CHAPTER FIVE: Working Out the Analysis: Voices, sites and strategies

One of the central themes of this thesis responds to the recognition expressed in Linda Gordon’s words as the title to Chapter One that the representations of domestic violence adopted during a century of Australian history are ‘not … changing responses to a constant problem but … a redefinition of the problem itself’ (Gordon 1989:2, 27-8). The previous chapters have demonstrated the multi-faceted nature of the feminist policy activist response to domestic violence; the processes examined included not only direct interventions such as the setting up of refuges and the pursuit of government funding, but also the building of new policy structures and networks, the initiation of research, the exploitation of immanent opportunities as they arose and the application of subtle readings of the preferred discourses of changing governments. This chapter re-traces the period covered in the last two chapters in order to put into place the facet of the domestic violence process which built the re-definitional analysis identified in Gordon’s statement. Here, I focus on the policy activist analytical process that shaped the foundation years of Australian domestic violence policy, from the opening of Elsie Women’s Refuge (1974-5) to the years (1981-2) during which building of the first comprehensive policy response to domestic violence began in NSW. Consistent with the scope of the thesis, I explore a selection of the analytical processes pursued in a Commonwealth context and in NSW.

The investigation conducted in this chapter puts into place an integral aspect of the narrative of policy activism which is the primary theme of the thesis, and continues exploration of the distinguishing features of that narrative. The policy process focus of the thesis also establishes the direction and limits of the examination of the development of feminist domestic violence theory made in this chapter. The issues to be investigated here include the extent to which policy activist strategy contributed to the development of analysis, the ways in which the emerging analysis shaped and/or was applied by the policy activist project, and the possibility that the eventual feminist analysis might have been compromised by strategic retellings in the policy context. It will be seen that investigation of these issues also contributes to the further thesis
theme investigating the place of the domestic violence policy process in the broader women’s policy enterprise.

The chapter is also relevant to the thesis theme of the contextual implications involved in this policy process, in the senses both of contextual opportunity and representational context and outcomes. This aspect of the chapter continues the exploration already started in earlier chapters of the gradual, exploratory, at times circumstantial and finally evolutionary nature of the analytical process within the Australian feminist response to domestic violence after 1974. The living process I investigate here also furthers recognition of the distinctions between a policy activist reading of the building of policy analysis, and the analyses of issue definition and framing provided by either the policy cycle/framework or policy agenda setting approaches.

Finally, in terms of the fourth main thesis theme, the chapter pursues the relationship between the emerging analytical representations and the policy outcomes which followed. It is in this context that the crucial significance of the feminist framing of domestic violence becomes clear. The international feminist re-framing of partner violence, built in the Australian context through the process identified in this chapter, was the social constructionist representation of which Gordon has acknowledged: ‘Defining wife-beating as a social problem, not merely a phenomenon of particular violent individuals or relationships, was one of the great achievements of feminism’ (Gordon 1989: 251). The significance of this construction for feminist policy activism was that if domestic violence could be established to be a consequence of, as well as a contribution to, the structural disadvantages suffered by women, it became an appropriate focus for policy. This followed both because the social framing established domestic violence to be the responsibility of the whole of society, and because it became something in which policy could, as well as should, intervene. If, on the other hand, domestic violence was agreed to be the result of individual or family dysfunction, it could be left to the attentions of the therapeutic professions. Here lay the nexus of the contest between the established and emerging representations of domestic violence interwoven with the analytical work examined in this chapter.
The methodology of this chapter involves the analytical review of a selection of the key documents through which the Australian feminist analysis of domestic violence, as it relates to the policy activist process, was made and recorded. The work analysed began soon after the foundation of the Elsie refuge in 1974, and was published up to and during 1983, although much of that later work was accessible within the policy process for the previous two years. The chapter is structured, with one exception explained below, as a consideration of the selected documents in the chronological order of their appearance; this will facilitate illustration of the evolutionary process by which the feminist and policy related framing of domestic violence emerged in this period. All of the work considered facilitated the comprehensive policy agenda in response to domestic violence initiated in NSW between 1981 and 1983, which is the subject of the next chapter. In some cases the documentary material is supplemented by participant interviews.

**NSW BUREAU OF CRIME STATISTICS AND RESEARCH (1975)**

*DOMESTIC ASSAULTS, STATISTICAL REPORT 5, SERIES 2, DEPARTMENT OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL AND OF JUSTICE, SYDNEY*

The first published piece of Australian research and analysis on domestic violence demonstrates the multi-facetted nature of such early work. The research on *Domestic Assaults* published by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BCSR) in 1975 was one of the Bureau’s regular series of Statistical Reports. This work had a clear relationship with policy, being located in an agency of the (then) NSW Department of the Attorney General and Justice with responsibility to inform the NSW government about ‘factors that affect the distribution and frequency of crime’ and ‘that affect the effectiveness … of the NSW criminal justice system’ (BCSR 2002). It was introduced as a response to the exaggerated fear of Australians about crimes of violence at the hands of strangers, and the simultaneous ignorance of many about the proportion of violent crimes occurring between relatives or close acquaintances. Reference was also made to recent statistics of the high proportion (59%) of cases of ‘assault female’ which came before NSW courts in the previous year in which the matter was allowed to lapse (BCSR 1975:1). The direction of the research was also clearly related to policy, although the Report makes no specific policy recommendations. Carried out before any new policy initiatives in response to domestic violence apart from the funding of women’s refuges, the BCSR research
examined the most accessible justice system measures open to women suffering violence at the hands of male partners and the use women were making of those measures.

At the same time several aspects of the BCSR project indicate that behind this matter-of-fact statement of research direction lay some innovative policy activist strategy and the drama of the recent feminist recognition of domestic violence. To begin with, the focus and timing of the project are significant, being undertaken in International Women’s Year and following not only the opening of Elsie and proposals for the other early Sydney women’s refuges, but the appointment of the first NSW Women’s Advisory Board (NSWWAB) by the Lewis Coalition government. Community women started to raise issues about domestic violence and refuges at the earliest consultations of that Board (Goodwin 1999: 147, 158). It is also significant that one of the three researchers and authors of the BCSR Report, Vivien Johnson, was a member of the founding collective of the Marrickville Women’s Refuge (Johnson 1981:1). Her later work, some of which will be considered in this chapter, locates Johnson in the analytical context of refuge feminism, and as an example of the flexible roles and identities of many feminist participants in this as in other aspects of the domestic violence policy activist process (Johnson 1980, 1981, 1982). These conjunctions suggest that initiation of the BCSR project involved a strategy of refuge feminist criminological policy activism directed to production of a piece of authoritative research demonstrating the justice system deficiencies that refuge residents and workers already knew about at first hand. They also demonstrate the extent to which feminist activism, policy activism and analysis building were interwoven in this piece of work. The other BCSR researchers were Tony Vinson, then Director of the BCSR, and Kim Ross. The dual publication of the report, by the BCSR in 1975 and as part of a pivotal collection on family violence edited by Carol O’Donnell and Jan Craney in 1982 and introduced below, indicates its significant contribution to Australian domestic violence analysis and policy response in this period, as does the use made of it in most subsequent policy reports on domestic violence (BCSR 1975; O’Donnell and Craney 1982a; RCHR 1977: Vol. 4, 133-55; NSWTFDV 1981: Appendix 4, 138).

The BCRS research focused on the personal interviews through which ‘victims of domestic assault’ sought ‘advice and quasi-legal counsel’ from NSW Chamber
Magistrates, as part of the magistrates’ formal role (BCSR 1975: 1). It involved a questionnaire directed to Chamber Magistrates, relating to the 184 interviews with women complaining of domestic assault undertaken in 21 of the 227 court houses across NSW between mid-April and the end of June 1975. The court houses included metropolitan and rural centres and regions with differing social characteristics. The outcomes of 396 cases which came before the surveyed local courts were also considered; given the time involved in bringing matters to court, few of these cases had been initiated through the surveyed interviews (BCSR 1975: 20-1).

The fact that hundreds of assaulted women each year sought interviews with Chamber Magistrates meant that the magistrates were a rich source of information not only about the court system but also many aspects of the women’s situations (BCSR 1975:1-2). This placed the BCSR project as the first piece of published Australian research into the nature and circumstances of domestic violence, as well as into whether the women concerned received the support they needed and sought. It also meant that this research was an investigation into yet another of the primary survival strategies undertaken by women suffering partner violence, and that their voices and actions once again drove the agenda.

Apart from the advice and referrals they might receive, local courts (Courts of Petty Sessions) offered women suffering assault or threats of violence the option of application for a summons for assault or apprehended violence, with possible penalties of fines of up to $500 and/or six months imprisonment under s.494 of the Crimes Act. Women seeking restraining orders under the legislation available at this time were not included in the research project, as such matters were dealt with in the Equity Court; nor were the most serious crimes of wife assault (for example murder, attempted murder and grievous bodily harm) included, as they would have been dealt with by police charge rather than being initiated by the woman herself through a magistrate interview (BCSR 1975: 5, 20-21). The research consequently examines the value of and problems for the women of resort to the criminal law by way of summons, and the kinds of strategies those women were employing through their negotiations with the magistrates and their courts. One of the indications of both was that only a small proportion of the women persisted to the point of a criminal conviction. Of the 90% of women who took some form of legal action, at least a
quarter did not proceed as far as a summons; of the remaining cases, 68% of the completed questionnaire cases and 70% of the court records cases lapsed for want of prosecution, sometimes because the parties did not appear at the hearing, sometimes after a number of hearings and adjournments, and in many cases after a settlement out of court in which the women withdrew charges on the condition of a commitment that the violence would cease, or that maintenance would be paid. A number of further women, in some questionnaire returns eight times as many as those interviewed, mentioned assaults but did not pursue the matter. The researchers deduce that all these circumstances suggest the likelihood of an even greater number of women suffering partner violence but taking no action (BCSR 1975: 20-3).

The researchers offer several explanations for these outcomes. Having noted that women intending to separate were less likely to take legal proceedings, they suggest that ‘it is possible in [the lapsed or settled] cases to see the women’s actions in having summonses taken out as an attempt to achieve a viable bargaining position, with legal backing, in relation to behaviour which they may feel unable to counter in any other way’ (BCSR 1975: 20, 23). The researchers also deduce, as some magistrates had done in the late nineteenth century, that ‘...fines or imprisonment may, in domestic assault, penalize the victim as well as the offender .... [when] the woman is economically dependent on her attacker, (not to mention emotionally attached to him and to their children)’ (BCSR 1975: 20, 21). They also record that some women withdrew for fear of reprisals from the violent partner. The interviews also demonstrated that the strongest deterrent to legal action by the women was fear of reprisal (38.7%), followed by accommodation difficulties and economic dependence (52% if combined, as they often were), then emotional ties (36%) and children’s needs (21.3%). All of this led the researchers to conclude: ‘that the existence of a domestic relationship between an assault victim and her attacker makes recourse to the existing legal procedures difficult’ (BCSR 1975: 17-9).

Together with these conclusions, the demonstrations provided by the BCSR of deficiencies in the service provided by both magistrates and police would also contribute to policy development. For example, it emerged that in more than a quarter of the cases Chamber Magistrates had assessed the injuries involved as ‘negligible’, despite the number of women who had required medical attention and that almost all
‘had suffered some degree of violation of their physical integrity’ including being ‘forced to submit to intercourse with their attacker’; magistrates also appeared to have taken insufficient account of the fact that almost 90% of the women were complaining of the most recent of a long series of assaults (BCSR 1975:4-5.) Police were called to or informed of 87 of the cases, but only laid charges on 12 occasions, leaving it to the woman to take out a summons in the rest; in 18 cases police ‘were said to have declined to interfere in a “domestic” matter’ (BCSR 1975:5, 21). The research also demonstrated that, after the police (52.2%) and health services (family doctors 22.8%; hospitals 14.1%), those to whom the women had turned most often for help were the same ‘traditional, informal sources of help to people under stress’ who had been so important a century earlier, that is neighbours, relatives and friends (BCSR 1975:13-4).

In addition to such conclusions directly related to policy assessment, the information garnered from the Chamber Magistrates’ questionnaires about the women’s experiences contributed to the key building blocks for the developing feminist analysis of domestic violence. Such information included that the violence women suffered was often of a repeated and long term nature; that it could continue, and become even more severe, after the woman had severed the relationship; that while 60% of attackers had consumed some alcohol, 40% had not and the research ‘failed to reveal any significant differences’ between the two groups of assaults; that ‘there was no evidence that wife-battering is confined largely, much less exclusively, to the lower class’; and that ‘[most] ethnic groups present in the Australian population were represented in the sample’(BCSR 1975: 5, 6-7, 8, 9).

A final noteworthy aspect of the BCSR Report is the brief reference to the report on women resident in the Chiswick Women’s Aid House in London prepared by the psychiatrist J.J. Gayford for presentation to the 1974-5 UK parliamentary Select Committee on Violence in Marriage (BCSR 1975:12). Gayford’s findings are mentioned by the RCHR only to underline their concerns about implications of the violence reported for the children involved (BCSR 1975:12-3). This brief reference is significant for two reasons. One is that it is the first example of the diligent alertness to international research which is a consistent feature of Australian work on domestic violence. The other is that the Gayford reference amounts to the first appearance in
the Australian context of acknowledgement of the reigning individual pathology
construction of family violence which Gayford, and through him the founder of the
Chiswick shelter, Erin Pizzey, contentiously represented (Dobash and Dobash 1992:
114-8). A key part of this construction was the claim, often known as the ‘cycle of
violence’, that growing up in a violent family had a grave and determining influence
on the later behaviour of both males and females (Dobash and Dobash 1992: 117).
Significantly, the BCSR acknowledgement is not made in the context of a challenge
from Australian pathological approach professionals but is stimulated by awareness of
the international debate. This is a demonstration that the useful consequences of the
early and uncontested achievement of a policy place for domestic violence in
Australia still applied, in that this first policy related response to the new feminist
framing of domestic violence was unconstrained by local challenge from the
individual pathology approach.

ROYAL COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS (1977) FINAL
REPORT, AGPS, CANBERRA;
A. DEVESON (1978) AUSTRALIANS AT RISK, CASSELL AUSTRALIA,
SYDNEY

The Royal Commission on Human Relationships (RCHR), an extraordinary event in
Australian social thinking, grew out of a proposal for a Royal Commission on
abortion. It was broadened through an amendment moved by Malcolm Fraser, then a
Liberal back-bencher, to Terms of Reference: ‘To inquire into and report upon the
family, social, educational, legal and sexual aspects of male and female relationships,
so far as those matters are relevant to the powers and functions of the Australian

Royal Commissions have been described as differing from other ‘non-permanent
[and] ad hoc’ mechanisms of public enquiry available to the Australian and other
Westminster style governments through the legislated powers of evidentiary coercion
that may be attached to them, and through the ‘symbolic value’ and ‘sense of
independence and prestige’ indicated by ‘their very title’ (Prasser 1994: 4-5; Ransley
1994: 22). They may be resorted to by governments for reasons including response to
crisis situations requiring an assurance of independent advice; the clearer definition of
policy problems; the impartial review of existing programs and policies; or to
investigate allegations of impropriety by individuals or organisations associated with the government. They have also been used to answer broader needs stretching from a need ‘to resolve public controversy and promote public participation and consensus about key issues’ to ‘managing the policy agenda by the illusion of action, deflection of criticism, or co-option of critics’ (Prasser 1994: 7-8). The political motivations involved in the RCHR appear to have ranged across the entire spectrum indicated by the last two of the uses I have listed.

Three widely respected Royal Commissioners were appointed to the RCHR on 21 August 1974: the Most Reverend Felix Arnott, Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, broadcaster and commentator Anne Deveson and Elizabeth Evatt, later Chief Justice of the Family Court, who was appointed Chair of the Commission (Summers 1979:192-3; 1999:346-8; Sawer 1990: 13-4; Deveson 1978:2-4). Although the mixed political origins of this enterprise produced difficulties for the Commissioners and the researchers employed by them, the potential of the RCHR was recognised by many, including Whitlam’s Women’s Adviser, Elizabeth Reid, who saw a means of addressing the issues of attitude and consciousness change she believed crucial to achieving change for women (Cox et al, 1978: 130-2, 140; interview material).

The Commission’s unanimous Final Report was released during the 1977 election campaign, after the Commissioners’ inquiry time and budget had been severely reduced by the new Fraser Coalition government (Deveson 1978:13). Release of the Report was delayed by seven months and its appearance heralded by sensationalised leaks, rumoured to have come from the Prime Minister’s Office. Prime Minister Fraser’s attempt to use such tactics to take advantage of the political time bomb he may have planted backfired, when he claimed the report ‘was appalling, and that parts of it would fill every family in Australia with horror’, but then had to admit he had not read it (Deveson 1978:1; Summers 1979:193).

Partly in reaction to the scandal of the Fraser government response, one of the Commissioners, Anne Deveson, followed it with her own publication, *Australians at Risk* (Deveson 1978). Her primary intention was to provide a more accessible account of the findings. She also added further research of her own, and printed a rich
selection of quotations from the statements of evidence, both written and oral. Both the final report and Deveson’s account are referred to here.

The decision to include domestic violence in the inquiry was another example of strategic intervention by women suffering partner violence, this time taking advantage of the Commissioners’ open consultative methods. Anne Deveson recorded: ‘The subject was not one the Commission had originally intended to research. Yet our evidence made us aware that violence against women was an issue of major social concern’ (Deveson 1978:100). The Commissioners heard from the women at public hearings and through written submissions; they also recorded submissions from the National Confederation of Women’s Refuges and from refuge workers in at least four states (RCHR 1977, Vol.4: 133-55; Deveson 1978:101, 109-23). The RCHR initiated in addition two pieces of related research: a study of 101 women resident at Elsie Women’s Refuge by Christina Gibbeson, a counsellor at the refuge, and a phone-in on family violence, to which 65 women responded (RCHR 1977, Vol.4:133; Deveson 1978: 101; Gibbeson 1977). They also reviewed the relevant literature, including the BCSR Report and that of the UK parliamentary Select Committee on Violence in Marriage, including the Gayford report (RCHR 1977, Vol.4: 133-55).

The Royal Commission’s findings on domestic violence are expressed in the Report Summary, with a fuller discussion in the volume dedicated to the Family (RCHR 1977, Vol.1:72-4, Vol.4:133-55). In terms of the development of labels and definitions, the Report sections are headed ‘Family Violence’, but the term ‘domestic violence’ is used interchangeably (for example Vol.4:133, para.8; 134, para.134; 138, para.32). The definition provided is: ‘We define family violence as acts of violence by one spouse against the other spouse or against the children. De facto relationships are included.’ In the significant move later adopted by the NWAC, the Commission extended their definition beyond physical abuse to include emotional and psychological damage, including ‘the effect such attacks have on [the women’s] confidence and self-esteem’ (RCHR 1977, Vol. 4: 143-4). It is also explained that: ‘Child abuse is technically part of this definition’ but that it is dealt with in a separate chapter (RCHR 1977, Vol.4:133).
The Commissioners used their own research to build on the NSW BCSR conclusions about the nature and context of the violence. They agreed that ‘the size of the problem is indeterminate’, although refuge use indicates that it is considerable (RCHR 1977, Vol. 1: 72, Vol.4:134). Differences between the response samples in the Commission’s two pieces of research produced the conclusion that ‘family violence is common in Australian society: it occurs across lines of class, race and age’ (RCHR 1977, Vol.4:133). It was also reported that: ‘Nearly all the cases we investigated have involved physical violence by the man against the woman’; the majority of the women had been attacked frequently and over many years; and that: ‘The damage done to women and children is often severe’ (RCHR 1977, Vol.4:133-8). Patterns of heavy drinking, unemployment and mobility were noted in each research sample, and both unreal expectations about marriage and evidence of mental disturbance suffered by the male partners were noted in the Elsie group. But the Commissioners were cautious in the conclusions they drew from this information. ‘There is no single cause of domestic violence nor is it easy to distinguish cause from effect’, they wrote (RCHR 1977, Vol.1:73). On the other hand, they appear convinced of the significance of the troubled family backgrounds they found in the Elsie study, and which they connected with John Gayford’s Chiswick evidence. ‘Their experience cannot be said to have equipped them to choose non-violence; rather the contrary’, they write of the Elsie residents, which ‘is why it is important to support … victims of violence in order to prevent such tragedies perpetuating’ (RCHR 1977, Vol.4:143, 138). They also agree with Gayford and Pizzey about the mental health needs of violent men: ‘Emergency mental health teams should be considered as an alternative to police intervention’ (RCHR 1977, Vol.1:73).

At the same time, the influence of the developing feminist analysis can be found close to such individual experience and ‘cycle of violence’ conclusions. In a key amalgamating statement in the Summary, for example, sentences identifying individual predisposition to violent behaviour and the influence of family background are followed by the structuralist statement: ‘Socialisation which encourages men to be aggressive and to treat wives as possessions provides a climate for domestic violence’. The paragraph then returns to a list of stress factors, for example unemployment, poverty and excessive drinking, which are concluded to be ‘all factors which can lead to conflict’ (RCHR 1977, Vol.1:73). In similar swings and
combinations, the Volume Four discussion states: ‘Men are still encouraged to be aggressive and women to be passive’, and: ‘We must question our views of family roles and relationships, for these may contain the seeds of conflict. … We must acknowledge that, as a community, we bear responsibility for the kind of environment that exacerbates violence.’ This is followed by a return to a ‘cycle of violence’ argument in conclusion (RCHR 1977, Vol.4:138, 155).

These carefully considered statements, made by three socially alert Australians committed to contributing to social cohesion and productive policy making, illustrate once more the distinct circumstances in which the framing of domestic violence and consequent policy responses took place in Australia. Once again, in the prominent but independent context of a Royal Commission, the Australian process fortuitously avoided the contested nature of ‘the show-piece meetings between the [shelter/refuge] movement and the state at which explanations of the problem, its ownership and proposed solutions were at stake’ which had shaped policy negotiations in the UK, USA and Canada (Dobash and Dobash 1992: 111). That meant that the Commissioners were able to chart and contribute to the representational process without professional challenge or contest. It also meant that the interweaving of the feminist and policy related projects of analysis and activism noted above could continue in this context. Significantly, the RCHR Report provides no indication that the Commissioners knew they were walking in an incipient representational minefield.

When Anne Deveson prepared her follow up publication Australians at Risk, she took the framing process a stage further. This was partly a response to a range of feminist material from the USA which she read after completion of the Royal Commission’s work (Deveson 1978: 438,102). One of Deveson’s new emphases is that she shifts the ‘social responsibilities’ conclusions in the Report towards a ‘conspiracy of silence’ analysis. ‘Behind the silence lies a tacit acceptance that wife-beating is not so unusual after all. This attitude stems from our traditional view that the man is the boss and owner, and that the female is his property’ (Deveson 1978: 101-2). She moves from this to her conclusion that: ‘Underlying the violence of wife-battering lies … the very nature of present relationships between men and women. As long as these remain unequal, as long as society tacitly condones the view of women as property, women
will continue to be terrorized and abused’ (Deveson 1978:109). Each of these steps is a significant move towards adoption of a social constructionist feminist reading.

Marian Sawer has described the RCHR Report as ‘notable for its intellectual clarity and for the judicious manner in which it converted issues [including those] put onto the agenda by the women’s movement into policy recommendations’. She adds that their proposals ‘opened up [many] areas [of policy relating to women] for serious discussion and debate’, which ‘were gradually picked up by state and territory governments’ (Sawer 1990: 14). Three of the Royal Commission’s proposals were immediately relevant in the context of the Fraser Commonwealth government. Each of these was a piece of explicit policy activism by both the Commissioners and the women who proposed them. The first of these was the recommendation that ‘the funding of refuges should be a Federal responsibility, with direct grants to refuges in a separate women’s refuge program’ (RCHR 1977, Vol. 4: 148). The RCHR also recommended that: ‘Government child care services should be provided for child care needs at women’s refuges’; this measure, as was noted in Chapter Four, was subsequently implemented and is an example of the ‘implementation by stealth’ by the Fraser government identified by Sawer (RCHR 1977, Vol.1:115; Sawer1990:14). The third domestic violence recommendation directed by the RCHR to the Commonwealth government was for ‘determined efforts to make the law provide a real help’; this would be reflected in the WAB and NWAC strategy for model law reform in the ACT, also examined in Chapter Four (RCHR 1977, Vol.4:154). The working through of these and others of the RCHR’s proposals will be further investigated in Chapter Six.

**THE BUILDING OF REFUGE FEMINISM**

This section differs from the rest of the chapter in both its chronological approach and the nature of the documents selected for analysis. It has been clear in the work already examined that the drivers and initiators of the response to domestic violence were women suffering and seeking to escape from domestic violence, operating through their primary survival strategies in many locations. It has also been clear that the most consistent interface between those women and the new phase of the Australian women’s movement was the women’s refuge, which was also where the bones of the
new framing of domestic violence were laid down. Those conducting the research analysed in this chapter all acknowledged these claims by making the refuges and those resident and working in them key sources for their findings. But the processes of telling and learning in the refuges, and the re-telling which they produced, were very different from the academic methodology observed so far. This was the heart of the living process of representational construction that began at Elsie in March 1974. During the years considered in this chapter the refuge process clarified a distinctive analysis which can be identified as ‘refuge feminism’.

The process through which refuge feminism was constructed was introduced in Chapter Three as part of the investigation of the early days at Elsie refuge. It is returned to here to capture the next stages in that living representation building and to investigate the relationship between it and the developing policy activist process. That relationship stretches across the time period of the chapter; accordingly, the examination of refuge feminism has been placed in the centre of the chapter in order to illustrate its contribution to all of the other pieces of work selected for analysis. All of that work provides information about refuge feminism. But here the process that produced it is sought in documents produced within the refuge movement itself.

The first of these is a history of the women’s refuge established in the Sydney suburb of Marrickville in 1976, produced by the founding residents and collective. The Marrickville history, published in 1981, was compiled by Vivien Johnson, who in addition to being part of the Marrickville collective was both a member of the BCSR 1975 research team and wrote her PhD thesis also on the Marrickville Refuge (Johnson 1982). Her introductory account of the foundation process provides a historical sequel to the pioneering analytical process at Elsie. In Chapter Three it was concluded that the first encounters between the Elsie founders and residents moved the feminist objectives for Elsie from a response to women’s homelessness to recognition of the extent and severity of partner violence and its role in creating the women’s homelessness, sometimes experienced before they left their supposed homes (Sophie Watson’s concept of ‘concealed homelessness’ is relevant here – Watson 1986: 21). The other early analytical steps were recognition of the damage the women had suffered to their personal confidence and autonomy, as well as their bodies, and first encounters with the wide range of practical issues they faced, which were already
identified as consequences of the economic dependence of women. Johnson’s account
tells how the experiences of the Marrickville founders, in parallel with refuge
feminists all over Australia, built on these first steps.

Two key developments stand out in Johnson’s account. The first is told as a reversal
of the earlier change of emphasis from homelessness to violence. She writes: ‘As
feminists, our original purpose in setting up refuges was to expose the dark underside
of patriarchy’s attitudes to women in marriage – the plight of battered women – by
providing [them] with the means to escape … [We] did not even include [housing] in
our original list of what we would be assisting the women with … However, after
about nine months of operation …[we] began to recognize that … our reformulation
of the domestic violence issue as … “homelessness” was … an appalling and
stubborn reality’ (Johnson 1981: 1, 7, 8, 13). In fact the housing issue becomes a
paradigm for the multiple reasons ‘that beyond the refuge does not lie “a viable new
life in the community”’, which are summed up in Johnson’s social constructionist
conclusion that ‘the system [needs] to change in a direction which gives [women] and
their children an alternative to dependence on men’. ‘Until these alternatives exist’,
writes Johnson, ‘all women … are essentially homeless and dispossessed. We demand
our right: a place in this world for women’ (Johnson 1981: 7, 16). Refuge experience
had firmly located domestic violence in the territory defined in this thesis as the
access of women to an autonomous household.

The second of Johnson’s developmental analytical steps records the challenges of
actually putting collective and self-help principles into practice, including that: ‘ …it
took us a long time to recognize the importance of letting the women speak for
themselves’(Johnson 1981: 11-2). The Marrickville founders’ response was two-fold:
the integration of residents and ex-residents into the worker collective and the
construction of the refuge history from the residents’ telling of their own stories
(Johnson 1981: 13-4, 11). The first of these strategies is claimed by Johnson as ‘the
key to the strategic significance of the development of women’s refuges … for
feminism as a political movement’, and rapidly became a primary feature of refuge
feminist practice (Johnson 1981: 11). The second was a strategic re-expression of the
‘personal as political’ feminist commitment to learning by listening which was the
basis of the refuge feminist analytical process.
Both of the analytical steps drawn out by Vivien Johnson from early experience at Marrickville are reinforced by another refuge source, the Annual Reports of Beryl, the Canberra Women’s Refuge opened in March 1975, as reported by Andrew Hopkins and Heather McGregor (Hopkins and McGregor 1991: 17-9, 23-4). The Beryl Reports describe both ‘the interplay between the twin issues of domestic violence and homelessness’ and the progress of the refuge from early domination by struggles over housing and funding, to roles in community education and as a policy activist lobby group (Hopkins and McGregor 1991: 17-9). The Beryl Reports also place their collective principles in terms of a commitment to enhance the personal autonomy of refuge residents. ‘The ultimate aim must be to help women make their own choices, even if the choice is to remain with a violent man. … If violence has its roots in hierarchy, … then non-hierarchical, empowering forms of organisation are an integral part of the struggle against domestic violence’ (Hopkins and McGregor 1991: 22).

The two central aspects of the refuge feminist analysis identified in both these accounts would become the defining contributions of refuge feminism to the policy response to domestic violence. The first of these is the social constructionist connection between domestic violence and the circumstances denying women access to an autonomous household; the second is the central importance of enhancing the personal autonomy of women suffering domestic violence. It was through these two pieces of analysis that the lived representational process of refuge feminism examined in this section became a policy activist as well as a feminist activist process. This claim will be demonstrated in the analytical work investigated in the rest of this chapter, and through the examination in the next chapter of the policy agenda proposed in NSW between 1981 and 1985.

One other noteworthy feature of the refuge feminism expressed in the sources I have analysed takes the form of a significant absence. That absence is made obvious, as was the uncontested nature of the first Australian policy responses to domestic violence, by international comparison. Gillian Walker’s account of the building of refuge feminism in Canada begins with a familiar set of stages which, as in Australia, took place in the earliest women’s shelters. As in Australia, those representational stages moved from emphasis on short-term housing needs to a focus on ‘women being
beaten, abused, battered and killed’, and then to a structural analysis based on women’s economic independence (Walker 1990: 23-33). But then a different step was taken. It has been noted that in Canada, as in the USA and UK, public hearings to determine initial policy responses, including refuge funding, placed refuge feminists in public contest from an early stage with established family violence practitioners (see Chapter Three). The strategy adopted by Canadian refuge feminists in response to that contest was to stress the criminality of wife battery. Walker relates that, from this early stage, the representation of partner violence as a crime and adoption of the label ‘wife assault’ were explicit feminist strategies to distinguish male violence towards women from a general concept of ‘family violence’, and a means of claiming the issue for women and refuge-informed feminism (Walker 1990: 44-50). In Australia, the dilemma of extracting an appropriate response from police and the courts to criminal assault perpetrated in the home was strongly represented in the policy documents and research already considered (for example, NWAC 1979: 14-5; 1980: 24-5; BCSR 1975: 4-5; 21; RCHR 1977, Vol. 1: 74, Vol. 4: 152-3). But neither the refuge sources examined above, nor others published in the same period, make either as strong or as strategic an identification of the criminal nature of domestic violence as the one Walker claims to have been adopted in Canada (see also Johnson 1980; Saville 1982; Perry et al 1982). As will be noted in the next chapter, the slogan ‘Domestic Violence: It’s a Crime’ found its place in public education campaigning in the last years of the thesis period, as a forceful means of locating the personal responsibility of perpetrators of domestic violence, as well as of signalling to women that they need not put up with it. But the absence of this representation in the stages of refuge feminism building examined in this chapter can be concluded to be a consequence, and so a further demonstration, of the relatively uncontested nature of the public context in which the refuge feminist framing of domestic violence took place in Australia. This, in turn, was reflected in the policy activist process I examine in the following chapter.

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY CONFERENCE: VIOLENCE IN THE FAMILY - NOVEMBER 1979

In the meantime, debate over domestic violence between feminists and established individual pathology approach professionals finally took place in a public context.
The site was provided by a Conference on Violence in the Family convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) in November 1979. The AIC Conference was funded by the Office of Child Care in the Commonwealth Department of Social Security, and was designed to bring together researchers and practitioners working on all aspects of family violence, in particular child abuse and spousal violence, to share their experience, evaluate current programs and policies and come to conclusions about future directions (Scutt 1980: iii, ix, 1, 5).

Those who took part in the AIC Conference remember it for the vigour of debate between feminists and those representing the traditional approach. Jocelynne Scutt, who edited the Conference papers, records that: ‘there were “violent disagreements” between participants at the conference’; others recall that she herself played a part in those disagreements (1980: xv; interview material). Nevertheless, the differences between the location of this debate in Australia and related countries continued. To begin with, domestic violence had already achieved a policy presence and feminist refuges had been funded, however tenuously. Further, the location of the preliminary debate under the auspices of a research institute operating with a degree of intellectual independence as a Commonwealth statutory authority, albeit receiving its funding through the Commonwealth Attorney General’s Department, meant that it was structured as a discussion between academics and experts, rather than as an agenda setting jostle for policy resources (AIC 2004). Finally, the published expressions of the individual pathology approach that particularly stirred the feminist participants had already been published, rather than being presented at the Conference, which probably explains why the passion of the debate is more evident in the recollections of participants than in the published proceedings.

The focus for feminist objections at this time, in Australia and similar countries, was, as has been noted, the central claim of individual pathology analysis labelled the ‘cycle of violence’. A notorious expression of this concept was made in the work of John Gayford, undertaken in alliance with Erin Pizzey of the pioneering Chiswick refuge in London, which was referred to in both the BCSR and RCHR reports, and which was responsible for a bitter split in the UK refuge movement. The claim was that children who grew up in violent families were more likely than others to perpetuate violent behaviour, to the extent that the only way to break the ‘cycle’ was
through mental health treatment (Gayford 1975 a and b; Dobash and Dobash 1992: 114-7). Feminists objected to the individual pathology, rather than social structures, construction of violent men. But they objected just as passionately to claims that women could be masochistically predetermined by childhood experience to accept passively and even to provoke violent male behaviour, and that such women perpetuated the violence by actively selecting violent partners. Despite the less precarious circumstances, the outcome of this debate was as crucial for Australian policy activism on domestic violence as it had been elsewhere: it would decide whether the adopted policy response would divert to mental health therapy or continue to support the funding of refuges and work towards more effective justice system measures.

In Australia the predisposition propositions had been taken up in research by John Price, Reader in Psychiatry, and Jean Armstrong, Research Social Worker, at the University of Queensland to test ‘the possibility that wives who are battered are in some way predisposed to be treated in this way’ (Price and Armstrong 1978: 43.) Comparing the ‘hostility levels’ of a sample of women whose partnerships had recently broken up over violence with recently separated women who had not experienced violence, they sought to establish ‘differences in … experience of violence prior to marriage’ and ‘differences in hostility as a personality characteristic which could act so as to provoke violent attack’ (Price and Armstrong 1978: 43; italics added). Their conclusions were that the fathers of the battered women ‘had more mental illness, were more violent and trended to be more strict’, although ‘[both] groups emerged as ... more hostile than a group of normal [sic] subjects’ (1978: 45). An earlier phase of this research was referred to in the RCHR Final Report; it was identified at the AIC Conference as the Australian example of the ‘individual peculiarities’ framing of domestic violence, although its authors were not present at the Conference (RCHR 1977, Vol. 4: 133; O’Donnell and Saville 1980: 80-1).

The key Conference paper in response to this approach was the work of Carol O’Donnell and Heather Saville (O’Donnell and Saville 1980). Their paper, initially distributed as an unpublished mimeograph, presented the findings of a research project funded by one of the Whitlam Commonwealth government IWY grants
Like the BCSR research in 1975, their research can be identified as strategic feminist work seeking to provide an authoritative, academically methodological, base for the living recognition made initially through refuge encounters. The authors set out to test many existing ‘assumptions regarding domestic violence’ and in particular to discover whether it was possible ‘to build up a “profile” of a typical battered woman’. Their conclusion was that ‘we are now convinced that there is no such thing as a typical battered woman, although we believe that it is possible to point towards situations where women are vulnerable’ (O’Donnell and Saville 1979:2-3). Their analysis confirmed and extended some of the conclusions about the extent and severity of the violence, its social distribution and relationship to alcohol use which were also demonstrated by the BCSR and RCHR (O’Donnell and Saville 1979:15, 26-7, 12, 19). But their defining contributions were their clear identification and then response to the conflict between the two prevailing analytical approaches to domestic violence, one emphasising ‘the individual peculiarities of marriage partners’ and the other ‘the structural inequality built into male and female roles in our society’ (O’Donnell and Saville 1979:7).

O’Donnell and Saville confronted the ‘individual peculiarities’ approach in two ways: they reviewed and challenged the literature (O’Donnell and Saville 1979:7-8); and they used analysis of their sample to contradict claims both for a masochistic predisposition among beaten women, and that it resulted from mistreatment in childhood. Only 9.6% of their sample of 145 women had been assaulted by more than one man, and so could possibly be open to a claim of a ‘predisposition’ to violent partners; moreover, half of those assaulted by more than one man ‘had no history of family violence’. They thus concluded that ‘... with over 90% of the women, it seemed unlikely that predisposition to assault played a part in the violence they experienced’ (1979: 17-8). On the other hand, the authors concur with claims based on the unruly behaviour of children in refuges that it was likely that ‘male children who have been witness to their mothers’ beating will frequently exhibit similar aggressive characteristics’ (O’Donnell and Saville 1979:17-18). This separation of the implications for girls and women, and for boys and men, of a ‘cycle of violence’
approach would be significant, through its offer of a preventative justification, in later policy related arguments.

In their second analytical contribution, O’Donnell and Saville argued that the situation faced by the women in their sample, and particularly those problems which made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to leave their violent partners, were the result of ‘the nature of power relationships’ and in particular ‘power inequalities’ through the ‘structural inequality present within the marital relationship, and within sex role divisions in [society in] general’ (O’Donnell and Saville 1979: 12, 20.) In the 1980 AIC Conference version of the paper this was expressed as ‘the structural inequality built into male and female roles’ (O’Donnell and Saville 1980: 88). Using the same kinds of information identified by the RCHR, essentially those practical dilemmas which define a woman’s access to the possibility of maintaining an autonomous household, O’Donnell and Saville built it into a structural analysis of the inequalities shaping women’s lives. They demonstrated that women with well paid jobs and no children stayed in violent relationships for a shorter time; that lack of adequately paid work, job security and access to affordable childcare reinforced women’s economic dependence on their partners; the housing difficulties of single mothers; and the socialisation of women ‘to play a nurturing, caring, self-effacing role as wives and mothers’ (O’Donnell and Saville 1979: 22-4). All of this supported their conclusion that: ‘Whilst sexual inequality is the paramount explanation for continuing spouse abuse, class inequality makes some women particularly vulnerable. .... It is clear that if these women only have access to low paid work, or face unemployment if they leave, then the likelihood of them being beaten frequently and for a prolonged period is greatly increased’ (O’Donnell and Saville 1979: 28-9).

As with the BCSR research, the significance of this paper, including in a policy activist context, is indicated by republication and references in subsequent work. It was published three times, with interesting, possibly strategic, changes from its initial title of ‘Domestic Violence and Power’, to titles emphasising the social and economic structural analysis, namely ‘Sex and Class Inequality and Domestic Violence’ and ‘Domestic Violence and Sex and Class Inequality’ for the two subsequent printings (O’Donnell and Saville 1979, 1980, 1982). It is also significant, as well as evident, that O’Donnell and Saville’s research and analysis were based in a refuge context.
Heather Saville became a working member of a refuge collective during the course of the project; women resident in that refuge constituted the research sample; and the analytical conclusions reflect as well as demonstrate the central refuge feminist concerns to establish the personal autonomy of women suffering violence and to demonstrate the structural connections between domestic violence and the circumstances denying women access to an autonomous household.

In the context of the 1979 AIC Conference, O’Donnell and Saville’s was not the only paper which contributed to both the building feminist construction of domestic violence and to policy activist strategy. Tess Rod’s paper demonstrated that the perpetrators of half the murders carried out in NSW were spouses or close kin; that the spouse murders, three quarters of which were perpetrated by males, typically occurred as part of a wider pattern of domestic violence; and that those perpetrated by males often occurred after the female partner had left. This important work informed the policy demonstration of the urgency of protective measures for women fleeing partner violence, and fuelled the defence of women who killed after suffering long term violence (Rod 1980). The significance of Penelope Stratmann’s paper reviewing legal resources available to Australian domestic violence victims and the innovations offered by the UK Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976 has been referred to in relation to the WAB/NWAC law reform proposals in Chapter Four (Stratmann 1980). Vivien Johnson, whose contribution to the Marrickville refuge history was introduced above, directed her paper on women’s refuges to shifting the analysis from the individual pathology dangers of overemphasis of the ‘psychopathic wife basher’ to the structural proposition of ‘a theory of marriage as an inherently violent institution’ (Johnson 1980: 198, 200-2).

The papers that come closest to identification with the individual pathology and therapy framing of family violence are the two describing the South Australian Crisis Care Unit, presented by its Supervisor, Andrew Paterson (Paterson 1980a and b). This Unit was a pre-refuge-feminism product of the concerns of social workers about family crisis situations; it involved professional psychologists and social workers, together with specially trained volunteers, working with police in family crisis situations ranging from spousal abuse to financial difficulties. Its foundation, and Patterson’s papers, expressed a psychologically based crisis intervention theory,
which could be read as running counter to the feminist analysis. Nevertheless, by the
time of the AIC Conference, staff of the Crisis Unit were participating, in cooperation
with representatives of feminist refuges and rape crisis centres, in the domestic
violence committee set up by the SA Premier’s Women’s Adviser (Patterson 1980b:
179; interview material). The Crisis Unit is an example of a policy response shaped
by one framing, which successfully integrated with the developing feminist analysis
and was taken up in subsequent policy activist proposals. It eventually provided the
model for the feminist policy activist driven initiation of the ACT Domestic Violence
Crisis Unit (Hopkins and McGregor 1991: 48-9).

BUILDING AND CONSOLIDATING: BEYOND THE 1979 AIC
CONFERENCE

This section considers two publications which built on the work presented at the AIC
Conference. They represent the fullest and most confident statements of the feminist
social structures representation of violence against women and children which
developed in this period.

The first of these publications is the book edited by Carol O’Donnell and Jan Craney
under the title: *Family Violence in Australia* (O’Donnell and Craney 1982). This book
came about as a direct strategic response to the AIC Conference and the alarming
demonstration it provided of the challenge the feminist analysis faced from
established individual pathology representations (interview material).

The strategies employed, and the major contributions made, by O’Donnell and Craney
in this book were threefold. The first of these was their strong endorsement of a
social, and particularly family, structures analysis of violence towards women and
children, and the clear location of this recognition in the women’s movement
(O’Donnell and Craney 1982a: x-xi). This conviction was expressed in the second
contribution made by the book: the re-printing of a number of pivotal pieces of
feminist social structures work, together with several complementary papers. Central
among these was the O’Donnell and Saville paper, which was republished in full
(O’Donnell and Saville 1982). The 1975 report by the NSW Bureau of Criminal
Statistics and Research on victims’ interviews with Chamber Magistrates was also
reprinted, and Penelope Stratmann contributed an extended version of her AIC paper on legal resources (BCSR 1982; Stratmann 1982). A further piece of work with significance for policy development was a paper by Wendy Bacon and Robyn Lansdowne raising the vexed issue of the availability of legal defences of provocation and self-defence to women who killed long term violent partners (Bacon and Lansdowne 1982). Another was Jocelynne Scutt’s paper on ‘the police response’, arguing that police and other justice system personnel should be trained to ‘use the powers they already possess to deal with persons who commit crimes upon those to whom they are wed, or those with whom they are living’ (Scutt 1982: 117).

The third, and the most dramatically new, contribution made by O’Donnell and Craney through their book is signalled by their statement that: ‘children … always remain the most vulnerable members of any society’ (O’Donnell and Craney 1982a: xi). In response to this conviction, the editors provided two articles in which they applied the feminist social structures analysis to child abuse, including incest (O’Donnell and Craney 1982b and c, see in particular 1982a: xi; 1982b: 172). These were courageous analytical breakthroughs preparing the way for the next stages of feminist work to counter child abuse. The policy strategies which followed go beyond the focus of this thesis; but it must be recorded here that a visit by Jan Craney and Carol O’Donnell to Helen L’Orange, then Director of the NSW Women’s Coordination Unit, to offer the challenge that feminists should be working for children as well as women suffering violence, helped to stimulate the program on child abuse launched from the NSW Women’s Coordination Unit soon after the publication of their book (interview material; NSWCSA 1985).

The second book to be considered in this section was also the work of a participant in the 1979 AIC Conference. Jocelynne Scutt’s Even in the Best of Homes. Violence in the Family (Scutt 1983) is a study of the experiences of family violence of members of three hundred and twelve families, whom she reached through Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) newsletters and conferences, on country and city visits as a member of the NSW Women’s Advisory Council between 1978 and 1981, through other publicity and through the refuge movement (vii, ix-x). During her research, Scutt also attended National Women’s Refuge Conferences in 1980 and 1982, sat on the Women’s Refuge Evaluation Committee in NSW, shared discussions with women’s
refuge collectives and was an active participant in both the Women’s Liberation movement and WEL (ix-x, 6-7). As has been noted with regard to Vivien Johnson, Jocelynne Scutt provides a one-woman demonstration of the multi-site but single identity nature of feminist activism at this time, as well as of the continuing interweaving of feminist representational and policy activism.

In a vigorous and individual voice and ranging across all identified forms of family violence, Scutt makes her most distinct contribution from her expertise in criminology and the law; but she also sums up the conclusions reached by the Australian feminist social structures representation of violence against women and children. Scutt demolishes the cycle of violence approach as ‘a new twist on the “blame the victim” syndrome’; exposes ‘psychological failing’ explanations of spouse abuse as an attempt to ‘explain away the contradiction’ between the ideal and reality of marriage; builds on the work of others in demolishing the myths of connections between domestic violence and economic status, unemployment, alcohol, the childhood background of either aggressor or victim and the supposed masochism of victims; and adds a demonstration that the law itself, and the ways in which it is policed and administered, express and reinforce the many structural inequalities which make women vulnerable to partner abuse (Scutt 1982: 96-7; 107-22; 126-41; 256-9; 281). Amongst this reinforcing review, one new feature stands out. Scutt is the first of those studied in this chapter who acknowledges men who suffer violence at the hands of female partners. She is at pains to demonstrate that they are a minority and that their circumstances, and particularly their economic advantages, differentiate them from female victims (Scutt 1982: 103-6, 111-4, 130, 133-5, 212-5, 225-7, 266-7, 276-7). Her care is an indication both that the reverse-claim challenge to feminist analysis of domestic violence has begun, and that, consequently, it has become strategically necessary to demonstrate that such violence is most usually perpetrated by men against women.

In a statement which breaks new ground in the building of the social construction analysis of domestic violence traced in this chapter, Scutt concludes: ‘As long as some people in our society (men) have more rights than other people in society (women and children), domestic violence in all its forms will continue. … To eradicate ... child abuse, child sexual molestation, spouse assault, marital rape and
marital murder, women must gain public and private autonomy, and children must be recognised as human beings with rights. … For women and children, battered, brutalised and exploited in their own homes, the remedy is the same. Men must alter their way of life’ (Scutt 1982: 281, 282, 285).

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter opened by posing a series of questions that positioned the feminist analytical process in response to domestic violence as part of the policy activist narrative. Those questions queried the relationship between the processes of representation building and policy activism, raising the issue of whether and how policy activist strategies or the demands of engagement with the policy process might have moulded, or even compromised, the representational process. The documents I have analysed in the chapter demonstrate a degree of integration between the representational and policy activist processes which makes such concerns, at least at this stage of the Australian feminist engagement with domestic violence, unnecessary. That demonstration also confirms the conclusion reached in the previous chapter that a significant degree of integration in a range of contexts is among the distinguishing characteristics of the domestic violence policy process.

Two kinds of integration have been demonstrated in this chapter. The first of these returns to one of the other distinguishing characteristics of the domestic violence policy narrative already identified in the thesis, that is, the nature and roles of the players in the process. I have demonstrated that the roles of, and relationships between, the players involved in the domestic violence representation building process were as significant as they have been found to be elsewhere in the feminist activist and policy activist process. In this chapter, in a process in which the roles and contributions of the participants continued to diversify, it has once again been discovered that their vision, commitment and often also their experience remained integrated. The women suffering violence continued their role as instigators and drivers, sometimes invited but consistently making immanent interventions whenever opportunities arose. The primary site for such encounters continued to be the women’s refuge. The new element in the process in this period was that the initial procedures of telling and listening were extended by academically informed research
methodologies; this step meant that the roles and locations of the feminists contributing to the analytical process diversified. Nevertheless, it has been found that the identities of many involved, and certainly the vision and commitment from which they worked, remained consistent and in that sense integrated. The work and roles of Vivien Johnson, Jocelynne Scutt, Carol O’Donnell, Heather Saville and Jan Craney, for example, each encompassing both refuge engagement or awareness and varied academic and policy activist skills and experience, established a pattern often repeated in this period. The task they undertook as a contribution of strategic activism was to test and extend the learning that began in the refuges, and to strengthen its authority, by application of their professional skills. The strategy they contributed was the one Nancy Fraser has defined as the construction of ‘bridge discourses, which mediate the relations between social movements and the state’ (Fraser 1989: 11, quoted Bacchi 1999a: 11, emphasis in original). It must also be acknowledged that this work was also integrated by the fact that some of these women also silently carried knowledge shaped by experience of male violence in their own lives (interview material).

The second, and related, kind of integration observed in the process I have investigated in this chapter was the interweaving between feminist activism, policy activism and analysis building evident in every piece of work examined here. Such interweaving continued the process driven by necessity, identified as one of ‘in at the deep end’ and ‘on the run’, which characterised the first stages of feminist engagement with domestic violence in the early 1970s. Just as a policy activist response and language were required within weeks of the first commitment to Elsie and the other first refuges, so the continuing lived process of representation building was interwoven with response to the practical dilemmas discovered in refuge practice, and ideas about the policy directions they demanded. The research projects examined contributed to this integrated process as they extended exploration of the women’s practical dilemmas, critiqued existing policy resources and strengthened the strategic authority of the feminist framing.

The integrated process I have demonstrated also indicates the way in which the analytical framing process both reflected and preserved the distinct positioning of the refuge movement and refuge feminism, which has been identified as another defining aspect of the domestic violence policy narrative. Whether observed in terms of the
roles and identities of the participants, or of the consistency of the analysis constructed, the framing process both continued and built on the distinctive insider/outsider relationship to the policy process maintained by the refuge movement. This, in turn, positioned the refuge movement and refuge feminists for the strategic role they would play in the next stages of policy development, at state government level.

To turn to the thesis theme concerned with the contextual implications of the domestic violence policy activist process, it is clear that the uncontested nature of the early stages of that process, also identified once more as a distinguishing characteristic of the policy process narrative, provided a significant context of opportunity for the representational process. It meant that the process of feminist representation building could shape the feminist position in terms of, but also in challenge to, the structural representational opportunities of its context, without the tactical demands of the precarious set piece public inquiries that shaped the early framing process in Canada, the USA and the UK. When the first public encounter between the feminist framing and the individual pathology construction of family violence occurred at the 1979 AIC Conference, the context was located away from the immediate policy arena and shaped as an engagement between expert equals, including refuge feminists, and the feminist analysis had already been both confidently constructed and reinforced by research demonstration.

Arrival at a confident, well supported social construction framing of domestic violence was the most significant achievement of the feminist analytical work investigated in this chapter. That analysis was built on and reflected the broad structural representation of women’s disadvantages adopted by feminism in this period; it offered, in turn, a representational reinforcement both to the wider feminist analysis, and to the women’s policy enterprise which expressed it. The domestic violence analysis was also crucial, as has been discussed, in establishing the place of domestic violence in relation to the policy agenda. How the subsequent relationship between the feminist framing of domestic violence and the related policy processes worked in practice, both with regard to domestic violence and through the wider women’s agenda, will be investigated in the next chapter.