

# **Adult Reflections on Childhood Verbal Abuse**

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By

Debra Helen Roth

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe, with the intention of understanding, the lived experiences and meanings given to these experiences, of adult women who were verbally abused as children. Existing studies in the area of verbal abuse have often examined verbal abuse as part of psychological and/or emotional abuse or in conjunction with physical and sexual abuse. In order to more fully understand the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse and to add to previous research, this study focused exclusively on verbal abuse using a hermeneutic-phenomenological research approach. Three adult women who experienced childhood verbal abuse, but who are coping successfully despite negative childhood experiences, were interviewed in three separate in-depth conversations; these were augmented with observations, fieldnotes and other documents. After multiple readings of the transcripts, stories of the three women were told. Further analysis consisted of a guided existential reflection based on lived time, lived body, lived space and lived relation (van Manen, 1990), to aid in the process of questioning, reflecting, writing, and coming to a deeper understanding of the ways these women have experienced childhood verbal abuse.

The findings from this study add to the understanding of childhood verbal abuse and perhaps will have the added benefit of bringing increased awareness of how detrimental this form of abuse can be to an individual's self-concept. Results suggest that although verbal abuse experienced in childhood can have adverse consequences, individuals can manage to become stronger and more resilient. Future research focusing on the body/mind connection and age-related factors would be useful. Implications for counselling practice are also described using recommendations from the participants.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Verbal Abuse and its Devastating Impact**

Verbal abuse is insidious.

Verbal abuse is endemic.

Verbal abuse impacts millions of people.

Verbal abuse and its denial are crazy-making.

Verbal abuse usually occurs in secret.

*Patricia Evans*

#### ***Background***

A small child stands in a circle and words rain down on her. Some of the words fall softly and are nurturing and growth producing to the child. They fall like a gentle, warm rain. Some of the words sting and are a little bit harsher, and sleet forms as they fall. The child shivers. Some of the words are cold and hard as hailstones and start to cause some damage and inflict pain on the child. All of the words are directed toward the child but it is the way the words are coming and the form they are taking that determines whether they benefit the child or harm her. The gentle, soft rain will likely produce a happy well-adjusted individual while the pounding hard hailstones may result in a shy, withdrawn child running for cover. As a child of verbal abuse I can see myself standing in the rain. Words were all around me and covering me with either a soft warm washing or a hard, cold deluge that left me with nowhere to go except within myself.

Verbal abuse and the dynamics and consequences of this issue have always been of interest to me. I experienced some of the effects of verbal abuse in my own life. I internalized a lot of the abuse and felt shame and guilt. I thought it was something that I did that caused the abuse. It led to low self-esteem and feelings of never being good

enough. I lacked confidence in my own abilities, was very shy, and doubted myself. I was overweight as a child. Food was used as a buffer against the abuse and to soothe my wounded spirit. Through my own personal spiritual journey, workshops and retreats I have attended, counselling, and books I have read, I have learned to overcome many of the feelings and negative thoughts I used to have about myself. I still struggle with feelings of inferiority and trying to measure up to other peoples' expectations. I realize that I have been influenced in a certain way as a result of having experienced childhood verbal abuse. I was very interested in how other women have been affected by verbal abuse and if their experiences were similar or different from mine. It is better to be clear and open about my understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions and theories (van Manen, 1990). Who I am as a researcher will ultimately affect the research that I am conducting.

At the beginning of this inquiry, my assumptions were that verbal abuse lowers self-esteem, can lead to problems with relationships, is associated with depression and feelings of shame and guilt; and that an individual who has been abused may also perpetuate the abuse when an adult. I assumed that the woman, who is successfully managing despite the abusive experiences, may not be as open about her feelings and may be more distrustful of others.

Given that there can be wide-ranging and detrimental effects of verbal abuse on a person's functioning, understanding the dynamics that lead to abuse as well as examining factors that buffer its negative effects is essential in order to break the cycle of abuse. I was curious as to what some of the protective factors might be that influence a woman to cope successfully with verbal abuse so that she does not perpetuate it or stay stuck in past

memories because of the abuse. I have identified some of the influences in my life that have been factors for my own growth in being a survivor such as my faith and counselling, and I was curious in finding out what some other individuals have done in order to live with their experience of childhood verbal abuse. When researching this topic I found very little specifically dealing with only verbal abuse. Most of the books and journal articles speak of psychological and emotional abuse which entails more than just being verbally abused. Verbal abuse is viewed by most researchers as one expression of emotional abuse (Garbarino, Guttman & Wilson-Seeley, 1986; Hamarman & Bernet, 2000; Kaplan, Pelcovitz & Labruna, 1999). In the literature review I address aspects of psychological and emotional abuse and then examine the research which specifically addresses verbal abuse.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” is an old childhood saying. Can words be as harmful as a physical assault? Feeling pain caused by words is as natural as feeling pain when you are hit with a brick (Elgin, 1995). There is a growing consensus among professionals that emotional and/or psychological abuse is more prevalent than other forms of maltreatment and is more destructive in its impact on development (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Garbarino et al., 1986; Vissing & Bailey, 1996). Verbal abuse may be underreported because the victims may not recognize that they are being abused. If they are even aware of the abuse they are usually not asked about it so it goes unreported (Schwarz- Hirschhorn, 2001).

From the Statistics Canada 2001/02 Transition Home Survey for Saskatchewan taken on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2002, there were 225 residents in shelters in Saskatchewan --46% were women and 54% were dependent children. Of the women living in shelters, 67%

(70) were victims of abuse. Of those who were abuse victims, 96% were fleeing psychological abuse, 91% physical abuse, 69% threats, 57% financial abuse, 59% harassment and 36% sexual abuse. Eighty-three percent of women who had parental responsibilities and were admitted for abuse stated that they were also protecting their children from witnessing their mother being abused--66% from psychological abuse, 40% from physical abuse and 28% from threats. From all across Canada, of women who were in shelters because of abuse, 85% were leaving emotional/psychological abuse, 74% physical violence, 53% threats, 36% harassment and 29% sexual abuse. These are only the statistics from shelters and do not represent the women and children who do not report the abuse or even realize they are being verbally or emotionally abused.

The high incidence of emotional abuse, threats and harassment are of great concern. Vissing, Straus, Gelles, and Harrop (1991) reported that most incidence or prevalence studies only supply information on the extent to which there is verbal aggression that has come to the attention of human services of various kinds. These studies therefore significantly underestimate the amount of psychological and other types of maltreatment.

Au Coin (2003) reported on the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) endorsed by Statistics Canada. The study gathered data from child welfare agencies across the country in order to follow the incidence of child maltreatment and characteristics of both the abused child and their family. In 1998, neglect was the principal reason for reported investigations making up 40% of cases followed by physical abuse (31%), emotional maltreatment (19%) and sexual abuse (10%). Emotional abuse inflicts injuries on such nonphysical and often intangible facets

of an individual such as self-esteem, self-concept and social competence (Hart, Binggeli, & Brassard, 1998; Wolfe, 1991).

### *Need for the Study*

All of the articles reviewed for this thesis, with the exception of one dissertation, used quantitative methodology to examine the very complex and subjective construct of verbal abuse. Many of the articles did not study emotional or verbal abuse separate from physical or sexual abuse (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Gross & Keller, 1992; Hoglund & Nicholas, 1995; Loos & Alexander, 1997; Ney, 1987). Perhaps the fact that verbal abuse is a concept that cannot easily be defined makes it a difficult construct to examine especially when doing quantitative research. Using qualitative methodology will help to bring more depth and understanding to this topic. Bruner (1996) stated that causal explanations deal only in material, efficient, and formal causes, explanations that are independent of context. To bring increased awareness and new insights to the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse, semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow the participants to share their personal stories and the meaning they attribute to their lived experiences. They were not required to answer a set of pre-determined questions or to fill out a survey that might not have captured their experience.

Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Skodol, Brown, and Oldham (2001) wrote that little is currently known about the long-term psychological consequences of childhood verbal abuse. Few studies have investigated childhood verbal abuse directly, although several studies have assessed verbal abuse as one aspect of emotional or psychological abuse. Researchers have attempted to define childhood verbal abuse but at present a well-established operational definition does not exist, nor is there consensus about the



prevalence of childhood verbal abuse in the general population. This is another reason that there is a need for this type of study.

When studying emotional and verbal abuse it is necessary to examine the context of the abuse and the subjective experience of the individual in order to more fully understand the nature and effects of the abuse. A qualitative study is necessary to add a different perspective to this sensitive and difficult subject and to bring new insights to the phenomenon of verbal abuse. This type of study will perhaps encourage further research on this topic, particularly in the area of effective prevention programs to stop emotional and verbal abuse from being perpetuated from one generation to the next. Understanding more about verbal abuse will also enable therapists and counsellors to provide better assistance and treatment to those who have experienced verbal abuse as children and who may still be victims of abuse and/or abusers themselves. As I am a counsellor, this area is of particular interest to me.

### *Delimitations*

In this study only adult females (18 years of age or older) were asked to voluntarily participate and share their stories of childhood verbal abuse. Because I am a woman, I was interested in what other women had to say about their experiences of being verbally abused as children. Furthermore, previous studies (Hogland & Nicholas, 1995; Loos & Alexander, 1997; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Varia, Abidin, & Dass, 1996) have found gender differences regarding the effects of childhood abuse; therefore, only adult women were interviewed for this study. Hoglund and Nicholas (1995) reported that exposure to childhood emotional abuse resulted in women being less likely than men to externalize their anger and having more shame and guilt related to the abuse. Varia et al.

(1996) found that men who experienced abuse were more likely to use a denying coping strategy to deal with past abuse. Men may be taught to deny their affect because being emotional is not considered masculine. Developmental studies of children living in at-risk environments and families, have found girls to be more resilient than boys. Boys react emotionally and behaviorally in more negative ways than girls to unfavorable family situations (Kumpfer, 1999).

### *Definition of Terms*

These are the definitions that were used to guide my research.

**Verbal Abuse--** (Verbally assaulting)- constant name calling, harsh threats, and sarcastic comments that continually “beat down” the child’s self-esteem with humiliation-includes openly telling the child that he/she is worthless and calling child derogatory/demeaning names (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000).

**Resiliency--** Capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship and repair oneself (Wolin & Wolin 1993)

**Emotional Abuse--** According to Oates (1996), emotional abuse is the habitual, verbal harassment of a child by disparagement, criticism, threat, ridicule and the inversion of love; by verbal and nonverbal means, rejection and withdrawal are substituted.

**Psychological Abuse--** “Psychological maltreatment means a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or of value only in meeting another’s needs” (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 1995).

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of this study was to describe, in an attempt to understand, the lived experiences and the meanings given to these experiences by adult women who were verbally abused as children. The present study used a basic qualitative inquiry informed by hermeneutic phenomenology in order to add to the previous positivistic research done in the area of childhood verbal abuse and to bring much needed innovative, in-depth understanding to a multifaceted and sensitive issue. It is only by studying a topic comprehensively that new insights and explanations can arise to explain the effects and dynamics inherent in verbal abuse.

### ***Research Questions***

The main research question for this study was:

What is the lived experience and meaning of childhood verbal abuse for adult women?

Sub-questions:

What is the nature of the effects of childhood verbal abuse on adult functioning (behavioral, physical, and/or psychological?)

What factors or experiences do participants identify as important in helping them cope with childhood verbal abuse?

### ***Summary***

Verbal abuse is a phenomenon that I have personally experienced in my own life and as a result I was interested in how other women have coped with their experiences of childhood verbal abuse. Many researchers have found that emotional and/or psychological abuse appears to be more widespread than other forms of abuse and may

be more detrimental to an individual's development, particularly in the area of self-esteem (e. g., Garbarino et al. 1986; Wolfe, 1991). Verbal abuse has only recently been addressed as a separate issue from emotional and/or psychological abuse and it is often studied together with physical and sexual abuse (Hoglund & Nicholas, 1995; Ney, 1987). At present, not much is known about the long-term psychological effects of childhood verbal abuse (Johnson et al., 2001). There is not a consistent definition among researchers or consensus on how prevalent verbal abuse is in the general population.

Most studies that have been done in the area of verbal abuse have used quantitative methods such as questionnaires or surveys. Therefore I examined verbal abuse from a qualitative perspective in order to add to the existing literature and to learn more about this phenomenon in a more detailed and subjective manner. Interviewing adult women in-depth about their lived experiences and the meanings they have made of childhood verbal abuse resulted in a more thorough and richer understanding of the phenomenon of verbal abuse.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

In this chapter a literature review was conducted to examine what other researchers have written about the phenomenon of verbal abuse. Research that was done in the later stages of the study as a result of the analysis is presented in the discussion chapter. A discussion of the complexity of defining emotional and/or psychological abuse will assist in understanding why the topic of verbal abuse has only recently been studied. Definitions regarding emotional and psychological abuse were assessed, as they inform the phenomenon of verbal abuse. Two pertinent theories were also investigated. One aids in explaining how verbal abuse may be perpetuated from one generation to the next (Social Learning Theory, Bandura, 1977); the other describes what effect verbal abuse may have on a child's development-behavioral, physical and psychological (Developmental Theory, Erikson, 1963). Factors that may buffer individuals from negative outcomes as a result of experiencing verbal and/or psychological abuse were also examined as well as what some of the mediating factors are that enable some individuals to survive and even thrive after living through childhood verbal and/or psychological abuse.

There appears to be difficulty among researchers in coming to a consensus on a definition of emotional and/or psychological abuse and the term that should be used. Some researchers use the phrase emotional abuse (e.g., Hamarman & Bernet, 2000; Thompson & Kaplan, 1996) whereas others report on psychological abuse (e. g. Ferguson & Dacey, 1997); yet others (e. g., Glaser, 2002) refer to emotional abuse and neglect as psychological maltreatment and (e. g., Vissing & Bailey, 1996) use emotional maltreatment and psychological abuse as interchangeable terms. O'Hagan (1995) has

written separate definitions for emotional and psychological abuse. Verbal abuse is considered to be a form of emotional and/or psychological abuse (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Hamarman & Bernet, 2000; Vissing & Bailey, 1996), although no consistent word is used to describe the phenomenon of verbal abuse. Verbal abuse has been labelled verbal aggression, verbal abuse, verbal attack, negative verbal interaction, negative interaction and coercive response (Vissing & Bailey, 1996). In this paper, the term verbal abuse was used and the definition by Garbarino et al. (1986) and amended by Pearl (as cited in Hamarman and Bernet, 2000) guided the research: “constant name calling, harsh threats, and sarcastic comments that continually “beat down” the child’s self-esteem with humiliation. Verbally assaulting behaviours include openly telling the child that he/she is worthless and calling the child derogatory/demeaning names” (p.929).

Two theories were examined in relation to verbal abuse. The role of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) offers a rationale for the continuation of verbal abuse from one generation to the next and may be an explanation for the prevalence of verbal abuse in society. Considering Social Learning Theory in terms of the family has led many researchers to theorize that behavior such as verbal abuse may be learned through role models such as parents (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Haj-Yahia & Dawud-Noursi, 1998; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Ney, 1987; Spillane-Grieco, 2000).

Erikson’s Theory of Human Development was also explored. According to Erikson (1963), each developmental stage has to accomplish certain social demands. These tasks will be learned and skills gained if the socializing representatives (e.g., parents) provide an environment for the child to learn to the best of his/her ability. Emotional and/or verbal abuse and neglect may cause development delays especially

during the early years of a child's life. Emotional and/or psychological abuse and verbal abuse in particular, and the effects on development have been considered by various researchers (Bifulco & Moran, 1998; Garbarino et al., 1986; Glaser, 2002; O'Toole, 2000; Solomon & Serres, 1999). Some of these studies were explored in this thesis. Factors that may safeguard individuals from negative effects of verbal and emotional abuse were also investigated (Schwarz-Hirschhorn, 2001; Varia & Abidin, 1999) as well as some factors that may mediate positive change in the inter-generational cycle of abuse (Bandura, 1999; Egeland, 1993; Garbarino, 1995; Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

### *Difficulty with Definition of Emotional and/or Psychological Abuse*

The difficulty of operationally defining emotional or psychological maltreatment and its forms points to its complexity and is in fact an indicator of the difficulty of even defining the concept of maltreatment or abuse (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995).

Maltreatment is a social judgment. Parental behavior is so judged if it violates certain minimally recognized community standards. Such standards also exist for psychological maltreatment. The majority of parents recognize, just like professionals, that repeated yelling and swearing at a child is likely to lead to the child having problems in life.

Psychological maltreatment shows itself in a variety of ways and has different consequences depending on the age and developmental level of the child. It is not exclusively characterized by the type of act, as is the case with physical abuse. The repetitiveness of the act, the socio-cultural context in which the act is performed, and the subjective meaning that the act carries for the child, signify the abusive nature of the particular form of psychological maltreatment. The idea that the abuse has to be

repetitive in order to be viewed as abuse when a single incident could be detrimental to a child makes this definition suspect.

Experts in the area of emotional abuse continue to have difficulty in recognizing and operationally defining it, and experience uncertainty about proving it legally. The lack of definition prevents protective service agencies from intervening in most cases (Glaser, 2002; Hamarman & Bernet, 2000). Glaser (2002) defines emotional abuse and neglect as a carer-child relationship that is marked by patterns of harmful interactions, requiring no physical contact with the child. Motivation to harm the child is not necessary for the definition. Unlike sexual abuse that is a secret activity, this author claims that these forms of ill treatment are easily observable. They might be observable to family members but the perpetrator will usually not act or say certain things in front of strangers or even friends of the family.

According to Kaplan et al. (1999) emotional abuse includes verbal abuse, harsh nonphysical punishments (e.g. being tied up) or threats of maltreatment. Emotional neglect covers failure to provide adequate affection and emotional support or permitting a child to be exposed to domestic violence.

Hamarman and Bernet (2000) list the following categories of emotional abuse proposed by Garbarino et al. (1986) and amended by Pearl (as cited in Hamarman & Bernet, 2000):

**Rejecting**-- refuses to acknowledge child's worth and legitimacy (rights) of a child's needs; defining child as a failure, refusing to show affection to the child, and refusing to acknowledge child's accomplishments.



**Isolating--** cuts off child from normal social experiences, prevents child from forming friendships, and makes child believe that he/she is alone in world; locking child in a room, basement or attic; not allowing child to participate in normal family routine.

**Terrorizing--** verbal assaults- creates a climate of fear; bullies and frightens child, makes child believe world is unpredictable and hostile; terrorizing behaviours include threatening and frightening child with guns, knives or whips.

**Ignoring--** deprives child of essential stimulation and responsiveness, stifling emotional growth and intellectual development-includes failing to stimulate in a suitable manner; not calling child by name and showing no affection.

**Corrupting--** encouraging and instructing child in antisocial/delinquent activity; teaching child sexually exploitative behaviours and teaching that bad is good and good is bad.

**Verbally assaulting--** constant name calling, harsh threats, and sarcastic comments that continually impair the child's self-esteem with humiliation-includes openly telling the child that he/she is worthless and calling child derogatory/demeaning names.

**Over-pressuring--** imposes consistent pressure to grow up fast and to achieve too early in areas of academics, physical/motor skills and social interaction-leaves child feeling that he/she is never quite good enough-includes criticism and punishment of age-appropriate behaviours as inadequate; making comparisons to those who are very advanced, consistently leaving child "poor" by comparison.

The severity of emotional abuse is a combination of intent and harm according to Hamarman and Bernet (2000): (a) an action that is committed both with intent to inflict harm and has high probability of causing harm is rated as severe; (b) an action that

contains neither intent or high probability of harm is mild; (c) and an action in the middle with either intent or harm but not both are rated moderate in severity. A child might be severely harmed whether or not the perpetrator intended it or it seemed harmless at the time.

Psychological and emotional abuses are not synonymous but not entirely separate experiences either according to O'Hagan (1995). It is likely that a perpetrator who is abusing the child emotionally will also be abusing the child psychologically and vice versa. O'Hagan (1995) has two separate definitions but acknowledges that in the United States psychological and emotional abuses are viewed as being the same. This author says that emotional abuse is the inappropriate emotional response to the child's experience of emotion and its accompanying expressive behaviour. Psychological abuse is the inappropriate behaviour which damages or reduces the creative and developmental potential of important mental faculties and mental processes of the child. O'Hagan (1995) also stresses that the abuse has to be repetitive.

Psychological maltreatment of children and youth consists of acts of commission and omission which are judged on a basis of a combination of community standards and professional expertise to be psychologically damaging (Wolfe, 1991). Such acts are committed by individuals, singly or collectively, who by their characteristics (e.g., age, status, knowledge, organizational form) are in a position of differential power that renders a child vulnerable. Such acts damage immediately or ultimately the behavioral, cognitive, affective or physical functioning of the child. I question Wolfe's definition. Is the perpetrator always in a position of power over the child or older than the child? It may be a peer or sibling that is doing the abusing.

To understand the emotional aspects of abuse it is necessary to support a perspective that underlines both developmental and social aspects of the issue. We need to have principles that work in all cultures for evaluating child care. There are practices that are inherently harmful to children and there are universals that can be applied across and within cultures (Garbarino & Gilliam, 1980)

Emotional abuse of children is always unacceptable, but cultural norms must be considered. Behaviors that may be abusive in some cultures could be acceptable in others and may not be harmful if they do not involve the replacement of love with rejection and withdrawal. When the behavior toward the child conveys the culture-specific message of rejection or when it impedes the development of self-esteem, then it is emotional abuse, whatever the family's cultural norms (Hamarman & Bernet 2000).

### ***Role of Social Learning Theory in Verbal Abuse***

The role of Social Learning Theory was considered as an explanation for the continuation of verbal abuse from one generation to the next and may provide one reason this abuse is so prevalent. An overview of Social Learning Theory will be discussed and then what the research has found regarding the perpetuation of verbal abuse in relation to this theory.

Bandura (1977) hypothesized that a great deal of human behavior is developed and shaped through observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes and emotional reactions of others. "Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action" (Bandura, 1977, p. 22). By observing others, a person forms an idea of how new behavior patterns are

performed and later on the symbolic construction serves as a guide for action. Learning by observation involves four separate processes: attention, retention, production and motivation:

1. Attention- Observers cannot learn unless they pay attention to what's happening around them. This process is influenced by characteristics of the model, such as how much one likes or identifies with the model, and by characteristics of the observer, such as the observer's expectations or level of emotional arousal. A child would very much identify with their parents and be emotionally involved with them if they are being verbally abused or witnessing abuse, so he/she would likely be paying attention.

2. Retention- This involves the observers not only recognizing the observed behavior but also remembering it at some later time. This depends on the observer's ability to code or structure the information in an easily remembered form or to physically or mentally rehearse the model's actions. According to Boeree (1998), this is where imagery and language play a part. The observer stores what he/she has seen the model do in the form of mental images or verbal descriptions. When the information is thus stored, the individual can later bring up the image or description, so that it can be reproduced with their own behavior.

3. Production- Observers must be physically and intellectually capable of producing the act. In many instances, the observer possesses the necessary responses (e. g. the child may verbally abuse a sibling if he/she has been verbally abused by a parent or has witnessed the parent verbally abusing a sibling). But sometimes, reproducing the model's behaviors may involve skills the observer has not yet gained (e. g. a young child who has been verbally abused but cannot yet speak).

4. Motivation- Usually, observers will perform the act only if they have some motivation or reason to do so. The presence of reinforcement or punishment, either to the model or directly to the observer, becomes very important in this process. There are three motivators that cause us to demonstrate what we have learned: a) past reinforcement-traditional behaviorism; b) promised reinforcement- incentives that we can imagine; c) vicarious reinforcement-seeing and recalling the model being reinforced. Negative motivators may be present that will give a reason not to imitate someone: (a) past punishment; (b) promised punishment (threats); (c) vicarious punishment (seeing someone in the past being punished). Bandura (1977) says that punishment in whatever form does not work as well as reinforcement and has a tendency to backfire on us. Attention and retention give an explanation for acquiring or learning a model's behavior; production and motivation regulate the performance (Funderstanding, 2002).

Social Learning Theory emphasizes the major roles played by vicarious, symbolic, and self-regulatory processes in psychological functioning. Human thought, affect, and behavior can be clearly influenced by observation as well as by direct experience. The capacity of humans to use symbols allows them to represent events, to analyze their conscious experience, to communicate with others, to plan, to create, to imagine and to engage in anticipatory action. Social Learning Theory stresses the importance of self-regulatory processes. People are not simply reactors to external processes. They can select, organize and transform the stimuli that intrude upon them. Through self-generated incentives and consequences they can exercise some influence over their own behavior. Human behavior is viewed in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral and environmental influences. This idea of

human functioning does not see people in the role of powerless objects controlled by environmental forces nor are they free agents who can become whatever they choose. Both people and their environments are reciprocal determinants of each other (Bandura, 1977). Reciprocal causation does not imply that the different sources of influence are of equal force. Some may be stronger than others and the reciprocal influences do not necessarily all happen at the same time. It takes time for a causal factor to exert its power and activate reciprocal influences (Bandura, 1989). There is an interaction between thought, affect and action. Expectations, beliefs, self-perceptions, goals and intentions give form and direction to behavior. What people think, believe and feel will shape how they behave. There is an interactive relationship between personal characteristics and environmental influences. Human expectations, beliefs, emotional tendencies and cognitive competencies are developed and adapted by social influences that express information and activate emotional reactions through modeling, instruction and social persuasion. People can provoke different reactions from their social environment by their physical characteristics, such as their age, size, race, sex, and physical attractiveness, separate from what they say and do.

There is also a two-way influence between behavior and the environment. In everyday situations, behavior changes environmental conditions and is, in turn, altered by the very conditions it creates. The environment is not a fixed entity that inevitably intrudes upon individuals. Most features of the environment do not operate as an influence until they are activated by appropriate behavior (parents usually do not praise their children unless they do something praiseworthy). The aspect of the prospective environment that becomes the actual environment for given individuals consequently

depends on how they behave (Bandura, 1989). Through their actions, people produce as well as choose environments. Aggressive individuals may create hostile environments wherever they go, whereas those who act in a more good-natured way generate a friendly social setting (Raush, as cited in Bandura, 1986). Behavior determines which of the many possible environmental influences will be a factor and what forms they will take. Environmental influences, in turn, partly determine which forms of behavior are developed and activated.

### ***Perpetuation of Verbal Abuse***

When applying Social Learning Theory to the family it can be seen that we model behavior that we have been shown as children (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Behavior such as emotional or verbal abuse is learned through role models such as parents, either directly or indirectly and it is reinforced in childhood and continued in adulthood as a coping response to stress or a method of conflict resolution. Observations of how parents and significant others behave in close relationships provide a primary learning environment of behavioral choices which are “appropriate” for these relationships. Mihalic and Elliott (1997) claim that there have been numerous studies for evidence of the intergenerational cycle of abuse, which proposes that violent and abusive adults learned this behavior as a result of being the victims or witnesses of aggressive and abusive behavior as children.

A history of verbal abuse in the childhood of the parents is a good predictor of these same parents verbally abusing their own children (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995). Verbal violence is more likely to be transmitted intergenerationally than is physical violence, perhaps because it is associated with a psychological dynamic. For example,

parents who were maligned in their childhood may, as adults, remain convinced of their unworthiness and thus repeatedly reactivate their own unresolved conflicts. A parent's history of childhood attachments will also profoundly affect the quality of future relationships as parent, spouse, or friend.

The family environment is a factor in whether people have a tendency to communicate in a verbally aggressive manner according to Martin, Anderson, Burant and Weber (1997). Individuals who come from verbally abusive homes not only are likely to be more verbally aggressive but they also experience less satisfaction with their own families and in their relationships with others.

Haj-Yahia and Dawud-Noursi (1998) examined the relevance of Social Learning Theory toward explaining how witnessing and experiencing resourceful tactics (i.e., reasoning) and destructive tactics (verbal and physical violence) in their families, affected the way Arab youth resolved disagreements with their siblings. According to these researchers children who experience any form of abuse have more social and emotional problems than their non-abused counterparts. It is useful to examine a different culture (Arab population in Israel) to see whether the effects of domestic abuse reported in Western cultures are also present among Arab children.

The family environment is seen as the key factor in understanding the etiology and maintenance of aggressive or abusive behavior. The idea of intergenerational violence comes mainly from Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Haj-Yahia & Dawud-Noursi, 1998). According to this theory, modeling represents one of the primary ways by which new behaviors are acquired and existing patterns are adapted. When children observe their parents acting violently toward other family members and/or



experiencing abuse themselves, they may adopt the same behavior without even being rewarded for it. Consequently, these children may view their abusive parents' abusive actions as acceptable ways of interacting with others and act the same way in return.

Haj-Yahia and Dawud-Noursi (1998) conducted a survey among 832 Arab adolescents in Israel between the ages of 16 and 18 of which 52% were female (433). Eight high schools in the Arab society were randomly selected from the northern and central regions of Israel. Different forms of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) were used to measure the extent to which adolescents experienced and witnessed different tactics for resolving conflicts in their family of origin. The CTS was also used to look at conflict tactics currently used by respondents in the way they related with their siblings. The questionnaires were administered in grade 12 classrooms.

The findings were presented in three ways: (a) the frequencies of different conflict tactics used in Arab families, as reported by offspring; (b) Pearson's correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) concerning the different patterns of witnessing and experiencing the use of different conflict tactics; (c) multiple regression analyses directed toward identifying the best models for predicting the use of different tactics to resolve conflicts with siblings.

Forty percent of the subjects reported witnessing their parents insulting, yelling, or swearing at one of their siblings and 49% had done so themselves at least once over the past 12 months. About 76% of the husbands and 53% of the wives had verbally and psychologically abused each other at least once over the past 12 months. Eighty-one percent of the respondents stated that they had experienced one or more acts of verbal and psychological abuse by their fathers, 79% by their mothers, and 81% by their siblings

at least once during the 12 months preceding the study. As well, 74% witnessed their siblings being verbally and psychologically abused by either one of their parents; and the same percentage (74%) reported that they had verbally and psychologically abused their siblings at least once over the past 12 months. Results indicated that the more husbands used reasoning to resolve conflicts with their wives, the less they used verbal abuse. The more husbands verbally abused their wives, the more likely they were to also verbally and physically abuse their adolescents. Similar results were shown for the mothers. The more the wives used reasoning to resolve arguments with husbands, the more likely they were to use the same method with their offspring and the less likely they were to verbally abuse them. The more the wives used verbal abuse against their husbands, the more they verbally and physically abused their children. The more their husbands verbally abused the wives, the more the wives verbally and physically abused their offspring. If the parents were likely to use reasoning to resolve conflicts with the siblings of the respondents, the siblings used similar methods with the respondents. The more parents used verbal abuse against the siblings, the more the siblings used verbal and physical abuse against the respondents; and the more the parents used physical violence against the siblings of the respondents, the more the respondents were victims of verbal and physical abuse by the siblings. There were several significant correlational patterns between witnessing and experiencing different reasoning strategies to resolve conflicts in the family, and the participants' use of reasoning to resolve conflicts with siblings. The more the respondents witnessed their fathers verbally and physically abusing their mothers, the more likely they were to verbally abuse their own siblings. The more the respondents witnessed their parents verbally and physically abusing their own siblings,

the more they tended to treat their own siblings in a similar manner. The more their fathers verbally and physically abused the respondents, the more the respondents used verbal abuse against their own siblings. Similarly, the more the respondents were verbally and physically abused by their mothers, the more they verbally abused their own siblings. The more their siblings verbally and physically abused the respondents, the more the participants verbally abused their own siblings

The survey by Haj-Yahia and Dawud-Noursi (1998) suggested that experiencing and/or witnessing different conflict tactics at home predicted adolescents' use of similar tactics to resolve conflicts at home. A large proportion of the variance in verbal aggression (61%) and physical aggression (49%) against siblings among Arab youth was explained by their exposure to, and/or experience with, similar methods for resolving conflicts in their families. These results provide strong support for the proposal derived from Social Learning Theory that violence is transmitted generationally and intergenerationally and does not appear to be culturally specific.

One of the weaknesses of this study is that these authors relied only on a single source of information about the occurrence of different conflict approaches in the family. Information from different sources (e.g., mother, father, and siblings) about the type of abuse that occurs in the family would have provided a different perspective on the situation in the families and on the relationship between the type of abuse and aggression at home and its impact on the way adolescents solve conflicts with their siblings. This study relied only on adolescents' reports of the types of conflict tactics existing in the family. These respondents may have reported familial and personal conflict strategies in

a biased manner. Doing longitudinal studies in this area might also lead to different results.

Ney (1987) investigated the effects of verbal abuse on children and on their abused parents. The sample included parents and children from all socio-economic backgrounds drawn from four populations in New Zealand: 32 parents and children who had phoned the Child Help line, 65 children hospitalized on the Child and Family Psychiatric Unit, 45 mothers who delivered a healthy second child at a hospital in Christchurch and 12 mothers who had delivered a healthy second child at home. Those who agreed to take part in the study were interviewed by a research assistant. The parents were asked to complete the Parent Bonding Instrument and the Denver Check-list. All those on the psychiatric unit had psychiatric, medical and psychological assessments. All their families were interviewed in-depth and observed both on the unit and at home. The frequency, severity and duration of five types of child mistreatment were measured (physical abuse, physical neglect, verbal abuse, emotional neglect and sexual abuse). The frequency and severity of abuse was measured on visual analogue scales. The parents could place themselves or their children somewhere on a continuous scale from no abuse to the most extreme. They were also asked about the duration and effect of the abuse. Examples were given of the five kinds of abuse for each visual analogue scale. The 65 children on the psychiatric ward were interviewed with 84 questions about their views of themselves, the world and their experience of abuse. They were also assessed by staff members for the degree of the abuse by father, mother, family member or other on the visual analogue scale and on a five point scale which used the same categories, described differently for purposes of comparison.

Only the results regarding verbal abuse will be reported here. Results indicated that there was a significant correlation between a mother's experience as a child and the way she abused her children. It appeared that the mothers who were verbally abused as children were more likely to abuse their own children. The greatest number of significant correlations was between the way the husband treated his wife and the way she treated her child. The mother tended to abuse her child in the same manner her husband abused her. Verbally abused children were more likely to be aggressive toward themselves and have a pessimistic view of their future; they were also more likely than children experiencing other types of abuse to be at risk of running away and attempting suicide. From this study it appears that verbal abuse is more likely to be transmitted from one generation to the next. The tensions provoked within the parents when they were children become a psychological imbalance that they try to resolve by re-enacting with their children the same conflicts. Ney (1987) suggests that verbal abuse may become an increasingly frequent form of controlling and disciplining children because of the increased awareness of physical abuse and because of the possible diminished value of children in our society. Verbal abuse may have a greater impact because the abused child has greater difficulty defending against the attack.

Spillane-Grieco (2000) examined the relationship between parental verbal aggression and teenage physical aggression. This author theorizes that the violent behaviors of teenagers are learned in their most intimate social system, the family and uses Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) to shape this study. The question of violent behaviors and abuse being learned from the role modeling of parents' behaviors is evaluated through the responses and perceptions of the teenagers. The intergenerational

transmission of abuse and violent behaviors is a widely accepted theory. Family relationship characteristics and parenting practices relate to the risk of antisocial behavior among children and adolescents. For aggressive adolescents, often the most important learning situations are experiences of aggression in the home and among peers. Twenty-five teens considered status offenders (removed from homes and in foster care) and criminal offenders were matched for age, sex, ethnicity, and family structure, to a group of 25 non-offenders who were randomly selected from 3 different high schools. The teens studied were not responding retroactively but were responding to their family situations as they existed at the time of the study.

Two measurement instruments were used (Aggression Questionnaire and the Straus Conflict Tactics Scales) in order to obtain rates of individual aggressiveness and perceptions of abuse and violence in the families of the teenagers. The Aggression Questionnaire is a 29-item instrument that assesses the individual's overall level of aggression. The Strauss Conflict Tactics Scale is a 15-item instrument intended to measure reasoning, verbal aggression and violence in the family. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to obtain information from the teens. They were asked such questions as: Who is someone you admire or think of as a hero? What kind of music do you listen to? Have you ever attempted suicide? Several questions concerned their use of alcohol and drugs as well as their parents' involvement with drugs and alcohol. Independent T-tests were used to compare the offender group and control group with respect to aggression. Chi square analysis was used for comparison of the categorical variables.

The offender group of teens were more aggressive than the non-offender group, both on the physical aggression subscale and the hostility subscale, of the Aggressive Questionnaire. The offender group reported more violence in their families compared with non-offenders verified by the Straus Conflict Tactics Scale for verbal aggression or abuse. The mother of the teenage offender was very verbally aggressive toward the teen and the teen was very verbally abusive toward the mother. Offenders were more verbally aggressive toward their fathers, but there was no corresponding level of verbal aggression by their fathers. Mothers of the offenders were verbally aggressive toward the fathers and vice versa. There were reports by the offender group of continuously being “put down” by both parents especially their mothers. They were often told they would never amount to anything, being compared to their fathers or another family member who did not achieve. They never remembered their fathers or mothers saying anything positive about them. Offenders responded with both verbal and physical aggression to both parents especially their mothers. More substance abuse was reported in the offender group, both for themselves and their families. Teens in both groups had somewhat similar responses concerning excessive use of alcohol. However, the majority of teens in the offender group reported the use of drugs in excess, especially by the fathers. The offender group reported much more runaway behaviour compared to the control group.

Most of the teens in the offender group had few positive role models or someone they could rely on in their lives. Having someone outside of the family who could help meet emotional or physical needs could help to buffer the effects of the abuse and might have prevented these teens from displaying aggressive behaviours. Offenders resented their mothers for the way they were being treated and they resented their fathers for being

unavailable to them and their mothers. They said their fathers never showed up for their activities.

Spillane-Grieco (2000) posited that because there is little visible evidence of psychological or emotional suffering, children who endure verbal and emotional abuse may never be recognized as victims. However, these victims begin to receive attention as offenders or abusers when their reaction to their psychological maltreatment is physical aggression. Findings from this study indicate that verbal abuse or psychological maltreatment has serious negative consequences on child and adolescent development and behavior.

Schwarz-Hirschhorn (2001) conducted a qualitative study, based on a social constructionist framework, with nine people about their verbal abuse experiences. This researcher was looking at the question, “What is the meaning, impact, and context of verbal abuse as understood by those who have experienced it either as perpetrators or as victims?” Participants were selected by purposeful sampling. Some were selected through referrals from therapists who knew of clients who used the term verbal abuse to refer to themselves, either as victim or perpetrator but who had not been in physically abusive relationships. Some volunteered because a neighbor or friend told them to contact the researcher. All of the participants but one experienced childhood verbal abuse. Three were also victimized as adults. There were six women and three men who ranged in age from the mid-thirties to mid- seventies. Five were in therapy at the time of the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and data was collected from a tape recorder and notes. Several transcript selections of each participant were presented with a short synopsis of each person’s background. Themes were presented and analyzed from



the interviews. Schwarz-Hirschhorn found that it was important not to separate emotional, verbal, psychological, and mental abuse. Many of her participants used these terms interchangeably. She states that the difference between emotional and verbal abuse may not be significant to those who have experienced these forms of abuse. The definitions are unclear to most people and if a researcher limits usage to only one of these terms, important data on abuse may be lost. A finding from this study was the distinction between overt and covert abuse. Overt verbal abuse included rejection, criticism, foul language, visible anger, and various types of neglect. The covert abuse category included subtle criticism, negation, distorting truth, and body language. There were three categories under the impact of verbal abuse- impaired relationships, personal impairments and substance abuse. Participants' evaluation of their personal outcomes from verbal abuse included bad feelings, confused thinking, and feelings of having lost themselves or judging themselves too harshly. Several talked about feeling like they did not know who they really were. Pain was the most frequently mentioned emotional outcome along with anger, fear, and emptiness. The intergenerational transmission of abuse is evident from the stories of three of the women who took part in this study. One of the women said that her father did not have a good upbringing. "His own parents weren't likeable. That's where it all stemmed from. They really didn't like him."(p. 166). Her father was verbally abusive to her. He would say horrible things to her and break things all over the house. This woman was also verbally abusive to her own children until she got help for a substance abuse problem and sought treatment.

## *Summary*

From a review of research in the area of the perpetuation of verbal abuse and the role of Social Learning Theory it appears that children model behavior they have witnessed and may continue this same behavior as adults as a coping mechanism for stress or to resolve conflicts. The family environment has a powerful influence on the lives of children.

### *Emotional and/or Psychological Abuse and Stages of Human Development*

Erikson's Theory of Human Development (as cited in Iwaniec, 1995) was reviewed next, as well as what effect emotional and/or psychological abuse may have on a child's development (physiological, behavioral, and psychological).

Human development can be looked at in terms of the accomplishment of critical socialization tasks according to Iwaniec (1995). These tasks will be learned and skills gained if the socialising agents (such as parents) provide an atmosphere and opportunities for the child to learn to the best of his/her ability. Not all children who are emotionally abused or neglected show growth failure, but most of them show developmental delays and various behavioural and emotional problems. Emotional abuse and neglect affect the speed and quality of development, especially during the early years of a child's life.

The psychosocial stages model proposed by Erikson (as cited in Hart, Bingelli, and Brassard, 1998) provides an explanation to the basic nature and susceptibility to psychological maltreatment of human beings. Relationships between the kind of psychological maltreatment experienced, the developmental stage when they are experienced, and differences in associated effects warrant more research according to Hart et al. 1998. Although there is some evidence to support theoretically logical

relationships such as the negative impact on attachment of withholding emotional responsiveness during the infancy and toddler stages, research on these relationships has only recently been of interest but it has the potential to provide considerable direction to child rearing and child protection.

Erikson (as cited in Iwaniec, 1995) has written that each developmental stage has to meet certain social demands. At each stage there is a psychosocial crisis, which is based on physiological development and also on the demands placed on the individual by parents and/or society. The crisis in each stage should be resolved by the ego in that stage, in order for development to proceed correctly. The essential task of infancy is the development of basic trust or security in others. The major hazard to achievement during this stage is neglect, abuse, or lack of consistent and appropriate love in infancy as well as cruel or early weaning. If the parents meet the majority of the infant's needs, the child will develop a stronger sense of trust than mistrust. Neglected and abused children suffer from a lack of parental care, attention, and affection, and as a result, their physical and psychological development tends to be impaired. The most common problem resulting from physical and emotional neglect during infancy is failure to thrive. The development of an affectionate bond between parents and children tends to be weak and insecure. Parent-child interaction is frequently cold, indifferent and at times hostile.

The second stage is between (2-4 years) and the major developmental task is the attainment of autonomy. The child views self as an individual in his/her own right, apart from the parents, although still dependent on them. The main risks to achievement are conditions that interfere with the child's achieving a feeling of adequacy or the learning of skills such as talking. If parents reward the child's successful actions and do not

shame the failures (e.g. bowel or bladder control) the child's sense of autonomy will be greater than the sense of shame and doubt. Parents, who continually discourage and/or criticize their child, will instil an overwhelming sense of shame and self-doubt in the child. Children who experience this abuse will lack confidence in their abilities to perform and they will expect failure. Maltreated children have a tendency to develop a negative self-image. They do not like themselves and tend to believe that they are to blame for whatever goes wrong. The way parents treat their children will determine what those children think about themselves. Living up to parental expectations (or always failing to do so in the case of critical or hostile parents) will become part of their self-concept (Iwaniec, 1995).

The third stage according to Erikson (as cited in Iwaniec, 1995) is between 4 to 6 years and the characteristic to be achieved is a sense of initiative. It is a period of energetic reality testing, imagination, and imitation of adult behaviour. The chief risk to achievement is overly strict discipline, internalisation of rigid ethical attitudes that interfere with the child's spontaneity and reality testing. If parents accept the child's curiosity and do not ridicule the need to know and question, the child's sense of initiative will counteract the sense of guilt.

In the fourth stage, from 6 to 11 years, the characteristic to be attained is a sense of duty and accomplishment and a leaving behind of fantasy and play. Children undertake real tasks, developing academic and social competencies. The chief threat to achievement is excessive competition, personal limitations, or other conditions that lead to experiences of failure, resulting in feelings of inferiority and poor work habits. If the

child encounters more success than failure at home and at school, he or she will have a greater sense of productiveness than of inferiority (Erikson, as cited in Iwaniec, 1995).

The characteristic to be achieved in the fifth stage from 12 to 15 years (Erikson, as cited in Iwaniec, 1995) is a sense of identity or a clarification in adolescence of who one is and what one's role is. The key risk to achievement at this stage is the failure of society to provide clearly defined roles and standards and the development of peer groups which provide clear but not always desirable roles and standards. If the adolescent can merge diverse roles, abilities and values and see their connection with past and future, the sense of personal identity will not lead to a sense of role diffusion.

### ***Emotional and/or Psychological Abuse and Effects on Development***

In infancy, restricted development will tend to show itself in insecure attachment and delayed psycho-motor development; in pre-school children, it will be exhibited in disturbance of social and emotional behaviour and in school age children it will reveal itself in serious learning deficits and behavioural problems (Iwaniec, 1995). The most common developmental deficits among 5 to 10 year olds who are emotionally abused and neglected are in the areas of academic achievements at school and their ability to relate to the peer group. Maltreated children are often behind in verbal performance and math abilities. Little importance may be placed on academic achievements in these families. Social and family factors associated with child abuse and neglect might contribute to the developmental deficits generally. Parents of emotionally abused and neglected children often show a lack of interest in their children's achievements and performance and do not provide a stimulating atmosphere or opportunities for these children to learn and attain new knowledge. Children who have been emotionally abused and neglected frequently

suffer from very low self-esteem and self-worth and their attempts to be accepted, wanted, appreciated and loved are often unsuccessful at home and very often at school. Low self-esteem shows itself in uncertainty, constant doubting, a sense of guilt, and a belief that everything wrong that happens is their fault. Emotional abuse can also affect a child's physical growth; often children will be small and thin for their age and show unstable eating behaviour.

Iwaniec (1995) states that it appears that emotional abuse and neglect may have an overriding role in poor developmental achievement and may contribute significantly to the development of emotional and behavioural problems in children. Neglect and rejection during infancy are associated with insecure and anxious attachment, which, if it persists, may impair a child's intellectual, cognitive, social, and emotional development. At the toddler stage, abuse of this kind may delay language development and alter personality formation, peer-relations and social adjustments. In middle childhood, the maltreatment can contribute to poor performance at school, learning difficulties, lack of motivation, and behaviour problems.

Emotional abuse and neglect in childhood are connected with a wide range of emotional, cognitive and behavioral difficulties in later childhood and this harm extends into adult life. The development of the child is harmed in all areas of functioning, but not being clearly the result of emotional abuse and neglect, cannot serve as supporting evidence in a diagnosis (Glaser, 2002).

The collective list of difficulties found in children affected by emotional abuse and neglect reads like the index of a child psychiatric textbook according to Glaser, Prior, and Lynch (as cited in Glaser, 2002). These authors conducted a study of 94 children

from 56 families whose names had been placed on the Child Protection Register under the category of Emotional Abuse. The following difficulties with which the children presented were: (a) Emotional state: unhappy/low self-esteem, frightened, distressed, anxious; (b) Behavior: oppositional, age-appropriate responsibility, attention seeking, antisocial/delinquent; (c) Developmental/educational attainment: underachievement, school nonattendance/lateness; (d) Peer relationships: withdrawn or isolated, aggressive; (e) Physical state: physically neglected or unkempt, small stature or poor growth, other (e.g. soiling, abdominal pain) (f) Other: sexualized behavior. It is evident from this list that the children experienced more than one type of impairment.

Bifulco and Moran (1998) reported that one of the outcomes of healthy child development is the establishment of feelings of self-worth. A child needs the love and respect of a parent figure in order to let these feelings develop. The parent has the power to increase the child's sense of competence, dignity and self-confidence. Alternatively, the parent has the power to obstruct the development of these qualities in the child.

Psychological attacks and criticism by one's parents seem to be expressly linked with subsequent low self-evaluation, most likely as a result of the child internalizing parental statements as a basis for self-perception (Briere & Runtz, 1990). These authors claim that it is important to examine specific types of low self-esteem when studying the impact of abusive childhood events. They developed a self-esteem scale that included particular items reflecting self-criticism, guilt and perceived undeservingness.

Children, who are psychologically maltreated by their parents, or even by an older brother or sister, tend to feel unloved, unwanted, inferior, inadequate and unrelated to any social system (Garbarino et al., 1986). They perceive themselves as unworthy and the

world as a place that is hostile to them and causes them to be failures. Some internalize their anxieties and aggressions and they manifest self-destructiveness such as depression, suicidal thoughts, passivity, withdrawal (avoidance of socializing with people) shyness, and a low degree of communicating with others; he/she lacks the skills needed to cope with the social context. They may also have nervous habits, nightmares and somatic complaints such as headaches. Children who externalize tend to be impulsive and overactive, lacking in self-control and often violent toward other people and their environment; they behave only according to impulses and not according to social norms. The child may avoid his/her parents or try to take care of the parents' needs. Adolescents who have been psychologically abused are similar to children except these patterns are often stronger and more elaborated and perhaps less linked to parents. They sometimes perceive abuse as unjust rather than as something they deserve. They may become truant or runaways or get involved with delinquency or substance abuse, rebel against authority or even become purposefully destructive; or they may become depressed, attempt suicide, develop eating or other physical disorders and become emotionally troubled and unstable. They are likely to either isolate themselves from the world, family, and peers or to become part of an antisocial group of teenagers as a way of protesting against parental injustices or achieving some revenge. Adolescents may also understand that their parents have problems; this may help to explain the abuse but youth are often puzzled and perplexed by the whole situation and do not know how to change it or feel inadequate to do so (Garbarino et al., 1986).

Jellen, McCarroll, and Thayer (2001) have written that because psychological maltreatment is thought to be the central component in child abuse and neglect, the



impact of such maltreatment on children is broad and profound. The effects are included under the following categories: (a) an inability to learn, (b) an inability to develop or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships, (c) inappropriate behavior and feelings under normal circumstances, (d) an all-encompassing mood of unhappiness or depression, and e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms.

In the next section, a number of journal articles are discussed regarding some of the harmful effects of verbal and/or emotional abuse on an individual's psychological development. From research done in this area there seem to be several negative consequences in a person's psychosocial functioning as a result of experiencing verbal and/or emotional abuse as a child.

### ***Effects of Verbal and/or Emotional Abuse on Psychological Development***

O'Toole (2000) used questionnaires and a structured interview format to explore the psychological effects of perceived parent-to-child verbal abuse in a sample of 168 European American females in California. The psychological variables of depression, body image disturbance, feelings of ineffectiveness and suicidal ideation were examined. It was hypothesized that European American women who perceived either of their parents as verbally abusive would have elevated levels of perceived ineffectiveness, more depression, and poor body image than women who do not perceive their parents as being verbally abusive. The second hypothesis was that European American women who perceive either of their parents as verbally abusive will have a greater history of suicidal ideation. The third hypothesis stated that the gender of the verbally abusive parent will make a distinction between the combinations of variables: ineffectiveness, depression and body image. Depression will be more evident for European American females verbally

abused by the father than by the mother. The participants varied in age from 18 to 76, with an average age of 29. The majority of the participants were either students or skilled workers. Participants with a history of sexual abuse (n= 37) were removed from the final analyses. One of the instruments used in this study was the Structured Interview for Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa (SIAB) which uses an interview format. This instrument is divided into two sections with the first section measuring eating disorder-related pathology and the second measuring family interaction and pathology. Each item is scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from zero to four, with zero signifying no pathology present and four suggesting very severe pathology present. Each question asks that participants give an answer for current behavior (the past two weeks) and for past behavior (from puberty until two weeks ago). The Eating Disorder Inventory-2 (EDI-2) was also used which is a 91 item instrument that has 11 scales intended to measure symptoms of anorexia and bulimia nervosa. The items are answered on a 6-point scale from always true to never true. The percentage of participants who perceived themselves verbally abused by a parent was 31.1% and is similar to the highest percentage estimated in other literature -25.7%.

Results indicated that verbal abuse by one or both parents was significantly associated with depression, feelings of ineffectiveness and body image disturbance in combination and accounted for 15.4% of the variance in the group. When examining the criterion variables individually, depression was the most significantly affected by verbal abuse. Ineffectiveness was moderately affected by the presence or absence of parental verbal abuse. Body image was minimally affected by parental verbal abuse. This author suggests that the low correlation between parental verbal abuse and body image

disturbance could be due to the small number of participants who were verbally abused mainly by the father (n=12). The second hypothesis, that European American females who identify either of their parents as verbally abusive toward them will have an increased history of suicidal ideation, was found to be very significant. This would follow the increased symptoms of depression and feelings of ineffectiveness. The third hypothesis was not found to be significant. The groups, verbally abused by mother (11) and verbally abused by father (12), were small and the results are inconclusive. For depression the mean for verbal abuse by father was higher than verbal abuse by the mother. The mean for verbal abuse by the father for body image disturbance was greater than the mean for verbal abuse by the mother. For ineffectiveness, the means were the opposite of what was predicted with the mean for verbal abuse by the mother less than that for verbal abuse by the father. According to O'Toole (2002) the results from this study suggest that verbal abuse has long-lasting effects and impacts many areas of the abused individual's life.

Martin et al. (1997) wrote that verbally aggressive messages can have a great and even severe negative impact on the intended victims. Recipients of the abuse may feel embarrassed, inadequate, humiliated, hopeless, desperate or depressed. Previous research consistently suggests that being verbally aggressive in relationships leads to negative relational outcomes. Verbal aggression between siblings can lead to social difficulties with peers. These authors, in a study of verbal aggression in sibling relationships, found that when verbal aggressiveness is present in a sibling relationship there is less satisfaction and trust between siblings.

An experimental study carried out by Gross and Keller (1992) examined whether some of the correlates of learned helplessness (depression, low self-esteem and a maladaptive attributional style) are long term consequences of child abuse. Participants were 260 students in a psychology course at Syracuse University (166 females and 94 males) aged 18-22 years. The participants were identified as physically abused, psychologically abused, both physically and psychologically abused, and nonabused, based on responses to the Child Abuse Questionnaire (CAQ). Participants were assessed for levels of nonclinical depression with the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), for self-esteem using the Rosenberg self-esteem Scale (RSE) and for the adaptiveness of attributional style via the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ). It was hypothesized that the results of these measures would correlate in such a way that a maladaptive attribution style (attributing external, unstable, and specific causes to good events and internal, stable, and global causes to bad events) would be associated with depressed affect and low self-esteem). It was proposed that the abused participants would show these characteristics significantly more than the nonabused respondents would. It was also hypothesized that each of the three groups would differ from the control group on the 3 dependent measures; differences among the 3 abuse groups were also examined. Participants who reported incidents of both physical and psychological abuse in their childhood revealed a greater tendency toward depression than did subjects suffering only one type of abuse or nonabused participants. Psychologically abused subjects and respondents who reported both psychological and physical abuse exhibited lower self-esteem scores than the nonabused group. Respondents who reported one type of abuse or participants who reported both types of abuse did not display a more maladaptive

attributional style than that of the nonabused group. Psychological abuse was a much more powerful predictor of depression, self-esteem and attributional style than physical abuse. Higher depression scores were correlated negatively with higher self-esteem scores, higher attributional scores correlated negatively with higher depression scores and high self-esteem scores correlated positively with higher attributional style scores.

There seemed to be a pattern indicating that psychologically abused participants showed evidence of a greater tendency toward depression and low self-esteem than did physically abused subjects although this tendency was not considered statistically significant (Gross & Keller, 1992). Limitations of the study could have accounted for these findings. Sample sizes of the four experimental groups were relatively small and larger group sizes might have revealed more significant differences between the abuse groups. This study also depended entirely on self-reports and participants' perceptions of parental behavior must always be interpreted with caution. The undergrad population tested cannot be considered representative of the abused population at large. Future research in the area of just psychological abused individuals would be extremely useful.

Vissing et al. (1991) conducted a survey to provide information on how many American children experienced verbal aggression from their parents and how often such abuse occurred. They also tested the hypothesis that the more verbal aggression experienced by children, the higher the rate of childhood psychological and social problems. The data was collected from telephone interviews in 1985 with participants in the Second National Family Violence Survey who had a child 17 or younger living at home (N= 3, 346; 37% fathers, 63% mothers). Verbal/symbolic aggression was measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). This is the definition of verbal/symbolic aggression

that guided the research of Vissing et al. (1991): “Verbal/symbolic aggression is a communication intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or a communication perceived as having that intent. The communicative act may be active or passive, and verbal or nonverbal. Examples include name calling or nasty remarks (active, verbal), slamming a door or smashing something (active, nonverbal), and stony silence or sulking (passive, nonverbal)” (p. 224). Besides parental use of verbal aggression, the analysis took into account four other independent variables that could be confounded with verbal aggression and psychosocial problems (physical aggression, age and gender of child, socioeconomic status and psychosocial problems of children). Logistic regression was used to test the hypothesis that the more verbal/symbolic aggression used by parents, the greater the probability that children would display psychosocial problems.

Results indicated that verbal/symbolic aggression against children is very common. Almost two-thirds of all the children, experienced at least one occasion in which they were victims of verbally aggressive acts during the year of the study. Slightly more boys (65.8%) than girls (60.9%) were victims of verbal abuse, and more children age 7 and up (69.9%) as compared to children 6 and under (66.3%). These are lower bound estimates because these researchers assume that some parents will not reveal instances in which they verbally attacked the child, and because other parents would have forgotten some or all such instances. Children who were victims of verbal abuse experienced an average of at least 12.6 attacks during the 12 month period of this study. More than a third of these children had 11 or more such attacks. The number of verbal assaults was somewhat greater for boys than for girls and somewhat greater for children

under 12. These researchers computed three thresholds to produce three estimates of the rate and number of verbally abused children (10 or more- rate is 267 per 1,000 children; 20 or more-rate is 138 per 1,000 children; 25 or more- rate is 113 per 1,000). When the criterion is set at 10 or more, the rate is 117 times greater than the rate of 2.2 per 1,000 children estimated from the 1988 survey conducted for the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN). Even using 25 or more instances as the criterion produces a verbal abuse rate that is 51 times greater than the NCCAN rate. The major reason for these vast differences is that the NCCAN rate is limited to cases known to human service professionals.

Three logistic regressions were computed, one for each of the three measures of the psychosocial problems. Verbal aggression by parents is significantly related to child problems with aggression, delinquency and interpersonal relationships. This relationship persists after factoring out the effects of parental use of physical abuse, age of child, gender of child and family socioeconomic status. This does not mean that the other four independent variables are unimportant. What the regression analyses reveal is that their relationship to the child's problems is separate effects. Three out of the four are significantly connected to all three of the child psychosocial problems measures. The t tests show that the probability of the child being aggressive, delinquent or having interpersonal problems is significantly related to physical aggression by parents, older age of the child, male children and low socioeconomic status. These researchers used a four-factor design: 6 levels of verbal aggression by 4 levels of physical aggression by 2 child genders by 3 child age groups. The results of the analysis of variance indicated the same conclusions as the results of the logistic regression analyses. The findings in this

study indicated that the association between verbal abuse and psychosocial problems is not an artifact of confounding with parents' use of physical punishment or physical abuse, age, gender, sibling group size or family socioeconomic status (Vissing et al., 1991).

Using questionnaires, Solomon and Serres (1999) examined whether parental verbal violence has negative effects on children's self-esteem and academic performance. They also wanted to make a distinction between the effects of verbal aggression and those from physical aggression. Participants were 144 French Canadian school children just off the island of Montreal ranging in age from 9-11 years. The Harter Self-perception Profile for Children (SPPC) was used to measure several aspects of the children's self-perception in order to evaluate the children's self-esteem. A self-report questionnaire, the Children's Perception of Parental Verbal Aggression (CPPVA) was used to ascertain whether the children had been subject to verbal aggression, physical punishment or both.

The results indicated that parental verbal aggression alone is harmful to children. Only six children (4%) out of 144 participants indicated that they had never been physically punished and had never been their parents' targets of rejecting, demeaning, terrorizing, criticizing (destructively) or insulting statements. According to these researchers, this is a shocking indication of how widespread parental verbal aggression is against children. The results relating to the relationships between parental verbal aggression and children's self-esteem leave little room for the rationalization that because everybody does it, it is not a form of abuse. Children who see themselves as having been the object of verbal aggression perceive themselves as less competent in their school work, as less comfortable with their own behavior, and generally feel less worthy. Those



who perceived themselves as the most verbally abused also had the most doubts about their peers accepting them. Children who reported that their parents were verbally aggressive did significantly less well in French class, their native language. The more they perceived they were verbally abused the lower their marks. Math marks were not significantly affected by verbal aggression. Mathematical skills may be more resistant to environmental factors. Children's feelings about their physical appearance and sports abilities were not significantly affected either. These authors speculate that perhaps at age 10, physical appearance does not have the importance that it will take on at adolescence and perceptions of sports abilities are highly influenced by physical abilities.

Johnson et al. (2001) speculated that childhood verbal abuse is likely to have an adverse effect on the development of interpersonal relationships. Because interpersonal difficulties are defining characteristics of personality disorders, they looked at the association between childhood verbal abuse and the development of personality disorders. Data were gathered from a community-based longitudinal study to investigate the association between maternal verbal abuse during childhood and personality disorder symptoms during adolescence and early adulthood. Interview items used to measure verbal abuse were obtained from the maternal interviews carried out in 1975, 1983, and 1985 to 1986. Interview items used to assess Personality Disorders (PDs) were gained from the parent and youth versions of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (DISC-I), the Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire and the Disorganizing Poverty Interview (DPI). After the publication of DSM-IV, items from the study protocol were added or deleted to be compatible with DSM- IV diagnostic criteria. The sample consisted of 793 mothers and their offspring (390 females & 403 males) randomly

sampled from 2 New York counties in 1975, 1983, 1985-86, 1991-93, when the mean ages of the children were 5, 14, 16 and 22 respectively.

Children who experienced maternal verbal abuse during childhood were more than three times as likely as those who did not experience verbal abuse to have borderline, narcissistic, obsessive-compulsive and paranoid personality disorders (PDs) during adolescence and early adulthood according to Johnson et al. (2001). Youths who experienced childhood verbal abuse had elevated borderline, narcissistic, paranoid, schizoid, and schizotypal PD symptom levels during adolescence and early adulthood. Childhood verbal abuse was not associated with increased risk for antisocial personality disorders during early adulthood. Childhood verbal abuse was associated with increased risk for disruptive disorders during late adolescence or early adulthood but was not associated with increased risk for anxiety, depressive or substance abuse disorders. The fact that some of the children were not that old could have had some bearing on this result. These findings suggest that childhood verbal abuse may contribute to the development of some types of PD symptoms, independent of the effects of other types of childhood maltreatment. These authors state that interpersonal difficulties are defining characteristics of personality disorders. Does a diagnosis of a personality disorder always lead to relationship difficulties? Is labeling a person always helpful?

Hoglund and Nicholas (1995) examined the relationship between an abusive environment within the family and proneness to shame, guilt, anger and hostility in college students. The sample (n=107 men, n= 101 women) was comprised of students enrolled in a western state university. It was a retrospective study that used questionnaire

packets that participants answered. In this study it was expected that those with greater exposure to an emotionally abusive environment would score higher on measures of shame, guilt, anger and hostility than would those with less exposure to such an environment. The Parental Abuse and Support Inventory (PASI) provided a retrospective description of exposure to emotional, physical and sexual abusiveness by mothers and fathers as well as measures of love/support, promotion of independence, and fairness. The only two subscales used were: Emotional Abusiveness (EA) (e.g. ridiculed your feelings; was cold or rejecting; made you feel stupid when you made a mistake), and Physical Abusiveness (PA) (e.g. pulled your hair; hit you with objects; kicked you). Participants reported frequency of behaviors experienced during childhood on a five-point scale (very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never). Only the results for exposure to emotional abusiveness will be examined.

Greater exposure to being emotionally abused was related to higher shame. Hoglund and Nicholas (1995) speculated that because emotional abuse specifically affects self concept, it follows that emotional abuse may be directly related to shame because shame taps into the self that feels inferior or defective. There was a lack of a significant relationship between guilt and exposure to emotional abuse. This may be related to the concept that the main awareness in guilt is an act of commission or omission for which the self feels responsible. Since emotional abuse seems to undermine a person's sense of self and may be tied more to who one is rather than what one does, emotionally abused individuals may be no more likely than non-abused to experience guilt for what they have done according to these authors. Young children might feel more guilt and responsibility for what is happening to them. They might think it is their fault.

The emotionally abused were more likely to act outwardly on their anger, either physically or verbally; or to express their anger covertly and to keep a greater amount of anger inside and not expressed. Shame was not related to explicit expressions of anger and hostility, but was related to covert hostility. Women were less likely than men to externalize their anger and also reported higher levels of both shame and guilt. These authors suggest this could be due to expectations of society or that the women were more willing than the men to admit experiencing these emotions.

### ***Summary***

From the literature reviewed thus far it seems that verbal abuse may be learned through role models such as parents and perpetuated from one generation to the next. This could be one explanation for the high incidence of verbal abuse. The stages of human development proposed by Erikson (1963) were appraised as well as the effect emotional and/or psychological abuse may have on a child's development. From studies done in this area it appears that verbal abuse experienced in childhood may lower self-esteem, lead to dissatisfaction in relationships and other psychosocial difficulties.

Next, research that has been done regarding buffering factors that may protect children from experiencing the negative consequences of verbal and/or psychological abuse will be addressed.

### ***Protective Factors***

From several studies done on resiliency, numerous protective factors in the lives of the participants seem to buffer the negative impact of the identified risks (Rak & Patterson, 1996; Rutter, 1985; Werner, 1984). Protective factors refer to influences that modify, improve, or alter an individual's response to some environmental threat that

predisposes to a maladaptive outcome (Rutter, 1985). “These protective factors... include elements of the temperament of the participants as well as environmental circumstances that combine to allow an experience of greater continuity and hope than might be predicted based on assessment of risk factors alone” (Rak & Patterson, 1996, p. 369). There seems to be several factors present in the lives of resilient children: (a) temperamental attributes that elicit positive responses from family members as well as strangers [e.g. as babies they are described as active, affectionate, cuddly, good natured, and easy to deal with; preschool children tend to play energetically, seek out novel experiences, lack fear and are quite self-reliant but can ask for help from adults or peers as needed]; (b) a close bond with at least one caregiver during the first year of life to establish a basic sense of trust; (c) an active engagement in performing works of required helpfulness in middle childhood and adolescence [e.g. taking care of younger siblings or managing a household when a parent is ill or hospitalized] (Werner, as cited in Rak & Patterson, 1996). Rutter (1985) formulated a buffering hypothesis which states that the availability of social support modifies the impact of stressors, thus leading to less damaging results.

Varia and Abidin (1999) wanted to identify and understand the role of mediating factors in adult outcomes of psychological abuse. They used a questionnaire format to examine how a minimizing style may be formed by looking at perceptions of abuse in relation to other past parent-child transactions and how a minimizing style may in turn be associated with current adult marital and parenting relationships. These researchers looked at three groups: (a) non-abused: consistent reports of non-abuse; (b) acknowledgers: consistent reports of abuse; (c) minimizers: reporters of abuse but did not

label themselves as having been abused. Ninety individuals (45 couples & 6 single parents) from a non-clinical adult sample completed self-report questionnaires regarding psychological maltreatment and adult relationship satisfaction. Parents were asked to participate in a voluntary research project looking at the relationship between early family environment and later social relationships.

Non-abused individuals reported significantly better adult relationship satisfaction than those who reported punitive/abusive behaviours in childhood. Minimizers reported relatively high levels of abusive events but failed to label themselves as abused. The non-abused group experienced more emotional warmth, affection and empathy from their mothers than persons in the other two groups. The minimizers also reported significantly higher levels of emotional warmth and care from maternal caregivers than the acknowledgers, but did not report higher levels of paternal care (affection and warmth) than the acknowledgers. The non-abused group experienced higher levels of paternal care than both the minimizers and acknowledgers.

Those who acknowledged experiencing abuse represented the ‘worst’ group, having experienced a combination of abusive events, cold parenting and over controlling or rejecting behaviours. In contrast, the minimizers while experiencing abusive events and authoritarian parenting also received more maternal warmth and care, which may have buffered their response to abuse. Varia and Abidin (1999) suggest that differences in perceptions are likely to influence and affect later perceptions of self as well as interactions with others. Acknowledgers had the most difficulty with their adult attachments and romantic relationships; they reported the most problems with their spouses in terms of not feeling supported and had high levels of conflict as opposed to the

non-abused group. Minimizers had less relationship problems; the majority reported a secure attachment but a significant number also reported feeling that they were somewhat uncomfortable being close to others and found it hard to trust completely. This study suggests that parental rejection and lack of warmth are associated with adult relationship problems.

Varia and Abidin (1999) report that buffering factors such as more maternal warmth and care may play a role in how an adult is affected by the abuse. The perception of the abuse by the individual seems to affect how he/she will function as an adult. It would appear that a person's personality and temperament has a part to play also in how the abuse affects them.

According to Schwarz- Hirschhorn (2001) four out of the nine participants in her study who experienced verbal abuse were supported and loved by other family members and friends. Three of them had grandmothers who gave abundant love and others spoke of their father and other family members who nurtured and cared for them. Even though they received love it appeared that the participants got less protection than they needed when confronted with verbal abuse. The grandmothers were powerless or did not speak up on their grandchildren's behalf. One of the participants experienced protection from her aunts and uncles and they served as successful buffers against her mother's hatred of her. Although the participants spoke affectionately about the people who tried to advocate and protect them the support did not appear to diminish the severe impact of their abuse.

Garbarino (1995) has written that seven important themes seem to have come out of all the research done in the area of why some children overcome difficult life circumstances. These themes are:

1. Personal anchors- Children require secure, positive emotional relationships with at least one parent or other significant person in their life. According to Garbarino (1995) this is the single most important resource for promoting resilience in childhood, having someone who is crazy about you. An early positive relationship teaches a child to trust and to respond, feel and pay attention. But if early relationships are undependable or negative, they teach a child to fear and withdraw and become numb and turn inward.

2. Cognitive competence- Having at least an average level of intelligence supplies an important resource in coping successfully. Children who are able to analyze their social environment successfully will have a better chance of mastering it. Intelligent children are more resilient.

3. Success- Children who have succeeded several times in the past are more likely to internalize the belief that they are capable of succeeding each time they meet a challenge. This will give the child self-confidence which is so necessary for some children who must overcome adversity again and again. It takes actual occasions of self-efficacy to lead to self-confidence and positive self-esteem in a child's life. Bandura (1999) also stressed self- efficacy.

4. Active coping- Children who actively seek to overcome challenges as they arise seem to do better than children who passively react to stress. Children need to be encouraged to see themselves as leaders in order to face up to life's difficulties.



5. Positive temperament- Temperamental characteristics which are chiefly inborn traits are a factor in coping and resilience. There are some children who are naturally more active and sociable than others and some are more inclined to passive withdrawal. Resilient children tend to seek out potentially helpful adults and draw them in to assist them and thus have more support than their passive counterparts.

6. Social climate- Children thrive in an open, supportive educational climate and with encouraging parental role models. Resilience occurs from a combination of the child and the environment. It is helpful if the home gives messages of affirmation and support but another important influence is the institutions outside the home, particularly the schools. Successful schools provide models of coping and encourage a planned approach to life. They teach children that they can think through situations and take steps to improve the future, academically and socially.

7. Additional support- Schools and parents are not the only important influences in a child's life. Other adults can play an important role in promoting resilience. These people are the child's neighbourhood and community. They offer something extra by perhaps taking the child under their wing when a child's family is in shambles or preoccupied with some crisis, offering the child a special opportunity to develop a talent or interest that can sustain the child, or intervening on the child's behalf with parents or school officials. This assumes that the child has access to the community beyond the family and that children are not so afraid of predators that they do not take advantage of the social support out there. Garbarino (1995) believes that human beings are motivated and capable of restoring themselves to equilibrium when thrown off-balance.

The means to this capacity are intelligence, self-worth, activity, attachment, social support, and education.

### *Factors for Positive Change in Abuse Cycle*

Emotional and verbal abuse can cause many developmental problems in a child's life. Finding ways to support families in crises and educating parents about more healthy ways to communicate with their children is necessary in order to break the cycle of generational abuse and lower the prevalence of verbal abuse. Some factors that may bring about constructive change to an individual affected by abuse are considered in the next section.

Pianta, Egeland, and Erickson (as cited in DeHart, Stroufe, & Cooper, 2000) interviewed and tested new mothers, most of whom were single, before birth and during the child's infancy. They found that abusers differed from nonabusers in two ways. They were less able to cope with the ambivalence and stress accompanying a first pregnancy and they had less understanding of all that is required in caring for a baby. Education and support for these new mothers would lessen the stress involved with being a first time mom and enable them to be better role models for their children.

Egeland (1993) states that good quality care and nurturance reduces the likelihood of abuse in the next generation, even for parents who are at risk for abuse because of adverse environmental and life circumstance. Being raised in a warm and accepting environment serves as a protective factor against abuse in the next generation. Mothers who break the cycle of abuse are more likely to have had foster parents or relatives who provided them with emotional support as children. Even though a woman may have been abused as a child, there was someone there for nurturance and support. Another variable

that appears to break the cycle of abuse is if the mother is in an intact, stable and satisfying relationship with a husband or boyfriend.

Involvement in psychotherapy as an adolescent or young adult also appears to be a factor in stopping the cycle of abuse. Through therapy and support the mother may become aware of her child rearing history and how it might affect the childcare she provides for her children. Training counsellors to be aware of some of the signs of verbal and emotional abuse as well as what some of the resiliency factors are that may buffer the individual from continuing the abuse, would be helpful. Although Egeland (1993) examined only mothers presumably the same variables would also be applicable to men.

Verbal and emotional abuse experienced during childhood can negatively impact a person's self-esteem (Blake & Slate, 1993; Gross & Keller, 1992; Loos & Alexander, 1997; Solomon & Serres, 1999). If the person can find one area of competence or mastery, repeated successes can raise mastery expectations or self-efficacy (Bandura, 1999). Once established, greater self-efficacy can generalize to other situations in which performance was less than satisfactory because of a preoccupation with personal inadequacies. Using modelling, with guided performance, allows a person to acquire a generalizable skill for coping successfully with stressful situations. If a person has been verbally abused as a child, the chances of being an abuser as an adult are increased. If the person can learn a new way of interacting with their children by being taught new skills, their personal efficacy will also be improved. Rutter (1985) stated that a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy makes successful coping more probable, while a sense of helplessness increases the probability that one adversity will lead to another. This

cognitive mindset is not a fixed personality trait but may change with altered circumstances.

Through clinical interviews with 25 resilient adult survivors of abuse, Wolin and Wolin (1993) developed seven resiliencies that reflect common themes that surfaced as these survivors considered the strategies they used from childhood to adulthood to protect themselves and to take strength from their struggles. These authors state that we need to hear less about our susceptibility to harm and more about our ability to rebound from adversity when it comes our way. From the interviews, they concluded that children of disturbed or incompetent parents frequently learn to watch out for themselves and grow strong in the process. The seven resiliencies that are mentioned in their book are: (a) Insight: the habit of asking tough questions and giving honest answers; (b) Independence: drawing boundaries between yourself and troubled parents; keeping emotional and physical distance while satisfying the demands of your conscience; (c) Relationships: intimate and fulfilling ties to other people that balance a mature regard for your own needs with empathy and the capacity to give to someone else; (d) Initiative: taking charge of problems; exerting control; a taste for stretching and testing yourself in demanding tasks; (e) Creativity: imposing order, beauty, purpose on the chaos of your troubling experiences and painful feelings; (f) Humour: finding the comic in the tragic; (g) Morality: an informed conscience that extends your wish for a good personal life to all of humankind. Few survivors can claim all seven resiliencies and put the past behind them completely. For most survivors of adversity, resilience and vulnerability are in continual resistance, one holding them up and the other threatening to tear them down. Wolin and Wolin (1993) write that individuals who have been abused should avoid labelling

themselves as “damaged” and to go in search of their resilience. They should look for times when they outmanoeuvred, outlasted, outwitted or outreached their troubled parent(s). They need to find the dignity they have mined from a degrading past. These authors have witnessed many survivors in the process of discovery replace pain and doubt with self-respect, pride and a new awareness of their own accomplishments.

Three things seemed to have helped over half of the nine victims of abuse that Schwarz- Hirschhorn (2001) interviewed. These were Alcoholic’s Anonymous (AA), God, and therapy. AA provided self-care and nurturing strength in difficult times. It also provided structure to people whose lives needed it desperately and taught empathy and compassion. One of the women learned parenting skills through the AA program. God provided another means to healing for some of these survivors of verbal abuse. Four of the participants in this study said that God was essential to their personal growth. God provided direction in their lives and also did the directing for them in ways they could not do themselves. Therapy was another important factor in the lives of some of these people. Two of them learned from their therapist that their suffering was because of their having experienced verbal abuse. One of the participants was a therapist herself and believed that her own skills and going to another therapist for a few sessions helped her get unstuck. These three growth- producing entities of AA, God and therapy assisted these abuse survivors and helped them to cope well enough that four of them spoke of purpose, contentment, peace and getting unstuck.

### ***Summary***

The literature reviewed for this thesis suggests that verbal abuse may be continued from one generation to the next. Some researchers have used Social Learning Theory

(Bandura, 1977), as one explanation for the way verbal and emotional abuse is perpetuated. It seems apparent that a history of having been abused as a child is a major risk factor for maltreatment in the next generation. However, many individuals who were abused do not mistreat their children.

According to Erikson (1963), there are certain stages a child must go through in his/her development. At each stage there is a psychosocial crisis based on physiological development and demands made of the child by parents and/or society. The crisis must be resolved by the ego in that stage in order for development to continue properly. As previously stated, emotional abuse and neglect can interfere with development and lead to developmental delays and various behavioral and emotional difficulties. Emotional and/or verbal abuse in childhood can also result in psychological difficulties as an adult. Although verbal abuse may be perpetuated and cause many psychological difficulties some individuals are able to overcome childhood abuse. There appear to be certain buffering or protective factors that enable some abuse survivors to cope and move beyond the experience of childhood verbal abuse.

## **Chapter 3 - Research Methodology**

### ***Introduction***

Most research on verbal and emotional abuse has used quantitative methods such as questionnaires or surveys. I located only one study that used a qualitative method (semi-structured interviews) and this was a dissertation (Schwarz-Hirschhorn, 2001) which was not readily accessible. In order to add to the research and to extend an understanding of the phenomenon of verbal abuse I used qualitative methodology in this thesis. It was my intent to further existing research in the area of verbal abuse by using in-depth semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to share their experiences of childhood verbal abuse and the meaning they have made of the abuse. I was interested in understanding how childhood experiences of verbal abuse manifest in women's adult lives. I was also interested in the effect of the abuse on the participants' development (physiological, behavioral, and psychological). I believe that knowledge is power and by coming to a deeper understanding of verbal abuse one day it may no longer be a part of our language and experience!

As mentioned earlier, this study was conducted using a qualitative method. The main research question of "what is the lived experience and meaning of being an adult woman who experienced verbal abuse as a child?" lent itself to a basic interpretive qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2002) informed by hermeneutic- phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). A study of this nature will contribute a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of verbal abuse. The overall objective of a basic interpretive qualitative study according to Merriam (2002) is to understand how individuals make sense of their lives and their experiences. The main goal is to uncover and interpret these meanings. A

phenomenological study has the added purpose of seeking to understand the essence (that which makes a thing what it is and without which it would not be what it is) and underlying structure or composition of the phenomenon. In this chapter I reviewed qualitative methodology with a specific focus on hermeneutic-phenomenological inquiry as a way of conveying the lived experience and lived meaning of childhood verbal abuse for adult women to the reader.

### *Qualitative Inquiry*

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) have written that researchers who are interested in qualitative methodology focus on the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational limitations that have an effect on research. Qualitative researchers emphasize the subjective nature of inquiry and search for answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. Qualitative methods can be used to obtain multifaceted details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes and emotions that are difficult to obtain or learn about through more conventional research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The subjective thoughts, feelings and emotions that an individual may experience as a result of childhood verbal abuse may not always be amenable to quantitative methodology.

### *Phenomenological Methods of Research*

Creswell (1998) defined a phenomenological study as one that investigates a phenomenon in terms of lived experience and lived meaning. He mentioned several approaches to phenomenology but the one that appeals to me, which is also Creswell's preferred approach, is the hermeneutic approach (e.g., Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988; van Manen, 1990) that focuses on the meaning of individual



experiences. Hermeneutic-phenomenology involves providing a thorough description of lived experience as well as revealing lived meaning. Lived experience describes the world of immediate experience before it is reflected upon. It is an exploration into the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relationships. Lived meaning refers to the way a person experiences and understands the world as real or meaningful. “Lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them. Through meditations, conversations, daydreams, inspirations and other interpretive acts, we assign meaning to the phenomena of life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 37). Lived meaning is experiential meaning, typically experienced non-verbally and only uncovered through intentional reflection, dialogue, and writing. To do research from a phenomenological frame of reference is to continually question the manner in which an individual experiences the world, to want to know and understand the world in which we live (van Manen, 1997). Hermeneutic-phenomenology is the study of lived or existential meanings in everyday life and it attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain level of depth and richness. A good phenomenological study does two things: (a) it provides concrete examples of lived experiences, and (b) it offers insightful reflections on the meanings of those experiences (van Manen, 2002b). “To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (van Manen, 1990, p.19).

According to van Manen (1990), hermeneutic-phenomenological research is a dynamic interaction among six research activities: (a) studying a phenomenon which

genuinely interests us and commits us to the world; (b) exploring experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; (c) reflecting on the essential themes that typify the phenomenon; (d) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (e) maintaining a deep and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; (f) balancing the research perspective by considering parts and whole. These six activities can never actually be performed in isolation and are not meant to impose a rote set of procedures but to animate inventiveness and encourage insight.

It is particularly important that a phenomenological researcher be invested in the topic she/he is studying and to select a topic of personal and social significance. The topic should engage the researcher both intellectually and emotionally so that she/he is intimately connected with the phenomenon (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Moustakas, 1994). Verbal abuse is an important social and cultural issue, which has only recently been studied separately from physical and sexual abuse (Johnson et al. 2001; Solomon & Serres, 1999), and is something that I have experienced in my own life. Because I have experienced childhood verbal abuse I have a personal connection to this subject and am intimately connected to the phenomenon. This can be viewed as an advantage in terms of generating and analyzing data, but I also had to be aware of possible negative impacts. I ensured that the focus was on understanding and representing the participants' stories and experiences. It was important to bracket (*epoche*) my own preconceived ideas about the phenomenon of verbal abuse to understand it through the voices of the participants. Bracketing involved coming to terms with what I already know about the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse and attempting to suspend my assumptions and theories on this subject so I would not interpret the nature of this phenomenon before I had even finished

the interviews (van Manen, 1990). This required that I take a self-reflexive stance and be aware of how the women's experiences were affecting me. I had to be prepared to manage personal reactions that listening to the participants' stories triggered for me. I wrote down personal reflections after each interview and talked to trusted friends and my committee members as a means of managing my own feelings and thoughts during the interview process.

### *Participant Selection*

Because the goal in the present study was to select participants who were information rich with respect to the topic of childhood verbal abuse, participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Three adult women (18 years or older) who experienced verbal abuse as a child, but did not have a history of other forms of abuse (physical or sexual) were included in the sample. I posted a "Call to Participate" notice (see Appendix C) in various buildings on the University of Saskatchewan campus including the Educational Psychology and Special Education department in the Education building and in the Psychology department in the Arts and Science building. I also let colleagues and friends know that I was looking for research participants and placed a notice at the front desk at Catholic Family Services and Family Services in Saskatoon to try to ensure that not only university students were part of the study. The sampling was still purposeful because I was looking for only self-described verbal abuse survivors. I included a telephone number and an e-mail address specifically set up for research purposes on the notice, so that those interested in taking part in the study could contact me for further details.

Two of the participants contacted me by email and I followed up with an initial telephone conversation; this consisted of a brief introduction, a description of the study, and questions to determine if the women met the criteria for participation. One of the participants was an acquaintance of mine with whom I also went over all aspects of the study to ensure her eligibility. In addition to determining eligibility and interest, a preliminary contact (telephone or email) was important in laying the groundwork for the mutual respect necessary to the interview process. As suggested by Seidman (1998), I went over all aspects of the study that the informed consent covers (see Appendix D). After ascertaining that each woman was interested and eligible, a date, time, and setting for the first interview was discussed in the initial contact. What worked for them and what time was convenient for them determined where the interview took place. The interviews were conducted in a private office that was conducive to an in-depth conversation.

### ***Data Generation***

Sources of data for this basic interpretive qualitative inquiry included tape recorded interviews, transcripts, observations, field notes, personal experience, as well as books and articles about verbal abuse experiences.

### ***Interviews***

The primary source of data was semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviewing is called for whenever depth of understanding is required (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As such, I conducted three in-depth interviews with three adult women who experienced verbal abuse as children in order to gain more insight and a rich description about the phenomenon of verbal abuse. Phenomenological information is usually

gathered through long interviews that are supplemented with the researcher's own self-reflection and previously developed descriptions from the literature review. Although I had my own understandings and beliefs about verbal abuse it was imperative that I did not impose my way of thinking and notions on the women I was interviewing. I tried to take the role of the participants and see the situation from their viewpoint, rather than superimpose my world view or assumptions on them. This does not mean that I did not have my own presuppositions but that I critically analyzed them (e.g. Kvale, 1996).

Although I experienced verbal abuse as a child and this no doubt affected my interaction with the participants, they had their own experiences which had similarities and differences from mine. Phenomenological reduction calls for a suspension of judgment as to the existence or nonexistence of the content of an experience. The reduction can be thought of as bracketing, which was an attempt to place my own beliefs and scientific knowledge about verbal abuse within parentheses to arrive at an unprejudiced description of the essence of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

There were three stages in the interview process (Seidman, 1998). The first phase entailed establishing rapport with the participants and informing them about the purpose of the study. It was necessary to build trust and a caring, supportive atmosphere where the participants felt secure enough to describe their experiences in detail in order to obtain a rich description. Gaining trust was essential to the success of the interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000). We discussed the format of the interviews during the initial telephone conversation, but I did not give the participants the actual questions that were asked. Being open about the purpose of the research aided in reducing the perceived power differential between myself as the researcher and the participants. Participants

were seen as co-researchers in this study. Letting the women know my background and my own experience of verbal abuse facilitated trust. During the initial telephone conversation I told all of the women that I had experienced verbal abuse as a child. One of the participants in particular was interested in how I came to be involved in this topic and at the end of the first interview I shared some of my story with her. It seemed to put her at ease and she became more relaxed. Throughout the interviews I was always open and straightforward about my personal involvement with this issue and I was always willing to answer any questions the women had regarding my experiences with verbal abuse. At the initial meeting, I discussed the participant's right to confidentiality, to withdraw from the study at any time and informed consent.

During the second stage of the interview process participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview at a time, date, and place mutually agreed on during the initial contact. Seidman (1998) uses an in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing structure which combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing. Because I was interested in phenomenology and my topic was on childhood verbal abuse, this interviewing format suited my purposes. I used mainly open-ended questions to build upon and explore participants' responses to those questions (Moustakas, 1994). In order to fathom the depth of the experience and to fully understand the context, three separate 60-90 minute interviews were conducted with each participant. The first interview focused mainly on life history which established the context of the participants' experience. This was especially important because in this study I needed to know what the participants' experiences were like as children being verbally abused. They were asked to reconstruct their early experiences in their families, school, with friends and in

their communities. During the second interview the participants talked about the concrete details of their present experience of having lived through childhood verbal abuse. They were asked about their relationships and their day to day functioning. For the third interview I asked the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience, to look at how the factors in their lives worked together to bring them to their present situation. Conducting three interviews over the course of one to two months built trust between me and the women I interviewed, and the prolonged engagement increased the likelihood that the findings would be credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It also allowed time for the transcription of the interviews and to review the material before the next interview. After listening and reading over the transcripts, questions arose that I asked at the beginning of each succeeding interview. One of the participants was going on a holiday so she requested the first and second interview to be a day apart. As a result I did not have a chance to transcribe her first interview before the second one took place.

I conducted the interviews in such a way as to allow the participants to tell their story. I asked a main or topical question to start the interview but the participant determined where the conversation would go. Some of the skills used to facilitate this style were using open ended questions, probing questions, follow-up questions, attending behaviors and empathic listening. Asking open-ended questions and using prompts when necessary increased the richness and depth of the interviews. Interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways to try to understand individuals (Fontana & Frey, 1998). The researcher must adapt to the world of the individuals studied and attempt to share their concerns and outlooks. I respected the participants and treated them as individuals with stories to tell so they were more willing to share their lives with me.

The third stage of the interview process involved confirmation of the data from the participants. I asked participants to think about the issues that we discussed in the interviews. A transcript of each interview was given to each woman and she had the opportunity to verify, expand and/or alter the transcriptions of the data. I wanted the participants to reflect on their reported experiences in order to determine the deeper meanings or themes of these experiences (van Manen, 1990). Two of the participants who were given their transcripts to review did not want to read them. One said that it was like she did not want to re-visit her childhood experiences. I could understand how they felt. It is difficult to talk about abusive experiences and to concretize them in writing makes them seem more real and permanent. It actually happened. After reading their transcripts I noted certain phrases and words that were repeated and jotted down some initial comments and impressions; I talked with the participants about them during the next interview to get their feedback. One of the participants added to the transcripts she was given and edited some of them. She wrote notes down on the side of the transcript pages to clarify some statements she had made during the interviews and took out some phrases that threatened her anonymity. Another woman emailed suggestions about how to improve the readability of her story. Their comments were appreciated. This was a way of member checking to ensure that as many aspects of the phenomenon as possible were examined and to achieve deeper interpretive insights. Both myself as the researcher and the participants as co-researchers, worked on what seemed to be the most important aspects of the transcripts, keeping in mind the original question of what is the lived experience and meaning of childhood verbal abuse in an adult woman's life.



I used a standard cassette tape recorder during each interview and, except for one occasion, the interviews were transcribed prior to each succeeding interview to identify patterns and issues that needed further clarification and elaboration. Seidman (1998) has written that the main method of creating text from interviews is to tape record the interviews and to transcribe them. I could then return to the tape and check for accuracy when something was unclear in a transcript.

### *Observations*

To add to the data obtained in the interviews, I used observations that included my interpretations and impressions of both the contextual environment and the participants' behavior and attitude in the study. Nonverbal communication was vitally important to be aware of during the interviews. This was done in order to enhance description (Adler & Adler, 1998). I needed to constantly analyze my observations for meaning (What was happening here?) and for personal bias (Was I seeing what I expected to see and not adding anything else? Was I evaluating and judging?) (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). van Manen (1990) refers to close observation as "the experiential anecdote" (p.68). Close observation involved an attitude of assuming a relation that was as close as possible while maintaining a hermeneutic alertness to the situation that allowed me to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of the situation. I was alert to the fact that all three women were visibly nervous especially at the beginning of the first interview. I also questioned my own body language and presence and how I was affecting the women I was interviewing. I wanted the women to feel secure enough to be able to openly share their experiences of childhood verbal abuse. I tried to put them at ease by letting them know some of my background and we chatted for a few minutes

before the tape recorder was started. This helped to relax us both and facilitated trust between us. The researcher who closely observes situations for their lived meaning is a gatherer of anecdotes and it is important to develop a sharp sense of the point that the anecdote carries within itself. It was necessary to write about only those living phrases and incidents that gave the anecdote a point and to edit the stories of the participants of all extraneous and irrelevant aspects (van Manen, 1990). This was a difficult task for me because I was constantly wondering if I was leaving out some important elements at the expense of others.

### ***Field Notes***

Another data collection method that enhanced the descriptions gained from the interviews was the use of field notes. If the researcher affects the participants then the participants will also affect the researcher. I used a tape recorder and a journal to document the thoughts, feelings and observations I experienced during each interview. These were used to enhance my analysis of the findings.

The field notes were a way to reflect on how the interview progressed and to make observations on the setting and the participant's behavior. As well, writing observations or talking about them on a tape recorder allowed for reflection on personal meanings and understandings acquired from the interview. When the women were sharing some of their experiences I found myself recollecting some of my childhood memories and I had to guard against allowing my own feelings and interpretations to affect the women's narratives. Field notes were both descriptive and reflective (Gall et al., 1996).

### *Data Analysis*

The data generated from interviews, observations and field notes were also analyzed following van Manen's (1990) guidelines. His method fits with my research objective of trying to describe and understand the lived experience and meaning of being an adult woman who experienced childhood verbal abuse. The meaning and experience of the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse in adult women's lives was reflected upon by analyzing the structural or thematic aspects of this lived experience. The first step was to read the participants' entire transcripts several times in order to absorb all of the data and become familiar with them (wholistic reading approach). As I read over the text I kept in mind the question, "how does this transcript speak to the meaning and lived experience of childhood verbal abuse?" For each transcript, I thought about what was the essential meaning or main significance of the text as a whole. Next, I analyzed the transcripts using a selective or highlighting approach. I used a pen to highlight statements or phrases that seemed to stand out and was enlightening or important to the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse. I then took a detailed reading approach and examined every sentence or sentence cluster to generate further thematic statements or phrases. With each reading of the transcripts a richer and more thoughtful description of the phenomenon emerged.

I then wrote a story for each of the participants using some of the participants' own words and phrases to ensure that their voices were heard. Through their stories I was attempting to find out what qualities make this phenomenon what it is and without which it could not be. What does this reveal about the experience of being a woman who lived with verbal abuse as a child? The purpose of using anecdotes or stories was to give

examples of lived experiences and allow the reader to more fully understand what it is like to live with childhood verbal abuse. Anecdotes pull us in and at the same time prompt us to reflect on the phenomenon. Stories engage us, involve us and require a response from us (van Manen, 1990).

### ***Etymological Reflection***

Throughout the process of reflecting and writing about the lived meaning of childhood verbal abuse, it was helpful to return to the original meaning of words. Over time, words tend to lose some of their original meaning, meaning that was often anchored in lived experience. Paying attention to the etymological origin of words may put us in touch with an original form of life where the terms still had living ties to the lived experiences from which they originally came from (van Manen, 1990). For example, when the women gave their definition of verbal abuse, I sought the original meaning of some of the words they used, in order to bring an increased awareness of what it is like to experience this type of abuse.

### ***Guided Existential Reflection***

As a guide for continued and deeper reflection on the data I examined the transcripts in terms of four fundamental lifeworld themes or existentials-lived body, lived time, lived space, and lived human relation (van Manen, 2002a). These four themes probably encompass the lifeworlds of all human beings despite their historical, cultural or social position. These four existentials help to describe and interpret how we live and experience ourselves as human beings in everyday situations and relationships. Lived body refers to the fact that we are always bodily in the world so the lived body always is part of the lived experience. Lived time is subjective time or how time feels and is also

our temporal way of being in the world (past, present or future). Lived space is felt space. The space in which we live affects the way we feel. Lived human relation is the lived relationship we continue with others in the interpersonal space we share with them as well as an existential relationship to search for the purpose or meaningfulness of life. These four existentials are not usually reflected on; they are usually experienced pre-verbally and not spoken of. They assisted in analyzing the data because they help reveal experiential meaning, i.e. meaning as it is lived. Examining the data in terms of lived human relation for example helped illuminate understanding in answering the question “how has the experience of being verbally abused as a child affected the relationships these women have today with family members and significant others in their lives?”

### ***Collaborative Reflection***

To produce deeper insights and understanding of the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse, collaborative reflective discussions took place. Such discussions were sought formally with the research participants to gather their views and meanings of the written transcripts and to see if any changes needed to be made. Through sharing the text with my research advisor and committee members I attempted in a less formal way to gain a fuller and richer understanding of the phenomenon. I was looking to achieve a common orientation to the concept of childhood verbal abuse as experienced in adulthood by women (van Manen, 2002a).

### ***Writing as Analysis***

Writing is the very activity of hermeneutic phenomenology. It makes some aspect of our lived experience reflectively understandable and intelligible (van Manen, 1990). In order to come to a deeper understanding of the data, I immersed myself in the transcripts

and wrote about specific episodes of verbal abuse and jotted down phrases and words that spoke to this phenomenon. I wondered how verbal abuse was similar and/or different from other types of abuse. What makes this type of abuse unique? I reflected on the four existentials and considered how a space filled with verbal abuse is different from a space where the words a child hears are positive and affirming. Writing and re-writing in an attempt to gain a more thorough knowledge and significance of childhood verbal abuse involved bringing in other sources of information such as etymological meanings, poetry, personal experience, and quotes on verbal abuse, books and articles related to verbal abuse; but always relating other sources of data to the lived experiences of the women I talked with. Writing stories or anecdotes for each of the three women provided examples of experiences of verbal abuse. The anecdotes revealed concrete details regarding the phenomenon and at the same time suggested more general principles about childhood verbal abuse. How does this episode speak to the experience of verbal abuse? “The paradoxical thing about anecdotal narrative is that it tells something *particular* while really addressing the *general* or the *universal*” (van Manen, 1990, p.120).

### ***Writing for a Vocative Text***

When I started to focus on the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse, I started to question what words I could use to describe this experience. How could I capture and interpret the possible meanings of the lived experiences of the women I interviewed? I wanted the text to speak to the readers. “The human science researcher is a scholar-author who must be able to maintain an almost unreasonable faith in the power of language to make intelligible and understandable what always seems to lie beyond language” (van Manen, 2002b, p.5). To present research by way of a reflective text is not to explain or

prove something or present findings but to do a reading as a poet would of a text that shows what it teaches (van Manen, 1990). I attempted to use language that would evoke a response from the reader and lead the reader to be personally engaged with the text. My aim was to construct an animating, evocative description of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in everyday life. Through the stories told by the women I tried to use words that evoked a sensory knowing of what it is like to live with childhood verbal abuse. The use of stories has the power to transform us; we may be shaken, touched, or moved by a story. Using poetry allowed for a deeper expression and more intense emotion of childhood verbal abuse. The use of an extended metaphor was meant to bring a more profound awareness of the phenomenon and to enable the reader to see childhood verbal abuse in a different light by relating it to another common, ordinary, widespread experience. My goal was to write in such a way that the text would involve the reader personally in order to get a sense of what it is like to live with childhood verbal abuse and to bring the reader to a thoughtful, reflective stance on the topic of verbal abuse.

### *Criteria for Assessing Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness, which ensures that the findings of this study are credible and worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was obtained by focusing on the following criteria: quality, representation, legitimation, dependability and confirmability.

#### *Quality*

Lincoln (2002) has proposed criteria for assessing the quality of a qualitative study. These include:

1. Positionality or Standpoint Epistemology, which means that the text shows honesty about the stance taken and the position of me as the researcher. I was open about who I am as the researcher through the sharing of my own experience of childhood verbal abuse and the motivations that have led me to this particular study.

2. Community, which recognizes that research takes place in and is addressed to a community. I wanted the research to benefit the participants; all of the women stated that telling their story was a positive experience. I am also accountable to the audience who will read this thesis; therefore the text has to be credible and the readers must be fully informed of the strategies used to represent the voices of the participants.

3. Voice, which emphasizes the importance of giving voice to those who have experienced childhood verbal abuse and to be involved with the participants in their journey. The women were allowed to tell their story in detail and received copies of the transcripts from their interviews as well as a copy of their stories.

4. Reciprocity involved developing a sense of trust, caring and mutuality with the participants. When the women initially contacted me I told them that their confidentiality and anonymity would be respected and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. At the first interview I let each of the women know my own background and interest in the topic of verbal abuse. I told them that I valued their input and suggestions when telling their stories. I saw the women as co-researchers whose contribution and ideas I respected as we attempted to come to a deeper understanding of childhood verbal abuse.



5. Sacredness, which recognizes that as a researcher I was concerned about human dignity, justice and interpersonal respect. The relationship with the women was based on mutual respect, granting of dignity and a deep appreciation of the participants' stories.

6. Critical Subjectivity, which meant that I was aware of the personal and psychological states of the participants as well as my own psychological and emotional states relative to verbal abuse. This was especially important during the interviewing phase. For example, when one of the women was struggling with articulating what she wanted to say during the first interview, she asked to have the tape recorder shut off. I turned the machine off and waited until she was more composed and able to continue telling her story. We talked about how she was feeling and then she started to remember a specific incident of childhood verbal abuse; when she indicated that it was all right to start taping again I turned the machine back on.

### ***Representation***

Representation refers to how I represented the voices of my research participants (Palys, 1997). It is important to establish credibility with the readers of this thesis by informing them about the strategies that were used to assure the findings are believable, authentic, and accurate. As a researcher I was accountable to the research participants. The women needed to be protected and their stories and experiences needed to be honoured. The participants' experiences and ideas were respected and listened to during the data collection process as well as recognized in the presentation of findings. The participants were considered co-researchers in this study and the conversations were based on a common desire to understand more about the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse and the meaning this lived experience has for them and for me. They all

stated that this research into childhood verbal abuse was extremely important and worthwhile.

A crucial technique for establishing credibility is collaborative hermeneutic conversations (member checking). These conversations involved asking the women whether or not I had accurately described their experiences. Interview transcripts were shown to the three women and they could alter or edit if they felt the transcripts were not correct. A copy of their stories was also given to them and they had the chance to change or edit anything they felt they did not want included in the thesis. One of the women made some editing changes which I honoured and another participant suggested I remove unessential words from the stories for ease of reading. Participants were asked to sign a transcript release form before transcripts could be used in the final written thesis.

Another method for establishing credibility with the readers was engaging in the phenomenological reduction which was mentioned earlier. To the best of my ability, I put aside my own interpretations and assumptions about childhood verbal abuse and guarded against hastily understanding the phenomenon based on personal preferences, inclinations, expectations or wishful thinking (van Manen, 2002a).

### ***Legitimation***

Legitimation indicates the criteria I used to ensure the data is credible and the interpretation of the data is reliable and trustworthy (Palys, 1997). I am accountable to the audience who will read this study and evaluate the authenticity and plausibility of the written text. Through participant protection, rich description, and member checks, the process of conducting this study was carefully preserved. Multiple data collection methods were utilized during this study such as interviews, observations, field notes and

documents to ensure a detailed rich description of the phenomenon being studied. In this way it is hoped that the reader of the text will nod in recognition that the descriptions and the meaning of the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse are credible and believable. The reader will recognize the experience as one he/she has had or could have had. This is what is known as “the phenomenological nod” (van Manen, 1990). A good phenomenological description is an adequate explanation of some aspect of the lifeworld that resonates with our sense of lived life. “A good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience-is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 27). This is called the “validating circle of inquiry” and the readers of this text can actively participate in this process when they read the text and decide for themselves if the descriptions and meanings generated are convincing and credible.

### ***Dependability and Confirmability***

Dependability refers to the accuracy of the text as well acknowledging all of the steps taken throughout the study. Confirmability is assuring the findings are grounded in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability and confirmability was established mainly through the audit trail which involved keeping an accurate record of the process entailed in the study. Writing reflectively in a journal and using many different sources for the data enhanced confirmability.

### ***Participant Protection***

Participants were protected through the regulations and conditions that the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioral Science Research endorses for research protocol approval. Participation in this study was strictly

voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw at any time. The purpose and the process of the study were stated before the participants chose to take part in the study. Informed consent was required and anonymity was provided. If at any time painful issues resurfaced due to the nature of this study, participants were given a list of resources that they could access if they so chose. (See Appendix H) The women stated that they appreciated the information given to them but none of them had to see a counsellor as a result of re-living childhood experiences of verbal abuse. One of the women said that she welcomed the list of books regarding the topic of verbal abuse. At the second interview all of the women mentioned that they were somewhat unsettled after the first interview. One of the women mentioned going home and eating an entire bag of potato chips. Another talked to her partner about how she was feeling. Although talking about their childhood experiences invoked hurtful memories, the women were able to manage their feelings and thoughts and were not unduly agitated by talking about their childhood verbal abuse experiences. They all found their involvement in this study to be therapeutic for them.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

The purpose of this study was to describe, in order to understand, the experience of childhood verbal abuse and the meaning adult women make of these experiences. The participants' rich descriptions of their lived experiences of childhood verbal abuse created the basis for the findings. First, a narrative of each of the women will be shared so the individual voices of the women can be heard. This will hopefully result in a better and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of verbal abuse. A brief introduction of each woman will be followed by an account of their experiences, using many direct quotations from the transcripts of the interviews. I have organized the stories the participants shared with me in terms of: (a) their life history that reveals their lived experiences of childhood verbal abuse and establishes the context of their experiences; (b) how the verbal abuse has affected and is affecting the participants' present situations; and (c) the meaning they make of their childhood verbal abuse experiences.

Next, a further exploration into the lived experience of childhood verbal abuse will be conducted using a guided existential reflection using the four lifeworld themes: lived time, lived body, lived space and lived relation (van Manen, 1990). These four existentials will serve as a guide for reflecting on, clarifying, and making explicit the lived quality and meaning of childhood verbal abuse. The purpose of hermeneutic-phenomenological reflection and description is to produce a more direct contact with the experience of childhood verbal abuse as lived. All phenomenological human science research can be viewed as explorations into how we live and experience ourselves as human beings. The reason for using accounts of lived experiences is to bring together life and theory. Experiential meaning is rooted in everyday life rather than being masked or

obscured by a theoretical framework. Contemplating on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already gone by or lived through. What is it like for these three women to live with childhood verbal abuse and what meaning has been made from this experience? After exploring these four existentials relative to childhood verbal abuse, a brief summary of the chapter will highlight the results.

In preparing the transcripts for inclusion in this thesis, particular conventions were implemented. The quotes used from the transcripts have been edited. All names, places and nationalities have been changed for the sake of confidentiality and anonymity. Two of the women chose pseudonyms they wanted to be known as and one allowed me to select a name for her. They were very worried that no one in their families be able to recognize them. For ease of reading and understanding, I deleted many superfluous words such as ‘um’ and ‘you know’ and some repeated words. Square brackets indicate where I have added to the quote for clarification of meaning. Two asterisks denote where quotes have been combined from different places in the transcripts. Three dots signify that the participant paused during the conversation before continuing.

### *Meeting the Participants*

#### *Ann’s Story- “The Monster Inside”*

Ann is an articulate, compassionate, well- educated woman in her early forties. After learning about this study from an announcement made in a class she was taking, she phoned me to say she was interested in participating. During the first interview Ann said that she was happy to participate in a study that is interested in verbal abuse without sexual or physical abuse, because, “I really believe that the scars I carry inside me are really as big [as those carried by survivors of sexual or physical abuse].” Ann grew up in

a two-parent home in a city on the Prairies. She is the oldest in a family of four. Most of the verbal abuse Ann experienced was from her father, who was “very patriarchal.” Ann never thought of her mother as verbally abusive but described her as more “emotionally abusive”. Her mom struggled and continues to struggle with depression. Ann had an older sibling who was killed in a car accident along with her grandparents when Ann’s mom was in the hospital giving birth to Ann. By the time Ann was six years old her mom had made a suicide attempt and then she was in and out of psychiatric wards for several years battling with depression. Ann was open and brutally honest in sharing painful and emotional childhood experiences with me. It is my desire that all who read Ann’s story will understand where she has come from and recognize the endurance and strength she has exhibited in overcoming the negative impact of childhood verbal abuse.

*Experiences of verbal abuse.*

**“All he ever did was put me down”** - Ann grew up in a home where there was no sexual or physical abuse but where she always feared her dad’s angry outbursts of verbal abuse and putdowns. She believed that she was a wicked person who was not loveable because her dad had told her all of her childhood that she was a slut and stupid. “[I was] carrying around this self-hatred, this... this deep knowledge that I was a bad person. I was just not lovable, a bad person.”

We weren’t sexually abused and we weren’t physically abused but... he screamed, he yelled, all the time, in a really, really, really, scary way. All he ever did was put me down. And the two big ones were that I was a slut and that I was stupid. Those are the two, two big ones.

Being the oldest in the family, Ann tried to protect her siblings from her dad. He would often be angry and shout harsh, biting words.

I have memories of standing in front of my sister with my arms and legs out in front of my dad like I was going to protect her. And he was like, twelve feet tall, his face just white with rage and shaking, and there would be screaming in French often. He'd scream a scream, "May lightning strike you down," he'd say it in French, and it was totally out of control; like it was in, in a complete rage.

He was very intimidating to a child who believed what he was saying. Ann speaks of her dad being dominant and dictatorial and whenever he was around, she was always frightened. "He was like very, like very controlling, very authoritarian and so whenever he was there you were always kind of afraid, you know?"

Her parents fought and argued and her dad would yell at her mom; because she was the oldest, Ann became her mother's main confidante. She says her mom would confide in her after her parents had been fighting. It made her grow up way too fast.

She would cry to me and say, "He rapes me you know." I don't think I was ever a kid. I think I was grown-up from the time I was little. I remember being at school in grade six and the girls in the bathroom talking about starting their periods and talking about sex and it was like, "Jeez, they don't know nothing!" And I felt like, "sit down, I'll tell you how it works." Because I knew it all; I knew way more than I, I wanted to know because my mother told me this stuff, and she said, "Don't...just whatever you do, don't get pregnant." And she told me she married him because she had sex with him, oh!, so she felt she had to.

**"Stupid Individual"** - The words her dad used affected Ann in a profound way. She says that she never felt loved by her dad and when she was with him she always felt inadequate and stupid.

The thing my father called me most of all was stupid. He'd say, "You stupid individual," and...but he would scream it. And, and I, I can't do it because it's too upsetting for me. But he would scream it and his whole face would go into this face like there was a really bad smell in the room, or something; like just, just completely hateful.

When Ann was an adolescent, her dad took her to a lake where he was building a cabin and she helped him clear the land. She always wanted her dad's praise and was



willing to help him, but to Ann it never seemed like she was doing a good job or that her dad approved of what she did. Ann felt isolated when she was with her dad.

I just remember him telling me, to clear these branches and bring them over here and, and doing it, and, and feeling alone. But I always felt really inadequate like I didn't... like I thought I must be doing it wrong. I wasn't strong enough, or I wasn't bringing enough or I was taking too many breaks. You know that kind of thing.

Ann has memories of her dad watching her do her homework. He would make derogatory comments that Ann believed about herself.

I have one memory of my dad looking at my marks and I remember him saying this, it was an A, and he said, "An A? What, an A? Not an A plus?" But it wasn't like the way you'd say it as a joke, like to say to somebody, "This is great! Geez is that the best you could do? Gee that's pretty rough," you know? Yeah, it wasn't in that tone; he was, he was serious. Like, "how come it wasn't an A plus." And I remember him standing over me when I had my science to do, and telling me I was lazy. I was lazy. He'd tell me I was lazy. I was lazy. And that I was... and I believed it! I thought I was this bad, bad kid.

Throughout her school years Ann could not accept that she was good in school. She always thought she was stupid. Ann could not acknowledge any good that happened to her. She did not believe it or that she was worthy to accept it. Ann said that "I've always felt outside, always felt different, I've always felt other."

It didn't matter what mark I got. It's like somebody would have had to say, "You are the smartest person in this class and we're, we just think you're amazing. You're the best person ever," in order for me to feel a little bit of, okay I'm... maybe I'm okay? I never believed that it was just, I was good. That I was, that I deserved my good mark; I never believed that. No, I didn't believe that at all.

**"Two-Bit Whore"** - One of the words that Ann's father used to refer to her was 'whore'. When the boys started to notice her, Ann was thrilled and felt like she was becoming a woman but her dad squelched her happiness with his words.

I remember being 13 and coming home... my girlfriend and I had gone to a restaurant you know, to get a hamburger and we were walking home. And some boys in a car, drove up and they were whistling at us, and we were just 13 and we just thought wow! We were just so popular, and we were pretty excited, and all that, and we came home and I felt all grown up, because... I really felt grown up because it was the first time that I, I might not have even been 13, gone to this restaurant by myself, not with my mom, but with my friend, like, you know, gone out for coffee like I'm grown up kind of thing? And so I felt all in the teenage direction, came home and, and these boys whistled at us and everything and I was just feeling all... special and grown up, and I came home and told this story to my parents. And my dad called me a two-bit whore and... I don't remember anything else, I just remember that.

**“Awful Shame”** - When Ann was 10 or 11 years old and her mom was in the hospital, a girlfriend came over to Ann's house and they were in the bathroom putting on some make-up.

My father came home and him just, screaming. And again it was... “Whores”, you know? “What do you think you're doing, painting your face like a whore?” And we were just... I was so ashamed. I remember always that feeling of shame, just profound shame; like being caught in the most... being caught with your pants down. And in a bad situation; just this awful, awful shame, just on and on. And then later I look back and I think, what a natural, normal thing to be doing.

Ann related another story to me about the time she wanted to buy a training bra and she had to ask her dad for the money to purchase it. As she was telling this story tears came to her eyes; the hurt and pain could be heard in her voice as she shared with me the reaction of her dad when she finally worked up enough courage to talk to him.

I had this awful, awful thing I had to do; I had to ask my dad for money for a training bra. Oh my God! Because I was like one of the last ones in school who still wasn't wearing one and everyone knew. God, I do not want to have to ask him. I do not want to ask him (whispers). So I worked up to it. I psyched myself up for it, and waited 'til he'd had his supper and his beer, and he had read the paper, and then I went to him and said, “Dad, I need some money to...” and mom was in the hospital right, so, I couldn't ask her. And I told him, and he laughed and he... and he'd laugh... it wasn't a nice laugh, it was... mean. I don't remember what he said; I just remember feeling so ashamed. He was basically saying, “You've got nothing to put in a bra, what a joke.” And it was, it was this awful pain, this awful shame. You know, you couldn't, couldn't feel

proud that now I'm becoming a woman and this is an exciting thing. I'm going to get my first bra.

*Life during and after the abuse.*

By the time Ann was in Grade two she said that she was experiencing depression.

I know in grade two I was on some kind of a... I'm sure it was Valium or something. I remember that my... mother went to the teachers and told them they had to lay off me, not put any pressure on me, because I was cracking up. Now I don't, I don't remember cracking up, I don't remember anything, I just know I was on these pills and I remember saying to my sister when we'd start to have an argument, "You have to be nice to me because I'm on these.. I'm on these pills." (Laughs) It was like... I was like, "Hey, I'm, I'm a special case here, you can't, can't pick a fight with me."

Ann was going out with boys and having sex by the time she was 13 years old.

She was looking for love and approval.

I had sex because I didn't know I could say no. And I just wanted to be accepted and loved. And I hated it, all the time. And I didn't like it, it was just... I was way too young jeez I just really didn't know. And then I'd feel terrible, terrible guilt. And I'd tell my best friend, "Ah, I'm such a slut; I had sex with this guy," and, and then I'd say, "I'm never going to do it again, I'm waiting until I'm married, I'm never..." and some other guy would look at me and that'd be it, I'd be gone and then I'd hate myself after. Just hate myself!

When Ann was in junior high she said that, "I know I was having sex, smoking pot, smoking cigarettes and putting on tons of make... black make-up; I wasn't allowed to wear it at home but I'd put it on and then wash it off, all over my eyes, and I was really depressed." When the school had phoned home to say that they were worried about Ann she felt that someone had called to say that she was a bad kid.

When my parents were told from someone outside that they [the teachers] were worried about their...me, it was like I felt I'd done something wrong. It wasn't like someone had called to say, "We're worried." It was like someone had called to say that she's a bad kid. Because they [mom and dad] didn't express concern, you know what I mean? It was like, "What's going on? How come these teachers are calling? What are you doing?"

By the time Ann was a teenager she was drinking heavily and taking all kinds of drugs. She had to find a way to cope with all the verbal abuse she was experiencing.

I did everything there was to do. Acid, pot, uppers, downers, cocaine, stopped at heroin, I was afraid of that, drank a lot, but it was all there, and I, and I... if it was there I would do it. I had no qualms. Any... somebody brought drugs into my presence, I would do it. And I remember doing things like going to my dad's cupboard and pouring some vodka and then downing it with a bunch of, you know, mom's 222s. I remember doing that as a teenager.

Ann spoke candidly about being depressed and suicidal, being addicted to alcohol and drugs, and being abused in adult relationships. She said that when she was in her early twenties she did not recognize that what she was doing to herself was abusive.

I just kind of walked around thinking, well I'm, I'm fucked up inside. No one knows it but I am. I just fake it. Everyone thinks I'm just all okay but I know I'm not, and, and they don't know and they're, and they're pathetically stupid because they don't see it, they don't get it. You know what I mean?

When Ann was going to university she experienced debilitating depressive episodes. She always had to excel at school because she craved her dad's approval.

I went through really bad depressions where I couldn't function. I'd drop out of school because I couldn't function. I'd be so down on myself, so... and I was always, I had to be an A student, I had to be like an A plus student and I was, you know, helping at clinic, helping doing sexual assault support for women... and, I had to be the best at everything.

Ann had anger inside of herself but she was not allowed to express emotions at home. She said, "We weren't allowed to be angry; we weren't even allowed to be sad."

Later she became depressed and suicidal as she carried a self-hatred and a deep knowledge that she was a bad person.

I didn't begin to express anger until well into my adult years. I didn't have anger, I mean it was there but it was so suppressed, I turned it in on me. I'd be suicidal and I, I had sex with whoever wanted me basically because I always

felt, well it's such a little thing to give; it makes them happy. I had no respect for my body or I had not anger to feel. I just had depression, lots of depression.

**“Question Yourself”** - Ann mentioned that when she first went to see a therapist and was telling her story it was like it had not really happened to her but to someone else. She said, “You even kind of question yourself; you think, well am I crazy?”

What's my problem? Like nothing really bad ever happened to me. And now yet when I tell my story I realize, yeah, something bad happened.\*\* But the first few times I think I told my story to anybody and that was to a therapist, I felt really disassociated from the story. I was telling the story like I was telling a movie.

### ***Generational abuse.***

Ann stated that her dad was physically and verbally abused himself as a child. Both of his parents were abusive but Ann said that her dad would laugh about the cruel, harsh treatment he received.

My father was basically a messed up guy who had no social skills and was abused a lot as a kid.\*\* He was raised himself in a... in what I would say is a pretty abusive environment, but when he tells stories of his childhood he laughs like it's a joke, being kicked under the bed by your dad, or having your mother break a broom over your back, or all kinds of things he tells... he had a really awful childhood.\*\* [He tells of] getting, getting whacked and marks left on him or watching his father rip off the neighbor's ear. He'll tell us these like awful stories and... But he laughs when he's telling them.

### ***Recognition of abuse.***

Ann did not think anything was wrong with the way she was being raised. Living in a verbally abusive atmosphere became the norm and it wasn't until Ann left home that she began to think maybe her father's behavior was not typical.

I thought it was normal. I thought that's what...I remember telling my siblings that, like well this is normal, this happens in other families. I don't know where the heck I got that from. I think maybe my mother must have told me that or something. But I thought it was.

Ann thought that verbal abuse by a parent or parents was worse for a child to experience than from peers or strangers. As a child she believed the words spoken to her by her parents.

I realized that to be hurt or attacked by an enemy, someone outside of you, is a whole different thing than to be hurt by somebody who's supposed to love you the most in the whole world. Who's supposed to be your protector, who, who is the first person you ever love in the world, your parents. And when they tell you you're ugly and bad, or stupid, wow! You totally believe them. As opposed to when a stranger tells you that, you go, oh, what a jerk! Or a... when an enemy hurts you, you go, oh, well they're a bad person. But how can you think that about your parents? You know, you can't, when you're an innocent child you love them. \*\* I don't think it's fair to make comparisons and I couldn't begin to compare the effects of damage from parents or from anywhere else, outside in the world. But... in a way I think it's, it's more damaging emotionally, I really do. [You are] carrying this deep profound part... thing inside yourself that you say, "I'm not okay, I'm just not okay."

*Image of abuse.*

**“An Out-of-Control Raging, Screaming Monster”** - I asked Ann if she had an image or picture that she would associate with the verbal abuse. She readily described the ‘monster’ inside of herself that she lived with for a long time.

It wasn't really a picture so much as a sensation that I, I could describe it visually. And, and the sensation was that there was something inside of me, somewhere around here in the middle, and it was black, and it was kind of faceless; it was like a half-formed human body, and it was black and slimy and ugly; it represented just ugly; there was a monster inside of me. And when I... one of the first persons that I did therapy with had me... sort of visualize that monster and I was supposed to be trying to go in and comfort it and I just couldn't get near it, it was, it was an out-of-control raging, screaming monster. And it was me. It was me. But it wasn't me. It was as if I'd been invaded by an alien but it... there was no getting... it was part of you. It's not there any more. It's gone. But for a long time it was something that I could almost see, almost feel. It was so... present. That's the way it would feel. \*\* Mine was like wet and slippery and slimy, like something that you wouldn't want to touch kind of thing.

*Motivation to change.*

For Ann, finding out that she was having a child was the incentive she needed to start to change and improve her life because she did not want to continue the cycle of verbal abuse.

Getting pregnant changed everything, 'cause all of a sudden I wasn't living for me any more, I was living for this child...And all I wanted was that she would never, ever, ever experience what I've experienced, ever. So, you know, I mean, right away I stopped smoking cigarettes, stopped smoking dope, stopped drinking coffee, stopped everything. Started going for walks every day, getting exercise, praying, doing meditation because I didn't want to send bad feelings to her even in the womb.

The first time Ann thought that maybe she could change and that things could be different was when she first started to see a therapist in her early twenties. The therapist had told her that he had experienced verbal abuse and that he had been verbally abusive and violent in his younger days but that he had changed.

But listening to him tell that, was like, okay, like maybe this is even possible that... that you can actually heal and change and... I remember that just like, this was like a reality orientation that really you can have a peaceful, happy life without yelling, without all this ugliness. That it's actually possible that some people actually really live that way not just on TV.

The therapist told her to say good things about herself, to replace the negative words her father said about her with positive statements. At first she did not believe the affirming words.

I said to him, "I'm stupid and bad and ugly, and that's what's in my head." And he said, "You know, that's like a tape that's running through your head that's been there for a lot of years." He said, "You have to replace it." He said, "You have to replace it with one that says I'm smart, I am beautiful and I'm good. I'm smart and good and beautiful." And I said, "But I don't believe that, like that's just words." I said to him, "That's a lie, though." He said, "No, the lie is the first one."

### *Meaning making.*

I wanted to know what meaning Ann made of her experience. Ann related that part of the reason for the abusive atmosphere in her home could be the result of the culture. The culture her father came from was very patriarchal and her mother was “a victim of ‘50s ideas about women.” Ann said that they were culturally set up to fail. Her own family history also contributed to the abuse. There was a chain of violence in her family but she has had more opportunities in her life to try to break the chain.

When I look back at my dad’s family there is alcohol and abuse, where in my mom’s family there was not abuse, there was neglect, there was illness and neglect and... So I look at it as that; my story is just one little story that’s probably similar to many people’s stories. And with parents who are... were also kind of just... in that culture, in that context and part of it is I think... I’ve always seen it as kind of a chain, of family kind of violence and addiction and my... what I look at it is... I’ve had the opportunity to get an education, an amazing education..., and to travel the world. And I had opportunities that my mother never had, or my father so to have some understanding of that. And I also, what I have that they didn’t have is, I grew up in a society where everybody does therapy, and therapy is easily accessible and it’s not something you look down on. So I had a lot. I had tools they didn’t have. So I had the opportunity to, to do more towards breaking that chain. They were just in survival, I spent some of my time in survival; they’re still in survival. Now I’m moving out of survival, you know? So they’re stuck, and I’m not... and I hope that my daughter goes just that much further.

**“Words are Powerful”** - I wanted to know what Ann has learned from her experience of childhood verbal abuse. Ann stated that what a child hears about themselves affects them forever.

I believe that the word is very powerful. And I didn’t used to believe that. “Sticks and stones can hurt my bones but names will never hurt me.” What a lie that is! Names are hugely important, what you call people, like, hugely important. And now, I’m almost obsessive, almost obsessive about words.\*\* When you’ve been hurt by words, you have that constant sensitive skin and you’re so aware, and I mean as a parent, right from day one, right from before day one I’m so conscious of what I say to my child about my child.\*\* I feel like I’ve witnessed somebody being hit when they say, “I’m so stupid,” I just feel sick.\*\* Tone of voice is power. Facial expression is powerful. You can tell



somebody that they're nothing, just with the tone of your voice, and with your face, and they will hear that just as loudly as if you'd swung a baseball bat over their head. It speaks so, so strongly. And to give someone the message that they're nothing, when they're a child, and they're so vulnerable, that will hurt them... forever.

**'The Tin Man'** - Ann said that her experiences of verbal abuse have strengthened her and given her a greater compassion for other people. She has been able to mine something positive from her harmful past.

So in a way I guess I'm trying to say that the good thing that came out of having been verbally abused is that I have, like the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz, I don't know if you remember, the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz doesn't have a heart so he's so afraid he's gonna maybe hurt somebody or step on a bug or something; you don't see that in the movie, you see it in the book though. And so he tries to be... he's extra sensitive, he's very cautious and careful that he might not... that he doesn't hurt anybody because he doesn't have a heart so he thinks. And it's ironic cause he's of course more kind and more sensitive than everybody, because of this worry; I think in a way that it can be a gift that way when you've been hurt that way. Because if you heal, if you do your work you can be more careful and kind and not hurt anybody that way. So I try to look at it that way now, having come through it. But I've got to tell you, it was hell. I wouldn't go back to starting all over at 16 or 18 even for anything.

### ***Jesse's Story- "Behind the Mask"***

Jesse is a soft-spoken, intelligent young woman in her early twenties who volunteered to take part in this study after noticing one of my posters advertising for participants. She said that she had not experienced any physical or sexual abuse. At the initial interview Jesse said that taking part in this study would bring her story out in the open and assist her to examine and clarify her experiences, "because I think that some part of me tries to suppress a lot of things and not deal with it." She was visibly nervous and somewhat anxious and said that it was very tempting to "walk out that door." Jesse did not walk out, but stayed and slowly and candidly shared with me some of her experiences of childhood verbal abuse.

Jesse had difficulty in going back and re-living some of the incidents of abuse. It was like there was not enough distance between what happened in her childhood and the present. It was still too close and too fresh in her mind. She admitted later that she has only been away from her family for three years and she has not really thought about her childhood experiences and how they have affected her in an in-depth way before. Jesse comes from a two-parent household and is the middle child in a family of three. She grew up in a small town on the prairies. She experienced verbal abuse from her mother but her dad was a great support for her. “[He] just made me feel like I was important.” Throughout the interview process Jesse impressed me with her level of maturity and inner strength. Being able to recognize the verbal abuse and to be willing to deal with issues related to the negative experiences honestly and openly, indicated a high degree of courage and determination in this young woman.

### *Experiences of verbal abuse.*

Jesse found it difficult to remember specific incidents of verbal abuse when she was a child. During the first interview I shut the tape recorder off twice because she was struggling with articulating what she wanted to say. “This is really weird...can’t express myself really.” When the tape player was off she would start to share and then we would turn it back on. She said that she was having difficulty recalling particular experiences because, “It was just a normal everyday thing so there was not anything in particular that would stand out.” There were a lot of times when her mom would just call her stupid. There was always a lot of anger surrounding her mom’s abusiveness.

The first incident that Jesse shared with me of verbal abuse was when she was supposed to carry some bags up to her brother's apartment. Her mom got so mad and angry and stormed upstairs.

Jesse, you fucking, blah, blah, blah, bitch, and blah, blah, blah, why didn't you help me take this all the way up from the ground to his apartment?" and "it's just like if you want something fucking set up here[I might as well do it myself] Jesse. I'm doing all the work here, you're so sick.

**"Just A Feeling That You Had"** - Jesse commented that there was an atmosphere of fear in the home. "I was just very, very afraid." As a child Jesse would not talk back to her Mom because her Mom would sound so angry. Jesse would just sit there and take her mom's anger and would not talk back. As a teen-ager she might answer her Mom back but, "even then she'd get more explosive and a lot more scary and you wouldn't want that to happen so you [stayed quiet]." Jesse said that she had to be careful what she said around her mom because her mom would become volatile and would over-react. Her mom's voice was very harsh so if she would yell, Jesse would get really scared.

I guess some of the words would be screaming. I guess it depended what you said to her but she would put you down and make you feel like you shouldn't have said that in the first place. It was just a feeling that you had.

Jesse spoke of the time when she started her menstruation. After school one day she went to the bathroom and noticed that she had got her period. She talked to a friend about it and asked how her friend's mom had reacted when she found out her friend had her period. Her friend said her mom had told her that she was really proud of her.

I just felt like... so unnerved because I thought my mom wouldn't react like that at all; she would just get mad. I was scared that she would yell at me like she would most of the time. I wouldn't bother... and I was laying in the bathtub and I was just crying and I finally went to her and I was like... I told her I had

my period and she's like... she didn't blow up which I was surprised and she's like, "Now here's a pad, now just don't have sex." She just meant now you can't have sex because you'll only get pregnant. I was like, "What? I'm only 13."

**"I Wasn't as Good as a Normal Person"** - I asked Jesse how she thought her mom would react to the news that she had started her menstruation. She thought that she would be accused of doing something wrong.

I thought she would get mad at me and be disappointed and that it was... be my fault. Like, I would get into trouble for it, I, guess yeah; but I just had a sense that anything I said I would get into trouble for doing, for saying that, or anything, so I felt that I wasn't as good as a normal person; it was bad or something wrong.

Jesse reported feeling like "I was very different growing up." She said that she remembered one time getting a picture taken with her siblings in a store and she would not smile. Her mom was there and her mom had made her mad and so she decided to frown and she said, "I started to make this sad little face."

**'No Privacy'** - Jesse remarked that growing up she had no privacy. Her mom would come into her bedroom and find notes she had written. Her mom would find suicide notes and tell Jesse that she had such a better life than her mom did. One time she had written a letter to a friend and her mom would not let her send it.

I remember one time I wrote a letter to my friend. I didn't have any privacy growing up but then my mom looked at the letter I did and she was like, "Why would you be writing this? This is so dumb. I mean, you don't say this to people Jesse, all right, so you're not going to send this."

When Jesse was in junior high and she told her mom she was going to try out for a play her mom told her she would have to lose weight.

Well you'd better lose weight because only skinny girls get the lead job so you're going to have to start dieting now...\*\* You're going to lose weight, and you're [going to] try your best at school, and we're going to look good together

and you're not going to be fat and stupid for the rest of your life" and she sat me down in front of a mirror. How would you be feeling if somebody said [that]?

Jesse also experienced verbal putdowns from her peers in elementary school. She related that she was obese as a child and she did not have many friends. Jesse excelled in academic work and was the teacher's pet.

Well I was called fatso a lot growing up. Like, I was always the, the worst person...you don't want to be... thought of as something as a disgusting thing as a child because you want to make friends, you're very vulnerable at that point.

It is only in the last year that Jesse has realized that she was verbally abused as a child. Jesse started to think she may have experienced verbal abuse when she watched a documentary in a class she was taking. A child was having behavioral problems in school and a video camera was set up in the home to try and figure out how to help this child.

How his parents treated him was exactly how my, my mom treated me. And at the end the kid was taken out of the house because... that was considered verbal abuse. And I cried during it because that was... dead on, how I was treated, and so I think that I started thinking that I was abused too.

### *Life during and after the abuse.*

Although Jesse has made improvements in her self-concept in the past year, at times she still finds herself thinking that she is not as good as other people. The messages she received from her mother continue to play in Jesse's mind.

I just, when I'm with people I just feel like I'm stupid, stupider than they are; I feel like I'm stupid. When I do talk to them I start talking like an idiot; people are just thinking that I'm dumb and overweight and stupid and fat...

Jesse attributes the fact that she has struggled with low self-esteem most of her life to the way that her mom treated her as a child. She thinks other people are better than she is.

I have a low self-esteem and I don't think very highly of myself, at times; and I always think that I'm inferior to other people, which would have a lot to do with, I think, how my mom treated me and I didn't really realize that 'til last year.

Jesse expressed that she was often sad and depressed on and off throughout her school years. In grade 8 Jesse stated that she was depressed and crying in school. She told one of her teachers that she was having suicidal thoughts. The teacher phoned her house and her mom answered. When Jesse got home she said that she was in trouble. Her mom was more concerned about the family's reputation than about how Jesse was feeling. Mom said, "Why would you ruin our name, why would you ruin our good name. We worked and dad has worked way too hard for [this]. You don't need to be talking at school to the teachers". After this episode, Jesse expressed that she bottled up her feelings and did not talk to any of her teachers anymore. "I guess because I got scared I would get in trouble with mom about it, I didn't speak out." She would cry at home but, "at night, when I was in my room."

Jesse was on the honor roll in school and was an enthusiastic, eager learner in elementary school. She said that although her marks would be in the 80's in school she was always compared to her brother. The message she received was that he was better than she was.

I always got all 80's in school, like 80, 83, and I got like 90's and... so, "Oh, that's good", and she looks at my brother's, she goes like, "Wow, you're so smart." He did such a better job than I, so much a better job than I did.

When she first left home Jesse said that she was very sad and found herself crying and crying. "I came to [the city] and felt very, very sad. I just let it all out and started crying."

Now that Jesse is more aware of how she was treated at home by her Mom, she questions how she reacts when she is in an argument with someone. She does not want to be like her mom.

Even now when I do react from a quarrel, is that the right way to react [to] it? I mean, was it really all that bad really? I just feel I have to not react or else I'll overreact. I might be like my mom. And I don't want to do that to people; so I sit down and think about was that a good reaction to have?

I asked Jesse if she was always questioning herself. She said, "I'm always uncertain. I always doubt myself". Then I asked her if she had difficulty making decisions. "Yeah, that's hard too. I'm always thinking do I have too?"

Before grade five Jesse spent much of her time alone and did not have a best friend. She focused on her school work and became a favorite of her teachers. As a result she was not accepted by her peers. "I think [I was] a keener when I was in school. I was a teacher's pet, uh, and I think kids that age don't understand, and they were jealous, 'cause I was getting the teachers' attention." In junior high she developed a close friendship with a girl who was popular and then started to have more friends after that. When she was older she had a lot of friends and still does. Her friends are a great support to her and got her out of the house when things were bad at home. Jesse said that some of her friends were afraid of her mom. They would usually not stay at Jesse's house but she would go out. "When I got older like, when I was about 12 or 13, some of my friends were actually scared of my mom. Yeah, they're like, "She's not normal, she scares me."

Jesse stated that it felt good when her friends did not want to stay at her house with her mom. It helped to realize there was something wrong with her mom. She said

they would make fun of her mom. I asked her what she thought of that and she said, “I just laughed and it felt good to bring her down”

Jesse said that her mom would not hug and kiss her when she was small but her dad would. More recently, when Jesse went home, she gave her mom a hug and she said that her mom actually returned the hug and said, “I can’t show love like you do Jesse, all right?” Jesse is still angry with her mom for the way her mom’s verbal abuse has affected her. Now that she is older, her mom no longer is as abusive towards her. She says, “I have stuck up for myself a lot more in the last few years so I think she’s learning not to say those things.” She said that her mom is trying to improve their relationship now.

She... I think is trying to develop a relationship. And I’m still a little bit angry so I try my best to just take it slow and... The process of forgiveness is going to be a long time, so... It’s gotten better like we’ll start talking a bit and not ignoring each other.

### ***Generational abuse.***

Jesse shared that her mom had been sexually abused by her dad and that both of her mom’s parents had been, and continue to be, verbally abusive towards her. She told of a time when her mom and dad went to see her mom’s parents a few years ago. Her mom stayed in the car while her dad went to the house; her mom’s parents said, “oh, where is that crazy Helen, that daughter of ours, that fat, son of a..., that fat bitch of a daughter of ours, where is she?”

My mom was treated very, very bad growing up and I think because of that, and if you didn’t have any role models to help you out in that time, I think it is quite possible to end up like her and [it is] hard to get out of that; you don’t know how to, because you just want to keep repressing it.



### ***Recognition of abuse.***

Jesse mentioned at the start of the first interview that she was not sure if what she experienced was verbal abuse. She told me that she had asked her counsellor if what she had experienced was verbal abuse and he had told her that it was. Jesse knew that what her mom was doing was not normal but she did not think of it as abuse.

Well I knew what she was doing was abnormal but I didn't think it was like abuse. I just thought it was... just some... I knew it was wrong but I didn't think it was abuse; it was just something she shouldn't do but she does.

I asked Jesse if the effects of verbal abuse are different depending on who is doing the abusing. Jesse experienced verbal abuse from her mom as well as her peers.

I think it's way worse if your parent is doing it, because that's the one person you're supposed to turn to, no matter, that would love you no matter what. I mean, they brought you into this world, and you think that they would protect you and love you and make you feel that you were a valuable person in this world, because that's their job. I think that's the one duty of a parent. So I think a parent doing that is, is much... much, much more devastating because that's who you are [with] all the time. Every day you're with your parents, and they're the ones supposed to be teaching you things about your life and yourself, and if they're teaching you the wrong things I think that is way, way more devastating than a peer.

### ***Image of abuse.***

I wanted to know if Jesse had ever thought about an image or picture associated with verbal abuse. She said that she had not previously thought about it but when I asked her what picture or image came to mind if I said 'verbal abuse' she said she could see her mom. When I asked how her mom would be looking Jesse said, "just with her angry face and when she's about to be explode you know and you're about to get it."

### *Motivation to change.*

After becoming aware that what she experienced at home could have been verbal abuse, Jesse said that she wanted to deal with her feelings and issues because, “I want to have kids one day and I don’t want to do that to them and I don’t want to live my life like my mom did cause it’s a waste of time.” Jesse does not want to continue the abusive cycle.

### *Meaning making.*

I wanted to know what meaning, if any, Jesse she had made from her experiences and how it has affected her. She said she hadn’t really thought about it before.

Well I know it should be stopped; and I think the thing with me in [a helping profession] is, I don’t want things like that to happen to other people. So... through research or counselling, I want to help people who are [like] my mom, who have problems that should be... need to be dealt with or people like myself who had low self-esteem growing up, because it’s wrong, and it should be stopped; and it helped me to realize what is right and wrong, because my dad was such a really good guy, gentle, pleasing, and gentle, nice, caring. My mom was totally opposite so it gave me a good sense of what was right and wrong. Dad’s right, mom’s wrong (laughs). So, I think I developed... I had to think about my own morals and what I thought was right and wrong, and, and it helped me to realize what I want to do with my life, it gave me a goal.

I asked Jesse what she had learned from her experience. She is able to see that how she thinks about herself is related to her upbringing.

I guess, just the big thing is, seeing the connection of how I feel to what happened to me in the past and feel why I do feel that way. Because I, I feel, always kind of felt, a certain way about myself, “I’m stupid and I’m not good enough” and I connected that with my mom; but at the same time it’s not going to help me get over how I feel, blaming people. It’s good to know where you came from and, you know, that it wasn’t that these things are, I guess, to shatter that belief, to show that it wasn’t, I’m not bad and my mom was just, she had her problems and it wasn’t about me; it was about my mom, and I wouldn’t have thought that before.

From going to counselling and education Jesse has obtained skills to deal with her verbal abuse issues. She now realizes that it does not do any good to compare herself to others.

I have the skills now to deal with it and I will never get that way again, 'cause I won't let it. So, I mean, there are times when you get upset, and you'll have bumps in the road where you'll still feel the same way, but it won't be as bad as it was before.\*\* The big thing is, that I'm finding out, is why give someone else a lot of power over you that they should... you should make them be so that they're better than you are. You know we're all equal I think. I think we all have our different strengths and weaknesses. And not comparing and just like I [was]seeing my counselor yesterday and he said don't compare. Just realize what qualities you bring to the table and appreciate that and realize that you have them for the next... or that you appreciate them and so far that is helpful although slowly.

Jesse is starting to take responsibility for her life and not blame her mom for what happened to her. She realizes that the only person she can change is herself.

There's no point in going into the past and pointing fingers and blaming, and getting angry because it's just... it's not helping at all because it's not... what I'm trying to fix is my self-esteem and that's not going to come by just pointing fingers and blaming. At some point you're just going to have to take responsibility; and like, I know that happened to me but now it's my job as an adult to... overcome this and not pass it on to other people.

### ***Susan's Story- "The War Zone"***

Susan has been an acquaintance of mine for about two and a half years. She volunteered to take part in this study because she knew I was looking for participants and she told me that she may have experienced childhood verbal abuse from her father. Susan is in her early fifties and it is only within the last five to ten years that she has become more aware of how her childhood experiences have affected her. Before that Susan thought she had a normal childhood and everything was wonderful. At this stage in her life Susan is a highly educated, intelligent, outgoing woman who has a zest for living. She is married and the mother of three grown children. Her parents are both still alive. She continues to work on improving her self-image and

asking for what she needs in relationships. Susan told me that to this day she does not have a close relationship with her father and that there is no real communication. From what she said as she was sharing her story, talking to her dad about her childhood experiences is something she feels she cannot do because “it seems too risky”. She does not want to hurt his feelings. After reading through the transcripts from our interviews, Susan wrote that she feels ungrateful “telling my truth”. She said that she feels guilty and that she wishes she could focus more on the positives or strengths her dad has and not on the negatives. In her childhood Susan was not allowed to exhibit negative emotions and still has difficulty expressing anger or even recognizing it in herself. After our interviews Susan phoned me and said that one day while out walking, she was thinking that her childhood home was like a ‘war zone’ with her dad in control of the troops. The voice of Susan will be heard in this story, from a little girl afraid to reveal her emotions, to a mature, capable woman who has worked on conveying her true feelings and needs.

*Experiences of verbal abuse.*

**“Stone-Faced”** - Susan shared that her dad would be angry much of the time and the words he spoke would be in an angry, blaming tone. She was not allowed to show any emotion on her face when her dad would be in this kind of a mood.

I can remember trying to look like stone-faced because my dad would say to me, “wipe that smirk off your face, wipe that smile off; what are you smiling about?” and that would be if he was getting angry.

When she was about fifty years old Susan hung a picture on the wall of her home of a girl whose face was without expression, “And I thought boy that represents how I needed to be, was totally expressionless. There was no room for expression of feelings.”

**“Walking on Eggshells”** - Being around her dad was like walking on eggshells according to Susan. She said that the family never knew how he would react or what kind of a mood he would be in.

Sometimes he was normal and sometimes, you always made sure you didn't cross him up so it was kind of a little bit like walking on eggshells I think. You could tell when he came home the way he cocked his hat whether he was angry or not. \*\* There was no room to express; you couldn't be really happy because if you make too much noise that was wrong.

As a child, Susan was thought of as the “easygoing kid” who spent a lot of time being a peacemaker. She said that she now believes she was afraid of her dad so she was caretaking, taking care of things so he did not become angry.

When I remember back, boy, it wasn't easy to be easygoing, keeping dad in a good mood, or soothing him if he was in a bad mood; and soothing would be, could be, brushing his hair. Sometimes he'd tell us to brush his hair. And so we were supposed to brush his hair and we'd brush it really cautiously because it had to be just right. And so afraid, I was really afraid of him.

Her dad liked order and everything to be in its proper place. Susan says this is probably due to his training in the army.

I remember this one time him clearing the counter off with his hand and saying, “get this mess cleaned up” and you're supposed to; so he created a bigger mess and you're supposed to clean it up right now. He was in the army, and I think he learned that the neat and tidiness was really important and that was very important to him. No mess around you. Put everything away before your dad gets home, so a lot of fear.

Susan remembers a time when her dad was playing ball with her and her siblings. She said it sounds like a happy time but for her it was more like work and trying to get better and better.

If you missed the ball it would be with such disgust that he said like, “Can't you bend down and get that ball”. We were always supposed to be improving and being better and better and better and so I don't remember getting, “oh that was good” very often. It was more, you always had to do better. And so I find

as an adult I'm still trying to always do better. Nothing is ever good enough. \*\* Well, when we were practicing, sometimes he'd be angry. He'd be angry if we missed the ball, so a lot of pressure to catch the dam thing.

Susan said that she never felt angry when her dad would be telling her to try harder and yelling at her. She was trying to please him so he would not get mad. From her written notes she said she felt tense.

I always tried really hard to make sure I got it right because I didn't want to make him angry. And so that even whose ball game was it, totally his. We, I just tried really hard never to miss. I mean there's no way I'd ever be a bit lazy on the, on the [ball], because I mean that's what he'd of interpreted it as if you missed the ball, or you'd kind of ran over but really didn't try really hard.

Susan and her siblings were always trying their best to keep their dad happy. "But I know we really, really, really tried hard to please. There's not one of us who would ever slack off. We never ever tried to cross him up. We always tried really hard not to cross him up."

Susan shared that her dad's angry tone and outbursts was what she perceived as abuse. It was the angry and 'gruff tone' of voice more than the actual words said. "It was more the disgust and wrath, than the anger that he felt, that we could feel. He'd keep yelling, yelling, yes yelling and always yelling."

**"Very Critical"** - Susan mentioned that her dad's criticism was an aspect of verbal abuse for her. She said, "critical, yeah, very critical, critical of others as well." It felt like if she would do something he did not approve of, "you would be really bad." Even now, Susan is still conscious of her father's voice when she is drinking or eating. "Last night I was eating ribs and I thought, "I wonder what I look like eating?" I wondered if I was eating properly or I still question how I drink; because no matter how you drank, it wasn't the right way."

**“I Didn’t Have a Voice”** - As a child Susan was not allowed to express an opinion or to express her feelings openly. Susan remembers her dad talking about a neighbor woman who had too much of an opinion and she was portrayed as a ‘bad woman’. Her mother was not allowed to have an opinion either and Susan mentioned that her mom has never been able to speak up for herself. “I didn’t have a voice as a child. I did what my parents wanted. And, and they never asked our opinion about things. We were just told what to do, what to wear.”

Susan stated that even today she has difficulty arguing with males. She could give her opinion in a discussion but she is still intimidated by a loud voice or if she hears blame in the speaker’s voice.

The voice isn’t there. I know better again, but I don’t speak out. If my brothers were saying something I wouldn’t disagree with them. I guess I would never feel... maybe I wouldn’t feel like I could argue with anyone, but I would never feel like I could argue with... males. When somebody raises their voice, I am completely intimidated. And they don’t even have to raise their voice high, to a high level, it’s raising their... the energy of their voice if you know what I’m saying? As soon as it’s in a blaming way or a, “I know everything” way, or anything like that I’m backed into a corner, I think.

Susan has encouraged her daughters to speak up for what they need and not to let someone silence their voices. Because she was not allowed to communicate negative emotions as a child, Susan has encouraged her children to be open about their feelings.

I’ve encouraged my kids to express their negative emotions. And I always say to my girls, my daughters, “Never let someone squelch your voice.” But as long as I had my voice squelched, what do they learn? They just learn to follow. If I hear a male saying, “she sure has a lot to say” I say to my daughters, “Don’t ever let them squelch your voice. I mean, your voice is important.”

**“Good girl”** - Susan had to try to live up to her father’s expectations. She was afraid of what would happen if she was not ‘good.’

They often told us that we were good girls and so we were very afraid not to be good and I think really, I mean, when I think of behaved, I think we were very well behaved. His anger was more what now feels to me like abuse than what he said and usually after he had had his little fit of anger about something he would come in and say, “well you know I’m doing this for your own good and I’m doing this because I love you and I want you to turn out to be a really good kid, good girl.”

Susan described her father as “controlling, powerful, overbearing, dominant, lots of those words.” When Susan was about 16 her dad arranged a date for her with an unpopular boy from school. She did not want to go but her dad made her. She said that she had no opinion in the matter.

He wasn’t popular and he wasn’t attractive. He phoned and asked me out; probably because I was a nice good girl and I said no. I had to wash my hair or something because I didn’t want to go (laughter in voice); and my dad heard this and he made me phone him back and tell him I would go. And I had to go to a movie. Dad in his rationale [thought] that, maybe if I went out with him, then other girls would see me going out with him, and then they would go too and it would give this man, this guy, a chance. So the message, it was nice, it was nice of my father to do that for this guy but you see the guy’s needs were ahead of mine.\*\* It wasn’t right that somebody could literally force me to go on a date that I didn’t want to. Like where is my judgment in this? What if the guy was a rapist?

**“Pins and Needles”** - Susan mentioned that her dad drank when she was younger but has since quit. She described him as a ‘dry drunk’. Susan stated that even though he has not drunk in a lot of years, his temperament has not changed. He still has a lot of anger inside of himself although he has become mellower. She said her dad would be angry when he drank and the family never knew what to expect if he came home drunk. Her dad’s drinking was never talked about openly at home.

Sometimes if he had been drinking a lot he might just come home and go up to bed. And that was the best. That was the best days. If he tried to stick around he’d get mad about nothing, anything. The chair wasn’t right, there was too much clutter on the counter or table, somebody spoke to him in the wrong tone of voice...\*\* You got pins and needles when he was around. Pins and needles, that word rings, that seems to really fit, pins and needles...



**“Don’t Want to Make him Mad”** - Susan wanted her father’s approval and was always trying to please and do what she could to make sure her father’s needs were met. She even berated her mom for making her dad angry.

I think I was mostly trying to protect my dad from, from getting mad, ‘cause we don’t want, don’t want to make him mad. It was always we made him mad. He never just was mad. I think I never really believed it was my fault because I was always pleasing and placating but I can remember getting mad at mom as a teenager saying to mom, “why do you make him mad, you know better than that; he doesn’t like it when you do this or that”.

*Life during and after the abuse.*

As a child Susan was always scrawny and underweight because she wouldn’t eat. Her parents gave her a tonic which was a drink with vitamins in it. She says looking back she probably had an eating disorder.

I didn’t like food at all; but I mean, hell, we sat around that table in a very tight atmosphere. How could you digest your food? I don’t remember stomach aches but I always had a protruding stomach and even when I was really skinny I had a protruding stomach, and when I look back now I realize that you hold a lot of your feeling I believe, like anger or if you don’t digest. I was always constipated, again holding, holding, holding, lots of digestion problems.

Eating issues have always been a concern in Susan’s family, especially on her dad’s side. She said that, according to her mother, her dad’s two sisters are always worried about food and who is eating less; they eat like birds and make comments about what the other one is eating. Susan’s son-in-law calls her father the ‘Food Nazi’.

He was joking one day. My father said something to his granddaughter, my son-in-law’s wife, about what she was eating or something or... you know something about weight. And she was kind of taken aback, and took it personally, and her husband said to her, “Well why would you, why would you think, like, that comment, why would you take that comment seriously, coming from the food Nazi?” You know the guy that’s in control of the food. He notices. And especially if he offers you a chocolate and you take one, he’ll

notice whether you take one or three or four. I mean, who else pays attention to what somebody is eating? It's irrelevant.

Susan remembers when she was at home her dad would criticize her mom for what she was eating. Her dad had to be in control of everything, even the food that was eaten.

More getting after mom for eating, because he wants her to be little. And when I look at 'little' now, I think of little as keep her little and insignificant and passive and quiet and no voice and small and childlike and dainty or feminine and all those things. "And that makes me a big man." I'm not sure but power, I think it's got something to do with that. The women in our family are supposed to be small, the men are supposed to be big.

Susan stated that her oldest child had an eating disorder but is now able to manage it. Her daughter has gotten help and is aware of the family pattern regarding her condition.

She still has the irrational thinking sometimes because she... if something gets the better of her, she's under stress. I think pretty much... as she gets older she's, she knows a lot about it, the history behind and where this comes from, and so she's really working... she's doing well. I would say first year university [it] was diagnosed, but she probably had it for three years by then. Yeah and denied, however.

Susan spoke about transferring to another college after completing one year at university. Her dad asked her to come home for the week-end and insisted she switch to a different college that he thought would be better for her. She attributes the stress of that afternoon to having no periods for the next six months.

"You're not doing what you want; you're doing what I want, and it's the best thing for you and I know what's best." And you know that's how it was and so I didn't have a choice in that and I was really upset. In fact that was in probably March or April and it actually stopped my menstruation. I mean that incident. From that point on I had no periods until six months later when I went back to school. The day I was going back to school my period started up again. And I had been doctoring through the summer. I mean there was absolutely no reason that I wouldn't have had periods, so I naturally thought

there was something medically wrong with me. Looking back it was the trauma of that afternoon where it just literally took away any individuation that I might have had. I wanted to be who I was and I didn't have that opportunity because it was just whipped right out away from me.

As a child, Susan was not allowed to express any negative emotions and as a result she said that she stuffed her feelings inside of herself. No one ever acknowledged negative feelings but pretended everything was great.

Negative feelings like sad and bad were not allowed in our house, and I'm not sure too much about the other ones either; but that for sure, the negative, were not talked about aloud and they're there; it's like the elephant, white elephant, you know it's there, and nobody.. Everybody pretends it's not there. Put a smile on your face, if you're feeling mad put a smile on your face.

She did not even recognize that she had a problem with anger until the last 5 years or so.

When Susan would start to feel any negative emotions as an adult she said she would numb out and get busy so she would not have to deal with the emotion. Susan can now feel emotions but she still cannot verbalize her anger.

Just in the last year I'm getting into anger. And I'll tell you when I went to, I think it was cranial sacral, I'm not sure or Reiki master or Reiki at one point and they said, "Oh, you have so much anger in you." And I was angry when I left there. I felt mad at this woman that she would suggest that. I said, "Oh, I don't think so, I don't have anything to be angry about." And I for sure didn't really believe that what she had said had any truth in it. I thought this was just a lie, because I was the happy person. I was the positive person, there's no anger in me. And I've learned since that there was a lot of anger in me. I didn't know it was there. And I can hardly believe that she could feel it.

**“Pleasing Others”** - Susan has struggled with pleasing others all of her life. With her husband she said, “I did a lot of pleasing to the point where I lost a lot of my self because we are two very different people and...I don't know; maybe even I thought probably some time he'd leave or...run off with somebody else or something if I didn't please enough.”

Pleasing others has been a major issue for me. Don't please myself, please others. Even about what to wear, how to wear my hair, what I do...\*\* I don't want to be unpopular. See again, the pleaser. Somebody would think I was not nice. If anybody wanted to wound me brutally they could just call me a bitch or say that I was a nag or, anything that wasn't... I want to be called the nice, the nice person.

Instead of confronting issues openly and expressing her anger, Susan stated that she has rebelled against her parents and husband in what she called "quiet, slimy ways".

I think I've spent my life rebelling, in small ways, rebelling at the very small... but doing things that are different than the norm. I don't know why that is, but I know... Well just as a little example, there was a ring I saw that I liked, it was about five years ago probably or maybe more now and it was 70% off. So it was \$100.00. And that's quite a bit but I thought, "I want that ring." And my mom said, this is my mom but... "You don't need that. What do you need that for?" So I went back and bought it. Like it's, it's that sort of rebellion. When she tells me I don't need something, like, "You're not worthy of it," is what I hear, so I buy it.

With her husband Susan has not been direct in communicating her feelings and needs.

I remember him saying once something about a coat, "If you ever buy a fur coat, I'll divorce you," or something. So I never bought a fur coat but I made damn sure I bought a really expensive one (laughs). It was like a rebellion. It was like a rebellion...in a quiet way. And that's, that was sort of... I would never have said that I was going to do that, but in my own way I found ways of... pleasing and doing what I need at the same time.

**"Good Enough"** - Susan has spent most of her life trying to be the best she can be and she is always trying to do better. "I find as an adult I'm always trying to do better. Nothing is ever good enough." She attributes this to her upbringing with her dad who was always pushing her to try harder. Her dad always said that if she just tried harder she could do a lot better.

If there's such a thing as perfectly behaved children how can you be better than that? And it seemed like it was never good enough; we really were good kids; I mean, we were afraid not to be. When I was a teenager some of my friends

smoked or tried to smoke. I wouldn't even puff on a cigarette because I knew I'd get killed or thought I would (laughs). We didn't drink, again fear of him finding out, or also the heavy handle of having to, I don't know if it's a handle, but having to be good; I mean it wouldn't be good not to. It wouldn't be good if we drank or smoked or anything out of line; you just knew.

Susan expressed, "I think I've always had really poor...self-esteem, low self-esteem. I mean, cognitively I knew that I was worthy of self-esteem but how I felt about it, I had no self-esteem."

Susan learned the skills that her dad viewed as important. She stated that one of the reasons she did all of these things was so that her dad would praise her.

All the things he did right like neat, tidy, organization those are skills that I've, I quickly adopted, and when we took Girl Guides I wanted to do everything neat and tidy, hospital corners on the bed; you know, get lots of badges, do everything, all of the achievement stuff I attribute to my dad so that's all good things eh? You get lots of accolades for doing those things and so probably a lot of my achievement I could attribute to my dad.

Susan is now questioning her behavior and wondering if just 'being' is not enough. Although she realizes that she is always busy doing things, it is difficult for her to slow down because she is proud of her accomplishments.

I brag about how busy I am, how busy, how many things I do in a day. I find myself emailing my kids and saying this, this, and that and over the last two or three years I've tried to slow that right down and just "be" rather than "do" because we're human beings, not human doers; and so I'm trying to just be and as I say that, because I'm going to take some time off now, I'm just like a robot just doing, doing, doing, doing and accomplishing a whole lot in a day and I guess that kind of pleases me too. I'm kind of proud when I can do, do, do.

**"No Power"** - Susan cited that as a young adult she had difficulty making decisions because at home she was not allowed to make decisions for herself. "I recognized how I had no decision-making ability; I had no power." She said that if she

did make a decision “it could be whipped out from underneath you.” Her dad would likely veto it.

When she was dating her future husband, Susan would not state an opinion about where they should go for a date. She had a difficult time making any decisions. When he would ask her what she wanted to do Susan would say, “I don’t know, it’s up to you.”

And so one time I remember him saying, “I don’t want to hear it’s up to you one more time; I don’t want to hear it,’ cause I want you to tell me what you want to do”. And I said, “Well, I don’t really have an opinion. I don’t really know”. And that’s how it was. It took me a long time to get an opinion and I kind of gradually learned; but decision-making was so painful and I think that’s partly because we had no practice.

Susan always followed her dad’s rules at home and when she got married she followed her husband’s rules. With her children she wanted them to follow her rules. She now realizes that when you follow other people’s rules you lose your own identity.

But other than the decision-making problem I have, doors opened for me because I did follow the rules. I mean I was always goody two shoes so you get accolades for conforming and fitting in and being, doing your best and those things; you get accolades for that. And that’s awesome. But you see out of that costs in many ways, a sense of self gets lost some place when you’re following somebody else’s rules, whether it’s little rules or big rules; and so we kind of tried to let the kids make up a lot of their own rules.

### ***Generational pattern of abuse.***

Susan has said that she does not think her grandfather was a good role model for her dad. She said that his dad was an orphan so would not have learned parenting skills. Her grandfather also liked to drink. Her grandmother left her grandfather when she found out he had a girlfriend in another province. Susan’s dad would never talk about anything personal from his childhood which she found kind of strange. One thing that Susan’s dad did say was that his parents did the best they could.

He said they did the best they could. That was always his saying, “they did the best they could.” So it would be nice if I could say that too and I actually think he did the best he could. But looking at how it is for my kids to grow up with the dad that they have and me, it’s so different for our kids. And so there’s been a point in time where I’ve sort of grieved the loss of what I didn’t have. \*\* Also Grandpa had been an orphan; so how he went from orphan to rich yet he built up a big business and then lost it and so I think there’d be a lot of not knowing how to be a dad and so he probably wasn’t a very good dad; and I think that the mom did a lot of single parenting in many ways before they did split. And in those days it was probably quite an unusual setting unless a spouse died.

When Susan asked one of her dad’s sisters about her childhood she said, “I don’t want to talk about my childhood. I haven’t got a good, one good thing to say about my childhood”. Susan does not know what happened but, “the fact that she won’t talk about it, it wasn’t good as far as I’m concerned.”

***Recognition of abuse.***

Susan commented, “Growing up I never thought of it as verbal abuse. When I was growing up, I thought, well, you know everything’s fine, everything’s good because you just believe what you hear.”

Yeah, it’s all I knew. And I think this... maybe I’m not sure if it was as an adult or later, that I started realizing that some families aren’t like that and even...And we were very obedient kids, especially us girls; we’d, we jumped at the tone of my dad’s look almost, you know? And I guess I noticed probably that some people didn’t, but I just thought that they’re bad kids.

***Image of abuse.***

I asked Susan if she had a picture or image of verbal abuse. She said she had not associated the abuse with anything prior to me asking her this question. “Black, dark, jagged edges, over my head like a, sort of like a black, jagged cloud, dark, kind of heavy.”

### *Motivation for change.*

Susan has been searching for a long time, at least 15 years, trying to figure out who she really is. Susan stated that it is only in the last 3 to 5 years that she has really started to work on herself and find out who she is as a person. At a class she was taking, the instructor kept asking her, “Who are you?”

I don't know, I don't know. I can tell you I've done all these things. “So who are you?” I don't know and I still feel a little anxious when I hear that because I did not know. Now I think I'd have an answer, I'm hoping, I'm working on what that answer might be. I know what I stand for; I know what I like. I don't think I could put it in a sentence or two but I'm beginning to understand who I am and what I like and what's important to me and what isn't important to me and I didn't really look at that, didn't really feel that or I'm starting to feel, I'm starting to feel emotions.

Susan is beginning to verbalize what she needs and is becoming more aware of her negative emotions. She says that before this she was busy being a mother and taking care of others. Now it is her turn to focus on herself and her needs.

I actually find now that when I express anger and, maybe not anger but if I express what I want, I'm finding now that I actually now can feel more joy. For example, if I say to my husband, “I don't like it when you do this and that and I've never liked it and I've never been able to express it so I want to tell you now how I feel about this” and I can go on and on and on and on and on and on and, and you know I'll vent and I'll explain it to him ahead of time. I need to get this out and then after that I feel more loving towards him and I don't mean in terms of... I just have those feeling inside. I feel more room for him in my heart type of thing, and I feel lighter. I believe, truly, that you keep those negative feelings inside, you end up with a whole bunch of negative feelings inside and you get sick. And if you let those negative feelings come out then there's room for happy feelings in there and I actually[feel] lighter and happier and life just keeps getting better and better and I think life keeps getting better and better because I'm emoting more; I'm actually getting more of those negative feelings out.



*Meaning making.*

Susan emphasized that, “everybody has their, a story, and so this is mine, and I wouldn’t trade it for any other story.” She said that when she first started to look at her childhood issues she was angry and blamed her dad.

Because I didn’t get quite what I needed in terms of love and security, and equality, voice, decision-making, and so I think I was kind of angry for a while; but I tried not to say it because it almost seemed like a flaw in the family. And so I kind of kept it to myself; but when I look back, I feel, I have felt sad. And what I’ve learned from that is how what I say and do impacts my family. And so in some instances I’ve had to go back and clean up, and say, “You know, I used to say this, and that wasn’t right,” and they’d say, “Well I know, mom,” you know, “and we told you that.” And I would say, “Yeah, I know, and I didn’t know any better, and I’m glad you told me, and I’m glad I know now,” and that kind of thing. Clean up the mess sort of.

It has been freeing for Susan to use her own judgment rather than someone else’s. She said that her family always says, “Don’t worry about what everybody thinks” but she doesn’t know a family that worries more about what other people think. It is a confusing message that she is trying not to perpetuate with her own children.

And I guess that for me, I try to be as real as I can, and if the kids call me on something I think about it, listen to them, and say, “You know, you’re right! That wasn’t the right, that isn’t right.” Like try to be human with them and, and real, honest, direct.

Susan is now at the stage where she is starting to feel good about herself and is working on improving her communication with her family. She is no longer pretending that everything is always happy and wonderful.

I think I’m at a pretty good spot, I mean, I believe that... the opposite of ignorance is bliss. I believe that knowing and being aware and that knowledge is powerful, and so for me, I love the learning that’s gone on for me; and what I do is transfer that learning or talk about that learning with my kids so that their learning... I wish I knew then what I know now and so I pass that information along and so I think it feels really good. And I never wanted to be negative against my family or say anything that was negative; I wanted

everything to be positive and joyful and all that. And I don't know at what point I decided to be truthful, how I really felt about things, and that has been so freeing for my kids to know that we all love each other, and that doesn't mean we always like everybody all the time.

Susan related that inside of herself she still feels like a small child but she is starting to nurture that child. She is beginning to trust herself and not look to others for validation.

Inside I'm just a child learning how to trust myself. Age doesn't have anything to do with it. It's just that this is the time when I can try and figure out who I am, what I want, all those things. And I try to give myself some peace, some time to be with myself. Life keeps getting better and better, so that's got to be a good sign in itself.

I asked Susan what she had learned from her experience of childhood verbal abuse. As a result of raising her children she came to realize what was lacking in her childhood. She also has learned that she patterned some of her child-rearing practices on how she was raised.

So sometimes when I think if I was over controlling or over demanding or anything I, I really look at my dad and how I wouldn't want to be and then if somebody ever says that to me, I listen really hard because I'm thinking, well, it would come natural for me to be controlling if I've grown up with it, so I have to, if somebody's saying that, I have to really hear and back off.

From the notes Susan wrote on the second transcript, she calls the strong connection to her mom and dad enmeshment. She is able to recognize some good patterns in her dad's childrearing practices too, but there was always a feeling of having to comply with her parent's wishes. "There wasn't a way to be who we were as individuals, there was no individual thing; it, was, we were their possessions I guess."

I guess there's a real strong family connection there, like I learned when I was... as an adult that really my parents are too involved in my life and I always feel guilty if I don't tell them everything. It's like I'm keeping a secret. Yeah! And so I think I've learned how I don't want to be. Or what didn't work

for me and lots of good things too, though, you know like there's... The fact is, the way he wanted us to be was... probably a, a good standard, and that's... so that's hard. It's the way we felt pressured.

Susan thanked me for interviewing her. She said that it was helpful for her to share her story. "I just think that the verbal abuse is really powerful and, and we learn a lot from looking at it and, and recognizing it and being aware of it and, and validating it."

### *Four Existentials- Three Stories Merged*

The experiential meaning of verbal abuse can be understood more fully when the existential themes of lived time, body, space and relation are reflected upon (van Manen, 1990). These four themes are helpful as a guide in the research process. Although each story told to me was unique and personal, shared elements were discovered as the women spoke of their lived experiences of childhood verbal abuse and its lived meaning. With each existential of lived time, body, space and relation common strands in lived experience and experiential meaning will be addressed.

#### *Lived Time*

According to van Manen (1990) lived time is subjective time as opposed to clock time or objective time. How do children exposed to verbal abuse experience time? Is it agonizing? Is it a wondering about when it will end? At the mercy of an environment and persons who speak intolerably, does time seem to crawl as the listener is caught in a web of word misery?

Ann often experienced time as an uncertainty. "We didn't know what was going to happen next." Her father would intimidate and threaten her and as a child Ann believed he would do what he said. "He would make threats and...but I don't think he ever carried any of them out. But, but I didn't know that when I was a kid, that he wouldn't

carry them out.” The verbal abuse had a timeless quality for Ann. “I’ve been told I was stupid from as long as I can remember.” “He was just nasty to me all the time.” Ann stated that it seemed she always hated her father, even as a child. “I mean for years I, I hated him; I hated him.” When Ann was a teenager, she and her dad would argue, and he would say to her, “Boy, the minute you’re 18, you’ll be out of this house so fast.” When Ann turned 18 she was in a hurry to leave the abusive atmosphere. She wanted time to speed up. “Three hours after being legally 18, I was packed and out of the house. I couldn’t wait.” She traveled to Europe and never wanted to come home but can you ever really leave the abuse behind you? Ann physically left the presence of her abusive father but the words he used became a part of Ann that she carried with her wherever she went. It took Ann a few years to recognize that what she experienced was verbal abuse. “It wasn’t ‘til I was way into my adult years that I even began to realize that...something happened that wasn’t healthy and good.”

Like waiting to leave the house, Ann has wanted to tell her story for a long time. “It’s something I’ve wanted to do for a long time, to just tell the story, all of it, and have it down on paper, even though I don’t want to look at it. I’m really glad it’s there because there will be a day when I want to look at it”

For Susan lived time as a child revolved around her father’s moods. “Everything hinged on what kind of mood dad was in.” To be safe, she would try to be very still and without expression when her dad was around her. “I sometimes had a nervous smile on my face and I remember that and how I couldn’t smile and I couldn’t, you just couldn’t look right when he was angry and so trying to look blank I guess.” Was Susan frozen in time? Did she have to always look a certain way when she was with her dad? Like Ann

there was a quality of uncertainty related to the verbal abuse that Susan would experience from her dad. I asked her what she could expect when she was around her father and she commented, “Who knows what.” Her father’s verbal anger and yelling would seem to never end. The verbal assault, once started, filled all of time and seemed unrelenting. “Relentless in terms of go on and on and on and you want to say, well I would never even have thought at that time, “enough already.”

Even when not angry, time with her dad seemed to be a burden for Susan. He always had certain expectations that Susan and her siblings tried to live up to. When practicing ball with her dad the atmosphere would be fast-paced and competitive. Susan conveyed that there was no time to just relax and enjoy the game. “So we scrambled to get the ball. I mean we tried really hard.” She was under a lot of pressure to be the best. For Susan, time was often rushed. When the family would see her dad’s car coming down the road, “oh everybody’s busy; go into fix mode, get everything ready, dad’s coming home.” When her dad would not let Susan transfer to another college after her first year at university she says, “I think that had [a] prolonged effect on my life, I think probably up until two or three years ago, forty years later, thirty years later, [I] still have trouble making any decisions that would be against the norm.” Susan attributes her striving to become better and better and always achieving more and more to her dad. “I had a message you could do better if you just tried a little bit.” “I’m just never working hard enough and so I’ve spent my life achieving, achieving and doing all kinds of things.” She got the message that time is to be used productively.

Jesse experienced her mom’s verbal abuse daily so she had difficulty remembering specific times when the abuse happened. “It was just a normal, everyday

thing so there was not anything in particular that would stand out.” She stated, “There was just a lot of times where she would be...I don’t know, she’d just call me stupid, and everything.” Although her dad was very loving and caring, he was not able to protect Jesse from her mother’s verbally abusive language. Jesse’s home time was full of mother. “I spent most of my time with my mom so I think because of that I, I took what she said as, as more true than what my dad says.” To escape from the atmosphere at home Jesse spent a lot of her time away from home with her friends and taking part in extra-curricular activities at school. “I always tried to be in things so I didn’t have to go home. \*\* I always played drama and...I worked out a lot at the gym and went out with friends.” Was time experienced differently at home than when Jesse was with her friends or at school? Jesse stated that she would not bring her friends home because he mother might start yelling or be angry about something. Her friends were scared of her mom. At school Jesse enjoyed being in drama. Was this a way of becoming someone different, of escaping the time spent at home? Jesse seemed to be more comfortable away from her mother’s daily verbal barrage.

Jesse remembered going on a few week-end trips with her family when she was at home. The time spent in the vehicle with her mom was not a pleasant memory. If her mom was angry and yelling there was no place to go. “Too much time spent with my mom; I didn’t like it very much.” “Mom time” was loud and inescapable. Time with mom was to be minimized especially when Jesse could not physically escape.

The parent and child both share a history called ‘family time’, when times together become memories of either positive or negative recollections of childhood (van Manen, 1990). Susan, Jesse and Ann spoke of many negative experiences of their time

spent with a verbally abusive parent. All three women recalled mealtimes with their abusive parent as stressful and did not remember these times as relaxed or happy occasions. They all maintained that they did not have any fun with the parent who was verbally abusive. Susan claimed that she always had to be performing as a child. "I don't remember ever playing just for fun with my parents you know; it'd be trying to be the best." When Susan was describing practicing ball with her dad she reported, "I don't remember that as fun. He was trying to make you better so you were the best on the team. So it was his kid is the best type of thing." Ann conveyed that even though she would spend time with her dad, "I never had any fun with him or anything." When I asked Jesse if her mom would play with her as a child she said, "No, she didn't." Both Ann and Jesse asserted that their abusive parent could not celebrate any good things that happened to them. Jesse said that her mom was not very animated about any of Jesse's successes. "Well she'd just be, "Okay, good," nothing enthusiastic, just, "that's good, whatever," And then move on."

For all three of the women, their past lived experiences cling to them in their present circumstances. They all continue to question their self-worth and at times experience self-doubt. Van Manen (1990) wrote,

whatever I have encountered in my past now sticks to me as memories or as (near) forgotten experiences that somehow leave their traces on my being...the way I carry myself (hopeful or confident, defeated or worn-out), the gestures I have adopted and made my own (from my mother, father, teacher, friend), the words I speak and the language that ties me to my past (family, school, ethnicity), and so forth (p. 104).

The three women carry their past with them and have found themselves using some of the same words and phrases that their abusive parent (s) said to and about them. They can easily recall exact words. Are these words recollected or known so deeply,

never forgotten? They seem to have become a part of who these women are. Critical voices and ugly words continue across time.

The past also changes under the demands and influences of the present according to van Manen (1990). All three women have worked on re-interpreting themselves, who they once were and who they now perceive themselves to be. They are ‘unsticking’ themselves from the past. At the start of the first interview Ann acknowledged that she has spent years working on her emotions and destructive behavior patterns. “I’ve dealt with my, myself, my feelings, my emotions, for, for a long time and I, I’ve gone through being suicidal, I’ve gone through drug addiction, I’ve gone through abusive adult relationships, and I’ve gone through years and years of therapy.” Ann has given herself time to change and heal. Is time now experienced as a faithful companion? As a child Ann could not wait to escape from her abusive father. She thought this meant just leaving the physical space. As an adult she became aware that it is not enough to be away from the abusive person because she still carried the scars within herself.

How is time different now for Ann? “I’m grounded and I’m not in survivor mode. And I’m not suicidal, and I have connections with community, with friends, with family, that’s fairly healthy, on my terms.” She seems to be more accepting of time and not just existing from one moment or day to the next. Ann mentioned that she feels it is now up to her to stop the pattern of verbal abuse that she experienced from her father. “I feel like it’s my life’s work, it’s the only thing really worth doing. If I do one thing in my life that’s, that’s the thing that counts is, is to heal myself and not be abusive, and not be addicted and not be judgmental and not be down on myself. Not hurt anyone else and not hurt me.” Now is the time to accept who she has become and to be more accepting of



others. In the past Ann was more focused on just getting through each day. Now she is looking to future time.

In the last few years Susan has been able to work on expressing her emotions and on her communication with her family. “And I’ve been working on it for probably five or ten years, particularly the last five pretty accelerated and that’s been a big, especially the last three, that’s been a big help to me. I mean I’m really getting a lot more joy out of life.” Although Susan has hastened the work she is doing on expressing her needs and wants, it is viewed as being a good use of time compared with past time when acceleration meant doing things at a fast pace for her father. This is ‘now time’ spent just for Susan.

Jesse has come to the realization that what she experienced at home was verbal abuse at a much younger age than either Susan or Ann. Jesse emphasized that she is working on improving her self-concept and that is something that cannot be done instantly. Time cannot be hurried. “I think I’m doing all of what I can do right now. I think it’s just time because you can’t rush things like this. It’s going to take time to develop new patterns and new ways of thinking to make yourself feel better about yourself. So like that becomes a habit and a lifestyle choice.” Jesse wants to undo the old pattern of not having a choice, with a new habit and a new choice of how she sees herself.

Even though these women experienced verbal abuse as children they can now see some positive results that have come from their negative experiences. Ann stated, “I see that whatever pain I’ve suffered, if you survive it, it really does make you stronger and, and gives you empathy for other people and some understanding, less quickly to judge people I guess.”

Jesse wants to be in a helping profession. She says that as a result of what happened to her, “I think I developed...I had to think about my own morals and what I thought was right and wrong, and, and it helped me to realize what I want to do with my life; it gave me a goal.”

Susan views what happened to her as a learning experience and has helped her be who she is today. “It’s like you have a rich background; it was my experience to be there and what I learned from that, and if I hadn’t been in that situation I wouldn’t be who I am because I’ve learned so much from that.”

There were many different times for these women when they were children: ‘family time’, ‘mom or dad time’, ‘meal time’, ‘play time’. All of these times seemed to be colored by the abuse they experienced. Was time marked off differently when not filled with uncertainty and the weight of abuse? The women mentioned feeling differently when they were not exposed to the verbally abusive parent. Was time marked by the presence or absence of the abusive parent? Susan related how the atmosphere in her home felt lighter and happier when her dad was not around. Were they ever free or can they ever be free from the abusive parent? Even now the women carry the baggage they received. They still are marked by the harsh, cutting words they heard spoken to them many years ago.

### ***Lived Body***

In our physical or bodily existence we make known something about ourselves and we always mask something at the same time which will not necessarily be done consciously or intentionally but rather in spite of ourselves (van Manen, 1990). At the initial meeting with each of the three women, their body language was revealing. All

three had difficulty maintaining eye contact with me and would look down or gaze off into space when speaking about their experiences of verbal abuse. Jesse admitted after the interview that she had difficulty making eye contact with me because of the sensitive nature of the study and her struggle with low self-esteem. Susan also said that she has always struggled with sustaining eye contact with others while talking with them. Both Jesse and Ann were very soft-spoken and hesitant during the first interview, and at times I had to ask them to repeat what they had said. I could sense their anxiety and tenseness. There was some nervousness with Susan but because she is an acquaintance of mine there was not the same degree of guardedness.

All three women have experienced various physical symptoms that they attribute to the verbal abuse they were subjected to as children. Is verbal abuse made visible in the distressed body? The body appears to be one site of the struggle these women have had in coping with the verbal abuse. Does the body manifest the emotional pain felt by these women? Ann described verbal abuse as being carried inside of her and becoming a part of her body. "It's who you are. It's in your bones."

Jesse and Susan had issues with eating during childhood. Jesse was overweight until she was about 14. She said that she ate as a "way of coping then and to do something because I didn't have friends." As a teenager she started to exercise more and lose weight. Her mom's attitude was, "you're 15, you have no life and nobody likes you..." Jesse says that she pushed herself too hard, wasn't eating that much and she said that she felt, "really exhausted, drained." She became bulimic when she was about 17 until age 19. She did not throw up but used a lot of laxatives. Finally she said that she couldn't do that to herself anymore and confided in a friend. She was able to stop on her

own. Susan now believes that she had an eating disorder as a child. Because she had no control or voice over most things in her life, Susan said that food was one thing she could control.

Ann is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict; she said that now when she is feeling stressed out or emotionally overwhelmed she has a tendency to over-eat.

I still have my down days. I have down days. I have times where I'm just in bed, have times where I just... I'm just eating, that's my escape now, I just eat but when they come I don't beat myself up about it any more, I just go, okay, one of those days. In the past I'd beat myself up about it.

When I inquired if Ann had any physical symptoms or if she could feel anything in her body when her dad would be verbally abusive towards her she said, "I don't remember. No, I mean I don't remember, Just like I have a, I have an image of him screaming and just...the terror, just absolute terror, going cold kind of thing." By the time Ann was in her early twenties she had made several suicide attempts, by overdosing on pills, and she says, "I was being fairly self-abusive in terms of relationships and, and drug use." She stressed that she was in so much emotional pain that she started cutting herself and became addicted to marijuana.

Ann has been diagnosed with fibromyalgia and lives with a lot of physical pain. It has been this way for years but the doctors only recently discovered what it was. Now that she knows what she has, she has been able to manage the pain. She has also had shingles which she says is stress-related. She used to believe that she would die young but now she wants to live to see her daughter grown.

I believe that all that is inevitably a result of the emotional pain I've lived with for so long. There's lots of times where I've thought, well I'm probably just going to get cancer and die young because I have too much anger and grief in me and I've carried too much for too long and... Well that would be okay.

As Susan was talking about her experiences with me, she could feel churning in her stomach but as a child of 10 or 12 she could not feel much. She was pretty shut down. It was, “like sort of frozen and cautious, really cautious”. Because of the stressful atmosphere at home Susan believes she developed shingles and other symptoms.

When I think about it now, it was very, very stressful for a child. I had shingles at one point. I didn't bite my fingernails but I scratched my head a lot. Scratched my head and had scabs on the back of my head. I'd have trouble leaving that alone. The shingles were around my midriff. But the scratching on the head, I mean I have done that sometimes in my adult life when I'm under a lot of stress I've noticed, but it started when I was a child and I would get salve and stuff and I also had impetigo. I don't know if that's related or not but stress was just part of what life was like with dad.

These three women tried to numb the hurt they were feeling in numerous ways. Is over-eating an attempt at stuffing down emotional pain? Can the self-inflicted pain of cutting be translated as a psychological crisis? Ann explained that the consequences of verbal abuse eventually come out in the open. “Nobody sees those scars because they're inside; but you carry them and you try and try and try to please all the time and inside you feel like you're nothing, and eventually something's gonna break.”

### ***Lived Space***

Both the physical space that these women occupied as children and the psychological or felt space they experienced are important aspects in understanding the phenomenon of verbal abuse. The women referred most often to the felt space of living with a parent who was verbally abusive. Van Manen (1990) alleges that the space in which we find ourselves influences the way we feel. He also states, “Home is where we can be what we are” (p. 102), and that home should be a very special and safe space which has something to do with the fundamental sense of our being. When

this is disrupted how does a child make sense of this? Their very sense of self is brought into question. Ann, Susan and Jesse have questioned their self-worth and their identities. The lived space of verbal abuse was often filled with loud, harsh, critical comments that surrounded the women and left them with feelings of worthlessness and shame.

Van Manen (2002a) has written that we become the space we find ourselves in. What was the space like for the three women living with verbal abuse? Words used by Susan, Jesse and Ann to convey this lived space included, “tense”, “cautious” and “afraid.” The space they found themselves in was often fraught with apprehension, fear, and constraint. As children they were vulnerable because they could not escape the abusive space for long. As adults, the women continued to be fearful. They have experienced anxiety, hesitation and trepidation as well as nervousness and dread. When Susan is in a space with males she feels intimidated and often does not speak up. Ann said that as a young adult she always felt like she was, “running in a state of fear”. Jesse has also had feelings of not being as good as others and feeling hesitant and anxious around people. Jesse, Ann and Susan had to be cautious when they were around their abusive parent. They were guarded with their feelings and could not express negative emotions. They had to be careful what they said. All three women could not express negative emotions to their abusive parent. They all had covert anger that was expressed in other ways. Ann and Jesse became suicidal and Susan and Jesse struggled with eating disorders. Ann also had alcohol and drug addictions. They were restrained and confined by the words and gestures from their abusive parent.

All three women conveyed the feeling of being very afraid in the presence of their abusive parent. As Ann spoke of some of the episodes of abuse, I could sense her terror and anxiety as she re-lived the experiences. When her dad would be screaming at her in a rage she felt “absolutely terrified.” Even when Ann was sharing the same physical space with her father, she stated that, “I always felt alone when I was with him.” Was ‘dad’ space lonely and disconnected? When Ann left the abusive space of her childhood home she traveled around Europe for awhile. She explained that this space, “felt so good, so clean, so fresh and good.” She could be whoever she wanted to be with no strings attached. She never stayed in one place long enough for anyone to get close to her. “Nobody knew me well enough to know how ugly I really was inside, so fucked.” Ann physically left the presence of her abusive father, but the words he used became a part of Ann that she carried with her wherever she went. Her sisters wrote to her about how bad things were at home and Ann felt guilty staying away. If it wasn’t for them, she says that she would never have come back. “It was like coming back into a...into that place where I was Annie; that’s what my father called me. And, and I was this bad, lazy, stupid, bad kid.” She was back in the dark, contaminated space.

The atmosphere in the home, when her dad was around, was described by Susan as ‘heavy’. “Sort of like cause the heavy hand’s going to come down. And the heavy hand, I guess, I think, would be verbal.” She said she feels this heaviness with her husband and son too. Susan felt carefree and open in “mom” space and burdened and tense in “dad” space. Susan’s voice changed when she recounted how her father spoke to her. It was in a critical harsh tone. She said the space in her home felt different when her dad was not around.

Stress was just part of what life was like with dad. Now when he was in town or something it was... I feel quite light when I talk about my Mom. From my mom I always felt light and friendly and loving and well not, she never talked about love, but she was always... you kind of knew that she was kind of watching out for us a bit. It was free and light and airy and fun.

How does a child make sense of this? How did this affect Susan's sense of self and her identity? Susan felt like her dad's verbal abuse was stifling and keeping her down, keeping her in a certain place. She was not free to explore who she wanted to be but was restricted to become who her father wanted her to be, a 'good girl' who knew how to keep quiet and excel at things that were important to her dad.

Susan talked about having to be careful when she was around her dad and not feeling at ease when she was in his presence. She stated that she was not free to express laughter because her dad might think it was out of control.

So pretty cautious, hard to love someone like that, hard to [feel] relaxed or comfortable. I don't remember feeling relaxed. I guess I don't remember ever laughing with dad 'cause laughing might be out of control too much or something I don't know.

As an adult, Susan drew a picture of a childhood memory that was supposed to be of a happy occasion. It was a picture of a swing but it turned out to be a dark, dismal picture. As a child Susan would go and swing to get out of the house if her dad was in a bad mood. She conveyed that, "I think I was always scared of what the next reaction would be, very intimidated." As she was drawing the picture Susan reported that it felt like she was back in that spot. The space was still constrained by her father's verbal abuse.

And I chose to sort of sit in it and feel those feelings and it was just incredible how scared I felt and how trying to just sort of erase myself in a way from feeling. It was just like trying to be motionless, trying to have [no] expression, no movement, don't do anything wrong. I was pretty uptight in that situation.



For Jesse, the felt space in her childhood home was often fearful. She was afraid of getting her mom upset and saying anything that would cause her to become explosive. “You had to really watch what you said around her.” I asked Jesse what her mother would do if she would say something that her mom did not like. “She would yell at you; she has a very harsh voice so if she yells at you, you get really scared.” Jesse tried to stay out of her Mom’s space as much as she could. As a child she said, “I was usually by myself in the back bedroom.” The space away from her Mom was calmer and not as fearful for Jesse. Jesse would often leave the house to escape the verbal abuse. “I always tried to be in things so I didn’t have to go home.”

All of the women did things out of fear not because they wanted to. They were all seeking the love and approval of their abusive parent. Susan emphasized that she achieved and did very well in school because she knew that her dad took a lot of pleasure in achievement but she said, “I’m sure I did it for him more than me.” Jesse spoke of seeking her mom’s approval because, “you want your parents to love you and to feel proud of you ‘cause you have no one else to turn to, to develop that type of [esteem].” I asked Jesse what she would do to try to get her mom to notice her. She said, “Clean the house, be polite, try to be good, follow whatever rules she did want me to follow.” Did Jesse think that a clean, ordered space would appease and silence her mom? At school Ann said she always got good marks but it wasn’t because she loved it or wanted to make good grades but it was out of fear. When I asked her what she was afraid of she stressed, “Not being good enough, not being loved.” Ann mentioned that she was having sex by the time she was 13 because she thought she couldn’t say no. She thought at the time it

was such a little thing to give. Looking back she realizes that she was “looking for love and acceptance.”

The space in the home around the table at mealtimes was described by Susan and Ann as ‘tense’. Ann remarked that her parents would frequently be arguing at mealtimes and the atmosphere was not relaxing or peaceful. Her father would be irritable when he came home from work and everyone knew that he was not to be bothered until he had drunk a beer.

My parents were usually fighting. Dad always came back in a bad mood after work; and the rule was, don’t talk to your father ‘til he’s had his beer, and that was the family rule. So he’d walk in the door, expect supper to be on the table and have his beer, like that. You didn’t talk to him until he’d had his beer.

Although Jesse said that they did not really eat together at home she also described the atmosphere as “always tense.” She became a vegetarian when she was nine and her mom expected her to cook her own meals. “You’d think you wouldn’t let your kid be a vegetarian when she was nine, but I was. I just remember my Mom saying, “OK, fine, you can cook your own meals now.” Because she was left to fend for herself, Jesse would often eat junk food.

In Susan’s home the space around the table at mealtimes was also stressful. She mentioned being told to hold her stomach in at the table and was worried about how she was eating her food. She always felt, “very tight, very, very tight” inside when she was eating. Her dad was critical of the way she would be eating or drinking. “Don’t drink your water that way, do it right; take another drink and do it right.” He would be angry as he commented on how she was drinking. Susan said that her and her siblings were supposed to be very quiet at mealtimes and, “don’t disturb dad.”

The abusive space felt threatening to the women when they were children. They were held responsible for their abusive parents' words and actions. All three women thought that there was something wrong with them. They all commented that they felt "bad." Susan got the message that it was something her and her siblings were doing that was antagonizing her father. "I feel sad when I think about it now but I felt bad, like I was bad." Ann said that she always felt that her dad blamed her because her mother suffered from depression. She never felt loved by her father. "Like he would say she was sick because of me. It was me. Because...I was my mother's ally, and he knew that and he hated me. I don't know why he hated me." Jesse calls her mother, "the queen of guilt trips." If her mom thinks she is being mistreated by someone Jesse stated that she will let that person know or make them feel bad about it. Jesse was blamed for not having a close bond with her mom. "She blamed me for not having a good relationship with her but she just didn't take self- responsibility."

From living in an atmosphere of fear the women learned to become hesitant. Self-doubt has been a major issue for all of them. They have found themselves continually questioning decisions they have made. Jesse mentioned that as a child when she would make a decision she felt it would not be the right one. "I felt I was making the wrong one all the time and my mom wouldn't approve of the decision I made." Ann had a difficult time making decisions and settling down after leaving home. "It just took me a long time to get settled. I just tried to go to university, I tried to go into pharmacy three times and every time I'd drop out. I tried to go into commerce, and I... every time I'd drop out." Susan related that deciding what to order in a restaurant was a major ordeal for her when she was a young adult.

Whereas when I was a young adult, I would be afraid to do things on my own, I, I couldn't... one of the examples is in a restaurant, to find, to order food. Man that was hard for me, as a young adult. I didn't know what to order, somebody tell me what to eat! And sometimes I'd watch other people and order the same as them or... you know that kind of thing, instead of sort of trusting that I could decide for myself.

All three women described how they began to enact the abusive patterns that they had learned from their abusive parent. They were creating a similar space of verbal abuse. In her early adult years, before she started working on healing, Ann told me that she was starting to perpetuate the verbal abuse that she had experienced from her dad.

I really am ashamed to say that I, in some ways became like my father. I was recreating, helping to recreate the tone of my family of origin: the violence, the fear, the yelling. I went through the absolute horror of realizing that I had become the monster. And I was just horrified.

Jesse said that at times she would find herself being verbally abusive as well. She now takes her time to respond to an argument and is quiet because she does not want to over-react.

Wishing how I'd not overreacted at times, just yelling and screaming and cursing; when I saw myself and I calmed down and so when I do get angry I'm very quiet because I want to make sure I don't overreact and take time out myself before I have to react.

Susan now sees that she used some of the same words and practices that her dad did when he was raising her. She wanted the same high values and ideals for her children as her father had set for her.

I actually patterned a lot of our child rearing, my child rearing of our kids after, like I admired, even though it was hurtful, I admired dad's standards. So tried to have those same standards for our kids and I used some of the same words which I would really like not to have, like particularly in the marks. Well, you had 97? Well where'd you lose your three marks? Oh, didn't you know that?" that kind of thing. So setting the standards really high...

### ***Lived Relation***

How has the experience of childhood verbal abuse affected the lived relationships (van Manen, 1990) Ann, Jesse and Susan foster with others and with themselves? Their identity was shaped and formed by the damaging, cruel words their abusive parent said about them. As a result, they experienced difficulties in other relationships. They saw themselves as being bad and insignificant and were always trying to measure up to other people's expectations. The communication patterns between them and their abusive parent when they were growing up were not healthy. The women were not free to express their feelings and were afraid to say anything to their abusive parent that might further provoke them. They were often criticized and yelled at and were terrorized into silence. Blame and self-doubt started to pervade their thinking as a consequence of living with this abuse.

#### ***Relationship with parents.***

Jesse mentioned that when she was younger her mom and she would "never have like daughter-mother conversations." Jesse learned not to say very much to her mom because she thought her mom would get angry at her or Jesse would be blamed in some way. "I just wouldn't talk to her about it or anything; just pretty much shut down and try to keep quiet." Communication has since improved somewhat between Jesse and her mom. "It's gotten better; we'll start talking a bit and not ignoring each other." Jesse said that her dad is like a best friend and she is close to him. He was not around the house that much when she was growing up but since she was about 15 they have gotten closer. Her dad started to talk to her about the situation with her mom and it helped her to have someone for support. Jesse is able to talk with her dad about the way her mom's verbal

abuse affected her. When her dad was at home Jesse's mom was not as abusive towards her but she stated, "she was still really mad and, and explosive."

Ann said that her dad would hardly ever talk to her, "other than to give me...instructions or orders to do something, or to...and to tell me I was doing it wrong and I was stupid." Ann would only talk to her dad if she had to ask him for something. "And the only reason that you talk to your father was to ask, ask something that he...only he had the authority to decide actually. You didn't share your day with him, anything like that." Her father would use sexualized talk when speaking to Ann, using words such as "whore" and "slut." When Ann first started to stand up to her dad he stopped talking to her. "When I stood up to him it wasn't like in a controlled way; I was like, I lost it. I screamed! I just yelled at him, screamed hysterically, and he was like...oh! It was the last thing he expected." Her relationship with her father is now pretty good. Ann does not allow him to be verbally abusive towards her anymore. "He walks on eggshells around me now I think." If her mom and dad start arguing when they visit her she will tell them, "If you want to do that at home that's fine; you can't do that in my home." Ann said that her relationship with her mother was not as a parent-child but she was more like her mom's sister. Her mother would confide in her and tell her about her marriage relationship. "I never felt like a kid. I was a grown-up. There was me and my mom and dad in this really messed up, dysfunctional thing." When Ann was away from home, and would not play this role any longer, her mom was angry and shunned her and started to turn to Ann's sister as a confidante. Ann is at the stage now where she can acknowledge that she has received some good gifts from her parents.

He's not a bad man, he's a really gentle man, and I see that. And I see the goodness in him, and some of that he's given to me, that love for animals. So I

see those things and I think that's a gift. And I've gained some of that sensitivity, that awareness from him. And from my mother, well my mother's a writer, my mother's an artist; and my mother, with all her adamant atheism, is one of the most spiritual people I know. Not that she will [ever] say that 'God' word, but she's so moved by... by nature. So I see them both as really broken... people, damaged, unhappy, and sadly, unloved by each other.

There was no real communication between Susan and her father. When Susan was at home, she said that she could never express an opinion about anything. Her dad did not want to hear what she had to say or thought.

There was no opportunity for me to have an opinion. He might ask you something like, "what could you, how could you be so, so..." I don't know if [he would] say "how could you be so stupid", I'm not sure if he could say that but that was kind of it and as soon as you went to say, "well I, well I..." he would interrupt you; there was no opportunity to speak my mind; he didn't want to hear my mind. He only wanted me to do what he wanted me to do.

Susan has never been able to express her true feelings to her dad. She could talk to her mom, but her mom would tell her dad and her dad would probably take out his anger on her mom. She is also worried about the effect such a conversation would have on his physical health. There have been times when Susan has thought about trying to communicate with her dad about her childhood experiences but she said, "I don't want to disturb the ... rock the boat, disturb the peace, whatever."

Well it would be risky in the sense that I figured he might have a heart attack, he probably wouldn't, but I would feel blamed if he had a... [heart attack]. I feel like he would take it out... I think he would take it out on her. And I don't want to hurt his feelings. I think he's a very sensitive man. And much as he's hurt lots of people in his life, I think it's because he's very insecure and hurting inside more deeply. And so I wouldn't want to hurt him. So he hears only the good stuff.

To this day Susan has a strong connection to her parents. She expressed that her mom and dad are still too involved in her life and she always feels guilty if she doesn't tell them everything.

And that to me doesn't... isn't healthy and it's not right, and I still have that guilt feeling. I bought a jacket last week and I felt like I haven't showed my mom and dad yet, and I'm thinking I should have.

I asked Susan if she has been able to forgive her dad for the way he treated her as a child. She said that she no longer blames him for the way he treated her as a child and she thinks that she has forgiven him.

I wonder if I haven't. I can look at him with... I wrote that on the page, with empathy and compassion. I can understand where he's come from and why he's so scared; I think it's fear of letting go, that he can't really trust us to have our own lives maybe or whatever. I don't know if that's exactly what it is or not, but forgive him? I think so, because I don't think... I don't blame him now, I think I did for a lot of years, but I think he did really well with what he came with. It's kind of like if you only give them half the... only tell them half the rules of the game, how do they play?

Jesse is working on forgiving her mom but has not talked to her about how the abuse has affected her. She still feels some anger toward her mom.

I think until I'm healthy and, and am able and feel comfortable, which won't be for awhile yet, then I will. Yeah someday I will, but not for awhile. I'm only 21, like, so just give me a few years and I probably will.

Ann has been able to forgive her parents for the way she was treated as a child but it has been a gradual process. At first when she thought about forgiveness she was not sure who she was supposed to forgive. She has also been able to forgive herself.

It took me a long time because I didn't know, what does that mean? Am I supposed to be forgiven? Am I supposed to forgive someone else? Well both since those things don't come all (snaps fingers) like that, like they do in the movies. They come slowly I think. And I've forgiven my parents very slowly, and I've forgiven myself. I've forgiven myself for being not a perfect child, and I've forgiven myself... for... being at the wrong place at the wrong time because... I was, really. And I've forgiven myself for all the ways I've hurt. I think I'm still working on that. But for the most part I think I have forgiven myself for the ways I've hurt my child and my partner, and my ex... who I still carry a lot of shame about that, and, not so much any more though. I'm more able to say, "Well, you know what? I did only what I could do."



***Relationship with siblings.***

Because Ann is the oldest in her family she had to watch her younger siblings a lot when she was at home. Her mom was often away in the hospital and she was left to make some of the decisions. “I remember until I left home, Sara was fifteen, she was still asking me, “Can I go out? Can I go?” And I remember once yelling back at her, “I’m not your mother.” Ann is close to one of her sisters but not with her other siblings. Because she has acknowledged the abuse in her life and worked so hard to heal, she believes her siblings have been able to work on some of their issues, although one of her sisters does not acknowledge any difficulties. “And because I started becoming suicidal and falling apart, and I had to deal with it, so because of that, I think it’s kind of given other people in my family a bit of a, of an opportunity to do some of the same.”

Jesse was often compared with her brother growing up. She said that her mom favored him and Jesse felt like she would never be as good. One time her dad was talking to her mom about Jesse’s marks at university. “Jesse is doing really good... well in university, like she’s getting high 70’s, low 80’s, she’s doing pretty good” and my Mom’s like, “yeah, well she’ll never compare to John.” Her brother thought that she was less than him and would often call her, ‘duh girl’ when they were both at home. The relationship has since improved but Jesse cannot talk to him about what it was like for her growing up in an abusive home. She said that her brother is emotionally shut down. Jesse has a younger sister of whom she is quite protective. Jesse looked after her sister a lot when she was at home and a few years ago she told her sister, “It’s not your fault what mom’s doing to you at all; it’s just the way, it’s mom’s problem,” and I said, “don’t ever feel bad what she says to you, don’t listen to her.”

Susan stated that her relationship with her siblings is all right but her older sister and brother do not acknowledge any childhood verbal abuse. She has never really talked to her sister about the way her dad's angry abusive tone and words affected her. When she tried to talk to her sister she just said, "You're so negative."

And it still is a fact that that's how it impacted me and it may not have impacted my oldest sister that way, or my oldest brother; I actually think it impacted them more and that they're in denial.

Susan believes that her older sister may have received more verbal abuse than she did but is not willing to talk about it. "She had a lot more pressure, she may have dealt with it differently but it looks to me like it's just denial. So everything's lovely. And so we just leave it as lovely." When Susan talked with her younger brother about her experiences with her dad, he also acknowledged that their dad was verbally abusive.

#### ***Relationship with others.***

As children, Jesse, Ann and Susan needed love and affirmation. Having friends helped them to cope with the verbal abuse they were confronted with at home.

Before grade five Jesse was often alone and did not have a best friend. She was overweight, a teacher's pet, and not accepted by her peers. She describes herself this way, "In elementary school, I was a big geek." She said that in grade 5 she wanted a best friend. "I remember in Grade 5 I prayed to God for a friend (laughs). I wished I had a best friend. And then I was invited to a girl's birthday party and one of the girls is still my friend to this day." In junior high she developed a close friendship with a girl who was popular and then started to have more friends after that. When she was older she had a lot of friends and still does. Her friends are a great support to her and got her out of the house when things were bad at

home. “So in my early years not so much...not so many friends, but when I got older I had a lot of friends. And I have a ton of friends now.”

Ann had friends in elementary school, but had to change schools after grade six, and she had trouble adjusting to junior high school. She says that adolescence can be ‘rough’ anyway but she had a really awful time. “I was in a lot of darkness. I, I wrote a lot of really depressing poetry and I remember I wore all this black make-up, all over my eyes, and I’d wash it off to come home. And I was really a messed up somebody and was pretty unhappy.” In grade nine Ann met a girl who is still her best friend to this day. “I met Val in grade nine, and everything was much better after that. Ooh, I still went through rough stuff but it wasn’t as scary.” Having a friend made a difference; what Ann had to live through was less frightening.

As a child, Susan said that she was popular in school and always felt like she fit in with her peers. She took part in a lot of extra-curricular activities and always had to try to be the best at whatever she was doing. Was Susan again trying to please others in order to be accepted?

I felt very accepted. I was involved in everything; small school, so did everything. I was pretty comfortable in my own skin as a child. I mean I certainly wasn’t comfortable when dad was mad, but in terms of how I related to kids at school and friends or... especially in high school, I felt like I really fit in. Like, into the right... you know, doing the ‘right’ things, not... I wasn’t a party or... never went to a party until I was way older. And anyway I think... oh, I guess I went to parties, but they were organized parties that [were at] somebody’s house that kind of stuff so I actually felt good enough in terms of peers.

Ann remembered two teachers who gave her special attention. She craved the affirming words that were said to her. One of her teachers told her that a poem she had written was really good. “Those bits of praise like that from an adult, I would just

latch on to them and hang around after class so there were a few teachers that were...made me feel pretty important.” Ann did not receive words of encouragement or approval from her father so hearing special words from her teachers took on added significance.

When Jesse was in junior high school, she commented that one of her teachers supported her and seemed to care, but Jesse was afraid to talk to her because she thought she would get in trouble at home for mentioning her problems. “I didn’t confide in her; I guess because I got scared I would get in trouble with mom about it, I didn’t speak out.” Her mother’s words controlled her.

Many of the adult relationships the women fostered with other people have been influenced by the verbal abuse they experienced as children. As a young adult, Ann would go out with men who were “either just like my dad, or nothing like my dad.” She mentioned one episode with a man who was verbally and physically abusive to her. Many of her relationships were tumultuous and chaotic. Was this because her father was an angry, controlling man and that was the model Ann was basing other relationships on?

But he used to yell, really, really, really violently. And he once threw me out of a car that was moving. I remember him once backing me into a corner and I remember having bruises on my arms and I don’t remember all the details. Once he broke into my apartment and wrote graffiti all over my walls. I guess I had a lot of relationships with people that were really intense like that.

The father of Ann’s daughter was not verbally abusive but he left her before her child was born. Although he did not wound Ann with words he inflicted pain on her by leaving.

I remember as soon as I knew him, as soon as I met him, he was so gentle, he was so... soft and I knew he’d never, ever raise his voice to me, he’d never, ever, he would never hurt my child is what I thought. Little did I know he hurt

us by leaving us, by never being there, [that] was a whole different way of hurting.

Although Ann had relationships with men, she has since discovered that she is a lesbian. Ann has been in a relationship with another woman for nine years and although at times it has been rough they are both committed to each other and the relationship.

And my relationship with my partner, which has been not an easy one at all, is... we've had a lot of arguments and troubles and split-ups; but the thing about the two of us is that we're both really committed to our own personal growth. And if we've gone wrong and made mistakes with each other we're really committed to growing past that. So I have a lot of faith in that relationship, a lot.

Ann has always been close to her daughter. She loves being a mother and finding out she was pregnant was one of the motivators for her being able to change her destructive behavior patterns. When I asked her about how she felt when she found out she was pregnant she was enthusiastic "Oh, I loved it, actually! I always knew that I wanted to be a parent, always, always knew that." Did Ann feel protective of her daughter? Was it safe for Ann to be who she wanted to be? At the time of the interviews Ann was concerned because her daughter seemed to be depressed.

And my relationship with my daughter well we've always been very close and she's just a great kid. She's going through some really rough stuff right now and I'm really worried about her. I would say that we're very open with each other. She tells me, and she talks to me about how she feels, and that's a wonderful thing. Last night we both laid on her bed for like hours and, and she just talked to me.

The boyfriend Jesse has now is gentle and the relationship is based on equality. Before this relationship, Jesse had difficulty in her involvement with the opposite sex. She thought she deserved to be treated like dirt.

Yeah, I've kind of found asshole boyfriends (laughs) growing up and when I went to university they didn't treat me well but I thought I deserved that. But with this boyfriend I [now] have, I realize that I don't deserve that and I

deserve a person like that whose just very sweet and very nice and genuinely cares about me and even if we broke up he'd still be a friend.

I asked Jesse if she attracted boyfriends who were not considerate of her because of her background. Was this a result of her low self-concept that was shaped by her mother's biting words to her?

Yeah because I had so low, I had so low self-esteem and I just let them have all that power over me. Like they were better and I didn't speak up for myself and stuff like that. They were selfish. They didn't really care how I felt. They didn't want to talk to me about things.

Susan married a man who was older than she was and they followed some of the same patterns that she had experienced at home with her dad. She was comfortable with her husband being in charge. "I always set him up as the authority figure. He was older than I, and he was male, so he had to be an authority. And so he probably really liked that place". Susan said that she thinks she married Peter, her husband, because he didn't appear to have any of the qualities her dad had. She did not think that he would ever be angry the way her father was. "I hadn't seen him angry until after we were married. And I'm sure that had a bearing on it. I couldn't see that he would ever be angry." The first time Susan witnessed her husband's temper after they were married she stated, "I think I was intimidated right back into being a child; which made it almost impossible for me to express myself when I disagreed." Both Susan and her husband had difficulty expressing negative emotions and having direct, clear communication. "So anger in our house, for the last 30 years doesn't show up. It might be percolating or building inside somebody but it doesn't show up on the outside."

As we were talking it was like Susan had an epiphany that the reason she had difficulty communicating with her husband was because of a fear of his anger. I had

asked her if the reason she could share with friends more easily than her husband was because it felt safer to talk with them.

Oh yeah safer! I think, as you're speaking I'm thinking I was afraid of what might erupt, if I talked to Peter about my real feelings. Fear of anger, just realized that now. That would be it. I didn't realize that it was a fear of him getting mad. Isn't that something how that can impact? Whoa! (laughs) I mean I wasn't conscious of that, but that's what held me back. Otherwise, unless you've been in that situation you may not understand what it's like to not want to go further for fear somebody got mad. If you're afraid of anger you don't want to go any further. Hmm, and I didn't realize that it was fear of anger.

Once again Susan was constrained by fear of anger and wanting to play it safe. Her childhood experiences of being controlled and restricted by her father kept her trapped.

Susan has always wanted to have a close relationship with her husband and she is only now starting to feel that things are getting better in the way of communication. The more she works on improving how she feels about herself the more she is able to love her husband.

When I'm working through things on my own and I'm feeling really secure in who I am, now I can get into those conversations. I think when people are secure then they can have direct communication. And when they're not secure they have a harder time, you know, being open. Anyway... so, emotionally I'm hoping I can get better at communicating and connecting. We shall see.

The relationship Susan has with her children is more open and equal than what she experienced with her parents. She wants to have open, honest communication.

I feel... maybe you can even say proud, but... pleased for sure, that the patterns that I did follow I've been able to talk to the kids about, saying, "You know what, this is how I was brought up, and that's why I'm like this. And if I'm doing that, tell me. I don't want to be doing that." I definitely want to be told. And I also want my kids always to be able to say anything to me, anything that is up for them, because how can you have a real relationship if you're pussyfooting around somebody.

Ann mentioned that she did not encounter too many difficulties working with others but she has a tendency to be judgmental and somewhat aloof. Did she feel judged by her father's critical words? Is Ann afraid to get too close to others because she does not want to be hurt?

I didn't have any problems with the people I worked with. I've always tended to be, kind of like, I'm the snob on the staff. I'm the one that doesn't want to come out for coffee or hang out with people. I've always been that way. I never want to associate with people that much, and I've got these ideals and [when I] hear my co-workers gossiping I'm just, "That's it I can't talk to them anymore because I heard them gossip." And okay, I think I'm a little more relaxed now. I think I was judging them, absolutely. Everything they were doing is bad, is wrong. In fact, I think judgment has been like one of the major kind of personality flaws that I try to become aware of and live with, because I mean I judge myself and I judge other people.

Jesse stated that she felt less confident when she was around other people because she felt like she was less than them; when she was working she thought that she was "slower than them and stupider than them." Jesse also had difficulty relating with authority figures but she has improved in this area in the last year. "Because she [Mom] affected my self-esteem for so long that I felt as if I was lower than authority figures but they're just people, like you and me, so... I mean I don't think anyone should have the power over anyone else." Jesse was powerless against her mother's angry, insensitive words and now does not want to give her power away again.

Susan has struggled with relating to persons in authority all of her life. She says it is totally related to how her dad treated her as a child. She was never allowed to express an opinion or to speak her mind. Even as a child she expressed that she "could never talk to adults."

At any point in time when I'd come up against someone that I perceived as authority, I feel very inadequate; and I think I wouldn't feel that way if I was



brought up as people are equals. Everybody counts and everybody has an opinion and everyone's unique and special and all that.

At work recently, when Susan wanted to take some time off, old feelings surfaced when she was speaking with her boss. Although her boss tried to stop Susan from taking time off, Susan was able to stand up to her and do what she wanted to. The boss was a woman so this may have assisted her to speak up. She says that she is still intimidated by a loud male voice.

When she didn't want me to take time off I immediately felt like the bad kid. I did what I wanted because, my gosh, I'm old enough to make my decision. It was only a part-time casual job, it's not like I needed to be there, but the guilt around going against the authority's wishes, it was directly I think a result of my upbringing. She wanted me to be there, and she made no bones about me being there. And if she could control me I would be there today. That's how it was. It was really, really high pressure. In fact, another worker who worked there said, "That was bully tactics," and it was so validating for me to hear that, because I thought, that's how it felt. It felt like she's bullying me. It felt like my dad, you know? Bully! Bully suits...

### *Summary*

The narratives told in this chapter contain anecdotes of the lived experiences of three women who have been affected by childhood verbal abuse. Ann, Susan and Jesse were verbally abused by a parent who they trusted and believed in. The women remembered specific incidents of verbal abuse that revealed their feelings of fear, terror and shame. They bear the scars of the verbal abuse with them to this day, as it has become a part of who they are. All of the women have been able to manage their childhood experiences and have become educated, contributing members of society. They see themselves as more sensitive and caring as a result of what they lived through. By using the four existential themes of lived time, lived body, lived space and lived relation as guides for further reflection, it can be seen that the verbal abuse

permeated every aspect of the women's lives. Time was experienced as being unpredictable and unsettling; the space around their abusive parent was often fraught with apprehension and dread; their bodies suffered and continue to suffer the impact of the abuse and relationships were affected by the women's experiences of verbal abuse as children.

Although they had many difficulties to come to terms with as a result of the verbal abuse they experienced, the women have been able to recognize the effects of the abuse, and have all worked on improving their self-concepts or how they think of themselves. They have been resilient in managing the consequences of their childhood verbal abuse. For them a key factor in dealing with the effects of the abuse has been a realization of what happened to them through education. Awareness was the first step toward healing. Having children of their own was also a motivator for Ann and Susan to question their own upbringing and start to examine how it affected them. Jesse, too, wants to have children some day and does not want to perpetuate the abuse she suffered.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion**

This qualitative study was conducted to understand more about the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse. Three adult women-Susan, Ann, and Jesse- shared their personal and often painful childhood memories of verbal abuse and its meaning in their adult lives. This chapter reviews and summarizes the main findings in this study, and integrates the results with the existing literature. The limitations inherent in this research will be considered as well as the strengths. Then, implications for future research and counselling practice will be discussed. Finally, personal reflections will be shared about the process I have gone through in writing this thesis.

### ***Summary of Findings***

Experiences of childhood verbal abuse have a profound emotional, behavioral and physiological impact on an individual. Ann, Susan, and Jesse recounted childhood experiences of verbal abuse that spoke of angry, critical, and controlling parents belittling and putting down their children. The women's identities were shaped by the negative, hurting words they were called. As small children they believed the cruel, cutting words that were spoken to them and accepted without question that they were bad, stupid and not good enough. They saw themselves through the lenses of their abusive parent. They craved love and acceptance and when they did not receive positive affirmation from their abusive parent, they turned to destructive means such as food, sex, and pleasing others to fill the void. Because they lived with the abuse on a daily basis, the women did not realize that what they experienced was abuse until they were older and had to contend with many negative consequences such as eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, suppressed anger and feelings of worthlessness, self-doubt and shame.

The consequences of the verbal abuse will always be with the women but they have been able to work on their abusive legacy and grow stronger and more resilient as a result. Recognition of verbal abuse as abuse was a major stimulus for Jesse, Susan and Ann in being able to deal with their past hurts. As children they thought that what they were living with was normal. Education and counselling have enabled the women to name the abuse and learn effective coping strategies. All three women have acknowledged where they have come from but have moved beyond blame and recriminations to working on healing and wholeness.

Phenomenological analysis of four lifeworld themes of lived time, lived body, live space and lived relation (van Manen, 1990) allowed for further illumination and a deeper understanding of childhood verbal abuse. Time was colored by the abuse the women endured. It was often experienced as unsettling and as not knowing what was going to happen next. For Jesse it seemed like the verbal abuse from her mother was always present. It had a pervasive quality. The emotional and psychological pain of verbal abuse was made visible through physical symptoms in the body. This was an unanticipated finding not discussed in detail in the chapter two literature review, but it will be addressed in this chapter. What was it like for the women to live in a space where verbal abuse was present? There was a lot of uneasiness and intimidation in the environment. All of the women spoke of feeling afraid and being terrified. The home was not a special and safe place for them where they felt love and security. There was tension and stress in the space around the abusive parent. The women could not relax and were not free to be themselves but strove to conform to the wishes of the abusive parent. The lived relationships of the women were affected by the abuse as well. As children, Susan,

Ann and Jesse learned that they could not express negative feelings to their abusive parent and must comply with what the parent wanted. The communication between the child and parent was one of domination, criticism and terrorization by the parent and often silence on the part of the child. As adults, the women still struggle with their relationship with their abusive parent. Other relationships have also been affected by their experience of verbal abuse. In her early twenties, Ann had intense, troubling relationships with men who were emotionally distant and she found that she was becoming verbally abusive as well. Jesse chose boyfriends who did not treat her with respect or caring. Susan was afraid of her husband's anger and spent many years trying to please others. Ann and Susan enjoy their relationships with their children and have worked on being open and direct with them. Jesse is presently in a relationship with a caring man that is centered on equality and mutual respect.

### ***Integration of Findings to the Literature***

The stories of these three women are unique but there were certain commonalities that emerged that are reflected to some extent in the literature.

### ***Definition of Verbal Abuse***

At present, there is no clear agreement on what constitutes verbal abuse or a definition that is agreed upon by the experts in this area. I asked Jesse, Susan and Ann for their definition of verbal abuse, thinking they might be able to bring new insights and fresh ideas to this subject.

Susan described verbal abuse this way:

Not letting someone have a voice or be who they are...because of verbal intimidation I think; that fear of saying something wrong; I don't know how it is. There seemed to be so much power and control over my life as a child and so I don't know if that fits verbal abuse but it certainly is how it was. Lots of

criticism of others which made us always feel inadequate. No, I shouldn't say made us, we always felt inadequate as a result of that.

What does it mean to not have a voice, to be silenced and not be given a say or a vote? Etymologically, the term 'voice' means expressed will or choice as well as a right to be heard. Susan commented that she was not given any choice at home. She could not communicate her own desires or needs but followed what her father wanted. Being verbally intimidated was synonymous with criticism, pressure, bullying, fear, coercion, squelched feelings, control and domination. These words were used by Susan throughout her story when she was speaking about her father. She mentioned feeling 'pressure' to succeed and that the word 'bully' suited her dad. What does the word 'inadequate' mean? Not feeling good enough, not measuring up? The word 'control' was one Susan said seemed to fit the best when describing her dad. He needed to be in charge and have power over the entire family. Did he view this as being in command of his troops?

When I asked Jesse what her definition of verbal abuse was, this is what she shared:

I guess belittling someone and making them feel less; and putting them down and making them feel that they're worthless and stupid and particularly for a parent. I guess unnecessary words or an attitude, like a very degrading attitude towards others.

The word 'belittle' literally means be plus little. Does the individual experiencing verbal abuse feel little inside? Does this make a person who belittles someone else feel bigger? Jesse equates a humiliating attitude with verbal abuse. She stressed that her mom would make her feel inadequate and shame her. It did not matter what Jesse said or did; she had the feeling from her mother that it was wrong.

Ann defined verbal abuse in this way:

Verbal abuse is killing someone with words, hurting someone with words. It's calling someone a name, defining them as bad. And telling them that they're bad, just telling them that they're ugly, that they're stupid, that they're, that they're anything but, you know... people, beautiful people who deserve to be alive on the planet and deserve to have their needs met. So... verbal abuse is to, to hurt someone in that way. Also I think it's verbally abusive to manipulate people, to make them fearful of things that aren't real or blame them for things that aren't theirs; I think that's abusive.

Can words be weapons? Are words as powerful as artillery and missiles when they find their target but leave scars not visible on the outside? If the wound is invisible how can help be offered? Are there many manifestations of the effects of abusive words? The body, in physical pain, appears to carry some of the burden.

The definition of verbal abuse that guided this study was used by Garbarino et al. (1986) and amended by Pearl (as cited in Hamarman and Bernet, 2000): “constant name calling, harsh threats and sarcastic comments that continually “beat down” the child’s self-esteem with humiliation. Verbally assaulting behaviors include openly telling the child that he/she is worthless and calling the child derogatory/demeaning names” (p.929). The definitions offered by the three women in this study concur to a certain extent with this definition. Ann and Jesse both experienced “constant name calling” and Ann’s father would make “harsh threats.” Susan’s father was verbally intimidating and critical of her. Both Jesse and Ann were called derogatory and/or demeaning names. The women developed poor self-concepts. From the categories of emotional abuse offered by Garbarino et al. (1986) all three women were children who lived with “verbal assaulting” “terrorizing” and “over-pressuring.” They also experienced abusive parents who were

emotionally distant. Jesse had this to say about her mother, “She kind of ignored us growing up a lot too and when she did pay attention she was angry and overbearing.”

### *Generational Abuse*

All three women identified patterns of inter-generational abuse. They grew up to be adults who used some of the same phrases and words that their abusive parents had assaulted them with. The abusive parent also experienced difficult circumstances growing up. Jesse’s mother was sexually abused by her father and verbally abused by both parents; Ann’s father was physically and verbally abused by his parents; and Susan’s dad never talked about his childhood although other relatives suggested his childhood was less than ideal.

Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory has been considered as one possible explanation for why verbal abuse continues to be a prevalent issue in our society and a reason for its perpetuation from one generation to the next. This theory states that observational learning occurs when an observer’s behavior changes after seeing the behavior of a model. Many researchers have posited that parents who experienced verbal abuse in their childhood often continue this same pattern when they have children of their own (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Haj-Yahia & Dawud-Noursi, 1998; Martin, et al., 1997; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Ney, 1987; Schwarz-Hirschhorn, 2001; Spillane- Grieco, 2000). Similar findings emerged from this study. Ann, Susan and Jesse conveyed that at times they were verbally abusive toward others and that their parents’ upbringing was weighed down with abuse also.



### *Erikson's Theory and Verbal Abuse*

Erikson's Theory of Human Development (1963) was reviewed to provide an account of what can happen when a child experiences a crisis at a certain stage of development that is not resolved. In this study, Jesse, Ann and Susan have all demonstrated behavioral, emotional and physiological symptoms in their childhood as well as in their adult lives. The verbal abuse that these women experienced was present throughout their childhood. The first stage of human development is birth to two years (Erikson, as cited in Iwaniec, 1995). The main task in this stage is developing a sense of trust versus mistrust. If not achieved, the development of an affectionate bond between caregivers and children will be weak and insecure and interactions between parents and children will often be aloof, detached, and at times hateful. The basic physical needs of the women appeared to be met in infancy although there could have been a lack of consistent and appropriate love shown by their abusive parent. Ann and Jesse reported that their abusive parent did not hug them or say that they loved them. Susan stated that she would go and give her dad a kiss goodnight because she was told to. "I don't think they kissed us. We kissed them goodnight. It was our ritual, our, our duty, our obligation." Her dad might be angry and say "I love you" so Susan said she received a mixed message.

In the second stage of development (2-4 years) according to Erikson (as cited in Iwaniec, 1995) a child is trying to develop autonomy. If parents reward successful actions and do not shame the failures, a child's sense of independence will be greater than their sense of shame, self-doubt and inadequacy. Susan, Ann and Jesse all mentioned being criticized as children and having a sense of shame and doubt. Susan still finds it difficult

to separate herself from her parents. The women question themselves and have difficulty making decisions. Iwaniec (1995) maintains that children who experience this type of abuse have a tendency to develop a negative self-image. These women all live with feelings of inadequacy and have had to work on re-defining their self-concept. As children they tried to live up to parental expectations but were often blamed for what went wrong.

A sense of initiative is the third stage of development (4-6 years) (Erikson, as cited in Iwaniec, 1995). The threat to this stage is if the parents ridicule a child's natural need to know and question. If the parent does not accept the child's curiosity a sense of guilt will develop. All three women mentioned feelings of guilt and shame and stated that their abusive parent was often critical when speaking to them. They still feel this guilt. All of them mentioned feeling guilty for speaking about their abusive parent.

The fourth developmental stage (ages 6-11) requires the child to develop a sense of duty and accomplishment and a leaving behind of fantasy and play (Erikson, as cited in Iwaniec, 1995). Children in this stage are developing academic and social competencies. The main threat to achievement is excessive competition, personal limitations or other conditions that lead to experiences of failure resulting in feelings of inferiority and poor work habits. Jesse, Ann and Susan have always questioned whether they measure up to other people and have had to work through feelings of inferiority they all experienced. All three women did very well in school in terms of their academic grades. Susan and Ann stated that they did it more for their abusive parent than for themselves. Susan stated, "I think that Dad took a lot of pleasure in us achieving and I probably did the best of all the kids I suppose." Her sense of duty and accomplishment

was well-developed and she did not develop poor work habits. Susan also conveyed that she always felt accepted by her peers at school. Jesse described herself as a “keener” in elementary school but was teased by her peers because she was obese and often felt isolated and sad. Ann had friends in elementary school but she experienced depression and in grade two she was taking medication for the condition. These women were productive in school but their home situations were less than ideal and it appears that even though they succeeded in school, it was not enough to counter-act the negative messages they were receiving at home to build up their self-worth. Other researchers have written that emotional and/or verbally abused children often do poorly academically in school (Glaser et al., as cited in Glaser, 2002; Iwaniec, 1995; Solomon & Serres, 1999). This was not supported in this study. Ann, Jesse and Susan were all excellent students in grade school and all went on to post-secondary education.

In adolescence, (12-15 years), the characteristic to be achieved is a sense of identity (Erikson, as cited in Iwaniec, 1995). The main risk to achievement at this stage is the failure of society to provide clearly defined roles and standards and the development of peer groups which provide clear but not always enviable roles and standards. If the adolescent can combine various roles, abilities and values and see their connection with past and future, the sense of personal identity will not lead to a feeling of role confusion. Susan did not have a sense of her own identity as an adolescent. She was told what to do and could not voice her own opinion. “We always did as we were told and asked how high on the way up, I mean literally.” She declared, “You know your identity was not encouraged at all.” The peer group was not influential in being able to offset the messages she got from home. She never drank or smoked even though some of her

friends did. “It wouldn’t be good if we drank or smoked or anything out of line you know.” Both Jesse and Ann were suicidal and depressed throughout adolescence. Their friends provided a much needed support system for them. The main risk to achieving a sense of who one is and what one’s role is was not society’s expectations or peer group pressure for these women but the damaging messages they received from their abusive parent. What they heard became a part of their identity. They all saw themselves as “bad” kids. Ann expressed it this way, “Slut. That was more my identity as far as my dad was concerned, anytime.” Ann did not think of the sexualized words her dad called her as sexual abuse but more as verbal contemptuousness and name-calling. The consequences of any type of abuse are often detrimental no matter what we choose to call the abuse.

### ***Other Research and Present Findings***

Low self-esteem has frequently been linked with experiences of psychological, emotional or verbal abuse (Bifulco & Moran, 1998; Briere & Runtz, 1990; Garbarino et al., 1986). Gross and Keller (1992) reported that psychological abuse was a much more influential predictor of depression, self-esteem and attributional style than physical abuse. Solomon and Serres (1999) found that there is a relationship between parental verbal abuse and children’s self-esteem. The children who reported being verbally abused perceived themselves as less competent in their school work, less at ease with their own behavior, and on the whole felt less worthy. Meggert (2000) has written that an individual’s self-esteem develops as a result of interaction with and response from others. This author suggested that negative feedback, whether verbal or nonverbal, will result in the individual internalizing negative feelings about self and will likely have poor feelings of self. Positive feedback will lead to the individual feeling successful and self-esteem

will be improved. Susan, Ann and Jesse all described feelings of low self-esteem that they linked to their verbal abuse experiences. With their words and tone of voice, the women communicated that they were “not good enough” just the way they were.

Depression has also been correlated with experiences of verbal abuse (e.g. Garbarino et al., 1986; Gross & Keller, 1992; Jellen et al., 2001). O’Toole (2000) stated that when the variables of depression, feelings and body image disturbance were examined separately, depression was the most significantly affected by verbal abuse. Ann and Jesse both experienced depression in their childhood and adolescence and into their adult lives. Susan said that she always tried to be positive and upbeat as a child but she acknowledged that her feelings were “frozen”. She claimed that she was not allowed to cry as a child. Her dad would say, “Stop that crying or I’ll give you something to cry for.” Susan learned to shut her feelings down for “survival.”

Susan, Ann and Jesse all internalized their anger toward their abusive parent. Other researchers have reported the same findings. Hoglund and Nicholas (1995) stated that the emotionally abused women in their study were less likely than the abused men to externalize their anger and also reported higher levels of shame and guilt. Garbarino et al. (1986) have written that some children internalize their anger and as adolescents it is often manifested through depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, developing eating disorders or other physical symptoms and becoming emotionally troubled and unstable. Ann and Jesse were depressed throughout their growing up years and had suicidal thoughts. Ann attempted suicide a few times after she left home. Susan and Jesse had eating disorders and all three experienced emotional difficulties. Susan expressed her relationship with anger in this manner. “I always thought of anger as my foe, not my

friend so we never, I never had anything to do with anger and avoid it at all costs from me or others.” Jantz and McMurray (2003) assert that an individual who has been emotionally abused will often channel the anger inward. In his counselling practice Jantz has seen children who habitually hurt themselves. “Presented daily with ‘proof’ of total unworthiness, the emotionally abused can turn the frustration on themselves” (p. 38). These authors state that for the person with bulimia the act of purging either by vomiting or a laxative is an aggressive elimination of the negative emotions of guilt, shame, frustration and rage. Jesse became bulimic and would use laxatives to purge her body of unwanted food and perhaps harmful emotions. Jantz and McMurray (2003) have also worked with people who cut themselves secretly to try to rid themselves of their anger. Ann spoke of cutting herself when she was in a great deal of emotional pain.

I had so much emotional pain and I didn’t know what to do with it, and by then I was becoming addicted as well; I became addicted to marijuana, and I started cutting myself. Oh God, I just hate telling this; I hate to tell this, but it’s true.

A finding in this study, that was not specifically examined in the chapter two literature review, was the powerful connection between the mind and body. What a person thinks and feels affects the body. The women all experienced physical symptoms that they related to their experiences of verbal abuse. Research into the area of self-harm reveals that childhood trauma often results in some type of self-inflicted bodily harm.

White, Trepal-Wollenzier, and Nolan (2002) have written that individuals who engage in self-harm often report that their actions help to alleviate psychological pain and keep traumatic memories from recurring. They also pointed out that qualitative investigations that inquired into the reasons why people self-injure revealed that for

some individuals, self-injury assists them to express their emotions and allows them to release anger, depression, and anxiety. Self-harm has been reported as a way of reducing emotional numbness and promoting a sense of being real. It also helps individuals to achieve a sense of control over their lives and emotional experiences. It seems to be a way to cope with distressing situations.

From a nationwide survey in the United States that sampled psychologists and social workers, Suyemoto and Macdonald (1995) reported that of eight theoretical models addressing why adolescents might engage in self-harm: behavioral, systemic, avoidance of suicide, sexual, expression of affect, control of affect, ending depersonalization and creating boundaries, the expression and control models received the most endorsement. The model summary of expression states that cutting results from the need to express or externalize overwhelming anger, anxiety, or pain that is seen as unable to be expressed directly. The control model of self-harm stresses that cutting is an attempt to control emotion or need. Cutting helps actively control the affect by making it concrete, or provides punishment for affect that is perceived as out of control.

Childhood trauma is known to be a central precursor in those who engage in intentional self-harm (Low, Jones, MacCleod, Power & Duggan, 2000). Low et al. (2000) explored the mediating variables between childhood trauma and consequent intentional self-harm in a sample of women incarcerated in a high secure setting. A group of 50 women were divided into three groups: non-harmers (n= 13), infrequent harmers (n= 22) and frequent harmers (n= 15). These three groups were then compared on several measures thought to be related with deliberate self-harm. They

found that the frequency of deliberate self-harm was related to low self-esteem, increased dissociation, anger (both inwardly and outwardly directed), impulsivity, and a history of sexual and physical abuse. Susan, Jesse and Ann all experienced low self-esteem, angry feelings toward their abusive parent, and a history of verbal abuse. Could it be that verbal abuse, as well as physical and sexual abuse, may lead to self-harm?

Jesse and Susan have struggled with eating disorders in their lives and Ann has recently turned to food as a way to cope with emotional pain. Willcox and Sattler (1996) observed that psychopathological factors such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social difficulties account for most of women's eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. They replicated and extended the research looking at the relationship between eating disorders and depression, using the Multiscore Depression Inventory (MDI). The MDI measures nine components of depression: low energy, cognitive difficulty, irritability, sad mood, guilt, low self-esteem, social introversion, pessimism, and instrumental helplessness. A questionnaire was given to 107 female undergraduate psychology students at the College of Charleston. The first measure was the 47-item short form of the MDI (SMDI) which is a true-false instrument. The second instrument was the 63-item Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI) which has a 6-point scale ranging from never (1) to always (6) to indicate answers. The results indicated that bulimia was positively related to depression and low self-esteem. Drive for thinness was positively correlated with depression and low energy level. The results also indicated that guilt may be a factor in eating disorders.



Kansi, Wichstrom and Bergman (2003) undertook a large study to examine the joint role of self-esteem and unstable self-perceptions for eating problems. A representative Norwegian population sample of girls in three age groups (N= 5287; aged 12-19) was investigated. Three scales from the 12-item Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-12) assessed eating problems, restriction, Bulimia-food preoccupation and diet. There were significant correlations between unstable self-perceptions and self-esteem on the one hand and eating-problem variables on the other. Girls with more unstable self-perceptions and girls with lower self-esteem levels tended to have more eating problems. Self-esteem was related to all eating problems. Low levels of self-esteem in any combination with self-perception stability levels revealed a decreased chance of belonging to the well-adjusted group and increased the chance of belonging to any of the two groups with eating problem syndrome. Highly unstable self-perceptions were also somewhat related to eating difficulties independent of self-esteem levels. Increased unstable self-perceptions lowered the chance of belonging to the well-adjusted cluster regardless of self-esteem levels but only when the self-esteem level was low did high unstable self-perceptions increase the likelihood of belonging to the syndrome high in bulimic tendencies and dieting behavior. When examined together, low self-esteem seemed to be more central as a risk factor for eating problems than unstable self-perceptions. The results from this study indicate the importance of investigating self-esteem and unstable self-perceptions in eating disorders.

### ***Research into Relationships and Verbal Abuse***

Previous research has speculated that individuals who have experienced verbal and/or emotional abuse are more likely to experience difficulties in their interpersonal

relationships (e.g., Garbarino et al. 1986; Glaser et al., cited in Glaser, 2002; Jantz & McMurray 2003; Jellen et al. 2001; Vissing et al. 1991). Martin et al. (1997) also noted that individuals who come from verbally abusive homes report less satisfaction in relationships. Schwarz-Hirschhorn (2001) found that relationships between the victim of verbal abuse and the perpetrator were severely impaired. Only one of her participants forgave and the other participants' feelings ranged from bare tolerance to hatred. Social relationships suffered because of a lack of skills in knowing how to interact as well as from social isolation, fear of being alone, damaged trust and becoming abusive themselves. Ann, Jesse, and Susan all shared that they have encountered relationship problems. Lack of meaningful communication with the abusive parent was mentioned by all of these women. They have found themselves struggling in other relationships as well.

### ***Resiliency Research and Verbal Abuse***

Resiliency has been defined in this study as the capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship and repair oneself (Wolin & Wolin 1993). What has enabled Susan, Jesse and Ann to cope with their experiences of childhood verbal abuse and to become compassionate, strong women? Resiliency research proposes that certain themes or factors seem to play a role in allowing individuals to move past the negative circumstances they experienced in their childhood (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Egeland, 1993; Garbarino, 1995; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Rutter, 1985; Schwarz-Hirschhorn, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993; Varia & Abidin, 1999). Werner (as cited in Rak & Patterson, 1996) mentioned that if children are required to do some type of helpful work they became more resilient. Ann, Jesse and Susan all talked about being caretakers to their younger siblings when they were at home. Jesse emphasized that she looked after her

younger sister a lot. “I was almost like her mom (laughs) kind of, and I was always playing with her and looking after her.” Susan would look after her younger brothers by taking them outside to play so her dad would not be provoked into becoming angry. Ann’s mom was in and out of hospital for many years and Ann often had to watch her siblings and she tried to protect them from her parents fighting. “I remember waking up and oh, in the night they’d be fighting, throwing things, swearing, screaming, and I’d take my sisters and put them in my bed and sing to them so that they couldn’t hear it.”

Having other family members or friends to support children who are experiencing traumatic circumstances appears to be a factor in resiliency (Garbarino, 1995). Schwarz-Hirschhorn (2001) reported that four participants in her study were supported by other family member and friends. A great support for Jesse has been able to talk to others about her abuse. Her friends have always been there for her. She said, “I had a support group in high school to help me out though and talk about things.” Her father also offered Jesse the love and nurturing that she did not receive from her mother. Susan stated that she could talk to her mother at home and she enjoyed the activities that she did with her mom. “There never seemed to be pressures from my mom. She would have the radio on and sing songs and as teenagers she would talk to us and we did a lot of baking.” Susan also felt accepted by her peers at school. Ann developed a close relationship with a girl in grade nine and they are still friends to this day. She was also her mother’s confidante at home. “Well I had a very good relationship with my mom. My mom and I were like this (crosses her fingers). I wasn’t her child, I was like her sister.” Her mom would try to support her when Ann’s dad was verbally abusive towards her. “Yeah, she’d interfere and then they’d start fighting”.

As adults, survivors of abuse are able to manage successfully if they can develop close and satisfying relationships with others (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Ann states that one of the reasons she was able to cope with the experience of childhood verbal abuse was that she found some people who loved and supported her unconditionally. "I was fortunate in that in my life I met some wonderful people who loved me". Ann described a relationship she developed with an older woman when she was in her twenties. They worked together and this woman became a mentor and friend to her.

She was a friend, she was like a mother to me, and she loved me in a way I have never been loved. She totally... she thought everything I did was good, she trusted all my feelings. Oh, God, she made me feel so special. And when I'd sing and play the guitar she'd get teary-eyed and she'd say, "Oh, you're so... this is so good." And I wrote songs for her, just dedicated to her, J. died a few years ago of cancer, and that was a really big loss for me.

Ann has always been close to her daughter. She loves being a mother and finding out she was pregnant was one of the motivators for her being able to change her destructive behavior patterns. Seeing how well her daughter is doing gives Ann a sense of hope.

That helps me, being a mother, really, really trying to see my daughter, see who she is, be present to her. So that really helps me and that gives me a lot of... I think she's just a great person, and she's okay. And I've made mistakes with her, there's no doubt about it, but they're not really, really big ones. And she's okay. And that gives me like, oh! So much hope.

Susan wants to be a good role model for her children even though they are now grown up. They have been a reason for her to grow and change.

It's been good for me to try and understand where I've come from. I've wondered for a long time why do I have low self-esteem? You know, what's this about? And why do I think I can't do that? Or should do that? Or, why am I trying to please others instead of myself? And I guess it probably comes back to when you're raising your own kids and you see it in them, you wonder, where does this come from. And you really want them to have the confidence

and self-esteem that you didn't have. Well if modeling makes a big difference, and so my incentive to clean up my act and, and try and figure out what was with me, is probably more based on my kids. Which is again, it's pleasing but I mean it's your kids.

Jesse is currently in a relationship with a man who is a good support for her. He is caring and nurturing. She deliberately looked for someone who is not like her mother. I questioned why she wanted someone who is gentle. "So I don't get someone like my mom I think whose explosive and angry and makes someone feel bad about themselves. Because I don't want a partner that would make me feel like that for the rest of my life".

Garbarino (1995) alleged that intelligent children are more resilient. Susan, Ann and Jesse are bright, intellectual women who have all excelled academically. Is this a significant resource in being able to cope with less than ideal environments as children? Has their education been a factor in allowing them to move beyond the negative messages they received about themselves? It appears that the answer is yes. All three women allege that education was important in their being made aware of verbal abuse and learning more about how it affected them.

Jesse views education as important in being able to recognize verbal abuse; it also provides information on how to cope with the effects. She is able to see the link between how she thinks of herself and how she was treated by her mother.

You don't know you have a problem if there wasn't that information out there; like you shouldn't be feeling that way about yourself. You shouldn't feel less about yourself. Being aware of those things that aren't right will help you realize how to get over that. The more you know, I think the better off you will be. Because I didn't know until someone taught me that this abuse is bad and that the connections between my mom's behavior and my self-esteem... I mean there was a connection there so yeah. You have to be actually thinking about these connections and how they apply to your own [situation]. It's a tool, education.

Susan has achieved many educational milestones in her life and is always striving to improve her quality of life. When I asked her what has enabled her to cope with her childhood experiences this is what she had to say.

I think education and awareness. Like as I read and learn and look at where they came from and try and understand it's helped me. Nothing else really, maybe counselling, but mostly I think just reading and learning and thinking about it, reflecting, maybe talking to some of the family and finding out what it was like.

Ann has many years of post-secondary education and sees her knowledge as one way of being able to stop the verbal abuse from being perpetuated. "I've had the opportunity to get an education, an amazing education...and to travel the world. So I had a lot; I had tools they [her parents] didn't have. So I had the opportunity to do more towards breaking that chain."

Counselling was described by Jesse, Ann and Susan as another factor in their healing process and being able to move forward from the pain of childhood verbal abuse. Other researchers have also reported that counselling plays a role in being able to overcome the abuse (Egeland, 1993; Schwarz-Hirschhorn, 2001).

Ann referred to someone who helped her when she went to see him for counselling. He was an older man who had been in the Second World War and had lost his eyesight. Ann said that he knew that she was tense just by listening to her shallow breathing. For her it was the first awareness that she had that she was holding all of her emotions in. She said that she was always in a state of fear.

He saw me for about two-and-a-half years, and I remember one time when I was really suicidal, he came to me in the middle of the night and he sat all

night long on a couch with me, holding my hand, and getting me through it of his own time.

Jesse said that seeing a counsellor has helped her to deal with her issues.

The big thing is not being embarrassed about it and letting it out in the open and realizing it's not my fault and don't be embarrassed about it, 'cause then I can talk about it and making those connections to how I feel about myself and to my mom, realizing that again I shouldn't feel that way about myself because my mom had problems. The big thing is that I'm finding out is why give someone else a lot of power over you that you should make them be so that they're better than you are. You know we're all equal I think. I think we all have our different strengths and weaknesses.

Susan started to see a counsellor when her children were all adults. It has only been in the last four or five years that Susan has really started to work on expressing her feelings and examining how her past has affected her present.

I went to a counselor too, who encouraged me to try and give myself what I didn't have as a child. And I mean I would have thought if you'd asked me when I was just out of high school how my upbringing was I'd think it was first rate. But looking back it looks quite different. And again after raising our kids, it looks quite different from the way I would choose to raise, raise our kids. And the one thing when she asked me about my childhood I said to her, it was great! It was just great! And that was probably only five years ago. When she asked me I said, "Just great!" And she said, "Okay." 'Cause she must have picked up on something so she said, "So, so would you like your children to be brought up in that home?" And I was like, "No!" "Well, why not?" Well! Then I started to think about it, and oh! No, our kids weren't brought up anything like that. It was a whole different picture, and I would never want my kids... I protected my kids from that.

Wolin and Wolin (1993) mention independence as an important attribute in being able to survive abuse. Drawing boundaries between yourself and the abusive parent is necessary to heal yourself. Jesse expressed that being away from her childhood home has helped her to grow stronger and to see the connection between the verbal abuse she experienced and the way she was feeling about herself. Ann couldn't wait to leave home and be away from the abusive atmosphere. She does not allow her father to speak to her

in a verbally abusive manner any more. Susan has not been as successful as Ann and Jesse in separating from her abusive parent. She refers to the relationship she has with her parents as “enmeshment.” Although she has a husband and three grown children and has not lived with her parents for many years, the emotional attachment is still very strong. When Susan is around her father, her voice is still squelched.

Creativity is another resiliency that appears to aid in coming to grips with abuse. Survivors try to find meaning and purpose in what they experienced and to insert beauty and order in their circumstances (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). All three women have used journaling as a way to put their feelings down on paper and to reflect and think about their experiences.

Ann writes and sings songs and these activities have been healing for her. She also writes in a journal.

Music and poetry and writing, writing and singing [are important] because it always feels like a real healing thing for me, a real kind of spiritual thing. Recently [I] have come to the realization that for me, writing and singing are prayer. They’re actually a, a spiritual thing for me because in that state where I’m writing, where I’m amazed by trees or by the stars in the skies or something, [it] just moves me so much I feel like I have to put words to it. I do journaling and poetry and I’ve done it since I was about 13. I’ve got just acres, just scads of journals; that’s been really part of the healing too. Just a lot of little things I guess.

Jesse used to journal and write down her feelings when she was at home but her mom would find her writings so Jesse stopped. During the second interview when I asked her if she did any journaling Jesse said that she was going to start writing again.

I’m a feeler but I, I think that would help me, write down what I feel would help me realize what I’m thinking and stuff, ‘cause I think how you feel is connected to what you’re thinking so I think that would help me out.



Journaling helps Susan to sort out her feelings and assists her when she needs to figure things out. When she has negative feelings she jots them down. She has only started to journal in the last few years. “I don’t write when I’m feeling really great. I mean sometimes I do but I often use it as a therapy. So it’s in needing to work something out.” Susan wrote one day about being good enough and questioned what kind of a role model she was for her children. This was a motivator for her to look at her behaviors and emotions and start to work on her issues.

When I wrote that letter to myself, “I’m not good enough” and a whole page of it, two or three years ago, I think there was like kind of a ‘aha’ moment there where I thought, okay, so this is what I’ve accomplished doing in my life, and I don’t think I’m good enough. And I can’t think of anything bad that I’ve done, I’ve always tried to be the good girl, so how must others feel who haven’t accomplished as much as I have, who have done things that are bad or wrong, how must they feel? So is the whole world out there feeling that they’re not good enough? And when I started looking at it like that I think I started realizing that there are good things I’ve done and why do I beat myself up for not being good enough? It’s kind of a sad way to spend your life, and what kind of a role model am I for my kids, particularly my daughters? If I can never be good enough how can they ever be good enough?

Ann mentioned that spirituality has assisted in her growth and healing.

Schwarz-Hirschhorn (2001) reported that some of her participants also found strength and direction from their belief in a higher power.

And now, I just say I’m not religious because I’m not, but I can say I’m spiritual and I have a relationship with the Creator, as I understand the Creator to be, and that’s a wonderful, amazing thing to have because in my greatest despair I can turn everything over to my Creator and before, I had nothing, so in my greatest despair I would smoke a joint because that made me feel better or worse.

Susan has found alternative therapies to be beneficial in bringing awareness of how she is feeling in her body; they have been effective in moving her along on her

journey of healing. Susan attributes starting to value herself through going to a massage therapist.

There's a person who did Reiki; when she was doing massages she often just did Reiki instead, and I didn't say, because I wouldn't say, I didn't say what I needed or wouldn't.. didn't say I really just need a shoulder massage, but through going to her occasionally, I think I learned to love myself, or appreciate myself, appreciate my body, appreciate who I am, I think that was the turning point.

Susan is now starting to go to different therapies and is taking responsibility for her own health.

What I've been doing in the last ten years off and on is doing health-conscious, positive, lifestyle choices, for me, like going for massage, going to the chiropractor, different kinds of therapy for me, because I am worth it. And I really believe that. And I don't think I believed that for... most of my life.

Through sharing their stories with me these women expressed that it was another level of healing for them. Ann stressed that being able to tell her story was good for her and having a copy of the transcripts of the interviews for future reference was important to her.

This has been a really good process, talking to you, which has been another kind of level of cleaning it out, telling the story. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time, to just tell the story, all of it, and have it down on paper, even though I don't want to look at it. I'm really glad it's there, because there will be a day when I want to look at it. And just knowing that it's there, that it's down, I've told the story.

Jesse described how she wanted to take part in this study to bring her experiences into the open and help her to understand more about what she went through. "I think it will help me...to deal with things, and sort it out."

When I thanked Susan for telling me her story and conveyed that it was good for me to hear it, Susan expressed that sharing her story with me was, 'good for me to tell it.'

### *Implications for Counselling Practice*

It is my hope that counselors will become more aware of the needs of clients who have experienced verbal abuse in childhood. Understanding more about the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse will enable counsellors and therapists to be more effective when relating to clients who may have experienced this form of abuse. All of the women in this study mentioned to me the importance of telling their story. They said that it had been beneficial to be able to share their painful childhood memories. Perhaps narrative therapy would be a favourable tool to use when counselling adult survivors of childhood verbal abuse. Using music as an aid to the healing process might be another possibility that counsellors could consider. Ann talked about her music as a valuable tool in her healing process. The women experienced physical symptoms that they accredited to the verbal abuse they experienced. They all felt tension and stress from being around their abusive parent. They held a lot of anger inside of them that they could not express outwardly. Relaxation techniques could be of great benefit to clients who experienced verbal abuse.

The women all spoke of not recognizing the verbal abuse as abuse. It is vitally important for counselors when seeing a client, perhaps for another issue, to be cognizant of how childhood verbal abuse may affect the client's present life. Education seems to be a factor in being able to recognize verbal abuse. Jesse became aware of verbal abuse through watching a video. Counsellors might want to contemplate using audio-visual materials to enhance their practice especially in the area of verbal abuse. I asked each of the three women what recommendations they would make to a counsellor who is seeing someone who has experienced childhood verbal abuse. All three women have experience

with the counselling process as clients and this is the advice they suggested for counselors to consider in their practice.

Jesse said:

I guess the big thing is just to listen to them and help them figure out what they feel. If they don't agree with what you think they are feeling, don't push it. I find my counsellor doing that. Because then he's like, "Were you afraid? Were you this..?" and I'm like, "Not really," and he's, and he'd kind of go back to it to... so just[let] them... say what they feel and not try to push it. And even though you may think that they don't feel that way when they should in that situation just, you know, don't push it. And just be a good listener and try to help them out with what they feel. And help them figure out what they want to do next, because they can't change the past, so... what things they want to work on.

Susan said that the counsellor should have an active listening style. It is important to "let the client tell their story and to sort it out as you go and then reflect later." For Susan it was important that the counsellor have a "Carl Rogers style" of counselling and be non-judgmental and supportive.

Ann also shared some of her ideas with me about the counselling process that she has found helpful.

Remember that [the] person sitting there has a wounded child inside them and they feel that they are ugly inside. The counsellor should be gentle, encouraging, and aware of how vulnerable you are. If the counsellor can share anything about themselves because trust is a big issue, open enough to tell me about their life. The counsellor should talk to you like you are a child because you are a child inside, the same kind of gentleness you would talk to a six year old.

### ***Implications for Future Research***

All three of the women I interviewed for this study did not recognize what they encountered at home as verbal abuse. Susan and Ann thought that what they experienced was normal. Jesse stated that she knew what her mom was doing was not right but she

never thought of it as abuse. “I knew what she was doing was abnormal but I didn’t think it was like abuse.” One possible avenue for future research in this area is whether age or life experience plays a role in being able to recognize verbal abuse as abuse. As children living with verbal abuse everyday the three women I talked with did not view their experiences as abusive at the time. Leaving home and increased education brought about a greater awareness of their childhood situations. How important is education in being able to recognize verbal abuse and the effects it may have on an individual? This could be a subject for researchers to investigate further.

Another exciting focus for further research is the mind-body connection. All three women experienced physical symptoms that they attribute to the way they were treated as children. Exploring this connection more fully could assist in a deeper understanding of how verbal abuse affects a child. Was the emotional pain felt by Jesse, Susan and Ann manifested in their bodies as physical symptoms? Alternative therapies such as Reiki, massage therapy, chiropractic treatment and deep tissue therapy have assisted Susan to get in touch with her feelings and have helped her to communicate her needs to others. Research into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and childhood verbal abuse could be beneficial in understanding more about this issue and in aiding counsellors and therapists who are working with verbal abuse survivors.

In this study three adult women were interviewed retrospectively. In an attempt to understand more about the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse, research working with children who are presently experiencing verbal abuse would be useful.

The role anger plays in verbal abuse is another avenue for future qualitative research. All of the women in this study related that the verbally abusive words directed towards them were often said in anger or rage.

Susan and Ann mentioned that society had a part to play in how they were raised and the way they perceived themselves. Research looking into contributing factors such as culture and environment would add to our knowledge and understanding of verbal abuse and the reasons for its continued occurrence in our world.

Research into parental verbal abuse versus verbal abuse from other people is another rich topic for exploration. The three women in this study viewed parental verbal abuse as more damaging to a child's identity than verbal abuse from other individuals.

Future research that links the four existentials of lived time, body, space, and relation (van Manen, 1990), specifically with resiliency research would allow for a deeper understanding of how a person manifests resiliency in lived experience. Although the present study spoke of factors that allowed the women to move beyond their negative experiences of childhood verbal abuse, it did not explicitly relate resiliency to the four lifeworld themes.

### ***Limitations of the Research***

For this present study only three adult women were interviewed about their childhood experiences of verbal abuse. These women are well-educated and come from a middle-class background. Therefore the findings cannot be generalized to the whole population, although as van Manen (1990) has written, "The tendency to generalize may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of

human experience” (p. 20). Pondering on the lived descriptions, from the stories offered by these three women, can bring a heightened awareness of the meaning and significance of childhood verbal abuse to all those who read this text.

Phenomenological research does not suggest cause and effect relationships and cannot be used to explain or prove. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to achieve a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. It offers the possibility of credible insights that puts us in more direct contact with the world (van Manen, 1990). I was not concerned with the topic of childhood verbal abuse as a problem to be solved but as a question of meaning to be explored and inquired into.

### *Strengths of the Study*

This study adds to the existing research done in the area of verbal abuse and contributes to the understanding and descriptions other qualitative researchers have ascribed to this phenomenon. Interviewing three adult women, in-depth, in three semi-structured interviews, allowed for fuller, more expressive descriptions to emerge about their lived experience of childhood verbal abuse.

Susan, Jesse and Ann all mentioned that sharing their story was another step for them in their journey of healing and they viewed it as therapeutic. Hopefully this experience has empowered them to be able to continue to tell their stories to others, who will benefit from their wisdom and strength.

### *Personal Reflections*

When I initially had the idea of writing about verbal abuse in my first year of graduate study, I was under the impression that I would find a wealth of information on

this topic. Little did I know that I would spend hours upon hours searching for journal articles and books in an attempt to find material pertaining only to verbal abuse. The quest continued and I have been able to pursue a subject that has been close to me for many years. Meeting each of the three women who agreed to talk about their childhood experiences of verbal abuse was an honor and privilege for me. I was struck by the determination and purpose they have exhibited in their lives despite their negative experiences. Their stories will forever live in my heart and mind as a testimony to the resiliency of the human spirit. It is my sincere hope that Ann, Jesse and Susan have also received some benefit by being able to talk and reflect openly and candidly about their personal history; perhaps it is another step in their continued healing and growth. I want to thank each of them for being brave enough to share many painful and sometimes shameful memories.

I have been engaged in the active and often agonizing process of interviewing, writing and re-writing and have come to the realization that there is so much left unsaid and remaining to be discovered about the phenomenon of childhood verbal abuse. At times I have struggled with my own recollections and have developed a new awareness and appreciation of the complexity of this issue. Childhood verbal abuse wounds the core of the individual and the outward scars are often imperceptible, but the memory of the verbally abusive behavior remains within the individual forever. There is hope, however, that by writing and talking about this issue, more people will come to realize that this type of abuse must be stopped.

Throughout this journey, I reflected on and listened to words, both spoken and unspoken. Communicating with words is something most human beings take for granted.



Although words are spoken in different languages, in different tones and inflections, they are found in all parts of the world. As I considered the universality of words, I started thinking about what else is common, widespread, and ordinary. My attention turned to wind and how it has some of the same properties as words. Wind also covers the earth and affects all of life. Like words, wind is an invisible force, unseen and yet pervasive. The effects of wind are manifested in many and varied ways. A soft, gentle breeze on a warm summer day cools and brings refreshing relief. Listening to the wind can be soothing and calming. Gale force winds on a cold, chilling night cuts to the bone and leaves a person running for cover to get out of the frigid blast. Hurricane force winds leave much damage and destruction in their wake. The wind can stir up dirt and debris, or carry seeds of hope and new life. In the autumn, wind rustles the dry, brittle leaves and is a reminder that winter is coming. Words can also be life-giving or a source of devastation and cruelty. Words can breathe life into a person and bring nourishment, comfort and hope or words can be biting, cold and frigid. Although wind blows where it will and can often be catastrophic, it can also be harnessed for good. Scientists have learned that wind power is an innovative way to incorporate a common phenomenon into good use. In a similar manner, human beings can be taught to think before they speak and to use words that will build up rather than tear down. As Proverbs 16: 24 states, “Pleasing words are a honeycomb, sweet to the taste and healthful to the body.”

I saw you toss the kites on high  
And blow the birds about the sky;  
And all around I heard you pass,  
Like ladies' skirts across the grass--  
O wind, a-blowing all day long,  
O wind, that sings so loud a song!

I saw the different things you did,  
But always you yourself you hid.  
I felt you push, I heard you call,  
I could not see yourself at all--  
O wind, a-blowing all day long,  
O wind, that sings so loud a song!

O you that are so strong and cold,  
O blower, are you young or old?  
Are you a beast of field and tree,  
Or just a stronger child than me?  
O wind, a-blowing all day long,  
O wind, that sings so loud a song!

The Wind by Robert Louis Stevenson

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## **APPENDIX A: Application for Ethics Approval (Behavioral Science Committee)**

### **1. Name of researcher (student) and supervisors and related departments:**

#### **1a. Student researcher:**

Debra H. Roth

M.Ed. thesis, in Educational Psychology and Special Education

**Supervisor:** Dr. Brian Noonan- Department of Educational Psychology  
And Special Education

**1b.** The anticipated start date of the data collection phase of this study is Nov. 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003 and it is expected that the research interviews will be completed by Mar. 31<sup>st</sup>, 2004. Thematic analysis of the data and written results are expected to be completed by Sept. 30<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

### **2. Title of Study:** Adult Reflections on Childhood Verbal Abuse

**3. Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to describe, in an attempt to understand, the lived experience and the meanings given to these experiences by adult women who were verbally abused as children. Verbal abuse has only recently been addressed as an issue by itself (Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Skodol, Brown, & Oldham, 2001) but has often been studied as an aspect of emotional or psychological abuse (Ferguson & Dacey, 1997; Gross & Keller, 1992). The definition of verbal abuse that will guide this study is: constant name calling, harsh threats, and sarcastic comments that undermine the child's self-esteem, as well as humiliation, which includes openly telling the child that he/she is worthless and calling the child derogatory/demeaning names (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000). Recipients of verbal abuse have been known to suffer developmental difficulties and can be perpetrators of abuse themselves. Past research has focused on quantitative analyses to study this complex and subjective issue. This study will strive to bring more insight and awareness to the following questions: (a) What is the experience of being a woman who was verbally abused as child? (b) What meaning do women make of this experience? (c) What challenges were and are experienced because they were verbally abused as children? (d) What was helpful in terms of successfully overcoming and coping with this childhood experience? Results of this study will have implications for future research and will enable researchers to more fully understand the effects of verbal abuse on adult functioning as well as what prevention programs may be effective in stopping the inter-generational cycle of abuse.

**4. Funding:** The student researcher will provide the primary source of funds to support this research.

**5. Participants:** Three adult women (18 years or older) who have experienced childhood verbal abuse but are successfully coping and perhaps even stronger because of the abuse and who do not have a history of other forms of abuse (physical or sexual) will be asked to volunteer for this study. Previous studies (Hoglund & Nicholas, 1995;

Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Varia, Abidin, & Dass, 1996) have found gender differences regarding the effects of childhood abuse; therefore, only adult women will be interviewed for this study. A 'Call to Participate' notice will be posted in various buildings on the University of Saskatchewan campus including the Educational Psychology department in the Education building, the Psychology department in the Arts and Science building, the Women's Centre in the Memorial Union Building and Counselling Services in Qu'appelle Hall. Colleagues and friends of the researcher will be notified to let them know that I am looking for research participants. A notice will also be placed at the front desk at Catholic Family Services and Family Services in Saskatoon. This will help to ensure that not only university students will be part of the study. The sampling will still be purposeful because I am only looking for self-described verbal abuse survivors. The researcher will request permission to talk to those who respond, regarding their experiences of childhood verbal abuse. The researcher's telephone number and email address (specifically set up for research) will be provided so volunteers interested in participating in the research study may contact the researcher. A copy of the 'Letter of Intent' is shown in Appendix A and a copy of the 'Call to Participate' is shown in Appendix B.

- 6. Consent:** Information about the purpose of the study and the methods that will be used will be given to individuals interested in participating in the study when they make initial contact with the researcher. The researcher will discuss informed consent and confidentiality before interviewing each of the participants. At that time, each participant will have the opportunity to indicate her wish to participate or her desire to not participate. At the beginning of the first interview, participants will be asked to provide written consent after reading the Informed Consent Form, as shown in Appendix C. Participants will be asked to consent to being interviewed two or three times by the researcher and that these interviews be audio taped.
- 7. Methods/Procedures:** Data will be collected for this basic qualitative inquiry primarily by conducting 3 semi-structured interviews with each participant. Interviews will be approximately 60-90 minutes in length. The interviews will focus on the participants' life history to establish the context of the experience, the participants' present experience and the meaning of the experience. Other sources of information will include observations, field notes, personal experience and biographies/autobiographies about verbal abuse experiences. The data gathered will pertain to participants' understanding of verbal abuse, their experiences of verbal abuse, nature of the effect of the abuse (behavioral, physiological, and/or emotional), means of coping with the abuse, and derived meanings from the experiences of dealing with the abuse. The Interview Guide for the individual interviews is found in Appendix D. The initial contact with the participants will establish rapport and explain the purpose of the study as well as the format that will be used. The participants will also be told of their right to confidentiality, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and an explanation of the consent form.
- 8. Storage of Data:** To protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, all relevant information obtained during the course of the study will be stored on computer

diskettes and kept in a locked filing cabinet. Following the conclusion of the study, interview transcripts, cassette tapes utilized during the interviews and cassette tapes of field notes will be securely stored for a minimum of five years in the office of Dr. Brian Noonan in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan.

**9. Dissemination of Results:** Data collected in the study will be used for the purpose of the researcher's thesis in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the Master of Education degree in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan. There is also the possibility that the findings from the study may be presented at conferences or published in scholarly journals.

**10. Risk or Deception:** To ensure minimum risk, the abuse must have occurred at least two years ago and only adult women (18 years or older) who have overcome or are successfully coping with the experience of childhood verbal abuse will be asked to participate. There is no deception of the participants. All participants will also receive a list of resources including books and counselling services in Saskatoon, as well as the name and phone number of a registered psychologist (Rhonda Gough- 244-7773) who they can contact if they so wish. (See Appendix G)

**11. Confidentiality:** Individual names will be coded in order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. Tapes and transcripts will be identified by a code that will be known only to the researcher. Excerpts of the interviews will be included in the final study, but no exact identifying information will be used. Furthermore, all relevant information will be stored on audiocassette tapes and computer diskettes that will be kept in a locked filing cabinet throughout the study and after the research has been completed. Participants will have the right to request that segments of the transcripts not be included in the thesis.

**12. Data/Transcript Release:** During the interview phase of the study, participants will have the right to peruse the transcripts of her own interviews, but not that of the other participants. Upon completion of the study, a copy of the finished transcripts from individual interviews will be given to each participant. Each participant will be asked to sign a Transcript Release Form and her signature will indicate that the transcript reflects what each respective participant said or intended to say. A copy of the transcript Release Form is in Appendix E.

**13. Debriefing and Feedback:** At the end of the interviews with each participant debriefing will occur. A copy of the debriefing script is found in Appendix F. Feedback will take place after the thesis has been written in its final form. Each participant will be given a summary of the findings.

**14. Contact Person:** Dr. Brian Noonan-Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan (phone-966-5253; email noonan@duke.usask.ca)

**15. Signatures:**

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Debra H. Roth (Student Applicant)

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Dr. Brian Noonan (Research Supervisor)

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Dr. Vicki Schwean (Department Head)



## **APPENDIX B: Letter of Intent**

September, 2003

Dear Voluntary Participants:

My name is Debra Roth and I am doing thesis research for a Master of Education degree in Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan. The topic of interest is adult reflections on the experience of being verbally abused as a child. The purpose of the study will be to describe, in an attempt to understand, the lived experiences and the meanings given to these experiences, by adult women who were verbally abused as children.

It is my hope that you will take part in this study as your input is essential in learning more about the experience and meaning of childhood verbal abuse in adult lives. The information you provide will be valuable in assisting us to gain a better understanding of the sensitive issue of verbal abuse.

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in interviews over a period of approximately two to three months. The purpose of the interviews will be for you to reflect on and talk freely about your experiences of verbal abuse and for me to listen to you and talk with you, so I can understand these experiences. The length of each interview will be approximately 1 1/2 hours. The interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and place.

If you agree to participate in the study, your name will not be connected with any information you reveal as pseudonyms will be used to ensure confidentiality and privacy. You are free to end the interview and to withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to end your involvement all data collected will be destroyed. You may also refuse to answer individual questions. If you would like further information about the study and/or would like to participate, feel free to contact me by telephone-283-4182 or e-mail-[evgem48@yahoo.ca](mailto:evgem48@yahoo.ca).

Sincerely yours,

Debra Roth

APPENDIX C: Call to Participate

**Call To Participate**

**Adult Women Who Have Experienced  
Childhood Verbal Abuse**

*Are you an adult woman who experienced verbal abuse as a child but have successfully moved into adulthood, resilient and perhaps even stronger because of these experiences?*

*Would you be willing to discuss your experiences in confidential research interviews?*

I am a graduate student researcher in Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan seeking volunteers to participate in 3 individual 60-90 minute interviews over a period of several months. I am interested in understanding the experience and meaning of childhood verbal abuse for adult women who feel successful and no longer victimized by their childhood experience of verbal abuse.

In order to participate, volunteers must:

- (a) Have experienced verbal abuse as a child
- (b) Be women
- (c) Be 18 years or older
- (d) Not have experienced other abuse as a child (e.g., physical or sexual)
- (e) Feel they are successfully coping with these childhood experiences of verbal abuse

For more information, please contact

Debra Roth- 283-4182  
E-mail- evgem48@yahoo.ca

## APPENDIX D: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Adult Reflections on Childhood Verbal Abuse*. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask questions you might have.

**Researcher(s):** Debra Roth (graduate student), Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan; contact number- 283-4182; email- evgem48@yahoo.ca  
Brian Noonan (thesis advisor), Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan; contact number- 966-5265; email-noonan@duke.usask.ca

**Purpose and Procedure:** The purpose of this study is to describe and understand the experience of adult women who were verbally abused as children and the meaning that they make of this experience in their adult lives. You are being asked to participate in a series of interviews designed to explore your experience. I want you to talk freely about your experiences and I am prepared to listen to you. I would like to interview you three times over a two to three month period. The length of each interview will be approximately 90 minutes. I will ask your permission to audiotape our individual interviews. All information from the tape recordings will be strictly confidential, your name and identity will remain anonymous. All individual interviews will be conducted at a mutually convenient and appropriate time and place.

**Potential Risks:** Any risk associated with this study is minimal. Participation is strictly voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time. You must have experienced the abuse as a child and you are now an adult woman who is coping successfully despite your past experiences. It is possible that you may experience some discomfort in recalling these childhood memories and reliving the abusive experiences; however, you will at all times be free to determine what you want to discuss and you can end a discussion or refuse to answer any question. If you feel agitated or upset during or after an interview, participation may be terminated if you decide you want to end your involvement. If you experience anxiety or any other negative outcomes as a result of your participation you can contact one of the counseling services from the resource list or Rhonda Gough (244-7773) who is a registered psychologist and is available to provide counseling. All participants will receive the list of resources including relevant books and counselling services in Saskatoon, as well as the name of Rhonda Gough and her phone number.

**Potential Benefits:** Talking about your recollections of verbal abuse may be beneficial to you. Many participants have reported that it is helpful and beneficial to talk about one's experiences in this kind of setting. Taking part in this study will also enable us to more fully understand the phenomenon of verbal abuse, broaden our knowledge about this issue, and importantly, have a positive impact on the practice of helping professionals.

**Storage of Data:** In order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, all information obtained during the study will be stored on computer diskettes and kept in a locked filing cabinet. Following the completion of the study, interview transcripts,

cassette tapes used during the interviews, and cassettes of field notes will be secured for a minimum of five years in the office of Dr Brian Noonan in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Confidentiality:** Data collected in the study will be used for the purpose of my thesis in partial fulfillment for the requirement of a Master of Education degree in the department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan. To protect the confidentiality and privacy of you, the participants, pseudonyms will be used in place of individuals' real names. The tapes and transcripts will be identified by a code that will only be known to the researcher. Although excerpts of the interviews will be included in the final study, no direct identifying information will be used. The consent forms will be stored separately from the computer diskettes, tape cassettes, and field notes so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses. As a participant you will have the right to request that portions of the transcripts not be included in the thesis. After an interview and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview. At this time you can add, alter or delete any information you provided in the interview as you see fit.

**Right to Withdraw:** You may withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any question for any reason, without penalty or loss of services (and without loss of relevant entitlements, without affecting academic or employment status, etc.). You can also request that the tape recorder be turned off at any time. If you withdraw from the study at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed.

**Questions:** If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researchers at the numbers provided below if you have questions at a later time. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board on (TBA). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Office of Research Services (966-2084). If you would like information regarding the results of the study, you may contact either myself at 283-4182 or e-mail at evgem48@yahoo.ca, or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Brian Noonan at 966-5265.

**Consent to Participate:** I have read and understood the description provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

---

(Signature of Participant)

Date \_\_\_\_\_

---

(Signature of Researcher)

## APPENDIX E: Interview Guide

### **Possible Questions for First Interview:**

#### **Introductory Questions**

What prompted you to respond to the advertisement?

What is your understanding of verbal abuse?

#### **Descriptions of Lived Experience**

Talk to me about your experiences of verbal abuse

Tell me about a particular experience of verbal abuse that you had as a child (at home, at school, in another place, from peers, from adults, from family members).

Tell me about another experience that was perhaps different in some way. That involved somebody else?

Probes: Can you tell me more about your experiences?

Tell it like a story, start at the beginning, what you saw, heard, felt, thought, anything you remember...start at the beginning, through the middle, the actual incident, and afterwards...

How did that make you feel?

Can you expand on that?

Do you have other examples?

### **Possible Questions for the Second Interview:**

After looking over the transcript is there anything you have thought of that you would like to add, alter or delete from our discussion during our first interview?

#### **Effects of Verbal Abuse**

What have you learned from your experience?

How has this experience affected you? Affected your day to day life now?

Probe: How has this experience affected your: 1) inter-personal relationships (spouse or mate, children, other family members, close friends) 2) work situations 3) emotional, behavioral and physical health 4) school performance 5) other?

### **Possible Questions for the Third Interview:**

Having read through the transcript from the second interview does it accurately describe what you said? Can you think of anything else that you want to add, alter, or delete?

#### **Identifying Meaning**

What meaning do you as an adult make of the verbal abuse you experienced as a child? (Positive? Negative?)

Are there particular times when you think about these incidents?

How would you define verbal abuse?

What does verbal abuse mean to you?

Do you have or can you think of a picture or image that you associate with the abuse?

## **Resiliency Factors**

What factors do you consider important in being able to survive this experience?

Probe: How have you been able to deal with the abuse?

What have you done? What are you doing now? Have these strategies been effective?

## APPENDIX F: Transcript Release Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Debra Roth. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Debra Roth to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **APPENDIX G: Debriefing Script**

The purpose of this study was to describe, in an attempt to understand, the lived experience and meaning of childhood verbal abuse from an adult woman's perspective.

Thank you for participating in the study, and if you have further questions regarding the investigation, please feel free to contact myself (283-4182), email- [evgem48@yahoo.ca](mailto:evgem48@yahoo.ca) or my supervisor (966-5262).



## **APPENDIX H: Resource List for Participants**

### **Books**

You Can't Say that to Me! Stopping the pain of Verbal Abuse- An 8-step Program- By

Suzette Haden Elgin, Ph.D

The Secret of Overcoming Verbal Abuse- By Albert Ellis & Marcia Grad Powers

Verbal Abuse- Healing the Hidden Wound- By Dr. Grace Ketterman

Lessons of Loss- A Guide to Coping- By Robert A. Neimeyer

The Resilient Self- By Steven J. Wolin, M.D. & Sybil Wolin, Ph.D

### **Counselling**

Student Counselling Services (University of Saskatchewan) - 966-4920 (for University Students only)

Catholic Family Services of Saskatoon (sliding pay scale) - 200 506 25<sup>th</sup> St. E. – 244-7773 (individuals, couples, families- do not need to be Catholic)

Family Service Saskatoon- 102 506 25<sup>th</sup> St. E. - 244-0127 (individuals, couples, families)

## APPENDIX I: Ethics Approval



### UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

<http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics.shtml>

**NAME:** Brian Noonan (Debra Roth)  
Educational Psychology & Special Education

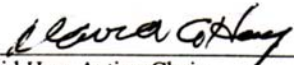
**BSC#:** 03-1237

**DATE:** November 13, 2003

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "Adult Reflections on Childhood Verbal Abuse" (03-1237).

1. Your study has been APPROVED.
2. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.
3. The term of this approval is for 5 years.
4. This approval is valid for five years on the condition that a status report form is submitted annually to the Chair of the Committee. This certificate will automatically be invalidated if a status report form is not received within one month of the anniversary date. Please refer to the website for further instructions: <http://www.usask.ca/research/behavrsc.shtml>

I wish you a successful and informative study.

  
Dr. David Hay, Acting Chair  
University of Saskatchewan  
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

DH/ck

Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan  
Room 1607, 110 Gymnasium Place, Box 5000 RPO University, Saskatoon SK S7N 4J8 CANADA  
Telephone: (306) 966-8576 Facsimile: (306) 966-8597  
<http://www.usask.ca/research>