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IN THE AFTERMATH OF SEXUAL ABUSE: MAKING AND REMAKING MEANING IN NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA AND RECOVERY

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This paper explores the applicability of a narrative approach to the understanding of psychological trauma and the process of recovery. We focus on a comparison of stories told by three survivors of sexual abuse in research interviews drawn from an ongoing study of recovery and resiliency in treated and untreated trauma survivors. Our aim is to learn how survivors make and remake the meaning of their experiences over the course of their lives and at different stages in their recovery, and to understand the role and functions of survivors' stories in the recovery process. Replacing long-standing feelings of powerlessness with a new sense of agency and reclaiming a positive identity from a "damaged" self-definition are neither easy nor painless tasks. These accounts suggest the importance of "turning points" that open possibilities for sexual abuse survivors to restore their experiences and arrive at new understandings that support their efforts to confront and deal with past traumas, and move on with their lives. We also call for more attention—by researchers, therapists, and others in survivors' lives—to the effects of our expectations and needs for coherent stories with positive endings that may make it difficult for us to "hear" what survivors are trying to tell us. (*Narrative, Trauma, Sexual Abuse*)

"It was very confusing. . . . It's amazing to me the power of that denial and affection. . . . I sort of entered like a state of shock when I started to realize all that had been going on. . . . I don't really try and look at who made this happen and whose fault it is whatever. It's just part of my experience." (Kate)

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"I'm not sure how I understood it. . . . It was like 'I did something bad how can I ever get out of this now' I knew it didn't feel right . . . but I couldn't get out of it." (Sonia)

"So I haven't made a sense of it. It has no place in my life except as a bizarre event. . . . and I don't think I've made peace with it. But I have decided that the second half of my life I really want it to be the way I want it to be so I have to figure out what that is." (Annie)

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the applicability of a narrative approach to the understanding of psychological trauma and the process of trauma recovery. We focus on a comparison of stories told by three survivors of sexual abuse in the context of research interviews drawn from an ongoing study of recovery and resiliency in treated and untreated trauma survivors. Our aim is to learn more about how survivors make and remake the meaning of their experience over the course of their lives and at different stages in their recovery. We are interested in how victimization and survivorship are reflectively understood and "metabolized" in changing cultural, ecological and developmental contexts (Harvey, 1996), and in furthering our understanding of the role and functions of survivors' stories in this process.

We are at an early stage in our work. In this paper, we explore several questions about the narrativization of trauma, recovery, and identity that have begun to emerge from our approach: How do trauma survivors deal with the problem of constructing a coherent life story and how does the content and form of their stories change over time? Do these changes reflect normal developmental processes or predictable stages in the process of trauma recovery? What initiates the restorying of a survivor's narrative and does this have a reparative effect, helping to repair the distorting impact of sexual abuse on normal identity development? What is the relationship between these personal narratives and cultural "master narratives" about women, sexual violence, trauma, and gender identity? How do our expectations and preferences, as clinicians and researchers, for a coherent story interfere with our being able to hear what survivors are trying to tell us? Finally, how can we develop ways of listening to their stories that respect their evolving understandings and their efforts to make meaning of their experiences of sexual trauma?

BACKGROUND: THE VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE PROGRAM

The work reported here was conducted at the Victims of Violence Program (VOV), an adult outpatient clinic of the Department of Psychiatry at the Cambridge Hospital. Like all Cambridge Hospital clinics, VOV serves an economically distressed, multi-racial and multi-cultural population. Providing a range of clinical and consultative services to individuals and communities victimized by crime and violence, VOV is guided by a theoretical perspective that integrates: a feminist understanding of violence in the lives of women and girls (Harvey & Herman, 1992; Herman, 1992); a "stages by dimension" model of recovery from sexual trauma (Harvey & Harney, 1995; Lebowitz, Harvey & Herman, 1992); "an ecological view of trauma and recovery" (Harvey, 1996); and a concern with resilience and its origins. One approach we have taken is to conduct in-depth interviews with trauma survivors to learn more about different "pathways to wellness" (Cowan, 1994).

We began our work with highly-structured interviews that were useful for developing reliable quantitative instruments. We are now exploring the value of more unstructured interviews and the applicability to our respondents' accounts of methods of narrative analysis (Mishler, 1986a; Mishler, 1986b; Mishler, 1995). The narrative perspective has led us to new questions, noted above, about the relations between the form and content of survivors' stories and our conceptions of trauma, resiliency, and recovery. This paper is an initial report of what we have been learning.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS: AN ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

Various approaches have been applied to research on the social and psychological sources and consequences of sexual abuse, violence, and other forms of trauma: Clinical case studies, quasi-experimental methods, large-scale quantitative surveys. Our work joins a recent and growing interest in many disciplines and areas of research in the application of methods of narrative analysis to individuals' accounts of their experiences (Mishler, 1995). Within medical sociology and medical anthropology, for example, the study of "illness narratives" has become a prominent topic (Hyden, 1997; Hyden & Mishler, 1999), including studies of: "Suffering" (Kleinman, 1989); breast cancer patients' "narratives of hope" (Good, Good, Schaffer & Lind, 1990; Good, Munakata, Kobayashi, Mattingly & Good, 1994); DES daughters' sto-

ries of medical care (Bell, 1988); genres of chronic illness narratives (Frank, 1995); the co-production of patients' stories in clinical interviews (Clark & Mishler, 1992); and "therapeutic emplotment" in occupational therapy (Mattingly, 1994, 1998). Closer to our own focus of interest are several important contributions to the study of trauma narratives: analyses of oral and written accounts of holocaust survivors (Langer, 1991, 1996; Young, 1988); Vietnam Veterans' narratives of traumatic combat experiences (Shay, 1994); young African-American men's stories of violent incidents (Rich & Stone, 1996); rape victims' accounts (Foa, Molnar & Cashman, 1995; Lebowitz & Roth, 1994); stories of survivors of war-related violence (Shepard, 1992); and those of male sexual-abuse survivors (Lisak, 1994).

MAKING SENSE OF SEXUAL TRAUMA: THE PROBLEM OF COHERENCE

The concept of coherence holds a prominent place in narrative studies and theories about the structure and functions of life stories. "Coherence strategies" are viewed by many narrative researchers as the primary way in which individuals explain and interpret life events (Linde, 1993), develop a coherent sense of self by finding continuity in their lives in the face of disruptions and transitions (Cohler, 1982), and serve as the source of moral integrity and identity (MacIntyre, 1981; Taylor, 1989, 1991).

These assumptions become problematic when we consider how trauma survivors try to integrate their experiences into a life story that has continuity and coherence. Langer's analysis of the oral narratives of holocaust survivors (Langer, 1991) is a cogent and troubling critique of the psychological and moral claims made for coherence. Apparently, the life-threatening, all-inclusive experience of terror cannot be absorbed into the temporal continuity of a life with a before and after. In some sense, as Langer argues, it stands outside of time—frozen, static, ever-present and not forgotten.

An additional challenge faced by holocaust survivors, and sexual abuse survivors as well, is that prospective listeners—researchers, clinicians, family members, various public audiences—are troubled by and may not want to hear survivors' accounts of atrocities. If they cannot avoid listening, then they prefer coherent stories, ones that make sense by following a culturally-preferred plot from a state of suffering and pain to one of wholeness and recovery, from terror and torture to liberation. Langer's work suggests that

holocaust survivors often resist these forms of emplotment. The quotations with which we began this paper suggest that victims of sexual abuse also experience difficulties in constructing coherent life stories. Indeed, the elusiveness of coherence is evident in all their accounts, with differences among them reflecting changes that may take place over time: for example, in Kate's being unable to "name" her experiences early on in the process; Sonia's learning to name what she did not understand but which did not feel right; Annie's reframing of what happened that still makes no sense.

Kate, 28 and single, was sexually abused and exploited in adulthood by a trusted spiritual guide, a teacher to whom she had turned for mentoring and "body work." She can only find the indexical "it" to refer to what was "very confusing" and went on for months until she "started to realize" what was "going on." Sonia, 36 years old with an adolescent son and younger daughter, was sexually abused by her father, beginning when she was six or seven and continuing until she was sixteen or seventeen and left home. She tells us that until her adulthood, she had no words for what happened, "no idea" of what it was about, "never thought" of the repeated occasions of her father's sexual abuse as "incest or sexual abuse." Annie, now a 42-year old mother of two young sons, was sexually abused by her stepfather from the age of six until she left home for college. She still cannot make "sense" of or "peace" with what even now she names only as a "bizarre event."

As we listened and relistened to the tape-recorded interviews of these three women and transcribed them in detail, it became clear that we were not free of Langer's "listener's" problem. Indeed, it seems that our own needs for coherence pressed us toward helping these survivors achieve it. For example, asking them "How" they made "sense" of what "happened," presumed that they could and would provide a coherent account. This is a general demand characteristic of any interview situation in which we inform/teach our respondents what we expect as an adequate answer (Mishler, 1986b). When our subjects find it difficult to provide a "right" answer, we as interviewers tend to reassure them, reflecting back with assessments that indicate what was said was heard as coherent. This tendency is particularly likely to have been strengthened here since all interviewers in this study were trained as therapists whose task in their clinical practice is to help patients clarify their understandings of their difficulties.

For example, in her interview, Kate offers a detailed account of her teacher's "sexualization" of their supposedly beneficial work, and of her

very delayed realization of what was happening to her. She had "opened up," talked with him about her "depression," the "blackness inside," and her "issues around intimacy and feeling very uncomfortable with any sort of touch." He took her on as a "special student" and they would "do these private sessions together." Over a period of four months the "relationship became very contorted." He drew her in systematically: "I mean he would have me touch him ... supposedly helping me get comfortable with touch." At one point, "where he was clearly like orgasming," she "panicked" and thought "Oh my God, what—" and then remembers thinking: "You're just oversensitive in this area (laughs) you=know. You think more things are sexualized when they aren't. This teacher is just helping you." (The transcription notation "you=know" represents a latching of the two words, that is, they are spoken as one word). This view became "seemingly tougher" for her to hold on to as the sessions continued and "he was asking to touch my breasts and he was like taking off his clothes," and a "part" of her knew that she "wasn't supposed to talk about it." In their last session, he became "really nasty" when she said she was having a "hard time" touching him as he was asking her to do. At the end, he "jumped up, put on his clothes, gave me a little gift, and just sort of left." At this point, the interviewer offers reassurance by naming the experience for her: "That sounds like an incredibly confusing (R: Yeah, it was very-) and painful experience. (R: It was very confusing)."

A similar inducement to coherence is evident in Sonia's interview. Faced with Sonia's apparent failure to "understand" or explain what she "thought" was going on and "why he (her father) was doing what he was doing," the interviewer offers a comforting assessment about the difficulty of living with such confusion. Sonia has used an example suggested by her therapist of the effect on children who had been manipulated into allowing nude pictures to be taken of them by a perpetrator, only to then feel "like they did something bad" to describe "what it felt like" to feel "trapped," unable to "ever tell anybody what I did what happened." That is how she "lived," "in that frame of mind." She "didn't like it," "couldn't get out of it," "didn't know how." The interviewer comments: "That's a long time to have to live like that." Sonia acknowledges the comforting intention: "Yeah. Yep."

Annie says the only sense she once made of her abuse—and that as an "afterthought"—was that she was a "sacrificial lamb." Her metaphor refers to having thought "if I was here he'll leave her (her sister) alone, he'll stay married to my mother, my mother will be happy, everything will just sort of

be fine." Asked if "that changed over time," she relates how this view was undermined and she "realized it was all for nothing" when her sister told her that their stepfather "tried to sexually abuse her" too, and, in addition, when her parents "got divorced." The interviewer brings this sequence to a close with an assessment that restates Annie's response, giving it a preferred clarity: "Even as you describe it seeing yourself as a sacrificial lamb, (R: mhm) holding the family together, (R: mhm) protecting your sister, (R: mhm) it does sound like a way to make meaning. (R: mhm) You tried to understand and make sense of it."

Listening to the tapes, reading the transcripts, and discussing the interviews in research seminars and now as narrative researchers, we are a step removed—a large step—from the immediacy of the interview situation. There are advantages to this analytic distance, for example, a clearer recognition of the role of the interviewer in the co-production of respondents' accounts (Clark & Mishler, 1992; Mishler, 1997). There are costs as well. For example, some of us were less supportive of Kate's "not knowing" what was going on, less able to feel the force of her need to trust in her denial, and not pressed, as interviewers were, toward an empathic response.

In pointing to the different ways we enter into the construction of meaning, from our vantage points as interviewers, researchers, and clinicians, we are suggesting both the active function of listening and the problematic nature of notions like "coherence." Meaning does not simply lie in the tale as it is told, but is a function of the context of its production, the theoretical perspective we bring to it, and the goals of our analyses. We must, therefore, be attentive to our own assumptions as we listen and try to make sense of our respondents' ways of making sense of their experiences.

TURNING POINTS: REFRAMING THE MEANING OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Stories change over time. Each of our respondents recalls a particular incident that served as a turning point, leading to a shift in understanding and opening up possibilities to break out of the plot that previously imprisoned her. In all of their accounts, the critical event was sudden and unexpected. Something happened that was revelatory, bringing into question earlier ways of understanding. Continuing their search for understanding, they reframe their experiences (Goffman, 1974; Ribeiro, 1994), place them in a different

context, and embark on an extended and difficult process that enables them to speak to others, to act, to become agents in restorying their lives and reshaping their identities.

Turning points, despite their apparent unexpectedness, occur against the background of other life changes, for example, developmental transitions such as approaching middle age or the birth of a child. Further, since stories express the dialectic between character and plot, in their "replottings" our respondents position themselves differently than they had in the past in their relationships with significant figures in their lives—their perpetrators, families—and also offer different perspectives on their experiences to interviewers and other audiences. In this way, they discursively produce another self, a new identity (Cain, 1991; Davies & Harré, 1990; Mishler, 1999; Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour & Bamberg, 1996). Their stories are still being written and enacted, and the endings remain uncertain as they continue to struggle with the impact of their new understandings on their lives.

In the week after her last upsetting "private session," described earlier, Kate attended the group class. Asked by the therapist how they "were doing," some said, "My neck hurts," or "My back aches." Everyone had "some sort of complaint." When the therapist turned to Kate, he said:

"You . . . everything perfect?"

And I said 'No.'

I said 'My heart's aching.'

And he said 'How delightful.'¹

Kate found that a "sort of a strange response." Reflecting on it later that day, she observes that although in "areas of sexuality" she was "very susceptible to confusion and manipulation," nonetheless, "I know my sadness

and I know it didn't feel delightful to me. And I just sort of said . . . in my head. 'My experience can be different from his experience.' And I was like 'Ahhuh.'"

Finally, Kate broke her silence. She called a friend to talk about "some things going on . . . at the studio" she didn't think "are that great." When her friend said "Get the hell out of there now," Kate felt "like- 'Really.'" She reflects: "It's amazing to me the power of that denial and affection. It's amazing to me." Her "Ahhuh" realization that her own experience could be different from her therapist's and the strong confirmation by her friend allowed her to trust her feelings and begin to reframe what had happened to her, although she is still amazed at the power of "denial and affection" that had blocked such understanding.

Sonia's sexual abuse by her father began in early childhood. Although she cannot recall the exact time, she "estimates" from visits to doctors for "physical symptoms" and "stomach problems" that abuse started when she was "six or seven" with "touching and things like that." Sometime around her "10th, 11th, 12th year uhm he had intercourse" with her and "from then on it was that type of sexual abuse," which continued until she was "16, 17 years old" when "I left the house or he left the house."

The interviewer asks about the early period of "touching":

I: "Did you not remember that until later on or how did you get the memories back?"

S: "Uhm I did remember that he did that.

uhm I didn't remember specifics around the incidents but uhm I did remember.

And uhm I always remembered the things that happened when I was in my teens.

I never thought of them as incest or child abuse.

uhm I mean- I- I- It was a whole new meaning when I started therapy and all of that.

I had no idea that that's what it was all about."

As we saw earlier, Sonia uses an example from her therapist about children who had been manipulated into feeling that "they did something bad" to characterize her own feelings and her sense of being "trapped." The turning point for Sonia came when her father, with whom she had earlier been "connected . . . through money" reneged on a promise he had made to her

¹ Alternative transcription procedures reflect both theoretical perspectives on discourse and specific research interests (Mishler, 1991). We found James Gee's sociolinguistic model of narrative analysis (Gee, 1991) particularly appropriate for this study of how sexual abuse survivors make meaning of their experiences through their stories, and adapted it to transcribe their interviews. In his approach, the fundamental meaning-carrying part of speech is an "idea unit," a "prosodic phrase" marked by falling or rising pitch, called a "pitch glide" that "signals the focus of the sentence," that is, what the speaker intends as "new or asserted information (p. 21)." Idea units may stand alone or be grouped together as a "line" which is about "one central idea, or topic (p. 22)." Gee's full model groups lines into larger units, for example, stanzas, that we do not use. Our excerpts include only the sequence of lines without further grouping.

about her business. She was already seeing a therapist, which helped her "remember and realize that you=know something was drastically wrong."

"And I think it was the anger that- I mean I was- I was enraged over this business thing that happened.
And I turned around- I hung up the phone and I turned around and said you=know 'How could he do this to me?'
And then it was like a light went off in my head that said you=know '(...) what did he do to you before? What did you expect?'
That was like- I mean that really was the turning point for me to all of a sudden just realize 'Wait a second. Something is terribly wrong here.'
But now I think of it and it was the rage or the anger that I felt around that that made me realize."

For Annie, as we learned earlier, the turning point was discovering that her acquiescence to her stepfather's continual abuse was "all for nothing." She recalls:

"bodily sensations of like utter anger and utter rage-you=know at-
God dammit it was all for nothing was my first thought
when I realized on some level I must have thought if I'm here he'll
leave her alone.
He'll stay married to my mother.
My mother will be happy.
Everything will just sort of be fine.
And then they got divorced
and then my sister told me about that."

The self-protective image of being a "sacrificial lamb" crumbles and she has no alternative interpretation with which to replace it:

"And I just- I didn't- I don't know that I thought about it more.
I just remember that instant feeling when she told me of it was all for nothing.
And so I haven't made a sense of it.
It has no place in my life except as a bizarre event."

These turning points are only first steps. The "Ahhah" experience displaces earlier understandings—"it was all for nothing," "something is terribly

wrong," "my experiences can be different from his." Although the catalyzing events vary in their particulars, they have some common features: an unexpected, external event—Kate's teacher's remark, Sonia's father renegeing on his promise, Annie's sister's disclosure—that evokes powerful feelings of anger, rage, or sadness that override earlier denials of what had happened, and a supportive relational context within which new understandings can be disclosed and validated—a friend, sister, or therapist. Together, these features allow them to begin reinterpreting the meaning of their experiences, that is, to restore their histories. The new plots reflect their current life situations, developmental stages and processes, and their future aims and expectations. They may also provide clues about where they are on their trajectories of recovery.

RESTORYING TRAUMA: RECLAIMING AGENCY AND IDENTITY

The move from identities shaped by the interests of their perpetrators—the enforced silencing to which they submitted—requires re-employment, a new story where the characters are positioned differently and there is a shift in direction. Each searches for ways to change the meaning of the past, to alter its hold on her current life in the service of marking out a different future course.

Kate, an adult when the abuse by her teacher-mentor took place, describes how her struggle to overcome a serious eating disorder (a struggle that involved an earlier period of hospitalization and therapy), and her desire to "come back to my body in a healthy way" led her to him. At the beginning, she thought, "he was great as a teacher." Her needs and feelings of vulnerability led to her denial of what was happening and a mode of self-pathologizing where she blamed herself for the contorted relationship that developed. From other parts of the interview, we learn that denial of troubling experiences was a pervasive family pattern.

After her overdue realization, the turning point reported above, she observes that "the months to follow were deeply sad for me. I felt very betrayed. He just sort of knew my vulnerability and just took it." This period ended when she no longer felt "so much in shock" and "really wanted this to stop." She decided to "go ahead legally" and received "a lot of support" from her family and friends. She wrote a "sort of memoir" of her experiences,

"everything I could remember in as much detail as I could." This was "very enlightening powerful writing."

She talked to an attorney—"found her myself"—who thought she "had a good case you=know. There was a couple of counts . legal counts." Kate knew little about the legal process and was not aware cases are often settled before going to court with a negotiated amount of money for claimed damages. She "didn't want his money" but her attorney suggested she think "creatively," and she realized: "I could take his money and make donations to places that would- that are helping people who suffer this kind of thing." "Very uncomfortable" with this and feeling "still sort of- I didn't want to hurt him," nonetheless, she agreed to go forward. To her surprise "he actually- he agreed to all of it. (I: Wow) He wrote a letter that he was guilty (I: mhm) and saying that it took great courage to come out." It "was like very confused. It was like a very nice letter."

Kate is at an early point in her efforts to rewrite her story and move toward a new identity. However, she is already well aware that her feelings of powerlessness have been replaced by a sense of agency. In her interview, she refers less to new understandings that are firmly secured than to the hope she will someday be at a different place. Thus, near the end of the interview, the interviewer asks: "Now a general question. How do you understand the- how do you make sense of the painful and traumatic things that have happened to you?" Kate asks for clarification, and the interviewer respecifies the question: "Or what do you think is responsible for them?" Kate's answer is indirect and oblique, drawing on a metaphor in a book to indicate her aspiration for the future rather than on her own current understanding:

"What do I think?

This is one of the most incredible things I ever um read.

I was reading this book. Possessing the Secret of Joy (I: mhm) this

Alice Walker book

and um about these women who undergo genital mutilation.

um There was this sort of- this witch doctor . healer

who was going to tend to the wounds of the people . sew them up.

um And there's this one line where she's sewing someone's body

which said 'She tended to the wound as a healer.'

And like that just taught me so much

because I can feel very wounded

or I can feel like a healer (I: mhm) and it's a very different approach to things."

She feels her experiences have "sensitized" her to "different types of pain and emotion," a "sense of shame and guilt . self rage." Wanting to make her experiences "as strengthening as possible," she doesn't "really try and look at who made this happen and whose fault it is . whatever. It's just part of my experience." She "might not have chosen it," but she can try to "take it in and use it" and "make something of it for good or whatever."

Sonia, dealing with her sudden realization that her father's betrayal—his reneging on a promise—was what he had done "before" and that "Something is terribly wrong here," tries to redo the past. Learning, through therapy, to name her history of sexual abuse as "incest," she moves beyond her sense of complicity, of feeling "bad" and "trapped." She confronts her father, writing him an angry letter documenting his behavior, naming it as incest, asserting his responsibility for what happened and its consequences on her life.

She also addresses the serious question to which she needs to find an answer to help her make sense of how she could have been victimized through her childhood and adolescence without anyone—particularly her mother, with whom she doesn't have "much of a relationship at all"—"knowing" what was going on or intervening. She now believes her "mother knew everything, which is hard for me to handle sometimes." Her sisters concur: "Mom knew everything. How could she not know?" Asked whether she has a "guess about what she (her mother) knew at the time? About what she knew or didn't know?" Sonia replies: "Yeah, I do."

Her mother continues to hedge on what she knew: "She said if only she had known- uh she had no idea that it happened to the extent that it happened. And she could never have dreamed that that could have or ever would have happened." Sonia believes her mother must have "known" something, and as confirmation reports an incident where her mother "hid in my closet one night." She recently asked her: "What did you hope to find or see?" Her mother states that she "didn't really know," "didn't remember anything," "didn't see or hear anything," "didn't say that she saw anything." The interviewer asks: "And she couldn't tell you why she did it?" Sonia responds: "She didn't know why cause I said to her 'Well why did you do that?' And she didn't know."

Nonetheless, her mother had many grounds for suspicion and acted on them: She knew her husband would "get up in the middle of the night" and "wasn't in bed all the time"; she found and patched "holes in bathroom doors and bedroom doors that my father had put in there to peek at my sister and to peek at us girls with our friends down in the bathroom where we used to get changed to go in the pool"; and she caught him "peeking in on them (her mother's own friends) through the keyholes and that- and she never invited her friends there anymore." Sonia concludes: "So then she knew. She knew something."

"Knowing" and "not knowing," her mother "thought he was a Peeping Tom or something. I guess that was the extent of what she thought. But she knew that you=know his behavior was strange." Once she found holes in Sonia's sister's bedroom door, patched them and put a note on the door: "George you're sick. You need help." But there were also signs her mother refused to notice or act on. Sonia recalls purposely not cleaning up her father's semen on the floor after one of his nightly visits. She was trying to "tell" her mother what was going on, hoping she would do something. Her mother never acknowledged or responded to her daughter's cry for help. As an adult, Sonia is able to recognize that her "cry" was a pathetic, childish gesture and that her mother would not have seen and would not have known what that spot on the floor was. Nonetheless, as a child, she believed her mother could know, did know, and did not act.

Recapturing the details of her abuse, her powerlessness as a child, the feeling of unreality when what was happening was denied and went "unseen," and her effort to make it known helps Sonia reposition herself in relation to her father and mother. Indeed, she was "trapped," but she was not "bad." Betrayed and coerced by her father who bound her to silence—"And I could never say anything you=know. And of course my father had said don't ever tell anybody."—she was left to fend for and defend herself without the support of the other adult in the family. As she tries to rewrite her story and claim a new identity, she still lacks the support of her mother who has resisted talking directly to the father, although it's "been a year" since Sonia showed her the letter she wrote to him. Nor does her mother acknowledge either that she "knew" or the seriousness of what happened. She may "write me a note once in while and say 'How are you? I hope you're feeling better.' Or you=know (l: Oh) 'I hope you're progressing' you=know. So it's at a distance. She knows about it but she doesn't care to be a part of it."

Annie describes getting to "a place of feeling the way I've felt, and being who I was, and sort of acting the way I was acting was unbearable anymore." It was "emotionally" and "physically painful uhm you=know. uh Just- I just couldn't be that way anymore. I was sick of it." She lists all the things that led to her "feeling sad" for the "first half" of her life, among them: Her parents' divorce when she was three, her mother's absence because she worked, her mother's marriage to the stepfather who abused her, and the failure of her own first marriage. She feels a "lot of years" were wasted.

"So finally I was just sick of it.

It was just- I just- there was too many years of that.

So I haven't made a sense of it.

And I don't think I've made peace with it.

But I have decided that the second half of my life

I really want it to be the way I want it to be

so I have to figure out what that is."

She attributes her change in perspective to "turning forty or getting close to turning forty," and the birth of her second son, a vaginal delivery in contrast to the "emergency Caesarean" with her first son, was a "cataclysmic sort of" event.

"There was something about- I mean for me what it truly felt like changes me which may have also been the trigger for memories was- (l: mhm) It felt like the first time I could- I had control over my body. (l: mhm) That I could say I could (l: mhm) do this. This is what's going to happen."

She was "deliriously happy," like "a marathon runner feels when they cross the finish line." Remarking that this is "funny" since the "simple fact" is she "gave birth the way the majority of the world does." She nonetheless recognizes the importance to her of this "simple fact," that "you can (l: mhm) have your body do (l: mhm) what you want it to do (l: mhm) and it works for you and it's not controlled by somebody else." Like Sonia, Annie was initially "propelled" by feelings of anger and rage, and wanted some kind of revenge on her stepfather. When her son "wasn't more than three months old," she contemplated exposing him by suing him. Over time, she relinquished her desire for revenge. She moved on to a different form of legal action and had her adoption legally annulled, which took her stepfather's name "off my birth

certificate." Further, she reestablished a connection with her biological father before his death. We might understand these actions as efforts by Annie to rewrite her life story, so as to give a different shape and direction to the second half of her life: She starts with a new beginning—her "real" father's name is reinstated on her birth certificate—and by reconnecting with him, she bridges over the intervening years by joining that past to the present. In asserting continuity in her life story, she is reclaiming her "true" identity that had been displaced by the history of abuse.

Replacing long-standing feelings of powerlessness with a new sense of agency and reclaiming a positive identity from a "damaged" self-definition are neither easy nor painless tasks, as we learn from the accounts of Kate, Sonia, and Annie. In different ways, each has moved in this direction. Each has acted, spoken, made hard choices, and begun to control her life. Their stories help us understand the complexity of the dynamic process through which sexual abuse survivors confront and deal with past traumas and learn to move on with their lives. Differences among them in how they restore their experiences open up the important question of whether these differences represent different stages in the recovery process (Herrman, 1992; Lebowitz et al., 1992). Further, they suggest directions for a more comprehensive theory of trauma and recovery, one rooted in the social and ecological context and sensitive to diverse, storied ways of understanding. Such a theory might, in turn, guide development of new clinical and community forms of intervention that would help strengthen the efforts of abuse survivors to free themselves from their pasts and move forward with their lives. To achieve those aims requires that clinicians and researchers adopt a mode of attentive listening, taking seriously how survivors talk about their experiences as they appropriate, modify, and resist cultural forms of employment.

WAYS OF TELLING: CULTURAL AND PERSONAL CONTEXTS

This report is exploratory, an account that suggests what may be learned about trauma and recovery from the ways sexual abuse survivors tell and retell their experiences over time and in various contexts. In our everyday lives, stories play a prominent role in helping us find ways to organize the flux of events—William James' famous "blooming, buzzing confusion"—into meaningful patterns. We emplot our lives, specifying how and why one

thing follows another, assigning roles to ourselves and others, moving from a beginning to an endpoint. Doing this is the work of narrativization, informed and guided by culturally-available formats: folk-tales, myths, novels and histories, family sagas, scientific models, e.g., evolutionary and psychoanalytic theories, and other ways of language-ing the world. But we do not simply repeat such stories in rote fashion, like actors following a script. We may use the culture's collective narrative as a point of departure, providing a general map of the terrain within which our story will be located, but then modify it—sometimes resisting and radically altering the original plot—to fit our circumstances and interests. And sometimes as new stories are told, they may acquire the force to change the traditional story—to choose one example, revising the "story" of the European conquest of the Americas as a heroic tale of the spread of civilization to the tragedy of oppression of indigenous peoples and destruction of their cultures.

The stories of Kate, Sonia, and Annie reflect this dialectic interplay between culturally available framings of their experiences and their individual struggles to find explanations that are personally meaningful. This is particularly evident in changes between their initial and current understandings, for example, in Annie's rejection of her presumed role as "sacrificial lamb"—a well-known metaphor with sacred overtones—where her victimization would somehow protect her mother and sister. When this explanation fails, the sexual abuse by her stepfather becomes meaningless—a "bizarre event"—but it is this realization that provides an opening for her to rewrite her story, to annul the adoption, reestablish a connection with her birth father, and move forward with a greater sense of agency and control over her life. Similarly, when Sonia breaks through the coercive silencing she has endured, she learns to name her abuse as incest and directly confronts her father and her mother. Realizing that she was not a "bad" child but a powerless one, she now has strengths that enable her to escape the imprisoning shame she had felt so she can shape a new identity. Kate seems to be at an earlier point in this process. Well aware that she has moved beyond the self-pathologizing and self-blaming stance with which she confusedly tolerated her teacher's abuse, she has acted with personal agency, but must still rely on a cultural metaphor of the "wounded healer" to find a way forward.

These concluding remarks about the complex and dynamic relationships between cultural and personal forms of employment, and the continual process of restorying, highlight problems faced by both clinicians and researchers in

their efforts to understand the meanings of trauma survivors' stories.² We have already noted that "turning points," events that make earlier understandings problematic and offer opportunities for change, are embedded in social and developmental contexts (Mishler, 1999). Further, it appears that the initial phase of restorying for each of these women occurred within a relationship: Kate's conversation with a friend who cut through her confusion and told her to "get out" of the situation; Sonia's phone conversation with her father whose reneging on a promise led to rage and recognition of how she has always been abused, and her later learning from a therapist to name her abuse as incest; and Annie's sister telling her that her "sacrificial lamb" view of her victimization was untenable since their stepfather had also tried to abuse her sister.

Although making meaning of their histories of trauma is a task each sexual abuse survivor must struggle with by and for herself, the process is inherently and intractably social. That is, their stories are told and retold to others, and the form and content of their stories reflect their life situations. For this reason, we have been urging researchers and clinicians—and the same cautions apply to friends, family members, and others—to be reflective about their own preferred stories. For example, wanting to hear stories with positive endings—liberation from the death camps, successful lives after childhood abuse—we may interfere with survivors' rights to tell their own tales, tales that may lack the coherence or resolution we and they desire. Or, we may too quickly impose our own theories of trauma and recovery, disregarding the variability among trauma survivors in their trajectories of change. We must learn to hear what they can tell us even when this is not what we wish to hear or when their stories do not resemble culturally available plots or match current theories. If we can listen to them and support their own efforts toward meaning, they may be better able to move through the process of restorying and on to new post-survivor identities. Further, as their stories become known, they may in turn transform earlier cultural and professional narratives about sexual abuse and other forms of trauma.

² Conceptions of therapy as involving "enplotment" and restorying have been important in the work of family therapists who focus on patients' narratives and refer, for example, to "co-authoring" or the process of story "deconstruction" and "reconstruction" to describe changes during the course of therapy (McLeod, 1996; McLeod & Balamoutsou, 1996; White & Epstein, 1990). The two McLeod papers review various approaches to research on restorying in therapy.

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