# EXPLORING FEMININITY:

# A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS


| | Page number |
|---|---|
| **1 INTRODUCTION** | 1 |
| General Introduction | 1 |
| Definition of terms | 3 |
| Femininity | 4 |
| Social Constructionism | 4 |
| Aims and Rationale of the study | 6 |
| Design of the Study | 7 |
| Sampling and Selection | 8 |
| Data Collection | 8 |
| Data Analysis | 9 |
| Format of the Study | 10 |
| Conclusion | 12 |
| **2 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM** | 13 |
| Introduction | 13 |
| Brief Historical Overview | 13 |

Second-Order Cybernetics 18

Social Constructionism and Second-Order Cybernetics 21

Principles shared by Second-Order Cybernetics and Social Constructionism 25

Language as Reality 25

Co-Created Reality 27

Multiple Realities 30

Grand Narratives 34

Social Constructionism and the Present Study 37

Impact of Social Constructionism on the Current Study 38

Conclusion 39

**3 FEMININITY** 41

Introduction 41

Femininity versus Feminist 42

Social Constructions of Femininity 44

Historical Overview of Women's Worth 49

Matriarchy 50

Menstrual Taboo 51

Bondage of Women 52

Importance of Woman's Virginity and her Role as Sexual Object to men 53

Women's Place in Patriarchy 54

Arranged Marriages 55

Conclusion 56

Women Today 57

Value of Women's Virginity 58

Menstrual Taboos 59

Symbolic Ownership of Women 60

Women's Role in the Family 62

Women in Fashion 63

Women in Psychology 64

Women in the Global Society 65

Conclusion 67

Mothers and Daughters 68

Socialisation of Daughters 68

Reactions of Daughters to Mothers 70

Need for Psychological Separation 71

Rejection of Femininity 72

Separation from Mother 72

Tomboys 73

Male-identified Females 75

Balancing Career and Motherhood 75

Matrophobia 76
Two types of Matrophobia 77
Conclusion 79

Reclaiming Femininity 79

Conclusion 83

**4 RESEARCH DESIGN** 85

Introduction 85

Research Paradigms 85
Qualitative Research Paradigm 86

Characteristics of a Qualitative Research Design 88
Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research 91
Justification for Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach 94
Reliability with reference to this study 94
Validity with reference to this study 96

Theoretical Perspective of this Study 96
Social Constructionism 96
Some Important Ideas that informed the Researcher's Thinking 98

Role of the Researcher 100
A Personal Statement 102

Sampling and Selection 103

Data Collection 104
Interview Method 105

Data Analysis 106
Hermeneutics and the Current Research 108

Conclusion 110

**5 MY STORY OF SAPNA'S STORY** 111

Personal Data 111

Introduction 111

Research Setting 112

Rejection of Femininity 114
Sacrificing for Others 115
Fear and Desire for Dependency 118
Anger and Resentment 123
Personal Self versus Public Self 128
Need for Outer Recognition 131

Shattered Illusions or Fantasies 132
Conclusion 134

Reclaiming her Femininity 135
Awareness 136
Risking Vulnerability 137
Conclusions 140

Redefinition of Femininity 141

Effects on the Researcher 142

Effects on Sapna 143

Conclusion 144

**6 MY STORY OF ALTA** 145

Personal Data 145

Introduction 145

Research Setting 146

Rejection of Femininity 147
Negative Attitude towards her Body 148
Anger at the Negative Status and Role of Women 151

Adopting Masculinity 153
Relationship with her Parents 155
Depression 158
Outer Appearance versus Inner Feelings 160
Conclusion 160

Reclaiming her Femininity 161
Social Reclaiming 162
External Support 162
Reclaiming her Body 163
Conquering her Fear of Reclaiming her Body 164
Appreciation of her Body 165
Becoming Vulnerable 166
Conclusion 167

Redefinition of Femininity 169

Effects on the Researcher 170

Effects on Alta 171

Conclusion 171

**7 MY STORY OF MARNA** 173

Personal Data 173

Introduction 173

Research Setting 174

Rejection of Femininity 175

Relationship with her Father 176

Relationship with her Mother 178

Sacrificing her Needs for Others 183

Low Self-Esteem 186

Conclusion 188

Reclaiming her Femininity 189

Separation from her Parents 189

External Support 192

Sexual Exploration 193

Changes in her Marital Relationship 194

Willingness to Risk Vulnerability 197

Conclusion 198

Redefinition of Femininity 199

Effects on the Researcher 201

Effects on Marna 202

Conclusion 202

**8 MY STORY OF THE PARTICIPANTS' STORIES** 204

Introduction 204

Common Themes Emerging from the Stories 204

Relationship with Significant Male or Males 204
Relationship with their Mothers 210
Appearance/Expectations versus Reality 213
Belief in Women's Inferiority to Men 216
Being Different 219
Depression 221
External Support 224
Separation or Distance from Family 226
Accepting their Vulnerability 227
Redefinition of Femininity 229

Conclusion 231

**9 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS** 233

Introduction 233

Relationship with Significant Male or Males 234

Relationship with their Mothers 237

Appearance/Expectations versus Reality 240

Belief in Women's Inferiority to Men 241

Being Different 244

Depression 245

External Support 247

Separation or Distance from Family 248

Accepting their Vulnerability 249

Redefinition of Femininity 250

Conclusion 251

**10 CONCLUSION** 252

Introduction 252

Evaluation of the Study 252

Strengths of this study 254

Limitations of this Study 256

Recommendations for Future Research 258

Conclusion 259

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** 260

**APPENDIX A** 273

**APPENDIX B** 287

**APPENDIX C** 306

**APPENDIX D** 315

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of women who felt that they had to reject their femininity in favour of masculinity, and who later reclaimed their femininity.

The epistemological framework of this study is social constructionism. This study involves in-depth interviews with three women who rejected their femininity and subsequently either reclaimed, or are in the process of reclaiming their femininity. The data was analysed using Hermeneutics.

The participants' stories were recounted through the researcher's lens in the form of themes that characterised the rejection and the reclaiming of their femininity. A comparative analysis between the three participants was undertaken.

The information gained could assist professionals in understanding the processes involved in why some women reject and later reclaim their femininity.



*Key words*: Femininity; women; rejection; reclaiming; social constructionism; qualitative researcher, hermeneutics; stories.

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## *Millie's Mother's Red Dress*

*It hung there in the closet*
*While she was dying, Mother's red dress,*
*Like a gash in the row*
*Of dark, old clothes*
*She had worn away her life in.*

*They had called me home*
*And I knew when I saw her*
*She wasn't going to last.*

*When a saw the dress, I said*
*"Why mother- how beautiful!*
*I've never seen it on you."*

*"I've never worn it," she slowly said.*
*"Sit down, Millie – I'd like to undo*
*a lesson or two before I go, if I can."*

*I sat by her bed*
*And she sighed a bigger breath*
*Than I thought she could hold.*
*"Now that I'll soon be gone,*
*I can see some things.*
*Oh, I taught you good- but I taught you wrong."*

*"What do you mean, mother?"*

*"Well – I always thought*

*that a good woman never takes her turn,*

*That she's just for doing for someone else.*

*Do here, do there, always keep*

*Everybody else's wants tended and make sure*

*Yours are at the bottom of the heap.*

*"Maybe someday you'll get to them.*

*But of course you never do.*

*My life was like that – doing for your dad,*

*Doing for the boys, for your sisters and for you."*

*"You did – everything a mother could."*

*"Oh, Millie, Millie, it was no good –*

*For you – for him. Don't you see?*

*I did you the worst of wrongs.*

*I asked for nothing – for me!*

*"Your father in the other room,*

*All stirred up and staring at the walls –*

*When the doctor told him, he took*

*It bad – came to my bed and all but shook*

*the life right out of me. 'You can't die,*

*Do you hear? What'll become of me?'*

*What will become of me?'*

*"It'll be hard, all right, when I go.*

*He can't even find the frying pan, you know.*

*"And you children –*

*I was a free ride for everyone, everywhere.*

*I was the first one up and the last one down*

*Seven days out of the week,*

*I always took the toast that got burned.*

*And the very smallest piece of pie.*

*"I look at how some of your brothers*

*Treat their wives now*

*And it makes me sick, 'cause it was me*

*That taught it to them. And they learnt.*

*They learnt that a woman doesn't*

*Even exist except to give.*

*Why, every single penny that I could save*

*Went for your clothes, or your books,*

*Even when it wasn't necessary.*

*I can't ever remember once when I took*

*Myself downtown to buy something beautiful –*

*For me.*

*"Except last year when I got that red dress.*

*I found twenty dollars*

*That wasn't especially spoken for.*

*I was on my way to pay it extra on the washer.*

*But somehow – I came home with this big box.*

*Your father really gave it to me then.*

*'Where you going to wear a thing like that to –*

*Some opera or something?'*

*And he was right, I guess.*

*I've never, except in the store,*

*Put on that dress.*

*"Oh Millie – I always thought if you take*

*Nothing for yourself in this world*

*You'd have it all in the next somehow*

*I don't believe that anymore.*

*I think the Lord wants us to have something –*

*Here – and now.*

*"And I'm telling you, Millie, if by some miracle*

*I could get me off this bed, you could look*

*For a different mother, 'cause I would be one.*

*Oh, I passed up my turn so long*

*I would hardly know how to take it*

*But I'd learn, Millie*

*I would learn!"*

*It hung there in the closet*

*While she was dying, Mother's red dress,*

*Like a gash in the row*

*Of dark, old clothes*

*She had worn away her life in.*

*Her last words to me were these:*

*"Do me the honour, Millie,*

*Of not following in my footsteps.*

*Promise me that."*

*I promised.*

*She caught her breath*

*Then my mother took her turn*

*In death.*

Carol Lynn Pearson

2nd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul

CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## General Introduction

The above poem illustrates beliefs that many women have regarding their role as women. They firmly believe that as women, they should be subservient and self-sacrificing for their husbands and children. However, while lying on her deathbed, Millie's mother realised that as a woman, she had believed that she should sacrifice her needs for others, but in living her life this way, she had not actually lived her life at all. All that she got in return for her sacrifices was a red dress that she never wore, except once in the store. Furthermore, her only 'selfish' act caused her husband to be angry with her. Thus, Millie's mother implores Millie not to follow her example and to be a different type of woman, possibly, as a woman who is able to meet her own needs as well as those of her family, and thereby live a balanced life.

The above poem also illustrates how gender role expectations are learnt, that is, children learn about gender roles from their parents, whose ideas are informed by the social and cultural context in which they find themselves. The approach that supports the notion that a person's social and cultural environments influence his or her understanding is called social constructionism (Owen, 1992). Social constructionism asserts that reality is co-created within a specific context (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). For example, Millie and her siblings may have become aware that their mother always ate the burnt toast rather than giving it to one of them. The idea that a woman's role is to sacrifice her needs



1

for those of her family may have become an expectation for their mother and for them. That is, they accepted this idea as the 'truth.'

However, because social constructionism regards reality as co-created within a specific context, this would necessarily imply that reality is multiple, that is, since no two people have the same experiences, each person creates and lives according to his or her own reality (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). In the above example, Millie and her siblings may share the 'truth' that a woman's role is to sacrifice her needs for those of her family. However, someone who grew up in a family where his or her mother did not sacrifice her needs for those of her family would regard a woman's role as one in which she did not sacrifice her needs for those of her family as the 'truth.'

In this study, the participants are women who were aware of or tried to live their lives according to the 'traditional' definition of women, as exemplified by Millie's mother. However, at some point in their lives, they decided that they could not live their lives according to this model, and therefore, began the process of rejecting their femininity, part of which entailed rejecting the above image of the self-sacrificing woman. After rejecting their femininity, the participants felt a need to reclaim their femininity. In the process of reclaiming their femininity, they developed their own definition of what femininity entailed, which allowed them to feel comfortable with their femininity.

Since this study involves exploring the lived experience of the participants, it seems necessary to see them in their relationship to their social and cultural environments and not as individuals existing on their own. That is, their process of rejecting their femininity and later reclaiming it, should be seen in the context

of their relationships with significant others, their cultural and social expectations and their own experiences of being female. Because the participants live in a socially created reality and their notion of reality influences their perceptions of themselves and their roles, the researcher could not separate the participants from their environment and study their experience in isolation, simple because their environment contributed to creating their experiences. Each participant's experience is regarded as unique to her within her context, even though there may be similarities between her experience and those of the other two participants.

In an attempt to explore the lived experiences of the participants, it would be evident that the research methodology would favour an in-depth analysis of a few participants' lived experiences as opposed to information from a large sample of participants. Therefore, the researcher selected a qualitative research design as opposed to a quantitative research design.

The qualitative research design supports the theoretical framework of this study because it allows the researcher to interact with the participants and for them to mutually influence each other and the research process, and thereby 'create new' meanings. The generation of 'new' meanings of femininity and the participants' experiences evolved throughout the process for the researcher as well as the participants.

## Definition of Terms

In what follows the terms **femininity** and **social constructionism** are defined as these definition provide the context for this study.

## Femininity

The Oxford dictionary (1999) defines femininity as "of or like women; considered suitable for women." This term generally refers to the external representation of women, that is, how women dress, behave or what women are expected to do. However, the term 'femininity,' as used in this research, focuses on an *internal* feeling or experience of a woman that makes her ashamed or proud of being female. If a woman is ashamed of her femininity, then she may hide or reject her femininity and opt for masculinity, whereas if she is proud of her femininity, then she will probably express it. The term femininity "comprises aspects of self-identification on a deep structural level..." (Ardener, 1993). It may include traditionally womanly things (for example, wearing a dress and make-up) or it may not (for example, wearing jeans and a t-shirt). That is, the term femininity may or may not concern itself with the external representations of femininity. It is *not* something that a woman does but what she *is* that makes the difference.

Femininity is different to feminist, which in this study is seen as the political and militant fight, by mainly women, for equality for women in a male dominated society.

## Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is an approach that asserts that all knowing is mediated through social interactions. That is, social constructionism does not regard knowledge as something that occurs within individuals' brains, but rather as the result of social interactions. Because reality is created in a certain context, social

constructionism is interested in knowing how people know what they know, and constantly questions beliefs and taken-for granted knowledge (Gergen, 1985). According to Gergen (cited in Owen, 1992, p. 385), "[s]ocial constructionism is a reminder that all values, ideologies and social institutions are human made." That is, people's values and beliefs are co-created in relationship to a particular time and place. In social constructionism, reality can *only* be constructed in relation with others. Since social constructionism sees meaning and beliefs as arising from social interaction, it would follow that people from different social or cultural environments would view the world differently, that is, they would have different realities. Furthermore, social constructionism emphasizes the importance of language in the creation of reality because "perception can only evolve within a cradle of communication," (Hoffman, 1993, p. 89).

In this study, it is assumed that the researcher and the participants have their own ways of viewing and creating reality based on their experiences and social environments. The researcher as well as the participants bring their understanding of femininity into the researcher context. Through discussing their process of rejecting and reclaiming their femininity the participants and the researcher, are able to re-evaluate their preconceived definitions of femininity. The interview process allows participants to realise how they have come to define femininity in certain terms because of their interactions with their social and cultural environments. Furthermore, because the participants have different social and cultural backgrounds, it would be expected that their notions of what constitute femininity might vary.

## Aims and Rationale of the Study

As will become evident from the literature survey in Chapter 3, there is a limited amount of literature on the processes involved in women's rejection and reclaiming of their femininity, although there is a fair amount of research on the social construction of the feminine as the inferior gender. Most of the studies that have been conducted on the rejection of femininity focused on young girls who reject their femininity and become tomboys. Other studies have tended to focus almost exclusively on the relationship between mothers and daughters as a factor involved in the process of rejecting their femininity. Furthermore, most of these studies have tended to limit the rejection process to a single element, rather than seeing the rejection as part of a process that is influenced by many factors.

The literature on the processes involved in women reclaiming their lost femininity is very limited. Furthermore, some studies imply that the reclaiming happens coincidently when a woman became a wife or a mother.

The aim of this study is therefore to tell the participants' stories of the processes involved in their rejection of their femininity and what led to and encouraged them to reclaim their femininity. It is assumed that both the rejection and reclaiming are processes that happen over time and not something that suddenly happens over-night.

It is hoped that this study will make a valuable contribution to women who feel that they have rejected their femininity and are unsure of how to reclaim it. It is also hoped that this study would be of benefit to professionals who work with

women who may be struggling to reclaim their femininity or who feel compelled to reject their femininity. More specifically, it is hoped that this research will allow these women to feel understood and that they are not alone in either their experience of rejecting or reclaiming there femininity.

## Design of the Study

Traditional research methods seem too restrictive to capture the complexities inherent in exploring the processes involved in women rejecting and later reclaiming their femininity. Therefore, it appears that this aim would be better served by using a qualitative research design. This would allow the participants to tell their stories and to feel that their difficulties regarding being feminine, in a male-dominated society, will be understood. The emphasis will be on the participants' relationships with their significant others as well as their social and cultural environments.

Because of the interaction between the research and the participants in this study, there is a potential for growth in both the research and the participants, because new meanings may emerge from the discussions regarding the participants' journeys to reclaiming their femininity. The participants and the researcher cannot but be affected by the encounter.

Although the researcher is aware of the processes involved in the rejecting and reclaiming her femininity, because of her own experiences, each participant is nonetheless an expert regarding her own processes. That is, because of their individual differences, the researcher cannot impose her journey on to the participants. Furthermore, because each participant and the researcher have

different experiences and social and cultural environments, their processes will necessarily be different.

The discussion of themes, unique to the individual participant as well as common themes among the participants, will provide greater understanding of the processes involved in the rejecting and reclaiming of femininity, and it will possible provide participants with a different understanding of their processes.

## Sampling and Selection

In this study, sampling will be purposive – unique-case and convenience sampling will be used. Participants will be selected who can articulate their experiences of rejecting and reclaiming their femininity. The sample will comprise three women who felt that they have gone through the process of rejecting their femininity and have either reclaimed their femininity or are in the process of reclaiming their femininity.

## Data Collection

Because of the nature of this topic, the researcher will utilise an unstructured interview method, which would allow the participants to discuss their experiences. The researcher will ask mostly open-ended and discovery-orientated questions.

## Data Analysis

The data will be analysed using hermeneutics, a methodology that emphasizes interpretation and the discovery of meaning.

The following sequence will be implemented in this study:

⇒ After written permission for their participation in this study is obtained, participants will be interviewed. The interviews will be recorded on audiocassettes. The number and length of the interviews will be decided by the individual participants as well as the researcher.

⇒ Next, the researcher will transcribe the tape-recorded interviews. Thereafter the researcher will work with one participant's story at a time.

⇒ After listening to the interview/s and gaining a sense of the participant's journey, the researcher will summarise the participant's journey or story, which can be found in the appendix.

⇒ Then the researcher will write a story in which she will identify the patterns and themes around the processes involved in each participant's journey of rejecting and then reclaiming her femininity. Since the participants are seen as active co-researchers, they will be given the opportunity to comment on the researcher's re-telling of their journey.

⇒ After the researcher has completed the above two steps with all three participants' stories, she will discuss the common themes found in participants' stories.

⇒ Finally, a comparative analysis will be undertaken in which the researcher will integrate the findings from this study with previous research.

## Format of the Study

This study will comprise both a literature survey and a practical component.

In this study, the literature survey represents an exploration of the existing body of knowledge on the social construction of gender. The literature survey includes the historical overview of women and the current social construction of the feminine, as well as how these constructions of the feminine may affect some women's relationship to their femininity. These aspects of the literature will be discussed in an attempt to give the readers a background into the understanding of how the social construction of the feminine may affect some women's relationship to their femininity. The historical context is deemed necessary because according to Onians (cited in Owen, 1992, p. 388), reality can be seen as the "product of the layers of many generations of humanity that have been laid down." Therefore, to understand the present context, it is necessary to have a brief historical overview of the topic.

The purpose of the practical component is to give three women the opportunity to discuss their lived experiences of rejecting and then reclaiming their femininity. This perspective will provide a different and alternative reality to that provided by the literature survey. Thus, different realities or meaning can co-exist.

The study will comprise of the following chapters:

*Chapter 2* will discuss social constructionism, which is the theoretical approach of this study. A brief historical overview will be given tracing the changes from

the Cartesian-Newtonian approach to the social constructionist approach. Grand Narratives will be discussed as they relate to the social constructionist approach.

*Chapter 3* will discuss the social construction of gender, tracing changes in the social construction of gender from previous generations to the current perceptions of gender and gender roles. Thereafter, the researcher will discuss the literature on some of the processes involved in the rejection of femininity and in the reclaiming of femininity.

*Chapter 4* will discuss the research approach of this study. This study is a qualitative research approach and the method of analysis is hermeneutics.

*Chapters 5, 6 and 7* will contain the researcher's stories of each of the participants' individual stories. Themes that characterised their process of rejecting and reclaiming their femininity will be articulated.

*Chapter 8* will contain the researcher's story of the stories where the common themes from the participants' individual stories will be discussed.

*Chapter 9* will contain the comparative analysis between the common themes that were articulated, and the literature survey.

*Chapter 10* will be the concluding chapter. The study will be evaluated and recommendations for future research will be made.

## Conclusion

Very little attention had been paid to the processes involved in women's rejection and reclaiming of their femininity. Therefore, this study employing a qualitative method will attempt to address this shortcoming.

# CHAPTER 2

# SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

## Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief historical overview of the changes in scientific thinking. It starts with the objective, Newtonian philosophy (modern era) and traces changes to the second-order cybernetic principles (post-modern era). Thereafter, social constructionism will be discussed, and how it fits with second order cybernetics and the proposed study will be explained.

Social constructionism was selected as the epistemological framework for this study. It refers to the way in which societal values and beliefs are incorporated by individuals as *their own* values and beliefs. Further, social constructionism proposes that all our knowing is mediated through our social interactions (Owen, 1992).

## Brief Historical Overview

The ideas of what constitute reality or science have changed over time and will, probably continue to change throughout history.

The modern era, in the scientific community, began approximately around the 15$^{th}$ and 16$^{th}$ centuries (Sampson, 1989). This era was based on Cartesian-Newtonian principles, which encompass the following:

- A belief that there is a single, objective reality, that is, a fixed reality that is true for all people, and throughout all time (Auerswald, 1985; Gergen, 1997b; Hibberd, 2001).
- A conviction that this reality can be discovered by following prescribed methodologies, which would lead to the discovery of laws governing behaviour and therefore, behaviour would be predictable (Auerswald, 1985; Gergen, 1997b; Hibberd, 2001).
- Reliance on the tenets of reductionism, linear causality and the objectivity of the observer (Auerswald, 1985; Hibberd, 2001). Reductionism refers to the breaking of what is observed into its basic elements and then studying these. It was believed that once all the component parts are studied, the whole could be explained. That is, the whole is equal to the sum of the individual parts. Linear causality implies cause-and-effect reasoning (Becvar & Becvar, 1996), that is, A causes B. In this reasoning, B does not influence A at all. Objectivity of the observer means that the researcher does not influence the research in any way and what is recorded is regarded as the absolute fact. The observer is expected to suspend all values and biases in order to be objective and neutral (Auerswald, 1985; Gergen, 1997b; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Hibberd, 2001).

In order to be taken seriously by the scientific community during the modern era, the human sciences adopted the modernist scientific principle of, inter alia, reductionism, linear causality and objectivity. Like other sciences during that era, modernist psychology focused on aspects of the individual (reductionism) and aimed to discover rules by which humans operated. This is evident in Freud's psychosexual stages of development, by which human development follows a

specific order based on different erogenous zones; the behaviourist notion that humans can be conditioned by means of reward and punishment, and so on. In keeping with the principle of reductionism, Freud reduced human development solely to various erogenous zones and the behaviourists reduced behaviour to being determined solely by its consequences, that is, one would seek rewards and avoid punishments. Linear causality is evident in these theories in that Freud regarded dysfunction as the result of not completing a stage or stages of development, and the behaviourist saw behaviour in terms of its consequences. That is, praise led to a behaviour being repeated and punishment let to a reduction of that particular behaviour. Furthermore, in keeping with modernist assumptions, these theories were seen to represent 'the truth', which was believed to apply to all people across time. Since these theories proclaimed to tell the truth, it is clear, from this perspective, that the theorists considered themselves as neutral observers.

The Cartesian-Newtonian foundation was shaken in the 1900's, by Planck's quantum theory, which found that light consisted of both waves and particles (Auerswald, 1985). Plank's quantum theory did not adhere to the notion of a singular reality. In terms of a singular truth, light had to be *either* a wave, *or* a particle, not both. Another challenge to Newtonian thinking was Einstein's relativity theory, which found that the speed of light is constant irrespective of the motion of the measuring instrument (Auerswald, 1985). However, linear causality requires the speed of light to change in relation to the movement of the measuring instrument. Thus, these theories did not fit with the modernist principles and a new way of thinking was needed to incorporate these views. This resulted in "a whole new structuring of physics, a whole new set of rules

governing reality" (Auerswald, 1985, p. 2). This was the beginning of the post-modern era. This 'new physics' or post-modernist approach assumes that:

- " the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.73), that is, one cannot explain the whole by looking at the parts. In order to understand how something works, it has to be looked at *in context* and *in totality*.
- explanations of phenomena are based on circular reasoning. Becvar and Becvar (1996, p. 9) describe this as "reciprocity, recursion and shared responsibility." This means that A and B interact with each other, with each influencing the other and "both are equally cause and effect of each other's behavior" (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.9). Since circular reasoning was utilised, systems were observed for *patterns of interaction* rather than causality (Keeney, 1982). In this way, thinking moved from discovery of rules to patterns of interaction.
- rather than the either/or reasoning of the modernists, a more inclusive type of reasoning was utilised (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). This refers to a both/and means of reasoning (Auerswald, 1985), for example, light can be *both* a wave *and* a particle.
- there is no fixed, objective reality (Hoffman, 1993). That is, reality is constantly evolving and changes according to the observer's perceptions of reality, and is strongly influenced by his or her biases. Thus, instead of an objective reality, there are subjective realities (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). These multiple subjective realities are referred to as a "multiverse" (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.82). Furthermore, since observations are

regarded as subjective, the researcher cannot be an objective, neutral observer.

In the human sciences, changes in thinking were also evident. It was Bateson, Jackson, Haley and Weakland (1956) who transformed thinking about schizophrenia as a disorder located within the individual to an indication that there are difficulties within the communicational realm of the family. Their study indicated that schizophrenia was the result of continuous double-bind messages, that is, when two contradictory messages are communicated simultaneously by family members. This means that the patient is given contradictory messages, and is placed in a paradox, from which he or she cannot escape. An example of the double-bind situation is when a mother tells her child to come closer to her, but at the same time she moves further way. Thus, the child does not know which message (verbal or non-verbal) he or she should respond to and whichever one he or she responds to, is 'wrong', and this is the paradox, from which he or she cannot escape.

The double-bind study moved psychology into the post-modern era because it shifted attention from the individual to his or her immediate surroundings (that is, it saw the person as *part* of a family, and not only an individual acting on his or her own), and it focused on the interactions of others as well as the patient. In this way, the study looked for patterns of behaviour. However, although this study can be seen as the start to the post-modern era, it cannot be considered as purely post-modernist because it was based on linear causality and assumed a single reality – that is, double-bind messages were believed to promote (cause) schizophrenia in some individuals, and this was considered the 'truth'. Although

interactional patterns of behaviour were observed, the study still focused on causality, or linear reasoning – double-bind messages caused schizophrenia in some people.

According to Hoffman (1993, p. 104), post-modernism "rejects any position that consists of a 'totalising truth', 'ideal discourse', or any other endpoint theory." Thus, Hoffman would not regard the above study by Bateson et al. to be post-modernistic. This is because their study is based on an objective stance (the researchers believed that they did not influence the research, that is, they regarded themselves as separate from the study), and it consists of 'totalising truths' (double-bind messages causes schizophrenia in some individuals). Nonetheless, it heralded a new way of thinking.

Cybernetics is part of this new way of thinking and will now be discussed. It falls under the umbrella of post-modernism. The term general systems theory is sometimes used interchangeably with the term cybernetics (Becvar & Becvar, 1996), but in this study, only the term cybernetics will be utilised.

## Second Order Cybernetics

According to Keeney (1982, p. 154), cybernetics is "the science of information, patterns, form and organizations." Therefore, from a cybernetics perspective, it would follow that patterns of behaviour and relationships between and within systems are important.

The cybernetic definition of systems includes everything in a person's life (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). That is, a person is regarded as a system, operating within the larger system of his or her family, which interacts within the larger system of the community, and so on. Furthermore, a person is also part of his or her school, church or other institutions, as well as continually interacting with his or her environment (as a system). Each system with which a person interacts, has its own culture and this influences the individual's idea of reality. Thus, it is evident that one is never alone in creating his or her concept of what constitutes reality. Cybernetics regards this as a co-created reality, or a reality created between people in a particular context (Becvar & Becvar, 1996).

Cybernetics evolved from first- to second-order cybernetics. The difference between the two is that the former regards the observer to be outside of the system under investigation while the latter includes the observer in the system under investigation (Keeney, 1982).

First-order observations are said to be objective. From a first-order perspective, a system can be open or closed, depending on the extent to which it allows information to enter into it (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). An open system would allow more information to enter into it than a closed system, and thereby be more open to change or 'outside' influence. A first-order therapist would observe the family's interactions as well as the family's relationships with other systems during the therapy process. However, it became apparent that " the observer becomes part of, or a participant in, that which is observed" (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.76). Therefore, the observer can no longer be seen as objective.

Thus, second-order cybernetics was born out of the need to include the observer within the system that is being observed. Keeney (cited in Atkinson & Heath, 1987, p. 9) emphasizes that

> *observers are always part of the system they observe...all observations involve self-reference, and any description says as much or more about the observer as it says about the subject of description.*

Thus, from a second-order cybernetics point of view, the observer can never be objective or neutral (Keeney, 1982). Since everything is self-referential (refers to the observer), all systems are viewed as closed systems (Keeney, 1982). This means that nothing is seen to be outside of the individual, because he or she is creating meaning in every situation in which he or she is involved. From a second-order perspective, what the observer observes, indicates his or her reality, or, the observations made indicate the researcher's frame of reference, which is the way in which he or she views the world (Keeney, 1982). Furthermore, it is through language that people are able to attribute meaning to their situation, that is, language is necessary for the creation of reality, or in other words, language creates reality (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). Therefore, a therapist, or researcher in this study, would see him- or herself as part of the family therapy or research process and knows that he or she influences and is influenced by what happens during therapy or research.

Cybernetics is based on both/and rather than the dualistic either/or principles (Auerswald, 1985). That is, a therapist can observe family interaction from a

first-order stance, as when he or she notices that a mother always answers for her daughter. When the therapist notices the effect on the daughter of her not being allowed to speak for herself and utilises this information in the therapy process, she is operating from a second-order perspective. Thus, one is not expected to be either a first- or second-order therapist, instead, one can, or according to Keeney (1982) one *should,* utilise both points of view, because without the other, the view is incomplete. That is, each perspective complements the other.

The above discussion highlights that second-order cybernetics is an approach that encompasses the principles of post-modernism. According to Becvar & Becvar (1996), it is an approach that subscribes to multiple and co-created realities and that reality is in a state of flux and may change when new information is obtained that does not fit within the old structure. An example of this change in reality can be seen in the shift from first- to second-order cybernetics. The need to include the observer in the observation process and to account for the subjectivity of the researcher led to the shift from first- to second order cybernetics, without negating the former (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). That is, the both/and principle is utilised in that the practitioner can operate from both perspectives in the same session. An approach that fits with second-order cybernetics is social constructionism, which will now be discussed.

## Social Constructionism and Second-Order Cybernetics

Constructivism preceded social constructionism. This will now be discussed because both approaches share some basic assumptions and are sometimes confused with each other, or the terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

Constructivism is an approach that regards understanding as occurring within the individual's head (Hoffman, 1993). This means that constructivists regard the attribution of meaning as solely an internal, subjective activity. Thus, constructivism asserts that knowledge is dependant on the observer (that is, the person) and not the observed (for example, the external object seen by the person's eye). Therefore, constructivism perceives all understanding as subjective. Hoffman (1993, p. 116) further explains that

> *constructivist beliefs tend to promote an image of the nervous system as a closed machine...percepts and constructs take shape as the organism bumps against its environment.*

This implies that what a person sees is not really the external object, but rather what that person's mind makes of the object. In other words, reality is not based solely upon a person's perception (for example, the image that the eye sees), but rather by the person's previous experience of that observation. That is, using previous information or experiences, a persons' mind interprets the object seen by the eye, into something familiar and reacts to the current object from the point of view of his or her past experiences with similar objects. Take for example, a person who hates dogs. This person's opinion of dogs as vile, mean creatures, is not based on the characteristics of a dog, but rather, on his or her experience of being bitten by a dog.

Von Glasersfeld (cited in Atkinson & Heath, 1987, p. 9) claims that "all communication and all understanding are a matter of interpretive construction on

the part of the experiencing subject..." This means that people have to continually create meaning, because meaning is not given or is not inherent in experiences. Although people are active creators of their reality, this is not solely an internal act. In other words, for a reality to be created, there has to be interaction between the external world (for example, the sight of a dog) and the internal mind of the individual. Because of this subjectivity in meaning attribution, constructivism holds that people live in a world of their own private experiences (Gergen, 2002) and any one person's interpretation is as 'true' as any other person's interpretation, as long as it works within a particular context (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996; Doan, 1997). This implies that not only is there no single 'truth' or interpretation, but also that all stories or interpretations that work are equally valid.

Atkinson and Heath (1987) argue that constructivists do not reject the possibility of an objective reality, but they do assert that this reality, if it does exist, cannot be knowable to humans. This is because everything that a person knows is tainted by that person's experiences.

Social constructionists also believe that reality is subjective. However, unlike constructivists, who regard meaning as being "skull-bound" (Hoffman, 1993, p. 89), constructionists see "ideas, concepts and memories arising from social interchange and mediated through language" (Hoffman, 1993, p. 116). According to Gergen (1997b), it is through relationships that people create the worlds in which they live, that is, through relationships the world becomes meaningful to people. In other words, constructionists see reality as created between people, through language, and in a particular context.

According to Abercombie; Hill and Turner and Stark (cited in Owen, 1992, p. 386) social constructionism, as a psychological approach, grew out of a "branch of sociology, instigated by Marx and Mannheim, called sociology of knowledge". Marx wrote that "social existence determines consciousness" (Owen, 1992, p. 386), which means that a person's social environment influences his or her knowledge. This idea forms the basis of social constructionism. Social constructionism as an approach was popularised by Kenneth Gergen. Gergen (1985, p. 267) regards social constructionism to have been nurtured by the "soil of discontention" and "doubt in the taken for granted world." The 'soil of discontention' possibly refers to the positivist notion of reality and the certainty of positivist theory. Gergen (1985, p. 266) said the following:

> *Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live.*

Thus, social constructionism examines the social processes that give rise to peoples common understandings of the world (Gergen, 2000) by looking at information pools from which people draw their knowledge. Everything is open for discussion, including what was formerly taken-for-granted. This includes 'core' assumptions and beliefs, for example, the belief that women are naturally motherly. Social constructionism, unlike constructivism, does not regard all stories or interpretations as valid (Doan, 1997). The stories that social

constructionists challenge are those that "are not respectful of difference, gender, ethnicity, race, or religion" (Doan, 1997, p. 130). That is, social constructionism does not support narratives that subjugate others.

## Principles Shared by Second-Order Cybernetics and Social Constructionism

Some of the second-order cybernetic principles to which social constructionism adheres are:

- What we know and how we know the world is through the process of language. Thus, that **language creates reality.**
- Both postmodernism and social constructionism regards **reality** as being **co-created** between the individual and his or her social environment.
- Since reality is co-created and no two people will have the same experience, it is evident that each person creates and lives according to his or her own reality. This refers to the notion of **multiple realities.**

## Language as Reality

Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996) state that, for the postmodernist, language is not a reflection of the world, rather it is world-constituting. Words do not simply 'map' or 'copy' the world, they create what people take the world to be (Davis & M.M. Gergen, 2002). That is, language plays an important role in the creation of meaning and thus, in creating reality. Because language is the primary means of obtaining information, it is through communication, that people are able to create and adjust their views of reality. That is, it is through language or the process of

naming that people know about the world around them, other people and themselves. Maturana (cited in Erwin 1999, p. 358) emphasised the importance of language when he stated "[o]utside of language nothing (no thing) exists because existence is bound to our distinctions in language." Hoffman (1993, p. 89) supports this importance given to language by claiming that "perception can only evolve within a cradle of communication." That is, to fully know something, a person needs to articulate it.

According to Gergen (1997a), it is through communicative relations that people are able to generate new meanings by incorporating some of the others meanings into their definition, thus continuing to change their realities. For example, it is by talking to other women about what married life means to them, that a woman is able to make sense of her experience in her marriage. That is, through discourses, this woman can use the experience of other women to validate or challenge her experience of being a wife. Although language is important in social constructionism, it is not seen as "a reflection or map on the world but as an artifact of communal interchange" (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). That is, the name given to an entity does not reflect the external object, but rather an individual's understanding of that object. Thus, language approximates reality, since reality can never be directly known.

Social constructionism is an approach that is constantly questioning beliefs and 'popular knowledge' (Gergen, 1985). This means that it questions people's meanings because meanings cannot be regarded as fixed, as they are constantly evolving. Psychologically speaking, people no longer have 'nervous breakdowns,' they now have 'identity crises.' With these changes in terms, a

different connotation is given to the experience. The former is seen in a negative light and the latter in a more positive light. It is these changes in terms, and therefore meanings, that interest social constructionists because they are linked to social perceptions and changing values or beliefs. According to Gergen (1985, p. 267-268), "[t]hey direct our attention to the social, moral, political and economical institutions that sustain and are supported by current assumptions about human activity."

However, although language is social, meaning is individual (Doan, 1997). For example, on some common level, people have an understanding of the term family. This common assumption enables them to communicate without the necessity of defining each word used. Nevertheless, on a deeper, more personal level, a person's definition of family is influenced by his or her experience and by his or her social or cultural beliefs. For some, the term family may refer to the nuclear family; for others in may include the extended family; and still for others it may include ancestors; and so on. The varied meaning of one term is what is referred to as multiple realities. Furthermore, within a given family, the individual members may have a different idea of what constitutes their family or how their family 'looks.' However, the fact that language is understandable to those that share the same worlds (language system) indicates that reality is co-created within a context.

Co-Created Reality

According to Onians (cited in Owen, 1992, p. 388), reality can be seen as the "product of the layers of many generations of humanity that have been laid

down." These historical narratives serve as the foreground for achieving moral identity within a relevant community (Gergen, 1998a), because according to social constructionism whatever people know or believe is the result of social learning. In other words, Berger and Luckmann (cited in Liebrucks, 2001, p. 365) assert that "reality is created by social interactions." However, according to Berger and Luckmann (cited in Liebrucks, 2001, p. 365), they are not referring to an external, independent reality (for example, a dog), but rather to people's "understanding and beliefs that [they] have about this world, that is, [their] conceptions about reality and not reality itself." This means that 'reality' applies to the value or meanings that a person holds, for example, to the attitudes that he or she has towards dogs. Thus, a person's perceptions about, for example, dogs is the result of personal experience and his or her social environment's attitude towards dogs. This is evident in people who grew up in families that had dogs as pets, generally having a favourable attitude towards dogs. In this way, the value attributed to dogs is co-created by personal experience (having favourably interactions with dogs) and the social environment (a family that regarded dogs as pets).

According to Harre (cited in Owen, 1992, p. 387), social constructionists regard the self as a misnomer because they do "not regard the individual out of context, but as people who are in a world of others," and not as alone or isolated. According to Gergen (1997a), people "acquire identities as particular people, along with interests, goals, ideals and passions." This view is consistent with the post-modern, and thus, second-order cybernetic notion of self as created in relationships with others (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). In social constructionism, 'others' need not only refer to people, but to institutions as well as all socio-

political-cultural environments with which one engages. Owen (1992, p. 390) asserts that

> *[k]nowledge, including every day understandings, is the series of specific judgements, conclusions and generalisations about what we have felt, heard, seen, smelt and tasted... Knowledge and personal experience are united and both subjects for a social constructionist enquiry.*

However, people are not passive recipients of knowledge, as they constantly re-evaluate and re-define what they know and believe. Since a person's reality is influenced by his or her social situations, it would follow that as the social environment changes, so should his or her constructs change. For example, in Apartheid South Africa, most people had very biased opinions about other races. Since the birth of 'the Rainbow Nation' (a change in construct and therefore meaning), due to increased social interactions across racial boundaries (personal experience), some of these opinions are likely to have changed to some extent. That is, the possible change in a person's opinion of other races is co-created by his or her personal experience (personal interaction with other races) as well as by the changes in the social environment (the Rainbow Nation).

Speed (1991, p. 405) maintains that the

> *social constructionist [has] alerted us to the notion that our participation in particular social groups*

> *crucially influence what ideas and beliefs we have and thus partially determines what we see and what meanings we impose.*

This means that if the social group (friends, church, sport, etc.) to which a person belongs holds a certain view regarding something, he or she will find evidence to back up that view and hold it as true for him or herself, as was evident with Apartheid. According to Gergen (cited in Owen, 1992, p. 385), "[s]ocial constructionism is a reminder that all values, ideologies and social institutions are human made." That is, people's values, belief and so on are co-created in relationship to a particular time and place. In social constructionism, reality can *only* be constructed in relation with others.

Multiple Realities

According to social constructionism, people live in a world created by their experiences and social environment (Gergen, 1985). Since each person has different experiences his or her definitions of the world differ, thus, there are multiple realities. Because of these multiple realities, one can no longer speak of a universe, but rather of a multiverse (Becvar & Becvar, 1996).

An example of a multiverse can be seen in the example of scientific language, which is understandable only to those who share that particular paradigm, or in other words, those that share the same socially constructed reality (Owen, 1992). For example, psychologists are familiar with the term 'psyche.' Yet, to someone who is uneducated in psychology, the term has no meaning. This further

indicates how language creates reality, that is, the psyche is 'real' for those who know about it.

As already stated, social constructionism regards the self as a misnomer because the individual is always in the world of others (Owen, 1992). According to M.M. Gergen (1995), the notion of a single self has disintegrated and the notion of plural selves are created through various relationships. Liebrucks (2001) regards these multiple relationships as the various roles that people play under different circumstances. For example, when at work a woman's children may regard her as their school principal, but at home, she is their mother. Thus, the type of interaction between this woman and her children will be determined by the environment and the roles that each person takes in the various contexts. Furthermore, this woman would behave or have a 'different' identity when she is with her staff members as opposed to when she is with her husband. This idea that a person 'changes his or her hat' according to the context, is further indication of the notion that reality is multiple. That is, a person has many identities, each of which is dependent on a specific context.

Since social constructionism sees meaning and beliefs as arising from social interaction (Gergen, 2001), it would follow that people from different social or cultural environments would view the world differently, that is, they would have different realities. It is for this reason that Liebruck (2001, p. 371) states that "...people who have been socialized in different ways and whose conceptual backgrounds, therefore differ, live, or partly live, in different worlds, with different objects." Because a person's social group influences his/her ideas and beliefs, it would follow that when a person chooses a particular idea or belief,

he/she simultaneously closes off options and separates himself/herself from others who have different ways of making meaning (Gergen, 1997a). Gergen also warns that if people reify their beliefs and do not regard them as social creations, then there is a danger that the 'others' may be devalued. This notion of people living in different worlds illustrates the concept of multiple realities. This multiverse can be seen, for example, in a Western woman's outrage at the concept of an arranged marriage, whereas a woman from the towns in the India, would possibly see it as her duty and her only choice to follow her parents' wishes to marry the man that *they* have chosen for her.

The notion of multiple realities can further be seen in the fact that customs and mannerisms vary between and within cultures (Liebrucks, 2001; Owen, 1992). What may be considered acceptable in one culture is regarded as wrong in another culture. According to Grof and Grof (1989), some communities regard schizophrenia as a spiritual awakening. However, from a medical perspective it is seen as an illness. Thus, for a researcher working from a second-order cybernetic framework, it would be important to determine what meanings particular constructs have for the participants, rather than to assume that it means the same for the participants as it does for the researcher. This is why Owen (1992, p. 387), regards "norms or appropriate, and abnormal or inappropriate behaviour, thoughts and emotions," as valid investigations from a social constructionist perspective. This supports the idea that in social constructionism, everything is open for investigation, including people's taken-for-granted realities.

A consequence of living in a multiverse can be seen in the effects of the 'global society.' The 'global society' has opened communication across cultures and countries, with the result that what was once regarded as 'fixed' beliefs or customs (for example, arranged marriages) are being challenged by the influx of new information (Renner & Laux, 2000). In other words, the global society has allowed people contact with other realities (customs, traditions, and so on) via modern technologies. This means that the new information is providing alternatives to communities and/or individuals, and thus, challenging current concepts of reality. Since the boundaries that 'protected' people from new information are weakened, people now have access to previously restricted information. Because of these increased contacts and lack of clearly defined boundaries, people are moving towards social saturation (Gergen, 1995). By social saturation, Gergen means that people are learning about the values and beliefs of others (through the global society) and incorporating some of these into their world-view. Today, more than in the past, personal values and beliefs are being challenged by alternative choices, and subsequently, a person's concept of what constitutes reality is changing (Gergen, 1995). For example, the previously mentioned Indian woman would have knowledge of alternatives available to her. She could realise that arranged marriages are not the only form of marriage. However, if she acts on this knowledge, she would challenge her community's belief system.

From the above, it is clear that social constructionism is an approach that embraces the second-order cybernetic principles of co-created and multiple realities, and that reality is created and maintained by language. Both, social

constructionism and second-order cybernetics fall under the larger umbrella of post-modernism.

## Grand Narratives

According to Doan (1997), Grand Narratives refer to narratives that subjugate others and purport to tell *the* truth with no room for alternatives. Grand Narratives are social or cultural "discourses that are formed by, and in turn, influence people and that take on normative views against which people measure themselves" (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996, p. 80). Most people fear transgressing societal or cultural norms because of what others might say or do. These values of others refer to the internalised subjugating Grand Narrative that people come to believe as the only truth and way to be. A possible Grand Narrative for the abovementioned Indian woman could be 'parents know best.' Therefore, she would not think of questioning her parents' choice of a marriage partner, because 'they know what is best for her.' According to Doan (1997, p. 130), most people assimilate the Grand Narratives to such an extent that they "speak with its voice and identify it as their own." This implies that people believe the Grand Narrative so deeply, that they think in the way that the Grand Narrative directs them to do, all the while, believing that these are their own thoughts. According to Owen (1992, p. 387):

> *[w]e continually take in the influence of others and send out messages of how to be that are taken in by others. In this sense, it is impossible to strive to be an*

> *individual because you can never be one: you can only swim with or against the tide of others.*

In this way, society tends to refer to those who swim against the tide as having a psychopathology, thus, placing "duress on [them] to…move in transition to a socially different place" (Owen, 1992, p. 388), a place that is more in line with societal norms and expectations. The manner in which society places duress on those who swim against the current can be seen, in the example, of a lawyer who goes to court in her beachwear, which would be regarded as socially inappropriate. She would probably be charged with contempt of court. In this way, the 'mad' and 'bad' are removed from society. The 'mad' and 'bad' are those members of society who do not follow the prescribed modes of behaviour. Shotter (cited in Liebrucks, 2001, p. 378) highlights this when he says that as a member of a given community,

> *one must be able to utilize the expressive means that are assigned a certain meaning by social convention. And one has to have the competence to act appropriately in a given situation.*

Liebrucks (2001, p. 380) further asserts that the rules of the community are implicitly learnt: "Rules are constituted in customs, uses and institutions, and often there are no explicit maxims of conduct to represent them." Furthermore, these rules and customs are influenced by the Grand Narratives. According to Doan (1997, p. 130), Grand Narratives are "supported by the weight of numbers, tradition, and firmly entrenched [within] power structures." In this way, some

customs and traditions propagate and support the subjugating Grand Narratives. Ironically, it is "those most oppressed" by the subjugating Grand Narrative that "become the most ardent defenders of the beast that threatens to consume them" (Doan, 1997, p.130). In the above example of the Indian woman from India, she may strongly believe that her parents will choose a better suitor for her than she would be able to, and she would possibly strongly support the tradition of arranged marriages.

Since social constructionism subscribes to a co-created reality and acknowledges that reality is grounded within a particular socio-political-cultural environment (which is entrenched within subjugating Grand Narrative), it would follow that the social context would determine what would be regarded as appropriate areas of research and what information should be made public. That is, scientific investigations or findings that support the current status quo are more likely to be published and brought to the public's attention than those that challenge the status quo. Furthermore, the social environment has the power to keep certain views alive, views that inevitably support that social reality. As Gergen (1985, p. 268) puts it:

> *[t]he degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes (e.g., communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric).*

In this way, the dominant status quo is maintained by continuing the propaganda with supporting research, thus maintaining the power and illusion of legitimacy of the subjugating Grand Narrative (Doan, 1997).

Like all narratives, Grand Narratives are socially created. However, unlike other narratives, Grand Narratives are subjugating and they tend to take on a life of their own. They permeate all aspects of people's lives and are generally taken to represent 'the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' Because of their power and seeming legitimacy (supported by the status quo), these subjugating Grand Narratives are rarely questioned. Nevertheless, their influence is very visible in the behaviour, language and attitudes of those who subscribe to them, consciously and unconsciously. Social construction does not regard all stories to be equally valid nor does it support the notion that any person or group can claim superior knowledge about the 'truth' (Gergen, 1997a). Therefore, Dickerson & Zimmerman (cited in Doan, 1997, p.129) assert that social constructionism "deconstructs the Grand Narratives by focusing on how the prevailing norms have evolved over time, especially those that marginalize and subjugate people."

## Social Constructionism and the Present Study

As already stated, from a social constructionist point of view, the taken-for-granted information would be regarded as valid areas of study. This research involves "questioning, searching, clarifying, checking and constantly re-evaluating opinions" (Owen, 1992, p. 386) regarding the definition of femininity. Since social constructionist aims to deconstruct Grand Narratives that subjugate others, this approach underlies this research. The Grand Narratives

that will be deconstructed in this research will be some of the narratives that subjugate women. Thus, this approach fits with this topic of exploring femininity, because the definition of femininity is constantly changing and women are trying to determine what it means to be a woman. The defining characteristics of a woman are different today, from what it was for previous generations of women and will alter for future generations of women. This changing definition highlights the notion of multiple realities and that reality is constantly changing. Furthermore, the definition of what it means to be a woman is influenced by the socio-cultural environments, and this highlights that the meanings of what it means to be a woman is co-created in a particular context.

## Impact of Social Constructionism on Current Study.

From the above, it is evident that this study is embedded in second-order cybernetics and particularly, the social constructionist perspective. Some of the implications, for this study are:

- From a second-order cybernetic perspective, the research can never be free of the researcher's biases and opinions.
- These biases determine how the researcher views the study and the data.
- Since the researcher interacts with the participants, they mutually influence each other.
- Social constructionism is based on discourses and thus meanings will evolve for the researcher, the participants as well as the study.

- The researcher and participants are rooted in a social and cultural history that determines how they view the world and thus attribute meanings to their narratives.
- Finally, since language is co-created, but meaning is individual, the meanings that the participants have about certain terms, (especially, masculinity and femininity) needs clarification. These will be discussed in the participants' stories.

## Conclusion

As illustrated in this chapter, the concept of reality and people's interactions with reality changed over time. What was once regarded as the absolute truth is now seen as one possibility amongst many possible realities or truths. It is evident that, as the social world in which people live changes, so does the individual's ideas change in accordance with the dominant ideology of the community. In this chapter, the researcher has outlined how the scientific community's concept of reality changed from the modernist to the post-modernist perspective and from first- to second-order cybernetics.

The researcher also highlighted how social constructionism fits with the second-order cybernetic perspective and how both of these can be subsumed under the post-modern umbrella. Some of the tenets that were explained in this chapter are the following: that language creates reality; that reality is co-created and multiple; and that the observer can never be neutral because of the co-created and thus, subjective nature of reality.

This chapter also illustrated how language plays an important role in the creation of reality and how language changes are linked to social changes. The explanation of Grand Narratives indicates how these narratives, more than other discourses, influence people's lives. Subjugating Grand Narratives purport to tell the only truth. This 'truth' is based on the promotion of one group (for example, males) at the expense of the other (for example, females), and is thus the focus of this research.

Finally, in this chapter, the researcher explained how the above approach fits with the current study and the implications of this approach for the study. Since this research is constructionist in nature, it can be expected that meanings will evolve as this research progresses.

CHAPTER 3

# FEMININITY

## Introduction

This chapter revolves around the definitions of femininity, or the value attributed to women, and the potential impact of these definitions on women. Firstly, the difference between femininity and feminist will be discussed. Thereafter the researcher will explain the social construction of femininity. A brief historical view of the status and social regard attributed to women will follow. This was regarded as necessary because the current definition of femininity is rooted in its patriarchal history. The researcher will then explain women's social position as it stands today. Thereafter, the relationship between mothers and daughters will be discussed, followed by women's rejections and subsequent reclaiming of their femininity.

As this research is based on social constructionism, it would be evident that the discussion that follows is based on the researcher's interpretation of the literature. In this way, the literature that follows is the researcher's constructions of what she read and it thus says as much about her as it does about the topic itself. Thus, what follows cannot be seen as the absolute 'truth' but rather a possible truth, from the perspective of the researcher.

## Femininity versus Feminist

The Oxford dictionary (1999) defines femininity as "of or like women; considered suitable for women." Fox-Genovese (1996) asserts that women can express their femininity in terms of the clothing and make-up that they wear; in their family interactions or in their role in their families, and so on. In this way, she focuses on the external representations of femininity. However, the term 'femininity,' as used in this research, focuses on an *internal* feeling or experience of a woman that makes her ashamed or proud of being female. The term femininity "comprises aspects of self-identification on a deep structural level..." (Ardener, 1993). It may include traditionally womanly things (for example, wearing a dress and make-up) or it may not (for example, wearing jeans and a t-shirt). It is *not* something that she does but what she *is* that makes the difference. That is, if a woman is proud of her femininity she may feel alive and exhilarated knowing that she is a 'wo(w)man.' This is possibly how little girls feel when they proudly proclaim that they are girls. Fox-Genovese (1996, p.56) also alludes to this internal femininity when she says, " most women clearly value the distinctly female core of their identities... It offers a connection to other women across lines of race, ethnicity, and class." That is, femininity refers to that inner identification that makes women proud or ashamed to be what they are.

Feminist, for the purpose of this study, refers to the militant, activists' stance whereby women fight for equality with men. It is a political stance that focuses on the external representation and treatment of women (Black, 1989; Fox-Genovese, 1996; Liss, Hoffner & Crawford, 2000). Furthermore, radical feminists are anti-men and anti-anything that defines women as a woman (Fox-

Genovese, 1996; Price, 1995). That is, they appear to reject the notion of biological differences between the sexes. Some radical feminists refuse to marry (a man) or if they do marry, they refuse to have children (Price, 1995). According to Price (1995, p. 324), for a woman to be a "real feminist" means that she does not describe "herself as a woman by her fertility," and if she does, then she feels guilty at letting her "sisterhood" down.

This difference between femininity and feminist is illustrated in the film G.I. Jane. In the film, Demi Moore plays a soldier who completes special training in which sixty percent of the men who sign up drop out. She refuses any special treatment and wants to be treated just *like the men*. She sleeps with them and competes with them at *their* level. She pushes herself and has a muscled body. At one stage, she says, "Suck my dick" and this wins her over to the men because she is now one of them. This illustrates the concept 'feminist' as used in this research. It is when women want to be able to compete with *men* in *their* games and according to *their* rules. They seem to want to tell men to 'suck their dicks.'

According to the researcher, the other women in the film illustrate femininity, as defined in this research. These women seem to enjoy being female in a male dominated society (the military). That is, although they are in the military, they have not lost their femaleness and seem proud of their femininity. One of the women is a doctor. She is portrayed as a caring, nurturing person. Although the doctor is in a caring role, it does not necessarily make her female. It is more in her mannerisms and how she carries herself that define her as feminine.

In summary, for the purposes of this research, femininity is defined as an internal, individual feeling. Feminist is an external, political stance. However, femininity is not exclusively internal, that is, there can be an external representation of her femaleness. Likewise, feminist cannot be exclusively external, that is, a feminist has an internal representation of herself, possibly as an oppressed individual. That is, femininity and feminist are both internal and external experiences.

As stated in the previous chapter, social constructionism asserts that all knowing is socially mediated. Thus, femininity as a construct is also socially constructed.

## Social Construction of Femininity

It is now generally accepted that gender and sex do not refer to the same thing (Carr, 1998; Lucal, 1999; Price, 1995). Sex, refers to the biological makeup of a person. That is, it is what a person is genetically – male or female. Gender, refers to the characteristics attributed to the sexes. Gender refers to the "complex of discourses, symbols and images that define the meaning of what it is to be or to act as a man or a woman" (Greene, 1997, p. 387). Thus, gender refers to how people are and what they do. Everything that a person does is gender-based or engendered behaviour (Lucal, 1999). In this way, a person cannot not do gender. In sum, sex refers to the biological differences, while gender refers to social and cultural sexual differences.

As gender is actively constructed "within the limits of existing social discourses or historically specific social institutions" (Carr, 1998, p. 528), it is evident that people's (personal and societal) gender definitions or gendered selves (M.M.

Gergen, 2002) are embedded in their cultural history. However, most cultures are entrenched in patriarchal history. Thus, a person's gender definition is influenced by his or her particular cultural definitions of gender as well as the patriarchal view of gender, which is maintained through language patterns (M.M. Gergen, 2002). Femininity is characterised as, inter alia, unfocused, fickle and emotional (Greene, 1997; Murdock, 1990). Masculinity on the other hand is characterised by, inter alia, assertiveness, dominance and intellectuality (Murdock, 1990).

According to Pleck, Sonenstein and Ku (cited in Courtenay, 2000, p. 1387),

> *women and men think and act the way that they do not because of their role identities or psychological traits, but because of the concept about femininity and masculinity that they adopt from their culture.*

Furthermore, Pleck (cited in Courtenay, 2000, p. 1387) states that these stereotypes of what masculine and feminine are, "provide collective, organised … meanings of gender and often become widely shared beliefs about who women and men innately *are*."

According to Greene (1997, p. 369), the meanings of masculinity and femininity are so powerful that they "not only reflect inner self-identification and outer realities but they come to create them" as well. This view is supported by the post-modern perspective, which regards gender, or more specifically, masculine and feminine, as "discourses, which, by definition have the power to influence thinking and behaviour and to shape individual subjectivities" (Greene, 1997, p.

378). Since gender is a social construct, it would follow that as the social realities change, so will the gender definitions change. However, this may not be the case. On one level, the feminist movement has paved the way for women to enter the financial sector (Black, 1989; Fox-Genovese, 1996), and in this way, to be accorded equality with men, yet, some women still experience femininity as the second gender, the inferior sex.

A possible reason for this 'inferiority complex' could be the social construction of feminine as the second gender (Greene, 1997). According to Greene (1997), the feminine is defined largely in opposition to the masculine. Thus, by its very definition, the feminine is described as the 'other' or 'less-than'. According to this reasoning, the 'masculine' would be defined as the 'us' or 'in-group' and the 'feminine' as the 'them' or 'out-group.' As Georg Simmel (cited in Von Broembsen, 1996, p. 291) observed,

> *[o]ur whole civilization is a masculine civilization... the very standards by which mankind has estimated the value of male and female nature are not neutral, arising out of the difference of the sexes, but in themselves essentially masculine...*

Thus, it seems evident that the creation of gender is to oppress one (feminine) in favour of the other (masculine). Lorber (cited in Lucal, 1999, p. 794) regards gender as the "process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities," that puts women in a devalued and oppressed position.

It seems that some women may find it difficult to break free from the oppression of their gender and a possible reason is that the definition of feminine is "deeply embedded in the language and culture of a society, in its myths, literature and political structures" (Greene, 1997, p. 367). The power of the discourse is that people identify with their gender from a young age, and to rebel against the ingrained definition of the feminine would be to disregard their inner identification with that construct. The discourses that we identify with as female (and male) are so pervasive that it seems that people cannot possible escape from them. Since "gender ultimately proceeds from biological sex, due to differential parenting and other social interventions" (Carr, 1998, p. 529), it is from birth that a person learns about what gender rules apply to him or her. That is, little girls are encouraged to be sweet, caring and nurturing, while little boys are encouraged to be brave, strong and independent.

Girls not only learn from their mothers and other women what it means to be a woman (Fox-Genovese, 1996), they also learn from the mass media (television, magazines, music, and so forth), from observations of other women, and from rhymes, fairy tales and songs. A rhyme that a 4-year-old girl was heard reciting was: "... girls are sexy, made of pepsy, boys are rotten, made of cotton...." At the age of four, she has already learnt that her value as a woman is to be 'sexy.'

Almost every fairy tale has a theme of the 'princess' being rescued by the 'prince' and then they 'live happily ever after.' Before her rescue, the princess lives a difficult life. For example, Cinderella had to suffer at the hands of her step-mother, Snow White's step-mother ordered her to be killed, Rapunzell was locked in the tower, and so on. Thus, little girls learn that women need to be rescued from their current lives by the charming prince. They also learn that if

they are not saved (that is married), then they will be 'lonely old hags, old maids' or at best 'spinsters.' Older unmarried men are bachelors. Thus, there are double standards in the connotations attached to the same behaviour by the different sexes. That is, the feminine has a negative connotation and the masculine a positive. A nursery rhyme that exemplifies the patriarchal view of women is the following:

*Peter, Peter Pumpkin eater.*
*Had a wife and couldn't keep her.*
*He put her in a pumpkin shell*
*And there he kept her very well.*

The above rhyme on a subconscious level, communicates to little girls that they belong to men, or will be their husbands' property. If they do not do as required by their husbands, then their husbands have the power, and right, to bind their wives ('put her in a pumpkin shell') in any way that they see fit – physically and/or psychologically. Furthermore, women who cannot be 'kept' are portrayed as 'evil-step-mothers' or 'wicked-witches' in fairy tales. Thus, creating an atmosphere wherein women unconsciously desire to 'be kept' in order to be socially accepted.

Although some women choose a life without a man, for the majority of women, having a husband is the norm (Fox-Genovese, 1996). For these women, 'finding' the right man is essential. Through these beliefs, mothers and other women transmit social expectations onto young girls. Furthermore, most young females learn from their mothers or other significant other females what it

means to be a woman (Fox-Genovese, 1996; Snyder, Valasquez & Clark, 1997) and what it is that men want from a woman.

As already stated, there is a difference between the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. However, there is also a difference between the terms 'gender identity' and 'presented gender identity'. 'Gender identity' is the gender with which the individual identifies (Rosenzweig & Dailey, 1991). That is, it is the gender that a person feels akin to. Gender identity may or may not correspond to the person's sex. That is, some people feel that they have been given the 'wrong' bodies. 'Presented gender', is the gender that a person presents to society. It refers to what Jung called the Persona (Stupak & Stupak, 1990, p. 272). The presented identity may or may not correspond with the person's gender identity, or biological sex. For example, a tomboy's gender identity is feminine, but her presented gender is masculine. That is, although she is essentially female, her behaviour is characterised by some masculine traits.

From the above, it is clear that gender is a social construction that promotes the feminine as the weaker sex, the inferior gender. However, as a social construction, it is embedded within a historical past.

## Historical Overview of Women's Worth

In line with social constructionist ideas, it is important to know how the definitions of femininity and women's status have changed over the decades and to see how some of the 'older' values are still prevalent today. Furthermore, a brief history is necessary to illustrate that gender is a social construction that seems to serve the needs of men in a patriarchal society.

## Matriarchy

Throughout patriarchal history, women have been regarded as the weaker sex and have been viewed as the property of men who could do as they wanted to with them. However, before patriarchy came into being, there was matriarchy (Rich, 1986; Thomas, 1964). During this time, the Goddess was worshiped and women were honoured (Rich, 1986). This was possibly due to their ability to give life. In matriarchy, women's menstrual cycle was "felt to be [a] *transformative power*" (Rich, 1986, p. 101). Furthermore, Rich (1986), speculates that birth, at that time, was considered a profound experience and accompanied by feelings of transformation.

With the fall of matriarchy, patriarchy became dominant. Instead of Goddess worship, a single male dominant God reigned. The Goddess was demoted to consort, wife or mother of the male God (Lerner, 1986). With the demotion of the Goddess, women lost their power and privileged position in society. According to Rich (1986, p. 126-127),

> *[p]atriarchal man created – out of a mixture of sexual and affective frustration, blind need, physical force, ignorance, and intelligence split from its emotional grounding, a system which turned against woman her own organic nature, the source of her awe and her original powers.*

What was once her power was now her curse. That is, her childbearing capabilities became the reason for her inability to care for herself and her need

for protection (Ussher, 1991). Furthermore, her menstruation cycles relegated her to secondary status.

## Menstrual Taboos

In the patriarchal society, the life-giving nature of women, and thus their monthly menstruation, was regarded as evil. According to Ussher (1991, p. 22), menstruating women have been regarded as "polluted, contaminated, dangerous" and have been "barred from worship [and] banned from work." The curse of the menstruating women extended to every part of her life. They were " forbidden to cross a man's path, touch his food, touch children or sleep in the same house as the family" (Ussher, 1991, p. 22). Therefore, menstruating women had to relocate to menstrual huts until they were 'clean' again (Rich, 1986; Ussher, 1991). Due to these constraints on the menstruating women, polygamy became essential. That is, since one wife was unable to 'care' for her husband during her menstrual cycle, it was necessary for a man to have more than one wife and/or concubines to tend to his needs when the others were 'dirty.' Thus, the menstrual taboo seems to have served the patriarchal society in that polygamy became a necessity.

A further way in which women's bodies were marked as different followed the menstrual taboo. Birth was now also regarded as defilement (Rich, 1986; Thomas, 1964). The notion of women as dirty after birth is widespread. According to Rich (1986), some traditions regard a woman as 'untouchable' for a period after childbirth, while other cultures force her into seclusion during this period and others even perform purification rituals on the mother before she can return to normal society.

From the above, it seems as if the birth and menstrual taboos construct women as the inferior gender and shamed them because of their God-given natural status – menstruation and birth.

## Bondage of Women

Through the menstrual and birth taboos, women were already marked as the inferior gender. However, women also endured physical bondage, which was deemed necessary to guarantee a woman's chastity and dependence on men. The most literal example of binding is the Chinese foot binding, in which a young girl's toes were permanently bent over the sole of her foot (Ussher, 1991), thus, making her incapable of walking on her gilded stumps and thereby guaranteeing her fidelity to her husband. In this way, a woman's worth now rested on her guaranteed fidelity and her assured dependence on her husband, both of which was achieved by her lack of physical mobility (Ussher, 1991). Furthermore, since women were deemed unfit to be educated (Ussher, 1991), they posed no intellectual challenge to men, either.

Another example of the manner in which women were bound to their husbands, can be seen in the Indian Suttees. Here, the widow was forced to enter the pyre and burn alive with her deceased husband (Thomas, 1964; Ussher, 1991). This illustrates that a woman belonged to her husband, both in life and in death. Since it was customary for men to marry much younger women (Ussher, 1991), this custom ensured that young widows did not live life to the full and that they did not have a life beyond their husband's death.

## Importance of a Woman's Virginity and her Role as Sexual Object to Men

Other ways in which a woman's virginity was guaranteed, was by subjugating her to wearing a chastity belt and by female circumcision (or more accurately referred to as 'female genital mutation'). The chastity belt was a " heavy, rusting, unhygienic cage of metal" (Ussher, 1991, p. 27), which prevented women from any form of sexual activity. Her father kept the key to the belt, and handed it over to her husband on the wedding day. Thus guaranteeing that his daughter was unsoiled goods (Ussher, 1991). According to Hoskin (cited in Ussher 1991, p. 28), female circumcision involved either the removal of "merely" the clitoris or

> *excision of the entire clitoris, labia minora and parts of the labia majora. The two sides of the vulva are then fastened together in some way either by thorns ...or sewing by catgut...Only a small opening is left (usually by inserting a slither of wood) so that urine or later the menstrual blood can be passed.*

Female genital mutilation ensured that sexual intercourse would be painful for women, and thus, they would unlikely seek it, thereby guaranteeing their sexual fidelity to their husbands. It is indisputable that the above procedures caused a great deal of pain and humiliation to women. However, Ussher (1991) maintains that in a patriarchal society, the effects of these on women were disregarded. That is, women's pain and humiliation seem never to have been considered.

During this time, it would appear as if the value of women rested on their ability to sexually satisfy men, and not on their being sexually stimulated by men. This was ensured by surgically 'correcting' women in order to prevent them from any form of sexual enjoyment (Ussher, 1991). That is, unlike today, where a man feels good about his sexuality if he is able to 'satisfy a woman in bed', it seems that in those days, if a man satisfied a woman, then he could not be regarded as a sexually 'good man.' Thus, women were merely objects of men's sexual enjoyment.

## Women's Place in Patriarchy

Although the above practices were seemingly for the satisfaction of men, women performed them. That is, the female nurse and/or mothers carried out the foot binding and circumcision on their daughters (Ussher, 1991). Today, one would find it inconceivable that a mother would allow her daughter to suffer the pain of having her feet bound or having her genitals mutilated. However, the mothers committed these unthinkable acts on their daughters out of love for them and so that they would have a future. This is an example of how deeply embedded the inferiority beliefs of women were. That is, if a mother loved her daughter, she would torture her so that she (daughter) would be acceptable to her future husband or as a future concubine. Her role as a woman was to serve men (Ussher, 1991). Furthermore, mothers did not have the power or authority **not** to torture their daughters. That is, due to their physical and often intellectual bondage, they could not challenge the authority of the male in the house or the community beliefs.

The above brief history illustrates that a woman's value was her sexual and nurturing role. That is, from a patriarchal point of view, women were worthy as objects of men's sexual gratification (Lerner, 1986; Ussher, 1991). Women were also useful to care for men and as an instrument from which men could have sons (Ardener, 1993; Rich, 1986). This emphasis on women's worth in terms of their reproductive abilities, is evident in the fact that the National Organisation for Women (NOW) only recognised the role of women as separate to that of mother in 1993 (Maxwell, 1994). This indicates that before 1993, a woman and her role as mother was one, that is, a woman did not have an identity separate to her reproductive capability. Therefore, little girls were socialized to be nurturing and caring. According to Fox-Genovese (1996), motherhood was a stage that all women should strive for and it was an idea that was 'sold' to women as their destiny (Ardener, 1993) or God-given right. Motherhood was characterized by total self-sacrificing and an image of a gentle, kind woman (Maxwell, 1994).

## Arranged Marriages

In ancient Indian practices, arranged marriages took place when a young girl, usually before the beginning of her menstrual cycle (Thomas, 1964),was married off to a much older man from another village. Since the girl was expected to be a virgin on her wedding night, in some cultures, the couple consummated their marriage on a white sheet, in an attempt to test the bride's virginity (Ardener, 1993). According to Ardener (1993, p.40), the white sheet was then inspected and

> *if she failed to bleed, she might be, or even ought to be, killed by her father or brother, who acted as joint guardians of her honour.*

Once married, a woman could not return to her village without her husband's permission (Thomas, 1964). Thus, she could not go home for assistance and/or support if she had any difficulties in her marriage. Furthermore, her physical distance from her family meant that she was totally the property of her in-laws. This ensured that she had no support networks and therefore, had to do as her 'new family' told her to do. Since divorce was prohibited, a married woman could never return home to her family of origin (Thomas, 1964). Because women were 'educated' to be of service to men and not educated intellectually (Thomas, 1964), they had no means of supporting themselves even if they left their husband. Furthermore, in the unlikely event that a woman did leave her husband and was able to support herself, she would be outcast by both communities – her community of origin and that of her husband's. Thus, a woman had no choice, but to remain in a marriage and to serve her husband and his family.

## Conclusion

From the above literature search, it may seem as if patriarchal history is characterized by the inferiority status of women and the emphasis on women as the property of men. Furthermore, it seems as if women's role in society was to serve the needs of men. Through the social construction of females as 'dirty' during their menstrual cycle and the virtue placed on their virginity, the patriarchal society's needs were satisfied. That is, women were seen as the

inferior gender and they believed that their purpose was to satisfy men, even if that meant pain and humiliation for them. Furthermore, the emphasis on the 'purity' of women, and the subsequent need to protect their 'virtue', legitimized the inhuman manner in which this was achieved, for example, via the chastity belt and female genital mutilation (Ussher, 1991).

The above restrictions on women's sexuality could be an indication that men were afraid of women's power to give life (Rich, 1986) and thus, they attempted to control what they could not understand. From the above, it is also evident that no such sexual limitations were placed upon men. Instead, in order for a man to prove his manhood, or that he is a man, he was encouraged to have sex with a woman (Ardener,1993). That is, men did not have to prove their virginity and their multiple partners were condoned as a necessity, rather than the desire of men.

It is the researcher's belief that the above restrictions could have been placed on women by men, out of envy for their life-giving abilities. That is, one of a man's most valued 'possession' is his son, and for this, he is dependent on a woman (Ardener, 1993; Rich, 1986). In this way, only a woman can give a man an heir, a sense of continuance of his lineage (Ardener, 1993). Furthermore, the researcher feels that nothing that a man can create can compare to the birth of his son, his heir.

## Women Today

Due to the strides made by the feminist movement, greater recognition and many formerly exclusively male domains have opened up to women (Black,

1989; Fox-Genovese, 1996; Liss et al. 2000; Walters, 1990). In some countries, for example, South Africa, women have guaranteed constitutional rights and are more visible today then they have been in the past. Externally, it seems as if women are almost on par with men. However, women still have a long way to go to be fully on par with men because, some women still receive lower pay than men, for the same work, and are regarded as inferior in some domains, for example in aviation, pilots and especially senior captains are mostly men.

## Value of Women's Virginity

On a symbolic level, it seems that women are still inferior to men. Double standards regarding women's virginity still appear to exist. Women are encouraged to be "virgins until marriage" (Fox-Genovese, 1996, p.60) or to 'save themselves for the right man.' This possibly indicates that women are still regarded as property in that they should be unsoiled and pure goods on their wedding day. Fox-Genovese (1996) provides an alternative view as to why some women choose to be virgins on their wedding day. She feels that this had to do with women being uncertain concerning their sexual liberation. Whatever the personal reasons for a woman choosing to be a virgin, it seems that on a societal level, women are expected to be virgins on their wedding day, whereas men are not expected to be virgins. This is evident in discourses that refer to sexually active women, outside of marriage, as whores and men in the same situation as studs. This different connotation to the same behaviour by the different genders reflects social expectations. It further indicates the patriarchal nature of society in which men are free to 'spread their wild oats' and women are expected to stay at home and be 'pure.'

The practice of female genital mutilation is still prevalent today. "It is estimated that more than 120 million females have undergone FGM [female genital mutilation] and that 2 million more girls are at risk of mutilation each year" (Refaat et al., 2001, p. 593). According to Refaat et al. (2001, p. 594), female genital mutilation is generally practiced by Muslims and by "some Christian communities in Africa and by Ethiopian Jews (Falashas)," because of the belief that it is in keeping with their customs and traditions.

It would seem as if society still places greater emphasis on a woman's virginity than on a man's virginity. Furthermore, some cultures still believe in the 'surgical correction' of women, as noted by Refaat et al. (2001).

## Menstrual Taboos

Today, many women regard their menstrual cycle as a natural occurrence. However, some women, especially in the Indian community, still maintain that a woman is dirty when she is menstruating. This 'dirty' status ensures that a woman is unable to pray or take part in any religious ceremonies during this period. This reinforces the notion that she is 'less-than.' That is, if she is religious, then for a week of each month, she is unable to devote herself to God. Therefore, from this viewpoint, she can never be a true devotee. According to Guru Dewa (cited in Sitaram, 1995), this belief continues despite the public proclamation by some male priests to the contrary. Thus, it seems as if the menstrual taboo is so deeply entrenched within the belief systems of some women, that despite evidence to the contrary, they still hold on to it. In this way, these women promote and support the subjugating Grand Narrative that classifies them as 'dirty' during their menstrual cycle.

The mass media, in the form of television advertisements for sanitary pads, propagate the notion that women should hide the fact that they have their menstrual cycle (Berg & Bolck Coutts, 1994). That is, sanitary pads are now thinner and less visible than in the past. The message that the sanitary advertisements convey to women is that now that their sanitary pad protects them, they are able to be more of themselves, even while menstruating. These images unconsciously convey to women that they are different to men because of their menstrual cycle and it is something, at worst, to be ashamed of, at best, seen as an inconvenience. According to Chafetz (cited in Berg & Block Coutts, 1994), women who accept this notion of their menstrual cycle as a negative episode are unwittingly accepting male interpretations of their biological functions as their own definitions. That is, they refer to their menstrual cycle from a masculine principle rather than the feminine, which regards it as a natural, biological and "*transformative power*" (Rich, 1986, p. 101). According to Murdock (1990, p. 115), the Native Americans celebrate the feminine, and refer to menstruation as "a time of cleaning; a time of dreams; insights, and intuition; a time of enormous power to be reclaimed and respected."

Menstruation is still seen by some as something that is restrictive and needs to be kept secret. Furthermore, it seems that some women believe so strongly in the menstrual taboo, that they cannot break free from that belief.

## Symbolic Ownership of Women

Although women are no longer 'owned' by men in the sense that they can be bought or sold, there is still a sense of symbolic ownership of women. This is

evident in many wedding customs, for example, in the traditional Christian wedding ceremony, the bride is 'given away' by her father to her husband. That is, she is passed from one man to another (Ardener, 1993). In some Indian cultures, the bride's family pays the groom's family a dowry, while in some black cultures, the groom's family pays the bride's family labola. Ardener (1993, p.123) regards this as 'bride-wealth,' that is, the price of the bride. On a figurative level, this indicates that women are commodities that are exchanged for money. In all cultures, after the marriage, the bride looses her father's name and takes on her husband's last name (Walters, 1990). In this way, her surname indicates her symbolic 'ownership.' This indicates that although externally women's status has changed, culturally, they may still be the property of men.

The domestic violence perpetuated against women is further indication of the notion that, symbolically, women are regarded as property (Refaat et al., 2001). That is, if a woman is property, then the owner (man) has a right to do with it (her), as he desires. She belongs to him, and thus, he has rights over her. In some cultures, marriage involves the female leaving her family home and moving in with her husband's family (Ardener, 1993). That is, marriage is not solely between a man and a woman, it includes the families, or more specifically, his family. Walters (1990, p. 55) regards the institution of marriage and family life as based on the idea that "the life of one adult person [wife] is largely organized by, and identified with, the life and person of another [husband]."

It would seem as if women are no longer literally regarded as the property of men, but that the figurative or symbolic ownership of women is still prevalent today.

## Women's Role in the Family

Throughout history, a woman has been the homemaker and the person who transmits social values to her children (Rich, 1986). This tends to place her in a serving role. Owen (1992, p. 391) maintains that "social constructionism sees women's subordinate status to men as being facilitated by some women who side with men and continue the cycle of oppression." This view of women supporting their oppression is shared by Woodman (1993). This is evident in the manner in which some mothers treat their sons as superior to their daughters. Furthermore, some cultures tend to place more value on the birth of a son than a daughter (Lerner, 1986; Rich, 1986; Thomas, 1964). According to this view, women co-create their subordinate status with men, and continue this cycle with their children.

Some independent, career orientated women, find that once married, they tend to hand over the major decision making to their husbands, and accept passive roles (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This includes the financial, living arrangements and other responsibilities (Walters, 1990). As already stated, from this point of view, the institution of marriage revolves around one person (male) influencing the life of the other (female). In this way, some women take on the submissive role and when or if they divorce, they may find it difficult to reclaim their decision-making responsibilities. This acceptance of a passive role once married may further indicate how some women support their oppression.

Today, due to financial necessity, many families are dual income families. This means that both parents are working outside the home and child-care is entrusted to someone else, mostly another woman (Walters, 1990). Yet, most

career women find that they work two jobs. One, a paid job, outside of the home during office hours; and the second, an unpaid job, after hours inside the home. That is, most household activities are still the domain of women, as is child-care (Fox-Genovese, 1996; Neff, 2001; Walters, 1990). Thus, despite changes made in the political arena regarding women, "their responsibility for maintaining the home and caring for the children remained basically the same" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999, p. 201). Unfortunately, those women who can afford to be housewives find that society does not accord them any status as a mother or housewife. As Fox-Genovese (1996, p. 122) states in "a 'man's world,' housewives have often been denied the respect they deserve." Thus, it seems that in a patriarchal society, childcare is not considered an important or respectful occupation, even though it is expected of women to fulfill this role.

It seems that in the family, which is a microcosm of society (Becvar & Becvar, 1996), some women support the patriarchal view of their position as the inferior gender. Furthermore, childcare is still essentially a 'woman's job.'

## Women in Fashion

As already stated, Fox-Genovese (1996) regards clothing as a means through which women are able to express their femininity. However, female fashion, for example narrow skirts and high-heels, ensure that women are less physically mobile than their male counterparts. Women today regard their choice of fashion as an option rather than a requirement. That is, unlike the past where women had to wear certain restrictive clothing, for example, a corset, today women have, to a certain degree, a choice regarding clothing. However, social pressure compels some women to wear 'sexy' clothing, some of which is

restrictive in nature. This means that women are indoctrinated with the belief that to 'catch a man' she needs to look desirable. This desirable look includes conforming to social norms of beauty, which include looking and acting in a feminine manner.

## Women in Psychology

The pervasive negative view of the feminine is prevalent throughout all fields of life, including the human sciences. Psychology, in the past, has not contributed to women's well being (Greene, 1997). That is, during the modern era, psychological theorists were men. This meant that, women or the feminine was seen from a masculine perspective (Walters, 1990). For example, Freud's notion of 'penis envy,' which claims that females are envious of men because men have a penis and women desire to possess one (Temperley, 1993). From this theory, it is evident that women were regarded as the second and inferior gender. To add insult to the wound, the psychoanalyst also blamed the mother for any 'psychological blocks' that her children experienced (Murdock, 1990). If a child expressed dependency traits, it was because the mother was too over-protective; if the child was too independent, the mother was blamed for not being sufficiently involved. Thus, women were in a double bind situation. They were not taught how to be 'good mothers' but were expected to be good mothers (Heffner, 1980).

With the change from modern to post-modern thinking, women entered previously male domains, such as, psychology. However, as noted by Hoffman (1993), many of the models of family therapy were pioneered by men. Therefore, they reflect the male view of women in society. Today, there are

more women entering the field of psychology then any other field (Greene, 1997). This is possibly due to the nature of psychology. That is, unlike the other sciences, psychology is a science that emphasizes empathy, support and allows the therapist to be nurturing (if necessary). Although there are greater numbers of female than male psychologists, women are still in the background in the academic world (Greene, 1997). By this, Greene (1997) means that men still occupy the positions of power in the field, in the sense that more men than women are given full professorships at universities, and thus, are in positions that can influence the field of psychology. However, this does not mean that women have no power in psychology. According to cybernetics, by virtue of women entering the field (system) of psychology, they will necessarily have an influence on the system.

It seems that modern psychology supported patriarchy by relegating women to secondary positions. Although post-modern psychology is still male dominated, the effects of women entering the field has had an influence on seeing women in perspective and by attributing respect to women. Furthermore, in the post-modern era, some women are occupying positions of status in the science.

## Women in the Global Society

Kimmel (cited in Courtenay, 2000, p.1387) stated that "[g]ender is constructed from cultural and subjective meanings that constantly shift and vary, depending on the time and place." The changes, in definitions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity, are in part due to the global society, in which people find themselves today. The mass media, especially television, which is the forerunner of the transmission of current ideologies, have bombarded women

with contradictory images of what a woman can and should be. They promote independence and self-reliance (for example, in the television series "Ally McBeal", Ally is a single, successful lawyer). However, the mass media also promote that notion that a woman is not complete without a man, especially as she gets older (Ally is always searching for a man to make her 'happy' and was distressed when she reached 30, and was still single). As stated earlier, our current reality is based upon many layers of generations. Some of these generational ideologies are easier to transform (for example, women as professionals) than others (for example, the sense that a woman needs a man in order to feel fulfilled). In this way, it seems as if the feminist (external representation of women) aspects of women's lives are easier to change than the feminine aspects, that is, how women feel about themselves.

Owen's (1992, p. 392 & 393) observation that there have been changes in "[b]ehaviour of all kinds, particularly between men and women and in permitted sexual expression," reflects the changing environment. That is, due to the influence of the global society and the sexual revolution, women (in particular) have become more comfortable with their sexuality and expression thereof (Fox-Genovese, 1996). According to Bowen's (cited in Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p. 152) hypothesis, the "dynamics of the family ... can be seen in the larger society." This hypothesis implies that a change in the family dynamics can have a societal impact. Thus, the sexual revolution, which caused changes in 'permitted sexual expression', had an impact on social values. According to Owen (1992, p. 393) these societal changes can be seen in the fact that,

> *[d]uring the last 20 years there has been a threefold increase in the number of divorces where once it was highly unlikely that a couple would split.*

This increase in the divorce rates can also be attributed to the decrease in social taboo of divorce. Thus, couples who would not have divorced due to the social taboo, would now, probably divorce. This is an indication of how social construction influences our attitudes and thus our behaviour.

## Conclusion

On the feminists level, that is, externally, women have advanced and made substantial shifts towards equality for women. That is, from the historical to today's view of women there have been great shifts towards equal representation for women in society. Today women are able to enter previously male domains and they form a large proportion of university students.

However, on a feminine level, that is, how women feel about themselves, the changes are less noticeable. Gender is a social construction embedded in a patriarchal past and present. Within the current social structures, the feminine has and will continue to be the inferior gender. That is, although the feminist movement has made great strides towards equality for women, on a constructionist level, this does not seem to have occurred. That is, women identify so deeply with the constructs that determine what they are, that it is difficult to break free from those chains. Furthermore, in order to break free, a completely new set of discourses is necessary. According to Murdock (1990, p.3), the way in which women will achieve this is by "learning how to value

themselves as women and to heal the deep wound of the feminine." A possible starting point for the new discourse could be within the mother-daughter relationship.

## Mothers and Daughters

The mother-daughter relationship is generally characterised by a close psychological and physical bond (Murdock, 1990). The mother is generally the primary care giver in the family. Unlike boys, girls are not expected to differentiate from their mothers, because they are of the same gender (Friday, 1979; Murdock, 1990). Because of their bond with daughters, mothers seem to have great influence on their daughters' development, especially in terms of their femininity.

### Socialisation of Daughters

Since mothers are their daughters first role model, it is from their mothers that daughters becomes aware of their gender role in their families and the larger community (Eisenstein, 1984; Snyder et al., 1997). This is evident in little girls wearing their mother's makeup and clothing, 'caring' for their dolls, or even in some little girls desire to help their mothers in the kitchen. Without being aware of it, they are performing gender specific behaviour and are learning what it means to be women. Furthermore, girls are encouraged to be affective, especially in their relationship with their mothers (Kabat, 1996). This emotionality encourages women to seek connection on that level and thus, they are perceived as the more emotional gender. That is, little girls are taught how to respond and connect on an emotional level.

Many women have a strong desire to be a mother. This desire is nurtured from a young age, when little girls play 'mummy' with dolls and think about the time when they will be mothers. According to Allen and Hawkins (1999, p. 204), "[m]othering may be many women's primary identity or source of satisfaction." Chodorow (cited in Eisenstein, 1984) takes this view further by arguing that the social construction of women as mother is deeply embedded within the culture and society. According to Chodorow (cited in Eisenstein, 1984, p.88) the desire for mothering is not merely the result of playing with dolls, but rather it is "strongly internalised and psychologically enforced, and [is] built developmentally into the feminine psyche structure." Through various and continuous propaganda, women learn that because they are biologically structured to have children, that they cannot be a complete woman until they utilises their God-given nature and become a mother (Ardener, 1993). Social and cultural propagation makes this desire to mother unattainable until a woman marries.

However, mothers and daughters belong to different generations and thus, could have different ideas of what femininity means or entails. This could possibly cause friction between a mother, who subscribes to the notion that women are the weaker and inferior gender, and her daughter, who believes that women and men are equal. According to Debold, Wilson and Malave (cited in Kenemore & Spira, 1996), these mothers would encourage their daughter's loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, by encouraging their daughters not to fight for what they believe, to accept secondary positions or by encouraging their daughters not to achieve too much and to be too independent and self-sufficient. Thus, these mothers support the patriarchal view of women.

It would seem as if the mother-daughter relationship serves as the foundation upon which daughters build their ideas about a women's role in a family and which fosters some women's desire to have children. However, because of the generation gap and thus possible different perceptions between mothers and their daughters, this relationship may also have the most conflicts.

## Reaction of Daughters to Mothers

Mothers are, firstly, women who have been socialised to be what and who they are. That is, mothers who seem to support patriarchy have been taught how to value this view and to value their secondary position in this ideology. Because daughters involuntarily learn from their mothers what it means to be a woman, there may be a lot of anger from daughters towards their mothers for accepting their passive status. Murdock (1990, p. 14) regards the devaluation of women as beginning with the devaluation of mother. This is because a "mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman" (Rich, 1986, p. 243). This is especially common during the daughter's adolescence (Kenemore & Spira, 1996), a time when she becomes alert to gender issues. This disappointment in a mother's lack of assertiveness (Carr, 1998) results in the daughter wanting to separate from her mother (Kenemore & Spira, 1996) and she may reject anything that a mother holds valuable. That is, she refuses to be anything like her mother and rejects what her mother may regard as feminine. Some daughters may also desire to cut themselves totally from their mothers by rejecting their similarity, that is, they reject their femininity (Murdock,1990).

What may appear as a drastic severing of the mother-daughter bond may be utilised for both the mother's and daughter's development.

## Need for Psychological Separation

In order for a woman to find her own definitions of femininity, it is important for a daughter to psychologically separate from her mother (Murdock, 1990). This may, or may not, include physical separation (Murdock, 1990). Many daughters who are physically separated from their mothers are still psychologically dependant on them. This may be indicated by a daughter's need to call or contact her mother regularly and to ask her mother's advice before any decision can be made. This psychological separation is important for three reasons.

- Firstly, it is necessary for the daughter to see her mother in perspective (Friday, 1979). That is, to look at the cultural and social circumstances of her mother's life. This is important, because until she does that, a daughter will tend to blame her mother for all of the evils that befalls the feminine (Murdock, 1990). That is, she may feel that her mother did not teach her how to stand up to men, instead, only taught her to be submissive, and so on (Carr, 1998).
- Secondly, the separation is necessary for the mother to see her daughter as a woman and not as a child (Kenemore & Spira, 1996; Murdock, 1990). This is important because if they are to work on a redefinition, they should be able to do it as two adults, without blame and/or guilt.
- Thirdly, the daughter needs to separate from her mother in order to differentiate from her. That is, she needs to know where her mother ends

and she begins. This refers to everything in her life, including her feelings, attitudes and behaviour (Friday, 1979; Murdock, 1990).

## Rejection of Femininity

The rejection of femininity by women, involves the rejection of an essential part of their being. That is, when women reject their femininity, they are rejecting the core of who they are. For some women, this rejection is necessary in order for them to psychologically separate from their mothers and for them to be able to redefine their femininity. A woman can reject her femininity at any stage of her life. That is, some women reject their femininity when they are young whereas other women reject their femininity as young adults and some reject it after marriage and/or children. Furthermore, the rejection can be a slow and insidious process or it can happen spontaneously.

### Separating from Mother

One way, in which women decline their femininity, is by severing the mother-daughter bond (Murdock, 1990). The separation from the mother occurs in various forms and is dependant on the degree to which the mother represents the negative definitions of femininity (Murdock, 1990). Some women deny not only their physical mothers, but their femininity as well. That is, they possibly find it difficult to separate from their mothers because they are of the same gender (Friday, 1979; Murdock, 1990). And, in order to separate, the daughters choose the masculine mode and hence, are different from their mothers (Murdock, 1990). In this way, they are free from the 'evils' of femininity. This severing of the mother-daughter bond may or may not occur consciously or

voluntarily. That is, a daughter may not consciously decide to reject her mother or she may be forced to do so due to circumstances – divorce, death, and so on.

From a constructionist perspective, a mother's reality regarding the role of women is embedded within the historical and cultural values of the **community** in which she grew up and is currently living in. The extent to which a daughter is able to reject her mother's reality, depends on the degree of support that the daughter receives for the rejection (Carr, 1998) and on the availability of alternatives. That is, if the social environment allows the daughter to reject her femininity, then she is more likely to do so, as in the case of tomboys. However, if she lives in a conservative community that believes that set gender codes can and should not be transgressed, then, it is unlikely that she will be able to experiment with alternative mannerisms. Furthermore, in this community, her transgressions would be corrected almost immediately. Alternative behaviour to what a daughter witnesses in her mother and other females is essential if the daughter is to adopt a different definition of her sexuality. That is, if all that she knows is what is available, then she does not know that alternative forms of behaviour are possible.

## Tomboys

A common way in which females deny their femininity in favour of masculinity is by being tomboys. The term tomboy generally refers to young girls or adolescent females who seem to have more masculine than feminine mannerisms. For the most part, the community accepts tomboys, as it is seen as a transitional phase. That is, it is something that a girl will outgrow as she gets older.

In a study by Carr (1998) on tomboys, she found that the most common answer as to why girls rejected their femininity in favour of masculinity was that the latter was more fun and that their mothers were not role models that they wanted to emulate. Some participants claimed to choose masculinity in order to gain their father's attention or to avoid his wrath, while others choose the masculine as a result of abuse because they perceive the masculine to be safer. Thus, the rejection of the feminine in favour of the masculine seems to have two essential elements.

1. That the participants have a negative view of the feminine and did not regard their mothers as role models that they wanted to emulate.
2. The participants have a positive image of the masculine and their fathers were generally seen as positive role models.

Tomboys' presented identities are masculine because they reject the feminine as boring and/or restrictive; because they see their mothers as weak in comparison to their fathers; or as protection from abuse; or they resent "having to care for, or protect, their mothers," (Carr, 1998, p.538). Because of the rejection of their femininity, and thus their mothers, these young girls find that they are closer to their fathers and other male role models and are thus referred to as "father's daughter" (Murdock, 1990, p. 29).

However, as they get older, many tomboys simply adopt a more feminine mannerism – either, out of choice or due to social pressure. Hemmer and Kleiber (cited in Carr, 1998, p. 530) maintain that "tomboys merely adopt a more feminine performance in the face of these pressures, retaining many of

their tomboy skills and traits." That is, some tomboys reduce the outer expression of their 'masculinity' but continue to hold on to their beliefs and attitudes of the tomboy.

## Male-identified Females

The term tomboy generally refers to young girls or females in their adolescent years. However, 'older tomboys' are often seen as male-identified women. This refers to women who seem to have adopted male standards of achievements (Murdock, 1990). Thus, as a tomboy gets older, she could become a male-identified woman.

According to Murdock (1990), this occur because some daughters, when grown up, may still want to please their fathers and thus accept the male criteria for success. This may be seen in the intense desire by some women to achieve outer success, in the form of degrees, status, positions of power and so forth (Murdock, 1990). According to Murdock (1990, p.6) these achievements "validates their intellect, sense of purpose, and ambition and generate a sense of security, direction, and success". These women generally find their reward in "an advanced degree, a corporate title, money [and] authority" (Murdock, 1990, p. 6).

## Balancing Career and Motherhood

Many women are torn between the desire to have children and the desire to have a career. The above subscription to the 'male-model of success' in women is evident in that many 'career-orientated' women choose not to be mothers. That is, they must choose between being a professional or a mother (Murdock, 1990),

and some chose the former because of the status and value that society attributes to the 'working' women. According to Fox-Genovese (1996, p.92), some women enjoy the freedoms and 'liberation' of having a career so much that they do "not want children if they are going to limit" their professional lives.

Since society does not attribute status to motherhood (Maxwell, 1994), those working women who leave work to be stay-home mothers, find that their 'friends' from work no longer visit or have time for them (Fox-Genovese, 1996). Thus, not only are mothers who choose to be at home 'rejected' by society (in that stay-home mothers are not attributed much status), but by their fellow females as well. Thus communicating that being a stay-home mother is not an 'acceptable' choice (Heffner, 1980).

The idea that women have to choose between being mothers or professionals, communicates to women that they cannot be both successful mothers and lucrative professionals. However, on some level, they are expected to be both. This puts them in a double-bind in that they are expected to be mothers as well as professionals, but are told that they cannot do both and still be considered as 'good mothers' (Fox-Genovese, 1996; Murdock, 1990). This double standard in personal and professional lives is illustrated by the notion that men are regarded as 'good' fathers as well as professionals, but women cannot successfully be both.

## Matrophobia

Another reason why some women may pursue male-orientated goals and refuse to have children could be due to matrophobia. Matrophobia is a term coined by

Lynn Sukenick (Rich, 1986). It refers to "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood, but of *becoming one's mother,"* (Rich, 1986, p. 235). According to Rich (1986, p.236):

> *Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victims in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr.*

The power of matrophobia, is that the daughter identifies so closely with her mother that she feels the need to totally reject her mother so as not to 'fall in the same trap.' However, these daughters imagine that if they let their guard down, they will inevitably become their mother (Rich, 1986). Thus, the way in which a daughter 'protects' herself from becoming her mother depends on her type of matrophobia. Once again, a daughter may not consciously be aware that her choices for not having children or marrying is based on her 'fear of becoming her mother.'

Two types of Matrophobia

According to the researcher, two primary forms of matrophobia exist. Each based on a 'function' or role attributed to women. The first form (A) is when some women have an intense desire not to have children or even to feel that they are capable of having children. It is a total blocking of all maternal feelings. These women are happy to marry a man, but not to become a mother. That is, they are comfortable with the title of wife, not mother. According to

Chasseguet-Smirgel (1994), these women fear that by having a child, they would fall into the patriarchal trap. A typical example would be a career-orientated woman who possibly feels that her life is too full to accommodate the needs of a child. Furthermore, some couples choose to be childless because they feel that children would detract them "from the marital relationship by interfering in the leisure time and intimacy of couples," (Hird & Abshoff, 2000, p.352).

The second type of matrophobia (B) is when some women refuse to marry (Fox-Genovese, 1996), in fear that they will be the type of wives that their mothers were. However, these women have a strong maternal yearning and a desire for children. That is, these women are comfortable with the title of mother but not of wife. According to Fox-Genovese (1996), the number of single mothers has dramatically increased in the past decade, but the majority of these are unintentional, that is, due to divorce or death of a spouse and so on. Furthermore, Fox-Genovese (1996) feels that since premarital sex is no longer seen as a major moral issue, it is possible for women who desire to be mothers to have children outside of wedlock. However, many women still hold on to the fairy tale idea of a family that includes a husband. That is, for these women, their difficulty lies in that before they can become mothers (in the traditional sense), they have to marry and to marry would mean that they have to become or sacrifice their lives to living the type of life that their mothers lived. An example of this type of matrophobia is seen in an unmarried young woman who chooses a career that involves working with children or being in a nurturing role.

Therefore, each type regards the one label as a positive experience and to be fulfilling and the other label as negative and restrictive. Thus, for A, marriage is positive and mothering is negative; and for B, the opposite is true.

## Conclusion

According to this view, it seems as if women have two inter-related reasons for rejecting their femininity. The first is their dissatisfaction with their image of their mothers and thus, not wanting to emulate them. Related to the rejection of their mothers is the emphasis on the positive aspects of masculinity and regarding their fathers in a more positive light than their mothers. Thus, these women adopt the masculine standards of success and self-worth. A further reason for the rejection of mothers by their daughters could be the daughters' matrophobia. These daughters believe that if they are not constantly vigilant, then they will repeat what they believe to be their mothers' failures. Furthermore, social and cultural expectations make it difficult for a career woman to feel that she is a good mother.

## Reclaiming Femininity

Like the rejection, the reclaiming can be a process or it can occur spontaneously; and it can be unconscious and involuntary or conscious and voluntary. Some women who have found success, according to the male model, may find that the titles, money and other signs of success do not fulfill them. According to Murdock (1990), these women find that something deep inside of them is lacking. Murdock (1990, p. 7) regards this as the loss of a woman's "deep relationship to her own feminine nature." That is, since these women

have rejected their femininity, they have rejected an essential core of their being. In this way, it is difficult for these women to feel complete or whole, because they are constantly ignoring an essential part of themselves. Murdock (1990, p.3) asserts that by re-claiming their femininity, women will once again be "fully integrated, balanced, and whole human beings." This view of wholeness is supported by Rich (1986).

Since some male-identified women inevitable adopt a masculine view of femininity, it may be difficult for them to feel secure and confident 'in their skins.' That is, since the masculine views the feminine as the 'second gender' or the 'inferior gender', these women may have a negative view of the feminine. However, these women may also be acutely aware of the fact that they are biologically female. Therefore, their negative attitude of the feminine results in them having a negative opinion of themselves, because of their sex or biological makeup. Thus, it is their perception of the feminine that affects how they view themselves. Therefore, no matter what they achieve, they may always feel that they are less-than (Murdock, 1990), because they can never be free from the construct of their gender. Therefore, in order to feel that they are worthy, women need to **redefine** what **femininity** means to them and to possibly see it in a more positive light.

For a woman who has sacrificed her femininity for most of her life, reclaiming it may be difficult. This is because for a long time in her life, she has seen the feminine from a masculine perspective, and now to accept that she is feminine could be difficult. However, she may feel the need to **redefine femininity** for herself in order to be comfortable with being feminine. Furthermore, in the process of redefining herself, a woman may realise the positive connotations of

femininity, which are, inter alia, "playful, sensuous, passionate, nurturing, intuitive, and creative (Murdock, 1990, p. 23). Also, this 'new' definition allows her to connect with herself and with others on a more personal and intimate level (Murdock, 1990).

Klieber (cited in Carr, 1998, p. 530), maintain that girls, who were **tomboys** and who retained "many of their tomboy skills and traits" may find these skills and traits helpful in reclaiming their femininity. Tomboys generally learn to be independent, self-sufficient, assertive and competitive. Women who were tomboys, may use their independence and assertiveness to help them to redefine and validate their femininity in a more positive light. For example, they may realise that although they are independent, this does not mean that they cannot ask for help or support. In this way, women can change the negative notion of feminine dependence into a positive attitude of allowing others to assist them without loosing their independence.

The reclaiming of the feminine, for some, happens coincidentally when they have children. However, Woodman (1993) asserts that the process of **becoming a mother** can only be linked to reclaiming femininity, if it is done consciously. This means that the mother should give of herself to her child, without becoming solely identified by her role as mother. Woodman (1993, p. 82) believes that "[a]n unconscious mother finds her whole identity in mothering". Thus, when the unconscious mother is forced to stop mothering, possibly when her children leave home, she may feel that she has no purpose.

When a daughter becomes a **wife and/or a mother**, her relationship with her mother possibly changes. She may now becomes aware of what it means to be a

wife and/mother and this could encourage closer bonds with her own mother. She possibly will also see her mother in perspective and this frees her from the anger directed at her mother for accepting her passive role (Rich, 1986).

Alternatively, Rich (1986) proposes that the way forward for women is to **reclaim their bodies**. Throughout patriarchal history, women have separated emotionally from their bodies. That is, their bodies have been a reason for their inferior status, and their natural functions have been turned against them. Women's obsession with their outer bodies is evident in some women's passion for clothing, cosmetics, dieting and the like (Fox-Genovese, 1996). By joining the emotional and the body, it is hoped that women can once again return to how they felt about herself in the pre-patriarchal times, a time when they honoured their bodies and were proud of their status as wo(w)men.

An important part of this reclaiming process, according to Murdock (1990), is for women to listen to their inner voice. That is, for women to connect with their inner selves, they need to listen to and acknowledge their inner femininity. According to Murdock (1990), the reclaiming of the femininity involves women taking time for herself, away from pursuits of outer success, and looking at their motivation for the need for outer recognitions of success. This **'time-out'** may be involuntarily forced upon her by illness or by the loss of her job. Some women consciously choose some time-out. The ways in which women create this conscious time-out, is dependant on their personalities. For some, it may include some quiet time in nature, for others, through meditation and so on (Murdock, 1990).

In order for a woman to reclaim her femininity, and thereby redefine what feminine means, she needs **positive female role models** and for some, they need to reconnect with the divine Mother or **Goddess worship** (Murdock, 1990). That is, since this reclaiming process may be difficult, a woman might need support and encouragement from other women who value their femininity. She can interact with these women directly or indirectly, via the mass media or the Internet. The process of reclaiming the Goddess, allows women to reconnect with their power, which they had during matriarchal times. That is, for women to reclaim their femininity, they can use the same agencies that gave them the negative image, but this time in the opposite direction.

Thus, we see that the reclaiming process is as varied as the rejection of the femininity. For various reasons, some women may want to reclaim their femininity, and for just as many reasons, some women may not want to reclaim their femininity. An important aspect of the reclaiming process is re-connecting with oneself and listening to one's inner voice and one's body.

## Conclusion

The fact that people are living in a patriarchal society can be discerned from the evidence, as presented above. This patriarchal history has contributed to women's perception of themselves as inferior members of society. The effects of patriarchy are visible today in, for example, the language double standards (that is, referring to a sexually active man as a stud and a sexually active woman as a whore) that condemn women while praising men for the same action. Furthermore, the above indicates that on a feminist level, there have been great

strides towards equality for women, but on a constructionist (feminine) level, not much has changed for women.

One cannot but admire the feminists for how much they have achieved in getting recognition for women in the political and social spheres. However, it seems as if some women are still not comfortable with their status as women. Rather than an external representation, it seems that theses women are plagued by the internal, negative view of the feminine. For various reasons, it appears that some women reject their femininity, in favour of the masculine. However, some of these women either consciously or unconsciously reclaim their femininity. Needless to say, all women do not go through this cycle of rejection and reclaiming. Some women have never rejected their femininity, that is, they have always been comfortable in their skin as women, while others are comfortable with their rejection of their femininity.

However, this research focuses on those women who have given up their femininity in favour of masculinity and who have either reclaimed their femininity or are in the process of doing so.

CHAPTER 4

# RESEARCH DESIGN

## Introduction

In this chapter, the methodology of this study will be outlined. Firstly, the researcher will discuss the two basic research paradigms and then will justify why a qualitative research design was selected. Then, the characteristics of qualitative research designs and how these relate to the proposed study will be explained. Thereafter the researcher will discuss the theoretical underpinning of the research, the researcher's role, sampling and selection, data collection, and how the data will be analysed, using hermeneutics.

## Research Paradigms

Durrheim (1999, p. 29) describes a research design as "a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between research questions and the execution or implementation of the research". There are two basic research paradigms, namely qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. Quantitative and qualitative research paradigms usually make different assumptions about the nature of reality and thus have different ideas of how research should be conducted. Since, qualitative and quantitative investigators have different epistemologies (perceptions of the nature of reality), it would follow that they would utilise different methods to find the answers or clarifications that led to the initiation of the research process. These two basic types of research designs or paradigms can be seen as representing two ends of a continuum. Because

qualitative and quantitative research occurs along a continuum, it may be possible to utilise both methodologies in the same study. That is, it is possible to utilise some qualitative and some quantitative aspects in a research. However, most researchers choose one or the other.

## Qualitative Research Paradigm

Quantitative research refers to approaches that fit best with the Cartesian-Newtonian principles or the modernistic approach to science. According to Durrheim (1999, p. 73), quantitative research entails following rules for "assigning numbers to objects in such a way as to represent quantities of attributes." Thus, quantitative research has strict rules for how research should be conducted and numbers are assigned to the phenomenon being investigated "to represent how much the object [phenomenon] has of a particular attribute" (Durrheim 1999, p. 73).

Since the researcher in this study aims to explore the lived experiences of women who have rejected and then reclaimed their femininity, it would be evident that a quantitative research design would not be suitable for this study. Therefore, the researcher has selected a qualitative research design.

According to Moon, Dillon and Sprenkle (1990, p.358), qualitative researchers are interested in understanding "the meaning of naturally occurring complex events, actions and interactions in context, from the point of view of the participants involved." This view of understanding people in context and regarding each person as having his or her own reality is consistent with the

post-modern and social constructionist principles of the whole and of multiple realties (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). Durrheim (1999, p. 42) asserts that,

> *[q]ualitative methods allow the researcher to study issues in depth, openness and detail as they identify and attempt to understand the categories of information that emerge from the data.*

In qualitative research, 'depth, openness and detail' are seen as essential components of the data gathering and analysis processes. Therefore, unlike in quantitative research, the information cannot be quantified or reduced to numbers. Instead, the data is expanded upon and the researcher provides 'thick' descriptions or multiple layered interpretations of the information received from the participants. In this way, the researcher is seen as an integral part of the research and can never be neutral or objective, like in quantitative research where the researcher is expected to be an objective, neutral observer (Becvar & Becvar, 1996).

Thus, it can be seem that most qualitative research designs would fall into the category of post-modernism, which was discussed in Chapter 2. Some of the guiding principles in post-modernist research are that the investigator is not an objective, neutral observer, but rather he or she influences and is influenced by the research; the participants are seen in totality and in context; and the conclusions reached are based on a co-created reality between the investigator and the participants. In this way, the participants may be seen as co-researchers, rather than subjects. The researcher also acknowledges that the interpretations

reached in a study are the result of the researcher's interactions with the participants, in a particular historically situated context.

In sum, qualitative and quantitative research designs have different epistemologies and different methodologies. According to Goetz and LaCompte (cited in Moon et al. 1990, p. 358) qualitative research can be described as closer to the "constructive, general, inductive, subjective poles" whereas quantitative research is nearer to the opposite poles of "enumerative", "verification", "deductive" and "objective."

## Characteristics of a Qualitative Research Design

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research designs do not have a fixed methodology. Therefore, to account for researcher subjectivity and design fluency, there must be criteria that the study fulfills in order to be regarded as a good and valid qualitative research. Moon et al. (1990, p. 359-362), specify characteristics that a qualitative research should have. They are the following:

1. Qualitative research is either explicitly or implicitly informed by **theory.** The specific theoretical approach determines the researcher's epistemology, that is, how he or she views the world or the phenomenon under investigation. This needs to be made overt so that readers of the study may understand how the researcher reached his or her conclusions.

2. Before beginning a research project, a researcher should clearly and explicitly state the **purpose** of the research. Furthermore, qualitative research **questions** are generally open-ended and exploratory. Stiles

(1993, p.607) asserts that the investigator should ask 'what' rather than 'why' questions. The former "questions elicit material of which clients have direct knowledge," and it "calls forth stories," while the latter generates theories. Thus, 'what' questions are more appropriate to gain knowledge of lived experiences and are more suitable for telling stories.

3. In qualitative research, the **participants' and researcher's roles** are more active and participatory than in quantitative research. That is, in some instances, participants are seen as co-researchers and collaborators. Since the researcher is the primary data collection instrument, it is important for him or her to clarify his or her role and to make his or her biases known in reporting the research.

4. According to Durrheim (1999, p. 44), **sampling** "involves decisions about which people, setting, event, behaviour and/or social process to observe." There are various types of sampling. Since qualitative analysis is concerned with detail and in-depth analysis, qualitative researchers prefer small samples that fit with the research aims.

**Selection** refers to the means by which the researcher delineates unit(s) of analysis precisely, using criteria based on specific considerations, and then selects participants and/or phenomena for study that meet those criteria. According to Goetz and LeCompte (cited in Moon et al. 1990), there are various types of selection that a researcher may use, including convenience selection, comprehensive selection, quota selection, extreme-case selection, typical-case selection, unique-case selection, and reputational-case selection.

5. **Data collection** techniques include both participants' and researchers' observations, interviewing and document analysis, which can be in the form of field notes, videotapes or audiotapes. Thus, data is usually visual and/or verbal rather than statistical.

6. **Data analysis.** Qualitative data can be analysed in various ways, with the aim of discerning patterns. In some cases, elaborate coding systems are used, which can be both time and labour intensive. Patterns emerge from, rather than being imposed on the data or information that the researcher received. Since analysis involves a great deal of interaction between the researcher and the information, the researcher needs to have first hand knowledge of the information.

7. **Results** "are usually in the form of assertions, discovered theories, or taxonomies (categorical systems)" (Rapmund, 1996, p. 104).

8. The goal of **reporting** is "to re-create the reality" that was studied (Rapmund, 1996, p.104).

9. **Reliability and validity** are conceptualized differently in qualitative research to how they are conceptualized in quantitative research. According to Durrheim (1999, p. 88), qualitative research conceptualizes the term reliability as the "dependability of a measurement instrument, that is, the extent to which the instrument yields the same results on repeated trials;" and validity as the "degree to which the researcher can produce observations that are believable for her or himself, the subjects

being studied and the eventual reader of the study" (p. 46). Reliability and validity, as used in qualitative research, are concerned with trustworthiness and credibility, which can be assessed in terms of a number of specific strategies. According to Stiles (1993, p. 601), reliability "refers to the trustworthiness of observations or data" and "validity refers to the trustworthiness of interpretations or conclusions.



Stiles (1993, pp. 602-607) refers to the following strategies with regard to **reliability**:

- "Disclosure of orientation" refers to the researcher's specific orientation including expectations for the study, preconceptions, values or theoretical allegiance.

- "Explication of social and cultural context" refers to the investigation's context, that is, the social and cultural context of the researcher, participants and of the research setting.

- "Description of internal processes on investigation" refers to the investigator's internal processes or impact of the research on the researcher. According to Guba and Lincoln (cited in Stiles, 1993, p. 604), "[q]ualitative investigators often address topics that are personally significant and thus involve them in self-examination, significant personal learning, and change."

- "Engagement with the material" refers to the researcher's relationship with the participants in the study as well as with the material. The researcher needs to establish a relationship of trust whereby he or she seeks to understand the world from the perspective of the participants.

- "Iteration: Cycling between interpretation and observation" which refers to the "dialogue" between theories or interpretations and the participants or text.

- "Grounding of interpretation" which refers to the linking of interpretations to the content and context, for example, themes are linked with examples from the interview text.

- "Ask 'what' not 'why" which grounds experiences in a context and is more suitable for telling stories.

According to Stiles (1993, pp.608-613) **validity** involves the following strategies:

- "Triangulation" refers to information from multiple data sources, multiple data collection and analysis methods, and/or multiple investigators (Moon et. al, 1990; Stiles, 1993). Investigator triangulation, as mentioned in Kelly (1999, p. 430), refers to using more than one researcher or evaluators to counter "researcher effects (i.e. the effects of the researcher on the research context)."

- "Coherence" refers to the quality of fit of the interpretation. Stiles (p.608) regards coherence as the apparent quality of the interpretation itself and it includes internal consistency, comprehensiveness of the elements to be interpreted and the relations between elements, and usefulness in encompassing new elements as they come into view.

- "Uncovering; self-evidence" refers to reaching conclusions that answer the research question or reason for the research or as Potter and Wetherall (cited in Stiles, 1993) call it, "fruitfulness" of the research.

- "Testimonial validity" refers to the validity obtained from the participants themselves. This refers to whether the researcher has understood the participants and has represented them 'as they are.'

- "Catalytic validity" refers to the degree to which the research process makes sense to the participants and leads to their growth or change or according to Stiles (p.611) "the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants."

- "Reflexive validity" refers to the way in which the researcher's way of thinking or the researcher's forestructure is changed by the data.

## Justification for Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative research paradigm fits with the social constructionist epistemological framework of this study.

Social constructionists assert that reality is co-created in a social context (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). In this study, the 'reality' of the participants' experience will be co-created in the context of them telling their stories to the researcher. Thereafter, the participants' stories will be re-co-created when the researcher, together with input from the participants, will re-tell their stories according to her perspective or how she understood their experiences.

This research focuses on exploring the processes involved in which some women reject and then reclaim their femininity. Participants will tell their stories to the researcher in the form of a conversation because from a social constructionist perspective, "perception can only evolve within a cradle of communication" (Hoffman 1993, p. 89). Since Berger and Luckmann (cited in Liebrucks, 2001, p. 365) assert that "reality is created by social interactions," the researcher will focus on the participants' reality as experienced by them in their social environments. In this way, the researcher aims to understand the participants' lived experience from **their** perspective, which can only be achieved by utilizing a qualitative research methodology.

## Reliability with reference to this study

Reliability will be achieved by adhering to the strategies as stated by Stiles (1993, pp. 602-607). These are the following:

- The researcher will "Disclose her orientation."
- The "explication of social and cultural context" of the investigation will become evident from the stories.
- With regard to the "description of internal processes of investigation," the researcher will mention how the investigation will affect her. In addition, the researcher will also discuss any difficulties that she might encounter as well as the themes that could enrich and extend her experience of the processes involved in rejecting and reclaiming femininity by women.
- With regard to "engagement with the material," the researcher will establish a close relationship with the participants, and will engage closely with the material. Following some of the techniques as mentioned by Stiles (1993, p. 604-5), the researcher will read and reread transcripts, underline promising ideas, extract key passages, move back and forth between excerpts and unabridged versions.
- With regard to "Iteration", the researcher will engage in a "dialogue" with the text, which includes audiotapes and transcripts. She will listen, read, conceptualize, re-read, re-conceptualize, and her observations will change and evolve in the process.
- "Grounding of interpretations" will be achieved by the researcher linking interpretations to excerpts from the original text and the context in which they occurred.
- The researcher will "ask 'what,' not 'why" questions in an attempt to gain direct knowledge from the participants, and which will lead to them telling stories, rather than theorizing.

Validity with reference to this study

In this study, validity will be achieved through triangulation from multiple voices or perspectives. Coherent interpretation, which fits with the experiences of the participants and their worlds, will be offered. It is hoped that this research will be 'fruitful' in the sense of enriching and extending the understanding of readers of this research, and help them to make sense of the subject. Testimonial validity will be obtained by the researcher presenting the participants' with her 'analysis' of their stories for comments and suggestions, which will be incorporated into their stories. Catalytic validity will be obtained from participants and it is hoped that their lives will be affected by their involvement in the research process. Finally, reflective validity will be obtained because the researcher's interpretations will keep changing as the researcher engages in the hermeneutic process.

## Theoretical Perspective of this Study

### Social Constructionism

This research is embedded in the social constructionist position, which was discussed in detail in Chapter 2. The basic assertion, as applicable to this study, is that people live in a world created by their personal experience and the social environment. Thus, each person creates and lives in his or her own reality. According to Gergen (1985, p. 266),

> *Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come*

*to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live.*

Thus, from a social constructionist perspective, it would be evident that women incorporate their cultural, societal and historical definitions of what it means to be a woman into their personal definitions of womanhood. In this study, the researcher is interested in 'explicating the processes' by which the participants 'come to describe [and] explain' their reality as women, who felt the need to sacrifice their femininity and then later, to reclaim it.

Social constructionism regards reality as being created by language. Therefore, the language that the participants in this study use to describe themselves is embedded in their socio-historical context and informs their sense of womanhood. Subjugating Grand Narratives are social or cultural "discourses that are formed by, and in turn, influence people and that take on normative views against which people measure themselves" (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996, p. 80). The Grand Narratives that the researcher is interested in are those that subjugate women and thus create the reality that women are 'less-than.'

Therefore, this study focuses on the language, societal circumstances and the implicit Grand narratives that may have, at some time in the participants' lives, made them feel that the masculine was better. It is through language or conversations, that the researcher is able to understand 'reality' from the participant's perspective, and through discussing their lived experiences, the participants are also able to make sense of their experiences. Thus, it is only through discourses that people are able to create and understand their reality.

Since language creates reality and the subjugating Grand Narratives are social constructions, it is hoped that through the discourses about the participants' gender constructions, the researcher is able to share their meanings and for possible alternative definitions to emerge in the process of the discourses. In other words, since reality is created by language, it can be deconstructed through the same process, that is, linguistically (Hoffman, 1990). Through the deconstruction of their experience, the participants may be presented with other possible ways of constructing meanings around their experiences, meanings that may have been pushed aside when the current meanings became dominant (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). This process of re-creating reality will necessarily involve the researcher and the participants, because reality is co-created in a context. Although the possibility for change is great, the direction or outcome of the change is unpredictable.

## Some Important Ideas that Informed the Researcher's Thinking

**Self as socially created:** As explained in Chapter 2, social constructionists do not regard the self as an isolate, but rather a person's identity is formed in relationships with others. The implication of this idea for the study is that the researcher would look at the interactions between the participants and their significant others for possible clues about what perturbed the participants to reject and reclaim their femininity. In this way, their rejection and reclaiming of their femininity is not solely an individual act, but rather occurs in relationships with others, especially significant others.

**Systemic organisation:** Since the individual can never be seen as an isolate, he or she is always part of a system. The family can be seen as the primary system to which a person belongs. This system is always part of a larger system, which is part of still larger systems, and so on (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). Each of the systems to which a person belongs has its own beliefs and ideologies. For this study, the participants' family's gender roles would be informed by the participants' personal views as well as their societal and cultural beliefs. Thus, the researcher cannot separate culture or society from the individual, as these have an influence on the participants.

**Change and Stability:** According to cybernetics, change and stability are seen as "complementary sides of a systemic coin" (Keeney, 1982, p.159). This means that for people to change, they need stability and vice versa. According to this idea, the changes in the participants, of this study, would have occurred with some sense of stability. That is, to facilitate the participants' change, they needed stability in some aspects of their lives.

**Structural Determinism:** The changes that a system can undergo, without loss of identity is determined by the structure of the system (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). This means that although a system can be perturbed, the perturbation does not determine how the system will change. Thus, for this study, it is the participants, as a system, as well as their social settings that will determine the possible influence that their participation in this study will have on the various systems.

## Role of the Researcher

From a constructionist perspective, the researcher cannot be a neutral observer. That is, by virtue of choosing a topic, the researcher draws a distinction between the phenomenon under investigation and all other phenomena (Keeney, 1982). In this way, the researcher has already asserted his or her biases in choosing or delineating the area of study. Furthermore, the researcher enters the study with a theoretical framework that implicitly or explicitly determines how he or she views the phenomenon under investigation (Keeney & Morris, 1985). According to Becvar and Becvar (1996), theory decides what the researcher will see and the phenomenon takes on the characteristics of the researcher. Thus, what the researcher sees or reports, says more about the researcher than the participants (Keeney & Morris, 1985).

Like the researcher, the participants are also embedded in a particular world-view. That is, they view the world and their experiences from a particular perspective. In research, the investigator attempts to looks at the world through the participants' glasses, and thus has to bracket some of his or her assumptions. This requires the investigator and participants to form a close relationship and to engage with each other. In this way, the researcher and the participants necessarily influence and affect each other's definitions of reality. Since the researcher is interested in capturing the participant's reality, he or she needs to limit his or her reality from affecting the research process, especially in the early data gathering stages. In order for the researcher to be able to 'capture' or verify if he or she has remained 'true' to the participants' story, it is important to include them, to some extent, in the research process. That is, the participants are regarded as co-researchers.

In keeping with the integrity and honesty with which researchers should conduct their research, researchers should clearly define the purpose of the research, before beginning the research. In this study, the researcher informed the participants that she was conducting a study into the processes that led to some women rejecting their femininity and then reclaiming it at a later stage. She informed the participants that although studies have been done on aspects of women rejecting their femininity, for example, studies on tomboys, the implication of this rejection of their femininity and the subsequent desire by some women to reclaim their femininity have not been clearly defined. The participants were told of the researcher's belief that only women, who have or are going through the reclaiming process, could give a lived experience of the processes involved rather than a theoretical viewpoint. Since this reclaiming of a woman's femininity is not generally given outer recognition (Murdock, 1990), by participating in this study, participants will possibly be able to legitimize their experiences and this could be a public proclamation of their acceptance of their femininity. The researcher also told the participants that their stories could add to the knowledge and understanding of women, especially with regard to their self-concepts and they could assist other women in reclaiming their femininity.

The role of the researcher in this study was clearly defined as a researcher interested in women's experiences of their femininity and the circumstances that led them to reject and subsequently reclaim their femininity. The participants were told of the researcher's interest in this journey and thus her reason for initiating this research.

## A Personal Statement

The researcher wishes to make her interest in this topic explicit, and thus account for her personal involvement in this topic. The researcher's journey will appear in the appendix, but she will present a short justification for her personal interest in this topic here.

The researcher feels that at a young age, she sacrificed her femininity in favour of masculinity. As a result, she has been a tomboy for most of her life. However, during the past few years, the researcher felt uncomfortable in this role and desired to change. But, she was not sure what change meant or how to go about changing. Through various processes, spanning the last four years, she has managed to reclaim some aspects of her lost femininity. She does not feel that she has fully reclaimed her femininity or that she will ever complete the journey, as she will continue to change and incorporate new perspectives in her life.

Thus, this study was born out of the researcher's desire to find other women who have or are going through this process. This study was initiated with an initial desire to learn how other women have reclaimed their femininity, but has evolved into an understanding of the various ways in which this can be achieved as well as legitimizing the researcher's claim on her lost femininity. The researcher also feels that this study would assist her in her definitions of femininity and in understanding her situation better, and thus, is part of her journey to reclaiming her femininity.

## Sampling and Selection

As already stated, there are many types of sampling that a researcher could use. In this study, criterion-based sampling was used to select a small group of participants. The criteria that the researcher was looking for in her participants were the following:

- Participants had to be female.
- At some stage in their lives, they needed to have rejected their femininity.
- With the above rejection, they needed to have adopted masculine principles.
- Participants needed to have either completely reclaimed their femininity or be in the process of reclaiming their femininity.
- Participants had to be willing and able to articulate their experiences.

The specific selection method used in this research is convenience selection. That is, once the researcher had identified the criteria, she asked people whom she knew if they knew of anyone who fulfilled these criteria.

Three of the researcher's friends fulfilled the criteria for selection. Besides the above criteria, the participants were conscious of their journey and were willing to explore possible alternatives to their meanings of femininity. Each participant had given her verbal and written permission to be part of the research. They each signed a consent form. Their participation is based on the assurance that the information will be used strictly for research purposes.

Two of the participants (Sapna and Marna) are married. Sapna has three children. Marna and her husband have opted not to have children. The third participant, Alta, is unmarried and has no children.

## Data Collection

Once the researcher has obtained written permission from the participants, the data collection phase begins. Personal data such as name, age, address, marital status, birth position in family of origin, number of brothers or sisters that the participants have, will be filled in on a form at the beginning of the first interview.

The method in which data will be collected is through interviews, which will be recorded on audiocassettes. The interviews will be unstructured and the process will be more of a discourse between the researcher and the participants, than a strict, formal interview. The researcher will ask mostly open-ended and exploratory questions (Moon et al., 1990), which will allow the participants "to give expression to...[their] feelings and experiences" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 153). That is, mostly 'what' rather than 'why' questions will be asked (Stiles, 1993). The researcher will allow the participants to talk with minimal interruptions, but this does not mean that participants speak about whatever they want to. That is, the interview will focus on the participants' relationship with their femininity. These questions and the informal manner in which the interview will be conducted should make the participants feel comfortable enough to discuss potentially sensitive issues.

Since the researcher and participants knew each other prior to the interviews, they already had a relationship. However, their interview relationship will have to be developed. That is, during the interviews, the participants will be seen primarily as co-researchers and not friends. This distinction is necessary for the researcher, in that during the interview, she is the interviewer and therefore, will not interrupt the interview process through self-disclosure, as she might have done if this were general conversation with her friends.

## Interview Method

The interviews will be flexible with regard to length and setting. No limits will be set as to the number and length of the interviews. Once the interviews begin, it will be up to the researcher and each participant to co-decide if another interview session will be needed or not. The interviews will be conducted at the participant's home, when there will be no one else at home or at a time when there will be minimal interference. This is deemed necessary to ensure that the interview process will be uninterrupted, or will have minimal interruptions, and to allow participants to feel comfortable to discuss potentially sensitive material.

The researcher will interview the participants with the aim of grounding their experiences in their personal history and cultural settings. The interview will focus on early childhood experiences with regard to the participants' view of femininity, relationships with significant other males and females, their position and role in their family of origin, and for those that are married, namely, Sapna and Marna, in their married lives. Furthermore, the researcher will explore the participants' perceptions of marriage, and how they have negotiated their femininity in their marriage. The aim of the interviews will be to gain an idea as

to the process through which these women have sacrificed their femininity and the subsequent process of reclaiming it.

Sapna, a 35-year-old married women with three children required four interview sessions. Marna, a 30-year-old married female, with no children, required two interview sessions. Alta, a 26-year-old, single female, required one session.

## Data Analysis

According to Rapmund (1996, p. 118), data analysis "is the process whereby order, structure, and meaning is imposed on the mass of data that is collected in a qualitative research study."

An interpretative approach to research attempts to understand, describe and interpret people's feelings (Kelly, 1999), and believes that people "cannot apprehend human experience without understanding the social, linguistic and historical features which give it shape" Kelly (1999, p. 398). This means that in order to understand an experience that a person has had, it is essential to look at that person in his or her historical and social context. That is, the person cannot be seen in isolation. This belief in seeing a person is also shared by social constructionism. Thus, social constructionism favours interpretative methods that treat people as though their thoughts, feelings and experiences are the products of systems of meanings that exist at a societal rather than an individual level (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Hermeneutics is an interpretative analysis method, which is consistent with both the theoretical framework of this study as well as the qualitative research

approach. Heidegger and Gadamer transformed hermeneutics, an ancient practice of interpreting religious text, into modern hermeneutics, which is a general philosophy to understanding and interpreting human experience (Reason & Rowan, 1981). From a hermeneutic perspective, humans are historical beings and therefore, cannot be seen as separate from their historical processes. Hermeneutic understanding is a fusion of two perspectives; that of the phenomenon itself and that of the interpreter. Both of these perspectives are embedded in their own cultural and historical past, which they bring to the current understanding. Therefore, the researcher has to immerse him or herself in the text (phenomenon) to gain an understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspective, and continually move from being part of and separate from the data. According to Reason and Rowan (1981, p. 134-135), this balancing act is referred to as the "hermeneutic circle" in which the interpreter gains understanding through the process of

> *moving between [the] whole and parts, between what is known and what is unknown, between the phenomenon itself and its wider context, between the knower and that which is known.*

This notion of the parts being understood in relation to the whole and vice versa, is consistent with the second-order cybernetic principle of context-specify behaviour and looking at the whole. Thus, the selection of this approach fits within the theoretical framework of this study and with a qualitative research design.

## Hermeneutics and the Current Research

The steps that will be involved in the analysis of the stories for this research will be a combination of techniques from Giorgi (1985) and Stiles (1993). These steps are as follows:

1. The researcher will transcribe the participants' stories. Once the stories have been transcribed, the researcher will work with one story at a time, to avoid 'cross-pollination'. That is, the steps that follow will be completed before the researcher begins with the next transcript.

2. The researcher will then read the transcript while listening to the audiocassette. This will enable her to get a 'feel' for the story and the emotions of what was said. Thereafter, she will read the story a few more times until she feels that she has a 'sense of the whole.'

3. Once the researcher had a sense of the whole, the researcher will summarise the information in the transcript/s in the form of the researcher's retelling of the participant story, which will appear in the Appendices.

4. Next the researcher will focus on reading the transcript with the intention of finding themes. These will be underlined on the original transcript, using different coloured pens. Thereafter, these themes will be ordered so that all the statements that follow a theme will be under that heading.

5. Thereafter, the researcher will move between these categories to the whole until she feels that the sense of the whole has been maintained.

This analysis will be coloured by the researcher's frame of reference and how she sees what has happened; which will be influenced by the research topic, that is, the researcher will be looking at the material from a certain viewpoint.

Therefore, the researcher feels that it is essential for the participants to have a say in this process or to be able to comment on the researcher's interpretation of their story. This will be achieved by the researcher presenting the participants with a copy of her interpretation of their story for comments and suggestions. This will enable the researcher to remain 'true' to her participants and will not alienate the participants from their stories.

6. Then, the researcher will 'transform the participants' language into psychological language', that is, the researcher will discuss the themes that emerge from the repeated reading and rereading of the themes and the whole, and the participants' comments will be taken into consideration in the final version of the story.

The interaction between the researcher and the participants will inevitably influence the research, the researcher, the participants and the relationship between the researcher and her participants. The researcher will have to be aware of this and will comment on it in the various chapters.

7. After the above has been repeated with all of the stories, the researcher will look for commonalities and differences among the participants' journeys and these will be discussed.

8. Finally, the researcher will undertake a comparative analysis between the common themes identified in this study and the literature on social constructionism and femininity. In the final chapter, the study will be evaluated and recommendation for future research will be proposed.

## Conclusion

From the above, it is clear that this research can only be qualitative, because quantitative research would not yield the thick descriptions desired nor would it allow for the researcher's subjectivity.

From the preceding discussion, it would seem as if the purpose of the research fits with the theoretical framework and the data analysis technique. The hermeneutic analysis process fits within the social constructionist theoretical framework, in that both place value on language and both consider the parts as well as the whole. Furthermore, the inclusion of the participants in the researcher process is also consistent with the theoretical context of the research and increases validity of the study. Thus, it would seem as if the research has a sense of internal consistency.

CHAPTER 5

# MY STORY OF SAPNA'S STORY

## Personal Data

| | |
|---|---|
| Participant: | Sapna |
| Age at interview: | 35 years old |
| Marital Status: | Married |
| Ages of children | Son – 16 |
| | Daughter – 14 |
| | Daughter – 8 |
| Religion: | Hindu |
| Number of interviews: | 4 |

## Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will firstly explain her relationship with Sapna, and discuss the settings in which the interviews were conducted. Based on the transcribed interviews and the researcher's retelling of Sapna's journey (which can be found in Appendix B), the researcher will discuss themes, which the researcher felt, characterised Sapna's rejection of her femininity, and themes that characterised the reclaiming of her femininity. Thereafter, the researcher will discuss the impact of Sapna's story on the researcher as well as on Sapna.

It is important for the reader to bear in mind that this re-telling of Sapna's journey is punctuated according to how the researcher sees Sapna's relationship with her femininity and her rejection and reclaiming thereof, and it is also tainted by the researcher's frame of reference. Therefore, this is the researcher's interpretation of Sapna's experience and although she attempted to remain true to Sapna's experience, the following cannot be seen as the absolute truth.

## Research Setting

Sapna and the researcher have been friends for at least the past ten years. The researcher felt that Sapna fulfilled the requirements for being a participant in this study and asked her if she would be interested in participating in this study. Sapna's eagerness to participate in the study was displayed by the fact that, in the two months between asking her to be a participant and the actual interviews, she regularly asked the researcher when she would be interviewed. Because of the prior relationship between the researcher and Sapna, it was not necessary to establish trust and rapport during the interviews. However, the interview relationship had to be established and differentiated from their personal relationship.

The interviews were conducted at Sapna's home. The house is warmly furnished, thereby creating a comfortable atmosphere in which the interviews could take place. Since there were no limits set to the number and length of the interviews, Sapna required four sessions, varying in length from 15 minutes to 45 minutes.

The first interview was conducted during the afternoon, while the children were at home. Since the interview took place in the lounge, her eldest daughter asked if she could sit in, and Sapna agreed. However, as the interview progressed, the researcher felt that Sapna's daughter's presence could limit or hamper the interview process. That is, the researcher felt that Sapna was conscious of her daughter's presence and this may have caused her to be cautious of what she said. In light of the above, the researcher ended the session early. In that session, the discussion focused on Sapna's early childhood.

The remaining three interviews were conducted in the mornings, while the children were at school, thereby avoiding possible distractions. These interviews were conducted in the garden, which was green and well maintained. This created a safe and serene atmosphere and the researcher feels that it also gave Sapna a sense of distance. That is, since most of the subsequent interviews focused on her family, being in the garden allowed her to mentally distance herself from the current happenings in her home.

All four interviews were conducted within a week. This was deemed necessary because the researcher wanted to maintain the atmosphere of the previous interviews and allow Sapna to tell her story without having a long period to think about what she wanted to say. That is, the interview was to be in the form of a lived story and not a rehearsed re-telling of events.

Sapna is the eldest of three children. She is four years older than her brother and six years older than her sister. She was born in South Africa. She spent her early childhood in Britain, where both her brother and sister were born. When she was eleven years old, her parents divorced. Her mother returned to South Africa

with the children, while her father remained in Britain. At the age of 16, she married her husband and they have three children.

## Rejection of Femininity

From early childhood, until nine years after Sapna married, she was happy to be female. For the first seven years of her marriage, Sapna fulfilled the role of the self-sacrificing wife, who was financially dependent on her husband. Thereafter she became financially independent, but was still happy with her femininity. Sapna only began the process of rejecting her femininity after her failed suicide attempt, nine years into her marriage. Sapna defined femininity as: "It's ... like delicate. ... femininity is being kind, gentle, loving, its everything that is soft and beautiful."

The following themes were identified in Sapna's narration of her journey as contributing to the process of her rejecting her femininity.

⇒ Sacrificing for Others

⇒ Fear of and Desire for Dependency

⇒ Anger and Resentment

⇒ Personal Self versus Public Self

⇒ Need for Outer Recognition

⇒ Shattered Illusions or Fantasies

⇒ Fantasy versus Reality

## Sacrificing for Others

This theme was dominant throughout Sapna's recounted story. It began early in her life; continued in adolescence; was the reason she married her husband; characterized her married life; and contributed to the rejection of her femininity.

From an early age, the Grand Narrative that influenced Sapna's behaviour was that females are naturally caring and nurturing. This was evident when she said:

> *From the age of nine, I was looking after my brother and sister most of the time [and] looking after a drunken father. My mum worked any hour of the day, she even worked night shifts.*

Sapna desired a "normal family life," and it seemed that she may have felt that if she sacrificed her needs for those of her family, she could have attained it. However, this did not materialize and her parents were divorced. Furthermore, her sacrifice for her family robbed her of being a normal "carefree child," because she felt that she "always had to worry…[about] what was happening at home when [she] was not there", which in retrospect she regrets.

After her parents divorced, Sapna, her mother and siblings returned to South Africa, while her father continued to live in Britain. Once again, she took it upon herself to sacrifice her need for an active social life with her friends, in order to take care of her siblings. She felt that her mother depended on her

> *for everything, for everything. For support, for not getting up to mischief, for setting a good example for my brother and sister. So I was under a lot of pressure. I had to be the perfect child.*

However, once again her sacrifices went unnoticed in that at the first sign of her becoming a "problem," (an adolescent who was attracting the attention of young boys) she was sent to live with an aunt in another town. Therefore, she probably felt that her sacrifices were insignificant and although she regarded what she did as a sacrifice, for others it seemed to have been what they expected her to do and therefore she may have felt that her sacrifices were insignificant to others.

In keeping with the Hindu tradition at that time, a marriage partner was arranged for Sapna whose growing sexuality was becoming disconcerting for her mother. However, Sapna did not want to marry the man who was considered suitable to be her husband because she felt that, at the age of sixteen, she was "too young to get married." Furthermore, she felt that he did not exhibit the characteristics that she was looking for in a husband, which were "caring, sensitive [and] loving." However, her mother felt that this man could give her daughter what she "never had as a child, which was security, stability, and a comfortable life. Meaning somebody who had enough money to give [her] a comfortable life." Sapna eventually accepted his marriage proposal because of constant pressure from her mother, which made Sapna feel that "this is the least that I can do for her. It was a form of gratitude for her bringing me up." Sapna also felt that if she made her mother "happy, [then she would] eventually be happy." Therefore, Sapna sacrificed her desire not to marry the man who was

considered suitable for her to marry, and accepted his marriage proposal as a token of gratitude towards her mother.

According to the Hindu cultural expectations for a married woman, it was believed that "a woman can make or break a man." This meant that if a man married a 'good woman' then he would be happily married for life, but if he married a 'bad' woman, then she would destroy his life and they will both be miserable in their marriage. When she married, Sapna was determined to be a 'good woman' according to the above belief, and this meant that she would have to sacrifice herself for her husband and their marriage. Despite her marriage not living up to her expectations and being unfulfilling, Sapna strongly believed that she had to make a success of her marriage, because divorce in the Hindu community was taboo and she desperately wanted to have a "normal family life." The cultural expectation that the wife is responsible for making or breaking her husband, made Sapna feel that she had to take sole responsibility for her marriage, because her husband was not expected to contribute to their marriage and neither did he seem willing to do so. Sapna sacrificed herself for her husband and their marriage, despite the fact that their marriage was unfulfilling.

Although she continued to sacrifice her needs for those of her husband, she did not seem to find happiness through her sacrifices. Instead, as time went on, she became progressively more depressed until one day; nine years into her unfulfilling marriage, she attempted suicide. Even her attempted suicide, can be seen as a form of sacrifice for her husband. That is, she attempted suicide because she felt:

> *If this is how you want life to be, if you feel that you don't want to live with me, it's fine. But I won't divorce you.*

Her strong-minded determination and her love for her children may have also led her to make the ultimate sacrifice. She was willing to die so that her children would not have to endure living with divorced parents, which she felt was "too devastating for the children, [having gone] through it [herself]." This notion of dying for one's children may have been influenced by a belief that a woman will do anything for her children. In this way, Sapna was willing to sacrifice her life for her husband and children's happiness.

After the failed suicide attempt, Sapna appeared to go to the other extreme and was no longer willing to sacrifice to make others happy. She probably felt that she had sacrificed enough and got nothing in return, and that she would make her own happiness. It seemed that she felt the only way she could find her own happiness was to become extremely independent, so no one would be able to expect or demand any sacrifices from her. For this to happen, she felt that she had to lose her ability to feel compassion or forgo any other 'soft' feeling for others. That is, if she no longer felt any 'soft' feeling for others then she could not be persuaded by sympathy or guilt into sacrificing for them.

## Fear and Desire for Dependency

This theme can be linked to the previous theme of sacrificing for others. It appears that Sapna felt if she sacrificed for others then they would be happy and would not leave her, and therefore, she could depend on them forever. However,

it was Sapna's experience that whenever she depended on someone to take care of her and in this way allowed herself to be vulnerable, either deliberately or due to circumstances, the dependency was taken away from her. Therefore, Sapna developed a fear of dependency. It was not so much a fear of dependency but rather a fear that the dependency would not be there forever or that it would be taken away from her. According to Sapna:

> *I'm scared to be spoilt and depend on someone and then have it taken away from me. If it is going to be there, it must always be there.*

This experience of being let down possibly began with her relationship with her father. She initially felt that she had a positive relationship with her father who used to "buy [for her] lots of toys. That was one thing he loved to do. He spoilt [her] that way." However, their relationship soon changed to one where she was taking care of him instead of him taking care of her, and therefore she lost her dependency on her father.

Although divorce is generally devastating for children, for Sapna, the physical separation from her father after her parents divorced, could have exaggerated the effects of the divorce. That is, after the divorce, she was living not only in a 'foreign' country (South Africa) with different rules; she was also physically separated from her father, who remained behind in Britain. Therefore, from her childhood perspective, the little that she had of her father was now taken away from her. With the loss of dependency on her father, she also lost her dependency on her childhood friend, whose home provided her with the only

place where she felt "pampered and treated like the baby," while she lived in Britain.

To add to her sense of loss, soon after coming to South Africa, she was separated from her mother and her siblings because her mother felt that she "was becoming a bit of a problem at home," with her burgeoning sexuality, and was therefore sent to live with an aunt in another town. This experience increased her fear of dependency because she realised that it could so easily be taken away from her. Sapna was angry at her punishment because she did not feel that she had done anything wrong to deserve being separated from her family for a year and a half, and she could never understand the "purpose of being separated from [her] family. [She] could never understand that, and [she] thought: 'Well, I am just being punished for something." Because of her dependence on her family, she felt that as punishment, she could be sent away or lose what she most valued, that is, her family.

This theme of being let down when she allowed herself to depend on someone can also be seen in her relationship with her first boyfriend. When he wrote to her while he was at university, she felt that she "had something good in [her] life, something to keep [her] going." However, this too was lost when he wrote to her telling her that their relationship was over because his parents disapproved of their relationship. She was hurt by what she, in retrospect, called "puppy-love" as she believed that it was true love which should last a lifetime.

The theme of depending on others and being let down by them continued throughout her married life. When Sapna married, according to the Hindu tradition, she lived with her husband and her in-laws. Sapna initially had a

positive relationship with her mother-in-law. She felt that her mother-in-law accepted her as a daughter and she could depend on her support when her husband was not there. However, after the birth of her son, Sapna felt that she was a "very capable mother because [she had] already mothered [her] brother and sister," and therefore she did not require anyone's advice on how to take care of her son. However, everyone in her husband's family constantly told her what to do regarding her son. Because Sapna had "all these people telling [her] what to do with [her] child," she felt that her son was never really hers as "he belonged to the whole family." Eventually, Sapna stood up to her mother-in-law, a stance that went against the Hindu cultural norm or the Grand Narrative of a daughter-in-law's subservience, which is interpreted as respect, and told her mother-in-law that she was capable of taking care of her child and did not like to be told how to take care of him. This strained her relationship with her mother-in-law, which in turn, negatively affected her relationship with the rest of her husband's family.

Even though Sapna did not love her husband when she married him, she believed that she "fell in love with him very quickly after marriage. [As she] found some good qualities in him and he was a good person." However, early in her marriage, her husband indicated his discontentment with their marriage by refusing to fetch her and their son from her mother's place when she went there for a holiday. This, she seemed to interpret as rejection by her husband and she felt that he was punishing her by not taking her back to his home and forcing her to stay at her mother's home. Therefore, once again, she was losing what she regarded as important to her, that is, her marriage. At that stage of her life, Sapna could not leave him because

> *I was not self-supportive, and I thought to myself: 'Even if I do leave him, how will I support myself. What will I do? I left school, I have no skill, I have no education behind me. What will I do?'*

Her dependence on her husband can also be seen as a contributing factor to her depression and suicidal feelings. She desperately wanted a home of her own, separate from her in-laws, and her husband had refused and said: "I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving my mum and them...I will die in this house. I am not moving." Therefore, Sapna felt that there was no hope of realising her dreams. Since she could not imagine living forever in the subsection of her in-laws home, and she refused to divorce her husband, she felt that the only solution to her dilemma was to take her own life, after nine years of unsuccessfully trying to make her dream of having a "normal family life" happen.

After her failed suicide attempt, Sapna "stopped depending on [her husband] for anything" and became extremely independent because she felt: "I loved you so much, why did you let me down." In an attempt to 'protect' herself from future hurt from her husband she felt:

> *I became so independent that I built a cocoon around me, that I would not let you hurt me again. I would not let you hurt me again. So, even if he tried to be kind or tried to be nice, I was resisting because I was scared that he would just take it away from me.*

Because of her experiences of being let down, Sapna had ambivalent feelings of desire for and fear of depending on others. According to Sapna:

> *I find it very difficult when people want to do things for me, like I can do it for myself and yet I want to be spoilt and taken care of, but I don't know how?... I'd love to be spoilt ... maybe there is a fear in a sense that don't spoil me and take it away from me.*

## Anger and Resentment

When Sapna depended on others and was let down by them it seemed that she felt anger and resentment towards them for letting her down. Throughout her life, Sapna experienced anger and resentment, which can also be linked to the theme of sacrificing for others, especially when she felt that her sacrifices went unnoticed and unappreciated.

As a child, Sapna may have resented her father for not being the type of father who supported her and took care of her. Furthermore, she may have resented him for not working and therefore forcing her mother to be the sole breadwinner of the family. Although Sapna did not overtly express her resentment at her father, the researcher feels that it was covertly expressed in the interview. A possible reason for Sapna not overtly expressing her anger towards her father could have been that she felt she needed to or should show gratitude for the brief experience that she had of him as a father. Also, by openly expressing her anger towards her father, Sapna may have felt that she would have to

acknowledge her pain at her perception of her father's abandonment and rejection of her, which she may not have wanted to admit.

Despite her covert resentment towards her father for not being there for her, it seems ironical that Sapna married a man who, like her father was often not at home and who preferred to spend his time with his friends, rather than with her and their children. Sapna only married her husband because her mother coerced her into the marriage. Ironically, Sapna's mother chose a husband for her daughter who turned out to be similar to her husband whom she divorced, thereby forcing her daughter into a marriage which would prove to be unfulfilling, as her own marriage was.

It seems that the dominant emotion in Sapna's married life was anger. Prior to accepting her husband's marriage proposal, she had met him once on the day that he proposed. Social custom prohibited Sapna from dating her future husband until they were engaged. Although she did not know him well enough to marry him, she "just got sick of the pressure [and she] called him ...and said, 'you know what, I will marry you." Their wedding date was set by his family within three months of her acceptance of his marriage. Sapna was angry because she felt that they "both were not ready for [marriage and they] were both pushed into it" by the early wedding date. However, being only sixteen years old, Sapna did not feel that she could challenge her husband's family's decision to have the wedding early and she may have felt that it was her duty to abide by their wishes. Sapna's marriage began with feelings of anger at being pushed into a marriage that she felt both she and her husband were not ready for.

Sapna was angry at her mother-in-law for constantly interfering in her marriage. Sapna blamed her mother-in-law for the problems that she had in her marriage because Sapna felt that her mother-in-law did not allow her husband to grow up and "think for himself what was right and wrong." She felt that her husband "was definitely a mummy's boy," which caused a great deal of pain for Sapna in her marriage. Although Sapna managed to suppress her anger towards her mother-in-law most of the time, at times she did express it. For example, Sapna wanted to have her own kitchen and despite her husband's and his family's refusal to grant her her wish, Sapna built one and cooked daily in it. In protest against her going against his wishes, and thereby asserting her independence from his mother, her husband continued to eat with his parents, while Sapna ate in her kitchen with her children. On one occasion when her mother-in-law bought groceries for Sapna, Sapna insisted on paying her mother-in-law for the groceries. However, her mother-in-law did not want to take money from Sapna and said: "No, you don't need to pay me, it's only my children that are eating" to which Sapna replied: "No [mother], MY children are eating, YOUR child is still eating with you."

Sapna in fact seemed to experience anger at her husband for most of their married life. She was angry at him for leaving her at home in the early part of their marriage and going out with his friends, thereby not being there for her. Because her husband was hardly ever at home, Sapna was forced to be in the company of his parents when he was out. She believed that because her husband made her "so miserable through [her] pregnancy... that [had] caused the premature birth" of their son. Sapna also seemed to resent her husband for not giving up his bachelor lifestyle after their marriage, and she was angry at his parents for supporting his lifestyle.

After the birth of their son, Sapna was angry at her husband for leaving her alone and for believing his mother's tales about Sapna's disrespectful behaviour towards her and therefore, never taking Sapna's side. Sapna felt that he should have 'protected' her and told his mother not to interfere in their lives. He should have been there to help and support her with their son. This anger is illustrated when Sapna said:

> *My husband cared a lot about having a son. I don't know why? He never played soccer with him or done any of that father and son things.*

Furthermore, she was angry at her husband for refusing to pick her up from her mother's house after a holiday thereby making her feel totally dependent on him; for making her choose between being a mother and being a wife; for taking her children or car away from her as punishment; and for making her life so miserable that she felt that suicide was the only way out.

At the height of her depression, Sapna attempted suicide. Immediately after the suicide attempt, Sapna "hated [her husband and] didn't want to see him. Because [she felt] 'he made me do this." Soon thereafter, she realised

> *that experience of trying to kill myself was a turning point for me. I didn't succeed, to me that was a message: 'You were meant to live, you were meant to make this life happen, you were meant to carry on, bring up your children and live.' And it was the*

> *turning point in my life and it made me stronger then I have ever been in my entire life.*

Because Sapna became "stronger than she had ever been in her life", she also changed her attitude. According to Sapna:

> *I didn't believe in being that feminine woman anymore, that gentle, sweet, kind, loving [person]. [Therefore] I became the opposite. I became antagonistic, I became argumentative, I would never take your word for it.*

However, although she changed her attitude and beliefs, she refused to take responsibility for who she had become and blamed her husband. She felt

> *it's your fault that I am this way. It's all your fault. You made me like this. I wasn't like this, it's my circumstances and what you put me through that I've become like this.*

Hence, it seemed that her extreme independence was an expression of her anger and hatred towards her husband and an avoidance of taking personal responsibility for the changes that occurred within her.

## Personal Self versus Public Self

Part of Sapna's anger and resentment had to do with feeling that she had to choose between being who she wanted to be (personal self) and what she thought was expected of her (social self). As a child, she could not be the "carefree child" that she would have liked to be because she was the 'parental child.'

When Sapna began her menstrual cycle, due to the menstrual taboos of the Hindu community she felt

> *suddenly, I couldn't go pray because I used to pray everyday and now I couldn't light the lamp when I had my periods because I was dirty. And I couldn't go to the temple while I was dirty. And I thought: 'What the hell is going on, what's so dirty about it.'*

However, as a child, she did not protest and did as she was told. As an adult, Sapna does not regard her menstruation as being dirty, however, she still abides by the restrictions placed upon menstruating women in the Hindu community. Therefore, it seems as if she has difficulties in asserting her beliefs within her community and thereby possibly being regarded as an outcast or shunned by her community. Therefore, it seems that her social self is maintained at the expense of her personal self.

Although Sapna was capable of taking care of herself and others from a young age, when she married it was assumed that her husband would "take care of"

her. Even when her husband was not at home, she was still taken care of by her in-laws. Although Sapna knew that she was capable of taking care of herself, she allowed herself to be taken care of when she married. Initially this seemed to have fulfilled her dependency needs, but later on, it resulted in anger and resentment. Once again, her personal self took a back seat to her public self.

After her son was born, Sapna refused to accept this childlike status and asserted her independence and therefore her personal identity as an adult. Although this caused friction in her marital family, she was willing to stand up and fight to be treated as a competent adult. Therefore, it seemed that when Sapna expressed her personal self as opposed to her public self, it caused problems with her in-laws, who expected her to be the woman they wanted her to be.

After the birth of her son, Sapna wanted to be a "good mother" who stayed at home to look after her son. However, her husband did not want to stay at home and whenever he had an opportunity, he would leave the house. Sapna felt that if she allowed her husband to go out without her, then they would never build the marital relationship that she so desired. As she could not take their young son out with them, Sapna's mother took care of her son while Sapna was out with her husband. In this way, Sapna felt compelled to sacrifice her desire to be a 'full time' mother to "concentrate on [her] marriage." This conflict over being mother or wife continued with her second child. Therefore, Sapna's primary role in her marriage was that of her social self (wife) rather than what she wanted as her personal self (mother).

In her tenth year of marriage, Sapna had her third child. By that time, she had her own home and was financially independent. Therefore, Sapna felt that she could focus "just [on being] a mother and not worry about anything else." Sapna had changed her focus from her husband to her children. She felt that if her husband wanted her as a wife then he would have to make the effort because she said:

> *That's it, I've done enough with you. You know, I've spent ten years of my life running after you. This is it now, I'm not running after you anymore.*

In this way, she fulfilled her personal role of mother and sacrificed her social role of wife. This fulfilling of her personal role at the expense of her social role was also evident after her suicide attempt when she felt that she was going to live her life according to her rules, and this meant not depending on her husband for anything and doing everything for herself. However, this too did not make Sapna happy and over time, she became "bitter."

It seemed that when Sapna was presented with a different social self to her personal self, this caused her to feel that she had to choose one role and disregard the other, to an extent. It seemed that, for most of her life, Sapna may have felt that to be accepted and to possibly belong, she needed to adopt the social self and to disregard her personal self. That is, the Grand Narrative that encourages women to sacrifice, may have led her to 'sacrifice' her personal self for the benefit of her family – both her family of origin and her marital family. However, later in life she moved to the other extreme of being only the personal self. Therefore, it seemed that Sapna experienced conflict over which self

(public or personal) she was expected to take on or wanted to take on, and it seemed as if she moved between the two roles.

## Need for Outer Recognition

Early in Sapna's marriage, her husband "used to praise [her] a lot." This "made [her] feel like now [she was] worth something." However, "things changed," and their marital relationship deteriorated and her husband stopped praising her. Therefore, Sapna began to look for other sources of external recognition.

Seven years into her marriage, Sapna became financially independent as a Tupperware agent. This, "was a major, major step for [her], in [her] life" because she "became more confident... And [realised] that [she could] be self-sufficient." The confidence that she gained gave her the courage to fight even harder for what she wanted in her married life. Although she gained confidence in herself as a Tupperware agent, her deteriorating marital relationship caused her to become despondent. Even though she was miserable in her marriage, she adamantly refused to allow her children to experience their parents' divorcing. Two years after becoming financially independent, Sapna attempted suicide.

After her failed suicide attempt, Sapna felt an even greater need for outer recognition and changed her focus from making a success of her marriage to making a success of her life in the form of having a career and thereby being self-sufficient. Therefore, it seemed that Sapna needed external recognition in order to increase her sense of self-worth.

Soon thereafter, when Sapna moved into her own home, she changed from being a Tupperware agent to being an estate agent. This change could be interpreted as a change from a more feminine occupation to a more masculine profession, one that required an examination in order to be qualified. Furthermore, as an estate agent, she attended lectures in a "university lecture hall," and when she passed her exams, she felt "totally intelligent." As an estate agent Sapna felt:

> *I was getting well-known, people started to know me... I was now 'Sapna, the estate agent', so it was wonderful, for the first time I had my own identity.*

Her determination to succeed as an estate agent is evident in her selling ten houses before she had even passed the qualifying examination. She also thwarted her husband's attempt to punish her by taking her car away, which she needed to succeed in her job, by hitching a lift to work. In this way, her husband's punishment patterns had lost their potency, and her confidence in herself grew.

## Shattered Illusions or Fantasies

Immediately after her failed suicide attempt, Sapna became stronger but initially she still clung to her belief that 'marriage is for life.' However, she soon realised that this illusion almost cost her her life, and she was no longer willing to die for her belief. After this realisation, she considered divorcing her husband but her husband refused to divorce her. While Sapna and her husband were separated for a period of a month and a half, Sapna's childhood friend proposed

marriage to her, even though she had two children at that time. However, because of the cultural taboo against inter-religious marriages, Sapna could not marry him, as he was Muslim and not Hindu. Therefore, Sapna refused to allow herself to feel any intimate feelings for him.

Eleven years into their marriage (two years after her suicide attempt), Sapna's beliefs in the illusive Grand Narratives that "love was forever" and that 'love conquers all' were shattered. Sapna realised that although she had previously proclaimed her undying love for her husband, she needed more than the material aspects of love to sustain her relationship with him. This realisation led her to examine her previously unquestioned love for her husband. Through honest inquiry, Sapna felt that

> *one morning I just woke up and I thought: 'You know what, I don't love you anymore.' And that for me was devastating, because I believed in fairy tale love stories. I will love you forever.*

Furthermore, she realised that she felt only anger and hatred towards her husband. When she realised that she did not love her husband, she became aware of her love for another Hindu man, a friend on the family. Although she reciprocated this love, she refused to act on it because of moral constraints, as she was "still a married woman."

It may be incomprehensible to the reader as to why Sapna suffered and fought for her unfulfilling marriage for eleven years; and why she refused to give up on her fruitless marriage when she found another love. However, Sapna may have

felt that she had sacrificed so much for her marriage, and divorcing her husband would possibly mean that she had failed as a wife and that she failed in her attempt to give her children a 'happy home.' Furthermore, in the Hindu community, a divorced woman is generally looked down upon more so than a divorced man is, possibly because of the cultural belief that it is a woman's responsibility to make her marriage work.

As a result of her shattered illusions and her confusion over what she wanted, Sapna felt as if she was torn between or living three separate lives – one with her husband, the other with her other Hindu man and the third as a loving mother. This ambivalence caused Sapna to feel "very, very torn" and she "lived in turmoil all the time" because she felt she "was not a whole person."

It was during this time that Sapna was crying out to her husband and wanted him to "save [her] from really sliding and falling." Although Sapna felt that she wanted her husband to help her, even if he had responded, it is doubtful that she would have allowed him close to her, because she feared that he would hurt her again. Therefore, Sapna was forced to live with this turmoil for five years.

## Conclusion

Sapna tried unsuccessfully to make her marriage work by sacrificing for her marriage and by placing her husband before her children. After years of sacrificing for her husband and their marriage, Sapna became depressed because she felt that her sacrifices went unnoticed and unappreciated. She was also angry at and resented her husband for repeatedly letting her down, which

compounded the depression. At the height of this depression, nine years into her marriage, Sapna attempted suicide.

After her suicide attempt, Sapna became extremely independent. She stopped sacrificing her needs for those of her husband and refused to depend on her husband for anything. She felt that she would live her own life according to her own rules, which entailed becoming an estate agent and therefore gaining her own identity, separate from her role as mother or wife.

It seemed that Sapna's rejection of her femininity was spurred on by her anger towards and hatred for her husband. However, although she could admit this hatred when she was angry, she strongly held on to her illusion of marriage for life and love conquers all. However, these illusions were shattered when Sapna was forced to acknowledge that she did not love her husband and that their marriage was nothing more than castles in the air. Once she could acknowledge her feelings towards her husband, she was free to acknowledge her love for another man. However, she still refused to give up on her marriage and this caused her to feel torn into three people.

After living in "turmoil" and not feeling like a "whole person" for about five years, Sapna decided that she needed to do something about her unhappiness and took the first step towards reclaiming her femininity.

**Reclaiming her Femininity**

Although Sapna desperately wanted to end the turmoil in her life, it seems as if she was uncertain of what she needed to do to end it and she was scared to allow

herself to be vulnerable again. Therefore, although she wanted to change her situation and wanted her husband to help her, she seemed to blame him for the loss of her femininity. Initially, it seemed that she expected her husband to change in order for her turmoil to end.

## Awareness

While Sapna was overseas helping her brother to cope with his divorce, the distance from her husband, children and the other Hindu man gave Sapna the opportunity to reflect on her life. Sapna became aware of her resistance and animosity towards her husband. She realised that through the years, she had become numb and had alienated herself from those close to her with the exception of her children. Her feelings of anger and hatred seemed to fuel each other, and the angrier she got at her husband, the more she hated him which in turn made her even more angry at him.

Sapna also realised that she had lost her ability to feel compassion when her brother said:

> *You are so strong minded, you don't feel anything ...don't be so hard, don't be so hard. Your husband is not going to love you anymore if you are going to be so hard.*

Although her brother's statements seems to support the dominant Hindu narrative of a woman being solely responsibility for her marriage and for making her husband happy, Sapna did not interpret it as him telling her to be

subservient to her husband in order for her to please her husband. Instead, his statements seemed to awaken in Sapna the realisation that she was responsible for whom she had become and that for her life to change, **she** needed to change rather than expecting her husband to change. Therefore, Sapna stopped blaming her husband for who she had become and took responsibility for her life.

Her acceptance of personal responsibility for her life seems to have freed her from feeling that she had no control over her life. Therefore, Sapna may have felt free to become the person that she wanted to become, rather than the person who she was expected to be; or the person whom she had become in reaction to being hurt by her husband.

## Risking Vulnerability

Because Sapna felt that her husband had repeatedly hurt her when she trusted him, she was afraid to trust him again. However, because of her experiences, Sapna was now a different person to whom she was when she married her husband, or when she attempted suicide. According to Sapna:

> *Something inside of me had changed. Either I grew up or, I don't know what it was, maybe I just became a woman and I wasn't a child anymore.*

Therefore, Sapna consciously decided to become a softer, more loving person. For the first time in her life, the changes that Sapna made in her life was because **she wanted** to change from the hard-hearted person that she was to the loving caring person she knew she could be. In the past, Sapna changed in

reaction to what someone had done (for example, becoming strong in reaction to being repeatedly let down by her husband) or because she felt pressurised into changing (for example, being the subservient wife). Therefore, for the first time in her life, Sapna did what felt right for her.

The daily e-mails that she received from her husband said:

> *I really love you and I really miss you, and I really want you back, and I can't wait till you get home. Things are going to be different.*

The e-mails and her having a different perspective on her life, allowed Sapna to realise, possibly for the first time in her marriage, that her husband loved and cared for her. That is, it seems that throughout her marriage, Sapna was so wrapped up in her experiences and so busy trying to keep her marriage going, that she may have lost sight of why she wanted to keep her marriage going and what marriage meant for her. Her feelings towards her husband seemed to be filled with so much anger and hatred, that she may have been unable to see his possible love and appreciation for her. This is evident in her shock when her husband asked her: "Where is the woman I fell in love with" because she felt that he "didn't love the woman that [she] was when [he] married her."

It seems that for Sapna, the realisation that she gained from her husband's e-mails, made her feel valued and needed by her family and this possibly encouraged her to become "softer" towards her husband, which would entail risking becoming dependent on him once more.

When Sapna returned home from her visit with her brother, she was a different person. Not only because she was "softer" but also because she seems to have matured while she was away from home. She now knew what she wanted for herself and in her life – which was her marriage to her husband, based on reality rather than fantasies. She was no longer the submissive woman that he married, nor was she the headstrong woman who had gone overseas. She was a combination of the two, a woman who could be soft and vulnerable, but also a woman who could stand up for herself, if she needed to. According to Sapna:

> *I actually started wanting to be helped and not to be so independent. Yes, independent in a certain sense. He knows I have my independence, but not in every aspect. I still want be in a marriage where I can have a husband that can take care of me, when I need to be cared for.*

These internal changes in Sapna became evident in her behaviour. According to Sapna:

> *I started becoming softer. I started becoming more loving. I started showing my husband that I do love you. And I started rekindling those feelings for him. And putting aside those other feelings and making myself stronger in the sense that this is the man that I married and I do love him.*

In reaction to this softer Sapna, her husband began to change. He proved to Sapna that she could rely on him to be emotionally and physically there for her and when she depended on him to do something, he proved his dependability.

This softer Sapna has resulted in their home being more peaceful because:

> *We don't have so many fights anymore because of my stubborn-headedness and the kids can see that mum is a more patient loving person, more happier person, more whole, you know, not so scattered anymore... We have become one entity. We have become one family, its wonderful to be so stable.*

## Conclusion

Sapna's rejection of her femininity seemed to have been insidious and she seemed not to notice it until she felt that she had completely "lost [her] femininity." Unlike the rejection of her femininity, the reclaiming of her femininity was a conscious process from the start. That is, her need to resolve the turmoil that she felt initiated the process of reclaiming her femininity. She had moved from the 'victim' role to a more proactive role.

Before Sapna could attempt to reclaim her femininity, she had to acknowledge her role in the rejection of her femininity and the unhappiness in which she found herself. However, she initially did not want to take responsibility for whom she had become and continued to blame her husband. The time and space away from her family allowed her the opportunity to see her life from a

different vantage point and this, together with the realisation that her husband and children loved and needed her, encouraged her to become softer and more loving, which in turn seems to have encouraged her husband to be more supportive of her.

Sapna also showed her husband that she loved him and he in turn proved to her that she could depend on him not to hurt her again.

## Redefinition of Femininity

Sapna has a more realistic perception of her life, and is able to deal with both the positive and negative aspects of being involved in a relationship. It appears that through the process of reclaiming her femininity, Sapna is now able to incorporate the opposites of independence and dependence, whereas in the past she felt that she had to choose one and reject the other. This incorporation of opposites can also be seen in her feeling that she is able to be both mother and wife at the same time and she seems to be comfortable with both roles. Her re-definition of femininity highlights this ability to incorporate opposites in her life. Sapna's re-definition of femininity is:

> *Being a woman is not just being subservient and cute and loving and whatever. Being a woman is being strong as well, and there is strength and vulnerability in a woman and you must know when to use them both.*

*[Womanhood] encapsulates both the positives and the negatives. Being a woman means being caring, loving, nurturing, and this is the meaning of being a woman, but it is also the strength that comes behind all that.*

## Effects on the Researcher

Because of the researcher's longstanding friendship with Sapna, Sapna's husband and children are also known to her personally. Therefore, it was difficult for the researcher to see Sapna's husband in the light that Sapna portrayed him throughout their marriage. The researcher understands these different images of the same man as the result of different experiences that she and Sapna have had with him. These different images also initially affected the researcher while she was engaged with the transcript. That is, the researcher kept on seeing the man she knows as opposed to whom Sapna experienced. In order to overcome this difficulty, the researcher mentally attempted to separate her knowledge of Sapna's husband and focused on the transcript, in an attempt to understand Sapna's experiences with her husband.

The researcher feels that Sapna's almost exclusive focus on her marriage was because she felt that her marital experiences shaped her into the person who she is today. The researcher admires Sapna for fighting and enduring so much for her marriage that clearly had no foundation, although she does not understand why Sapna sacrificed and fought so much for a non-existent marriage. However, since Sapna has reclaimed her femininity, the researcher is convinced that her marriage is stronger and it is evident that both she and her husband love each other and are committed to their marriage.

Because of their prior relationship, the interview, and the subsequent information about Sapna's life, have given the researcher a new perspective of Sapna. That is, the researcher feels that her knowing about Sapna's journey and the struggles that Sapna went through, have given the researcher greater respect and admiration for Sapna, thereby strengthening their relationship. The researcher also feels that she understands Sapna's fears and behaviours better in the context of what she has been through, that is, in light of her rejection and reclaiming of her femininity.

Finally, the researcher feels that she has a better understanding of femininity as conceptualized by Sapna under the re-definition of femininity. The researcher feels that Sapna's redefinition encapsulates what femininity can be. Unlike Sapna's journey to reclaiming her lost femininity, her re-definition seems to encompass opposites, which the researcher feels is an important element to enjoying a balanced life, which she feels Sapna is finally able to have.

**Effects on Sapna**

Sapna felt that it was difficult to relive her difficult experiences during the interviews. However, at the end of the interviews, she felt relieved to have told her story and she felt good about where she is currently in her life.

Through the reading of her story, Sapna was struck by what she had gone through in her life and it made her aware of the human potential to endure and to conquer if one has the determination.

Sapna was also overwhelmed by emotions when she read the researcher's narrative of her story. She also realised that her marriage is very important to her and that she cannot take it for granted, now and in the future.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher discussed Sapna's journey according to themes that she felt characterised Sapna's rejection and reclaiming of her femininity. The themes that characterised the process of rejecting her femininity are:

⇒ Sacrificing for Others

⇒ Fear and Desire for Dependency

⇒ Anger and Resentment

⇒ Personal Self versus Public Self

⇒ Need for Outer Recognition

⇒ Shattered Illusions or Fantasies

The reclaiming of her femininity was characterised by her becoming **aware** of her situation and her role in preserving her misery, and her subsequent willingness to **risk vulnerability**.

The above themes are based on the researcher's understanding of events and punctuated according to how she felt Sapna reacted to certain events. Although this chapter is a re-telling of Sapna's journey, it remains close to the 'facts' in that Sapna felt that the researcher portrayed her life in an acceptable manner and she also felt that the 'analysis' fitted with her experiences.

CHAPTER 6

# MY STORY OF ALTA

## Personal Data

| | |
|---|---|
| Participant: | Alta |
| Age at interview: | 24 years old |
| Marital Status: | Single |
| Number of children | None |
| Religion: | Christian |
| Number of interviews: | 1 |

## Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will firstly explain her relationship with Alta, and discuss the setting in which the interview was conducted. Based on the transcribed interview and the researcher's retelling of Alta's journey (which can be found in Appendix C), the researcher will discuss themes, which she felt, characterised Alta's rejection and reclaiming of her femininity. Finally, the researcher will comment on the effects of the research on the researcher and on Alta.

It is important for the reader to bear in mind that this re-telling of Alta's journey is punctuated according to how the researcher understands Alta's rejection of

her femininity and her reclaiming thereof, and it is also tainted by the researcher's frame of reference. Therefore, this is the researcher's interpretation of Alta's experience and although the researcher attempted to remain true to Alta's experience, the following cannot be seen as the complete truth.

## Research Setting

Alta and the researcher have been friends for at least three years. Alta fulfilled the requirements for participants in this study. When the researcher asked Alta if she would be willing to be a participant she agreed to participate without hesitation.

Alta required one two hour-long interview. The interview was conducted at her boyfriend's home. After introducing the researcher to her boyfriend and some casual conversation, her boyfriend excused himself, thereby giving the researcher and Alta the privacy they needed to conduct an interview. Alta's boyfriend's home is warmly furnished and situated in a very quiet neighbourhood, which the researcher felt assisted in creating a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere in which the interview took place. Since the researcher and Alta knew each other before the interview session, there was no need to establish trust and rapport. However, for the duration of the interview, the researcher was the interviewer and Alta was the interviewee, thereby creating a relaxed but formal setting. After approximately an hour and a half into the interview, there was a short tea break.

Alta is the eldest of three children. Her brothers are 22 and 20 years old. They are all still living with their parents.

## Rejection of her Femininity

In discussing the rejection of her femininity, Alta felt that the rejection concerned itself with two essential aspects of femininity. The one is "physical, [how] you relate to your body [or] how it feels to be in your body." The other is social – "what you are supposed to do, not just with your body, but with the whole package – what does it mean to be a woman." Although Alta discussed the rejection of her femininity in terms of these aspects, it was evident to the researcher that Alta rejected both aspects of femininity simultaneously and therefore these aspects will be discussed concurrently.

In the interview, during Alta's discussion of the processes involved in the rejection of her femininity she defined femininity as:

> *Something very weak in that [women] allow men to run all over them. In a sense pathetic, because they don't stand up for themselves. If they're angry at their mother-in-law or whatever, they just keep quiet because that is the nice and polite way of being a woman.*

Alta's process of rejecting her femininity was characterised by the following themes:

⇒ Negative Attitude towards her Body

⇒ Anger at Patriarchy as a Societal Norm

⇒ Adopting Masculinity

⇒ Relationship with her Parents

⇒ Depression

⇒ Outer Appearance versus Inner Feelings

## Negative Attitude Towards her Body

Alta's anger and subsequent rejection of her body seemed to have occurred in reaction to the sexual abuse she suffered at the age of five. Alta said:

> *I blamed the body for the assaults because if I never had boobs and a vagina and whatever then some kind of a penis would never want to come in.*

Furthermore, because she felt that "men always wanted to have something to do with your body," she was uncomfortable in her body and she was angry at her body for classifying her as female, the gender that could easily be abused by the other gender.

As a way of 'escaping' from her gender, Alta became a tomboy. Her attempt to change her gender identity also manifested in her hating her name because "it just did not sound right." She cannot recall if she "wanted a boy's or girl's name," she just recalls wanting a different name. It appears that she may have associated the name 'Alta' with the girl who was abused and therefore, in order to detach herself from that experience, she wanted "a different name." A different name could have been her attempt to re-establish her identity, not as the young girl who was abused, but the strong tomboy whom she had become.

In early adolescence, her growing discomfort at being in a female's body compelled her to separate her consciousness from her body. Therefore, she began to see her body as a machine, which she felt she had to

> *maintain [because] it had a function and therefore it was your duty to keep it clean and keep it running, almost like a car... you need your body to take you from place to place.*

Furthermore, she saw the parts of her body in terms of the functions that they performed. For example, she felt that her hands were needed because they performed functions and therefore they were useful. However, with her sexual development, that is the development of breasts and the beginning of her menstrual cycle, Alta "couldn't see [the] purpose" that they fulfilled in the functioning of the body. She said:

> *They had no function. It is like putting a bumper sticker on your car... [whether] it is there or not, it doesn't serve the purpose of this machine functioning.*

Although she knew that they signaled her ability to bear children, she said: "I'm not finished with school, what would I want to do with babies. I don't want them." Furthermore, she may have felt that she would never want children because that would be the final indication of her femaleness.

As the years passed, the separation between Alta's consciousness and her body increased. For Alta, the gradual

> *process of not wanting my body ...led to a time when I couldn't feel the body. So I also [began] to see it as an object, something that I schlep around with me all day.*

Her extreme detachment from her body became evident in early adulthood, when she became involved with her abusive boyfriend. Her attitude towards her body at that time was:

> *I don't like it, I don't want it, so whatever happens to it happens... Because I didn't care about it, I couldn't care how it was used and it was not mine, it was nothing of mine.*

As a result of being emotionally detached from her body, she did not perceive the abuse early in the relationship with her boyfriend. However, Alta was extremely uncomfortable with sexual intercourse and would

> *disassociate from my body... I [would go] numb, numb, no sensations, numbness [would] come over my body. I just wouldn't feel anything.*

Initially, Alta believed that her body reacted in the above manner to intercourse because of the previous abuse she had suffered and therefore intercourse was something she needed to "learn to be more comfortable with."

The separation of her consciousness from her body can be seen as a defense mechanism, which was necessary to separate her previous abusive experience from her awareness, but had become destructive in that it prevented early recognition of the abuse in her relationship with her boyfriend.

## Anger at the Negative Status and Role of Women

Alta's separation from her body, which she blamed for classifying her as female, appeared to be provoked by her anger at the pervasive negative connotations, regarding the status of women. Alta became acutely aware of the inferior status accorded to women from early adolescence onwards. That is, she found support for women's inferiority to men everywhere she looked – in her family; on television; in books; and also in the way the people around her spoke.

In high school Alta felt: "isolated because I went to a different high school than all my friends did." It seemed that Alta did not feel that she was close to any of her female peers because she found typical "female conversation to be very, very restricted, narrow and very critical towards other females." Furthermore, Alta felt that the mass media, particularly television and the "typical Mills and Boons" type of love stories that some of the girls in her school read influenced them into

> *thinking that a woman is supposed to be helpless, weak, sweet and pathetic, especially in relationships with men. And they should never get angry or never ever make the first move.*

Alta was angry at her female peers who seemed to have accepted the above form of inferior behaviour in relationships with men. Since Alta "could not understand [the] thinking [of her female peers] ... [she] felt she could not be one hundred percent" part of the girls group, therefore she felt like

> *a little bit of an outcast anyway, not really, really an outcast, but there were times when they knew that I was thinking or acting in a way that didn't fit with them.*

For example, because Alta rejected the notion of a woman's submissiveness to men, if she had a conversation with her female peers and one of them spoke about the boy she liked, Alta would have said: "So, go tell him or write him a letter or give him a lollypop. Why not?" to which her female peers would reply: "She could never [do that]."

Alta also found the notion of female inferiority to men to be evident in the Afrikaner's social expectation of women in marriage, as exemplified by her mother and grandmother. Alta was angry at both her mother and her grandmother who she feels "sacrificed and sacrificed and sacrificed for the sake of" their husbands. Therefore, Alta feels that in the traditional Afrikaner marriage, a woman is expected to be

> *a thousand percent obedient to [her husband], regardless of whether he is awful or nice. You sort of don't exist. You are there to breed his children and to look after them.*

In addition to her anger towards her mother and grandmother, Alta also expressed her anger at the Afrikaans language, which she finds to be very sexist. She feels that when some people describe inanimate objects, feminine terms are often used to illustrate something that is weak, unreliable, and untrustworthy, while masculine terms are generally used to illustrate positive characteristics like trustworthiness, strength and reliability.

> *For example, when the car won't start, it is 'she' and when the pipe burst, it's a 'she', but if it's a wonderful television that they had for five years, it's a 'he.'*

Therefore, Alta feels that the Afrikaans language perpetuates and supports women's inferiority to men.

## Adopting Masculinity

Because of the above negative feelings that Alta had towards being female, she "felt that it was best to be a boy," and therefore adopted a masculine mode of conduct early in life.

Although Alta "wore dresses" as a child, she was unlike the "stereotypical …girl [who did] not want to get dirty or play in the mud or …kill snails with salt." That is, she seemed to prefer playing typical boy games or activities with her brothers rather than playing typical girl games with her female cousins. Furthermore, when Alta was told: "Girls are not supposed to do" something, she replied: "Why? I want to do it, so let me do it," and she generally did whatever she was told girls could not do. Therefore, it seemed that although Alta wore

dresses, she was a tomboy during her childhood, as indicated by her behaviour. She felt that her level on femininity during her childhood was confined to "mostly outer appearances."

In adolescence, Alta's intense dissatisfaction with being female became evident. Since she found the image of the typical female to be demeaning, she did not want to be a typical female. She therefore "wanted to achieve academically, so that [she would] not be like [those] other women- who just want to finish school and then get married." Furthermore, because she found typical female conversations to be boring and restrictive, in high school she preferred to spend her free time talking with her male friends, because "with them, [she] didn't feel as judged as she did with the women" and possibly because she perceived it as being safer. Alta interacted with her male friends as she did with her brothers; therefore, it was not on an intimate level. Therefore, indicating her preference to being with males as opposed to being with females, possibly because she seemed to have a better 'fit' with males than with females.

In adolescence, Alta "wore old clothes from [her] father ... [and she] wore big baggy clothing" in an attempt to hide her emerging sexuality and therefore her gender. However, it seemed that for Alta, her sexual development confirmed that she was not "one of the guys [and was] now a real woman, in the true sense of the word. A real woman ...that ... can have babies." However, it seemed that Alta may have felt that if her male friends did not know about her menstrual cycle, then she would still be accepted as "one of the guys." Therefore, Alta hoped that her male friends would not notice her "suspicious behaviour" for example, taking her school bag into the bathroom with her during her menstrual cycles. She feared that if they had discovered that she had started her menstrual

cycle, "they would have teased [her and] would have made fun of [her]," thereby making her feel like an outcast with them as well.

Therefore, it seemed that what Alta had tried to avoid most of her childhood, that is, acknowledging her femaleness, was making its presence known to her and others, in the form of menstruation and breasts. Alta may have felt that her body was becoming that of a female and since she did not want to be a female, she felt the need to mentally separate herself from her body.

## Relationship with her Parents

Alta feels that her home environment is "very patriarchal, and ... in that sense [it has a] more traditional set-up." This she felt was evident throughout her childhood, because her "mother gave up her career and [her father] continued with his" after they married. Furthermore, her mother "was primarily responsible" for the children. That is, everything and anything relating to the children was her mother's responsibility. Her father "was not involved ...[in] taking care of the children or raising them." His involvement with the children consisted of looking "at the end results of things, like the exams or whatever." His reason for not being actively involved with the children was that he did not want to "interfere," as he felt the children were his wife's responsibility. Therefore, Alta felt that he was "more of a presence than an entity." Furthermore, as children they could not directly approach their father. All communication between the children and their father took place via their mother, except when their father was angry, then he "would just explode and say 'you people' and then [her] mother would also be included" in the blame for whatever the children did.

Nonetheless, in childhood Alta desired to be close to her **father**. He was in the army and was therefore often away from home. When he would come home, Alta recalls running "to give him a hug [but] he [didn't] respond ... He [didn't] even lift his arms or anything." Therefore, as a child, Alta felt that he never reciprocated her need for emotional closeness, and imagines that she "just stopped [reaching out to him], because if it didn't get reciprocated, then why bother?"

In adolescence, she seemed to have found a way of getting recognition from her father by excelling in whatever she did. When she excelled in something, she felt that her father recognised and approved of her, but when she failed to excel, she felt rejected by her father. Therefore, it seemed that in an attempt to gain recognition from her father, Alta assumed her father's view that "it does not matter if you participate, you have to break the record, you have to win, otherwise it's not okay." However, the closeness that she had with her father was based on success and performances, and it did not include the emotional closeness that she desired from him. This unfulfilled need for emotional closeness with her father continued throughout her life and is a characteristic of their present relationship.

As a child, Alta felt that her relationship with her **mother** was good because her mother "stayed at home and looked after [her and her brothers], and ... she had a lot of time for [them]." However, as Alta matured, she began to feel anger towards her mother for accepting, what she perceives as an inferior role in the family. Alta still seems angry at her mother for sacrificing her life and career to take care of the children and giving up a part of her personality for her father

and her children. Her definition of femininity illustrates her perception of her mother as "weak and pathetic."

During her adolescence, Alta felt that she "was very angry and moody," which, in retrospect, she interprets as an expression of her depression. Because of her anger and moodiness, it seemed that her mother "just left [her alone] to stew and brew and be angry by [herself]." It seems that Alta may have interpreted her mother's lack of involvement during her trying adolescence as rejection. Therefore, Alta may be angry at her mother for not giving her the emotional support that she desired or needed.

Finally, Alta may also be angry at her mother for not setting an example for her as to what a strong woman is or can be. Therefore, her anger at her mother seems to mask her disappointment in her mother.

Although Alta is able to see her father in perspective in terms of the era in which he grew up, and she feel that he may be "trapped in the traditional male role, where society frowns upon you when you express emotions," she is unable to accord her mother the same privilege. Therefore, she has sympathy for her father and understands his difficulty in expressing his pride or approval directly to her, whilst she has anger towards her mother for not being stronger and more assertive.

Alta's difficulty in seeing her mother in terms of the generation, or the era, in which she grew up and married her father, may be due to the fact that, Alta looks at her mother through her eyes, which are influenced by a modern day perspective and exposure to different ideas.

Due to her childhood experiences, Alta refuses to marry a man who has "traditional beliefs" like her father. She wants her husband to treat her as an equal partner in their marriage and to be a loving, emotionally present father to their children, not distant like she experiences her father to be. Furthermore, when she marries, she refuses to be the type of wife that her mother was and therefore refuses to sacrifice her career for her husband and children.

## Depression

A dominant theme in Alta's retold story is her desire to be in control. The initial abuse happened when Alta was very young and she may have felt that she had no control over it. In order to protect herself from future abuse, she may have felt that being in control would safeguard her from being harmed. However, despite her efforts to always be in control, it was not always the case. Her inability to control everything that happened in her life seemed to have contributed to her depression. Furthermore, her attempts to deal with her depression seemed to exacerbate it.

In her childhood, for the most part, it appears that Alta was able to 'hide' from her gender identity by being a tomboy. However, despite her determination not to be female, in adolescence her sexual development confirmed her status as a female. Furthermore, the beginning of her menstrual cycle signaled an end to her childhood. As she was not a "child or a girl anymore [but rather] a woman," she had to "sit nice and behave nice," therefore, she may have felt that her emerging sexuality robbed her of the protection that she may have felt as a tomboy, and thereby possibly contributing to her depression.

As already discussed, Alta's desire to excel in whatever she did was motivated by her desire for attention and recognition from her father. Therefore, Alta adopted a "work-o-holic" attitude towards her studies and training, because she felt that if she studied and trained hard then she could control the results that she got in these activities. However, it seemed that, no matter how hard she studied or trained, she could not always be the best and this added to the depression and frustration she experienced towards herself and her situation. However, it also seemed that the more she succeeded, the more her father may have expected from her, which made Alta feel that for her father, whatever she achieved was "never enough." This seemed to have caused a vicious cycle in which Alta felt that her achievements were never good enough to please her father, which in turn made her feel not good enough and therefore contributed to her depression.

As a way of coping with her difference to her female peers and feeling like an "outcast" in relation to them, it seemed that Alta spent her free time training for athletics or studying. This in turn seemed to have further alienated her from her peers who were interested in other pursuits, like makeup, dancing and men. This possibly increased her alienation, which seemed to have contributed to her depression.

Alta's relationship with her abusive boyfriend may have been an attempt to gain control over her body and mastery over the abuse that she experienced earlier in her life. However, she could not force her body to feel "comfortable with" sexual intercourse, which could have also contributed to her depression.

Therefore, it seems that despite Alta's intentions and attempts to be in control of her life, she could not control everything in her life. Therefore, her depression

and frustration seemed related to her "not being able to change anything" regarding events in her life – for example, going to a different high school to her friends, the results that she got, her emerging breasts, her menstrual cycle and being female.

## Outer Appearance versus Inner Feelings

As already discussed, as a child, Alta wore dresses but her behaviour typified that of a tomboy rather than a little girl.

During her abusive relationship, Alta dressed in a way that pleased her boyfriend and she may have conducted herself in a certain manner to get his attention. However, inside she disliked what her dressing and behaviour may have provoked, that is, sexual intercourse. Although she refused to feel her body and "did not care what happensed to it," she also used her body "in a more stereotypical way, to get attention from" her boyfriend. Although Alta strongly disagrees with the social prescription of a woman's submissiveness in a relationship with a man, it appears that she fulfilled this role in her abusive relationship, thereby being untrue to her strongly held beliefs.

## Conclusion

Alta appears to have begun the process of rejecting her femininity after the sexual abuse she suffered at the age of five. However, although as a child, she may have been angry at and blamed her body for the abuse, it appears that the active rejection of her body only began later in life, when her sexuality began to emerge. It seemed that as a child, because she was a tomboy, she did not feel the

need to reject her body, but rather to reject the social restrictions of being female. That is, because she was a tomboy, she did not have to abide by the restrictions placed on girls.

However, in adolescence, with her budding sexuality, it became evident to her that she had to become a woman as her body was forcing her female status on to her. Because she did not want to be female, she felt the need to mentally separate from her body, which she may have felt was betraying her.

The gradual separation from her body seemed to have been spurred on by her anger at the demeaning social and cultural expectations society set upon women, which may have made her feel even more determined not to be a woman, and therefore she separated further from her female body.

The separation from her body reached its peak in early adulthood, when she felt that her body was "nothing of" hers and she did not care what happened to it. During that time, she became involved in a sexually abusive relationship, but could not perceive it as such early in the relationship.

**Reclaiming her Femininity**

The reclaiming process took Alta years to achieve and still she does not feel that she has fully reclaimed her body and therefore her feminity. Unlike the rejection process, it seemed that the reclaiming process occurred in two phases, and it required a conscious effort on her part. Alta first reclaimed the social expectations of being a woman and then gradually, she reclaimed her body.

External Support

Alta began to change her perception of femininity when she entered university, and

> *came into contact with other people from families who are not as traditional, not as patriarchal [as her family is] and [there was] exposure to other ideas and beliefs.*

This different perspective on 'reality' opened her up to the possibility that there were alternatives to her family structure and that different beliefs about gender roles were possible and existed.

Furthermore, she found support for her "alternative beliefs" that contrasted vastly to her father's "traditional beliefs," both in "the formal structure of the university and informally, with the friends and other people [she met]." Finding support for her ideas and beliefs may have made her feel less 'strange' and less of an "outcast", because she said: "As strange as my ideas may be, there are fifty others who share them with me," and therefore she felt that she was finally understood by others and felt that she belonged.

This external acceptance could have been the catalyst for her changing perceptions about femininity. That is, she may have realised that being feminine did not necessarily entail being submissive and weak. She may have found in

the formal university setting, females who had recognition and status, which she perceived as signs of being strong and powerful. Therefore, her ideas of what femininity entailed were questioned. Finding support for who she was and what she believed in may have given Alta the courage to

> *decide that this is what I want to do with my life whether it be a very female or very male role. Basically it is making decisions, so that other people can't choose for you anymore.*

Through the years, she has become comfortable in her beliefs and has consciously decided not to define what she does in terms of gender roles. That is, she stopped defining her behaviour in terms of gender, instead in terms of whether she wants to do something or not and she does not feel the need to do things that make her uncomfortable or go against her beliefs and personality. That is, although Alta may perform typical female activities (for example, bake a cake), she does not define it as her role or duty to bake a cake, but rather as her wish or desire to make a cake, because she may feel like eating a cake. Therefore, Alta has reclaimed control in the choices she makes and the attitudes she takes.

## Reclaiming her Body

It appears that Alta began to reclaim her body after she ended her abusive relationship and attended psychotherapy.

Conquering her Fear of Reclaiming her Body

Alta was encouraged to become aware of her body by her male therapist. This entailed touching her body and consciously being aware of her body. For example while she was

> *running or jogging [she had to], really be aware of ... [her] toes [and] how do they feel in [her] shoes, and make a cognitive decision to be aware of that body part. Okay, then you would move up. Toes, ankles, knees, everywhere.*

However, Alta "could not understand the purpose of reclaiming the body" and was resistant because she was afraid to become aware of her body because she felt:

> *In my mind, if I am aware of my body then it means that other people will also be aware of my body and it was my body that got me into trouble in the first place.*

Therefore, she resisted 'finding' her body. She would start the process of reclaiming her body, but it seemed that as soon as she felt threatened by it, she stopped becoming aware of her body. The process of starting and abruptly stopping the process continue for years. Finally, in the last two years, Alta managed to really become aware of her body. It seemed that when she began feeling her body, she was filled with desire to know it better.

Appreciation for her Body

Alta is able to appreciate her body to an extent. While feeling and sensually touching her body, she realised that although her body is not that of "a pinup" supermodel, her body does "actually... look quite beautiful" and she gradually began to appreciate the beauty of her body and stopped "seeing [it as] a piece of flesh." Therefore, she has changed her perception of her body from a machine to a living, human body, which she can appreciate.

As Alta reclaimed her body and began to appreciate her body, her internal changing perceptions of herself manifested in her changing the type of clothing that she wore. As opposed to the harsh "t-shirts and baggy pants," she now prefers to "wear soft clothing that [she can] feel on [her] skin." Alta also feels that the softer, feminine clothing that she wears is "an expression of [her] personality," and her comfort with her femininity. Her acceptance and her appreciation of her body have resulted in her feeling "calmer in [her] body [and] much more relaxed in general."

Although Alta appreciates her body, she does not "fully understand why [men] find [her] body attractive or appealing." That is, she does not understand what men find so appealing in the female form. Therefore, she is aware that she has not entirely reclaimed her body and feels that she needs "to feel safe wherever [she] goes. Now it is limited to certain people and certain places."

Becoming Vulnerable

Alta grew up in a family that has no physical contact between members, and because of the sexual abuse that she experienced at a young age, she has avoided physical contact for most of her life. Although she had always had the desire for contact from her family, this need remained largely unfulfilled. Part of Alta's process of reclaiming her body involved re-connecting her emotions with her body. This entailed, for example, stroking her "arm or neck to comfort" herself while she watched a sad movie. As Alta became aware of her body and her emotions, she became aware of her need for physical contact. This desire reached its peak at the beginning of this year when she felt her body tingling with sensual energy and needed to be touched, not sexually touched, but rather a sensual need for human contact that could be fulfilled by anyone.

When she experimented with the desire for human contact by allowing her boyfriend to touch her, she felt that it was "physically pleasing, it was soothing and calming [and] at the same time it was very intense." Her intense anxiety was because she felt what she was "doing led [her] to a relationship that [she] thought was a 'no-no,' so there was [a sense of] high danger and high [alertness]." Her calmness seemed to be because she felt safe with her boyfriend and it was satisfying her need for physical contact.

Through repeated, controlled and gentle touching by her boyfriend, she was able to increase her sense of pleasure and decrease her anxiety. That is, she began to feel safer and this decreased the tension that she had felt earlier. Through the slow process of trusting her boyfriend not to hurt her, she began to relax and

enjoy the physical touching, that is, unlike in the beginning, her body did not get cold and tense in order to defend itself from abuse.

Although she enjoys physical contact with her boyfriend, she is unable to completely surrender to the pleasure that she feels, that is, the "pleasure [is] in a sense controlled" because she feels that she "can't experience it fully in case something goes wrong." In an attempt to be in control she prefers to dictate the time and the type of physical contact, although she does not reject her boyfriend when he makes the first move. Alta may still be wary of being hurt or being taken 'advantage of,' and therefore her need to feel in control.

## Conclusion

It seemed as if Alta's reclaiming process has been a conscious attempt to reclaim what she had lost early in her childhood. It is also evident that she has not fully reclaimed her femininity in that she still feels uncomfortable in her body and with her status as a woman at times. Although she still needs to work on the reclaiming process, she seems determined to enjoy her femininity and is proud to be female.

Unlike with the rejection process, the reclaiming of her femininity appears to have occurred in two separate stages. First, she reclaimed the social aspect of her femininity. This occurred when she entered university and found **external support** for her ideas and way of life. Her previous restrictive definitions of what femininity entailed were questioned by exposure to new and alternative ways to what she had experienced. Alta also found support for her way of

thinking and her beliefs. Therefore, she felt that she could be who she wanted to be without feeling rejected or as an outcast.

Because of her extreme disassociation from her body, consciously "bringing [her]self back into [her] body, took a long time." Alta first had to **conquer her fear of reclaiming her body** because she thought that if she were to become aware of her body then so too would others become aware of her body, and this scared her. With the support and encouragement of her therapist, Alta began to bring herself back into her body. This entailed physically touching her body; being aware of how different parts of her body felt during different activities; looking at her body with appreciation; and reconnecting her emotions with her body.

Gradually, through physically touching and looking at her body, she began to **appreciate her body.** She felt that it was beautiful and she also changed her choice of clothing to reflect her connection to her body. As Alta began to reconnect emotions with her body, her body began to tingle with sensual energy. For the tingling to end, she needed someone to physically touch her skin. Although Alta was afraid to allow her boyfriend to touch her because of her previous experiences, she eventually allowed him to gentle touch her skin when it was tingling. In this way, Alta became **vulnerable** to abuse, because what she was doing had led her into her previous abusive relationship. Although she was very anxious at the start, her anxiety gradually decreased and her pleasure in touching and being touched by her boyfriend increased.

## Redefinition of Femininity

Although Alta resisted redefining femininity because of her conscious decision not to define things that she does according to gender, after persuasion by the researcher, she feels that being feminine is:

> *Being the person I like to be without being ashamed of it or having to explain it to anyone. Being comfortable with being who I am.*

The above definition is understandable in light of her experiences during the rejection of her femininity, when she possibly felt ashamed of who she was and was not comfortable with herself and in her body. At the end of the interview, Alta expressed her pride and joy at being female because:

> *We have brains, we have beauty, we have lots more choices than men. And we have broken lots of our stereotypes and really fought for our rights and which I think men are just discovering now... I think they just have more constraints, we are allowed to express our emotions. You can just walk into a department store and see women's clothing stretching out and men's clothing in a small section. In a sense, we are freer and for me we are more in tune with other people.*

Although her pride at being female is based on external representations of femininity, like fighting for rights, clothing, and having greater freedom of choice; for the first time in Alta's life, she is able to feel proud of herself

because she is a woman, and not a man. According to Alta "being a woman is so cool. Who would want to be a man?"

## Effects on the Researcher

Knowing about Alta's journey has given the researcher the opportunity to better understand Alta, in relation to her discomfort with sexist jokes and her discomfort at being stared at by men in public places. The researcher admires Alta for her strength and determination to reclaim her femininity despite her overwhelming fears. She feels that Alta definitely shows strength of character because despite being hurt in her previous abusive relationship, she is willing to trust her current boyfriend not to hurt her and to respect her wishes regarding where and how to touch her. The researcher also feels that Alta's current boyfriend has contributed greatly to Alta's reclaiming of her femininity and her pride at being female. Possibly for the first time in her life, Alta is experiencing true joy at being a woman. Her satisfaction with being female is evident in her feminine dressing and her mannerisms.

The researcher also feels that she is better able to understand the effects of abuse on women. That is, not only does abuse destroy a woman's self-esteem, it can also destroy her relationship with her body, in terms of rejecting her body and blaming it for the abuse. Although the separation is a defense mechanism, as in Alta's case, it could also perpetuate the problem.

The researcher feels that because Alta's rejection of her femininity was so extreme, it necessitated a long reclaiming process and she still seems to have a long way to go, before she is fully comfortable 'in her skin.' However, the

researcher is convinced that since Alta has reclaimed aspects of her femininity, nothing will stop her from continuing the journey to finding herself.

## Effects on Alta

Alta found the interview to be emotionally charged, especially with regard to her father. She realised her relationship with him has and possibly always will be unfulfilling from her perspective. During the interview, she was comfortable discussing her sexual abuse, because she had worked on it in therapy over the years. Furthermore, she was glad to share the effects that the initial abuse had on her, so that others could know about the effects of abuse and how "it changed" her.

Reading the researcher's rendition of her story made Alta feel a bit depressed because she feels that her issues have been with her for so long and it seems that she may never be free of them. It was also painful for her to read of her experiences because it brought them back to conscious memory, which may have contributed to her depressed feelings while reading the researcher's re-telling of her story.

Alta felt that the researcher had portrayed her experience in a satisfactory manner and she allowed her boyfriend to read it. This indicates her willingness to share her life with her boyfriend and for him to understand her better.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher has outlined Alta's experience of rejecting and reclaiming her femininity.

Although Alta discussed the process of her rejection of her femininity according to the two aspects of femininity that she felt characterised the journey of rejecting and reclaiming her femininity, it was evident that both aspects were simultaneously rejected. The themes that characterised Alta's rejection of her femininity are the following:

⇒ Negative Attitude towards her body

⇒ Anger at Patriarchy as a Societal Norm

⇒ Adopting masculinity

⇒ Relationship with her Parents

⇒ Depression

⇒ Outer Appearance versus Inner Feelings

Alta first reclaimed the social aspect of her femininity, by finding **external support** for what she believed in. The reclaiming of her body took longer and she feels that she still needs to work on reclaiming her body. The themes that characterised her reclaiming of her body are the following:

⇒ Conquering her fear of reclaiming her body

⇒ Appreciation of her body

⇒ Becoming vulnerable

Although this is the researcher's version of Alta's journey, she had attempted to remain true to Alta's experiences and to be fair in her comments regarding Alta.

CHAPTER 7

# MY STORY OF MARNA

## Personal Data

| | |
|---|---|
| Participant: | Marna |
| Age at interview: | 30 years old |
| Marital Status: | Married |
| Number of children | None |
| Religion: | Christian |
| Number of interviews: | 2 |

## Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will firstly explain her relationship with Marna, and discuss the settings in which the interviews were conducted. Based on the transcribed interviews and the researcher's retelling of Marna's journey (which can be found in Appendix D), the researcher will discuss themes, which she felt, characterised Marna's rejection of her femininity, and the themes that characterised the reclaiming thereof.

It is important for the reader to bear in mind that this re-telling of Marna's journey is punctuated according to how the researcher understands Marna's rejection and reclaiming of her femininity and it is also tainted by the

researchers frame of reference. Therefore, this is the researcher's interpretation of Marna's experience and although she attempted to remain true to Marna's experience, the following cannot be seen as the only truth.

## Research Setting

Marna and the researcher have been friends for three years.

Towards the end of last year, Marna and her husband moved to America. Marna and the researcher have maintained contact throughout this year. When the researcher approached Marna to ask for her participation in this research, Marna was eager to assist, but was unsure if her 'story' would be useful. Having known a bit about Marna's childhood and her current circumstances, the researcher felt that Marna fulfilled the requirements for participations and told this to Marna. Marna, however, was unconvinced, but she agreed to the interviews.

Marna required two interviews of about an hour and a half each. The interviews were conducted at Marna's mother's home, while Marna and her husband were in South Africa for a holiday. The interviews were conducted in the guest bedroom, at night, in an attempt to limit distractions. However, there were still the occasional disruptions that required Marna's attention. For the duration of the interviews, both the researcher and Marna conducted themselves in a formal manner.

Marna is the eldest of two children. Her brother is two and a half years younger than she is. Marna grew up in South Africa. She is currently living with her husband in America.

## Rejection of Femininity

Before the age of ten, Marna does not think that she objected to being a girl because she had a "pink room ... and [she] liked ballet classes." Although she felt she "was always a bit wild," she attributed this to the farm environment in which she grew up. She said: "I did rough things, as the environment required of me, like gathering cattle on horseback; and having an interest in wild animals, because they were there." As a child, she perceived a woman to be

> *someone who is married to a husband and takes care of him and raises their children. And she cannot do certain things well, like deal with rough things. And she does things like cooking and sewing and spending a lot of time dressing up, and chats with other woman.*

Marna feels that she started the process of rejecting her femininity when her breasts began developing at the age of ten. To her, this was the "final sign that [she] had to be like [her] mother to be accepted by [her father]".

Because Marna was uncertain of whether or not her 'story' was valid for this study, she began the first interview by discussing what femininity meant for her. She defined femininity as:

*When you do female things, like being soft and non-assertive and non-aggressive, and using your emotions, and you do the things society sees as female, like clean the house and seduce your husband, and wear pink, if pink is fashionable... Femininity must also have to do with nurturing children, fertility. I can identify with that somehow, because I know I'll be better than males and they can't do that.*

The following themes characterised the process of Marna's rejection of her femininity:

⇒ Relationship with her Father

⇒ Relationship with her Mother

⇒ Sacrificing her Needs for Others

⇒ Low Self-esteem

<u>Relationship with her Father</u>

Marna loved and desperately wanted approval from her father. Her father was not always at home; therefore, his time with the family was precious. Because he was the head of the family, it seemed that Marna might have felt that if she were close to him, it would have increased her status in the family. Her need to impress her father and thereby possibly increase her status in her family was a result of her feeling that: "My brother always had preference because he was the son, and because I was the daughter, I was last in the pecking order."

Because her father was involved in a relationship with her mother, Marna realised:

> *I could not compete with my mother to get [my father's] attention, because I cannot be as pretty as her, and as feminine as her. [Therefore] I had to become more like my brother, and compete with him to get my father's attention.*

In Marna's attempt to compete with her brother, she "tried to kill him [and] degraded him [because] he was a rival." It seemed that Marna felt that her father never had time for her; therefore, she felt she had to 'steal' his time away from her mother or brother. To achieve this, she needed to challenge them for attention from her father.

Although Marna loved her father and was intellectually close to him, as was evident in him discussing his work and politics with her, she felt that they could not relate to one another on an emotional level. She said:

> *Our relationship was ambivalent, in that I so much fancied him and so much wanted to be closer to him, but there wasn't even the road to go there. I just had this unrealised need to be closer, but I had such anxiety about that, and could not make it overt, as if the message was also there not to get close.*

From the age of ten, Marna felt that her father gave her mixed signals of his expectations of her to be both masculine and feminine. Therefore, because of her uncertainty of what he expected from her, Marna was afraid to get close to him because she felt that he would be disappointed in the male-identified female that she was becoming. Therefore, she "was scared of him - not because [she] had fear of him being violent, but of being rejected."

## Relationship with her Mother

It seemed as if, with the intense desire to please her father, Marna might have felt the need to reject her mother. That is, as a child, Marna "did not use her [mother for] guidance; all that mattered to [her] while [her father] was still alive, was what he thought was good" for her. Therefore, it appears that because of her desire to be accepted by her father, Marna and her mother never seemed to develop a close mother-daughter relationship.

Furthermore, as already discussed, Marna regarded her mother as her rival, who had her father's attention "because she was still his wife, and they were very close, and he loved her." Marna felt that the only way in which she could compete with her mother for her father's attention was to be different to her mother. She achieved this by "being on time, reading things about the world, watching the news on TV, so that [she] could show her father that [she] knew about" what went on in the world and politics. In that way, Marna became different to her mother.

Another reason why Marna did not bond with her mother was that she perceived her mother to be weak and vulnerable in comparison to her father. Marna felt that her mother was

> *unable to become who she is and to live her personality, because she was constantly having to succumb to her husband's needs and cultural and religious expectations all the time.*

Furthermore, Marna felt that her mother "only [had] authority [over them] as children because [they] knew that [their mother] would tell [their] father if [they] didn't listen to her." Marna "realised that her [mother's] role [was] so utterly flimsy, only depended on [her] father's authority and her position as his wife." Therefore, Marna believed that her mother would not be able to function in the world or do anything on her own. Because she saw her mother as weak and incompetent, Marna did not want to emulate her mother.

Furthermore, Marna was angry at her mother for not being a suitable role model as she felt that her mother portrayed the image of the typical Afrikaner submissive wife. This anger was evident when Marna said:

> *I remember, the one day she gave us both a hiding, about the only one I recall, and with good reason, but the first thing she did when my father came home was to tell him. Why on earth couldn't she make a stand by herself?*

Because Marna did not consider her mother a suitable role model, she actively rejected her femininity only when she started developing breasts, which she felt

> *was evidence that I am a woman and I have to accept it, but I couldn't, as mum's version of femininity was just too overwhelming.*

At that time, Marna thought that the only way in which she could express her femininity was for her to be like her mother. However, she could not accept her mother's type of femininity because it made Marna feel, "vulnerable when having to deal with the world." Therefore, when Marna began her menstrual cycle, she refused to tell her mother because she feared that her mother "would [want to] discuss feminine things with [her] or feel that she could come close to" her. Furthermore, Marna found her mother to be "emotionally intrusive." Therefore, Marna did not feel it was 'safe' to get emotionally close to her mother. This lack of closeness is evident when Marna said:

> *I have always been scared of my mother coming too close to me - at times physically as well, as I felt that she would prey on my feelings. As a result, I have grown up as a non-expressive child.*

Marna's impression of her mother improved when her mother began to work outside of the home when Marna was fourteen years old. Marna was "proud of [her mother] and liked the fact that she could cope, [and she] respected her [mother] more then" before. Marna felt, for the first time in her life, that her mother was showing her, "the more competitive and competent side of being a

woman", which Marna approved of. Although Marna was proud of her mother, she was unable to incorporate the positive characteristics of her mother into the pervasive negative image that she had of her mother. Therefore, she could not perceive her mother as a suitable role model for her to emulate.

Marna's discomfort in being emotionally close to her mother became apparent when her father died. During this emotionally difficult time, Marna could not express her feelings to her mother, as she felt that she had to be strong because her mother was in a "complete state after [Marna's father] died." Therefore, even during a time when they may have needed each other the most, it seemed that they were unable to connect on a deep emotional level and to share their pain and grief with each other.

After her father's death, Marna continued to reject her mother because Marna was afraid of becoming emotionally dependent like her mother. Her fear of becoming her mother became evident in Marna's extreme attempt to differentiate herself from her mother, at the age of twenty. Because Marna "despised the fact that they have the same sort of bodily shape," in an attempt "to differentiate from her [mother, Marna] was on [her] way to becoming anorexic," until her therapist intervened and stopped her.

Although Marna is afraid of becoming a dependent person like her mother, she has incorporated some of her mother's characteristics into her personality. For example, in university, when she wanted to attract a boyfriend, she felt that she "advertised" her availability in a similar manner to what she presumes her mother would have done, that is, by being thin and caring. Like her mother, Marna also likes "making the place look pretty, [enjoys] being a good hostess

and is capable of empathising." Therefore, although Marna tried to differentiate from her mother by adopting her father's interests, she seems to have incorporated some of her mother's characteristics into her personality. The subtle incorporation of her mother's similarities seems to scare Marna into the possibility of her becoming her mother.

Therefore, at times, Marna feels the need to consciously differentiate herself from her mother, possibly when she feels that she is becoming too much like her mother. To this end, she

> *consciously thinks of outer things that differentiates [her] from her [mother], like the fact that [she has] studied further than her [mother] did, that [she] can't cook well, etc., to remind [herself] that [she is] not her [mother].*

The fear of becoming her mother also stops Marna from having a child. Marna feels that having a child would "reduce the time that [she] can spend in [her] other role as a person who is able to participate in the world." Therefore, Marna believes that if she has a child, she would become "dependent [and] emotionally immature", as she perceived her mother to be. Furthermore, Marna seems to think that dependency leads to weakness and necessitates submissive behaviours.

Because Marna exhibits a very restrictive way of viewing her mother in terms of only the negative characteristics, Marna separated from her mother by rejecting her femininity as well as rejecting her mother as a suitable role model.

## Sacrificing her Needs for Others

As a child, Marna felt that "the only way [she] could have access to [her father] was when [she] joined [him] in doing boyish things". Therefore, Marna became "boyish" at a young age. She enjoyed riding horses (the masculine way) with her father and she took part in rodeo riding and competitive horse riding because he wanted her to do so. As a child, Marna may have felt that there was no place for her to be feminine because her father wanted her to be "boyish."

At the age of ten Marna's sexual development began. Her mother told her "that [her father] does not want [her] to be like his sisters, who are all good women and wives, but very unsophisticated… and very rough." Therefore, from the age of ten onwards, Marna was uncertain as to whether her father expected her to be "boyish" or feminine like her mother, because he continually gave her contradicting messages to be both masculine and feminine.

Marna was a tomboy from a young age. After the age of ten when her sexual development began, her father continued to encourage her to "successful out there in the world" and "competitive". Marna associates these traits with masculinity and therefore she felt that her father wanted her to be masculine, and in that way, unlike her mother, whom she perceives as very feminine. Marna felt that her father also encouraged her to be unlike her mother by "discussing his work, politics and religion" with her, and not with her mother. In a way, Marna felt that her father thought that she "was competent, even though [she] was a woman." Therefore, it appeared that Marna might have sacrificed developing her own interests by adopting her father's interest in an attempt to get close to him.

However, from the age of ten, Marna also felt that her father encouraged her to be feminine, like her mother. As already discussed, Marna did not want to be feminine as defined by her mother, because she felt that it would make her vulnerable. However, when she felt that her father expected her to be feminine, she pretended to be feminine, for her father's sake. For example, for Marna's first horse riding competition, her mother made Marna "a blouse with a lot of lace on the collar, and a velvet jacket." Marna did not like the blouse and the jacket, because "they were too feminine" and she "felt silly" wearing them. However, she did not object to wearing them, because she may have felt that her father would not have approved of her rejecting her femininity or her mother's efforts to be supportive of her. Although Marna did not want to be feminine, she felt that she had to sacrifice the desire not to be feminine, and pretended to accept her femininity, by wearing the feminine blouse and jacket, for her father to accept her.

Although Marna had an intense desire to please her father, she seemed uncertain as to what he expected of her, that is whether he wanted her to be similar to or different from her mother. Therefore, it seemed that in an attempt to please her father, Marna sacrificed her need to develop her own identity and became "boyish" most of the time and pretended to be feminine when she thought she was expected to be feminine.

A month before her 16th birthday, Marna's father passed away. Thereafter, Marna felt that she had to "became the dad in the house" and took over most of the responsibilities of the family and the farm. That is, she sacrificed her need to be supported and to grieve for her father, for the sake of her family. Although

Marna became depressed soon after her father passed away, she could not express her depression, as there seemed to be no place for her pain. Marna sacrificed her need to be supported, so that she could emotionally support her family.

When Marna went to university, although she did not want to study medicine, she studied it because her extended family expected her to do so. Therefore, she sacrificed her desire to study psychology for the sake of her family. Fortunately, Marna failed first year medicine, and therefore she was able to pursue a career in psychology.

When Marna married, she felt that she had to be a "good woman." That is, while her husband studied, she attempted to take care of him, their home and their marriage while still trying to study psychology on a part time basis. That is, she sacrificed herself for what she felt she needed to do for her husband and their marriage. However, after a year of placing her husband's needs and the needs of their marriage before her own need of studying, she realised that her husband thought of her as a submissive, traditional wife, which she did not want to be. This became evident to Marna, towards the end of their first year of marriage, when her husband decided, without consulting with her, that they would move to America. Although Marna did not want to move, she felt that she "had no choice" because her husband was financially stronger than she was and therefore, he had more power than she did in their marriage. Therefore, Marna sacrificed her need to actively pursue a career in psychology so that she could take care of her husband, their home and their marriage.

## Low Self-Esteem

When Marna started school, she achieved good results. Because her father "approved of [her] academic achievements, and it became the one thing [she] could do better than [her] brother, [she] excelled" at it. Her father's pride in Marna's academic achievements was evident in him encouraging her, from a young age, to further her studies at university. He was willing to sacrifice the farm in order to pay for her tuition. However, in adolescence, because Marna was anxious about her emerging sexuality, there was a decline in her academic performances, which may have caused her father to feel disappointed in her. Therefore, she felt she was "not able to please anyone with who [she was], just with how well [she] performed", which may have made her feel that she was not good enough, therefore contributing to her low self-esteem.

As a child, Marna's mother dressed her up with flowers in her hair. Although she feels that it may have been cute, she recalls feeling "like a clown" and that her mother made her "look silly." Therefore, it seemed that from a young age, Marna felt that she looked silly in feminine dressing. Her resentment at her mother for "making [her] look more feminine than [she] wanted to be," was also evident in Marna feeling that she was forced to wear the feminine blouse and jacket that her mother had made for her for her first riding competition. Therefore, Marna seemed angry at her mother for making her look feminine, which she equated to looking and feeling silly. Marna felt that dressing in a feminine manner made her feel silly and therefore contributed to her low self-esteem.

As Marna grew older, she stopped wearing dresses and only wore them on Sundays to church because she was forced to do so, and she cut her long hair very short. On one occasion, her father bought Marna a dress and she felt that it was "a traumatising experience [because she] could hardly stand the look of [her]self in a dress." Therefore, although Marna desired approval from her father, even he could not encourage her to dress in a more feminine manner or to identify with her femininity during adolescence, because of her feeling that she looked ugly in dresses. Therefore, she had a negative perception of herself as a female, and consequently, had low self-esteem.

Marna's low self-esteem was also evident in her relationships with her mother. When Marna compared herself to her mother, Marna always came up short, and Therefore felt despondent about herself. This was evident, when at the age of 14, Marna recalls:

> *Standing in front of the mirror, realising that I'm* ***so*** *ugly, and I will never be as pretty as my mother, who happened to have gone through life as rather pretty, and I felt hopeless!*

Marna continued to feel inferior to her mother after she went to university. After her first boyfriend ended their relationship, Marna felt: "he also wants someone like my mother, very feminine, and I wasn't good enough." She also felt she was "too fat and ugly to keep a boyfriend." Because Marna compared herself to her mother, she felt inferior to her in terms of her femininity, which contributed to her low self-esteem.

Therefore, it seemed that Marna's low self-esteem was related to her discomfort at being feminine, and in that respect, feeling inferior to her mother.

## Conclusion

Although Marna felt that she began to reject her femininity around the age of ten, it seemed that she rejected aspects of her femininity long before the age of ten. That is, she was always "wild" and according to her definition of femininity, she felt that a woman "cannot do certain things well, like deal with rough things," at which she seemed to excel.

It seemed that Marna's rejection of her femininity was influenced by her desire to please her father, whom she felt only acknowledged her when she was "boyish." When her sexuality began to emerge, Marna began to receive mixed messages from her father to be both masculine and feminine. However, Marna did not want to be feminine like her mother, because she experienced her mother's type of femininity as threatening. Furthermore, Marna seemed to be angry at her mother for being a traditional wife, who sacrificed everything for her husband. Because Marna only saw her mother in a negative light, and seemed to disregard her positive qualities, Marna did not regard her mother as a suitable role model for her to emulate. As a result of Marna's similarities to her mother, in terms of having a similar body shape and similar interests like interior decorating, Marna felt that she needed to reject her femininity to avoid becoming her mother. Marna may have also rejected her mother and her femininity because she felt that in comparison to her mother, she was always the 'ugly duckling.'

## Reclaiming her Femininity

Marna did not consciously reclaim her femininity. Like with the rejection, the reclaiming of her femininity seemed to have occurred in conjunction with changes in her environment. The following themes characterised the reclaiming of her femininity:

⇒ Physical Separations

⇒ External Support

⇒ Sexual Exploration

⇒ Willingness to Risk Vulnerability

### Separation from her Parents

It seemed that Marna needed physical and emotional distance from her parents for her to explore her femininity without fear of rejection or competition.

Although tragic, her father's untimely death gave Marna the space she needed to experiment with and express her femininity without feeling burdened by his expectations of wanting her to be both masculine and feminine. Marna's freedom to explore her femininity after her father's death became evident when

> *weeks after his death, [she] started growing [her] hair, and wearing skirts. Before, [she] only wore a dress to church because [she] had to, and [she] had a short, boy's-cut hair.*

After her father's death, Marna entered a depression. However, this went unnoticed until the end of her first year in university, when her boyfriend ended their relationship. For her, that "was the last straw." She may have felt as if she was losing her father again because, once again, she had lost an important man in her life. Therefore, Marna began psychotherapy to assist her to cope with her depression. Living at the university residence allowed Marna to be physically separated from her mother. Her depression and resultant need for psychotherapy appeared to have allowed her to mentally separate from her parents. Therefore, she was able to focus on herself and what she wanted, rather than fulfilling or rejecting her parents' expectations of her. The physical and emotional separation from her parents allowed Marna to live her life according to her expectations and desires.

When Marna married, she moved out of residence and lived with her husband. Once again, Marna had space from her mother and could explore and experiment with being the type of wife that she wanted to be, without her mother instructing her on the appropriate behaviour of a wife. By the time that Marna and her husband moved in with her mother, five years into her marriage, their marital relationship was fairly secure as they had already negotiated their roles in their marriage. Marna felt that her mother could not interfere with her expression of her femininity in her marriage because her husband had already partly accepted her for the woman that she was. Therefore, the separation from her mother was necessary for Marna and her husband to develop their own role definitions in their marriage.

However, it seemed that Marna allowed her mother's presence to interfere, on a subtle level, in her marriage. This became evident in that, since they moved

overseas last year, Marna's relationship with her husband has improved greatly and she feels that they are closer and more supportive of each other now, than in the past. Therefore, it seems that Marna does not feel completely free to express her femininity in her mother's presence.

Therefore, it seemed that with her father's death, Marna felt she was free to explore what femininity meant to her and to establish her own identity. When Marna left home for university she was able to define femininity according to her own terms, without feeling that she had to be like her mother to be acceptable. After marriage, it seemed that the physical and emotional separation from her mother was necessary for Marna to establish her marital relationship according to her expression of femininity.

It seemed that the physical and emotional separation from her mother was also necessary for Marna to build her relationship with her mother. Marna feels that she is now, for the first time in her life, capable of allowing her mother "close [to her]...without feeling swamped" by her mother, and therefore they have "a bit of a mother-daughter" relationship. The improvement in Marna's relationship with her mother is evident because Marna said:

> *We get on well. I have accepted her feminine ways, and she has accepted my expression thereof. I give her pink paintings, as I know she loves it, and she gives me stuff from the bush, as she knows I love that ... I rely on her for emotional support now, although I will not show her much of my raw feelings! I am still scared to see hers as well.*

## External Support

After her father's death, although Marna took on most of the 'masculine' responsibilities, like taking care of the horses, changing the light bulbs and doing the electrical work at home; her mother and her aunt, who came to help them, assisted her in looking after the farm. Because femininity was redefined, in terms of being "more functional, not only pretty", Marna began to re-evaluate her previous negative attitude regarding femininity. After her father's death, Marna's father's friend encouraged her to be feminine and with him, Marna felt "it was okay to be a woman." Therefore, it seemed that for the first time in her life, Marna felt that she received support and encouragement for her expression of her femininity.

Besides her father's friend, Marna found support for her claim on her femininity from other substitute father figures in the form of a teacher and her psychologist. Marna felt that she was able to reclaim her femininity with these men because they were not involved in a relationship with her mother, and therefore, there was no competition between Marna and her mother for their attention. Moreover, it seemed that these men had a different, less restrictive definition of femininity than her father's traditional definition, which allowed Marna to explore femininity without feeling that it was too restrictive. Again, Marna received external support for her expression of her femininity.

After her father passed away, Marna felt that she "outgrew" her peers on an "abstract" level. At university, Marna lived in a women's residence and bonded with her female peers, while she was recovering from depression. During that time, she seemed to have completed her adolescence experiences, because she

felt that the gap between herself and her peers was no longer apparent. She also felt, during that time, that it was "good to be feminine." It appears that by bonding with her female peers, Marna felt that she received external support for who she was.

At university, Marna felt that she could experiment with being the type of woman that she wanted to be because she was not in her mother's "shadow all the time" and she "didn't feel the need to make a statement about how unfeminine [she] could be." Furthermore, at university, Marna allowed herself to feel feminine without fear of being judged or feeling inferior, as she seemed to feel when she was around her mother. At university, Marna found herself

> *to be more feminine than [her] girlfriends at the residence, [because she] did more dressing up and wore more make-up than most of them. [She] did more interior decorating and was more interested in men.*

Because Marna seemed to manage her femininity better than her female peers did, they held her in high esteem. Therefore, for the first time in her life, Marna felt supported because of her femininity and she enjoyed being a woman.

## Sexual Exploration

After Marna recovered from her depression, she felt that she was ready for a sexual relationship and she felt that she had to make up for lost time. Her previous boyfriend, who recently proclaimed his homosexuality, rejected her need for sexual exploration.

The female environment in the form of the university residence in which Marna lived, saw a woman as being "successful if she had a boyfriend." Marna felt that attracting men "was an easy game to play as [she had] learnt the rules from [her] mother." Therefore, Marna "advertised" her availability, by being very thin, wearing short dresses and having long hair. She was also "caring and concerned," and she consciously tended to her boyfriend's needs. For Marna, this was not an act to attract men; instead, she felt that she became a woman who was sexy, caring, nurturing and dignified. Therefore, it seemed that Marna used her sexuality to attract men and when she found a man that she liked, she used her care and concern to keep him interested in her.

## Changes in her Marital Relationship

Initially, in their marriage, Marna felt that her husband believed in the traditional marital roles where the husband "makes the decisions and [the wife] must comply." However, although initially in their marriage, Marna tried to be the semi-traditional wife by placing her husband's needs before those of her own, she refused to accept the traditional role of depending on her husband for everything and allowing him to dictate the terms of their marriage to her. Marna has studied psychology for most of her married life (except for the year that she was in America with her husband) and she has never depended on her husband to pay any of her tuition fees. In this way, she has always been independent in her marriage.

Marna never appeared to fully accept the traditional role of a wife. This is evident in her actively pursuing a career in psychology "because it is [her] way

of empowering [her]self and [it gives her] an identity as a woman." Although the traditional members of her extended family accept a woman who studies "**in case** she has to earn money for herself", they do not support Marna's active pursuit of her career, because according to them: "[Marna's] career should fit in with [her] marriage, that comes first and you do not do [things] independently from your husband." In this way, Marna refused to fulfill the image of the typical traditional wife, because she was determined to have a career as a psychologist.

Marna's relationship with her husband changed significantly last year, when she threatened to divorce him because he did not consider her needs when he made a unilateral life-changing decision that they should return to America for a few years. Therefore, unlike her relationship with her father, in her marriage, Marna was willing to fight to have her needs considered. However, Marna feels that this would have been the absolute "last resort" as she did not want to start all over again and she loves her husband dearly. Compared to when she first got married, Marna felt more secure in her marriage, and therefore felt that she could fight for her husband to accept her as the non-traditional wife that she was. That is, Marna was no longer willing to pretend to be the traditional wife, and thereby stopped allowing her husband control over her life. Although Marna threatened to divorce her husband, she hoped that they would not divorce because of their love for each other. In an attempt to save their marriage, they went for marital therapy.

Therapy resulted in Marna feeling like an equal partner in their marriage. She became actively involved in making decisions and her husband accepts that

Marna is not a traditional wife who is submissive and will allow him to make all the decisions.

Her husband's acceptance of her definition and expression of her femininity became apparent to Marna when he gave her a watch. The watch was made by a company that previously made only men's watches. The watch was similar to the men's version in that it was "just as resistant and suited to an outdoor lifestyle, but it had been customised for women." Marna feels that her husband giving her this watch symbolises his acceptance that she "can be a woman, and also go to rough places."

Since last year, because of Marna's firm stand on being accepted for who she is, her relationship with her husband has evolved to one in which he

> *supports [her] identity as a wife who also has a career and a life of [her] own. He does not just expect [her] to stay in the role of the serving wife. He realises that [she has] different needs from those that [her] mother had in her marriage. He does not see [her] wrapped in the typical feminine role, and that allows [her] personality to have some room in the relationship.*

Therefore, Marna has changed the definition of what a wife is for both herself and her husband. This is evident in her husband "helping in the house."

## Willingness to Risk Vulnerability

Until recently, Marna did not have any desire to have children because she had

> *a great fear that when [she would] have children, [she would] be like [her] mother and become dependant, and be seen as weak, and exist only as a mother and a wife.*

However, because of the above changes in her marital relationship, Marna feels she "can trust [her husband] more and [they] are both more committed to each other and [their] marriage." The improvement in her marital relationship makes Marna feel "safer and more empowered to venture into having children and being dependent on [her] husband."

Therefore, it appears as if her sense of 'safety' in her marital relationship has allowed her to 'connect' with or to further explore her femininity. That is, Marna feels that she has "peaked sexually" and this has contributed to her "craving... for children," although she is still scared that having children would make her vulnerable like her mother.

Marna also feels that she does not have to be strong and "manly" anymore in order for her husband to consider her needs or to feel that she is an equal partner in their marriage, and she has therefore joined the gym to "have a more attractive body, a female body." Because of her security in her marriage, she is now able to allow herself to be more feminine in her relationship with her husband, which until recently, she associated with being vulnerable.

Therefore, her trust and security in her marriage allows her to be more comfortable in being feminine and still feel that she is able to be functional in the world, like the watch that her husband gave to her.

## Conclusion

It appeared that Marna's process of reclaiming her femininity was influenced by two critical moments in her life. The first was when her father died and the second, was when she threatened to divorce her husband.

When her father died, Marna was physically separated from him, therefore she felt free to explore her femininity without fear of rejection from her father and competition from her mother. Her substitute father figures encouraged her to be feminine, which was redefined in a more practical manner. Later, when Marna went to university, she felt that she could express her femininity because she was no longer close to her mother and therefore, her mother could not criticise her for being 'unfeminine.'

At university, Marna enjoyed being in the female environment of the women's residence. There she felt good to be a woman and her peers seemed to hold her in high esteem because of her ability to manage her femininity better than them. Therefore, it seemed as though Marna needed the support and nurturance of being in a female environment for her femininity to emerge. This re-emergence of her femininity can be likened with a re-birth. That is, after being 'absorbed' in a female environment, Marna seemed to emerge into the world and was ready to accept her role as a woman, as defined by her.

After her 're-emergence' from the feminine world, Marna felt the need for sexual exploration and "advertised" for a man, whom she soon married. Initially, she and her husband had a semi-traditional marital relationship. While he studied and was responsible for making the decisions in their marriage, Marna maintained the house and tended to his needs, while also trying to study.

Their marital relationship changed significantly when Marna threatened to divorce her husband because she felt that he did not consider her needs before he made important decisions. Being on the verge of divorce, both Marna and her husband redefined their relationship in terms of their needs and beliefs, and no longer according to what their culture saw as a husband's or a wife's responsibility in a marriage. Therefore, Marna feels that she and her husband are now committed to their marriage and to each other. Because Marna feels secure in her marriage and her relationship with her husband, she was able to relinquish her 'masculine' identity, and to take on a more feminine role in their marriage. That is, she is willing to consider having children and thereby risk being dependent on her husband.

**Redefinition of Femininity**

Marna's redefinition of womanhood is influenced by her journey in exploring her femininity. It reflects her ability to combine some of her previous attributes of femininity with her changing perceptions about femininity. Therefore, it reflects Marna's determination to define and live her life according to what fits with her personality. Marna's changing redefinition of femininity is evident when she said:

*I am [expressing my femininity] differently from my mum [in] that I am married to my husband, and I am still able to make it out there. And I have had the space to find a different way of doing things, which I'm still developing.*

> *[My idea of femininity] is okay the way it is, whatever my version is. But it's not the same as it was, and it can't be the same as it was, because it is in the process of change.*

Despite her uncertainty regarding her current definition of femininity, Marna feels that womanhood is

> *a state of being shared with other woman. It revolves around doing things slightly differently than men would, as in being more caring and more emotionally attuned and being able to take more things into account than just seeing things from a practical basis... And it has to do with shared experiences like living with men and childbirth and nurturing in general. And it also most of the time concerns itself with specific activities, like decorating and beauty.*

## Effects on the Researcher

Since the researcher knew Marna and saw the visible changes in her over the last year, it influenced the questions that she asked and she was able to use this information to direct Marna's attention to these changes. The researcher also knew a bit about Marna's past, therefore, the beginning of the interview was to clarify her picture and resulted in some of the questions being quite focused.

In writing this chapter, the researcher was struck by Marna's internal conflict with her mother. That is, although Marna emphasized her relationship with her father, it seems that her relationship with her mother was just as crucial to both the rejection of her femininity as well as the reclaiming thereof.

The researcher also has admiration for Marna, who has fought to be understood, in her marriage as different to her mother and the traditional definition of women. The researcher also feels that despite her uncertainty of her definition of femininity, she is able to be comfortable with being female and that seems to be a big step for Marna. That is, for the first time in her life, she seems able to incorporate the 'softer' side of femininity into her personality. As Marna said, she does not need to be "manly" anymore, and the researcher was able to notice this 'softer' Marna when the researcher visited Marna to interview her. The researcher feels that Marna seems more mature in her marriage now, compared to when the researcher befriended Marna.

## Effects on Marna

The interview gave Marna some perspective, even though she felt that some aspects were difficult to relive. However, she feels that it would have been worth it if it would benefit some female patients one day.

Marna felt that the interview allowed her to explore aspects of herself that she sometimes did not want to look at, but felt that she needed to. It also made her realise that she is content with who she is and it was the first time that she could admit this to herself. She feels that her father may, after all, be proud of her and that seems to comfort her. She knows that she still has to work on some aspects of herself, but for now, feels happy with herself.

The effect of reading the researcher's rendition of her story was that it encouraged Marna to embrace more of her femininity. She regards cooking as a very feminine activity and has until now, "detested every aspect of it." After reading the researcher's version of her story, Marna feels even more comfortable with her femininity and has bought cooking books and currently enjoys cooking "in a totally different manner" to her mother. Furthermore, she is proud of her femininity and wants to feel female and to look feminine in terms of the shape of her body and clothes that she wears.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher outlined Marna's process of rejecting and reclaiming her femininity.

The following themes characterised Marna's rejection of her femininity:

⇒ Sacrificing her Needs for Others

⇒ Relationship with her Father

⇒ Relationship with her Mother and

⇒ Low self-esteem

Marna's journey to reclaim her femininity was characterised by the following themes:

⇒ Physical Separations

⇒ External Support

⇒ Depression

⇒ Sexual Exploration

⇒ Willingness to Risk Vulnerability

Although this is the researcher's version of Marna's journey, she had attempted to remain true to Marna's experiences and to be fair in her comments regarding Marna.

CHAPTER 8

# MY STORY OF THE PARTICIPANTS' STORIES

## Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will outline some of the common themes that emerged from the researcher's retelling of the participants' stories. Although each participant's experiences were unique to her and her situation, some common themes run through their experiences.

## Common Themes Emerging from the Stories

It appears that in the process of rejecting their femininity and then reclaiming their femininity, the participants experienced changes in some of their relationships, attitudes and behaviours.

### Relationship with Significant Male or Males

For all three participants, the process of rejecting their femininity was influenced by the unmet desire for attention and love from a significant male. It seems that the process of reclaiming their lost femininity was also influenced by finding love and acceptance from a significant male or males.

**Sapna** was the only participant who rejected her femininity later in life. She only began the rejection process after she was married and had two children. The process of rejecting her femininity was strongly influenced by her

relationship with her husband. She desperately wanted him to love her and to take care of her, but this did not happen even early on in their marriage. Because her husband had similar traits to her father, such as he preferred to spend his free time with his friends rather than his family, it could be speculated that her attempts to gain love from her husband could have been influenced by her unfulfilled needs of being loved and taken care of by her father.

Despite Sapna's repeated attempts to make her husband happy by sacrificing her needs for him, she felt rejected by him. She felt that he did not love her and did not want to remain married to her. Because Sapna believed that she loved him dearly, when he rejected her, she felt anger and hatred towards him for making her life so miserable. This anger and hatred grew in her for nine years until she decided to take her own life. However, although Sapna was able to express her anger and hatred towards her husband immediately after her suicide attempt, these feeling remained largely buried, in that she felt that she basically still loved her husband and only felt these negative feeling towards him when she was provoked. However, after two years of masking her anger and hatred towards her husband, she was finally able to admit that she did not love her husband any longer. The realisation that she did not love her husband, allowed her to become aware of another source of love. However, Sapna still desired to be loved by her husband, possibly because from a Hindu cultural perspective, divorce was taboo. She also still clung on to her dream of having a happy normal family.

After her suicide attempt, Sapna began the process of rejecting her femininity, which seems to have been spurred on by the anger and hatred she felt towards her husband. She refused to depend on her husband for anything as she felt that

she could look after herself, their children and their home by herself as she became financially independent as an estate agent. Sapna also refused to allow her husband to get emotionally close to her, because she was afraid that he would reject or hurt her again. Therefore, it appears that after her attempted suicide, Sapna became emotionally and financially independent.

As part of the process of Sapna rejecting her femininity, she became emotionally strong and independent, which eventually caused her to feel that she had become a hardhearted person. However, instead of taking responsibility for who she had become, she blamed her husband for making her into the bitter, ugly person that she was. Sapna accepted responsibility for whom she had become only when she released the anger and hatred that she felt towards her husband, thereby possibly indicating a turning point in her life.

Thereafter, Sapna took responsibility for her life and she also took charge of her life. She knew what she wanted from her life, and although she returned to her husband, she was a different, more mature person. Her 'new' life was built on the reality of the difficulties involved in being in a relationship. Furthermore, once she released her anger towards her husband, she was able to see his love for her, and therefore she began to reclaim her femininity by becoming softer and more loving towards her husband. Her husband supported her reclaiming process by ensuring that she felt loved and he tried not to let her down when she depended on him for something. Therefore, Sapna began the reclaiming process because she wanted to have a relationship with her husband, which was different to her previous relationship with him.

Although **Alta**'s father was not always at home during her childhood, she desperately wanted to be emotionally close to him. Therefore, she would run to give him a hug when he returned home from the army. However, because he never reciprocated her need for emotional closeness, Alta felt anger towards him for rejecting her and her attempts at emotional closeness.

In adolescence, Alta found that when she excelled in something, her father was proud and showed his acceptance of her, and in this way, she felt that she was able to be close to him, or at least to gain his attention. However, when she failed to excel, he was disappointed in her and Alta felt rejected by him. His lack of support when she did not excel angered Alta who felt that she always tried her best and the least that he could have done would have been to acknowledge her efforts. In an attempt not to feel rejected by her father, Alta strived for excellence in academics and on the athletic field. In this way, she adopted her father's standards of 'winning is all that matter', and in that way, she became a male-identified female.

Therefore, throughout her life, Alta felt that her father never fulfilled her need for emotional closeness. She continues to be angry at him for not being the type of father that she wants him to be. Although Alta still desires emotional closeness with her father, she seems to feel that they will never be close, because the emotional distance is a characteristic of their interactional style with each other.

As part of the process of Alta's rejection of her femininity, she rejected her body because it classified her as female. As Alta began to reclaim her body, she gradually felt more comfortable in it. After a year of gradually becoming more

comfortable in her body, Alta felt safe to venture into a relationship with a man. Her relationship with her current boyfriend is characterised by mutual love and respect for each other, which is unlike her previous relationship with a man who sexually abused her.

Her relationship with her current boyfriend has encouraged her to reclaim aspects of her lost femininity. For example, in her relationship with him, Alta has become comfortable with him touching her and she enjoys touching him as well. She is also more comfortable in her body and with her femininity. Alta's desire for her boyfriend to understand her was evident in her allowing him to read the researcher's rendition of her journey. Therefore, unlike with her father, Alta may feel that her boyfriend loves and accepts her for who she is and not what she achieves. In this way, her relationship with him has contributed to the reclaiming of her femininity.

From early childhood, **Marna** wanted to be loved and accepted by her father. She felt that the only way in which he would accept her was if she was "boyish," therefore Marna became a tomboy at a young age. However, after Marna developed breasts, Marna felt that her father wanted her to be feminine like her mother. But, her father also encouraged Marna to be different to her mother and similar to him when he discussed his work, politics and religion with her, which allowed Marna to feel that she was intellectually close to her father. Because of the conflicting messages from her father regarding what he expected from her, Marna was unsure if she should be "boyish" (like her father) or feminine (like her mother), to be accepted by her father.

Nonetheless, Marna felt that the male-identified woman that she had become was not what her father expected her to become, although she was not entirely clear what it was that he expected from her. Therefore, she was afraid of getting close to her father because she felt that if he discovered who she was becoming, he would not have approved of her, which Marna may have interpreted as him rejecting her. For that reason, Marna characterised her relationship with her father as ambivalent in that she desperately desired to be close to him. However, she felt that she could not be emotionally close to her father because he would not allow her to be emotionally close to him and because she did not want him to discover her 'secret', which was, that she was not becoming who he expected her to be. Therefore, Marna rejected her femininity, in part, because she felt that the only way that she could get close to her father was by being "boyish".

After her father's death, a month before Marna's sixteenth birthday, Marna felt freed from her father's double bind expectations to be "boyish" as well as to be feminine, and her feeling that no matter who she became, it was not what her father expected from her. Because Marna felt freed from her father's expectations of her after his death, she began reclaiming her femininity with the support and encouragement from her substitute father figures.

In her marriage, Marna felt that she had to fight to be accepted as the woman that she is, because she felt that her husband wanted a traditional wife, who would allow him to make all the decisions concerning their lives. However, it seems that unlike with her father, in her marriage, Marna was able to assert who she wanted to be. Although Marna loved her husband, she threatened to divorce him if he continued to neglect her needs and attempted to force her into the mould of the traditional wife.

After renegotiating their marital relationship, Marna feels safer in her marriage because of her love for her husband and his eventual acceptance of her expression of her femininity. Because Marna knows that her husband loves her and regards her as an equal partner in their marriage, she is able to relinquish her masculine identity and accept more of her femininity. That is, because she feels safe and loved in her marriage, she is able to consider accepting the more traditional female role in her marriage by experimenting with staying at home, learning how to cook and considering having children in the future. Therefore, her husband's acceptance of her has encouraged her to further explore and accept her femininity.

## Relationship with their Mothers

It appears that all three participants' relationships with their mothers contributed to the rejection of their femininity.

**Sapna**'s mother did not model the typical traditional Hindu wife's role of being submissive towards and dependent on her husband, because of their family circumstances. Sapna's father was an alcoholic. Therefore, her mother was forced to be the sole breadwinner, and later her mother divorced her father, even though divorce was regarded as taboo in the Hindu community during that time. Today, divorce among the Hindu community is more frequent and less of a taboo.

It seems that Sapna did not want to emulate her mother and when she married, she tried to be the traditional wife, by sacrificing her needs for those of her

husband. However, because she was independent from a young age, she found it difficult to be the typically submissive wife, and constantly fought with her husband to give her her fantasy of a 'normal happy family', where the father worked and the mother stayed at home to take care of the children. However, after nine years of trying to be the submissive wife, Sapna realised that she was miserable in her marriage because her dream of having a normal happy family did not materialize and it seemed that it never would. She attempted suicide when this realisation dawned upon her. It appeared that when Sapna tried to be different from her mother by being a traditional type of wife, she was unhappy in her marriage.

After her suicide attempt, she became extremely independent, and in this way became more like her mother. However, her mother was divorced from her father and therefore, her mother needed to be extremely independent. Sapna and her husband refused to divorce each other. Therefore, when Sapna may have tried to emulate her mother, her behaviour did not fit with that of being in a marriage that was based on the traditional Hindu custom of the husband being the sole breadwinner in the family and the wife being dependent on him for everything. In this way, it appears that when Sapna tried to emulate her mother, because of the different marital circumstance in which she found herself, her emulation of her mother contributed to her rejection of her femininity.

In her reclaiming process, Sapna redefined femininity according to her experiences and impressions of what femininity entails. She has incorporated aspects of the traditional definition of femininity as well as 'new' ideas that are congruent with her experiences, for example, that a woman can be strong as well as vulnerable.

**Alta** felt that her mother represented the traditional Afrikaner submissive wife. Although as a child, Alta appreciated her mother being at home to take care of her and her siblings, as she grew older, she was filled with anger and resentment towards her mother for sacrificing her career to take care of them. Alta regarded her mother as "pathetic and weak" because Alta felt that her mother sacrificed her life for her father. Alta was angry at her mother because Alta felt that her mother never expressed her anger at her mother-in-law, because according to the Afrikaner culture, it is taboo; and her mother never pursued any of her own interests. It seems that Alta may have been angry at her mother because Alta perceived her mother to be weak and unable to assert herself in her relationships with her husband and her mother-in-law. Therefore, Alta rejected her mother as a role model.

Alta's redefinition of femininity has incorporated her experiences of finding her femininity and therefore, she does not see femininity in terms of being submissive or inferior to men.

Like Alta, **Marna** felt that her mother exemplified the traditional Afrikaner wife who sacrificed her needs for those of her husband. Since early childhood, Marna felt that her mother was weak in comparison to her father and therefore Marna never considered her mother's opinion as important in her life. When Marna began developing breasts, she felt pressurised into being more like her mother in order to feel accepted by her father. But, Marna was afraid that if she accepted her femininity as defined by her mother than it would make her vulnerable when she had to deal with the world.

When Marna was 14 years old, her mother showed her for the first time, that she could be competent when she began working outside of the house and thereby earning a living for herself. Nonetheless, Marna clung to her pervasive negative perception of her mother despite evidence to the contrary and continued to reject her mother. Because Marna perceived her mother as weak, incompetent and dependent, Marna did not consider her mother to be a suitable role model, for her to emulate. Instead, Marna attempted to be different from her mother by being the opposite of her, namely, by being masculine.

Despite Marna's rejection of her mother as a role model, Marna has incorporated some of her mother's interests into her life. For example, like her mother, Marna enjoys interior decorating and being a good hostess. Therefore, Marna is afraid that if she has a child, she would further resemble her mother, by becoming dependent on her husband, like she witnessed with her mother.

Marna's redefinition of femininity has incorporated some of her mother's traditional beliefs as well as her 'alternative' ideas about what femininity may entail. Because she is in the process of redefining what femininity means for her, she feels that her future definitions will definitely be different to her mother's initial definition as well as Marna's current definition of femininity. Therefore, indicating that her definition of femininity evolves with her experiences and comfort with being feminine.

Appearance/ Expectations versus Reality

All three participants appeared to struggle to balance who they wanted to be with who they felt they were expected to be.

For most of her life, **Sapna** struggled to balance being a child with being an adult. As a child, she was forced to accept adult responsibilities. Early in her marriage, she was an adult but felt that she was treated like a child who needed to be taken care of. After her son was born, she was torn between wanting to stay at home to take care of her son and wanting to enjoy going out with her husband. Although Sapna desired to a 'full-time' mother to her child, she could not fully experience motherhood as she felt that she needed to concentrate more on her marriage than her role as mother. Therefore, she felt that she was robbed of experiencing true motherhood with her first two children. When her third child was born, Sapna moved to the other extreme of the continuum and focused all of her attention on her children. Therefore, although she was both a mother and a wife, Sapna felt that she could not fulfill both roles and as a result, she sacrificed one role for the other.

Before Sapna began reclaiming her femininity, she appeared to have had everything materially that she wanted in her life. She had her own home, with her husband and children, and she was self-sufficient. Although Sapna felt she was torn into three people and lived in turmoil for five years, she appeared to cope well outwardly with her life. Sapna only began the process of reclaiming her femininity in an attempt to end her internal turmoil.

Only when Sapna reclaimed her femininity, was she able to balance who she wanted to be with who others wanted her to be, without feeling that she had to choose one role at the expense of the other and she realised that she could incorporate both roles in her life. She is currently happy to be both a mother to her children and a wife to her husband without feeling that the roles conflict

with each other. Furthermore, she feels that she is now a whole person in that her internal feeling and how she behaves are more congruent.

As a child, **Alta** wore dresses, possibly because, as a little girl growing up in an Afrikaner community, she was expected to dress in a feminine manner. However, her behaviour characterised that of males, as she preferred playing with her brothers rather than with her female cousins. Therefore, Alta's feminine appearance in childhood did not reflect her tomboy identity.

When Alta was involved in a relationship with her sexually abusive boyfriend, she dressed in a manner that pleased him and not her. She wore dresses that possibly made her look attractive, which is not what she felt towards her body or herself. Therefore, although she dressed in an appealing manner, she hated what her dressing prompted. Alta's appearance did not correlate with how she felt.

As Alta reclaimed aspects of her femininity, she started to dress in a way that represented how she felt about herself, that is, they reflected her comfort with her feminine gender identity. She now wears clothing that feels pleasant on her skin and buys her clothing from the women's department stores.

Like Alta, as a child, **Marna** wore dresses possibly because her father expected her to wear dresses because she was a girl. However, her behaviour was characterised more by masculine than feminine traits. Although she did not like the feminine blouse and jacket that her mother had made for her first horse riding competition, she wore them. Her wearing of the blouse and jacket may have been seen as a display of her acceptance of her femininity, when in reality,

she only wore them because she felt that she was forced to wear them. In adolescence, Marna did not want to be female, but felt that she had to put on an act for her father because she had been told that he wanted a daughter who was unlike his "rough and unsophisticated" sisters. Therefore, throughout her childhood and early adoloescence, Marna's feminine appearance did not correlate with her discomfort with her femininity.

As Marna reclaimed her femininity, she had to fight to feel that her husband accepted her as a different type of woman to her mother. Since she feels more comfortable in her body and in her relationship with her husband, she has begun to express her femininity in terms of wanting a more feminine body shape and size as well as dressing in a more feminine manner. Therefore, her appearance and her feelings now seem to correlate.

<u>Belief in Women's Inferiority to Men</u>

All three participants believed in the subjugating Grand Narratives that propagate females' inferiority to males. Although Sapna and Marna belong to different cultures, they both seemed to share the same cultural expectation that a 'good woman' sacrifices herself for the man in her life. Although Alta seemed to reject this cultural belief, in practice, she seemed to have fallen into the trap of sacrificing her needs for that of her abusive boyfriend.

When **Sapna** married, she strongly believed the Hindu cultural adage that a "woman can make or break a man." Since she wanted to be regarded as a 'good wife', she felt that it was her responsibility to sacrifice everything for her husband so that he could be happy, which in turn would ensure that she would

be happy and that they would live 'happily ever after.' However, it seemed that the more she sacrificed, the more she was expected to sacrifice for her husband and their marriage, which may have made her feel that her needs were disregarded and the sacrifices that she made were insignificant. Because her sacrifices did not bring her happiness, she was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for her husband by killing herself and therefore giving him a way out of their marriage. In this way, Sapna was literally willing to die for her husband's happiness.

After her suicide attempt, Sapna refused to sacrifice anymore. She may have been angry at herself for believing the Hindu cultural belief that if she sacrificed for her husband then she would have a happy marriage. As a result, she moved to the other extreme of not sacrificing for anyone and living her life according to her rules only. Therefore, once Sapna stopped believing in the subjugating Grand Narrative, she stopped believing in sacrificing for her husband and decided to make her own happiness. However, when she no longer sacrificed for her husband, it did not bring Sapna happiness either.

As she began the reclaiming process, Sapna realised that she did not have to make sacrifices for others in order for them to accept her or for her to feel appreciated by them. When she now makes sacrifices, it is because she chooses to sacrifice rather than because she feels obliged to sacrifice. The sacrifices that she now makes are for her family as a whole, that is, it is for her happiness as well as for the happiness of her family. Therefore, Sapna re-evaluated her previous belief of sacrificing her happiness for that of her husband and created her own understanding of sacrificing for her happiness as well as that of her family.

**Alta** refused to abide by the Afrikaner Grand Narrative that professes that women are inferior to men. In high school, she was angry at the fact that her female peers refused to make the first move or were submissive and weak in their relationships with males. However, when Alta became involved with her sexually abusive boyfriend, she adopted the "stereotypical" female role in their relationship. That is, she dressed in an attempt to please him and used her sexuality to gain his attention. Although she was extremely uncomfortable with sexual intercourse, she indulged his need for intercourse. Because of the sexual abuse that she had suffered as a child, she felt that intercourse was something she needed to "learn to do". Therefore, her behaviour supported the Afrikaner cultural Grand Narrative of putting a man's needs before her own needs.

As Alta is in the process of reclaiming her femininity, she still does not believe in sacrificing her needs for that of her boyfriend, although she seems more comfortable with her role as a woman. This has resulted in her feeling that she can perform feminine tasks without necessarily being submissive and self-sacrificing, or going against her beliefs and feelings.

**Marna** believed that for her father to approve and love her, she needed to be "boyish." In an attempt to please him, she also adopted his interests as her own. This was evident in her discussing politics and his work with him. In this way, she felt that her father thought of her as "competent" even though she was a woman. In adolescence, she was not comfortable with being feminine, as defined by her mother. However, she could not openly reject her femininity because her father would not have approved, as he wanted her to be feminine. Therefore, Marna sacrificed her need to develop her own identity and became

what she felt her father wanted her to be, although she was never certain of whether he wanted her to be feminine or masculine.

Early in her marriage, Marna subscribed to the Afrikaner cultural Grand Narrative that advocates that a wife ought to make sacrifices for her husband. Therefore, she sacrificed her needs for those of her husband until she realised that her needs were not being considered by her husband when he made decisions regarding where they would live. Marna refused to continue to sacrifice her needs for those of her husband. Therefore, she fought for her need to have a say in their marriage. As a result, both she and her husband were forced to reconsider their notions of a marital relationship and to build their own relationship based on their personalities and desires rather than following the traditional marital relationships pattern.

## Being Different

It appeared that all three participants never really fitted in with their peers and were different from them.

Throughout her life, **Sapna** felt that she was different to her peers. It seems that after she married, she never exemplified the typical subservient Hindu wife, as was evident from the constant fights and arguments that she had with her husband while she was pregnant with their first child. After the birth of her son, she continued to fight for her independence with both her husband and her in-laws. Although she pretended to be submissive when she apologised to her mother-in-law, it seems that that was more lip service than a sincere apology and it did not stop her from voicing her opinions either. After she became

financially independent, she further differentiated from other Hindu wives, in that she did not depend on her husband for anything. Therefore, it appears that throughout Sapna's life, she did not seem to feel that she belonged with her Hindu peers, although she was not ostracized by them.

As Sapna reclaimed her femininity, she still does not fit in with her peers, because she has found her own way of relating to her husband, which is different to the traditional expectations of married Hindu women.

From early childhood, **Alta** was not a typical girl and unlike her female cousins and friends, she enjoyed getting dirty, killing snails and playing rough games. In her adolescence, she could not stand listening to 'girl-talk' which she found to be very boring, limited and judgmental. Unlike her female peers, she did not experiment with learning how to dance, putting on makeup or experimenting with different hairstyles. She also could not understand why her female peers accepted the passive, submissive role in relationships with men. Compared to the other two participants, Alta seemed to experience the greatest degree of alienation from her peers.

As Alta reclaimed aspects of her femininity, she felt that she was understood and belonged with her peers in university. Therefore, Alta does not feel like an outcast anymore.

Although **Marna** had a "pink room" and learned ballet as a child, she always considered herself to be a bit "rough." She attributed that to the environment in which she grew up but it was also an attempt to gain her father's attention and approval. Unlike other young girls, Marna refused to admit to being afraid.

When her brother refused to take part in rodeo riding, because he was afraid, she was even more determined to prove her fearlessness by taking part in it. After her father's death, she felt that she outgrew her peers on an abstract level as she tried to understand death. Therefore, Marna seemed to be different from her peers.

Through the process of reclaiming her femininity, Marna feels that her husband accepts her different expression of her femininity and accepts her as an equal partner in their marriage. In this way, Marna has redefined a woman's role in her marriage for both her and her husband. Therefore, Marna still does not fit in with some Afrikaner wives, who still subscribe to the traditional definition of being a woman.

The fact that all three participants never felt that they fitted in completely with their peers, may have contributed to them engaging in the process of rejecting and reclaiming their femininity. Although Sapna and Marna still feel that they do not fit in with their peers, they seem to be comfortable with who they are.

## Depression

It seems that the timing of the rejection and reclaiming process followed a period of depression or unhappiness. Although all the participants did not suffered from clinical depression, the rejection and reclaiming processes seemed to have followed a period of unhappiness with who they were.

Although **Sapna** was not diagnosed as being clinically depressed, it appears that she might have been depressed when she attempted suicide. She felt that it was

hopeless to continue living the life that she was living and therefore attempted suicide. After her suicide attempt, she was filled with anger and hatred towards her husband for making her so miserable and at herself for not succeeding in killing herself. Therefore, it seemed that Sapna's attempted suicide was her way of escaping from the intolerable situation in which she found herself.

Thereafter, she seemed to have changed and became a strong independent woman. However, as Sapna grew stronger over the years, she began to feel more isolated because she refused to allow anyone into her space. Eleven years into her marriage, Sapna realised that she had stopped loving her husband and was in love with another Hindu man. However, she refused to divorce her husband for this other Hindu man. Therefore, Sapna felt that she was living a fragmented life and lived in turmoil all the time. After living in this turmoil for five years, Sapna decided that she needed to end her turmoil and therefore took the first step towards reclaiming her femininity. It seems that Sapna began the reclaiming process in an attempt to end the unhappiness in her life.

**Alta** rejected her femininity after the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. This trauma caused her to dislike herself and she was probably depressed as she tried to understand what had happened to her and why. In adolescence, a time when Alta actively defied social norms regarding feminine behaviour, she became depressed once again. Because of her defiance, she felt that she did not fit in with her peers and this may have contributed to her depression. It was also during that time that Alta began to see her body in terms of the functions that it performed and in that way, she attempted to distance herself from her body and her status as a woman. The separation of mind and body could have also contributed to her depression during adolescence. It seems that many factors

contributed to Alta's depression during her adolescence, which was when she actively rejected her femininity.

Alta began the process of reclaiming her femininity after she ended her relationship with her abusive boyfriend. Alta may have felt depressed because she had allowed herself to be abused once again. She may have realised that because she had separated her consciousness from her body, she was unable to realise early in the relationship that it was a sexually abusive relationship. Furthermore, it seemed that after she ended the abusive relationship Alta began psychotherapy, which helped her to accept herself. It seemed that Alta's motivation in reclaiming her femininity was because she was depressed with whom she had become.

**Marna** actively rejected her femininity when she started to develop breasts. To her, it was a sign of her being forced to become like her mother and this caused her a great deal of unhappiness. During that time, she was also very unhappy with her appearance and she felt that she was ugly compared to her mother. When she began her menstrual cycle, she did not inform her mother for fear that her mother would feel that she could get close to Marna. Therefore, Marna actively began rejecting her femininity because she felt depressed at being feminine as defined by her mother.

Marna began reclaiming her femininity after her father's death. Although she was depressed after his death, her depression went unnoticed until the end of her first year at university after her boyfriend broke off their relationship. Thereafter she attended psychotherapy to assist her with her depression. Therefore, it

seems that Marna's reclaiming process began after her father's death, which caused her to become depressed.

## External Support

External support refers to people or institutions outside of one's home environment that allowed or encouraged the participants to reject or reclaim their femininity.

**Sapna** appeared to be the only participant who experienced external support for her rejection of her femininity, which was equated with submissiveness and dependence on others. When Sapna changed from being a Tupperware agent to being an estate agent, she had the opportunity to attend lectures in university lecture halls. That, together with passing her board examinations, made her feel "totally intelligent." Furthermore, as an estate agent, Sapna felt that she was becoming well known and for the first time in her life, she had her own identity, separate from her role as mother or wife. Therefore, it seemed that as an estate agent, Sapna received external support for her rejection of her femininity because she may have felt that she was "worth something."

Unlike Alta and Marna, Sapna did not experience a different environment where she had the opportunity to experience alternative ways of being, during the reclaiming of her femininity. Furthermore, she did not have any support or encouragement for the creation of the 'new' self that emerged during her reclaiming process. Instead, it seemed that when Sapna changed her attitude towards her husband and accepted his love, she was able to change from a hardhearted person to a softer, more caring woman. Although Sapna did not

receive external support for her re-definition of her femininity, she received support for her expression of her femininity from her husband.

**Alta** found acceptance for her beliefs in both the formal and informal university settings. She saw that there were alternatives to her family structure and that not all women were as traditional as her mother and her grandmother. The university setting gave Alta a sense of belonging and of being understood. Therefore, the university environment gave her the opportunity of accepting her own values, that is, it supported her social reclaiming of her femininity.

Alta attended psychotherapy, which helped her to reconnect with her body. Although it was a difficult and long process, her therapist supported and encouraged her to appreciate her body. In that way, her therapist helped and supported Alta's efforts to reclaim her body.

After her father's death, **Marna** found support for her femininity in the form of her substitute father figures. She felt that they encouraged her to be feminine and because they were not in a relationship with her mother, Marna did not have to compete with her mother for their attention. While living in a women's residence, Marna discovered that she was very feminine and in that environment, she was seen as a very capable female. Furthermore, Marna attended psychotherapy and this helped her to explore and accept her femininity and her relationship with her mother. The most recent person to support Marna's reclaiming of her femininity is her husband. In their marriage, he accepts her as different from her mother and supports her different expression of her femininity. His support of her expression of her femininity has encouraged Marna to feel safer to explore other aspects of her femininity, like considering

having children and most recently, experimenting with different ways of cooking. Therefore, Marna received external support for her expression of her femininity from various sources.

## Separation or Distance from Family

It seemed that all the participants needed physical and/or mental distance from their families in order for them to redefine what femininity meant for them and to reclaim their 'new' lives as women.

**Sapna** began to accept her femininity while she was overseas, away from her family. Because she did not have to worry about the day-to-day activities of her family, she was able to reflect on her life. The physical separation from her family also gave her the opportunity to find out what she wanted from her life and she took control of her life. Through the daily e-mails that she received from her husband, she realised that he loved and needed her. She resolved to return home. She was now emotionally stronger and more mature, which allowed her to be softer and more loving towards her husband. Sapna seemed to have needed the physical and mental distance from her family to 'find herself.'

Although **Alta** never moved out of her parental home, her distance from her family was more on an emotional level. When she entered university, she found acceptance for her beliefs and that made her feel at home with her peers. Attending psychotherapy also allowed her to mentally separate from her family, which gave her a different perspective on her relationship with her family. Alta's emotional separation from her family was necessary for her to establish

her own beliefs and to feel that she was accepted even though she may have felt differently to the rest of her family.

For **Marna**, her father's death seemed to have helped her to separate from him with regard to his expectations for her. Because of her similarities to her mother, Marna needed to explore her femininity away from her mother. She was given this opportunity when she went to live on campus and later when she married. It seemed that only when there was substantial distance between Marna and her mother, when she moved to America, that Marna was able to explore her femininity to a fuller extent. Psychotherapy contributed to her understanding her mother and seeing her in perspective. Marna separated both physically and emotionally from her parents and that allowed her to define femininity according to her own personality and expectations of herself.

<u>Accepting their Vulnerability</u>

For each participant, vulnerability entailed something different. For Sapna it was depending on her husband and trusting that he would not hurt her again. For Alta it was being comfortable with physical, intimate contact and trusting her boyfriend not to abuse her. For Marna it is in becoming a mother and thereby becoming dependent on her husband.

Because **Sapna**'s husband had hurt her when she trusted him, she found it difficult to allow him back into her life and to trust him not to hurt her again. However, she knew that if she did not allow him close to her, then she could not save her marriage and would have to either divorce him or continue to feel torn in her marriage. While she was overseas with her brother, and communicated

with her family via e-mail, she realised that her husband loved and needed her. Because she had changed, she was able to trust him again. When she trusted her husband, it was based on the reality that he if he did not do what she expected him to do, it was not because he did not love her, but rather, for some other reason. Therefore, Sapna gradually began to enjoy the feeling of depending on her husband and realised that she could depend on him without being hurt. Because of her change of perceptions and her 'new' attitude, Sapna could become vulnerable without the fear of being let down and hurt by her husband.

In the beginning of this year, **Alta** felt that her body was "tingling" with sensual energy and needed to be touched in order to soothe the tingling sensation. Eventually, she and her boyfriend acted on the desire to be touched. Although it caused her great anxiety, Alta also felt a sense of calmness. Her anxiety was related to her vulnerability to being abused because she felt that what she was doing had led her into her abusive relationship. Therefore, Alta was initially on very high alert for possible danger, but as her trust in her boyfriend not to hurt her increased, her anxiety decreased. Although she still feels the need to be in control in an attempt to protect herself, the level of her anxiety and tenseness has decreased considerably and she is able to enjoy being touched by her boyfriend and touching him. Gradually, Alta has allowed herself to be vulnerable to possible abuse by her boyfriend. Because of his gentleness and respect for Alta, her embracing of her vulnerability has allowed her to enjoy intimate physical contact with her boyfriend.

In her relationship with her husband, **Marna** felt that she needed to be strong and independent. That is, because of the power-struggle relationship that they have, she felt that if she was not earning money, then she would be totally

dependent on her husband and that would necessitate her being subservient to him. However, as their relationship has improved over the last year, Marna feels more comfortable with exploring aspects of her femininity like staying at home. She feels that if she has a child, she can trust her husband to take care of her and their child and to provide for both of them. However, her fear of being dependent like her mother was when she has a child still makes her unsure of whether she is willing to accept the 'risk' that having a child would entail for her. Although Marna is now able to acknowledge her "craving" for a child and she feels secure in her marriage, she still seems uncertain of her willingness to depend on her husband and thereby embrace her vulnerability.

## Redefinition of Femininity

While discussing the rejection of their femininity, all three participants defined femininity in terms of negative attributes. However, after discussing the reclaiming process, their definitions changed to a more positive one. The redefinition of femininity may have been a contributing factor to the reclaiming of their femininity because femininity was no longer seen in negative terms. Although each participant redefined femininity in a different way, their definitions seem to indicate their level of comfort with being feminine and what they regard as essential aspects of femininity.

**Sapna**'s redefinition expresses her comfort with being female and encapsulates both the 'positive' and 'negative' characteristics of being female. However, she does not regard the 'negatives' as limiting and as making women feel inferior to men. Instead, she regards a woman's ability to be vulnerable, loving and

nurturing, as strengths. Sapna's redefinition of femininity has allowed her to embrace her femininity and to be proud of her femininity.

**Alta**'s redefinition of femininity is based on an external representation of women in terms of women fighting for their rights and having greater choice and expression in the clothing they wear. However, unlike her previous definition of femininity, which focused on women's submissiveness and inferiority to men, Alta is proud of the freedom that being feminine accords her and does not want to be masculine again. Alta's redefinition of her femininity, in which she feels that being feminine means being comfortable with who she is, without having to explain herself to anyone, has assisted her in reclaiming both the social aspects of femininity as well as reclaiming her body, in terms of the clothing that she wears.

**Marna**'s redefinition of womanhood highlights the commonness shared by women, for example, "being more caring and emotionally attuned" and common experiences like having children. It also incorporates some characteristics of her previous definition, for example, her inclusion of specific activities like decorating the house. Her redefinition of femininity is still in the process of change as she is still trying to determine what being feminine entails for her. Her redefinition allows Marna to feel that she is part of the greater community of women and this makes her feel that despite her individual expression of her femininity, she is still and always will be a woman.

## Conclusion

It appears that all three participants share common themes with regard to the rejection and reclaiming of their femininity. Although the manner in which the theme manifested varied, there are common elements.

The common themes that were discussed in this chapter are:

⇒ Relationship with Significant Male/s– This theme seemed to have contributed to the participants' processes of rejecting and reclaiming their femininity.

⇒ Relationship with their Mothers – This theme contributed to the participants' rejection of their femininity.

⇒ Appearance/Expectations versus Reality – The discrepancy between what the participants' felt and their external appearances was evident during the rejection process but as they reclaimed their femininity, there was more congruency between their internal feeling and their external appearances.

⇒ Belief in Women's Inferiority to Men – This theme seemed to contribute to the rejection of their femininity and was linked to Alta and Marna's anger towards their mothers for representing the typical woman. Through the reclaiming of their femininity, all three participants re-evaluated their belief in this Grand Narrative.

⇒ Being Different – It seems that all three participants were never completely part of their peer groups, and were in ways different from their peers.

⇒ Depression – It appeared that both the rejection and the reclaiming processes were prompted by feelings of depression at who they were or how they felt towards themselves.

⇒ External Support – Sapna was the only participant who seemed to receive support for her rejection of her femininity. Alta and Marna obtained external support and encouragement for the reclaiming process. Sapna was encouraged to reclaim her femininity by her awareness of her husband's love for her.

⇒ Separation or Distance from Family – It appeared that all three participants required some form of physical and or mental separation from their families for them to evaluate their lives and to reclaim their femininity.

⇒ Accepting their Vulnerability – Each participant had to accept her vulnerability in the process of her reclaiming her femininity. Marna is aware of her vulnerability and feels that she may be able to accept it, but is currently unsure of her willingness to risk being vulnerable.

⇒ Redefinition of Femininity – Each participant redefined femininity in a way that expresses her comfort with her femininity and the redefinitions of femininity may have contributed to the reclaiming of their femininity.

CHAPTER 9

# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

## Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will compare the common themes that emerged from the participants' stories with the literature on social constructionism and femininity, which was discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. The themes that were found in this research share similarities to, but also differ from, what has been found in previous studies.

Harre (cited in Owen 1992, p. 387) asserted that according to social constructionism, a person can never be regarded as an individual in his/her own right but rather as a person who is created in relationships with others (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). This assertion was evident in the participants' journeys, because both the rejection and the reclaiming processes of the participants were influenced by their relationships with other people. The influence that other people had on the participants' lives will be discussed in some of the following themes that characterised the participants' experiences:

⇒ Relationship with Significant Male or Males

⇒ Relationship with their Mothers

⇒ Appearance versus Reality

⇒ Belief in Women's Inferiority to Men

⇒ Being Different

⇒ Depression

⇒ External Support

⇒ Separation or Distance from Family

⇒ Accepting their Vulnerability

⇒ Redefinition of Femininity

## Relationship with Significant Male or Males

Sapna's relationship with her husband contributed to the rejection of her femininity and the reclaiming thereof. In keeping with the Hindu traditions at that time, Sapna's marriage was not based on love. Rather, she and her husband were forced into the marriage by their respective families. However, Sapna believed that soon after the marriage, she fell in love with her husband. Her husband, however, never seemed to reciprocate her love. Instead, he seemed to have rejected Sapna from early on in their marriage by not supporting her or being there for her. Their marriage was characterised by constant fighting and arguing, which Sapna blamed for the premature birth of their son. Dominian (1995) discusses how conflict in marriages negatively influences the marital relationship. For nine years, Sapna attempted to gain her ideal of a happy family life, in which her husband would be there for her and he would love and support her. However, this did not materialize, and she became miserable. Sapna was filled with anger and hatred towards her husband for making her life miserable. Keltner, Ellsworth and Edwards (1993) found that angry people perceived others to be responsible for their circumstances or situation. As a result of her anger and depression, she attempted suicide. Gotlib and Hammer (1992) discuss depression in married women, whose marriage is characterised by conflict and tension. Rook (1990) discusses the damaging effects of being in a marriage that is characterised by conflict with a spouse.

Alta and Marna both rejected their femininity in childhood. According to Murdock (1990), part of a daughter's rejection of her femininity is her desire to be close to her father and her aspiration to be like her father. This was evident in Marna's story, and to a lesser degree, it was also a characteristic of Alta's story.

Alta wanted her father to notice her and to be proud of her. As a child, she attempted to be emotionally close to her father, but he rejected her attempts at emotional closeness. In adolescence, Alta realised that if she excelled in academics or on the athletic field, her father expressed his pride in her achievements. Therefore, she became achievement orientated because through achieving, she felt that her father would love and accept her.

All that mattered to Marna while her father was alive was complying with what he thought was good for her, because she desperately wanted to be loved and accepted by him. Marna felt that the only way in which she could be close to him was by being "boyish" and therefore, she became a tomboy at a young age. Therefore, both Alta and Marna's experiences of rejecting their femininity, was in part, influenced by their desire be close to their fathers.

The process of Sapna reclaiming her femininity was also influenced by her relationship with her husband. While she was away from her family, helping her brother to cope with his divorce, she realised that she could take charge of her life. When Sapna took charge of her life, she stopped blaming her husband for whom she had become, and released her anger and hatred towards him. As a result of her experiences, she had matured, which allowed her to open herself up to her husband again. Lerner (1988, p. 245) claimed that "a woman cannot save

an unhappy marriage until she can save her own self." Sapna's husband proclaimed his love for her via e-mails. The knowledge of her husband's love and appreciation of her encouraged Sapna to become a more loving, caring person. Robertson (1988) found that marriage could to be a very important source of support.

Alta's relationship with her current boyfriend has encouraged her to reclaim aspects of her femininity. Since she began a relationship with him, his love, acceptance and respect for her has encouraged her to feel safer in her body and with her sexuality. Their relationship seems to be characterised by mutual love and respect for each other. House, Umberson and Landis (1988) discuss the importance of social relationships meeting the need for attachments for the psychological health of people and Dominian (1995) discusses some of the positive effects that courtship and falling in love can have on a person's self-esteem.

Marna's reclaiming of her femininity was supported and encouraged by her relationship with substitute father figures, her therapist and most recently, by her husband. It seemed that her husband initially expected her to be a submissive wife, who would allow him to solely make all of the important life-changing decisions. However, last year, Marna threatened to divorce her husband if he did not consider her needs and if he continued making unilateral decisions regarding important decisions that affected their lives. As a result, Marna now feels that by standing up for herself she has become an equal partner in their marriage. Their marriage now seems to resemble Davis and Robert's (1985) notion of an I-thou relationship in which both participants in a relationship co-create a shared world, and both parties feel recognised and

treated as an equal in the relationship. Dominian (1995) discusses different types of marital relationships. Some relationships are based on an unequal distribution of power in the relationship, which seemed to characterise Marna's marriage in the beginning. In other types of marital relationships discussed by Dominian (1995), both partners have equal power in the marriage, as seen in Marna's current relationship with her husband.

## Relationship with their Mothers

Eisenstein (1984), Fox-Genovese (1996), and Snyder et al. (1997) assert that daughters learn from their mothers about gender roles in the family and the larger community. This was evident in all three participants' stories. Sapna learnt from her mother that a woman could be strong and independent and did not have to depend on a man for anything, and yet she chose a dependent and submissive role when she married. Alta learnt from her mother that a woman's duty is to sacrifice for her husband and children. Marna learnt from her mother that a woman needed to be beautiful and she needed to do what was necessary to please her husband. Both Alta and Marna rejected their mother's beliefs and therefore did not want to emulate their mothers.

Sapna was the only participant who rejected her femininity after she married and had two children. She rejected her mother's independent role for a submissive, dependent role because she believed that it would give her the normal family life that she desired. After her suicide attempt, Sapna began to model *herself on her* mother. She became extremely independent and self-sufficient, which seemed to contribute to the rejection of her femininity. There seemed to be a lack of synchronisation between Sapna's independence and her

expected role as a Hindu wife. According to Owen (1992), social constructionism views relationships between people as either conforming to or lacking a fit with the idealized roles or ways of relating to others.

Carr (1998), Kenemore and Spira (1996), Murdock (1990) and Rich (1986) assert that because daughters learn, what it means to be a woman, from their mothers, daughters may experience anger at their mothers and may therefore reject their mothers for being passive and for not teaching them how to stand up for themselves. According to Kenemore and Spira (1996), the anger at and rejection of their mothers is especially true during adolescence. In adolescence, both Alta and Marna were angry at their mothers for accepting a seemingly inferior status to their fathers, and thereby being living examples of traditional submissive wives.

Carr (1998) found that some young girls rejected their femininity because they did not want to emulate their mothers or because they found masculine activities to be more enjoyable than feminine activities.

Alta rejected her femininity, in part, because she found the feminine to be weak in comparison to the masculine. Alta also found 'typical female' activities to be boring compared to 'typical male' activities, and she found male toys to be more fun. Therefore, it appeared that from a young age, Alta did not want to be a female. Furthermore, because Alta regarded her mother as weak and pathetic, she did not want to emulate her mother. Alta's expression of matrophobia is less pronounced than Marna's expression thereof. Matrophobia is "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood, but of *becoming one's mother*" (Rich, 1986, p. 235).

Alta is adamant not to be the type of wife that her mother was to her father. She felt that her mother sacrificed everything for her father. Alta strongly feels that her future husband would have to accept her as a career woman because she refuses to sacrifice her hard-earned career for a husband and children, like her mother did. Fowers, Lyons, Montel and Shaked (2001) discuss fantasies about marriage that some single-people have, which may not fit with the realities of being in a marital relationship.

Like Alta, Marna also found 'typical female' activities to be boring compared to 'typical male' activities. As a child, Marna enjoyed riding horses the masculine way and she enjoyed helping her father on the farm rather than helping her mother in the kitchen. Marna only began to actively reject her femininity when she began developing breasts, at the age of ten, which she felt meant that she had to be like her mother, whom she perceived as weak and incompetent.

Murdock (1990) argues that the only way for some daughters to separate from their mothers is by rejecting their mothers as well as their femininity, thereby being different from their mothers. Because of Marna's similarities to her mother, Marna feared that if she accepted her femininity, as defined by her mother, it would have resulted in her becoming her mother. From early adolescence, Marna seemed to experience matrophobia. In order to differentiate herself from her mother, Marna rejected her mother and her femininity.

However, although Marna rejected her mother as a role model, she is still afraid that if she has a child, then she would become dependent like her mother. Because Marna equates dependency with "immaturity, helplessness and

vulnerability" (Herman, 1983, p. 508), for her, having a child would mean letting her guard down, which, she fears, would cause her to fall into the patriarchal trap and become dependent, immature, helpless and vulnerable (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1994; Rich, 1986).

Fox-Genovese (1996) and Murdock (1990) state that many career-orientated women choose not to have children because it could interfere with their professional lives. This appears to reflect Alta and Marna's feelings regarding having children.

## Appearance/ Expectations versus Reality

The theme of appearance/expectations versus reality in Sapna's story revolved around her desire to be a mother and the compulsion that she felt to sacrifice her desire to be a mother so that she could focus on her marriage. Murdock (1990) found that women are often torn between a desire to pursue a career and their desire to be a mother, because there is an implicit message that women cannot be both (Fox-Genovese, 1996). However, Sapna was comfortable with being a real estate agent and a mother. Her dilemma was between having to choose to be a wife or a mother because she felt that she could not be both. Although her desired choice was to be a mother, she felt compelled to choose being a wife, in an attempt to save her marriage. Lerner (1988) mentions how women sacrifice themselves for the sake of their marriage. Sapna may have been willing to sacrifice experiencing motherhood for the sake of her marriage because of the Hindu cultural Grand Narrative that places the burden of making a marriage work on the wife rather than it being a joint effort by both the husband and the

wife. Miller (cited in Jack, 1991) refers to the guilt that women experience if their relationships falter or fail.

As Sapna reclaimed her femininity, she realised that she could be *both* mother *and* wife, without the roles conflicting. This links to social constructionist ideas where both can be accommodated.

Both Alta and Marna were tomboys during their childhood. However, they often wore dresses, possibly because of the Afrikaner social expectations that young girls should dress in a feminine manner. It was only later in life that they stopped wearing dresses or dressing in other feminine clothing. It appears that their feminine Personas (Stupak & Stupak, 1990) or presented gender (Rosenzweig & Dailey, 1991) did not correlate with their masculine gender identity.

### Belief in Women's Inferiority to Men

Grand Narratives are social or cultural "discourses that are formed by, and in turn, influence people and that take on normative views against which people measure themselves" (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996, p. 80). In this study, the participants believed subjugating Grand Narratives, which 'validated' women's inferiority to men. Although Sapna and Marna belong to different cultures, it seems that both the Hindu and Afrikaans communities have similar Grand Narratives that encourage women to be subservient and self-sacrificing towards their husbands. According to Carter and Kaslow (1992), cultural legacy puts men in a position of power and women in a position of oppression and subservience. This view is shared by Lorber (cited in Lucal, 1999).

Sapna pretended to be submissive to her husband and apologised to her mother-in-law even when she felt that she had done nothing wrong. She strongly believed that her submissiveness would make her husband happy, which in turn, would eventually make her happy. Therefore, Sapna sacrificed her happiness for that of her husband.

Although cognitively, Alta did not believe in women's submissiveness to men, in practice, she seemed to have adopted this behaviour during her sexually abusive relationship. During her abusive relationship, she dressed in a manner that pleased her boyfriend and engaged in sexual intercourse with him, despite her intense discomfort with it. Thereby illustrating the power of Grand Narratives, that is, it permeates all aspects of people's lives.

From young, Marna became what she thought her father wanted her to be and did what she thought he would approve of. When she married, Marna tried to be the 'good wife' by taking care of her husband, putting his needs before her own needs, and allowing him to make unilateral decisions concerning their living arrangements. Freedman and Combs (1996) and Walters (1990) found that when some independent women married, they tend to take on the passive role in the marriage and allow their husbands to make the major decisions, for example, deciding where to live, and so on. This seemed evident in Marna's story, until she decided that she wanted to be treated as an equal partner in their marriage.

It seemed that not only did the participants' definition of femininity influence their inner self-identification with their femininity; it also created the reality of

their perception of femininity as the inferior gender (Greene, 1997). However, in the process of reclaiming their femininity, the participants re-evaluated their lives in terms of their present context and looked at their relationships in terms of equality, thereby rejecting the subjugating Grand Narratives. According to Dickerson and Zimmerman (cited in Doan, 1997, p. 129) subjugating Grand Narratives are deconstructed "by focusing on how the prevailing norms had evolved over time."

Sapna stopped being the dependent, traditional wife, and incorporated a degree of independence that she experienced during the rejection of her femininity into her current life. That is, she managed to find the middle way between being absolutely dependent and independent, which has resulted in her feeling comfortable with herself and she no longer feels the need to sacrifice herself for her husband. Her sacrifices are now for the benefit of the whole family, herself included. Therefore, Sapna changed her behaviour and attitude from supporting the subjugating Grand Narrative to establishing her own relationship with her husband.

Alta's re-connection with her body has allowed her to unite her attitudes and her behaviour. In her current relationship, she does not feel the need to totally sacrifice herself for her boyfriend, as they both make sacrifices for each other. Furthermore, she feels that her boyfriend respects her wishes and does not force his desires on to her. Alta's behaviour is now congruent with her attitude of rejecting the subjugating Grand Narrative.

As Marna's marital relationship progressed, she fought for the right to be an equal partner in their marriage, which is more in keeping with her generation's

beliefs. She refuses to be the type of wife that her mother was, which she feels may have been appropriate during her mother's generation. Her rejection of the subjugating Grand Narrative has allowed her husband to accept her as an equal partner and it has changed their marital relationship. Marna's changes in her definition of a wife and the subsequent change in her marital relationship support the social constructionist notion of multiple and co-created realities and that reality is in a state of flux (Becvar & Becvar, 1996).

## Being Different

All three participants did not seem to fully fit in with their peers and thereby experienced a degree of alienations or a lack of synchronisation.

Sapna seemed to have experienced being different from her peers throughout her life, although she never felt ostracized by them. Even after reclaiming her femininity, Sapna is out of synchronisation with the image of a traditional Hindu wife, because she has redefined femininity according to her experiences and her circumstances.

From all the participants, Alta's sense of alienation seemed to be the strongest. During adolescence, Alta's feeling of being an outcast with her female peers contributed to her depression. Alta interests were different to those of her peers and she found typical 'girl-talk' to be boring and restrictive. Therefore, Alta was out of synchronisation with the societal norm for young women. Alta only began to feel a sense of belonging when she found acceptance for her thinking and her attitudes at university. This assisted her in reclaiming the social aspects of her femininity.

Marna's sense of alienation appeared to be the weakest. Marna has always considered herself a bit 'wild,' compared to other females. Although she feels that her expression of her femininity is not that of the typical woman, she is comfortable with it. She also feels that her husband has accepted and has started to support her different expression of her femininity. Therefore, she is also out of synchronisation with the societal image that asserts that women should not be "rough."

According to Owen (1992, p. 387), people "can only swim with or against the tide of others." Hobfall (1986) discusses the importance of ecological congruence or the person-environment fit of social support and other coping resources. The participants experienced a lack of ecological congruence between what they were (person) and what they were expected to be (environment) and this, caused them some discomfort.

## Depression

Depression may refer to "a brief negative mood, an interrelated set of symptoms and experiences, and a medically-defined syndrome" (Gotlib & Hammen, 1992, p. 2). It seemed that all three participants experienced depression prior to, or at the time of the rejecting and reclaiming their femininity.

As already discussed, after trying unsuccessfully to make her marriage work, Sapna was depressed and attempted suicide. After her suicide attempt, Sapna rejected her femininity and became a 'male-identified' female (Murdock, 1990). However, she did not seem to find life as a male-identified female to be

fulfilling either. According to Murdock (1990), male-identified women find that something deep inside of them is lacking and it is difficult for them to feel whole or complete, which was evident in Sapna feeling fragmented and she lived in turmoil after she had rejected her femininity. Sapna only began the process of reclaiming her femininity in an attempt to end her turmoil.

Alta began to reject her femininity after she was sexually abused at the age of five, which probably caused her to become depressed as she tried to understand what had happened to her. According to Shrout, Link, Dohrenwend, Skodol, Stueve, and Mirotznik (1989, p. 466), "uncontrolled, disruptive life events are risk factors for both the onset and the recurrence of major depression." Murdock (1990) found that because some male-identified women adopt the masculine view of the feminine, they inevitably see their achievements as being limited by the fact that they are biologically female. Therefore, no matter what they achieve, it will never be good enough because they may feel that they are 'handicapped' by their femininity. Because Alta had a negative perception of femininity, she had a negative perception of herself, as a female. Therefore, no matter what she achieved, she may have felt that she was less-than, because of her inherent femaleness. Alta began the reclaiming process after she ended a sexually abusive relationship with her previous boyfriend. Thereafter, she was possibly depressed and therefore began psychotherapy.

As already discussed, Marna was depressed about having to accept her femininity when her breasts developed, because to her it meant that she had to be like her mother to be accepted by her father. Marna began to reclaim her femininity after her father's death, which resulted in her becoming depressed. Gotlib and Hammen (1992) discuss loss as a cause of depression.

## External Support

This theme was evident in Sapna's journey when she began the process of rejecting her femininity. According to Murdock (1990), when a woman adopts male standards of achievement, she becomes a 'male-identified' woman. As a male-identified woman, Sapna had an intense desire to achieve and receive outer recognition. In order to do so she became a qualified real estate agent, which gave her an identity independent from her role as mother or wife and made her financially successful. According to Murdock (1990) these achievements would have validated her intellect, given her a sense of purpose and generated a sense of security, which is what Sapna experienced. Therefore, Sapna received external support for her rejection of her femininity.

In the process of reclaiming their femininity, Alta and Marna received support for their femininity from other women, when they entered university. Murdock (1990) mentions the need for women to connect with positive female role models. Alta found positive female role models in both the formal and informal university settings. Marna found that her type of femininity was acceptable in the university's female's residence in which she lived. Alta and Marna's connection to positive female role models allowed them to experience an alternative reality to what they perceived femininity to entail. According to Renner & Laux (2000), the global society has allowed people contact with other realities, which means that new information is providing alternatives to communities and/or individuals, and therefore, challenging current concepts of reality.

According to social constructionism, people live in a world created by their experiences and social environment (Gergen, 1985). Therefore, when Alta and Marna entered a different social environment, their notions of their femininity changed and in this way their realities changed.

## Separation or Distance from Family

Murdock (1990) felt that an important part of the reclaiming process involves women taking time for themselves, away from outer pursuits, to listen to their inner femininity. Each participant took time out for herself in her own way. For Sapna it was going overseas without her family; Alta found space to think about herself in therapy and Marna mentally took time out for herself when she was depressed and she also attended psychotherapy.

According to Friday (1979), the psychological separation between mother and daughter is necessary for the daughter to see her mother in perspective. Because Sapna focused almost exclusively on her marital relationship, it is not clear as to how or if her relationship with her mother has changed through her process of reclaiming her femininity. Alta does not seem to have psychologically separated from her mother as is evident from her still feeling anger towards her mother and her inability to see her mother in perspective. Marna saw her mother in perspective of her personality and generation only after she attended psychotherapy, where she 'worked' on her relationship with her mother and after she returned to South Africa after her previous stay in America.

According to Kenemore and Spira (1996) and Murdock (1990), the psychological separation of daughters from their mothers also allows mothers to see their daughters as women rather than as children. Marna's mother only accepted Marna's expression of her femininity after it was evident to her that Marna's husband had accepted her expression of femininity and accepted her as an equal partner in their marriage.

## Accepting their Vulnerability

All three participants felt that they needed to become vulnerable to fully accept their femininity. Their definitions of what constituted vulnerability varied according to their unique circumstances and experiences. For Sapna, this entailed depending on her husband and trusting him not to hurt her again. Dominian (1995) mentions the difficulties that spouses have in trusting each other after they have been hurt.

In the process of reclaiming her body, Alta had to trust her boyfriend not to hurt her. She felt that by allowing him to touch her, she was being vulnerable to possible sexual abuse by him, as she experienced in her previous relationship. According to Rich (1986), the reclaiming of a woman's body is important because throughout patriarchal history, women have separated emotionally from their bodies. Because of Alta's extreme separation of her emotions from her body, the reclaiming of her body was a long, slow process.

Because women are expected to choose between being a professional and being a mother (Fox-Genovese, 1996; Murdock, 1990), Marna is uncertain of her willingness to sacrifice her financial independence to look after a child. She

feels that having a child would necessitate her staying at home to take care of the child and would thus make her financially dependent on her husband. However, unlike in the past, she is now open to considering the option of having a child and being vulnerable to her husband supporting both her and their child.

## Redefinition of Femininity

Since language creates reality (Becvar & Becvar, 1996), it was only when the participants redefined femininity in a more positive light that they were able to accept their femininity. Murdock (1990) feels that a woman cannot be comfortable with her femininity unless she is comfortable with the definition of her femininity or with what femininity means to her. According to Anderson (cited in Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p. 275):

> *The search for new meaning, which often comprises searching for new language, is a search for us to be the selves with which we feel most comfortable.*

Klieber (cited in Carr, 1998, p. 530) stated that girls who were tomboys and who retained "many of their tomboy skills and traits" might find these skills and traits helpful in reclaiming their femininity. Sapna utilised her determination and strength that had characterised her during her time as a male-identified woman to focus on her husband and to revive her love for him.

Once Alta found acceptance for her ways of thinking, she felt comfortable with being who she wanted to be. That is, she did not feel as an outcast anymore.

This acceptance contributed to her fighting to be who she wants to be even though it may not be the conventional type of woman.

Initially Marna felt the need to be 'manly' in her relationship with her husband for him to consider her needs when he made decisions. However, as their relationship has matured, she now feels that her husband will consider her needs without her having to fight for her to be heard in her marriage. The safety that she feels in her marriage has allowed her to be more comfortable with her role as wife and therefore she is more comfortable with her femininity.

According to Doan (1997), although language is social, meaning is individual. This is evident in that each participant redefined femininity in a different way according to her attitude towards the feminine and her comfort with being female.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher discussed the common themes that she identified in the participants' journeys, which were linked to research findings. However, it is important for the reader to bear in mind that the themes discussed were according to how the researcher punctuated and understood the participants' journeys.

Furthermore, from the above discussion, it should be evident that although the researcher discussed common themes in the participants' journeys, the manner in which these themes manifested were unique to each participant and her experiences.

CHAPTER 10

# CONCLUSION

## Introduction

In this concluding chapter, the present study will be evaluated in terms of its strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the researcher will provide recommendations for future studies.

## Evaluation of the Study

In this study, the researcher intended to explore the lived experiences of women who felt that they had rejected their femininity in favour of masculinity and who later reclaimed their femininity. It is believed that this task was adequately achieved in the stories provided, which gave rich accounts of the participant's experiences.

The following are the common themes that characterised the participants' rejection and reclaiming of their femininity:

⇒ *Relationship with Significant Male or Males* – This theme seemed to have contributed to the participants' processes of rejecting and reclaiming their femininity.

⇒ *Relationship with their Mothers* – This theme contributed to the participants' rejection of their femininity.

⇒ *Appearance/Expectations versus Reality* – The discrepancy between what the participants' felt and their external appearances was evident during the rejection process but as they reclaimed their femininity, there was more congruence between their internal feeling and their external appearances.

⇒ *Belief in Women's Inferiority to Men* – This theme seemed to contribute to the rejection of their femininity.

⇒ *Being Different* – It seems that all three participants were never completely part of their peer groups, and were in ways different from their peers.

⇒ *Depression* – It appeared that the rejection and the reclaiming processes were prompted by feelings of depression at who they were or how they felt towards themselves.

⇒ *External Support* – The participants received support for either the rejection or the reclaiming of their femininity.

⇒ *Separation or Distance from Family* – It appeared that all three participants required some form of physical and/or mental separation from their families for them to evaluate their lives and to reclaim their femininity.

⇒ *Accepting their Vulnerability* – Each participant had to accept her vulnerability in the process of her reclaiming her femininity.

⇒ *Redefinition of Femininity* – Each participant redefined femininity in a way that expresses her comfort with her femininity and the redefinitions of femininity may have contributed to the reclaiming of their femininity.

The information from this study could be helpful to those working with women who have rejected or are currently reclaiming their femininity.

## Strengths of this Study

This study is rooted in social constructionism. This is evident in the 'fact' that both the rejection and reclaiming process are constructs, and as such, are given meaning in relation to the experience. Furthermore, social constructionism regards constructs as important because language creates reality (Becvar & Becvar, 1996); therefore, they were valid aspects of investigations in this research where femininity is also seen as a construct, and as such the meaning or attributes of femininity change with experiences and exposure to new ideas.

Because each participant lived in her own world created by her experiences and social environment (Gergen, 1985), the process of rejecting and reclaiming her femininity was unique to her. Each participant's experience was different from, but also had similarities with the other participants' experiences, thus supporting social constructionists assertion of multiple realities (Becvar & Becvar, 1996).

From the three participants' stories, it should be evident that both the rejection and subsequent acceptance of a woman's femininity happens in relationship to and within certain contexts. According to second-order cybernetics, this is obvious since an individual is not seen as an isolate and because reality is co-created. In this study, the participants were seen in the context of their relationships with others and their social and cultural environments.

Because language is social, but meaning is individual (Doan, 1997), this research does not purport to tell the absolute truth; instead it gives the reader an insider view of the participants' lived experiences, through the researcher's lenses. However, according to Keeney (cited in Atkinson & Heath, 1987, p. 9) the researcher's discussion says as much, if not more, about the researcher than it does about the participants. Nonetheless, although this study is the result of the researcher's interpretation of what the participants said, the researcher believes that she has remained true to the participants' experiences. Therefore, this study is one truth among many possible truths that the researcher or other researchers could have deduced from the participants' stories.

Reliability as conceptualized in terms of qualitative research was achieved in this study. The researcher disclosed her orientation, the social and cultural context of the investigation was explained, the researcher's internal processes were mentioned, the researcher engaged with the material and in the hermeneutic cycle, themes were linked with examples from the interview text and the literature review, and the researcher asked 'what' rather than 'why' questions.

Validity was achieved in the following ways:

- Internal coherence was shown to exist in the fit between the research purpose, context and method of investigation.
- This research has succeeded in enriching and extending the reader's understanding of the experience of some women who have rejected and then reclaimed their femininity.
- Testimonial validity was achieved from the participants who felt that the researcher had portrayed them 'as they are.'
- Catalytic validity was achieved through the interaction between the researcher and the participants, and between the participants and the researcher's retelling of their stories, which allowed new meanings to emerge, and for new understandings to be reached.
- Reflexive validity was achieved as the researcher engaged in the hermeneutic dance. Her understanding was extended and enriched with each encounter with the text. Her understanding of the complex processes involved in the rejection and the reclaiming processes has given her new admiration for the participants who went through this process or are currently engaged in reclaiming their femininity.

## Limitations of this Study

The researcher's personal interest in the rejection and reclaiming of a woman's femininity led her to select this as the topic for research. Therefore, the meanings and themes that she articulated are biased by her frame of reference and involvement in the topic. However, it is impossible for a researcher to be completely value-free, and her biases form part of the research. This implies that although the researcher had attempted to remain true to the participants'

experiences, what has been written is her interpretation of what the participants said and is therefore a second hand account of the participants' journeys.

As a qualitative research, the researcher studied three cases intensively, as opposed to having a large sample. Although the methodology was labour intensive, the researcher feels that she managed to gain a sense of the lived experiences of her participants. However, it seems that the processes of rejecting and reclaiming one's femininity are varied and more cases might have added to a greater understanding of the processes. However, it is doubtful that an exhaustive sample could have been found. Therefore, the validity gained in this research is at the expense of its generalizability (Moon et al., 1990). Therefore, the themes that have been discussed should be used as guidelines rather than a recipe for how the reclaiming process can be achieved.

This study could be criticized for providing a singular perspective of the lived experience of women in a patriarchal society. However, it is doubtful whether women who do not feel marginalized in a patriarchal society would have rejected their femininity and therefore do not fall within the scope of this study. Furthermore, the researcher speculates that more women reject their femininity than reclaim it, however, these women did not fulfill the criteria for participation in this study either.

A further limitation could be that the personal information that is elicited during the interviews is often of a very personal nature and this raises important ethical issues (Moon et al., 1990). Pseudonyms were used and details were changed to protect the anonymity of participants. Although the participants were eager to

participate, it was only when reading the researcher's reconstruction of their stories that they realised the impact that the study had on them

This research could also be criticized for using participants with whom the researcher has a personal relationship. The researcher's personal relationship and prior knowledge of the participants' experiences may have influenced the interview process and the data analysis process.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Although there is limited research on young girls who give up their femininity in favour of masculinity and thereby become tomboys, there is scant research on women who reject their femininity in adulthood, like Sapna in this study. This could be a possible area for future research.

Research could be conducted on women who have never felt the need to reject their femininity, in an attempt to understand the various processes involved in accepting one's femininity.

It would be interesting to find out whether the process of rejecting and reclaiming one's femininity is a result of the global society, that is, is it a 'modern day predicament?' This could be achieved by interviewing women from conservative, non-modernized communities to see if they reject their femininity and if so, to what extent are they able to reject their femininity in a conservative community.

## Conclusion

This study has provided valuable information regarding the processes involved in some women rejecting and then later reclaiming their femininity. It has shown that people live in and are created by their environment and their interaction with others. This information could be valuable to those working with women who are experiencing difficulties in accepting their femininity. The qualitative research methodology has been valuable in understanding these phenomena from the lived experience of women who have gone through the process. Some important areas for future research were addressed. These include research on women who have rejected their femininity later in life; exploring the factors involved in women who have never rejected their femininity and determining if the rejection and reclaiming processes are 'modern day' conditions.

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APPENDIX A

# RESEARCHER'S JOURNEY OF REJECTING AND RECLAIMING HER FEMININITY

## Childhood Experiences

I am the second and last born in my family. My brother is two years older than I am. I was an unplanned and unwanted child. I am not sure if it was told to me, or how I knew it, but I knew from a young age, that I was an unwanted child. I used to say 'Bhavna the great, born by mistake.'

After my parents married, they lived with my father's parents; his brother and his family; and my father's sister. My brother was born in that household. Soon after my brother's birth, my parents moved into their own home. It was here that I was born. Nevertheless, for most of my life I remember being with my father's family. That is, although we lived separately from my father's family, almost everything was done with them or at their home. Thus, I grew up in an extended family. My peer group or siblings consisted of my brother and my two male cousins. There is a year age difference between my first cousin and my brother and between my second cousin and myself. In this way, I was the only daughter in the family.

### Growing up with Brothers

As the only female child, I think that I felt very alone most of the time. The boys would play soccer and cricket and I could not play this with them. I was often told that 'girls can't do that' or 'girls should not do that.' However, because I did not

have any other company, I would sometimes insist on playing with my brothers (cousins were regarded as brothers as well). If they were playing soccer when I insisted on joining them, then they would decide that it was time for penalty shoot-outs, and I had to be the goalkeeper because they knew that I was scared of the ball and therefore I would run into the house. In this way, my brothers probably saw me as the annoying little sister and did what they could to keep me out of their games.

The only time that I can really remember playing with them, and being accepted by them, was in the tree house outside of my uncle's house. It was brilliant. We could all play in it together and it was a very stylish house with steps and everything. Here, we were all equal and I could join without any hassles. However, the tree house did not last for long as the municipality said that we could not build a tree house on public property and therefore we had to remove it.

During school holidays, the four of us were always together. When we went away for the holidays, we went either with my parents or with their parents. The boys were always together, and I was stuck in the house or doing solitary activities like reading. I know that I spent a lot of time in my head, imagining what life would be like, if I had a sister. The 'companions' that I had, were either my mum or my aunt, and I did not regard either one as fun company. However, I know that my mum tried to do things with me during our holiday and she spent time with me doing what I wanted to do, but it was not the same as having companions of my own age.

From the age of ten, we spent almost every school holiday in Durban. The boys would spend most of their holiday in the squash court or going to the lagoon, and so forth, and I would be with the parents. I remember the one holiday, my brother and I went with my uncle and his family to Durban, and I was so miserable. It was

my twelfth birthday and nobody wished me happy birthday or knew that it was my birthday. Therefore, I cried and insisted that I wanted to go back home and refused anything from my uncle. As a result, they put me on a plane and I was home for my birthday. My parents took me for supper and I felt special because my brother was not around.

## Female Influence

When I was about five years old, I had a female friend who I was very close to. We did everything together and even slept over at each other's house. She taught me 'girl' games and I felt that I had a sister. However, when I was about ten years old, she moved to another area and when we met again, years later, she had changed. We were never close to each other again.

At the age of five, I had female cousins for the first time. My mother's three brothers lived together. Two of my aunts had daughters a month apart from each other. However, for a while, they were too young for me to play with. As they grew older, it was lovely to teach them girl games and to play with them. They looked up to me as a role model and I imagine that I was proud of being female at that time. For the first time in my life, I was the older one and I could influence them. I remember that they wanted to be like me and it made me feel good about myself. I remember being in their kitchen, when one of my aunts told me that I should cut my hair. I proudly replied that I was a girl and girls had long hair.

Around the age of five, we moved out of our home and moved in with my great-grandparents. That was a very rewarding experience because I formed a very close

bond with my great-grandfather. I saw him as the only adult who had time for me. He would walk with me to and from school and after school, he would play either cards or draughts with me. I really felt loved and cared for when he was around. Therefore, I think that he performed both the mother and father role for me at that time. However, at the age of nine, my great-grandparents left South Africa to live in India.

## Relationship with my Mother

Because I was an unwanted child, my mother felt that I was an intruder. For the first three months after my birth, she still felt that I was intruding in her life. During this time, whenever she bathed me and tried to give me medication, I would faint. Therefore, our neighbour, who was a nurse, bathed and gave me medications.

Before moving in with my great-grand parents, my mother was an authority figure in the house. Both my brother and I were afraid of her and therefore listened to her. However, when we moved in with my great-grandparents, she was no longer allowed to shout at or hit us. That is, my great-grandparents shouted at her for shouting at us or hitting us, and they physically protected us from my mother. Therefore, her authority over us children decreased, although it still existed, but to a much lesser extent. We also knew that if we were very naughty, then she would tell our father and then he would shout at us.

As a child, I do not recall having much of a relationship with my mother because she was always busy in the kitchen or shopping for groceries with my aunt.

## Relationship with my Father

From the time that my parents married, my father was a married bachelor. He was not actively involved with his wife and children. His life revolved around his friends. He was always out with them or they were always at our home. When he was at home without his friends, he would read the newspaper or listen to the news and was therefore was still absent.

As a child, I enjoyed taking part in school plays, and my father hated these. He needed to be forced and reluctantly came to my concerts and he always had a negative comment to make after the show. Since I was often given an award at the concerts for academic excellence, I felt that my school achievements were not good enough for my father as he did not want to attend the shows. In an attempt to get my father's attention, I attended karate classes, as he seemed to approve of my brother doing karate.

My father never showed any affection towards us. As a child, I had to fight to kiss him goodnight. Although logically, I know that he was just playing with me, I think as a child, I felt that for me to get affection from my father, I had to fight to get it. At the age of six, I spent the night at my friend's home and in the morning, her father kissed her mother, and then my friend goodbye. Then he turned and kissed me. This scared me and I cried and ran home. Although I did not understand my behaviour, I later realised that this is something that I wanted from my father. I wanted my father to kiss me and to show me some affection.

Although my father never hit us, my brother and I were afraid of him, as he would raise his voice at us. As a child, at times, I felt that my parents loved my brother

more, but not because he was a boy. Likewise, at times, he felt that our parents loved me more.

## Adolescent Experiences

I do not know when I rejected my femininity, but between the time when I refused to cut my hair because I was a girl and the age of ten, I had actively rejected my femininity. That is, from around the age of ten onwards, I refused to wear dresses. If I did wear a dress or a skirt and someone commented on how beautiful I looked, I would immediately change into trousers and a t-shirt. In my adolescence, I also felt that if you were soft and kind, then people would take advantage of you and use you. Therefore, I refused to be soft and kind to prevent people from taking advantage of me.

My desire to be a tomboy in my childhood was out of boredom at being female and therefore not being included in my brothers' games and at what I thought femininity represented. To me being a woman meant being subservient to men, and sacrificing everything for your husband and children. It was not being a person in your own right but being used and abused by others. That is, I felt that the more you 'gave' to others, the more they expected you to sacrifice. Hence, I was not willing to be a female and therefore, I would not have to sacrifice anything for anyone. Therefore, I could not be used as a doormat.

My nuclear family accepted my tomboy status. However, some members of my extended family wanted me to be more feminine as I was the only daughter from my father's side of the family. The more that they wanted me to be feminine, the

more I rebelled and became masculine. That is, I actively resisted the pressure to be feminine and to conform.

In adolescences, I was very moody and was filled with rage at being female. Although at that time, I did not understand my anger.

## Relationship with my Parents

My anger during adolescence was mainly directed at my mother. I was angry at her for typifying the traditional wife and for not standing up for herself. My father was still a married bachelor and she would wait up for him to come home so that they could have supper; or she would stay up waiting for my father and his friends to come home so that she could dish out food for them. If my father and his friends were 'partying' at home, then she would wait until they left so that she could clean up. This subservient behaviour angered me because I felt that it was my destiny as a woman and I did not want to be female.

At family functions, I saw that my mother was not the only woman who typified subservience. All the females would be in the kitchen, working, while the men would be outside or watching television. It seemed as if the women were there to serve the men and as the daughter, I was also expected to serve the men. That is, if my brother was watching television and he wanted tea then I would be told to make it for him. This 'service' was also expected from me when my father's friends were at home, therefore I hated being at home when my dad and his friends were at home.

In early adolescence, my relationship with my father was distant and I sincerely felt that in his life his friends came first, then came golf, then maybe my mother and us. I could not express my anger at my father, so I blamed his friends for stealing my father from me.

In late adolescence, my mother started working and our relationship improved. Although I still saw her as submissive, she was no longer traditional in that she stopped wearing a sari daily and started to wear trousers. I also saw her as being more capable and independent.

## Womanhood

I regarded my breasts and my menstrual cycle as a burden. Throughout my adolescence, I wore loose fitting t-shirts that I bought from the men's sections in stores. I refused to wear tight clothing because my breasts would show and I was ashamed of them, and my femininity.

My mother told me about my menstruations. I found them to be an inconvenience because I was regarded as dirty during my menstrual cycle, and could not participate in religious activities. Although I did not understand the reason for the restrictions, I abided by them.

I was ashamed of my menstrual cycle and was glad that my cycle was irregular, because it allowed me to use the menstrual taboo to my advantage in that I would claim to be "dirty" when I did not want to attend a religious function. I was angry at my mother for telling my father and other family members that I was "now a

woman." I was also angry that this signaled the end of my childhood, because I was expected to behave like a woman.

## Body Image

Since young, I was always told that I have a large frame and that I have to watch what I eat. I felt that my father was always watching what I ate and if I wanted to indulge, he would ask if I really wanted a cake or chocolate. Therefore, as an adolescent, I disliked my body shape and size. I was constantly on a diet of one kind or another and always thought of myself as fat and ugly.

My dislike of my body changed in late adolescence when I took part in a stage production of Macbeth as one of the witches. It was a school production and the entire standard saw me jumping around in my witch costume. After this experience, I stopped worrying about what other people had to say about me and how I looked.

## Relationship with my Peers

Although I had female friends and spent all my time with them, we [my friends and I] were not typical girls in that we did not have any boyfriends. Before attending high school, I felt that girls who were "indecent" had many boyfriends and they were "bad girls." This was what I thought of those girls who wore short skirts and had different boyfriends ever month. Throughout high school, I would spend my breaks talking to my girlfriends. Our conversations did not revolve around boys or typical girl-talk of makeup and so on.

As an adolescent, although I desired to have a boyfriend, I would not allow myself to have one. Firstly, I felt that I was not good enough to have a boyfriend and 'protected' myself by being strong. Secondly, I was afraid that if I had a boyfriend, then I would have to assume the female role and that to me, meant being subservient, inferior and weak. Therefore, when boys showed the slightest interest in me, I could not understand their attraction and I 'scared' them away by being rude and nasty. For most of my adolescence, I attended karate classes and made it know to everyone that I was a "karateka" and would fight anyone who interfered with me. Therefore, I was torn between desiring a relationship and being afraid of having a relationship.

My closest male friend was my father's friend's son. We literally grew up together and what bonded us was our anger at our fathers for not being there for us. We supported and encouraged each other's struggles with our fathers. With him, I did not have to assume the female role, as we were equal and cared for each other. Besides my great-grand father, he was the only other male whom I allowed to see my vulnerable, compassionate side. However, in my Matric year, he committed suicide. With his death, I felt that there was no hope for me as he was the only male peer who understood me.

## Adulthood

After matric, I went to university. I was still torn between the desire to have a boyfriend and the fear of having one. Because of my fear of being rejected, I never allowed any of my boyfriends to get close to me and I always ended the relationship before I could get emotionally attached.

My relationship with my father improved to the extent that I was able to discuss work and have philosophical conversations with him. That is, after my friend's suicide, I became very interested in the afterlife and philosophy. I was intellectually close to my father but emotionally we were still distant. I knew that my father loved and cared for me, but this was never said. My reason for joining the gym was to get his approval, but later, I found that I enjoyed it. Going to gym also gave me something to discuss with my father, as we would talk about how much exercise we did at the gym.

## Reclaiming my Femininity

My reclaiming began in my Honours year when I went to Rhodes University. Although it was not a conscious reclaiming, it started when I began to explore my life. This was the first time that I was living on my own and I could differentiate my feelings from that of my family. Through various conventional and alternative therapies, I realised that I was angry at my family for molding me into what I did not want to be. It was also the first time that I was able to acknowledge my anger at being female and to realise what I thought being female meant. I was also given the opportunity to release my anger at my father for treating my mother as a servant and my anger at my friend for committing suicide.

My Honours year was emotionally very difficult in that I dealt with issues regarding my feelings towards those that I loved and I was learning how to have my say without hurting them. However, it was only later that I realised how valuable this experience was for me and that it had started me on the road to finding myself again.

After completing my Honours degree, I returned home. My relationship with my mother had improved as I saw her as more capable and I admired her strength to endure my father's abuse for the sake of her children and I hoped that I would have such strength one day. Towards the end of my Honours year, my father went insolvent. This affected our relationship in that most of his friends deserted him and therefore he had more time to spend with his family. In addition, I had matured during my Honours year and this facilitated a more grown up relationship between my father and I.

The year after I completed my Honours degree, I befriended some women whom I felt were strong female role models. Although some of them were married with children, they did not seem to characterise the typical married woman. I also attended a Woman's Weekend with them and realised the power and the beauty of the feminine. After the workshop, I felt delighted to be a woman and cherished my femininity. However, after a while, I would slide back into my old routine. That is, I could express and enjoy my femininity when I was with my female friends and the effects carried forward to my daily life for a short while. However, I could not sustain my femininity in my daily life. I am not sure of the reason, but I think that it possibly had to do with me not trusting that those who knew and loved me would accept this 'new' me, or maybe it had to do with the fear of showing my femininity which I felt would make me vulnerable. That is, I think that I felt scared to be a female in my daily life.

## External Support for my Femininity

In the first year of my Masters degree, I lived in a flat with five other females. It was the first time that I felt that I could bond with females and I enjoyed doing

female activities. My fellow students in my Masters class supported my claim to my femininity to such an extent that I was encouraged to wear a dress to class. On the day that I wore a dress, I was given external recognition and acceptance of my femininity. I slowly started to accept that I am female, and I began to enjoy my femininity. As an external indication of my acceptance of my femininity, I celebrated my 'coming-out' with my close family members.

During this time, I had a client towards whom I felt very protective and maternal, and my mother had a hysterectomy. I realised that the female attributes of nurturing and compassion, were not necessarily weak, as I had regarded them to be. I enjoyed caring for my mother and feeling feminine in being able to give her back some of the care and love that she gave to me.

Through talking to other women about their femininity and feeling secure in my expression of my femininity, I am able to express my femininity more freely. I have realised that being female does not depend on me wearing a skirt or makeup and at times, when I want to dress up, I enjoy dressing up and behaving in a typical female manner. But being female for me starts from the inside, it is the love that I have for who I am, for my body and my soul.

**Present**

My current relationship with my father is positive. We seem to be able to discuss both intellectual and limited emotional topics. I see my father as a source of support and guidance. At present, I think that our relationship is the best that it has ever been. He accepts me for who I am and I do not feel that I need to prove anything to him. He supports my career and my need to have a career.

My current relationship with my mother is difficult to define. At times, I still feel that I need to protect her and at other times, I feel the need to encourage her emancipation from her dependency on my father. Because I was living separate from my mother for a year and a half, the physical and emotional separation from her, has allowed me to see her in context. I feel that I have also encouraged her to depend on my father rather than me, although she knows that I will always be there for her.

Currently, I am not involved in a relationship because of a combination of a lack of time, a lack of effort on my behalf to meet men and the lack of suitable male companions where I am living. I also feel that because I have only recently accepted my femininity and myself, until recently, I was not open to having a relationship.

## My Future

Although I feel comfortable as a woman most of the time, I know that I still need to reclaim aspects of my femininity and I doubt that this journey will ever end. That is, I will always find aspects of my femininity that I will want to embrace.

Now that I feel that I am comfortable in this body, I know that I am ready to venture into a relationship where I will have to grow as a woman and my ideas of love and marriage will necessarily change with my experiences. Because I now love who I am, I can accept love from another without feeling that I have to become someone else in order to be loved.

APPENDIX B

# RESEARCHER'S RE-TELLING OF SAPNA'S STORY

## Childhood Experiences

Sapna's childhood was characterized by constant fighting between her parents, her father being drunk most of the time, and she taking care of her siblings. In order to escape her home environment, she spent time at a friend's house where things were more stable. Sapna found her friend's parents to be loving, caring and nurturing. This escape helped her maintain her "sanity" despite the situation at home. At her friend's house, she was freed from her role as the parental child and enjoyed being pampered and taken care of.

As far as Sapna is concerned, she was grown up by the age of nine. This meant that from this age, she recalls cooking for and looking after her siblings and her drunken father, because her mum was always out working.

As a result, Sapna did not experience the mother-daughter relationship as one in which her mother cared for her. Although she believes that her mother loved and cared for her, this was never expressed because her "mother was always at work. She wasn't at home."

Her relationship with her father was initially experienced as positive, in that she was his pet and he always bought for her toys. But, as she grew older, this changed to her looking after him instead of him looking after her. In retrospect,

Sapna feels that it was because of him that she had to grow up so early and that she lost out on a carefree, happy childhood.

## Adolescent Experiences

Sapna's parents were divorced when she was eleven years old. This resulted in the whole family, except her father returning to South Africa, from Britain. Because her mother was now a single parent, Sapna felt that she had to be the perfect child, to avoid being a burden to her mother. Since her mother was working, Sapna still had to take care of her brother and sister.

However, being a pretty, young girl meant that many young men were interested in her. Her male cousins treated her as a sister and this gave her the opportunity of having a healthy social life. At one stage, there was a young man "interfering" with her and she told her cousins about it. In order to protect their 'sister', her cousins took it upon themselves to beat him up. This caused friction with her aunt who banned Sapna from her house. Therefore, Sapna could no longer be with her cousins and this, to her felt like the end of her life.

In light of this, her mother felt that she would be better off with living with another aunt and she was sent away from her family to live with that aunt. To Sapna this was like being banished and she could not understand why she was being punished. However, she swore to herself that she would never again depend on anyone to sort out her problems and she would stand up for herself. Initially she was glad to be going to her aunt's place because she was miserable at home. However, she soon realised that she had to be on her best behaviour at her aunt's house in order not to be sent packing again. So, on the one hand she

was free from the responsibility of her siblings, but on the other hand, she had to watch what she did. After spending a year and half with her aunt, she returned home to her mother.

## Body Image

Sapna never considered herself as "drop dead gorgeous." During adolescence, she had a poor self-image. Although people around her told her how beautiful she was, she never accepted it. She also had no confidence in her abilities. She always put herself down and expected to fail. For example, while she was writing a class test, she would be convinced that she had failed.

She began to accept her beauty with the help of a friend whom she thought of as "not beautiful, ...clumsy, ... not at all a woman," and who was a tomboy. This friend helped Sapna to find her inner beauty. She supported her and encouraged her to find that which everyone around her could see in her. Her friend emphasized her inner beauty rather than her outer beauty. Through the love and support of this friend, Sapna managed to reclaim a positive image of herself.

This friendship continues until today. This friend is always there for Sapna when she needs her and she praises her for her achievements. This friend has been a constant source of support and encouragement for Sapna.

## Womanhood

With only the knowledge about menstruation given to her by a cousin, Sapna began her menstrual cycle at the age of nine. However, she felt that she got her

menstrual cycle too early and the way that it happened scared her. That is, she had her first cycle during the night and she "got up in this pool of blood." After informing her mother, she was told that now she had to wash properly and that she can now have babies. Her menstruation also signaled the end of daily prayers, because she was now considered 'dirty' for the duration that she had her menstrual cycle. Sapna did not understand what made her so dirty but did as she was told.

However, as an adult, Sapna still does not longer regard her menstrual cycle as being dirty. Despite this, she still follows the prescriptions that she is not allowed into the temple or cannot participate in any prayer ceremonies during her menstrual cycle.

## First Love

After returning home to her mother, Sapna fell in love for the first time, with a man slightly older than she was. He went off to university and they kept in contact by writing letters to one another. Her mother supported this relationship in that she would bring his letters home from work. Sapna's only nostalgic memory of her mother is that she would wait in anticipation for her to come home from work with a letter. However, soon after he left for university, Sapna received a letter from him saying that their relationship was over because his parents were not in favour of it.

This devastated Sapna, who firmly believed that love was forever. Now that she had nothing to look forward to at home, she started going out with friends. Her mother did not like this and started enforcing curfews on her. This caused a rift

in their relationship as Sapna felt that her mother did not trust her. She suspected that her mother thought that she had been having sex and might be on "the wrong path," therefore making curfews necessary.

## Marriage Proposal

Sapna's mother was worried that due to the devastation of the breakup, Sapna would follow the "wrong" path, which would entail her getting involved with a Muslim man, or someone else from another caste.

Her future husband saw Sapna, aged 15, at a community show. He inquired about her from his cousin, who then told his mother about his interest in Sapna. His mother then told his aunt. Since this aunt was also related to Sapna, she told Sapna's mother that someone was interested in her daughter. This was in fact an informal proposal. When Sapna's mother approached her with the proposal, she refused because she was too young to get married. The mutual aunt, who initiated the conversation of marriage, supported her mother's belief that Sapna would follow the wrong path. Therefore, her aunt felt that it was essential to get Sapna married as soon as possible to the man who had proposed, as he was from their caste. This type of arranged marriage seemed to be the cultural norm and it seemed that girls married at a young age, and therefore this does not seem to be out of the ordinary.

In her sixteenth year, the mutual aunt returned and said that her future husband wanted a wife and asked Sapna's mother if Sapna and this man could go out for supper. Her mother refused to allow them to go out for supper but agreed to a meeting in her house. Sapna believes that both she and her husband were

pushed into this meeting and therefore met reluctantly. However, when they met in November, within an hour of their conversation, they discussed marriage. Sapna refused to get married because she felt a responsibility towards her mother who was a single parent, and she felt that she needed her to help her mother to support her siblings and provide for their future education. He promised her that if she married him, he would see to it that her siblings were taken care of. At the end of this meeting, he told Sapna that she had until the 28th of February to accept his proposal.

In December, Sapna, her mother and siblings went for a holiday to Durban. During that holiday, her mother kept pressurizing Sapna to accept the proposal. However, Sapna was adamant that she was not going to marry him. This strong difference in opinion caused an even greater rift in Sapna's relationship with her mother. Sapna felt that her mother's reason for pushing her into the marriage was that her mother wanted Sapna to have what Sapna never had which was "security, stability and a comfortable life, meaning somebody who had enough money to give [her] a comfortable life." This is what her mother saw in her future husband. Sapna wanted something totally different; she wanted somebody who was "caring, sensitive and loving."

As a resulting of the mounting pressure from her mother and feeling that by accepting the proposal, she would make her mother happy, Sapna accepted the marriage proposal on the 28th of February. Sapna also felt that her acceptance of the marriage proposal was an expression of her gratitude towards her mother for all that she had done for her.

On February 28, Sapna met her husband for the second time. Their brief courtship ended in marriage early in May of the same year. This was because it was convenient for his family, as they had close family members visiting from overseas, who wanted to attend the wedding. In retrospect, Sapna feels that the wedding was too soon for both of them.

## Adult Experiences

Very soon after their marriage, Sapna believes that she fell in love with her husband, as she found some very good qualities in him. She had a very positive relationship with her mother-in-law, who accepted her as a daughter. Her husband praised her often and she interacted well with his friends. This made her feel that "now [she was] worth something." Her marriage gave her confidence and made her feel whole.

### Motherhood

Soon after marriage, Sapna was pregnant with their first child. Although she was initially happy to be pregnant, she took this as a sign that now she was "stuck for life." This was because she had promised herself that she would never allow her children to go through the experience of having divorced parents, as she had. Three months into her marriage, her marital bliss ended when she felt that her husband suddenly had no time for her and he always went out. She felt that because she was pregnant, she was expected to stay at home. However, her husband felt that he did not have to stay at home with her as he still "had a life." Living with her in-laws aggravated the situation, in that it gave her husband the freedom to do as he pleased because his parents were there to

look after Sapna if she needed help and therefore, he never felt that she was alone at home.

As a result, Sapna was miserable during her pregnancy, which was characterised by constant arguments and fights between Sapna and her husband. When Sapna was six and half months pregnant, she went into premature labour. Fortunately, the doctors managed to stop the labour but she was bedridden for two weeks. In her seventh month, she went back into labour and her son was born.

Having a premature child, at the age of 17, added to Sapna's suffering in that she could not hold her baby and had to visit him daily in hospital. She blamed herself and more so, her husband for making her so miserable throughout her pregnancy, which she felt resulted in her having a premature baby.

## Married Life after their First Child

When the baby came home, her relationship with her mother-in-law deteriorated. Although Sapna felt she was a very capable mother because she had already mothered her siblings, she believed that her mother-in-law and other family members did not see her as a capable mother because they were constantly dictating to her how to take care of her child. Being strong minded, Sapna did not stand for this, and told her mother-in-law that she knew how to take care of her child. According to the Hindu culture, a daughter-in-law is expected to respect and listen to her mother-in-law, therefore, Sapna's standing up to her mother-in-law was a cultural taboo. During that time, she still lacked her husband's support as he was living the life of a married bachelor.

As the years passed, the marriage deteriorated further. On a few occasions, when Sapna went to her mother's house for a holiday, her husband refused to pick her and their son up. Sapna feels that he was a "mummy's boy" because his refusal was based on what his mother had told him had happened between her and Sapna. He would agree to pick her up on condition that she apologised to his mother for what she had said or done. Sapna did not find any support for her struggle from her mother who instead of encouraging her to fight for her marriage, encouraged her to leave her husband if she was unhappy. However, Sapna believed that marriage was for life and she refused to allow her son to grow up in a broken home, so she did whatever he asked of her in order to save their marriage. Another reason for staying in the marriage was that she could not take care of her son alone, having no education and thereby making it difficult to find a job. Her mother was also a single-working parent who had to take care of her children who were still at school. Therefore, Sapna felt that she could not burden her mother with more responsibilities.

## Power of a Woman

Sapna's determination to endure the abuse in her marriage was fueled by her strong belief that a "woman can make or break a man." This gave her the courage to endure, fight and to make her marriage work. She strongly felt that one day she would conquer and have her dream of a normal happy family. Therefore, she was prepared to "do anything to make [her dream] happen."

This strong belief in a woman's power and ability was born out of watching her mother make their life 'normal' despite being a single-working mother with three children.

## Mother or Wife

Sapna feels that she was forced to choose between being a mother and being a wife. She felt that if she did not work on their marriage on a daily basis, it would not survive. Therefore, her primary focus was on being a wife. Her mother's willingness to take care of her son, gave Sapna the opportunity to go out with her husband and concentrate on being a wife and it also allowed her to forget about her responsibilities as a mother and to enjoy herself.

Although Sapna had her second child two years later, she still could not be a full-time mother because she felt that she needed to focus on her marriage. Although she felt that she never neglected her children, her primary focus was her husband. She constantly worried about where he was and what he was doing.

Sapna felt that her husband robbed her of the joys of motherhood because of the emphasis that she had to place on their marriage. She also felt that because of the lack of attention that her children received, she needed to rebuild her relationship with her first two children later on in life.

Their third child was born ten years into their marriage. By this time, she felt that her marriage was more stable, and therefore she could focus all of her attention on being a mother. She feels that if she did not have her third child, she would forever have regretted not knowing what it feels like to concentrate solely on being a mother.

## Self-Worth

Seven years into her marriage, three years before the birth of her third child, Sapna attended a Tupperware party and the host of the party asked her if she would be interested in becoming a Tupperware agent. Her husband and in-laws had already told her that she should not work. However, the host sold the idea of being a Tupperware agent as fun and socializing rather than work. Sapna's husband agreed to her becoming a Tupperware agent. This, she regards as the stepping-stone to her success. Eventually, her parties got bigger and more frequent and she earned "more money and became more confident." The confidence that she gained gave her self-worth, as she knew that she could now earn a living and therefore was no longer totally dependant on her husband.

As she became more independent and confident, Sapna gained the courage to challenge her husband. One such challenge was that they move into their own section in his parent's home and later, against his and his families' wishes, she built her own kitchen. Her kitchen and therefore independence from his family caused turmoil in her life. For two months, her husband refused to eat with her and their two children. However, she was determined to have the type of family life that she desired. The turning point occurred when, one day, as her mother-in-law was going shopping, Sapna asked her to buy some food for her to cook that night. When her mother-in-law brought the food, Sapna insisted on paying for it. However, her mother-in-law did not want to take the money because she felt that only her children were eating the food that she bought. Sapna responded by saying, "No [Mother], my children are eating, your child is still eating with you." That evening, her husband was eating with them.

## Depression

Even after her husband had joined them for supper, Sapna was still not free from worry. She desperately wanted to live on her own and to be independent from her in-laws. To her, living in their own section of the house, cooking and eating by themselves was the same as living on their own. However, her husband refused to move from his parental home. This caused Sapna to lose hope and she fell into a deep depression. The depression reached its height, nine years into her marriage, when she was helping a friend move into her new home, because she realised that this dream of hers would never be realised as her husband had said that he would die in his parent's home.

That day, her husband had taken their children away from her, as a form of punishment, and she became progressively more depressed. When she returned home from helping her friend, she telephoned her husband and said that she wanted to see their children, but he refused to bring the children home so that Sapna could see them. Eventually, she decided that if her husband did not want her to see her children and she could never have her dream of having the type of family life that she wanted, then she would kill herself by overdosing.

Her reason for attempting suicide was that she refused to break her promise to herself by allowing her children to live in a broken home. Furthermore, she felt that her children would cope better knowing that one parent died, rather than with their parents separating. She felt that death was easier to comprehend than divorce.

Fortunately, her husband returned home in time to rush her to the hospital and to save her life. After regaining consciousness, she was very angry at her husband and hated him for making her so miserable. She was also filled with regret that she did not succeed in her suicide attempt.

## Changes After the Suicide Attempt

Shortly after the suicide attempt, she became "stronger than [she] has every been in [her] life." She took her survival as a sign that she was meant to live and to raise her children. Her mother-in-law told her husband that if Sapna was so miserable, he should divorce her but Sapna refused to divorce her husband and return home to her mother. Initially she was prepared to live a single life but under his roof. However, this changed when she went to her mother's home, and her husband told her "lets call this marriage over." She agreed, because she was now so strong that she was willing to end their marriage, thereby breaking her promise to herself that her children would not live in a broken home.

She was separated from her husband for a month and a half and they were on the verge of getting divorce. In that time, Sapna and her brother went out looking for a flat and a job for her. During that time a Muslim, male friend of hers, who lived near her mother's house, proposed to her. However, Sapna did not reciprocate his feelings. Instead, she thought of him as a brother. His love for her was so strong that he was willing to marry her with her two children even though he knew that she did not love him. It seems as if another man's interest in Sapna made her husband realise that he could lose her, therefore, he went to her mother's house to pick Sapna and his children up to come and live with him again.

After bringing Sapna back home, he reluctantly agreed to move out of his parental home. Sapna went house hunting on her own as her husband said that she must find houses that she liked and he would then look at them and decide which one he wanted. While house hunting, Sapna asked the male estate agent how one becomes a real estate agent. On the day that they signed the papers for their new home, Sapna became an estate agent.

## Independence

From a Tupperware agent to a real estate agent was a big step for Sapna. Having only completed Standard eight in school, she now had the opportunity to sit in a university lecture hall for three months every Saturday. In the nine months between joining the estate agency and writing her board examinations, Sapna managed to sell ten houses. She passed her board examinations and felt exhilarated to be independent and to have her own identity. Prior to this, her identity was either as wife or mother. Now, she had her own identity as an estate agent, which gave external recognition. Sapna felt that her life was finally falling into place. She had her own house and her family was still together. Sapna felt that after waiting ten years, her dreams were finally coming true.

Due to her newly found financial independence, Sapna's husband was constantly "on his toes" because he knew that she could leave him at any time and still be able to support their two young children. Soon after moving into their new home, Sapna fell pregnant with their third child. This was her best pregnancy as she could focus solely on being pregnant and being a mother. She no longer had to worry about her husband.

## Changing Needs

Sapna felt that her husband could not handle her independence and subsequent loss of control over her. Even when he tried to punish her by taking her car away, Sapna hitched a lift to work, thereby proving her total independence. These "punishments" by her husband, angered Sapna and made her hate her husband for treating her in such a manner. This anger and hatred grew in Sapna, until she felt that she would no longer allow him to treat her like that. Shortly thereafter, around the time of their eleventh anniversary, Sapna realised that she had stopped loving her husband. This realisation devastated Sapna who believed "in fairy tale love stories," that is, that love was forever.

Soon after realising that she was no longer in love with her husband, she realised that she loved another Hindu man. Although she did not actively seek out a relationship or love, she found that she had feelings for a Hindu man, who was a family friend. He was constantly at their house and she felt that he paid attention to her and they had similar interests. Although this man reciprocated her feelings, they kept their relationship platonic. Sapna refused to get involved with another man while she was a married woman. Therefore, it was more the feeling of love and being loved that kept Sapna going, rather than the physical aspects of love.

## Protective Walls

Although Sapna had this other love, she refused to give up on her marriage. She was constantly hoping that her husband would "save" her from "sliding and

falling." Because she had fought so hard and sacrificed so much for her marriage, she did not want to give it up, even for a man whom she loved. However, because of the pain that her husband had caused her, she built protective walls so that he could never hurt her again. This is when Sapna felt that she completely lost her femininity because she became absolutely independent and self-reliant and she "became very bitter." Although she was screaming out for her husband to help her, she would not let him help her; for fear that he would hurt her again.

Although the protective walls were also up for the other man, it was more out of issues of morality rather than fear of being hurt. That is, Sapna would not allow him to get close to her because she was faithful to her husband and it would be morally wrong to get involved with him while married to her husband.

## Being Torn

During that time, Sapna committed herself to her children. She "stopped being the loving wife and became the most loving mother." In this way, she began to rebuild her relationship with her children. However, although Sapna wanted to give herself fully to her children, she could not as she felt she was torn into three pieces, with each piece living a different life. The three lives consisted of the one with her husband, the second with the other man and the third as the loving mother. During that time in her life, Sapna regarded herself as "very damaged, very tormented, " and she felt "very, very torn." She felt that she was not a "whole person" and she lived "in turmoil all the time."

For five years, Sapna lived with this turmoil. During those five years, Sapna was crying out for help from her husband, but because of the protective walls around Sapna, he could not hear her cries or help her. Finally, Sapna decided to speak to her husband about their relationship. She told him that they would have to do something to save their marriage or else they should end it. He told her that she had become a very "defensive, ugly person" and he wanted to know what had happened to the woman whom he loved and married. This shocked Sapna because she felt that he never loved the "nice, kind and loving" woman that she was when they married. Although her husband pointed out the ways in which she had changed and indicated why he felt that he could not reach her, she remained very defensive and blamed him for whom she had become.

In 2001, Sapna went overseas to help her brother who was going through a divorce. Instead of being a support to him, he experienced her as a hard person who could not express or feel any compassion for the pain that he was going through. Even though he pointed this out to Sapna, she still did not want to admit it. Instead, she encouraged him to be strong and recover from the divorce.

The only time that Sapna actually realised how hard she had become was when she and her brother got into a screaming match with each other and he shouted at her not to be so hard and that her husband would not love her if she was so hard. After this screaming match, Sapna realised what she had known all along and what her husband was trying to tell her. She realised that she had built a wall around herself and would not let anyone or any 'soft' feelings to enter her space.

## Accepting Love

During the three weeks that Sapna was away from her family, she realised that she had become a very strong-minded, independent person. Being away from her family and the day-to-day activities, gave her the opportunity to reflect on whom she had become and she realised that she needed to reclaim her ability to feel compassion and love and that she needed to break down the wall that she had built around her.

While helping her brother to cope with his divorce, Sapna consciously decided to become softer. The only way in which her family could contact her on a daily basis was through e-mail. In his e-mails to her, her husband declared his love to her and said that he missed her. This made Sapna feel that he did actually love her and that her family needed her. So, while overseas, she began to work on breaking down the walls that she had built to protect herself from getting hurt, which had made her into this cold person whom she could no longer identify with.

When Sapna returned home, she was a different person. She made an effort to tell and show her husband that she loved him, and to rekindle the feelings that she had for him early in their marriage. She put aside her feelings for the other man and focused on her husband and their relationship.

As she softened, she allowed her husband into her world and permitted him to help her with things, by asking him for favours and to help her with the maintenance of the house. She gave up the totally independent self and started

wanting to be helped, and enjoyed being dependant in some areas. However, this was a different type of dependence to that when she married. She was still independent in thought and ability, but dependent in the relationship, wanting her "husband to take care of [her] when [she] needed to be cared for. Not babied, but [she] wanted to be cared and loved."

Today

Sapna feels that the softer, more caring person who she is now has resulted in her being calmer and the home being more settled. She now feels much more happier and she feels like a whole person. This change has influenced the family in that Sapna now feels that they are one entity and that they are now truly a family.

Sapna's career has also changed from an estate agent to a beauty therapist and her focus is now on her family and not her career.

APPENDIX C

# RESEARCHER'S RE-TELLING OF ALTA'S STORY

## Childhood Experiences

Alta is the oldest of three children. She is two years older than her first brother and four years older than her second brother. Her mother was pregnant with her before she married her father. Alta felt that her mother chose to marry her father and to sacrifice her career to look after the children, even though she was earning a better salary than her father was at that time. Therefore, her mother was a full time, stay-home mother who took care of her children. Her mother always had time for the children and was their primary caregiver. Alta seems to appreciate the time that her mother had for them as children.

Alta had a difficult childhood as she was sexually assaulted at the age of five. Although not consciously, Alta felt that she blamed her body for the assault. She felt that if she did not have a female body, then she would not have been abused. Therefore, she did not want to be a girl. As a child, she recalls not liking her name. She felt that her name did not fit with her. She cannot recall whether she wanted a girl's name or boy's name – "just a different name."

Throughout her childhood, Alta was not a typical girl. She enjoyed playing with cars, getting dirty and killing insects. Although she wore feminine clothing, she was not feminine in her behaviour. Alta and her brothers were close to each other and always played together as children. She did not like her 'girl' toys, and preferred to play with cars and other 'boy' toys. Alta recalls that when she

and her brothers played with her dolls, they did not play typical girl games like tea parties, instead they hung or operate on the dolls.

Alta's father was in the army during her early childhood and she does not recall much about his presence. However, she does recall that when he came home, she would run to hug him. However, her father never extended his arms and therefore Alta felt that he rejected her attempts to hug him. Therefore, she feels that he was not physically nor emotionally present during her childhood. Furthermore, since her family was very traditional and patriarchal at that time, there was no direct communication between the children and their father. That is, if Alta or her brothers wanted to tell their father something, it would have to be done via their mother and the same would happen if their father had something that he needed to tell the children. In this way, Alta felt that the children were completely her mother's responsibility and her father was more of an overlooking entity who examined the final results. In childhood, Alta felt that all the children were treated equally.

**Adolescent Experiences**

Adolescence was a particularly trying time for Alta. She was filled with anger and was very moody. In retrospect, Alta felt that she was depressed during her adolescence. She felt isolated because she attended a different high school to all of her friends. During this time in her life, she was achievement orientated and was in a class of top achievers.

Alta felt that the only time she got recognition from her father was when she was achieving and excelling, therefore she pushed herself to accomplish both

academically and in athletics. However, she felt that whatever she did was never good enough for her father who always expected her to win or to be at the top. She recalls one specific racing event, which she had to qualify to enter. She did not perform well and her father left the stadium before she completed the race. Although Alta does not feel that her father gave her brothers preferential treatment, she does feel that he taught them things that he did not teach her, even when she asked to be taught, for example, how to fix the car.

Alta's relationship with her mother during adolescence was distant. She felt that because she was so angry and moody, her mother left her alone most of the time. She also felt that her mother lacked the intuition to know when to help and when to leave her alone. However, she acknowledges that she is not open to talking to her mother when she is angry or hurting.

Adolescence was also the time when Alta mentally separated from her body. That is, because of the difficulties that she experienced in being in her body, she separated from her body, by seeing it in terms of functions and objectifying it. That is, she saw that her hands were needed because of the functions that they performed and therefore, she had to look after them.

As an adolescent, Alta did not experiment with what her female peers experimented with in terms of makeup or perfumes, and so on. She found these pursuits to be meaningless and boring. Even during family gatherings, she did not conform to the typical female dressing in that she would not do her hair or wear makeup. Therefore, her relationship with her female peers was on a very superficial level. She felt that girls were very shallow and found typical 'girl-

talk' to be boring and unintelligent. Although she spent time with some girls in her class, she did not have a close or lasting relationship with them.

Because of her sexual abuse at the age of five, she was afraid of physical contact with males. Therefore, unlike her female peers, she did not experiment with relationships with boys and refused to learn how to dance or look beautiful. However, she did not avoid males completely. She merely avoided having any type of physical contact with them. That is, Alta had good relationships with boys on a casual friendship level, in this way, she related to them as she did to her brothers. She also felt that, she could have intelligent conversations with the boys, as they discussed a wider range of topics to the girls and she found them not to be as judgmental as the girls. Therefore, the boys provided her with 'intelligent' conversation and company.

It was also during this time that Alta became aware of the social expectations of women and this angered her. She felt angry when she though of her mother sacrificing her work and therefore her identity for her husband and children, and even more angry at her grandmother for also sacrificing her life for her husband. Alta refused to incorporate these values into her life.

Alta also rejected the popular media's definition of femininity in that she refused to be or act in the way in which love stories portrayed women as. She found the image of women to be negative and demeaning. This image coincided with what she felt her mother and grandmother represented. They represented what a good woman should be – "weak in that they allow men to run all over them" and pathetic in that they don't stand up for themselves and are always nice and polite even if they are angry and irritated inside.

Alta felt that she was different to the other girls and could not fully understand them, especially with regard to the social expectations of women in relationships. That is, Alta felt that they were influenced by the mass media that dictates that in relationships with men, women are expected to be "helpless, weak, sweet and pathetic" and never ever make the first move. Alta likes to make the first move and finds nothing wrong in doing so.

## Womanhood

By the time that Alta developed breasts, she had already rejected her femininity in terms of being in her body. Therefore, she perceived her body in terms of functions and could never understand the need or purpose for breasts. She felt that her breasts caused her discomfort and was a financial burden because she had to buy more underwear.

Alta's mother informed her about menstruation "long before it was due." Like with her breasts, she could not understand the purpose of her menstrual cycles. Although she knew that it meant that she could have children, she could not understand the need for having her menstrual cycle while still at school, because she felt that she was too young to have children. Her menstruation was an inconvenience because she felt that she had to hide the knowledge of her menstrual cycle from her male friends, who she was afraid, would make fun of her if they found out about her menstruations. Alta felt that her menstrual cycle was confirmation that she could not fully be "one of the guys" because she was a woman.

In an attempt to hide her emerging sexuality, Alta dressed in men's clothing and wore baggy clothing.

## Adult Experiences

At the age of 21, Alta was involved with a sexually abusive boyfriend, but because of the systematic and prolonged separation from her body, she was unable to perceive the abuse early in her relationship. She thought that the discomfort that she experienced during intercourse was due to the sexual abuse she suffered at the age of five, and therefore, she needed to get used to having intercourse. When she realised that it was a sexually abusive relationship, she ended the relationship.

Her relationship with her father was still distant. When Alta ended her relationship with her abusive boyfriend, her father did not know that he was abusive and blamed her for ending the relationship. Alta does not regard her father as someone who is open to communication. However, after her brother was assaulted in 2001, she felt that her father has opened up a bit more and is a bit more approachable. However, Alta feels that her father does not understand her different values and she feels that he perceives a difference as not respecting or loving him. Therefore, Alta relates to her father on an achievement level or she may tell him about work, but not about what is meaningful in her life.

Her relationship with her mother is a bit distant in that she feels that her mother is more interested in her brother's love lives and as the eldest child, Alta feels that her mother feels that Alta is capable of looking after herself.

When Alta entered university, she was exposed to people from different cultures and families that were not as patriarchal as her family was. Therefore, she learnt that there were other ways of being and she felt that her ideas were not unique in that other people shared them. Therefore, she found acceptance for her way of thinking and being in both the formal and informal aspects of university life. This encounter gave Alta the strength to make her own choices despite what others may say because she believed that some people shared her feelings and ideas. Therefore, she stopped allowing others to dictate her life and began living her life according to her terms.

Alta attends psychotherapy. Her male therapist encouraged Alta to feel her body in an attempt to reunite her consciousness with her body. This entailed her being conscious of how various parts of her body felt while, for example, jogging, sitting in the sun or in the bath and actually looking at her body. However, Alta would start the process, but as soon as it became too much for her, she would stop. Her fear was that if she was aware of her body, then so too would others be aware of it and she was afraid that this would lead to another abuse.

However, her therapist continued to encourage her to feel her body and in the last two years, Alta has been able to feel comfortable in her body. She now likes to wear clothing that is soft on her skin and pleasant to feel.

In the beginning of 2002, Alta felt that her body was tingling with energy and it needed to be touched to be soothed. This was not sexual touching but rather she needed to feel the touch of another human on her skin. She decided to explore this need to be touched by allowing her boyfriend to gently touch her arm.

Although it was pleasing to her, it was initially very anxiety provoking. She was conscious that she was doing what had led the sexually abusive relationship.

However, her boyfriend was gentle and supportive and gradually, her pleasure increased and the anxiety decreased. However, she is still not a hundred percent comfortable with intimate physical contact, because she feels that she still has to be in control of her pleasure.

Today, Alta is more comfortable in her body and feels comfortable with her boyfriend touching her. However, she still feels safer when she makes the first move of initiating contact. Although Alta has regained confidence in herself, she is still afraid of her sexuality in public places, that is, she feels uncomfortable if, for example, she is passed by a group of men in the mall. She still gets very angry at men who 'give her the look' of being interested in her and feels that she still needs to reclaim her femininity so that she will be comfortable in her body all the time.

## Marriage and Children

Alta feels that the reason that she is unmarried is because she is too young to marry and she feels that because she is still studying, she would not be able to commit herself to her relationship because she is a "work-o-holic." Furthermore, Alta refuses to be financially dependent on her husband. Therefore, she is willing to marry only when she is financially independent. At present, because she is still studying, she is unable to be financially independent. She feels that the men whom she had had contact with are not the

type of men who she would want to marry. Because she had only reclaimed her body in the last two years, she did not actively date or seek out a relationship.

With regard to a husband and children, Alta feels that the man that she marries would have to be kind, considerate and loving. Alta has mixed feeling about wanting children. She does not like the way in which children are created, that is, sexual intercourse. Another deterrent to her having children is the financial and social environments. She would only think of having children once she is in a stable marriage, and financially stable. That is, Alta intends to work so that she would be financially independent. Her career is a very important part of her life and her identity and feels that she would never sacrifice that. Therefore, she would plan her life around her children, but not sacrifice her career for them or her husband.

APPENDIX D

# RESEARCHER'S RE-TELLING OF MARNA'S STORY

## Childhood Experiences

Marna is the eldest of two children. Her brother is two and a half years younger than she is. She can clearly recall the day that her brother was born as it was a day that she spent alone with her father. From the age of two, Marna and her family have been riding horses at her grandparent's farm. Later, at the age of seven, they moved to a farm of their own. Therefore, Marna seemed to have had a unique childhood as she lived on a farm and she was actively involved with the running of the farm and the animals.

### Desire for Attention from her Father

Marna's childhood was characterised by a strong desire to be close to her father. Because her father was often working or away from home, she felt that when he was home, there was often competition for his time and attention. When her brother was still young, she feels that she spent more time with her father, but as he grew older, he seemed to have become closer to their father because he was the son. Therefore, Marna felt that she was last in the "pecking order" because she was the daughter.

In an attempt to gain her father's attentions, she drew horses and kept herself informed on the political situation, as her father was interested in politics. Her father also encouraged her to perform well at school, which was something that

she felt she was better at than her brother was and therefore she excelled at school. When her brother was afraid of taking part in rodeo, she was determined to succeed, in an attempt to prove to her father that unlike her brother, she was not afraid.

As a child, she was afraid to challenge her mother's authority because she felt that it was "flimsy" and only dependent on her status as her father's wife. That is, Marna felt that as children, they only listened to their mother because they knew that if they did not, then she would tell their father. Marna did not seem to care about her mother's approval at that time, all which mattered to her was what her father thought.

## Changing Attitudes

At the age of ten, when her sexuality began to emerge, Marna felt pressurized to be feminine, because she was told that her father wanted her to be unlike his "rough and unsophisticated sisters." However, she also felt that her father gave her the impression that he wanted her to be masculine. Therefore, from the age of ten, she felt that she continually received mixed signals from her father who she felt wanted her to be feminine like her mother but also encouraged her to be strong and competitive, unlike her mother.

However, although her father wanted her to be feminine, Marna could not be feminine because for her, being feminine was equated with being vulnerable and weak. At the age of 11, Marna cut her long hair very short into a 'boy-cut' style. She also hated wearing dresses because she felt that she looked ugly in them, although she wore them to church.

It was also approximately at this age when Marna realised that she could not compete with her mother by being feminine to get her father's attention. Not only was her mother was an 'expert' at being feminine, she was also her father's wife, whom he loved dearly. Therefore, she felt that she could only compete with her mother by being different from her. She competed with her mum by "being on time, by reading things about the world, by watching the news on TV, so [she] saw things and showed [her father] that [she] knew."

Therefore, she actively began to challenge her brother for her father's attention from the age of ten. However, she knew what behaviour her father approved of and did not do anything in the open, which would get her into trouble with her father. Being older and stronger than her brother, she "tried to kill him," and degraded him while their father was not at home.

However, despite the competition for her father's attention, Marna felt that she had a good childhood, in that support structures were present. She felt that her parents sacrificed a lot for them, so that there was stability in the home and they also had support from their extended family.

## Adolescent Experiences

Adolescence was a continuance of Marna's desire to get close to her father. She felt that their relationship was superficial and ambivalent in that she desired to be close to him but was afraid to do so. Although she was unsure of what her father expected from her, she felt that if she got close to her father, he would be disappointed with the mael-identified female that she was becoming. That is,

she was not the woman that he wanted her to be – she was unlike her mother. She also felt that she was unable to impress him with whom she was and could only please him with how well she performed. Therefore, she seems to have felt that she was not good enough.

As Marna grew older, she felt that she was continually receiving mixed messages from her father. On the one hand, he wanted her to be feminine like her mother and therefore he left her alone with her mother most of the times. On the other hand, he wanted her to be different from her mother by encouraging her to study to such an extent that he said that he was willing to sell the farm in order to pay for her fees. At the age of 14, Marna recalls being able to discuss with her father his work, religion, and politics. This made her different from her mother and it seemed as if her father accepted them both. Marna felt that her father regarded her as competent, even though she was a woman.

At the age of 14, Mara felt that she was ugly and she could never be as beautiful as her mother was. In addition, at this time, her mother began to work and she felt proud that her mother could be independent in the world and she liked this more competent, competitive side of her mother.

## Womanhood

The development of breast was very traumatic for Marna as it signaled that she had to be a woman like her mother in order for her father to accept her. She also felt that she could not negotiate femininity according to her mother's standards, which made her feel vulnerable.

When Marna began her menstrual cycle, she did not inform her mother as she felt that her mother might take this as a sign that she could get close to Marna. Marna also felt that her mother overwhelmed her with her feelings and therefore she did not show her any of her raw emotions to her. Prior to her beginning her menstrual cycle, her mother had briefly mentioned it and Marna knew about it from school, so she was informed about what was happening. Marna only told her mother about her menstrual pains when they became unbearable.

## Father's Death

Marna's father passed away a month before her 16th birthday. In a way, she felt freer after his death because she was able to define her femininity for herself. Weeks after his death, she began to grow her hair and started wearing skirts. Her father's friend, who became her father substitute at that time, defined femininity differently and "with him it was okay to be a woman."

However, emotionally, her father's death devastated her family and her life. At home, Marna took over her father's responsibilities of caring for the horses and her mother; she also took over the responsibility of the physical maintenance of their house. Her mother, she felt could not cope with her father's death and therefore, she had to be the adult and care for the family at that time. Months after her father's death, they had to move off the farm and therefore, she lost her support networks in the form of her teachers and her friends. She also felt that she lost a big part of herself, which was the bush and her father's legacy. He worked for the preservation of wildlife and after his death; she witnessed the killing of animals according to superstitions.

## Adult Experiences

After matric, her mother moved to another town and Marna went to university. Living in the women's residences, gave her the opportunity to further explore her femininity. However, at the end of her first year, her boyfriend, who recently acknowledged his homosexuality, ended their relationship and she failed first year. Therefore, Marna became depressed. Her depression lasted for a year. To assist her to cope with her depression, Marna attended psychotherapy and she did not date while she was in therapy. Therefore, Marna spent most of that year bonding with her female friends in the residence.

After her depressive state lifted, she felt that she was ready for a relationship. Having a boyfriend was seen, by the girls on campus, as a sign of success. Marna knew what she needed to do attract men as she felt that her mother had taught her the rules of the game. Therefore, she became very skinny, wore short dresses and grew her long hair. She was also caring and concerned, a bit proper and saw to her boyfriend's needs.

Therefore, she managed to attract a young man's attention and they were married a year later. Marna was attracted to her husband because he was different to her father but similar to a substitute father that she had later in her life. She found her husband to be caring and she felt a familiarity with him that she did not experience with any other man.

## Marriage

They were soon married. Although they were both studying at that time, Marna was working and studying part-time while her husband studied fulltime. At that time, she tried to be the 'good wife' but found that she could not manage to look after the house, her husband, while also trying to working and studying at the same time.

After her husband completed his studies and began working, he wanted to leave for America and because she was earning significantly less than he was, she was forced to go with him. Their marriage was characterised by a power-struggle and the person who earns the most has the greatest say. After a year in America, they returned to South Africa. When they returned to South Africa, Marna continued with her studies and thereby refused to play the typical wife role, as she was determined to have a career. In this respect, she also did not allow her husband to be a typical husband because she was not fully dependent on him.

When her husband wanted to return to America in 2001, Marna refused because she felt that she did not have a say in their marriage. Marna loved her husband and did not want to leave him after five years of marriage, but she felt that she could not stay in a marriage in which she felt she was not supported and her needs were not considered. Being on the brink of a divorce, they decided to see a marriage therapist and her husband found that if he allowed Marna to have a say or negotiate with her then she would be more open to his suggestions. Marna also began to see that she was not a very easy to live with and she felt that if she could not make this marriage work, then she might not be able to make her next marriage work.

Therefore, Marna insisted on being his partner rather than the typical submissive wife and she became actively involved in the finances and the day-to-day occurrences in the household. As Marna began taking on more of the 'male' role, her husband began helping with her with more of the 'female' activities like helping with the dishes, and so on.

Her husband accepts that Marna has her own definition of femininity and he supports her need for a career. To this end, he bought for her a watch that Marna felt signifies his acceptance of her non-traditional definition and expression of her femininity.

However, lately, Marna has begun going to the gym in order to become thin again. She now desired to have a more feminine body in terms of shape and size. Her desire to change her bodily appearance is linked to her change in her attitude. She does not feel that she has to fight for her to be able to express herself or to be as strong as a man is in order to be accepted by her husband.

## Children

Marna has mixed feeling about desiring and not desiring to have children. She is afraid that having a child would make her dependent on her husband and in this respect she feels that she would became like her mother. However, as her marriage is more settled and she trusts her husband more, she is more open to the idea of having a child, although not in the near future.