Faith Born of Seduction

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Published by NYU Press

Manlowe, Jennifer L.
Faith Born of Seduction: Sexual Trauma, Body Image, and Religion.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/15763.

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https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15763
Appendix I
The Quality of Experience: A Feminist Method

In this section I will briefly familiarize the reader with the method used to interview, analyze, and theorize about the ways in which incested women preoccupied with their appetite, body, and weight reveal religious, psychological, and socially constructed conflicts. First, I will explore the general background of the nine women who were selected for this study. Then I will go into some detail as to the method of inquiry I have chosen and why.

The Interview

I conducted nine in-depth interviews and administered lengthy open-ended questionnaires to explore the social psychology and theology of female survivors of incest who identify themselves as having eating disorders. Typically, I had at least two prior contacts with the respondent before asking her if she would be interested in being interviewed. Having a prior contact—establishing some trust—was particularly important given the secrecy and shame associated with this topic and the necessity of survivors of incest, women of color, and lesbians to be discriminating about how their lives are studied.

To create analytical notes and conceptual categories from the data, I adopted Thompson’s (1992) and Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) technique of “theoretical sampling,” which directs the researcher to collect, analyze, and test hypotheses during the sampling process (rather than
imposing theoretical categories onto the data). I took my first samples in 1991 by attending a summer conference in Chicago called "Victims of Incest Can Emerge Survivors" (VOICES). At the conference I gave out a lengthy questionnaire with a stamped, self-addressed envelope to be returned to me within a month after the conference. From this sample questionnaire I got a sense of some of the shared religious themes among over fifty survivors of incest (ages twenty to sixty-seven). Women who responded to the questionnaire inspired me to take seriously the links between what a woman believes about herself due to her sexually traumatic and theological past and how a woman relates to her body.  

Second, I attended OA for three months prior to setting up interviews. During that time, I took ample notes and read the OA literature as well as conversed with women after the meetings. I was able not only to gather material for formulating my final open-ended questionnaire, but also to test my hypothesis about the connection among eating problems, incest, and religious discourse.

Demographics of the Women in the Study

Birthplace

Three of the incest survivors interviewed came from big cities: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Baltimore, Maryland. Five came from smaller cities and towns: Cleveland, Ohio; Ludington, Michigan; Whittier, California; Metuchen, New Jersey; and Watseeka, Illinois. One of the women interviewed came from Bombay, India.

Religion

All of the women interviewed were at one time practicing Christians. Two of the women grew up in practicing Catholic families (both went to Catholic schools; one attended Mass six days a week until the age of fourteen, the other grew up with Hindu grandparents but with her siblings attended Catholic services). Five grew up in families that attended Sunday Protestant worship services: Episcopalian, Methodist, Southern Baptist, Unitarian, fundamentalist Presbyterian and mainline Presbyterian. Two grew up going to Protestant services on holidays only.
One grew up with parents and relatives who publicly attended Protestant worship services and privately participated in a sadistic cult.

**Education**

All of the survivors are college educated. Four hold graduate degrees.

**Employment**

Two of the nine survivors were unemployed at the time of the interview. Three held two or more jobs at once, "to make ends meet." Three of the survivors were administrative assistants. One survivor called herself a "recycler": "You know, I collect garbage and haul it in to be recycled." This same survivor graduated with honors from an Ivy League school.

**Class**

Two of the women interviewed may be considered as coming from working-class backgrounds, six may be considered middle-class, and one identifies herself as coming from an upper-class background: "We had a nanny and several hired-help."

**Race**

Six of the women are European-American. One woman is Indian-American. One woman has an African-American mother and a Native-American father. One woman’s mother is Native-American and father is European-American. For some of the women of color, racism coupled with the stress resulting from class mobility related to the onset of their eating problems. The woman born of an African-American mother and a Native-American father was frequently admonished for looking "dirty." Her father often humiliated her by "washing" her in a tub in the bathroom with a dry Brillo pad while reciting a degrading litany: "You're filthy, you're dirty, you're no good, just like your mother." He did not do this to her brother, who was lighter skinned. As a young child, this survivor began to think that although she could not change the color of her skin, she could at least try to be thin. However, her father, who was a
working-class cook on a railroad, began bringing home food and insis-
ting that his children were going to be “well fed.” After her father in-
cested her he would call her a “fat ugly pig.” He would announce,
“You’re fat and disgusting and no one will ever love you.” As a result,
like many of the survivors interviewed, this survivor tried to “control”
her eating in public and do most of her eating in secret—in her bed-
room. By age eight, she weighed 250 pounds.

The fact that some of the women of color associated the ambivalent
messages about food and eating with their family’s class mobility and/or
the demands of assimilation suggests that the added dimension of racism
was connected to the imperative to be thin. Their parents class expecta-
tions exacerbated standards about weight that they inflicted on their
daughters.8

Sexual Orientation

Five of the respondents identify themselves as heterosexual. One of the
respondents identifies herself as lesbian and one as celibate. Two of the
women were not comfortable affixing a label to their sexual preference.
According to psychologist Elaine Westerlund, “Both confusion between
affection and sex arising from the incest experience and confusion over
the role of the incest in choice-making may contribute to self-doubts
over sexual preference in women with incest histories.”9 Since I do not
assume that lesbianism (or celibacy or bisexuality) is a “failure” of
“normative” heterosexuality, it was not an intent of my study to investi-
gate the role of the incest trauma in the establishment of a lesbian (or
celibate or bisexual) identity.

Family Information

The size of the participants’ families of origin vary from 2 children to 5
children. Five of the women are the oldest in the family. One is the
middle child. Three are the youngest. Three of the survivors were one of
two children. Two of the survivors were one of three children. Three of
the survivors were one of four children. Only one of the survivors came
from a family with five children. Most of the mothers of these women
were exclusively “homemakers.” Only two of them held paying jobs
outside the home (one was an elementary school teacher, the other a
legal secretary). Four of the survivors have mothers who have died (one of whom was a perpetrator). One woman's mother died when she was seven; the three other mothers died when the survivors were adults. Two of the survivors have fathers (both of whom were perpetrators) who have died. The father of one died when she was seventeen and the other when she was forty. One survivor's family lived with their paternal siblings' family and paternal grandparents; as she put it, "There were twenty of us living in 3 rooms."

**Offenders**

All of the survivors were abused by one or more older males in their family.\(^10\) Two were abused by women as well. The paternal perpetrators may be professionally categorized as follows: cook, mechanic, fisherman, mechanical engineer, electrical engineer, traveling salesman, accountant, doctor, and attorney. In two cases the paternal grandfather was the perpetrator. Of the three female perpetrators one was the aunt and one was the mother of the child abused; the other was the nanny of the child-victim. Of the three male sibling perpetrators, each was at least four years older than the survivor. One brother was five years older (he was twelve and she was seven), another brother (who recently confessed his abuse of her) was four years older (he was thirteen and she was nine), and the other was 6 years older (he was seventeen and she was eleven) than the survivor upon the onset* of sibling-sexual abuse.

The women I have interviewed represent diverse backgrounds and reveal that class, sexual preference, race, and ethnicity neither predispose a woman to nor protect her from developing an eating disorder in North America. Too often the epidemiological portrait of eating problems has been one of a white middle- and upper-class "illness." This model is more likely to reveal which populations of women have been studied rather than the actual prevalence.\(^11\)

I am aware of the dangers of generalization that tend to go hand in hand with psychological readings of female predicaments—as if all women share the same experience. Each woman's story is her own. Yet, as a feminist, I am equally aware that no woman's story is just her own. I try to write from this dual perspective, following the style of Mary Daly, Karen Horney, Ellyn Kaschak, Judith Herman, Charlotte Davis Käsl, and other feminist theorists. Each woman leads a particular life
determined by her own talents and temperament, her abilities and experiences, her ethnic and class membership. Yet all these experiences, I maintain, are centrally organized by gender, so that each woman’s story of violence and consequent problem with food and identity may reflect many women’s stories.

**Feminist Qualitative Methodology**

In feminist qualitative methodology one is concerned with the process of gathering data as well as the product of the research. Feminist methodology holds the belief that the personal and the political are very much connected. As a feminist researcher in psychology and religion, I see the sexual-abuse history of a woman not only as her personal history but also as a microcosmic portrait that cannot be separated from the larger reality of violence against women in culture. I am concerned with how women have been socialized to become victims, how men have been socialized to become aggressors, and what role religious discourse plays toward “normalizing” these ends. The feminist methodological process that I employ is an interview method that is respectful of respondents’ strengths and recognizes each respondent as an authority on her own experience. At times the reader may wonder why I quote the women at length—it is because I believe their theoretical insights into their history are just as valid as the ones being made about them by me or other theorists.

Because I understood the volatility of the questions that I was using for investigation, I took great pains to see that my respondents were not overtly or subtly victimized by the process. I made it clear that under no circumstances would her name or identifying characteristics be revealed. I informed her that she could “share her history” with as little or as much detail as she saw fit. I wanted her to know that she was in control of what she decided to share.

As the interviewer, I am collecting and relaying the respondent’s interpretation of her own life history and present experience. I use social and self-psychological theory as well as feminist theology and philosophy to explore survivors’ expressed experience throughout this book without ever presuming to be the authority on the respondents’ “real” meaning in their self-descriptions.

I see women as an oppressed group. I seek to recognize the political
Appendix I: The Quality of Experience

and social context of what it means to be a woman in North American culture. Issues of race, class, age, and sexual orientation are, of course, relevant. For instance, the female respondents who are women of color and/or lesbians live within multiple webs of oppression. It is understood that in addition to what they have internalized because of their incest history, they may be feeling self-hatred as members of oppressed minorities. A survivor who is further marginalized by her race, class, or sexual preference may have internalized the racism or homophobia of Western culture, which may complicate her empowerment process. According to psychologist Christine Dinsmore, “Incest survivors, because of their childhood traumas, generally feel different from the rest of the world.” Classism, homophobia, sexism, and racism only further conspire to deepen a survivor’s alienation.

As author and poet Margaret Randall writes, “The female child, double commodity in a consumer society, suffers her greatest invisibility at the hands of the male authority figure abusing her in incest. The reclamation of worth, with its accompanying reclamation of rights, must, in fact, include a reclamation of memory.”

I see the process of gathering data as facilitating the adult survivor’s naming injuries of all kinds—sexism, classism, racism, and heterosexism. The interview process also enabled a reclamation of memory and, as such, possibly offered one of the many potential vehicles to her social and psychological empowerment.

Politics of Social Scientific Research

In asking each of the nine women if they were willing to be interviewed for my research on incest, I was careful to solicit her cooperation in a friendly and non-authoritarian manner. I worked to convey a sensitive approach because I knew personally the vulnerability of the subject as well as the volatility of my subject matter. I wanted each woman to know that I did not intend to exploit either her or her personal information. The attitude I conveyed may have had some influence in encouraging the women to regard me as an empathic observer rather than purely as an objective, scientific observer of a social phenomenon.

Ann Oakley writes in her essay, “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms,” that in her previous interviewing experiences she found...
an attitude of refusing to answer questions or offer any kind of personal feedback was not helpful in terms of the traditional goal of promoting "rapport." A different role, that could be termed "no intimacy without reciprocity," seemed especially important in longitudinal in-depth interviewing. Without feeling that the interview process offered some personal satisfaction to them, interviewees would not be prepared to continue after the first interview. The interviewee's definition of the interview is important.\footnote{15}

Frequently researchers establish rapport not as scientists but as human beings yet proceed to use this knowledge for scientific ends, usually without the informants' knowledge. According to Oakley, ethical dilemmas are greatest when there is the least social distance between interviewer and interviewee. When both share the same gender socialization and critical life experiences, social distance can be minimal. When both interviewer and interviewee share membership in the same minority group, the basis for equality may impress itself even more urgently on the interviewer's consciousness. She quotes A. F. Mamak, who writes:

I found that my academic training in methodological views of Western social science and its emphasis on "scientific objectivity" conflicted with the experiences of my colonial past. The traditional way in which social science research is conducted proved inadequate for an understanding of the reality, needs and desires of the people I was researching.\footnote{16}

As interviewer, I informed all of the respondents about the nature of the interview and explained that the information gathered would be used for my research on incest, theology, and psychology. Before every interview I explained to the respondent that I was a fellow survivor and that I understood how difficult this subject matter is to talk about. I promised her name would be changed to preserve her anonymity. I also assured her that in the way I wrote up the findings her identity would be protected.\footnote{17}

My research is decidedly political; it offers women who were sexually violated by family members or "friends" a chance to unload themselves of the shame brought upon them by their perpetrators, as well as a chance to expose the patriarchal culture that licenses male domination in home, church, and state. Also, by sharing their "personal" stories while cognizant that others are doing the same, they have a sense that they are not alone—that this is not a unique female experience—that they are naming something political that has been a part of female experience and female gender construction for millennia.
Method of Case Presentation

The way the cases are presented in the book is at times analogous to a group-therapy interview—where each woman responds to the interviewer's questions from the written, open-ended questionnaire. The interviews were actually conducted not in a group setting but privately between the respondent and the interviewer, who taped and transcribed the session. At times I have chosen to quote from the interviews when I thought an illustration of a theoretical point might aid the reader.

Anonymity

One of the women interviewed wanted the tape-recorded version of the interview to be mailed directly to her after it was transcribed. Another asked me to destroy the tape after I had transcribed the interview. I obliged both of them. I also made written transcripts available to the three survivors who wanted them to better understand their own history of sexual abuse as well as how it related to their eating disorder and faith.

Nonhygienic Research

It is my belief that research cannot escape the researcher's personal history. As Helen Roberts claims, "All research is 'grounded' because no researcher can separate herself from personhood and thus deriving second order constructs from experience." A feminist methodology for social science requires that this rationale of research be described and discussed not only in feminist research but in social science research in general. According to Roberts,

[Feminist methodology] requires, further, that the mythology of "hygienic research," with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production, be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than a dangerous bias—it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.

In qualitative research the self is always a nonhygienic "instrument" of observation. The data are always messy and require acute observation
to winnow out. One needs to draw upon one's background and experience and imagination at all points in the process. As Grant McCracken has put it: "The diverse aspects of the self become a bundle of templates to be held up against the data until parallels emerge."  

**Disciplined Subjectivity**

In psychohistorical work, the "compost heap of today's interdisciplinary efforts," as Erik Erikson put it, there is, it seems, a unique burden on the part of the investigator to discipline her or his subjectivity. What that means for Erikson is a *specific self-awareness* that the observer must include in her or his own field of perception. According to psychohistorian Charles Strozier, "Nothing else is really honest." Strozier claims that "thoughtful psychologists and historians and social scientists in general have always had some sense of their own role in shaping what they are observing, but disciplined subjectivity necessarily sharpens such awareness."

Because I am a survivor of incest as well as a woman who has struggled with the traumatic symptoms of food, body, and weight preoccupation, I bring empathy to the interviews as well as to the analysis of the data. *Empathy*, as Heinz Kohut has clarified, is the primary tool by which we gather psychologically meaningful data. Defined as "vicarious introspection," empathy is one of our best means of exploring psychological experience. Without empathy as a primary means of gathering data, we are left with little that reveals much of substance about the human world that is customarily the purpose of our inquiry.

**Specifics of Long-Interview Method**

The *long interview* is one of the most powerful methods in qualitative research. For psychologically descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing. This method can take the investigator into the mental world of the individual, to expose categories of logic which she or he uses to make sense of the world. It can also take the investigator into the life-world of the individual to see the content and pattern of daily experience. The long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the minds of other people, to see and experience the world as they do themselves.
The applications of the long interview method are many, but for my social-scientific area of study the method is used to get to a clearer understanding of the theological and psychosocial meaning behind the behaviors and beliefs of the women in question. Quantitative studies have been done on women with eating disorders and with women who have suffered incest. Quantitative research is often concerned with comprehending the breadth of a trend or problem rather than understanding the cultural and psychological underpinnings to that trend or problem. A focus on numbers alone may leave us with monocular vision when it could be binocular. Without a qualitative understanding of how culture mediates human action, one can know only what the numbers reveal. The long qualitative interview is useful because it aids the investigator in situating these numbers in their fuller social and cultural context.

Using a qualitative method has enabled me to inquire into how incest survivors who are food, weight, and body preoccupied define themselves in relation to their spirituality, their sense of agency, their bodies, their families, their relationships, and to those whom they hold in authority. The long interview lets me map out the organizing ideas of spirituality for the survivor and how these ideas enter into her values, her view of herself, and her world. The self-as-instrument process works most easily when it is used simply to search out a match in one's experience for ideas and actions that the respondent has described in the interview. In my research I have enabled the "fleshing out" of what the respondent may hint at by matching her comments with statements that show familiarity (but not necessarily similarity). For instance, when one respondent mentioned that having an alcoholic in the family made her able to read others' moods with great accuracy, I was able to rummage around in my own history for my own relationship with an alcoholic in my own extended family and the consequent feelings towards that person. This matching activity helped me to understand the combination of fear in relation to her alcoholic father—of not knowing who would show up, the sober one or the drunk one—and the powerful social skill she felt she had learned as a result. The matching process helped me fill in and develop what the respondent meant to say and enabled her to expand on the meanings behind the words she chose. My own experience serves as a bundle of possibilities, pointers, and suggestions that can be used to dive deeper into the remarks of the respondent. I worked
never to assume but always substantiate and confirm the matches before I considered them thematically relevant.

Sometimes there was no match to be found in my own experience (e.g., I have never been gang-raped). In these cases I proceeded by fashioning an understanding of what was being said. According to McCracken, the process of imaginative reconstruction is somewhat more difficult than the matching technique: "It requires the investigator to build an alien, mysterious world of meaning out of assertions that are themselves unconnected, new, or strange. They must perform this task using their own categories of everyday thought, categories that neither anticipate nor welcome the new configuration of meaning." The best technique of imaginative reconstruction is to hold whatever the respondent says (no matter how unfamiliar) as simply and utterly common and then ask oneself, "What does the world look like when I hold these things to be true?" When this process succeeds, the investigator succeeds in reconstructing a version of the respondent's view of the world by taking up and trying on her underlying assumptions and categories. Its results are often the real achievements of the qualitative methodology.

As I have said, qualitative methods are most useful and powerful when the are used to discover how the respondent sees herself and the world. This objective of the method makes it essential that testimony be elicited in as unobtrusive, nondirective manner as possible. Before conducting the interviews I immersed myself in the literature of eating disorders and religion, and incest and religion, but did not find material exploring the connections among sexual abuse, eating problems, and religion. I became familiar with the theories in the literature, and then I worked to set them aside to better pay attention to the life stories and reflections of the subjects I was interviewing. I remembered that the law of the qualitative long interview is nondirection: one must avoid leading questions that interpret or proscribe feeling and intent. I felt it to be vitally important to allow the respondent to tell her own story in her own terms. I believe it is also just as important to give structure to the interview by providing a well-shaped protocol (questionnaire) with a well-constructed series of "prompts" that give the interview structure and focus.
Self-Interview

I interviewed myself on tape before interviewing any other respondent. This process was both strange and enlightening. I found that I could play the part of interviewer by staying focused on the questionnaire. By pausing between asking and answering the question, I could switch into the role of respondent and tell my own story. After having the interview transcribed I was amazed by my candor and spontaneity. The process of sharing a side of myself to another side of myself proved worthwhile. In the writing up of the data for this project, I decided to quote my own case material just as I quote that of the other survivors. Overall, this act of interviewing myself helped me (therapeutically as well as professionally) to discern the differences among what I would hear over the following months as I interviewed the other eight survivors.

Questionnaire

For the purpose of giving focus and structure to the long interview process, I chose to use a open-ended questionnaire, which I formulated with the help of psychohistorian Charles Strozier. The open-ended questionnaire has several functions. First, it ensures that I cover all the terrain in the same order for each respondent in each interview. Second, since the respondent and I, the interviewer, are both survivors of incest, the questionnaire also facilitated some distance, giving the respondent room to articulate her story in her own language. Prompts were used to keep the respondent on the topics in question. The third function of the questionnaire is to establish channels for the direction and scope of discourse. The fourth function of the questionnaire preserved the larger structure and objectives of the interview and therefore freed me to give all my attention to the respondent’s testimony.

Because of the sensitive area of inquiry, incest and eating problems, trust had to be established before respondents would agree to be interviewed. None of the respondents were perfect strangers to me prior to the interview. They came from Twelve-Step, Feminist Step, or self-help spirituality groups in which I had been a participant-observer. I deliberately selected the respondent pool for contrasts in age, class, education, sexual preference, race, Christian denomination, and occupation.

I opened the interview carefully with a general inquiry section in
which respondent anxieties about being interviewed were laid to rest. The questions and prompting strategies were then set in motion as I worked to identify key terms, chose the most promising avenues of inquiry, and listened for material that was indexed by respondent testimony but not made explicit in it. All of this activity was set in a generous time frame (at least two hours) in order to let respondents tell their own story in their own terms.

### Analytic Categories

The analysis of qualitative data is perhaps the most demanding and least examined aspect of the qualitative research process. There were several preliminary technical considerations to be considered. Interviews must be recorded on tape. Interviewers must transcribe a verbatim account of the interview testimony. For all nine of the interviews a transcript was created. If I interviewed a respondent for a second time, a transcript was also made. If I conversed with a respondent after a Twelve-Step or other spirituality meeting or came across her locally, I would make a written record of the content-rich information in writing.

The object of analysis was to determine the social, psychological, and religious, categories, relationships, and assumptions that informed the respondents' views of the world in general and in the topic in particular. I came to this undertaking with a sense of what the literature says ought to be there, a sense of how the topic at issue is constituted in my own experience, and a glancing sense of what took place in the interview themselves.

In a few instances, a follow-up interview was necessary to inquire about particular matters so that further narrowing and clarification could take place. In sum, the final step of the long qualitative interview called for the careful analysis of the verbatim transcription of interview data.

### Quality Control

How does the investigator ensure the quality of her own qualitative research? There are no guarantees. Much of the difficulty surrounding this question stems from the tendency to judge qualitative research by quantitative standards. It is important to keep in mind the distinction
between qualitative and quantitative research visible and clear. In the first, categories take shape in the course of research, whereas in the second, they are fixed from the beginning. The reader of qualitative research must keep in mind that such work is done to show shared themes among a group of particular women and as such may or may not be transferable to a larger population. I do make some general claims about culture that come from hearing the women's stories and coping history. I also qualify such claims when necessary.

I am convinced that this qualitative feminist method enabled me to draw out complex psychological themes, gendered cultural nuances, and religious layers of meaning that could not be reached with a "fill-in-the-blank" questionnaire. The open-ended protocol gave the survivor some control regarding disclosure.

My main intention was to understand the multilayered psychosocial "nature" of a survivor's relationship to food, her body, her past trauma, and her consequent faith. A focused open-ended interview was the ideal vehicle to gather such information. Because I have familiarity with the subject matter I believe I was able to design a sensitive questionnaire, to listen empathically, and to analyze data with greater perception than a quantitative study would have allowed. By using the long interview approach I was able to collect and analyze richly descriptive information. At the same time, with the help of the focused questionnaire, I was able to manage this incredibly full data. Too, a mutually respectful relationship during and prior to the interview appeared to facilitate positive results for my respondent, myself, and this study. Overall, I believe both respondent and interviewer were enriched by the process.