

# Women Survivors' Experiences of the Intersection of Abuse and Work<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Abuse creates barriers that effect women's ability to enter the paid work force: barriers that persist long after initial supports have been exhausted. The present paper examines the questions: how do women make meaning of the ways in which they have experienced the intersection of abuse and work after they have been away from abusive experiences for a period? Five women volunteered for extensive one-on-one interviews employing a narrative methodology. The long-term affects of abuse experiences resulting in loss of mental and physical health, educational and work experiences, self-esteem and self-efficacy, voice and emotional support, and loss of a sense of safety in the world was a major across participant theme. Additional themes included readiness for change, housing issues, and working for change with other women. Implications for career counselling practice, from the perspective of a social constructivist career theory, emphasize counselling in the context of women's whole lives, the importance of hearing women's stories of abuse, understanding the nature of complex trauma and the need for long-term targeted support in employment programs.

Career counsellors working with women who have had a history of abuse realize that many individual and social realities affect women's ability to enter the paid work force. Several authors contend that relational issues are a dominant theme for women in the ways in which they approach work situations (Flum, 2001; Josselson, 1992; Schultheiss, 2003). If primary relationships have been disrupted by abuse experiences, it is likely that issues and problems within a work context will also emerge (Flum, 2001). Components of physical, emotional, intellectual, and psychological well-being influence a woman's ability to work (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003) and work becomes

very important for women who are trying to rebuild their lives after experiencing various forms of abuse (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003).

Immediate support for women as they leave abusive situations is very important. Yet the effects of abuse create barriers that persist long after initial supports have been exhausted. Women who have experienced abuse encounter a number of specific life situations that often interact, overlap, and connect to create barriers to work. Experiences of assault by an intimate male partner and historical abuse combined with poverty, and current health conditions contribute to potential barriers when women seek to find and hold employment (Wells, 1994). How are women giving meaning to the intersection of their abuse experiences and their work histories in light of the fact that problems may persist for them when it comes to finding and maintaining employment? How would they go about telling these stories? The present paper explores these questions.

## Survivors and Work

Career choice and career development unfolds in particular ways for women; options and opportunities are influenced by a social context that includes balancing work and family, dealing with career interruptions, and diverse career patterns (Schreiber, 1998). Lent, Brown and Hackett (2000) describe Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as providing an important theoretical perspective from which to view women's situations in terms of work. An emphasis on variables such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals, as well as environmental variables that include family, friends, financial conditions, and the larger societal context allows this theory to be especially useful when examining how career unfolds for women.

Chronister and McWhirter (2003) have applied the SCCT model specifically to women who have been the tar-

get of domestic violence. Learning experiences were limited; opportunities to succeed in education and career related activities were low; and fear, anxiety, and depression influenced self-efficacy and future expectations. In the face of harassment in the workplace by abusers, absenteeism, impaired work performance, and lack of advancement, it was not hard to understand that women held negative outcome expectations.

Little attention has been paid to the long-term effects of domestic violence on employability (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003). Women who reported domestic violence were more likely to have had more jobs but a lower personal income with their socio-economic status dropping over time (Lloyd, 1997). Studies confirm that these women do seek employment but are unable to maintain it (Raphael & Tolman, 1997). Women who have experienced histories of abuse experience a complex set of circumstances and behaviours that may present multiple barriers to employment (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003).

Psychological trauma contributes to hyper-arousal tendencies (Herman, 1997). Job interviews can create panic; women survivors may experience extreme levels of fear over appearing uneducated, being asked personal questions that are uncomfortable to answer, or having to explain problematic job histories (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003). Elevated levels of fear and anxiety can accompany job evaluation or testing situations (Gianakos, 1999). Stress related illnesses can result in time lost from work, education, or training and women often quit jobs or are fired due to their absences (Wells, 1994). Raphael and Tolman (1997) found rates as high as 56% of women reporting that they had missed school or training due to abuse. Abuse has robbed women of control over their lives and their bodies at a very deep level and this leads to feeling powerless (Chronister & McWhirter,

2003). Powerlessness can result in an inability to make choices about employment options, a lack of awareness that one can be assertive, the tendency to relinquish power, and difficulties with authority figures (Wells, 1994).

Gianakas (1999) writes that women who have unresolved issues resulting from abuse may behave inappropriately with male supervisors in work situations. Interpersonal conflicts with co-workers and supervisors can emerge in training and work settings (Prigoff, 2000) because of this inability to maintain healthy boundaries. Many studies indicate links between domestic violence, childhood abuse and substance misuse (Bala et al., 1998; Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Reitsma-Street, Schofield, Lund, & Kasting, 2001; Ullman & Brecklen, 2003; Wells, 1994). Women experience difficulty accessing treatment due to pressures related to obtaining childcare, lack of funds, and transportation problems (Schober & Annis, 1996).

Hall (2000) interviewed 20 urban, low-income women who had suffered multiple forms of childhood abuse and were in recovery treatment due to substance abuse. She analyzed the women's stories as they related to learning and work difficulties and found four domains of interest: a) problems with school because abuse in the home environment had compromised school as a source of learning and as an arena of peer socialization, b) a lack of adult skills related to relationship competency, money management, life planning, and parenting, c) problems around academic and health literacy, and d) problems related to alcohol and drug addiction. These four issues represented barriers to success in the job market for these women.

The above authors have raised questions about the ways in which women with abuse histories move past the initial supports offered to them to negotiate the world of work. The focus of the present study was to explore survivors' stories of the intersection of abuse and work experiences in a relational context.

### Methodology

The research question, situated within an overarching framework of so-

cial constructionism, assumes an approach to career and work that is relational. Blustein, Schultheiss, and Flum (2004) argue that this point of view leads to a particular leverage in understanding how people comprehend, construct, and act in relation to the challenges and opportunities of their working experience. Relationship and relational frameworks, woven through the stories these women constructed about career and the work process, provide many important points of interest for career counsellors working with women who have a history of abuse, as well as with women who have experienced other relational difficulties.

Narrative methodology honours and allows the unique voice and story of each participant to emerge. Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, Devoy, and DeWine (2005) write that, "Narrative analyses are particularly informative to the psychology of work for individuals who have been outside of the mainstream of career development discourse" (p. 359). Career narratives in particular have the ability to identify aspects of the social realm that have enabled or constrained individuals (Cohen, Duberly, & Mallon, 2004).

Five women, recruited from a local employment program created for women with abuse histories participated in a 90 minute audio-taped one-on-one interview with the author. The women were asked to speak of how their past experiences of abuse had intersected with their abilities to find and maintain employment. As each woman sat down for the interview, she was asked, "When you heard me say that this research was about work and your experiences of abuse and I asked if you thought you might have a story to tell about that – what did you start to think about? What stories came to mind for you?" Work was defined in a broad sense as the carrier of meaning in their lives, not just paid work outside the home. During the interview, each woman was offered the opportunity to create a time line drawing in which she could illustrate the times in her life when abuse experiences intersected with her choice of work, her ability to obtain or retain work.

Frank (2000) writes of the ethical and intellectual responsibility to enter into relationship with the stories we

elicit as researchers. The analysis of the women's narratives became an entering into the relational space created between the participant and the interviewer. This entailed working amidst several layers of interpretation – field notes taken throughout the process, tape recorded interviews, verbatim transcripts, time line drawings, and concept maps created to illustrate major themes.

### Results

#### Becky<sup>2</sup>

Becky described verbal abuse from her father as a starting point that made her vulnerable to sexual abuse as a teen that then precipitated her slide into prostitution and criminality. Living within this belief system led to missed opportunities. Becky spoke of the people she had known and the type of work she had done as blinding her to any reality outside of criminality for a large portion of her life. "Most of my life has been spent in a different world and if it had been spent working at MacDonald's and going to Burger King and having a paper route it would be a whole different reality . . . If I hadn't had to put so much time into surviving the mental abuse and I hadn't put so much time into abusing myself, I wonder how much differently my life would be and I would be . . . I bet I'd be walking out proud of my resume and being comfortable with getting a job."

The four themes identified in Becky's story include: a fragmented sense of self, loss of opportunities, a lack of "job getting skills", and a desire to work for change with other women. Becky described issues related to a lack of support to become the self she might have been and a distorted sense of self worth due to her experiences. She describes her experience of assault at the hands of an intimate male partner as being her lowest point, "When I first got out of the situation, my sense of self, there was no sense of self, and I remember just describing it as 'I fragmented'." Loss of opportunity connected to her belief that she was living a life script that she did not have a hand in writing. Becky spoke of how her life was on a certain path she had no control over.

Becky struggled with not being able to visualize herself in the world of work and her lack of experience with

any of the "getting a job skills" that most people begin to experience at a much younger age. She shared that she had never had to go on an interview, or sit across from someone who was judging her as capable to do a certain job; ". . . you don't have to apply to be a prostitute and they don't ask you to fill out a job application to be a drug dealer." When speaking about the world of work, Becky's story was filled with expressions of unfamiliarity, lack of vision, and fear. What Becky lacked was the recognition that many of the job skills she had acquired in her life were in fact transferable and she could draw on them now as she moved into a different type of work world.

A prominent theme in Becky's story was her desire to work to educate and help other women. She believed that her experiences of domestic violence have made her sensitive to this issue. She shared her desire to work in the field of social work and how experiences with other women had shown her that she was able to do that type of work. "I do have the ability, I know that. I am able to give people hope and I think that is a gift."

#### *Jeannie*

When Jeannie first began to recover from the shock of a break-up with a long-term, abusive partner, she spoke of waking up in the morning and thinking, "What am I going to do for myself today. Not for my son, or for anybody else, but for me." She spoke of not really knowing how to think about herself. She had been looking after her partner and her son for so long, that had constituted her work. Jeannie was amazed by the notion of being by herself and learning how to do things for herself. "I had to keep reminding myself, you know, that there was no one to tell me what to do." The realization that she was on her own was scary. "I was scared thinking how I would have to go out and look after myself and make money."

Four significant themes identified in Jeannie's story included: doing things just for herself, being taken by surprise and not being heard, feeling silenced in the face of abuse, and questions related to being ready to move forward with her life. As Jeannie told her story, she repeated a theme related to the number of

times she was caught off guard by what was happening to her. She entered into a relationship after leaving her abusive partner only to find herself in another abusive relationship and it was a shock. "He started hitting me and doing things and saying things I never expected." Jeannie also described speaking and not being heard. She told her abusive partner to leave and yet he remained, she broke off a subsequent abusive relationship only to find the man back in her apartment as if she had never spoken of ending their relationship. In not knowing and not being heard, Jeannie did not seem to be an active agent in her own life.

Jeannie spoke of being uncomfortable with talking about being a victim of the abuse. "I was so ashamed of what was happening to me and I didn't want anybody else to know about it . . . I didn't think it was a good feeling to have other people know these things." She worried about being part of an employment program for women with abuse histories because she knew she would have to talk about things that had happened to her.

Parts of Jeannie's story relate to her lack of readiness to move forward with her life. While doing the time-line drawing, Jeannie spoke about not remembering her childhood at all. These gaps in her memory and experience limit her ability to understand and move forward. When speaking of her long-term relationship with an abusive partner, Jeannie says, "I had a good life" and minimized how he had abused her. Jeannie did not seem ready to completely face these experiences and she shared a sense of limitation in her ability to be an active agent in her life and move forward.

#### *Betty*

Before the age of fourteen, when she ran away from home to live on the street, Betty had already undergone intense trauma. She became vulnerable to alcohol abuse. "I started drinking heavily when I was around that age. Cause I discovered that even through it tasted awful, it made everything okay." She was vulnerable to men in the workplace and ultimately she was vulnerable to a relationship with an abusive husband. When Betty finally got away from this

violent and abusive marriage, barely with her life, her emotional and physical health was severely compromised. She fell into a pattern of addiction and depression that made work impossible. Betty spoke of surviving two major breakdowns and a serious suicide attempt. It took her a long time to begin to find her way out of the darkness.

The three themes identified in Betty's story: low self-esteem, ability to work, and lost opportunities, were not discrete units. These themes merged and overlapped. Long-range affects of abuse set Betty up to be vulnerable to other incidents of abuse, to addiction issues, and to the extreme distress she has lived with most of her life. The long-range affects of abuse overlap with the other themes and create intersections with her work experiences:

Betty's physical weakness and her drinking compromised jobs she was able to obtain after getting away from her abusive husband. She was unable to cope with a job she had in a truck factory where men harassed her. "I was still quite afraid of men at that point . . . I was trying to be tough, to prove to myself I could be around men . . . I just started getting more and more stressed . . . I still had the physical problems from the abuse in my back and legs . . . I would be on Demerol for the pain and still trying to work. I was drinking pretty heavily then." In subsequent attempts to obtain employment, Betty shared that her abuse affected her. "I don't have the confidence to apply for a job and when I did work at a job I couldn't handle the stress, physically or mentally, and I would need to go on sick leave."

When Betty was homeless and living on the street after losing her job at the truck factory, she ran into a friend who was able to connect her with a woman who let Betty stay at her house until she could qualify for social assistance. Betty shared that she was amazed this woman would open her home to her. She saw herself as the "scum of the streets" and wondered why anyone would let her live in their home. The state of Betty's self-esteem seriously impeded her ability to see herself as capable or able to work.

Melanie

For much of her life, Melanie had defined herself in terms of her past abuse experiences. She alluded to the many implications: her lifelong eating disorder, relationship issues, questionable choices with work, and a sense of fear. Speaking of her work experiences, "I think that one of the major ways my abuse has affected work is in how I feel about myself and then how that translates to the type of work I have chosen and how that reinforces those feelings." She chose cleaning work, being around other people's dirty things, seeing herself as an observer, standing on the outside of life looking in. "That explains a lot of my life and it comes from the sexual abuse and never feeling like I could really participate in my own life."

The four themes that connected Melanie's experiences of abuse and her work history included: being defined by her abuse experiences, her perceptions of being unsafe in the world of work, paths not taken and opportunities lost, and how healing became her work.

Melanie defined her work life as having been guided by her strong attraction to unsafe work experiences that served to reinforce what she already felt about herself: that her purpose in life was to be used by others. Many of her work experiences are seen through this lens: out delivering papers all by herself or working at a summer resort out in the middle of nowhere. "Now I see that I was choosing things that weren't necessarily safe."

Melanie named many opportunities she missed because of her abuse. She felt regrets about missed opportunities in her relationship with her husband because of the sexual abuse issues she was dealing with. "I wish I could have allowed him to be my ally." Opportunities missed in the world of work figure largely in Melanie's story. "If I hadn't had this idea that work was where I would get used and feeling like that was all I was good for . . . maybe I could have chosen a different path with work." She also reflected that dealing with sexual abuse meant she could not work full time and have access to the money necessary to pursue certain paths. ". . . maybe I could have just kept working somewhere and had the money to do some training – maybe then some

of those other paths would have been possible."

Very early in her interview Melanie made a telling statement, "When I think about the question of abuse and work, in some ways I have started to perceive that my healing from the abuse is a big part of my work." For a number of years she had been in counselling and had been part of many healing programs and experiences. Melanie's healing work became full-time work. "I couldn't have got to where I am now without having gone through the blackness and the searching and the healing. It was worthwhile, all of it."

Cinnamon

A dominant theme that emerged from Cinnamon's story was her struggle to understand and deal with an unhealthy relationship with her mother. Cinnamon spoke of always trying to please her mother and this had an impact on work and intimate relationships over her life span. She described the traditional mindset her mother held, "It's the whole religious thing, you know . . . my background and my mom's was very traditional . . . my mom wouldn't have even had a way to get what was happening to me." These early experiences and family values created vulnerability for Cinnamon that she connected with unhealthy choices in the work environment and an abusive marriage.

Cinnamon's story generated four themes that connected her experiences of abuse with her experiences of work: family of origin issues, how these issues influenced both work and relationships, loss of confidence and belief in herself, and current feelings about work. Living out a script of trying to please her mother was transferred to her work life. "I was always trying to please the owner . . . it all got overwhelming, I had a breakdown, everything fell apart." Cinnamon shared that when she met her husband she transferred all the control and people pleasing to him and, ". . . just went on doing the same thing . . ." She talked about the links between what she went through in her marriage and what she went through in her childhood with her mother, "I guess you could say I married my mom."

Cinnamon's experiences of abuse in her marriage reached out to influence

what she could envision for herself in the future. She described a marriage in which she was isolated; her husband did not like her to have friends or speak to her family on the phone or to work outside of the home. "I'm still in isolation in some ways . . . years of living like that takes a toll on you . . ."

What Cinnamon had gone through was characterized by what she had lost. When she previously worked in management, she speaks of having confidence. She could attack problems and find solutions, now decision making is difficult. "I don't have confidence in my abilities anymore . . . confidence is a big challenge right now."

Cinnamon's relationship with the world of work is fraught with fear, reluctance, and distrust. She is afraid to go back to work, ". . . going back to work, I'm just not ready. That is why I'm choosing school right now. . . ." The pressure to get out and find work made her feel as though she had moved from one controlling environment, her marriage, to another. "I still feel like I don't have a say. I have a bit more control but I'm still not calling the shots on my life and it's frustrating."

### Discussion

The five women in this study experienced barriers in terms of being able to find and maintain employment, a prerequisite for forging a work identity that is capable of providing an ongoing sense of agency. Isaacson and Brown (2000) state that work is the means of relating to society and it can provide status, recognition, and affiliation. Though work may come to serve these functions for some of these women, they did not speak of work in this way when they told their stories. Work was going to be something to figure out (Becky), something never done before, but now necessary (Jeannie), something not likely to be done again (Betty), something to be envisioned as many different paths even though the way is blocked (Melanie), or something that is feared (Cinnamon). Their experiences of abuse continue to effect their views of and participation in the world of work.

Women who have experienced violence and abuse are at risk for mental or physical health problems (Elliot & Re-

itsma-Street, 2003). This was clear in Betty's story: she had not had a paying job in twelve years; and it seemed unlikely, in view of her fragile state, that employment would be part of her future. Betty's struggle to deal with her pain, both physical and emotional, by self-medicating with alcohol relates to studies that have linked childhood abuse, domestic violence, and addiction issues (Bala et. al., 1998; Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Reitsma-Street et. al., 2001; Ullman & Brecklen, 2003; Wells, 1994) fit with

Melanie spoke of spending the past eight years working full-time on her own healing. Though she had many dreams of what she might do in terms of work in the future she also reported feeling very stuck and unable to move on. The emotional affects of her abuse experiences still had a powerful hold on her. Melanie continued to experience a number of stress reactions which create further barriers to employment (Gianakos, 1999).

Loss of valuable educational and work experiences played a large role in blocking potential work opportunities and options. Women who have abuse histories have often experienced limitations in learning experiences. Opportunities to succeed in education and career can be few; fear, anxiety, and depression influence future expectations (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003). Becky spoke of school as difficult for her due to abuse at home and the way in which her future expectations were skewed based on negative messages of verbal abuse she was taking in from her father. Betty ran away from home at a very early age, ending up homeless and on the street; her educational options seriously compromised. Melanie spoke of not being able to pursue educational opportunities because of her abuse. Cinnamon left home before graduating and had to finish Grade twelve through night school classes.

Three of the women spoke of lost opportunities related to work. Becky had many work experiences but she did not have work experiences she felt she could put on a resume. Chronister and McWhirter (2003) report that job interview situations can create panic for women who have experienced abuse, this may relate to having to answer per-

sonal questions that are uncomfortable or having to explain problematic job histories.

Jeannie had simply never needed to work outside the home. Her partner had always gone out and made the money; she just assumed her life would continue on that path. Women with abuse histories often come from backgrounds that are characterized by rigid gender stereotypes about work-role attitudes (Brown, Reedy, Fountain, Johnson, & Dischiser, 2000). Jeannie simply never envisioned a time when she would have to look after herself financially and this was a scary thought for her now.

Melanie lost significant opportunities to pursue work that might have better suited her because, in her opinion, she did not receive the support to look at other options. She also relates the ways in which abuse experiences blocked educational opportunities. Her sense of herself as "garbage" and her pattern of choosing only work that would reaffirm this belief blocked many other work experiences. She also speaks about the time involved in healing and how this has meant lost chances to sustain employment over time and save money that could have gone toward education.

Loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy was another common theme in the women's stories. Abuse and trauma experiences have an affect on self-esteem and one's basic sense of self-worth (Rosenbloom & Williams, 1999). Brown et al. (2000) contend that low self-esteem is the most significant barrier to employability and the barrier that contributes the most to lower levels of self-efficacy. Employment success is related to high levels of self-efficacy (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Gianakos, 1999) and the literature indicates that abuse lowers these levels (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Brown, et al., 2000). Sustaining a healthy self-concept under the circumstances of abuse is almost impossible (Ibrahim & Herr, 1997). Becky shared her distorted sense of self-worth due to her experiences in the sex-trade. Betty spoke, quite poignantly, of how she had no self-worth; she thought she was the "scum of the streets." Cinnamon compares her confidence levels now with how she saw herself in the past and

feels she has lost so much. Melanie described the ways in which abuse destroyed her sense of herself as capable of following certain employment paths in her life. Jeannie's reference to "doing things just for herself, for the first time" and the struggle that has been indicates a lack of a clear sense of self-efficacy in the world.

Abuse compromises interpersonal choices. Schultheiss (2003) writes about the need to take an in-depth look at the role of relationship in one's life in order to determine how these influence one's work experiences. Townsend and McWhirter (2005) suggest that connectedness is often seen as a central organizing principle and a critical theme for women. When connections have been disrupted because of relational violence, work relationships are also affected. Betty reflects that she would not have chosen her "crazy" husband if she had not experienced early childhood abuse. Cinnamon spoke of having ended up with her abusive husband because of a life long habit of people pleasing rooted in her childhood experiences. Becky believed she was targeted for sexual abuse in high school due to her earlier abuse experiences. The cumulative affects of these abuse experiences have direct impacts on work ability and choices.

Loss of voice and isolation was a further theme expressed across participants. Phillips and Daniluk (2004) write that women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse report feeling different, alone, and invisible. Jeannie spoke of feeling voiceless; Betty's severely abusive husband separated her from all relationships, both work and social; and Cinnamon's husband separated her from her friends, creating a long-term problem in terms of trusting people and making new contacts. Melanie's struggle within the actual interview to find words to describe her experiences seemed an aspect of silencing; her sense of being different and isolated is clear in her depiction of various work experiences.

Abuse experiences resulted in a serious loss of a sense of safety. In Judith Herman's (1992) recovery from trauma model, re-establishing a sense of being safe in the world is the first stage of recovery. A dominant theme in both Melanie and Cinnamon's stories is their

fear and the way in which they no longer feel safe in the world, including the world of work. Chronister and McWhirter (2003) describe what happens to a woman when abuse has robbed her of control of her life and her body; she becomes quite powerless to move about in the world with confidence. Powerlessness can lead to an inability to make employment choices, a lack of ability to be assertive, and a tendency to relinquish power (Wells, 1994).

A social constructivist approach to career that emphasizes the whole person in the ever changing context of their life (Peavy, 1995; Savickas, 1995) provides an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the five women interviewed for this research. It is not hard to visualize the ways in which their life context had influenced how they understood work. Their stories illustrate the interaction of the many factors involved in approaching, making, and maintaining work choices. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent, et al., 2000) fits particularly well with the stories of the participants in this research. In each of their stories it was obvious that they brought many issues related to cognitive and personal variables (i.e. past performances, emotionality, vicarious learning, and verbal persuasions) from the past, most of which had affected their sense of self-efficacy, into their present reality of having to negotiate the world of work. SCCT also emphasizes contextual and environmental factors. An upbringing that emphasized traditional sex-role stereotypes (Cinnamon), an identity formed through adolescence by a verbally abusive father (Becky), and a sense that work was an arena in which you were used like a piece of garbage (Melanie), create very real and specific contexts for the women who are living with these past experiences. An emphasis on context also allows counsellors to focus on issues surrounding relationship.

Three of the women interviewed had gone through long waiting periods in order to obtain safe housing. Low income women experience major difficulties meeting basic housing needs and there is a serious lack of supportive housing for women who have been victims of various forms of abuse (Re-

itsma-Street et. al., 2001). Abused women consistently rate issues regarding housing, affordable childcare, and transportation as their priorities (Elliot & Reitsma-Street, 2003).

In all of the participant's stories, the issue of being ready for various experiences emerged. Becky spoke of many fears but ended on a note of hope and readiness to move forward. Jeannie was at a stage of envisioning possibilities for herself but her story seemed to indicate a need for more time and support before she would be able to move forward with a sense of self-efficacy. Betty's story indicated a readiness to enter the employment program; she was able to take advantage of counselling opportunities in relation to her abuse experiences. Melanie had accessed many support and healing programs but her story indicates that she was still not ready to move forward. Cinnamon admits that the employment program came too soon for her, she was not ready to re-enter the world of work.

Herman (1992) writes that the final stage of recovery from abuse and trauma is the desire to reconnect. This desire is in fact the core of recovery. Some women may adopt what Herman describes as a survivor mission. They feel called upon to engage in changing the wider world in some way. They focus their energy on helping others who have experienced similar abuse as a possible means of transcending their own experience and gaining personal power. All five of the participants spoke directly of their desire to work for change in the world, specifically with other women and children. For Becky this has to do with social work and helping other women get out of abusive situations. Jeannie had managed, through everything that happened to her, to maintain a volunteer position working with single moms and she experienced this to be a safe and beneficial place for her. Betty shared a very well-thought out plan to create a soup kitchen once a month for women and children. Experiences of feeling unsafe in such situations have created a desire to provide other women and children with a safe place to be together. Melanie spoke of her desire to carry on with her education and pursue a career in counselling. Cinnamon spoke quite passionately of the

need for schools to begin teaching children conflict resolution skills and how to stand up for themselves in an effective manner. This was in direct response to her reflections on her own lifelong struggle to find her voice and stand up for herself.

### Implications for Career Counselling Practice and Policy

Counselling women about career and work choices is counselling in the context of their whole lives, for work is rooted in life. Bluestein et. al.'s (2005) contention that work is embedded in complex layers of social, cultural, and political factors points to a need for career counsellors to consider how these layers and contexts have affected all areas of a woman's life. The social constructivist career model makes it clear that life-context matters (Peavy, 1995). Women who have experienced abuse bring that specific context to the career counselling setting.

Aspects of trauma counselling highlight the importance of hearing women's stories, but also the ways in which these stories interact with everything else that is happening in women's lives. A constructivist framework for career counselling is well suited to helping counsellors recognize how experiences of abuse have influenced other important areas of a woman's life. Mahoney (2003) writes that a constructivist therapist experiences clients as intentional agents in their own lives; as active in their own meaning-making process. The constructivist counsellor works to collaborate and facilitate the client as an agent in her own life, holds affirmation and hope for the client at times when she may not be able to, and comes to understand and know the client from within her own belief system.

Constructivist counselling also conceptualizes human experience as complex, a lifelong experiment in which the client is neither a prisoner of the past nor totally free to choose any future path (Mahoney, 2003). Themes in the participant's stories link to some of the newest research on complex trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006). All five of the women interviewed described life situations that involved ongoing experiences of abuse. Briere and Scott (2006) describe complex trauma as severe, pro-

longed, and repeated trauma that takes on a chronic, developmental etiology: the result of a wide range of outcomes that vary from person to person as a function of their unique trauma exposure; for example, age of first trauma experience, issues related to disrupted attachment, and subsequent revictimization. Childhood abuse issues can lead to maladaptive adolescent behaviour (substance abuse, inappropriate sexual behaviour, ongoing emotional or mental health issues) which in turn result in vulnerability to additional victimization, which leads to further responses and behaviours leading in turn further risk.

When working with this population it is important that career counsellors have an understanding of the complex nature of trauma, especially as it may relate to early childhood exposure to traumatic experiences. Although Betty's story was severe in terms of the cumulative nature of her trauma experiences and the ways in which they made her vulnerable to further victimization, her story is in no way unusual. The types of cumulative abuse that many of the participants shared form a life context that influenced all areas of their lives, including their ability to work. By recognizing that career counselling is counselling for life, counsellors realize that to facilitate readiness for work many issues need to be addressed.

Women who have experienced abuse need opportunities to learn about themselves, the world of work, and the options they might have for their future (Gianakos, 1999). Simply learning skills is not enough for this population of women (Wells, 1994). Understanding the context of their abuse and how it has influenced their decision-making is also important (Belknap, 1999). Elliot and Reitsma-Street (2003) argue against programs that pressure vulnerable women to take any job that comes along without addressing the significant stresses and barriers they face. Being ready to access specific support experiences is crucial for the success of these endeavours. As is seen in these women's stories, when recovering from abuse experiences, readiness is a complex process.

The literature and the individual women's stories support the need for long-term targeted support for women

who have experienced abuse and are now moving toward re-entering the world of work. Although the targeted employment program all five women took part in was a positive experience, fourteen weeks was not long enough. Programs also need to address the multiple issues these women face: the need for vocational training, education, employment coaching and support, housing, childcare, legal advice, assistance with welfare, and skills training for independent living (Moe & Bell, 2004).

Programs need to be holistic in the ways they view women. Models of empowerment, such as the one suggested by Chronister and McWhirter (2003) emphasize: (a) collaboration between facilitators and clients, (b) paying attention to context which includes educational levels, attitudes to work, affects of abuse, family demands, culture, economics, and access to community supports, (c) an active process of recognizing the skills and resources the woman already has, (d) helping women become critical thinkers about their own life situations and move toward exercising more personal agency, and (e) connecting women with the wider community.

There is a particular need to pay close attention to factors of *readiness* for change in a woman's life. If employment programs are offered before women are ready, they may not be able to take advantage of the opportunities for education and skill development being offered. This readiness is related to a process of recovery from abuse experiences that is hard to place on a specific timeline. Lock-step programs that focus on one particular model of career preparation or readiness may not work for this population of women. Appropriate assessment and programs designed to meet individual women's needs would seem to make the most sense. The stories of the five participants in this study indicate different profiles of readiness that is unrelated to the time away from abusive experiences. Some women would benefit from supportive employment internship programs, others are still in need of counselling to deal with the long-term affects of abuse, and yet others may need to enter into the world of employment and concentrate on the healing personal work involved

in abuse recovery later.

Policy makers must also pay attention to the critical issue of access to safe and affordable housing for women who are attempting to rebuild their lives. Ensuring that women can find housing is an essential component of their safety and the safety of their dependent children (Moe & Bell, 2004). In extensive research directed at housing issues and policy options for women living in urban poverty in three Canadian cities, Reitsma-Street, et. al. (2001) found that there is a serious lack of supportive housing for women who have been the victims of domestic violence. This was echoed by participants in this study.

The five women who narrated the ways in which abuse intersected with their experiences of work spoke of many barriers in their lives. At the same time, their stories shone with light and hope. They were determined to move beyond abuse experiences and though they were at various points in the process of doing that, their individual courage and determination to not be defined solely by these experiences was clear. Many of them reflected on how far they had come on their individual journeys of recovery and all had hopes and dreams for the future. Betty's words speak of this hope when she talks of why she is telling her story, ". . . maybe it will give some woman hope that you can still have quality of life even after being devastated, you know . . . you can still follow your dreams."

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