Women Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Understanding the Political Engagement and Civil Society Inclusion of CSA Survivors

An Ethnographic and Authoethnographic Study

by

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ABSTRACT

Do adult women survivors of childhood sexual abuse see their past victimization as having any relation to or impact on their current political engagement? While it is important to know how having experienced childhood sexual abuse (CSA) impacts women survivors' adult personal relationships, health, and wellbeing, more research must be done on how these abuse experiences affect women survivors' political engagement. Nearly 25,900,000 women voters in the United States have likely experienced childhood sexual abuse (National Sexual Violence Resource Center 2011), therefore it is imperative and participation. This interpretive autoethnographic and ethnographic study examines the narratives of six women CSA survivors currently attending a counselling support group, and employs feminist methodology to conceptualize the women's beliefs and feelings on the impact of CSA on their political participation. The findings of this study, however, do not seek to be generalizable to all women survivors of CSA, but instead reveal how six adult women survivors of CSA cope with and interpret their victimization as having an impact on their adult political engagement and participation. Utilizing interpretive concepts of power, citizenship, and civil society, this study finds that adult women survivors of CSA may be more politically active if they have a safe space to disclose their abuse experiences to fellow survivors of CSA. This study suggests that a civil society community of adult CSA survivors might be beneficial for survivors and may encourage survivors to see political engagement as a viable avenue for healing from the trauma of CSA.

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INTRODUCTION

As soon as I made the decision to acknowledge that I was sexually abused as a child, I struggled with the question "does my abuse define me"? It has been quite difficult to come up with an answer. I think sometimes possibly, yes, I am defined by the childhood sexual abuse (CSA) I experienced as a young girl. I look to my behaviors, my worries, my fears, my beliefs, my preferences, where I feel most happy, and I can see how each has been influenced by my life-long responses to having been sexually abused as a child. But I also see how none of those things are solely impacted by the abuse I experienced; they are instead characteristics that I have developed through my own personhood. I often question: do I hold agency over my own self, or has the abuse I experienced held agency over me throughout these many years? I am not alone. This questioning is a difficult struggle over identity and power, reflected in the statements of the participants in this research as well.

The invisibility of ridding ourselves of our trauma is frustrating; we see how trauma impacts our lives and defines patterns in ways that we struggle to change; however, we also never define ourselves to others as abuse survivors. None of us wish to let the CSA we experienced define us. In fact, we are all actively working to rid ourselves of the trauma that has resulted from our past experiences. We do not go up to strangers with introductions of "hi, my name is _____, and I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse". We know that we are so much more than the label of survivor. We have many identities that are more powerful, impactful, important, and that better define us than

"survivor", but we also understand that being a survivor is a form of existence that intersects with and challenges all of our multiple layers of identity.

I came to the questions that guide this research during a time when it seemed that every decision I made or action I took was guided solely by the trauma I was carrying with me as a result of the CSA I experienced. I found myself continually second-guessing the decisions that I made, asking if I was in control of my responses to the world around me or if, instead, it was my trauma that was in control. Every thought I had was centered around this uncertainty, and I began to realize that many of the important decisions I had made in my life were decisions dictated by the behaviors I had learned from experiencing CSA. I began to wonder if other adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse felt the same way. Do survivors of childhood sexual abuse have a strong understanding of their personal power and agency, or do they feel as if their trauma as CSA survivors dictates their understandings of power?

At the time that I began to ask myself these questions, the political discourse in the United States was entirely divisive. This was in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. I had cast a vote in that election that I regret to this day, and I began asking myself if I had done so because of the submissive and pleasing behaviors I had learned from the CSA I experienced. The vote that I casted in that election was one that pleased my family, one that kept the peace between myself and them. I wondered if having experienced childhood sexual abuse has any impact on adulthood political engagement and participation. Do other adult survivors of CSA feel as if their victimization impacts their political engagement? Do they see any connection at all between their political engagement and their past victimization? These questions

about power and agency, and past victimization and current political engagement guide this research.

Research Design and Methodology

This research is structured through interpretivist design utilizing feminist methodology. Feminist and interpretive methodologies "… provide the tools necessary to combat…" gender and race-based discriminaton in research (Behl 2017, 581). An interpretive design for this study has been chosen because the highest source of knowledge on this topic originates from adult women CSA survivors themselves (Nagar & Sangtin 2006[1]). This research wishes to avoid taking voice away from the women respondents and concluding in a manner that is not representative of the women studied, therefore any conceptualizations resulting from the study will not aim to generalize (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Feminist methodology seeks to deconstruct power structures and understand how power structures intersect in the lives of many to cause a continuation of marginalization and oppression (Ackerly & True, 2013). Therefore, the power relations presented within these women's narratives will be uncovered, as well as the power relations between researcher and the women who are interviewed.

This writing is both autoethnographic and ethnographic. I pick these interpretive methods because I believe that the individual experience cannot be summed up in a generalizable statement, as traditionally positivist research has aimed to do (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012). Timothy Pachirat warns of the undesirable consequences that detached, unbiased research can wreak on studied populations that are given no voice in

[1] In *Playing with Fire*, the authors discuss how the NGOs they work for claim to be the highest source of knowledge on NGO employment. The authors counter argue that the employees themselves are the highest source of knowledge due to their lived experiences as employees.

research (Pachirat 2018). Each survivor of CSA has vastly different experiences than my own. Discovering and understanding these lived experiences in their fuller complexity is the primary goal of this study. I aim to provide a conceptualization of my experience and the experiences of the six women survivors of CSA that voluntarily participated in this research.This conceptualization is an identification of the common experiences of each participant that have lead to similar understandings and beliefs between the participants of their own power and agency, and further, how these understandings and beliefs impact the participants' political participation. Through this research, I aim to establish the six women contributors as the highest source of knowledge on CSA - they are the beings who experienced it, they know first-hand what it is and what it means to be a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. For clarification, the six women I interviewed are randomly assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities: Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy.

Power is divided into two different concepts in this writing: "power as domination" (Yeatman 1997; Lloyd 2013,114) and "power to" (Lloyd 2013, 120). Power as domination is used to describe the oppressive forms of power that have been held over the participants since the first time they experienced CSA. This research dives into the many different forms of oppressive power that the participants have lived through, including the sexual abuse they experienced as well as institutional oppression inflicted by government agencies. The idea of "power to" is used to describe the power that the participants of this research have themselves. They have the "power to" be politically engaged, but may be hindered in their own belief in their "power to" due to their trauma healing processes. Further, the participants in this study practice power in disclosing the

truth of their abuse experiences to others. This study finds that when CSA survivors are able to safely disclose their experiences with CSA to others, they find power in that their voice can cause lasting social and legal repercussions on their abusers. This understanding supports the currently popular political messages of movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up in encouraging survivors of sexual abuse to use their voices as a form of power. Further, this research conceptualizes civil society communities as a potential form of political mobilization for adult women survivors of CSA. This writing utilizes the interpretive concept of "situated citizenship" outlined by author Natasha Behl (2019) to understand the lived experiences of the six study participants. The concept of situated citizenship helps to explain how some of the participants of this study experience their citizenship rights differently from others while they actively try to heal from their past trauma. Paired with the idea of situated citizenship, I utilize the understanding that civil society is a sphere of citizenship that can lead to a deep understanding of political participation for citizens, but only when civil society is robust and inclusive to all. For the CSA survivors in this study, both the civil society sphere and the political sphere in the United States feel unwelcoming, and therefore neither of them seem to be accessible during the trauma healing process. These conceptualizations will be expanded on further later in the writing.

Reflexivity is a central mechanism of interpretive research design. As I reflect on the way in which I interviewed the participants in this research, I realize that I overlooked an important question. I did not ask the participants about their racial and ethnic identities nor their economic standings. If I could go back to my interviews and correct this oversight, I believe that my research would better represent the full identities of the

participants. Because of this, I describe the participants solely based on my own limited observations, missing important details about their identities. Amy, Mary, Bridget, and Carrie are all white women between the ages of twenty to fifty in acending order. They all, along with Stacy, discussed in some form their sexuality as being straight. Stacy looked to be in the early years of her twenties and a woman of color. Susan seemed to be in her mid-twenties to early thirties and described herself as a woman of color belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Bridget, Carrie, and Stacy all disclosed to me that they are mothers to children of various ages. These intersectional identities of each participant impact their lived experiences differently and in turn their experiences with and responses to the CSA they experienced as young girls.

In this writing, I use feminist methodology to critically examine power structures and power relations within my life and the lives of Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy. I understand feminist methodology to be a form of critique of power (Dahmoon 2013; Ackerly & True, 2013). I use my voice and the voices of the six women in a collaborative way, with the main voices of this writing being predominately the six participants, inspired and modelled after the Sangtin Writers (Nagar & Sangtin Writers 2006). I use intersectionality in my processes of understanding because identities are all things but singular, and each aspect of identity is impactful to life experience and should be acknowledged (Behl 2019; Hawkesworth 2005; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012). I also acknowledge my position as a researcher who has been personally impacted by CSA, but who also might have been seen by the participants in this research as a power holder. My reflexivity and positionality (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012) in this research is important

to address, as I have a close, personalized understanding of CSA. This understanding impacts all details of my writing and research.

Data Collection

To find participants for this study, I reached out to fifteen local sexual abuse and trauma therapists and counsellors listed on psychologytoday.com through email. In the email, I explained my research design and asked if they would be open to me coming into their offices and asking their patients if they would be interested in participating in my study. I received three responses to my mass email inquiry. Two of these responses were to inform me that the counselling group I had been inquiring about was no longer active. The third email was from a counsellor, who will be referred to with the pseudonym Kelley in this research, who held a therapy group for women survivors of CSA that met weekly. Kelley invited me to come in a talk with her more about my research design and ask the women members of the group if they would be interested in participating. After speaking with Kelley, we agreed that I could hold the interviews for my research in her office space. This allowed me to conduct my interviews in a safe and quiet space with a licensed counselor nearby.

I was allowed to come into the meeting room for the therapy group that Kelley led and ask the group members if they would consider participating in my study. There were about eight women in the room, and that day they were celebrating the birthday of one of the group members. They were immediately kind to me and offered me a cupcake, while I was visibly nervous about asking them to participate. My voice shook as I looked around the room at the eight women and told them about my research and the questions that I would likely ask them if they decided to participate. To my surprise, six of the eight

women agreed to be interviewed for the research. To keep their anonymity, we worked with Kelley to schedule meeting times in which I could use an office room to conduct the interviews. Through email communication with Kelley, I received times and dates in which I would come into the office and meet the participants for the study one on one. All but one of the volunteer participants showed up for our scheduled meeting times, this is why the number of participants from the counselling group fell from the originally planned six to five. The five women that participated in this study from the group are Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, and Carrie. Amy, the sixth participant in this study, is an acquaintance that volunteered to be interviewed once I informed her of the research I was conducting.

The interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended, with the intent to make the participant the leader of the discussion. The interview consisted of twenty-five questions split into three sections with focuses on the CSA experiences, adult life experiences (i.e. employment, relationships, etc.), and the political and civic engagement of the participants. The interviews I conducted with the five participants lasted between thirty minutes to an hour and thirty minutes depending on the depth of the answers that the participants gave to each question. I assured the participants at the beginning of each interview that they were able to skip any question or stop the interview at any time. I asked for permission from each participant to record our discussions with a recording application on my smartphone, and each agreed. I used the recordings to transcribe each interview, and I deleted the recordings after each interview was fully transcribed.

I further use my own autoethnography of my lived experience as an adult survivor of CSA to add to this discussion. The autoethnography in this piece is interwoven

throughout this discussion, though I do not include a full writing section on my lived experience as a CSA survivor. I have done this because I am not ready for my entire story as a CSA survivor to be known to others outside of myself. I acknowledge that my position as an academic in the eyes of the six participants of this research may have caused the participants to withhold details about their lived experiences. I further acknowledge that my positionality as a CSA survivor can be seen as a biased position in this research. I believe that my position as a CSA survivor has provided a clear lens through which the narratives of Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy can be conceptualized and understood. I am a CSA survivor, but I do not claim that I can fully identify with every other survivors' experiences. Rather, I have a shared sensibility to understand their experiences compared to others who have not experienced CSA. Additionally, I believe that because I disclosed my position as a CSA survivor to the participants of this study, they were more open with me in their discussions – which is critical to exploring their stories and experiences.

Background Information on Childhood Sexual Abuse and Women Voters in the United States

The 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that 1 in 2 women experience sexual abuse at some point in their lifetime (NISVS 2011). Of the 9,086 women surveyed by NISVS in 2010, 35.2% of females reported experiencing sexual abuse as a minor, with 12.3% at the ages of ten or younger, and 29.9% at the ages of eleven to seventeen (NISVS 2011). The majority of the reported abusers were classified as adult males (National Sexual Violence Resource Center 2011). Further, it is common for women who experienced childhood sexual abuse to report having had only

one abuser (NISVS 2011). Commonly, these abusers are acquaintances and family members (National Sexual Violence Resource Center 2011). Predominately, girls are subjected to childhood sexual abuse more often than boys (NISVS 2011).

Having experienced childhood sexual abuse has multiple adverse impacts on the health and well-being of women survivors (Sigurdardottir & Halldorsdottir 2012). The experiences of sexual abuse during childhood can lead to severe mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and can often lead to comorbidity of such illnesses (Chard & Owens 2001; You, Talbot, He & Conner 2012). Further, experiencing childhood sexual abuse can predict risky sexual behaviors in adulthood that can lead to health complications (Senn & Carey 2010). As such, a study conducted on the health of pregnant women survivors of childhood sexual abuse found that women survivors were hospitalized during pregnancy at a rate of 41.2% as compared to women who had not experienced CSA (19.4%) (Leeners, Stiller, Block, Görres & Rath 2010). There is a strong correlation between experiencing childhood sexual abuse and developing adverse health conditions in adulthood for women survivors.

Outside of health complications, women survivors of childhood sexual abuse also face complications in their adult romantic relationships. Having a history of childhood sexual abuse is a strong predictor of revictimization in the adult lives of women (Coid et al 2001). Classen et al. found that two out of every three women reporting childhood sexual abuse also report revictimization in their adult lives (Classen et al. 2005). Further, having experienced CSA leads to a higher likelihood of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) in women's adult lives (Daigneault et al. 2009). Women who survived

childhood sexual assault are also more likely to experience psychological aggression and abuse in their adult romantic relationships (Baynard et al. 2000).

These adverse impacts of surviving childhood sexual abuse can lead to women survivors experiencing difficulties in their professional and academic lives. Though many women survivors of CSA usually complete a high school education, many do not return to schooling to attain a college or university education (Robst 2010). A similar study done by Robst on women survivors of CSA found that these women frequently reported low incomes (Robst & Smith 2008). Labor force participation, economic annual earnings, and educational attainment are all adversely impacted by CSA in women survivors, but at different rates depending on the type of abuse suffered (Hyman 1993). These trends in lower economic and educational attainment are frequently attributed to the mental and physical health impacts that childhood sexual abuse causes in women survivors (Kirkwood 2014).

While research is lacking on the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and political participation in women survivors, there is bountiful research on the voting trends, political, and civic participation of women voters in the United States. There has been a rise in civil society protests among women in recent years with movements that are easy to join through social media such as Time's Up and #MeToo (Heintz 2018; Garber 2018). In 2017, after the inauguration of President Trump, more than 3,000,000 people around the United States participated in the Women's March, making it the biggest public demonstration in United States history (Chenoweth & Pressman 2017). In the 2018 United States midterm elections, more women voters than male voters turned out in certain states such as Arizona (Zetino 2019), and the public elected historically

high numbers of women leaders to public office (Gaudiano 2018). In the current social climate in the United States, women are being encouraged to participate in protests, to have their voices heard, and to be politically active. But, these trends come after a time when, in 2016, 42% of women voters cast their votes in support of Donald Trump, a man who had been accused of abusive behaviors and misogynistic rhetoric (Roberts & Ely 2016). Author Jane Junn explained that the support for Trump from women is that of support from white women voters in the U.S., where Hillary Clinton had received strong support from "African-American women, Latinas, and Asian-American women" voters (Junn 2017, 344).

As of 2016, there are around 200 million registered voters in the United States (Goldmacher 2016). Of the voters polled by Gallup in April 1-9 of 2019, 27% leaned Republican, 26% leaned Democrat, and 44% leaned Independent (Gallup 2019). A 2018 study done by the PEW Research Center found that more registered women voters leaned Democrat at 56% leaning Democrat as opposed to 37% leaning Republican in 2017 (PEW 2018). Historically, women make up higher percentages of both registered voters and actual voters (Center for American Women and Politics 2017). In 2016, 73.7 million women reported voting where only 68.3 million men reported voting (CAWP 2017). This means, according to the NCVIS data detailed above, about 25,900,000 (8.6% of 73.7 million) of these women voters have experienced sexual abuse as minors. If 42% of all women voters decided to vote for a man accused of sexually abusing and harassing women, it *might* mean that some of these 25.9 million women overlook or place value in areas other than their histories of sexual abuse while voting. Though this might be the case, it is entirely possible that women CSA survivors do not see their CSA as influential

or related to their political participation and ideologies in the slightest. This might also be dependent on intersecting identities of women voters such as race and socioeconomic standing (again we can look to Jane Junn's (2017) explanation of the differences between white women voters and women of color voters).

Literature Review

Civil Society, Political Engagement, and Power

This research draws heavily on feminist citizenship studies with a focus on civil society and "situated citizenship"(Behl 2019). This research aims to add to the discussion on the importance of creating a robust civil society and the potential for participation in civil society communities to lead to participation in the political sphere. Definitions of citizenship are highly contested (Cohen 2009, 2). T.H. Marshall defined citizenship in three parts; civil, social, and political (Marshall 1992, 8). Author Benjamin R. Barber drew from Marshall's conception of the three spheres of citizenship to postulate that when civil society is lacking in a democracy, citizens withdraw into the private sector and "think of themselves as narcissistic consumers" (1996, 147). Barber went on to explain that without a strong civil society, citizens' understandings of democratic participation (here, I refer to democratic participation as political engagement) are lessened and weak (Barber 1996). In this research, I will focus predominately on the inclusion of adult CSA survivors in civil society and communities and how this inclusion (or lack of) may impact their beliefs and understandings of political engagement.

Some of the participants in this study, due to their trauma responses to the gendered violence and abuse they experienced at young ages, experience living as a formal citizen in the United States while being unable to access the full rights of

citizenship. Author Elizabeth F. Cohen describes this type of existence of lacking the provision of rights as being semi-citizens (Cohen 2009, 2), a purposely positive conceptualizion while author Natasha Behl explains this to be experiencing situated citizenship (Behl 2019, 3), an interpretive conceptualization. This is an important distinction because positivists assume that universal knowledge can be obtained through unbiased research that uncovers observable facts that can be replicated across all research areas, whereas interpretivists believe that there is no one universal mode of experience, focus on the meaning-making processes of individuals, and believe that bias is unavoidable and beneficial in research. In this research, I will draw on Behl's (2019) definition of situated citizenship, of which she explains "highlights how citizens understand and experience the promises of formal equality" (4) and "captures the fact that citizenship is more than a fixed legal status; it is also a situated social relation" (3). This idea of citizenship as being experienced in unequal and uneven ways depending on a person's location, status, gender, and other personal factors (Behl 2019, 4) is drawn upon here. This view of citizenship diverges from traditional literature on democracy and begins to uncover the ways in which marginalized voices have been silenced and disregarded by such traditional literature. The inclusion of voices that have been traditionally silenced is a mode of utilizing feminist methodology that uncovers and aims to break down power structures (Ackerly & True 2010).

This writing focuses on civil society as an aspect of citizenship that can potentially impact the political engagement of adult women childhood sexual abuse survivors. The exact parameters of civil society in the United States are debated, where some believe that it should not include the private economic sector (like Barber), and

others believe that it should include "everything outside the state" (Waylen, Celis, Kantola, & Weldon 2013, 363). In this writing, I utilize a definition of civil society that excludes the private economic sector. As explained by Barber (1996) strong involvement in civil society can teach citizens ways in which they can participate democratically. He postulates that when civil society is not strong in a democracy, citizens become self-absorbed in the private sector and shut themselves off from community involvement (Barber 1996). Civil society has long been an area in which women in the United States, who were barred legally from political engagement until the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920, have pursued forms of democratic engagement to have their voices heard (Strolovitch & Townsend-Bell 2013, 372). It is with this understanding of civil society as an arena for women to organize in solidarity when they are shut out of the political sphere that I write on the potential for civil society involvement to serve as a form of encouragement to politically engage for adult women survivors of CSA.

Further, I use an understanding of civil society that some of the participants brought forth during our discussions. Here, I conceptualize civil society as a means for mobilizing democratic participation only if civil society is robust, meaning that citizens feel included in civil society communities. The participants of this study felt that civil society in the United States is not welcoming to survivors of childhood sexual abuse, or at least that there is no representation of the CSA survivor population within civil society. Further, the participants in this study felt that civil society in the United States has turned to primarily individualistic ideals, and therefore feel that their healing from CSA must be done in solitude. This ideal coincides with Barber's postulation that the private economic

sector has diminished civil society and turned citizens away from community involvement and towards the individual consumption of goods (Barber. 1996).

Turning away from civil society to political engagement and power, I use the understanding of voting in democratic elections and participating in political discourse as a form of utilizing self-power. Power is explained by author Moya Lloyd (2013, 113) to be thought of by many writers as a *resource* that "is something people have that enables them either to do things directly or to get others to do things for them". Lloyd further goes on to explain that power as a resource has been linked to distribution and peoples' "access to particular (state) institutions" (Lloyd 2013, 113). Others, though, disagree that power is a resource, but instead postulate that it is *relational* (Young 1990). Even further, some scholars do not fully agree with either conception of power, and have introduced a new idea of power as *domination* (Yeatman 1997; Lloyd 2013, 114). Power as domination is described to take place through the means of patriarchy (Lloyd 2013), where male domination over women is prevalent, including men's sexual domination over women (Millett 1977).

In this research, I discuss the conception of power as domination to understand the sexually abusive acts that the participants' abusers inflicted upon them as young children. I further understand power as the *ability to*, or as "power as capacity" (Llyod 2013, 120) in describing the power of the adult women survivors of CSA in this study. The participants in this study have the *power to* enact change, speak up about their abuse experiences, vote in political elections, and engage in political discourse. This conceptualization of power as the power to act is explained by scholars as a *community-based* form of power that allows for collective action (Hartsock 1985). I tie this

conceptualization of power as "power to" to situated citizenship (Behl 2019) because I want to make clear that, despite some of the participants in this research having the power to, they still are hindered in their belief in their own "power to" and their ability to access their "power to" because of the gendered violence they experienced at young ages that they are still healing and recovering from.

Conclusion

I will further discuss these ideas of civil society, political engagement, and power in the chapters below. Chapter one, "Learning Extreme Gender Roles in Response to CSA", will discuss how some survivors of CSA might respond to their abuse experiences by learning extreme gender roles. The extreme gender role that I explain in chapter one is of taking on an understanding of the 'woman' role as being submissive, pleasing, and reliant on others. I explain how having adopted an understanding of the woman gender role as subordinated might make some adult women survivors of CSA feel unwelcome in the political sphere, as the political sphere has traditionally been unwelcoming to attributes and behaviors traditionally ascribed to women. In chapter two, "The Political Non-Engagers", I draw on the understanding of "the personal is political" outlined by Carol Hanisch (1969) in the ethnography of the political "non-engagers" – Mary and Stacy. I look at Mary's and Stacy's attitudes toward and understandings of their own political engagement, or lack of, and civil society communities. In chapter 3, "The Political Engagers", I include the ethnographies of Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy to understand their views on political engagement and civil society communities. I aim to outline the differences between Mary and Stacy as the political "non-engagers" and Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy as the political "engagers" to understand why they

might feel differently about how their CSA experiences might impact political engagement. I conclude with a discussion on the inclusion of childhood sexual abuse survivors in civil society communities and how an increase of inclusion and representation of adult women survivors of CSA might encourage political engagement from CSA survivors.

CHAPTER 2

LEARNING EXTREME GENDER ROLES IN RESPONSE TO CSA

Introduction

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse (CSA) has a strong, lasting impact on a CSA survivor's understanding of the aspects of the self. This statement resonates with my life experience. When I reached adulthood and independence, I began to reflect on my CSA experience and how it has impacted every aspect of my being. In moments of reflexivity, I asked 'am I the way I am, am I who I am because of what I experienced as a young girl?', I found myself answering, more often than not, 'yes'. This was and still is a horrifically heartbreaking revelation. To me, it seemed that my ability to grow into and become my own person and develop my own agency was stolen from me by my abusers. I wondered if other survivors of CSA felt the same as I did; did they feel this loss of agency, did they feel like every aspect of their being is influenced in some way by the CSA they experienced? Are we the people we are today because the CSA we experienced distorted our understandings of our existence? I was afraid to confront these questions, to dig deeply into my existence and possibly into others' to find conceptualizations to these ideas. It is because of this fear of revealing the truth, the pain, and the heartache that I choose to do this research because I must confront these things to get through them, I must be brave. As Gloria Anzaldua wrote "writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression…" (Anzaldua 1980).

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which having experienced childhood sexual abuse can possibly lead to the internalization of extreme gender beliefs and roles.

This will be demonstrated through the experiences of Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, Carrie and Amy. Within this, I will address gender roles, sexuality, and power. It is important to state two influential shared characteristics between Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy. First, they all refer to themselves as and identify as women. Second, they were all abused by male family members. Therefore, this discussion is unique to this very group of women because they have similar gender identities and because their abuse experiences stemmed from interactions they had with men and it may not be applicable to others who have experienced CSA.

Before I begin my discussion, I will outline the gender theory that I am drawing upon for this conceptualization. When I discuss gender in this writing, I take on the "...modern concept of gender..." in which gender is a socially constructed idea that is separate from biology (Vigoya 2016). Here, gender is used as a means to critically examine power structures in the lives of the six participants in this research and in my own life. Gender in this conceptualization is understood as a learned identity (Oakley 1972). One learns the performativity of gender: gender is a repetition of acts that "constitutes the gendered subject as a gendered subject," (Lloyd 2016; see also Butler 1990). When I discuss learning and internalizing 'extreme gender roles', I am discussing coming to understand women as severely subordinated[2] and performing that woman role accordingly. The experiences of Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy reflect

[2] In the context of United States culture, the woman has historically been cited as domestic, submissive, pleasing, acting in modest ways such as crossing her legs when she sits (Lloyd 2016). An extreme iteration of this woman is to internalize these subordinated ideals of a woman and perform them so as to never stand up for oneself, aim only to be pleasing to others while disregarding self-desire and personal needs, to the point of possibly mentally and physically harming oneself.

how a child who experiences CSA can come to understand the idea of an extreme 'woman' gender role.

Childhood Sexual Abuse and the Internalization of Extreme Gender Roles and Sexual Behaviors

Now, I will address how learning about sexual roles between girls and boys is accelerated and exaggerated at the onset of abuse. I will consider the ways in which young females who experience sexual abuse can feel confusion, guilt, shame, and anger about sexuality and how these feelings can become reinforced and validated by the women, girls, and society that surrounds them. Finally, I will discuss how, at the onset of childhood sexual abuse, young females can begin to learn and understand power relations between men and women and between women and society, and begin to internalize behaviors in response to these learned power relations.

Gender Roles, Sexuality, and Power in Women Survivors of CSA

Women who have survived childhood sexual abuse experience some of the most extreme forms of gendered violence, oppression, and imposed gender categories from a young age and thus began "doing gender" and "doing difference" (West & Zimmerman 1987; West & Fenstermaker 2002) in extreme ways from the day their victimization begins. From the moment of onset of abuse, if they did not already, young girls who experience CSA can sometimes begin to understand their socially prescribed roles as females; silenced, weak, powerless, existing to please, among other attributes (West & Fenstermaker 2002; Lloyd 2016; Stone 2016). If a CSA survivor is abused one or multiple times, the role they begin to understand and internalize from the moment of abuse is carried with them for the rest of their lives, even if it is later tackled through

therapy, counselling, or other means in adulthood. Every time they reflect on their abuse, or even just their childhood, they are reminded of these gender roles. These statements were all displayed in the discussions I had with Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy by recognizing, and in some cases prescribing, to these characteristics.

Recently, I began to acknowledge the abuse I went through and the ways in which my personality, and my responses to and understandings of the world have been altered by the CSA I experienced. Looking back on the past situations I experienced as a young adult, I can now see how my abuse experience has pushed me into aiming only to be pleasing to others, into being submissive to powerful people in my life, into being willing to cast aside my wishes and desires for the approval and acceptance of the authority figures in my life. I believe these characteristics are directly linked to the abuse I experienced as a child, such as being told only to do and not to speak, being laughed at by my friends and scolded by authoritative figures when I attempted to tell the truth of my abuse experience. When I was not pleasing to my abusers, I was shunned and attacked with manipulative phrases such as "why don't you want to make me happy, you know I want to make you happy" and "you'll be a good girl for doing this for me". As a seven-year-old, I was being taught about the "girl/woman" gender role by men older than me, white men who grew up in a patriarchal society who had already come to understand and internalize traditional westernized gender roles. From those men I learned about sexuality, sex roles, femininity, and power dynamics.

Similarly, Mary discussed how her understanding of the pleasing girl/woman gender role was altered as a result of the CSA she experienced. Mary stated that "… somewhere along the road I developed this, I guess like core belief that other peoples'

needs were more important than mine, you know … it was more important to please other people than it was to get my needs met, or even heard". Because of the CSA Mary experienced, at a young age she had already come to understand that performing the woman gender role meant that oftentimes, a woman must put others' needs and desires above her own (Langton 1993). This "core belief" that had been established and solidified due to Mary's experience of CSA was reinforced when she attempted to disclose her abuse to her mother and later to her friend. Mary stated that "... after the first... time or two with each abuser, I went to my mom, so informally [disclosed] I guess to my mom. And she didn't believe, didn't believe and invalidated, so after the first couple of times of trying with her, I stopped trying with anybody and kept it a secret and just never told anybody". Later, Mary tried to tell a friend about the CSA that she experienced in her young childhood: "I did tell a girlfriend once in childhood, as well. And she had this like, this similar reaction that my mom had where she just wrote it off, minimized it, and kind of made me think that I just didn't know what I was talking about, … that it was something I did wrong that it wasn't something someone else did wrong".

Mary learned through these interactions that the women and girls surrounding her would sometimes hold her accountable to the norms and performativity of the girl/woman gender. This is in accordance with the gate-keeping behavior that women display toward each other; women often hold each other most strongly to the performativity and norms of gender roles while at the same time experiencing the same oppressions themselves because of these prescribed gender roles. Author Natasha Behl discussed this gate-keeping phenomenon in *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India* (2019) where some Sikh women Behl had discussions with believed in

the equality detailed in their faith but still taught younger Sikh girls and women that "women are polluted" upon the start and continual cycles of menstruation. Here, Mary was taught by her mother, a lesson later reinforced by her friend, that in sexual relations, the man's narrative of the relations is usually held to have more credibility than the woman's, and the woman should never freely discuss her sexual relations or else be scolded or discredited. Therefore, instead of discussing the CSA she experienced through her own narrative, Mary decided to never discuss such things with anyone again as to avoid being reproached for discussing her past sexual contact, even if that sexual contact was from an abuse experience, a reaction that stemmed naturally from her CSA experience.

In another vein, Carrie talked about feeling special as a young girl because her abuser's sexual attention set her apart from her brothers: "… he [the abuser] was kind of like you're special, I love you, so I felt that way. And so, in a way I mean… that was the only attention really that I had, I had four brothers. It was kind of like he made me feel special [for being sexually desirable], so I thought I was,". Carrie felt as if she was special compared to her brothers at the time because she was able to fulfill a feminine sexuality trait - she was desirable and therefore that made her special. She learned that what set her apart from her four brothers was the fact that she was feminine, that she was a sexually desirable object as girls and women "should be" in the eyes of boys and men (Threadcraft 2016; Calogero 2004). Her abuser confirmed this lesson in telling her that she was special almost exclusively during the moments in which he abused her. Carrie went on to explain that it took her a long time to realize that her abuser did not actually care for her as a human being, but rather that he only cared for her because she could

fulfill his sexual desire. She stated that it took her long into her adulthood, some years after the abuse stopped, for her to realize this and only after he began denying their "relationship" to others, stating that Carrie was a liar. For Carrie, this was heartbreaking.

Carrie learned as a young girl the ways in which women and girls who are viewed as desirable objects by men are treated in a "special" way. She learned that her brothers, the boys surrounding her, could not fulfill the desires of her abuser and therefore she was special in that her feminine being could. But as Carrie grew older, she also came to the realization that this sexual femininity that had made her special and had set her apart from her brothers did not actually gain her the respect or understanding she longed for from her abuser. Carrie's experience reflects the sentiments that a patriarchal society believes about girls and women; they are valuable when they are sexually desirable and can fulfill sexual fantasies, but they are not valuable as human beings with self-agency (McNay 2016).

Bridget discussed learning similar sentiments about women's and girl's sexuality from her CSA experience. Bridget said "... you know, I had a lot of energy, but I was sexually promiscuous with the boys and I always felt, and I still do, like that had to do with my dad. Where I felt like my sexual activity with the boys contributed to my dad seeing that in me and feeling that was okay to touch me, does that make sense? … I always had to sit next to the teacher because I would end up saying inappropriate things to the boys…". Here, Bridget felt like if she had been "better" performing the girl gender by being sexually conservative and less promiscuous, then maybe her father would not have seen her as a viable body for abuse. Of course, this is not the case as Bridget's father is solely to blame for the abuse that he enacted on Bridget. But as a young child, Bridget

was taught through her abuse experience that girls and women will be punished if they are open about their sexuality. Bridget saw her father's abuse as a punishment for being "sexually promiscuous" and was punished by her teacher for voicing "inappropriate" thoughts.

Young females who experience CSA are also often taught about patriarchal power structures through their abuse experience. Stacy discussed how her mother reacted to discovering Stacy's abuse experience: "I was told to lie about it, so I said it didn't happen. My mom was afraid that she was going to go to jail, that he [the abuser] was going to go to jail and he was the money maker, stuff like that,". Stacy was unable to disclose her abuse to formal networks because her mother was afraid of losing the monetary support her grandfather provided to the family. As Stacy's mother convinced her to be quiet about her CSA experience, Stacy was shown that it is predominantly men who are seen as the capable and designated monetary providers for families, and because of this, they are able to do as they please without facing repercussions for their actions.

Bridget also experienced a similarly gross abuse of power after her father had been arrested for sexually abusing his children. Bridget explained that her father had close connections through an organization to powerful people in the city in which her abuse took place, so he was able to get the judge on his case switched and his charges reduced. She explained: "...and then he got us [Bridget and her siblings] back by paying the judge off. He basically slept with our social worker, gave her $10,000, she wrote a good report and he got us back". After Bridget moved back in with her father, the abuse

continued. Bridget saw the power of a white[3] man with money in our society through this interaction. Her father was able to get out of trouble and erase any consequences he should have faced for sexually abusing his children by using his wealth, class, and male status. Bridget's experience demonstrated to her the domination that a man can have over women and girls when he utilizes his male status, especially if he is able to display wealth alongside it.

From experiencing childhood sexual abuse, myself and the six women who shared their stories with me all were taught that women and girls can and should only have limited power in their interactions and relations with men, as well as limited power within our society, especially when it comes to their power to speak truth about their abuse. Carrie spoke on her experience with trying to oust her abuser to protect children that might come in contact with him from possibly being abused the same way she was as a child: "I did try to contact the police but they said too much time has passed [for] making a report. But I said that I would at least like to have a report so if my niece, ... ever wanted to report something [she could], because I suspected something was happening there. And they wouldn't take a report. They said it, 'then we will have to go and get a report from him and it will be your word against his. And so, do you want that down on the record, what he has to say about it?' And I wasn't, you know, prepared for all that…". When Carrie later attempted to report her abuser to CPS, "... one of the first things that CPS said... it felt like at the time the person didn't believe me. She said, 'well

[3] Bridget belongs to a family that is labeled as white. We did not discuss race or racial background, therefore I can not say that Bridget's father was definitively white. It is important to note here that possibly if Bridget and her family were seen as a part of a racial minority, that the experience her father had in the U.S. criminal justice system could have been vastly different. This is why I note that he was both a white man upon appearance and a wealthy man.

why did you wait this long if that's what happened?' … I was like mortified by that, like 'what do you mean?' … it was kind of upsetting,". Carrie experienced a lack of power within the state systems that were supposed to protect her as a victim of childhood sexual abuse. These agencies disregarded her experience, her voice as a victim, and her credibility as a human being, and instead informed her that she is powerless against the word of her male abuser and within the eyes of these systems.

Carrie was not the only one of us to experience skewed power relations as a result of our experiences with childhood sexual abuse. Both Bridget and Susan felt some form of powerlessness when their abuse was reported to police agencies alongside Carrie. All of us felt powerless in trying to speak the truth about the CSA we lived through. As children and as adults, our voices were silenced, discredited, and invalidated. Through our CSA experiences, we all learned in some form that the woman gender has no power, especially in the process of speaking the truth about our abuse. We are still working to unravel these learned understandings of women's power.

Extreme Gender Roles in the Political Sphere

Given how entrenched extreme gender roles are, CSA survivors enter into voting age shaped by a distinctive gendered view of the political sphere and their role in it. They also enter a new space, in politics and in political science as a discipline, that is itself gendered in such a way that silences the voices of women in political spheres in all areas of the world (Behl 2017). Politics in the United States has historically been unwelcoming to the political involvement of women and has criticized the gender traits of women. Before the "start"[4] of feminism in the 1960s, "Male dominance in formal, decision-

[4] The 1960s is regarded as the start of Western Feminism.

making positions had come to seem natural and uncontestable…" (Celis, Kantola, Waylen, & Weldon 2013, 4). The norm of male dominance in the United States was uncontested in such a way that other spheres, civil society and private life, besides the political were organized around that norm (Strolovitch & Townsend-Bell 2013). This organization around male dominance still exists today though many, especially critical feminist scholars, are working to dismantle such power structures that place males at the top.

Today, we can see the political hostility towards women in examples like the heavy debates on issues that have been characterized as "political" but involve women's health and rights, such as the debate on abortion (Celis et al. 2013, 2). Knowing that women have been ridiculed by politicians for voicing their opinions (for example, Donald Trump's 2015 statement on Megyn Kelly[5]), a CSA survivor having learned extreme gender roles as a result of having experienced abuse may see the political sphere as especially unwelcoming. One example of this is the sexuality and desirability that Bridget and Carrie discussed learning at young ages as a result of their abuse. They learned that sexuality and desirability is central to the definition of 'woman', but the political sphere "… requires assimilation to the norms associated with powerful [male] bodies" (Celis, et al. 2013, 161). This assimilation requires a denouncement of feminine traits that some CSA survivors learn like sexuality, desirability, and submissiveness and requires an adoption of opposite traits and characteristics including domination and aggressiveness.

[5] In 2015 after the first Republican presidential debate where journalist Megyn Kelly called out Donald Trump on his use of slurs against women, Donald Trump responded by suggesting that Megyn Kelly had been on her period and experiencing PMS symptoms during the debate (Chavez, Stracqualursi, & Keneally 2016).

These traits associated with "powerful bodies" would be a challenge to take on for some CSA survivors because the traits can reflect abuse experiences that they might have had as young children. Stacy discussed how having experienced CSA made her "shut down and feel suffocated" in the face of any forms and displays of domination and power. Carrie explained that she has learned to never question authority and to sometimes even thank others for displays of power: "…I have a hard time with [people of] authority, or even if I just think they do. Like, if I were to get a speeding ticket, I would right away say thank you and be the submissive type. Like 'okay! I appreciate your help for the city'". Due to our trauma responses resulting from CSA, some of us have had to make an effort in our adulthoods to learn to think of ourselves as having the capability to possibly become a "powerful body", or to take on the attributes of such a body. Having learned to be submissive and silent, it is a difficult process to reverse our understandings of these extreme gender role attributes in an effort to begin to understand our own power. Having an unsteady grounding in power and a discomfort with the ascribed attributes of a "powerful body" in politics, some of us see the political sphere as unwelcoming and even potentially harmful.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I utilized gender as a tool to critically examine the ways in which having experienced sexual abuse in Mary's, Stacy's, Bridget's, Susan's, Carrie's, Amy's, and my own childhood manipulated our understandings of the power relations within our lives. We came to understand an extreme form of the social construction of 'woman' as a performative gender and to engage in our daily gender acts in a corresponding manner. Our discussions touched on themes of submissiveness, aiming to be pleasing, feeling

special only as a feminine sexual object, and how the discrediting of our voices lead us to be largely silent on the abuses we faced. I further discussed how our understandings of extreme gender roles are experienced and seen in the political sphere of the United States. Our apprehension to the attributes of a "powerful body" in politics (i.e. a dominant male) has made us as CSA survivors feel unwelcome in the political sphere. In the next chapters, I will touch more on this discomfort with power through the lens of politics and the potential for organizing civil society to be a medium through which the CSA survivors in this study could feel comfortable with, and come to participate in, the democracy of the United States.

CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICAL "NON-ENGAGERS" – MARY AND STACY

Introduction

When asked “how do you believe your life would be different if you had not experienced childhood sexual abuse”, Mary responded candidly “… I think that my life was kind of just running from these secrets and this shame… I feel like I was just running my whole life and trying to escape all these awful feelings and secrets. … And so now I’m slowing down, dealing with all the stuff I have been running from and trying to reevaluate … what is actually important to me,”. Here Mary details some of the process of working to separate the self from the trauma of abuse. I mention again the sentiment “the personal is political” (Hanisch 1969), but what happens to the political if you do not fully understand the personal? This question, I’m sure, has been raised many times by many others, but I raise it again. The trauma of childhood sexual abuse convolutes the personal.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which the personal can be impacted by having experienced CSA in the form of learning extreme gender roles. I discussed learning submissiveness, learning to please others, learning about self-agency, and sexuality. These learning processes can make pulling oneself away from the idea of “my trauma defines me” difficult, confusing, and harmful. I further discussed how having learned extreme gender roles as CSA survivors have made some of us feel unwelcome in the political sphere in the United States. In this chapter, I will discuss how understanding the personal after having experienced childhood sexual abuse impacts the political participation of adult CSA survivors. I will discuss how understandings of political

narratives within the United States and personal political involvement (talking with others about politics, actively researching political happenings, etc.), as well as political engagement (voting) and the desire to be politically engaged are all impacted by the processes of understanding the personal after having experienced childhood sexual abuse. These processes of understanding the personal involve overcoming the learned extreme gender roles I discussed earlier, as well as asking the question to oneself "am I defined by the abuse I experienced"?

In this chapter and the next, I will discuss how all of the participants differ in their political involvement and engagement and how their pasts with childhood sexual abuse potentially play a role in their involvement and engagement. I have decided to split this discussion into two parts (chapters) – the political "non-engagers", and the political "engagers". The "non-engagers" will showcase Mary's and Stacy's political engagement and involvement. "Non-engagers" does not mean that neither Mary or Stacy have never been politically involved or engaged, but rather that they were currently not participating in politics at all during the time of our discussion. The "engagers" chapter details Bridget's, Susan's, Carrie's, and Amy's political participation as they all currently are active voters. Beside the divide between the two groups of being currently politically involved or not, there is another: all of the women in the "engagers" group have seen or have actively pursued the punitive penal punishment of their abusers, with the exception of Amy. Mary and Stacy, within the "non-engagers" group, have not seen or actively pursued the punitive punishment of their abusers.

The Political "Non-Engagers" – Mary and Stacy

I would like to say here that Mary and Stacy might not have disclosed to me all of their true feelings and beliefs about political participation and engagement. They both knew that I am a survivor of CSA myself, but that was where our known similarities ended. I believe that my being both a researcher and an outsider from the walls of academia coming into their space and asking them difficult questions might have made them apprehensive at sharing every detail with me. Though I tried not to portray this image, I may have been seen as the power-holder during our discussions, or possibly "the one with more knowledge", and this may have caused them to share with me base level observations of their feelings and beliefs. The discussion that follows is based solely on what both Mary and Stacy disclosed to me and does not claim to be fully representative of either woman.

Mary

At the time of our discussion, Mary, a young white woman, was not currently politically active, though she had been in the past. She had voted in the 2008 presidential election between Barrack Obama and John McCain. Mary stated that she believed it was important to be politically engaged because engagement serves as a chance for citizens to discontinue oppressive situations and to "get things done". Mary had ended her political enagagement during the process of healing from the trauma she experienced in childhood. Mary explained that she was no longer politically active because "… our political world is so insane and… just incredibly negative and … it's just hard to be engaged in it with so much hostility and hatred". She stated that she stepped away from this hostility and hatred because of her "… own stuff going on". But still, she saw her future political engagement in a hopeful light "… as I recover, hopefully heal and put my

life back together, I can see that [political engagement] being potentially the biggest way that I can heal. Because I don't know… that I'm going to have like actual justice and that people [her abusers] are going to go to prison. … So, if I can help others… that's probably going to help heal a lot of the parts of me that still need it".

Mary's political engagement has been halted during her healing process. In her therapy sessions, she said, she continually uncovers traumatic experiences that have been pushed away from her thoughts for many years. She compared herself to some of the other women in the therapy group, saying that the ones who were further along in the process of healing had uncovered "all of their details" of their abuse, whereas she was "not there yet" because she is "very new into… healing". Remembering the traumatic events of her childhood has taken a toll on her mental and physical health, causing her to focus solely on the process of healing from her trauma.

Mary's political involvement is heavily impacted by the childhood sexual abuse she experienced. Here, Mary herself draws an obvious connection between the trauma she faced and her decision to be politically inactive. She needs to heal from her trauma, to feel fully "put back together" before she can focus on the difficult duty of being politically active. Mary is not alone in feeling as if being politically engaged does not bode well on mental health. A 2019 study found that "A large number of Americans believe that... their exposure to politics… has resulted in emotional costs and lost friendships," (Smith, Hibbing, & Hibbing 2019). A 2011 study done by the same authors Smith and Hibbing found that persons with higher stress levels were less likely to vote (French, Smith, Guck, Alford, & Hibbing 2011). Mary discussed with me how she found

that both her body and her mind "started breaking down" with many "medical and emotional issues" while living with the trauma resulting from CSA.

With trauma having an impact on Mary's healing processes, it similarly has an impact on her ability to take hold of her own power and self-agency still to this day. Mary did not disclose her abuse to anyone for so long that the stress she carried into her adulthood with her from her childhood began to overtake her life. As discussed in the previous chapter, she learned to be pleasing, to be submissive, and to stay quiet as a result of her abuse. When she tried to disclose to her mother and her friend near the onset of her abuse, she was invalidated, made to believe that the abuse was her fault, and decided to keep her abuse a secret. She kept relationships with her abusers throughout her life until very recently in her adulthood. Her abusers used tactics to take away her power and others around her, though possibly inadvertently, invalidated her voice to the extent that she began to believe that her truth held no power – she lost control of her self-agency. Still to this day Mary admits to having trouble identifying her childhood sexual abuse for what it is, she said "… I'm still trying to use the word abuser, the word rape…". Further, Mary learned that "…other peoples' needs were more important than…" her own as a result of her abuse, effectively impacting the "personal" in the political.

The violence that Mary's abusers inflicted onto her from a young age has effectively made her abusers the continual power-holders in Mary's life (though she is now actively taking control of her own power through therapy and healing processes). The power tactic of the use of violent action by the powerful against those they control has been called out by critical feminist scholars (Lokaneeta 2015). In *Gendered Citizenship*, author Natasha Behl discusses how violence in democratic India has cut off

Indian women's access to the public spaces needed to participate in their equal democracy, unfortunately making India's democracy more equal on-paper and in-discourse than in its actual implementation (Behl 2019). In *Playing with Fire* the Sangtin Writers discuss their grapples with the understandings of personal power that they had learned through the forms of violence inflicted upon them throughout their lives (physical violence, sexual violence, violence through discourse, etc.) and their newly found understandings of power that developed through their own employment (Sangtin Writers 2006). Postcolonial scholars have also recognized the continued use of violence by states and "… non-state actors from dominant classes and communities…" to keep power over all peoples throughout history, predominately women and people of color (Lokaneeta 2015). Mary's experience with childhood sexual abuse reflects the historical use of violence by the powerful to keep specific groups oppressed.

Stacy

Stacy, a young, straight woman of color, disclosed that she had never voted before and that she was not currently registered to vote at the time of our discussion. When asked if she thought that being politically engaged was important, Stacy responded "I think it is, every person's opinions count. I mean, I'm not into the whole world thing… I don't really care for it". I believe here that Stacy was referring to her community and to the larger nation when she said, "the world". I asked her if she felt overwhelmed by the world and she stated, "… it just doesn't come into my everyday life. I do want to vote, I do want to be involved, but I can't be involved with the world if I can't focus on getting my shit together. … I can't help others if, you know, I haven't been there to help myself yet". She went on to say, "when it comes to sticking up for people, I'll do it". Stacy had

never been to a protest or rally for any group, but she did say that a big driving force for her possible political engagement would be anything protecting women and children, "…anything to help, I would do. As long as it's for women and children". She has also participated in a few community events that centered around women's health, specifically benefit walks for women with PCOS and for women with breast cancer.

Stacy attributed her political inactivity to her focus on healing from the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, similarly to Mary. Again, I point to where she stated that she can't help others if she hasn't yet helped herself. I think this sentiment also can be reversed, Stacy does not see community as a potential vehicle for self-healing. She reflected this idea earlier in our discussion: "I am so paranoid in my life. Like, I think that everyone is a rapist. … I don't work, I do school online, … everybody is a bad person when it comes to me… I don't know what someone is capable of". Stacy feels that she is unable to be involved in her community at all, that she doesn't "really care for it", because the violence inflicted upon her by her abuser from a young age caused Stacy to believe that within every interaction that involves power, she is always in the weaker position. Again, this is similar the position brought forth in *Gendered Citizenship* that violence toward women severs them from the public spaces needed to participate in democracy (Behl 2019). The abuse of power and violence that Stacy's abuser inflicted upon her made Stacy associate any form of power with negative feelings, making political engagement within her community difficult, because invariably she will have to face power-holders in the process.

Further, it seems that Stacy is not interested in being politically active or engaged because it does not serve her in any way. Instead, Stacy believes that being politically

active would cause more harm than good for her healing processes. For her, it seems the personal is not the political. Or rather, the personal is detached from the political (but it could also be re-attached through healing). Conflict is inherent in politics (i.e. conflict between democrats and republicans, between nations, between policy positions, between ideological positions, between voters and politicians, etc.) and Stacy admitted that she is not comfortable with conflict. When asked what type of reaction she would have to someone who was confrontational to her in person, she said "… I would tense up, feel suffocated, and just cry. I'm not good with confrontation up front". She went on to say "… not being able to have a voice as a child, not being able to stick up for yourself as a child I think that… if you have people taking advantage of you in your life as a child and you don't know how to stick up for yourself, how are you going to stick up for yourself when you're an adult if you haven't learned how to do that, if you're taken advantage of your whole life". The conflict inherent in politics clashes with Stacy's response to the childhood trauma she faced, the learned submissive and pleasing role that was discussed in the previous chapter.

The Political "Non-Engagers"

Stacy and Mary both held a few similar sentiments toward their political inactivity. Both stated that being politically active would be a detriment to their mental health and that their healing processes were currently being prioritized over political participation at the time of our discussion. Both stated that they felt they wouldn't be able to help others through political activity unless they helped themselves first by fully healing from their trauma. Both felt as if the conflict and power inherent in political activity was too overwhelming for them, that they didn't know how to navigate such

spaces because they were taught to shy away from their own self-agency and power from a young age as a result of the abuse they experienced.

Both Mary's and Stacy's feelings toward political involvement show a lack of belief that the community inherent in political involvement can serve as a form of healing. This sentiment seems to be reflected in their statements for a number of reasons. First, the communities that surrounded Mary and Stacy while they were both going through and recovering from the childhood sexual abuse they experienced had led them to believe that they are not in control of their own power, and that those with power will only continually oppress them through some form of violence. This made them both feel that a community would not accept them during their healing processes because perceived 'valued members' of communities have control over their self-agency (i.e. people who are in the voting community are able to focus on, learn, and form opinions about politics because they "have it all together"). Second, it is argued that American Individualism makes citizens themselves not community-driven, but rather self-driven and self-interested (Gilbert 2013; Bauman 2001; Curtis 2012), and this individualism does not make a political community of self-driven individuals welcoming to the healing processes of others, at least not in Mary's and Stacy's perceptions.

Mary and Stacy both stated that they felt they needed to go through and successfully complete their healing processes from the trauma they faced as children before they would consider being politically active again. These healing processes were being aided by the therapy group they were together in, where they were able to sit with other survivors of CSA and work through their trauma. This understanding of mental health healing overpowering everything else in their lives is reflective of the effects of

trauma itself. At times, when a person is "in the thick" of healing from their trauma, it can seem like the trauma itself is the sole driving and all-encompassing force within their lives (Davidson 1997). Little things that seem insignificant to others can set off someone recovering from past trauma into a deep despair, sadness, or other adverse reaction (Mayo Clinic Staff 2018). Speaking from my personal experience, sometimes carrying trauma around can make one feel like they aren't "all there" mentally. It is reasonable to Mary and Stacy to think that they aren't currently suited for political engagement because they feel they need to stick to recovery, they need to focus on their therapy.

Others have held this same belief about political participation. The essay that brought forth the saying "the personal is political" itself was a response to a critique that politics is not therapy and cannot be used as a means of reflecting personal problems (Hanisch 1969). Hanisch's response to this, I believe, can serve as a viewpoint opposite to Stacy's and Mary's: "Women are messed over, not messed up! We need to change the objective conditions, not adjust to them," (Hanisch 1969). Later in the same essay, she states that there is a "political therapy" and its "most important [aspect] is getting rid of self-blame" (Hanisch 1969). But Mary and Stacy do not see this as a possibility within their own political participation.

From Mary and Stacy's statements, it is obvious to see that they both have predominately dealt with the trauma resulting from the CSA they experienced alone. They both tried to disclose the abuse they were experiencing to the people close to them, Mary to her mother and her friend and Stacy to her friend, but both of these attempts at disclosure led to their isolation in the healing process. Mary's mother and friend both disbelieved her and invalidated her, leading her to decide to stay quiet about the abuse

she experienced. Stacy's mother asked her to stay quiet about the abuse she experienced because her abuser would go to prison, and therefore be unable to provide their family with needed resources. They both did not seek out help until they were in their adulthoods and they no longer had any contact with their abusers – Mary chose not to contact her abusers anymore and Stacy's abuser died. The silencing they went through led them to believe that the CSA they experienced as children was contingent on personal issues and not a reflection of larger systemic power structures. It is important to note that this belief they both carried has been delegitimized by the therapy they both were currently receiving at the time of our discussion.

They are not alone in this feeling. Many CSA survivors attribute the abuse they experienced to personal actions or characteristics, placing the blame on themselves (Filipas & Ullman 2006). The self-blame of CSA victims has shown to also lead to higher rates of revictimization and PTSD in adulthood (Arata 2000; Frazier 2003; Katz, May, Sörensen, & DelTosta 2010). Moreover, gendered sexual violence victims can often face larger societal blame for the violent acts inflicted upon them (Suarez & Gadalla 2010). The societal blame that victims of sexual gendered violence face is often characterized as "rape myths", these myths commonly being such ideals as; the victim was wearing an outfit that was too revealing, the victim was too intoxicated and let their guard down, the victim is married to or dating the abuser so they must have enjoyed the assault, etc. (Basow & Minieri 2010; Baugher, Elhai, Monroe, & Gray 2010). In Mary's case, both her mother and her friend made her feel as if the CSA she experienced was a result of her own personal actions. We can look to another example of such societal-blame in Chanel Miller's memoir of the attack she faced at the hands of a Stanford undergraduate student.

In her memoir, she states that once the story of her rape was published in media outlets, the comments that readers posted on the stories ranged from such sentiments as "not trying to blame the victim but something is wrong with you of you drink yourself to unconsciousness," to "there are women out there suffering real abuse and you want to call this assault," (Miller 2019, 46). Chanel Miller went on to make an apt observation in response to these criticisms, "they seemed angry that I'd made myself vulnerable, more than the fact that he'd [the abuser] acted on my vulnerability. … People were confounded that I had failed to protect myself," (Miller 2019, 47). Many women and survivors of gendered sexual abuse are attacked with similar statements from those around them, leading them to work through the trauma of their abuse in silence.

Self-blame and societal blame that victims of gendered sexual violence often face are another means of power control by abusers themselves. Take, for example, Sue Lees' 1997 study of rape trials in the British Judicial system, where she found that such trails were being used primarily to police and shun the survivors' sexualities and life styles instead of punishing the rapists for crimes committed (Lees 1997). If those who abuse are being placed in the background while those who have been abused are pushed to the forefront to face criticism and blame for the violence used against them, the true blame of the abuser goes unnoticed and unaccounted, enabling them to continue their abusive behaviors. Further, if communities are torn by focusing blame not on the abuser but on the victim, it is likely that they will not come together to actually address and stop the abuser and further similar abuse from happening because they are unable to attribute the abuse to what it is, a horrific misuse of power, and instead attribute it to some personal trait of the victim so that they feel something similar will not happen to them if they act

opposite of the victim. The truth is, as it can be seen here in my own and the six participants in this study's experiences, abusers will continue to abuse not because of some characteristic of their victims, but because they enjoy taking control of those more vulnerable than them.

The isolation that self-blame and societal blame caused for Mary and Stacy coupled with the extreme gender roles they learned as a result of the CSA they experienced led them to hold a disbelief that being politically active through actions such as voting would do little to better their healing processes. As discussed above, the communal aspect of being politically active seems to be off-putting to Mary and Stacy because they have learned that they must face their problems on their own and that communities are unwelcoming and unforgiving of vulnerability. Further, being politically engaged is an active use of one's personal power and agency, as a vote enables a citizen to utilize their own voice in such a way that dictates, at least in some part, how the nation they vote in is operated (i.e. the power of women voters to eliminate discriminatory laws (Lloyd 2013). Mary and Stacy do not see political engagement as a form of healing through the practice of using their own power, but rather see it as an action that can *only be done once they feel they have personally regained total control of their own power and self-agency*.

Conclusion

Stacy and Marry have both decided to not be politically engaged for a multitude of reasons. As discussed in the previous chapter, Stacy and Marry learned extreme gender roles as the result of their childhood sexual abuse, roles that place pleasing behaviors, submissiveness, and non-confrontation at the forefront of importance. These extreme

gender roles caused a disconnect with their personal self-agency and power and their willingness to utilize these things. In this chapter, I took the discussion of their understandings of self-agency and power a little further to illustrate why both Stacy and Mary had decided not to be politically engaged at the time of our discussion. Two factors both play on and clash with each other in Mary's and Stacy's decisions to be "non-engagers". One, Mary and Stacy do not see that political participation could serve as another form of healing from trauma through its inherent requirement of a politically engaged person to utilize their own power – they do not see that the "personal is the political" (Hanisch 1969). Second (somewhat diverging from the first reason), Mary and Stacy do not see the community aspect inherent in political participation as welcoming to people who are going through trauma healing processes such as themselves. Rather, it might be more accurate to say that Stacy and Marry have come to see communities as entities of judgment and misuse of power. This is because they both faced societal-blame for their CSA from their family and friendship communities and because they both learned from a young age that those with power over them will use that power to their advantage in abusive ways, meaning the leaders in communities with power over others may do the same. This is why they both expressed the similar belief that they needed to focus on their own mental health and, in the words of Stacy, "get [their] shit together"[6], before they can actively be politically engaged. Mary and Stacy feel that by getting themselves to a continually healthy mental state they will no longer be vulnerable, and therefore be able to begin to utilize their own power and self-agency to its full extent.

[6] When Stacy says she needs to "get her shit together", she is stating that she feels she needs to sort out her mental state, that she needs to heal completely from the trauma she faced.

In the conclusion of this writing, I will advance an argument that both Stacy and Mary were already utilizing their power and agency within the therapy group that they were in at the time of our discussion. I will make a connection between the therapy community they were a part of and the potential for such a community to transition to and encourage political engagement. I will discuss how such communities may be able to help CSA survivors overcome the extreme gender roles they learned in response to their victimization and begin to utilize their own power. In the next chapter, I will discuss the political "engagers", Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy.

CHAPTER 4

THE POLITICAL "ENGAGERS" – BRIDGET, SUSAN, CARRIE, AND AMY

Introduction

In the last chapter, I discussed Mary's and Stacy's reasonings behind their decisions to be political "non-engagers". I discussed how their understandings of the personal and how the personal relates to the political have been influenced by the extreme gender roles they developed as a result of the CSA they faced. Further, I discussed how the CSA they went through as young children has impacted their beliefs that community involvement and political participation can serve as a form of healing. Rather, they believe that they can only be involved in both their communities and in politics once they have fully healed from the trauma that they carry with them daily.

In this chapter, I will discuss the political "engagers", that is Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy. I have decided to group their experiences together because, at the time of our discussions, they were all politically active. Here, I define being politically active as doing one or multiple of the following things; voting, engaging in political discussions, attending political protests or rallies, making your political views known to those around you, and so on. In this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which the participants have actively used their voices (in other words, our self-agency and power) to call out the abuses they experienced as children. There is another important similarity between the participants in this chapter that I believe has significant impact on their political participation – all have seen or actively pursued the punitive punishment of their abusers, save for Amy. I believe this is an important factor in the political participation of Bridget, Susan, and Carrie because they have witnessed first-hand how their own voices can

potentially have a heavy power over their personal lives, an understanding that possibly translated to using their voice through their vote. I will discuss more on this in later in this chapter.

This chapter will be structured similarly to the last; first, I will interpret separately the discussions I had with Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy on their CSA experiences and their views on political participation. After which, I will bring together all of their experiences to aim to understand why they are politically engaged while Mary and Stacy are not. I will end with a discussion about how their understandings of community and political engagement differ from Mary's and Stacy's possibly because most of them, in some way, were believed and supported during their disclosure of their CSA experiences to others around them.

The Political "Engagers" – Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy

Bridget

I would like to start by stating that Bridget had a lot to say about every topic we discussed. Bridget is a highly opinionated person, something I gleaned from her the moment we started our discussion. This, I will admit, was a bit of a surprise to me. First, I was surprised because I had come into this research with my own personal experience as a CSA survivor, in which I believe I am passive and submissive (and therefore seldom voice my opinion) due to the abuse I experienced as a child. I was also surprised by Bridget because the discussions I had with Mary and Stacy, where they corroborated my bias through their similarities to my experience as a CSA survivor, came before the discussion I had with Bridget. Bridget swiftly informed me by disclosing to me her lived

experience that this research was not going to go the way I thought it was. To be clear, I was absolutely happy with this turn of events.

Birdget is a straight, white woman around forty years old. Bridget was candid about the abuse she experienced as a young child. She started by telling me some exact details of the abuse, which I will not go into in this writing. She had even brought in a folder full of court documents, photographs, and narratives corroborating her experiences, an action that shows Bridget may be accustomed to defending herself to others. She disclosed that her father was both physically and sexually abusive toward herself and her sister while she was between the ages of eight and thirteen. She further explained that her mother did very little in response to the daily abuses Bridget and her sister faced at the hands of her father; "my mom neglected us… she did not provide a safe environment". To explain why the abuses she experienced from her father stopped at the age of thirteen, Bridget stated "he was murdered at thirteen"[7].

Bridget explained that she and her sister had been taken away from her father once before he died due to the abuse they experienced at his hands. She stated, "my mom reported it, finally, to the police department. …They came in, took us while my dad was sleeping. …My mom took us to the police department. …They arrested my dad because… he became violent". I asked Bridget if, once she was taken away, she voluntarily discussed details of her abuse to the police. She responded "being that my mom told them what was occurring in the house, …they went off the interviews starting with that. …My sister started talking about the sexual abuse, so when my sister told them

[7] Here, Bridget was explaining that her father was murdered when she herself was at the age of thirteen, not when her father was thirteen years of age. She did not disclose to me the age at which her father passed away.

what was happening to me, they started asking me questions to verify it". She went on to explain that, in the interview with police, she felt like she was able to express herself and tell her story. But once the police began to interview her father, she found through court documents of the interview that the police did not discuss with her father the abuses he put Bridget through. Rather, they only discussed with him the abuses he inflicted upon Bridget's sister.

Bridget told me that her response to discovering that the police did not interview her father about the abuses he carried out on her was one of paranoia. Coupled with the reality that her father was a member of a Masonic Lodge[8], the way it seemed that the police had disregarded her experiences of abuse from her father resulted in a paranoid response from Bridget. To her, it seemed possible the abuse she was experiencing might continue on despite the abuse having been disclosed and reported to the police.

Bridget stated that because her father was a member of the Masonic Lodge, he was able to get out of criminal charges against him for the abuse he inflicted on his daughters: "… they basically replaced the judge with another judge through the Masonic Lodge to get my dad's charges dropped, …so he walked away". Her father's ability to escape punishment did not end in the court system. Bridget went on to explain to me that her father was able to convince a social worker to suggest he regain custody of his children after they had been taken away from him by having a sexual relationship with the worker and paying her a large sum of cash. After she was placed back with her father, Bridget explained that the abuse she experienced became more severe and escalated at

[8] A Masonic Lodge is a local chapter of a larger Masonic Group that consists of about "fifteen members who meet regularly to perform [esoteric] rituals" (Mahmud 2014). Bridget explained the Masonic Lodge to me as a hidden, organized religion.

times to her father pointing a gun at her head. She stated that her father was angry with her for telling the police about the abuses she experienced. The physical abuse stopped only after her father passed away, but further forms of abuse have continued on for Bridget since his death.

After her father passed away and as a result of his abuses against her being outed, Bridget was forced by court order to attend therapy sessions. Bridget stated, "I've been in therapy ever since". She explained that since the age of 5, she has been prescribed a pantheon of different pharmaceutical drugs to help with her bipolar disorder and PTSD. She explained that the therapy she was ordered to take part in as a child didn't feel like it was accomplishing much to her. It was only after she began to seek her own therapy as an adult that she felt it was helping her make progress toward overcoming her trauma. She stated that seeking therapy on her own volition as an adult was empowering, especially after she went a stretch of time without therapy or medication that ended in her leg being severely injured. She is still working to overcome her trauma that resulted from the CSA she experienced as a child as well as the trauma that occurred from her encounters with police, courts, and mandated therapy sessions in the years following her father's death.

Finally, I asked Bridget if she believes it is important to be politically engaged. She passionately responded, "Yeah, I think that if you pay taxes and you're over eighteen, you better fucking be a part of it. … Because you're a human being, you breathe air, eat, you consume products, and therefore you are part of the world. And you need to make your part heard, you have an imprint on the world, therefore you need to have an input". Bridget expressed a firm belief that if you are of age to vote, you should be voting. She suggested that as soon as a person begins paying taxes, they need to vote,

and possibly if a person doesn't vote, then they should not receive their tax returns for that year. It is clear that Bridget believes in the power of an individual's vote.

After discussing her trauma and its impact on her adult life, I asked Bridget about how she believes her experience with CSA may impact her political participation. At the time of our discussion, Bridget was politically engaged through voting frequently in local and national elections. She quickly identified her political party as independent by stating she wants to be free to swing any way she desires. She told me she voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. But, when it comes to being involved in political rallies, she stated, "I don't get involved …because I know damn well I'll get arrested. I get too aggressive in that stuff". She went on to say, "I want to learn to find a safe outlet where I can do it, but I feel like I'm just wasting my time. But, at the same time, I feel like there has to be some way that I can have my voice heard". When Bridget said, "do it", here she is referring to speaking to others in public about her political opinions.

Bridget said that she has two public Facebook groups where she voices her political opinions, but she seemed to be dissatisfied with these outlets, as she called them "stupid". She told me that her Facebook groups have many followers, one amassing over 9,000 followers. I asked her if she believes that her posts in these groups were persuading others in their political beliefs and she responded, "No, no, no. I think that they are more entertained by my outrage and aggressiveness. But at the same time, it gives them something to think about". Again, she expressed a desire to find an in-person group where she could discuss politics and voice her opinions without being seen as too aggressive.

Susan

The discussion I had with Susan was quite brief compared to those that I had with the other participants. Susan is a woman of color, around twenty-five years old, who identitfies with the LGBTQ+ community and has steady work as a social worker. Our discussion was about twenty minutes long while the other discussions were thirty minutes to an hour. From the moment our discussion began, it was clear to me that Susan is a confident woman with a strict set of morals and beliefs. We discussed briefly both her CSA experiences and her political engagement. She disclosed to me that she experienced CSA daily from the ages of four to twelve. Her abuser was a close family member, her grandfather. When I asked her if she had decided to keep a relationship with her abuser after the age of twelve, she explained to me that the reason the abuse stopped was complicated.

"At eight years old, I talked to my cousin and she was like 'hey, like has [grandfather] ever touched you?' and I looked at her and we knew automatically. And so, we went to her mom and we were like 'he's touching us; and she was like 'I'll handle it', like 'don't say anything'. And so, from eight years old we didn't say anything and then every time, I lived with him, so every time they left us… my aunts would come over and they would say like 'if he tries to touch you, you call us'. So, it was kind of like swept under the rug". Susan explained that her mother was in and out of her household while growing up until she reached the age of ten, when her mother was released from prison. At that time, she moved to Goodyear with her mother and her step-father. Soon after, she and her cousin got into a fight and, as a result, her cousin told her own father that their grandfather had been abusing them.

Susan explained the events that took place after her cousin disclosed of their abuse to her uncle. “My uncle is a police officer, so he immediately reported it, we got taken to school that day and he [her grandfather] got picked up. And he said that he did it, he admitted it, so he was sentenced to prison and that’s kind of how the relationship [ended]. But before that, I always thought my mom knew, but she didn’t. … I didn’t even know until I was an adult that my mom and my aunt were abused by him”. Susan’s abuse was brought to a police agency where her abuser was placed in prison because her cousin disclosed the abuse they were experiencing without her consent. I asked Susan what the process was like, going through police interviews on the CSA she experienced.

“Traumatizing. I remember I was in the sixth grade and I got called to the principal’s office. There was a lady in there, social worker, and the principal and she was like ‘oh, we’re just going to ask you some questions,’ and I was like ‘okay’. She was like what’s your favorite color, what’s your birthday, very casual conversation. Then, all of a sudden, she was like ‘has your grandfather ever touched you?’ and I literally looked at her and started crying. …I remember being taken in a cop car to the station and I was put in this little room. It was like a little children’s room and I was twelve. And there was like a glass window and I see my uncle and my cousin walking in through the door and I …like ran up to the glass and I was trying to talk to them, and my uncle was like to my cousin ‘you guys can’t talk’”. She explained that her grandfather died in prison while serving his sentence for abusing both her and her cousin.

Similarly to Bridget, Susan was required to attend mandatory counselling in the aftermath of her grandfather being sentenced for abusing her. Like Bridget, Susan did not feel like the mandatory counselling was helping her at all, she was angry, and she didn’t

want to be forced to go to meetings that she felt were doing nothing for her. Both she and her mother decided that it would be best for Susan to not attend her mandatory counselling sessions. It was not until Susan's freshman year of college that she decided to seek therapy for the CSA she experienced. She explained that in the time she spent alone in college away from her family, she became depressed and decided to make use of the free counselling services provided to students through her school. After she graduated and became a social worker, she found the counselling group that she is a part of now while searching for resources for one of her clients.

My discussion with Susan on her political involvement was short. Susan told me that she is politically engaged through voting and attending political rallies on occasion. When asked if she believes that it is important to be politically engaged, she said: "Absolutely. …because if the people don't, not everybody is a politician, and I feel like understanding what's going on politically these days, I feel like so many things are changing especially being a woman of color and in the LGBTQ community. …You just have to know really what's going on or you're just going to be in the dark". Susan described herself as someone who votes "for the people" and explained how she had recently been to a pro-choice, women's empowerment march in the wake of the recent change in abortion laws in Alabama[9]. She also expressed that she feels strong support for many social groups that are currently on the rise, specifically Black Lives Matter (BLM), and anything pro-choice and pro-immigration. When asked if she believed that the CSA

[9] In May of 2019, the Senate of the state of Alabama passed a bill (HB 314) that punishes doctors with up to 99 years in prison for performing abortions.

she experienced as a child impacts the way she is politically engaged, Susan had a simple answer: “yeah, yes”.

Carrie

Carrie experienced CSA from the ages of six to sixteen, though she noted that forms of non-sexual abuse continued until she was eighteen. Carrie is a straight, white woman around the age of fifty years old. The perpetrator of her abuse was her step-father. The abuse she experienced occurred randomly, there was no pattern to it. Carrie explained that the abuse occurred whenever her step-father “felt like it”. Growing up, to Carrie, her step-father seemed more like her actual biological father than a step-dad – “he was just my dad, you know”. She explained to me that she continued on a cordial relationship with her step-father after the age of eighteen because he had made her feel special, he made her feel loved. She believed that they had a truly deep connection, he loved her, and she loved him. She explained to me that she knew it was wrong of her step-father to have subjected her to sexual abuse as a child, but she disassociated her abuser from the abuse he inflicted upon her.

“… I knew at that point [at the age of eighteen] obviously that it was wrong but, in my mind, I would disassociate, I would keep that separate …and just be like ‘okay that happened to someone else’… I would look at a different part of him. But I couldn’t keep that up for too long…”. Carrie disclosed to me that she no longer has a relationship with her abuser. The reason she had cut contact with him was because he had betrayed her trust. She told me that at a younger age, she attended therapy sessions where she discussed her CSA, but at that time she did not believe that her step-father did not have real, caring feelings toward her. She was convinced that he loved her and that he would

never do anything to harm her. “Looking back [to old therapy sessions] compared to now, which is wonderful, I was really detached and… I don’t even know what I talked about… I didn’t talk about the issue too much, just skirted around it. At that time, I really thought that my step-dad cared about me and so it was like betraying him if I talked about [the abuse]. [I was] not wanting to think that he didn’t care about me, but he really didn’t”.

Carrie explained to me that it took her a long while to admit to herself that what her step-father did to her as a child was, in fact, abuse. As a young girl, she had come to associate the attention that her step-dad would give to her during moments of abuse as special treatment, setting her apart from her brothers. The moments during the abuse where her step-dad told Carrie that he loved her truly made her feel seen and valued. It was not until she was around twenty years of age when she began to realize the implications of what her step-dad had done to her as a child. She felt betrayed when she began to disclose her abuse to members of her family and her step-dad denied ever abusing her. Her feelings of betrayal sharpened when her brother, of whom had seen the abuse happening while they were children, insinuated that Carrie was lying about the abuse. Her step-father had even aimed to convince Carrie’s family that she was lying about the abuse in an attempt to gain money: “… he was telling everyone I was doing this for the money, that’s what he told everyone in the family. That I was just making this up because my brother, who shot himself, owed me like $2,500 or something, which I didn’t even know about”.

At the point where Carrie’s step-dad began denying her truth about the CSA he inflicted on her, she was mortified and decided to take action. She explained to me that her niece frequently visited her step-father when she came into town from California.

While her niece was in town, she would spend the night at Carrie's step-father's house alone. This made Carrie uneasy to the point where she decided to try to file a case against her abuser with the Department of Child Safety. Carrie explained, "I did try to contact the police, but they said too much time had passed… but I said I'd like to at least have a report because if my niece ever wanted to report something, because I suspected something was happening there, and they wouldn't take a report. [They said] 'we'll have to go get a report from him and it will be your word against his. So, do you want that down on record, what he has to say about it?' and, you know, I wasn't prepared for all that. So, I tried reporting it to DPS …but they wouldn't take a report because she lives in California and California [DPS] wouldn't take a report because it's happening here".

This experience made Carrie feel as if she needed to take the law into her own hands, in a sense. She described a sort of vigilante justice that she carried out against her abuser. "… Thirty years ago, I had made these fliers with his picture on it. Because he lives by three schools, he runs a business out of his home and he's really good with kids, for some reason they just love to talk to him. So, I made this flyer and I put his address and his name, everything about him, and I didn't lie on it and I didn't embellish anything, I just said the truth. 'Known child molester', because he is known to me, 'looks can be deceiving' because he does look really nice, and it was kind of corny, but just 'don't leave your children around him'…I was really scared, but I put them up around the neighborhood. …I was kind of ashamed and embarrassed by it, …if I were to do it now, I would be proud about it. But I wasn't then, I had to do it, not as revenge, I just felt this need that I had to do something to make a change. I couldn't believe that no one in my family was believing me. …The truth was so important to me at that time. Here I am

being so honest about everything, and half the family doesn't believe me because he is so good at lying. …if someone had done that for me, it might have been different".

Carrie told me that as a result of the fliers she hung up around her step-dad's neighborhood, her step-father filed a restraining order against her. She fought this restraining order in court, as she felt it was important to set the record straight about the issue. She attended the court session alone, while her step-dad brought along an attorney to represent his case. She explained that, at that time, she was too afraid to describe to the judge what the restraining order brought against her was truly about. She said that in a full courtroom, with all eyes turned on her, she was not able to disclose the abuse her step-dad put her through. Today, though, Carrie told me, she would easily be able to call out the abuses that she experienced as a young girl, if she had the chance.

Carrie, like the others in this group, was politically engaged at the time of our discussion by being a frequent voter. She explained to me that she was rarely vocal about her political beliefs until this last presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016. Carrie makes sure to engage in political discourse with her daughter, as she and her daughter often listen to radio shows that discuss politics, such as NPR, and speak with each other on their responses to the shows. I asked Carrie if she believed it was important to be politically engaged, and she responded, "…maybe not engaged, but to be aware and to know what is going on and to stay current with everything. I just know what I believe in, but I believe that facts are important. It's important to be aware and if something is not right to take a stand on it".

Amy

Amy can remember very little details of the CSA she experienced as a young girl, similarly to Mary. She does remember that the abuse she experienced took place while she was between the ages of seven to nine and stopped as soon as her parents' divorce was finalized. She often finds herself ranking the abuse experiences she remembers by "severity", some memories standing out above the rest. To be frank, she told me, she would prefer to forget her experiences altogether, to have a life free from the trauma she experienced growing up. Amy had three abusers, all of whom lived with her within her household. She still has told only a handful of people about the abuse she went through, and she has never told anyone in her family the true identity of those that abused her. Amy stated that she is afraid of what would happen if the truth came out, especially if her mother came to know the truth. To Amy, it seems that some things are better left unsaid.

For a long time, she did not acknowledge the CSA she experienced. She stated that she would just push the memories far down into her mind continually when they began to creep to the forefront. It was in moments that she spent alone that "these memories seemed to bury me", Amy stated. It got to the point where she felt like she could not do anything without it reminding her of the abuse she experienced. Speaking to others, she would wonder if they knew what it was like to be abused in such a way. Seeing her peers in happy, healthy relationships, Amy wondered if she would ever experience such a thing. Amy never allowed herself to get attached to any man because just their presence made her nervous, to the point where she would shake and sweat, she disclosed to me. Finally, after feeling alone and overwhelmed, Amy disclosed that she had been sexually abused as a young girl to her mother. She told me she remembers that, while telling her, she was shaking more than she ever had in her life. Amy stated that

“nothing was as scary as telling my truth to the one person I wanted to protect from it most”. Still, she has decided that she will never tell her mother who her abusers were, as she does not want her to ever have to live with that pain. This is why she did not disclose the identity of her abusers to me during our discussion

Amy still has a relationship with her abusers, she said: “we act like the things they did to me never happened. I believe that they are hoping that I simply forgot about the abuse. Of course, I will never be able to forget. I can recall one day, to my shock, one of my abusers brought up to me in conversation what he had done to me. He asked me “do you remember when…?”, I stayed quiet. He apologized for what he had done to me and told me thank you for never telling anyone else. He said, “thank you for not telling anyone what I did to you. It would have been really bad for me if you had told someone. So, thank you for not telling anyone. I thought for a long time that I had messed you up badly, because you’ve never had a boyfriend until now. It’s a relief, for me, to see you in a relationship because now I know that you turned out normal”. He said all of this to me while I was locked in a moving car with him. All I responded with was “of course”, like it was a common courtesy of me to not disclose the abuse I had experienced”. Amy told me that none of her other abusers have ever apologized for what they did to her, and that she does not expect them to.

Amy explained to me, “it is a strange way to live, pretending that you have never been abused by the people you see nearly every day. It is even stranger, I think, to still have a decent relationship with them; to laugh with them, to eat lunch with them, to tell them about your day, to ask them for advice. Still, despite these cordial relations and that these people are my family, I will never have a genuine relationship with them. My abuse

taught me, more than anything, to be pleasing to everyone around me, to plaster on a smile and be polite, even if I may be hurting. My abuse taught me to be quiet".

Amy explained that she has always been opposite of her mother in political ideology, but she never made it known. After her parent's divorce, she relied heavily on her mother for everything, she even slept in her bed for three years once they moved out on their own, she explained. She considers her mother to be her best friend and to be highly knowledgeable, therefore she had always followed in her footsteps. This was no different for political engagement; what her mother believed Amy believed. When she turned eighteen and received the right to vote, it was 2016. Voters had to make a big decision in 2016, who would be the next president of the United States. This decision weighed heavily on many and proved to be highly divisive. Some people believed Donald Trump should take on the country, some people believed it should be Hillary Clinton. During this divisive time, Amy told me that she looked to her mother for guidance. She always saw her as an authoritative figure, and she explained that her abuse had taught her to do all she could in her power to keep a happy, cordial relationship with figures of authority. Amy had been taught that showing respect to those with power over her meant bowing down to their every wish.

Amy told me that she had strong opinions about candidate Trump, and they differed decidedly from her mother's. She was all for him, Amy was not. But in the end, Amy explained that she had voted for him. Amy didn't see a problem with this, in her mind it was to keep her mother happy, to please her and show her respect. This is what Amy had learned to do, after all, be pleasing and submissive in order to keep a happy relationship with the power holders in her life. It was not until Amy ventured off on her

own, lived on her own, and became the primary power holder within her own life, that she began to see what a harmful mistake she had made. A mistake that had undermined her own power, undermined her opinions and beliefs, and undermined what she was passionate about, Amy stated. Now, Amy stated that she came to "understand my vote to be one of the strongest forms of utilizing my self-agency. Back then, I saw it as little more than a means to be continually pleasing and keep the peace with those around me".

Unlike the other participants in this chapter, Amy has never seen or attempted to gain the criminal punishment of my abusers. This is predominately because she told me that she would feel uncontrollable guilt for punishing members of her family, even despite the abuses they put her through. She told me that she knows "this will be seen as weak or wrong to some, but it is the best decision for my sanity, at least for now". It should be said, though, that one of her abusers has been punished for unrelated crimes and is currently serving a seven-year sentence in prison. This, Amy told me she supposes, could be seen as a sort of de-facto punishment for the abuses he inflicted on her as a child.

Amy stated that she believes that her stance on political engagement made a complete turn-around while she was a member of a strong community of women. Amy said, "I became a member of a service-oriented organization of women during my time attending university for my undergraduate degree. I had never been around a highly diverse group of women like this group. All of the members of this group were out-spoken, opinionated, kind-hearted, and goal-driven. This was new to me. Yes, my mother and aunt had served as wonderful role models to me, but I had never met a peer my age that was as confident as the members of this group. They showed me power and gave me

a place where I could freely and safely utilize the self-agency I was coming to understand". Amy stated that this group of women, coupled with her education, inspired her to see her political engagement as a means of utilizing her self-agency and power. In the next chapter, I will discuss more on this group that Amy was a member of and the therapy group that Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, and Carrie belonged to during our discussions. I will explain why I believe such groups for survivors of CSA can lead to a clearer understanding of agency and power as well as more democratic participation.

The Political Engagers

What sets Amy, Bridget, Susan, and Carrie apart from Mary and Stacy? Why are they actively politically engaged while Mary and Stacy feel being politically engaged would be harmful to their mental health? In the last chapter, I discussed how the childhood sexual abuse that Mary and Stacy experienced overwhelmed them with trauma to the point where they could focus on little else in their adult lives. They expressed that they did not view political participation as a potential form of healing. Further, they did not believe that the communal aspect of political participation would be welcoming to those going through trauma healing processes, such as themselves. Both Mary and Stacy did not disclose their abuse to anyone (who believed and validated them) until they reached adulthood. With the political engagers, we see another story.

All of the women within this "political engagers" group have showcased a use and understanding of the power of personal voice. Both Bridget and Susan saw the power of their voices through their interviews with law enforcement after their abusers had been arrested. Despite Bridget's abuser ultimately getting away with his crimes, the process of his going to jail for her testimony to investigators showed her what the power of her truth

can do. Susan saw her abuser be sent to prison as a result of speaking her truth. Carrie, though her abuser has not been punished for his abuse through the criminal justice system, used the power of her voice and truth to warn a neighborhood of the abuses that her step-father could potentially inflict upon other children. Amy began to understand the power of my truth and voice when she decided, at the age of seventeen, to press charges against one of her abusers for an unrelated crime[10]. Amy saw her abuser placed in prison for a second time as a result of speaking her truth.

These exercises in utilizing their voices demonstrated to them the true power that speaking one's truth can hold. By giving testimonies to police agencies and putting up fliers that warned a neighborhood of potential risk to children, serious consequences landed on their abusers[11]. They began to understand in these instances that, if they use their voices, they can possibly have the power to begin to right severe wrongs. This is not to say that the criminal justice system in the United States protects those survivors of any form of sexual abuse and assault that speak out. For many survivors, going through the formal processes of disclosing experienced abuse to any state agency can cause more harm and trauma. Further, some of the participants in this study did not feel that their experiences with the criminal justice system were beneficial. There is still a chasm of work that needs to be done to make the process of formally reporting sexual assault and abuse in the United States beneficial and helpful to all survivors. Still, this understanding

[10] Amy told me that she pressed charges against one of her abusers through a local police agency when he stole something valuable to her. Luckily, she was able to locate the item at a local pawn shop. The police obtained video proof that he had sold the item to the pawn shop.

[11] To clarify, I do not believe that speaking to a police agency about one's abuse is always helpful or is the only means of utilizing power. Speaking to police about one's abuse can prove to be a harmful and traumatizing process for many. In this case, Bridget and Susan saw their testimonies to police agencies be turned into serious repercussions for their abusers.

translated to their ideals on political engagement. Bridget, Susan, and Carrie expressed deep concern with ensuring that all voices are heard through voting. Bridget even went as far as to suggest that those who do not vote should not get their tax refunds back, because when you do not vote, you aren't ensuring that you make your input known. Susan explained that it is important that all voices from all groups, groups such as women of color and LGBTQ+, are known so that no injustice is ever kept in the dark. Carrie stated that the votes of all can make us aware of all circumstances and "if something is not right, to take a stand on it". It is clear that Bridget, Susan, and Carrie see the power of a vote and its ability to better circumstances for many.

Further, Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy experienced another person within their community standing up for them after they had disclosed the CSA they experienced. For Bridget, it was her mother that went to the police after watching her daughters be sexually abused by her husband. Susan's uncle assured that her abuser was punished through the criminal justice system. Carrie's mother shouted to Carrie's abuser "I'll shoot your balls off if you go near her", once Carrie had disclosed to her mother the CSA she experienced. Amy's mother sat and cried with her while she told her that she had experienced CSA and later found a therapist for Amy to see and work through her trauma. Despite the truth that they all might not have great relationships with these people, they still witnessed these acts of protection and solidarity and learned from them. Through these experiences, they began to understand the strength of community. This understanding of communal power translated to their beliefs in the potential power of a vote to transform society for the good of all. As stated in the previous chapter, community is inherent in political participation, and the women in this "political

engagers" group feel power in contributing to this community. Mary and Stacy, on the other hand, do not.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the childhood sexual abuse experiences of Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy. I described how, in each of their experiences, they were supported by the communities surrounding them in some way. Further, they all used their voices in speaking their truths to enact repercussions on they abusers: Susan and Bridget through the criminal justice system, Carrie through public shaming, and Amy through criminal punishment of her abuser on unrelated crimes. This experienced support from their communities, coupled with their use of personal voice, led to a belief that political participation is a vital form of power through personal expression and civil society communal protection. They believe that, by using their political voices, they can make their own desires and beliefs known, as well as protect the desires and beliefs of others. With the following conclusion, I will utilize the ethnographies laid out in this chapter and the previous chapter to explain why the inclusion and representation of adult women survivors of CSA can potentially lead the participants in this study to increase their political engagement.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Questions to Continue Asking

Before I conclude, I would like to make note of the questions that I have asked here that must continue to be asked by others. Generally, more research on how having experienced childhood sexual abuse impacts political participation needs to be done, as this question has rarely been asked. This study, as stated previously, does not claim to be representative of or generalizable to all adult CSA survivors. The conceptualizations stated here only resulted from the statements and beliefs of Mary, Stacy, Susan, Bridget, Carrie, and me. There are many questions left unanswered about how experiences of CSA may impact adult political participation. If this study were to be continued or built upon, more questions about feelings of inclusion and representation in civil society and the political sphere need to be asked of adult survivors of CSA. The idea that a civil society community for CSA survivors could possibly be a means to mobilize survivors to be politically engaged must be looked into further.

The discipline of political science is lacking the voices of survivors of childhood sexual abuse and these "…ommissions and distortions that permeate political science…" (Hawkesworth 2005, 141) have continually ignored and invalidated the existence of CSA survivors. To understand the resilience of survivors and their substantial impact on the political sphere within the United States, political science must recognize them as agents capable of and already contributing to political mobilization. In *Gendered Citizenship*, author Behl explained "What is radical is the insistence that we shift our focus from women's formal, legal inclusion to understanding the gendered nature of this inclusion,

thus combating women's exclusionary inclusion…" (Behl 2019, 116). I believe the discipline of political science must be radical in the way Behl explains by including the voices of women survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Further, in some ways, this writing pushes both feminist scholarship and citizenship scholarship to ask new questions about conceptions of feminism and what leads to political engagement. Throughout the narratives of each participant, there is a clear conflict between the feminist idea that separating oneself from an abuser is best practice[12] and the reality of the lived experience of some of the survivors where a clean exit from the abuser may cause more harm than good. For example, we can look to Amy's experience where she still speaks with her abusers, or Mary's experience where it took her until recently to end communication with her abusers, a process for her that caused more pain. For Amy, keeping in contact with her abusers saves her from the pain of losing three members of her family. Though it is difficult for her to remember the abuse inflicted upon her by her three abusers, she believes now the pain would be made worse if she were no longer able to contact her abusers, because severing the relationships she has with each abuser would force her to exit from relationships with her entire family. Amy feels guilty for keeping these relationships, because she knows that some would shame her for ever forgiving her abusers for what they had done to her. This example pushes feminist scholarship to consider the ways in which relationships with abusers can be complicated and complex, and the idea of exiting these relationships is not always right or feasible for all survivors especially if the abuse has stopped occurring.

[12] This idea is showcased in the push for survivors of abuse to bring criminal charges against their abusers (Elman 2013, 237).

This writing also asks citizenship scholarship to look past women's access to rights in the short term (i.e. short term victories that can be easily reversed, such as holding political office or having a large women voter turn out for one election), and consider what would lead to long term changes that would not only create healing spaces for CSA survivors but also create continued, uninterrupted, and irreversible access to citizenship rights for CSA survivors. For example, looking at the goals of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, we can see a trend of aiming for the criminal conviction of abusers, disclosure of abuse, and increasing women's access to spaces required for political action, such as voting polls. These are all fantastic goals that create meaningful changes for survivors of abuse. Still, this writing asks how survivors of abuse, particularly CSA survivors, can build off of these short term goals to create long term change that is not just access focused, but rather community and healing focused. If the focus stays on access to rights, important factors that keep abuse survivors from *utilizing* their power *to* access these rights might continually be overlooked. This writing suggests that focusing simply on access will not always bring about the structural changes for abuse survivors that are desired. Instead, these structural changes might be better addressed through community building where healing spaces can eventually lead to political engagement. I suggest that when a form of healing is offered through community, more CSA survivors will feel that they do have the power to access their full rights. When all survivors have a community that they can go to a feel accepted and learn to believe in their power to access their rights, long term healing is enabled.

A Civil Society Community for Adult CSA Survivors

Benjamin Barber argued that "without civil society… citizens are homeless" (Barber 1996, 147). Mary, Stacy, Susan, Bridget, Carrie, and Amy have all experienced this homelessness that Barber explains. For CSA survivors in the United States, there is no place in civil society nor the political sphere where we can go to feel welcomed, accepted, and understood. This feeling of homelessness was reflected in the statements of the six participants of this study. I believe that the creation of a civil society community that accepts and represents adult survivors of CSA could *possibly* lead Mary, Stacy, Susan, Bridget, Carrie, and Amy to politically engage through voting and beyond to political discourse, protests and demonstrations, and political organizing. In this section, I will discuss in an open and inquisitive way the *potential* for a civil society community of CSA survivors to politically mobilize adult survivors of CSA. My aim here is not to make definite conclusions, but to open up a discussion on civil society and political engagement for adult survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse.

It is a deeply personal task to identify childhood trauma and work through it as an adult. The process of recognizing the power of domination that our abusers held over us as children and subsequently working to determine our own power and agency in our adulthoods as survivors of CSA is one that we seem to usually walk through alone. Each survivor of childhood sexual abuse has different ways of healing, understanding, and meaning making. It is through processes of healing that some of the participants in this study came to understand their "power to" (Lloyd 2013, 120). This understanding of the "power to" is something that Mary and Stacy are hoping to gain during their time spent healing from the trauma of CSA. Both Mary and Stacy hope to become comfortable with their individual voices and utilize their power to eventually begin engaging in the

political sphere again once they feel they've overcome their trauma. I mention again here, as stated in the "Political Non-Engagers" chapter, Mary and Stacy see their ability to become politically engaged as a solely individually driven process that they must do on their own. I provide a counter to this belief here: despite trauma healing being a sometimes solitary process, becoming part of a civil society community of adult CSA survivors can *possibly* help the participants of this study further understand their "power to" and eventually increase their political engagement.

Civil society communities have the potential to create solidarity among members. In spending time with other community members, the shared experiences and problems of community members can be voiced and corroborated among one another. When open, judgment-free communities invite members to freely express their lived experiences with uneven power relations, fellow community members can come to understand or identify with the experiences of their peers and support them. This creation of solidarity between civil society community members can have the *potential* to lead to political mobilization. This process of solidarity creation within non-political, civil society communities leading to the political engagement of community members is reflected in groups throughout U.S. history (i.e. the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movement).

An example of this process can be found in one of the texts guiding this writing, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (Sangtin Writers 2006). The seven collaborators of *Playing with Fire* came together in solidarity after sharing their lived experiences with one another in a safe space outside of their home and work environments (Sangtin Writers 2006). They cried together, laughed together, and shared with one another their deepest feelings. This process of open sharing

in a space outside of the pressures of the familial, economic, and political spheres led to the eventual political mobilization of the seven group members in writing a true account of NGO employment in India (Sangtin Writers 2006). In sharing with each other in community residing in civil society, the members were able to establish solidarity as a group by voicing their lived experiences and feeling supported and validated, and hearing the lived experiences of others be voiced and thus support, validate, and identify with the lived experiences of others.

Within civil society communities, the process of solidarity building between members can reveal common lived experiences of abuses of power, structural disadvantages, and larger community issues. For this revelation process to happen, I believe that the community must be considered as a safe space by the community members. If the fear of being judged, shunned, ridiculed, or criticized is eliminated, community members will not feel comfortable with sharing their hardships and deep personal issues. Once community members have identified shared or similar lived experiences that could potentially be addressed in the political sphere, the community members may become politically mobilized. This motivation to become politically engaged could stem from the hope to eliminate the group's shared hardships or to ensure that no other person, whether in the group or outside of it, will have to endure similar hardships. An example of this motivation can be seen in Susan's decision to become a social worker in her adulthood or in Carrie's desire to change the laws of statute of limitations in Arizona.

I believe that this sort of open, judgment free communication that could potentially lead to political engagement is already occurring within the therapy group that

Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, and Carrie were members of during the time of our discussions. First, with the "homework" assignments that Kelley gave to the members of the group, the group was able to communicate their similarities and differences in their lived experiences of healing from the trauma of CSA. They were able to identify shared experiences of abuses of power and how these abuses influenced their lives in such a way that impacted their understandings of their own power and agency. For example, Carrie explained to me that one of the group's homework assignments was to think of the ways they respond individually to the power holders within their everyday lives (i.e. bosses, professors, coworkers, etc.). Though Carrie did not explain to me the group discussion that was held once this homework assignment was complete, I imagine that such an exercise was illuminating to the group members. Here, they would have had an opportunity to freely and openly express their understandings of and experiences with power within their own lives and to identify with the experiences of other group members. With discussions like this, the group members could potentially come to feel a sense of urgency to "do something" about the common abuses of power that CSA survivors have been subjected to.

Further, during my discussion with Amy, she explained that she believes that her increased political engagement stemmed from her membership in a service-based community of women. Before belonging to the community in which she was inspired to become politically mobilized, she did not see political engagement as an extension of or vehicle to aid in her trauma healing processes. She explained to me that she became inspired to see the personal in the political when, during community meetings, community members disclosed to her their own healing processes and how they regarded

political engagement as having an impact on their daily lives. Amy said "I had never met another survivor of sexual abuse that was my age. When I became a member of this community, even though the community was about service projects, I was told by fellow members about some of their abuse experiences. Their strength and fearlessness to speak their truths inspired me to begin to do the same. It was almost like I was finally being allowed to acknowledge my abuse and take a stance on it, and I began to see how the other members used voting and going to protests as a means to do just that". Amy was inspired by the actions of the other women in her civil society community to begin to use political engagement as a form of personal power. I believe that if Amy had been able to be a part of a civil society community for CSA survivors, this process would have possibly happened sooner in her adult life.

Bridget made an off-hand comment during our interview where she quickly stated that the members of the therapy group that the participants belonged to were prohibited from speaking on politics during group sessions. I think that this is imperative for a therapy group, but not for a civil society community. The therapy that the participants are going through is political in that it does cause some members to think about power, but it is not overtly political to where the participants can discuss the ways in which they can use their power to become politically engaged. Without the ability to engage in, at the least, small forms of political discourse such as election dates, there may not be the possibility for a civil society community to eventually mobilize its members politically. I believe this could *possibly* be one of the reasons why Mary and Stacy did not feel that they had the power to or the capacity to be politically engaged at the time of our discussion. If they were to become members of a civil society community for adult

survivors of CSA, they *might* begin to realize their power to be politically engaged through community discussions that go beyond the limitations of the therapy group discussions. Within a community where discussions between members are open to both talking about their abuse experiences and trauma healing processes *and* the ways in which they have responded politically to their trauma, members like Mary and Stacy may begin to see the feasibility of their own political engagement.

Further, in belonging to a civil society community that openly discusses the political engagement of its members (without placing pressure on its members that are not politically engaged to become engaged), Mary and Stacy might come to understand that they will be supported by their fellow community members if they eventually decided to become politically engaged. Stacy told me that she was not "into the whole world thing" during our discussion when I asked her about political engagement. This statement reflects that she does not see political and democratic engagement as a reflection of the self, but rather as a reflection of the world outside of herself. I believe that if Stacy were to become a member of a civil society community for adult survivors of CSA, she would possibly come to see the ability for political engagement to be a reflection of personal power. Through hearing other members' accounts of being politically engaged and their reasonings behind such engagement, Stacy may come to understand that factors contingent on the personal are valid reasons to become politically active.

In Learning Extreme Gender Roles in Response to CSA, I discussed the ways in which survivors of childhood sexual abuse might come to understand an extreme version of 'woman' and begin to feel unwelcome in the political sphere in the United States that

has been traditionally hostile towards female gender traits and characteristics. In the Political "Non-Engagers" chapter, I took this discussion further and looked at Mary's and Stacy's beliefs on being politically engaged to see that they do not see the "personal" in the political, they don't believe in the ability for community to serve as a form of healing, and that they believe their eventual political engagement is contingent on their ability to heal from their trauma on their own. In the Political "Engagers" chapter, I looked to the experiences of Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy to understand their attitudes towards their own political engagement. I suggested that because most of them felt some type of support from their communities when they disclosed their abuse experiences (even if the support was miniscule), they began to understand the power their voices held and the ability for community to accept them during their healing processes. Together, Mary, Stacy, Bridget, Susan, Carrie, and Amy all feel some sense of urgency to ensure that no other child ever experiences childhood sexual abuse again. I believe that, given the free, open, and communicative space of a civil society community for adult CSA survivors, this urgency *could* be identified as a common thread among community members and be used to politically mobilize.

As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I feel that the following quote by Chanel Miller explains exactly how I, and likely many other survivors of CSA, feel: "I say *her*, but whether you are a man, transgender, gender-nonconforming, however you choose to identify and exist in this world, if your life has been touched by sexual violence, I seek to protect you. And the ones who lifted me, day by day, out of darkness, I hope to say thank you" (Miller 2019, viii). I hope that this writing can serve to inform some about the realities of living as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. If you are a survivor of

childhood sexual abuse and you have read this writing, I hope that you understand that you are not alone, that you have power and validity to use that power, and that you can make a difference in others' lives and rise above the abuse that was inflicted upon you. I hope that you are inspired to connect with fellow survivors around you and reach out to others for support while you walk through the healing processes. It is my hope that, with this writing, I have been able to in some small way protect survivors of CSA and thank those that helped me realize that I am powerful.

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