracelet. I lost that when I left . . . . He [ex-
> partner] wouldn't give me that . . . or the athletic awards I won or cards or
> yearbooks from school, nothing. It's disappeared, all gone. I lost all my
> history, all my past. I have nothing. I just left there with my body and my
> kids.

By far the deliberate destruction of items by ex-partners was raised the most

frequently as the manner in which women lost tangible pieces of their history. The wilful

destruction of objects by abusive partners as described by the women I interviewed seemed

nothing short of malicious as their comments indicate: "He wouldn't have a qualm about

breaking something of mine." "When he got mad at me, he threw everything that I had,

everything." "He said the wind blew it [glass bowl] down [from the window] but the window wasn't open." "He would break something in front of me to get the reaction he wanted." "When we moved on one occasion, I had a small baby and a young child. He was responsible for moving a lot of my things . . . and he just didn't move [some of] them, left them behind. They weren't important to him". He was "very destructive". He destroyed "just about everything . . . . He destroyed anything that had meant anything to me." "He sold all my books; I saved money and bought them back." And finally, from another woman, "He took all my clothes . . . . I took whatever I could get in my bags and whatever was left he took . . . . He was mad and I was gone . . . . He just heaved it all."

Women devised various means to ensure things remained safe. Significant objects were "tucked away", locked in trunks, hidden in closets, and stored elsewhere to keep them out of the potentially destructive hands of abusive partners. "I kept them in the closet and made sure he didn't know which closet they were in." From other women: "I had taken it out of the apartment that I shared with my first partner because I was scared of what he would do with it if I left it behind and I had it stored in a friend's basement"; "After he broke something, I packed away stuff in a trunk and locked it"; "Because I couldn't display them [photographs], the fear that they'd be damaged or destroyed; I had to put them away so I didn't get to see a lot of them for years." The women's families of origin also became involved in protecting the material aspects of the family legacy:

> They [parents] wouldn't give anything to me before [when still living with
> ex-partner] . . . because they didn't trust, they were afraid they would get
> destroyed . . . . Some of it they didn't want to give to me because they
> didn't trust my partner so they didn't want me to have those things.

A different woman who had already given her adult daughter some of the things she had saved for her, found herself in the rather unusual position of receiving them back for safe-keeping when her daughter was in an abusive relationship.

Once out of the abusive relationship, women were free to unpack and enjoy those things which had been in storage for safe keeping.

> I had to hide them over the years in that first relationship I used to tuck them away. I knew I couldn't hang them on the wall because now and again there'd be a spiteful reaction and he would destroy things deliberately you know smash something in front of me so I just learned to tuck it away . . . . Now I can enjoy them, have them out.

For the majority of the women interviewed, the role of traditions and of material history took on added significance once they were on their own, "It meant a terrific amount when I was newly out of the relationship because it was part of who I was and it was part of an expression of my freedom . . . to have it around me". From another woman:

> I found when I was with both the abusive partners the family traditions were sort of gone and it was after I left the relationship that these things became important . . . . [Previously] we were doing things with his family and they were doing things his way."

The same woman referred to the value of her own family traditions to her as "just something we could always count on". Another woman offered an explanation for why family and tradition gained in significance for her since leaving her abusive partner:

> I think what's happening now because most of us [interviewee and her siblings] are older now and we're, things are becoming more important to us now so we're, we're starting to do things that are more meaningful and things that are, are important. Whereas in the years, years past they weren't really, it was more, it was more survival than anything, like let's just get through this year or this relationship and do the best we can and everybody was, and each sister, most of us were in abusive relationships at one degree or another so the bond amongst ourselves was kind of not even possible because we were all in survival mode in our own family. Now that we've

all gotten out of those relationships, we as sisters have become closer; we
spend more time together. Holidays mean more; we get together as a
family.

Creation and Maintenance of a Historical Record

All but one of the women interviewed expressed that it was important to hand

down a sense of family, a historical record to their children and grandchildren. Where it

could be pieced togther, this was about gathering the existing record, which as discussed

above was not always an easy task. In addition, it was about creating a new record:

When you come from a family that has any sort, you know, any sort of
abusive dynamics to it, part of, part of moving on from that is letting go of
some of those traditions and it's not necessarily because they're bad
traditions but it's the letting go of the whole dynamic of what went on . . . .
Maybe you want to let that go and start a new tradition just because it's a
new start for you.

A new beginning could be as simple and symbolic as a name change. One woman

who had very recently switched back to her maiden name commented, "Right now I'm

starting on a new foot with a name change . . . . It's like starting over, another chance, a

new beginning." Another woman described it this way, "Going back to my maiden name,

that was a delight." For these women, giving up their ex-husband's name and taking back

their own, was tied to their sense of identity. Interestingly, neither woman changed her

child's family name.

The women interviewed presented two key reasons why saving a family record was

of importance to them. These were an awareness of something missing due to their own

lack of a family history, and a desire to pass something on for the next generations thereby

rectifying that void. From one woman:

> I was very aware there's so little I have from my past that I'm going to keep
> what I have to hand it on and treasure the things that are happening now
> . . . knowing that I can pass them on. I make an effort to have photographs
> when . . . [my daughter, my mother] and I are all together and she
> [daughter] will have these pictures of the three generations of women.

From a woman who has made a concerted effort to save things for her daughter, "I had a

great sense of not having very much from my past. I noticed how other people had all

kinds of things from their past when I was growing up". Most of the other women echoed

these sentiments.

Significant life experiences were named as factors prompting women to begin

saving their history. Commented one woman: "I didn't have the same sort of regard or

interest in family before the birth of my child as I did after. Suddenly it was an epiphany;

family became all important with the birth of a child". Another woman echoed that she

wanted to learn more about her own family history "largely because of my daughter".

Previous to the birth of her child she knew only that her "own family history was one of

abuse" and felt this explained why she had been told so little about it. Thus, a record is

deemed necessary for the children and grandchildren it is assumed will be born. From

another woman, "When he has children, if he has a little girl, it'll be something he can pass

on to her [christening gown]."

Speaking of the value of the material objects and the dangers inherent in losing

them, one woman commented:

> They're evocateurs, they are the conjuring, evoking symbols that from
> which the stories spring, from which you anchor - 'oh, that was granny's
> brooch'. . . . They are the talismans for the stories; they're the evocateurs
> for the stories. When the things are gone it's harder to keep the stories
> alive, I think, I believe, it's kind of like the illustrations in a child's story
> book. They carry the story in a way.

Things that women discussed saving covered a large range. Some were entrusted to them by previous generations; others originated with them. Some were of monetary value, others were purely sentimental. Rarely were they without emotional attachment as shown by the women's descriptions. The lists of items included:: "an amazing quilt that I remember from infancy or early childhood made by my father's mother, made for me and I slept under"; "a Christening robe used for three generations"; "photographs from my parents' childhoods"; "a doll that was my father's doll"; "a very beautiful necklace given to me by my mother when I married, made by my mother's father for my mother's mother as an engagement gift"; "recipes, both orally handed down and written"; "a recipe that mum and them all use, my grandmother's recipe for homemade beets"; "an afghan from mum's mum"; " rings from my maternal grandfather who I only met once"; "an old photo of my mother that I keep on my desk"; "mum's mum's turkey platter"; " recipes for my mother's Christmas cake and pudding that I make every year"; "125 year old needlework"; "letters from my mother"; "quilts from my two grandmothers, one who has since passed away"; "my mother's and grandmother's rolling pins"; "spinning wheel"; "Persian rug"; "a recipe for Swedish Rye bread"; "a set of sterling silver"; "my mother's cookbooks", and photographs, lots of photographs.

Items that the women were saving to hand down to their children, thus, adding to the family legacy included: "baby clothes that I made for my daughter and which I will give her whether she has a child, if she has a child it might be special for her to have those"; "the hospital baby bracelets, mine and [child's]"; "a Christening gown, my own which my son also wore and which I will give to him for his kids some day"; "[child's]

lock of hair"; "a photograph album filled with mementos"; "a small [photograph] album of [daughter] and her father and his family"; "refrigerator art"; "cards and crafts that she [daughter] has made me, I'm saving them and will give them back to her some day"; "photographs from my own childhood"; "[child's] daycare graduation certificate"; "[child's] handprint"; "I plan to write them each a letter . . . so I can let them know how I feel about . . . them"; "the boots that [son] had when he first walked"; and lots of photographs.

Photographs were named so frequently as a means of recording history for future generations as to warrant separate mention here. A number of women interviewed expressed regret about the photographs they did not have, either because they had been lost, destroyed, or left behind or because they were never taken.

> I don't remember all of those years . . . . I just can't remember year to year things going on, have very few photographs of my daughter from certain ages. I have childhood photographs - I have maybe one or two from the time she's 12 to 17. We weren't enjoying ourselves as a family so unless she happened to be with some friends and their parents were taking photographs, I didn't really get them, didn't think, I had a camera I just didn't think about using it so I think she lost part of some memories too, at least some record of them.

From another woman:

> I'm taking as many pictures [of grandchildren] as I can while they're little because one thing that I didn't have when I had my kids, when they were little was the opportunity to take a lot of pictures. That just wasn't something that I could do. There was no, there was no camera; there was no money for film, for developing so what pictures I do have of when my children, when they were little, when I was with [ex-partner] are very few, very far between. And there are no pictures of me when I was a baby so I think it's important that the kids be able to say, 'that was me'.

Most women tried to compensate for gaps in the record with the taking of lots of photographs:

> I was always disappointed with my parents not taking very many [photographs] because there's these little spots where they took a bunch of pictures and then there's these gaps and it sort of leaves a gap for me in different places and so with [child's name], I'm trying to take, regularly take pictures, and events that are really big, I try to make sure I have pictures and I record it so I'm trying for her I guess cause when I look back a lot of things are missing and because we moved a lot, things get confusing for me, so there are gaps for me.

One woman explained her picture taking this way: "I'm trying to keep their memories alive because I personally don't remember a lot about my childhood . . . But the few pictures that I do have I remember the day the picture was taken". The taking of photographs, then, is important in order to create and maintain a permanent, historical record:

> It seems such a simple thing to take a picture and there's that time frozen forever - like [child] will always remember the Christmas she got her Cabbage Patch doll because she has the picture . . . and she'll always remember how she felt at that particular time in her life whereas if I didn't have the picture it would be something she probably would never think about again.

Of course, the record preserved by photographs may not always be entirely accurate. In reality, what cameras do is allow us to manipulate history to a certain degree. Photographs are often taken with a specific purpose in mind, such as capturing the good times: "I want her [daughter] to remember the happy days" so I take pictures.

The photographs women take are not being forgotten but rather are being meticulously organised in photo albums, and artfully displayed. Nor are the ex-partners being left out; rather than destroy photographs and reminders of their ex-partners upon the cessation of relationships, the women I interviewed were striving to preserve these for their

children. Several women mentioned separate photo albums they were organising for their

children detailing the good times the children had with their fathers and their fathers'

families before the relationship ended. From one woman who had started an album for

each of her children:

> I also plan on with the albums doing one of [daughter], because I don't
> have a lot of photos of her [daughter] and him [daughter's father] and that
> family [father's relatives], of doing one, a small album of just them, like,
> that side of the family so that she'll have, and then I can put whatever
> information there . . . just so she can have it to look back at it or whatever if
> she wants.

Not only the item saved but its manner of being handed down to the next

generation took on significance. One woman was saving things for her adult daughter.

Her own mother had given important family items directly to her over the years because

she "didn't want someone else deciding who would get what if she died suddenly". With

each item came the story of its significance, the object's own oral history. "She would

make gifts of things . . . things that were precious to her so we would hear the stories."

Following her own mother's lead, the interviewee had made a list detailing who gets what

so the things she intends for her own child, "won't get lost in the shuffle". Another

woman explained that things were handed down to her at "real turning points" in her life

including when she graduated, when she got married, and when her child was born.

One of the women interviewed was not concerned with passing on a historical

record:

> Material things mean less and less as I get older . . . because they're just
> material things you know, they don't, you know, it doesn't make me happy
> to have these things. I would miss them if they were gone but I would get
> over it. It's not like having a relationship with another person; relationships
> are more important than items and frankly most of my family is dead and I

> would prefer to still have the relationship rather than the item . . . . I look at
> the things that are around me which have some significance for me and I've
> never imparted that to them [my children] what these significances were
> because those people are dead . . . it means nothing to them [her children]
> the only family history they have is the history of our little family unit from
> start to finish of what they can recall and the things we've done together;
> that's where their family history comes from.

The same woman described herself as "not a terribly sentimental person" and explained

that when she was a child her family moved frequently due to her father's work and saving

things was "kind of a hassle . . . an onerous responsibility". For another:

> The thing that you value is not grandmother's necklace, not the
> Chippendale hutch; the thing you value is your character and your
> education because no matter [what happens] . . . you have that to start up
> with again. You can go anywhere with who you are so the valuable stuff is
> the stuff that you can learn the skills and the knowledge that you can
> acquire that is what's ultimately priceless.

While many traditions from both families had been lost or discarded, women had

begun creative new traditions with their children in hopes that they would be continued and

become a permanent part of the family identity. "He's got a lot of things that are gonna be

passed down to him but I want to give him some of his own, something that's his sort of

thing something that was started from me and him sort of thing hopefully . . . if he has kids

he'll pass it on to them". Other women echoed this desire to have something for their

children "of our own", something positive which looked forward and was not tempered by

past family conflict or dreams of how life might have been. Some women had blended a

"mishmash of traditions" as one woman referred to her family's attempts to combine old

traditions from both families of origin with new traditions. New traditions that women

discussed were often centred around a calendar holiday, especially Christmas, and involved

their young children. Examples of these included: special Christmas Eve meals, decorating

a tree outside with food for birds at Christmas, leaving oats outside for Santa's reindeer,

writing letters to Santa Claus on Christmas Eve to leave with his snack, and taking their

children shopping prior to Christmas to purchase a toy for donation to a needy child.

Although women identified many information gaps in their knowledge of their own

and especially, their ex-partners' oral histories, some had also been told or had uncovered

important parts of that history. While much of what was known related to stories of abuse,

there were other noteworthy stories about such things as the role of various ancestors in

various wars, castles in Ireland, and a great great grandmother who was both a midwife and

psychic and who had lived to be 101. These more positive and colourful stories, however,

were less common.

Women discussed actively working to continue and expand the tradition of oral

history within their families for the benefit of their children and the generations to come.

Commented one woman, "I kept my father alive for the kids". Two women discussed

taking their children to visit the grave sites of their own grandparents, their children's great

grandparents, and making it an opportunity to discuss the family's history. One of these

women explained that she felt her son's interest in his ancestors may have developed from

and certainly was encouraged by their trip to her grandfather's grave.

Interestingly, and contrary to the bulk of the existing literature, it was not always the

women of the families who had preserved what material history and records did exist.

> Certainly you couldn't grow up in my side of the family without knowing,
> you know, the history of the [family name] side of the family . . . . It was
> drilled into my head when I was a youngster by my father about you know
> where we came from and the family history was documented and he
> documented it again when he was older and you know they can trace their
> family history back thorough the females and the males for generations . . .

to the present day. They know, you know, where both sides of the family,
where they came from. It's a big deal. It's part of the oral history. It's part
of the written history.

Another woman told how her father, at family gatherings, "will talk for hours about this

[family history] stuff" with the stories being "embellished depending on the amount of

alcohol consumed".

Nonetheless, as the women I interviewed demonstrated through their efforts, the

preservation of traditions, rituals and a material history is important to, and generally falls

to, or is chosen by, the women of a family as their work. This is consistent with the

literature as discussed earlier. Commented one woman:

> Once the females go, the rituals go, like my paternal grandmother was a
> great one for oral history and a great one for maintaining the rituals of the
> family but when she became, she was elderly . . . so you know my paternal
> grandmother loved to have her family around but unfortunately she was not
> healthy enough to keep up her rituals.

Discussion

Ten women who had lived in abusive relationships as adults were interviewed about their sense of family identity. Six key themes emerged from this exploratory research: the myth and reality of the happy family, the tradition of abuse, silences, isolation, preservation of material culture, and the creation and maintenance of a historical record. The interview data were very rich, such that not all salient points could be addressed here. Instead four major elements that ran through these themes and have a bearing on the larger themes of family violence and family identity are addressed below.

The Subculture of Violence

All of the women in the current study reported the relatively pervasive presence of violence throughout their families of origin and their extended families. In fact, violence and its correlates, alcoholism, undiagnosed mental illness, etc., were so common in many of the families as to be the norm.

In highlighting cultural norms quite different from the mainstream, this study points to a subculture of violence existing inside abusive families. This is another way of describing what is herein labelled "the tradition of abuse", part of which involves the unintentional education of children about the role of violence in intimate relationships. Some of the earliest explanations for family violence were of the subculture type, (see Besharov, 1990; Breiner, 1992; and Dobash & Dobash, 1990 for comments on the history of theory in this area) although these writings typically referred to an identifiable socioeconomic group to which many negative traits were ascribed (alcoholism, criminality). Later (mainly feminist) authors labelled this thinking as classist, and provided evidence that

family violence existed across the socioeconomic spectrum. The evidence they presented, however, tended to be high profile single cases and not comparative rates of incidence. Ethnographic studies (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gelles, 1993) also pointed to the presence of a culture of violence.

My findings suggest that although the subculture of violence is far from a complete explanation of domestic violence, there are clusters of families and extended families where a significant part of the family and its identity, the oral history or lack thereof, and the traditions are tied to abuse. The silences discussed in the current paper are an important aspect of this. Part of the abusive family's survival in the larger society is to keep the secrets of abuse within the family. This effort is something in which abusers have traditionally been aided by patriarchal norms dictating that what goes on behind a family's closed doors stays there.

Many of the women interviewed could readily point to three generations of women in their families who had lived in abusive relationships. This also occurred in the families of their ex-partners, and became a part of the family's sense of identity, part of how children learned to see themselves. Following from this, the women with young children were adamant that the cycle of abuse would stop with them, that their children would grow up to be neither abusive nor abused, and had strategies to ensure this. It seems logical to assume here that their own mothers may have wanted, albeit unsuccessfully, the same thing. One hopes that the sense of self-awareness possessed by these women about their experience, and the changes they have made and continue to make in their lives, will make the difference they intend. The alternative, as the results demonstrate, is the perpetuation of

a pattern that has dire effects for both adults and children.

The experiences of the women interviewed for this study also have some bearing on the arguments as to "why women stay" referred to in the literature review. As a backlash against early theories of family violence which tended to blame the victim for masochistic tendencies, later feminist writers down-played the role of pre-existing personality traits in explaining why women tolerate abuse. Rhodes and Baranoff McKenzie (1998) argued that the effects of the abuse itself, not a woman's personality traits, are responsible for her staying. Bowker, in refuting an earlier argument by Walker (1979, as cited in Bowker, 1993) about the so-called battered woman syndrome, argued that abused women's problems are largely social not psychological, that is, with the necessary institutional or other social supports, no woman would remain in an abusive relationship. She further argued that self-esteem is not the major issue it is often reported to be, as indicated by many women's covert efforts to escape from their abusive relationships. However, the current study would suggest that individual issues such as family of origin experience, the norms with which women have grown up, and low self-esteem formed as a child in an abusive family, are at least as important as social variables in determining who will enter into an abusive relationship and who will remain in one. The significance of this to the current study, then, is that the dynamic of abuse becomes a part of individual and family identities and is thus transmitted intergenerationally.

Preservation of Material Culture and Family Identity

Two inter-related themes that stood out in discussions of each family's material history were the preservation of existing items and the creation of a new record. Material

items are generally recognised for their permanence and therefore their ability to facilitate and maintain a connection to one's family of origin. Zeitlin et al. (1982), saw 'things' as memory aids that help us recall people, experiences and our place in the family. Tuan (1980) and Csikszentmihalyi (1982) saw material possessions as part of our self-image and important in connecting us to others. For the women in this study, the willful destruction of cherished personal items by abusive partners provided a different dimension to this discussion, and interrupted the intergenerational flow of information and artefacts. The women interviewed went to unusual lengths to ensure the preservation of items they wished to hand down to children and grandchildren: hiding them in closets, locking them in trunks, storing them with friends or parents, whatever it took to keep things safe.

It was necessary to protect these items because they served as tangible links to important people, relationships, and experiences in their lives. When such an item was deliberately destroyed by a woman's partner, it was done to demonstrate power and control. The significance was often not in the item itself but in the memory it held. To this end, women explained that objects of importance to them were likely to be destroyed in front of them to ensure that they understood their abuser's power to deprive them of what they held dear. This became one more loss for the woman, as another piece of her identity was taken from her by her partner. Behaviour of this nature points out the fact that, as Bowker (1993) illustrated, violence in relationships is often by design, with the goal being to "teach helplessness" to the victim.

Where there were no items preserved, it was important for the women interviewed to create a record. Especially once out of the abusive relationships, they worked to save

things for their children and to create new traditions. In particular, the importance of a

photographic record was mentioned frequently. Photographs worked both to record

history and to enhance the ideal family myth. Mahan, (1991) referred to the ability of a

camera to record not only how individuals or families look, but how they would like to

look, to themselves and others. For these women, photographs, and family stories to a

lesser extent, became part of what appears to be a conscious manipulation of history.

The desire of the women interviewed to gather and to build a history, a sense of

family, included the family's stories or oral history and its traditions and ritual.

Interviewees spoke of dropping or adapting old traditions, and of creating new traditions

for their children. These new traditions, although they may be only a few years old, were

designed so that young children would see them as how things had been done forever. Not

all traditions, after all, need be old traditions.

Women's Work

The current study's findings extend the information presented in the literature

review about women's customs into the area of abusive relationships. Other authors have

written about the traditional role of women as preservers of the family's history (Pett et al.,

1992; Stone, 1989; Weigert & Hastings, 1977). The women interviewed worked hard to

maintain and facilitate a sense of family identity for their children about both sides of the

child's family. Even where a woman's ex-partner rarely if ever called or visited his child,

women attempted to ensure that a link between child and father was maintained by

compiling photo albums of the man's family, and, initially at least, by facilitating contact

between the child and the man's family. These findings point to the powerful influence on

these women of their traditional role as preservers of the family's history and identity, even in families where these efforts were actively resisted. Several women, in fact, mentioned, as does di Leonardo (1987), that the passing of older women in their families meant that oral history was lost and that family traditions and connections were not continued.

Feminist writers (Coontz, 1995; Stacey, 1995) have highlighted the myth making power of mass media in the current, seemingly universal acceptance of the patriarchal nuclear family model with its post-war, "Leave It To Beaver" roles. Both writers have pointed out that current cultural beliefs with respect to the nature of the family have little or no historical basis. Instead, the history of the family is one of diversity, resulting from variation in cultural norms and demographic and economic necessity.

Women's responsibility for family maintenance and identity is equally puzzling. It could be argued that the role was assigned to them by men who were busy in other spheres, either through necessity or lack of interest. Alternatively, it might also be argued that women adopted the role out of an understanding of the importance of familial relationships, especially relationships with and between children. Regardless, the current study points out that, for the women interviewed, the work of family development and identity remains important work that deserves substantial effort. The power of the myth can be seen in the fact that these women's experiences of family, both as children and as adults, does not resemble the myth at all. Despite this, they work actively to provide for their children a structure and lifestyle that they have never directly experienced, which suggests that the myth has real meaning and is highly desirable.

The Positive Spin

One thing that became clear on review of the findings was that the study's

participants were intent on putting a positive spin on even their most negative experiences.

Whether a coping mechanism, a personality characteristic, a world view, or simply naivety,

all of the women, without exception, found opportunity to bring forward the positive. This

is seen as an indication of the power of the myth of the happy family to create and support

expectations of happiness even in people whose experiences seemed to dictate otherwise.

Ultimately the women found or created a positive slant to much of what they

discussed, with the belief, "it has made me a better person" being common. Whether

discussing abuse – emotional, physical, or sexual; parents who ignored or deserted them;

alcoholism; or custody battles, they managed to find the silver lining, if you will. Once I

became conscious of the extensiveness of this underlying theme, it was visible through

much of what was said. Thus, it seemed a disservice to the women, and to their intent, not

to address it. Even when the women's perceptions of what was positive seemed

questionable, their motivation to find and highlight the best in their families was obviously

strong. To that end, I included throughout the Results chapter, examples of these more

positive aspects of their family life.

Limitations and Areas for Further Study

Clearly the study diverged from the path I originally began to follow. This was not

entirely unexpected given the nature of exploratory work grounded in participants'

experiences. It is important to note that the study's findings may not be generalisable to the

experience of all abused women, nor was this intended to be a goal of the research. The

women interviewed represented a relatively specific group. Although there was diversity in their ages, the length of time in the abusive relationship, and the length of time since the relationship ended (as well as in socioeconomic status), all were women who had succeeded in leaving and remaining out of abusive relationships and all had at least some degree of self-awareness with respect to their experience. All had made contact with a transition house, either as clients, volunteers, or staff. This may set them apart, both from women who have sufficient personal resources and so do not need to access a transition house when they leave an abusive relationship, and from women who have been unsuccessful in leaving to date. This bears on the arguments made earlier about whether domestic violence is restricted to an underprivileged segment of society or is pervasive throughout. The current study cannot resolve this question.

Any study asking participants to comment on their life experiences is open to memory error, selective disclosure, and intentional re-writing. In fact, the study's findings illustrate the usefulness of these strategies in women's efforts to promote the myth of the happy family. However, the fact that the current research did not focus specifically on abusive behaviour but rather on the women's sense of connection to their families of origin, might have meant they were less inclined to re-write their experiences.

This study, by incorporating two areas of research - family identity and family violence - suggests numerous directions for further study. Most of the women interviewed outlined a very active process by which they attempted to build new structures of positive family tradition for their children, in order to replace that which had been destroyed by abuse and separation (or had never existed in abusive families of origin). A closer

examination of the processes by which this is done under often hostile conditions would add to the literature on the creation of family identity.

The women interviewed very often attached stories filled with positive emotion to the items which had been handed down to them within their families. As discussed earlier, these emotions are often in contrast to the woman's actual experience growing up in an abusive household. The way in which these objects have become disassociated from the negative effects of abuse that are otherwise pervasive in these women's lives seems worthy of further research.

The results contain many of the women's memories of what it was like to grow up in abusive households and, in retrospect, the effects that this had on their sense of connectedness to their families. These reminiscences, however, may not reflect their perspective as children, or the perspectives of their own children. Although there are obvious ethical issues in such research, the perspectives of the children with respect to their sense of family identity would be very valuable. They could be used to help indicate to what extent their mothers' efforts to build a healthy family structure and to thereby prevent the further transmission of family violence, had been successful.

Despite the limitations discussed above, the current study through its close look at the lives of ten women who had lived in abusive relationships makes a contribution to existing research. In examining the effects of violence on family identity, it links two fields of study, adding to our understanding of both.

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Appendix A

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study of the relationship between domestic violence and family identity. Specifically, the purpose of the study is to explore how family violence disrupts the intergenerational transmission of such things as family traditions, physical objects and family history and what affect this has on family identity.

I _____ *agree to be interviewed with the aid of a tape-recorder for the purpose of collecting information about family identity and domestic violence, as described above. I understand that the tapes will only be made with my consent and will be stored under lock and key.*

I understand that my name will not be used and that any information which could identify me or my family will be altered or deleted.

I understand that I can withdraw my participation at any time.

I have read and understand the information presented above and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ *Date* _____

Witness _____ *Date* _____