

‡  
CHALLENGING VICTIM DISCOURSE:  
RE-MEMBERING THE STORIES OF WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN BATTERED

by

MARGARET CARTER

B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1993

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
Department of Counselling Psychology

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 1997

© Margaret Carter, 1997

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Date April 23/97

### **Abstract**

This study problematizes the notion of victim in the context of women who have experienced battering in their intimate committed relationships. To this end I interviewed four women, using an in-depth semi-structured interview to obtain the women's narratives. I examined the women's narratives in order to analyze how they constructed and interpreted their experiences of victimization as well as how they perceived and defined themselves. The intent was to render visibility to the uniqueness, complexity, diversity, and commonalities of these women's stories. Women who have experienced battering are important to this study because the label "victim" is frequently applied to them regardless of whether these women define themselves or construct their experiences in terms of being victims or of being battered.

Critiquing dominant perspectives, attending to broader cultural contexts, and exploring marginalized realities are indicative of a longstanding feminist agenda. Psychology and counselling psychology are constructed within dominant historical and sociocultural contexts. Mainstream and popular psychological texts, in their attempts to establish grand theories and prevailing norms, have tended to engage in oversimplified textual constructions presumed to reflect lived realities, yet ignoring both individual and broader contexts. In this thesis I attend both to contexts and to marginalized realities.

The significance of this project lies in its potential to enhance current therapeutic and counselling practices. Additionally, it provides a challenge to the often presumed innocent employment of language without regard for its significant meanings and impact. It is critical that professionals working with women who are experiencing battering, understand the complexity of their experiences without imposing labels that limit these women's identities and are incongruent with their lived realities. This thesis problematizes dominant discourse regarding victims and victimization in an exploration of multiple, sometimes seemingly contradictory meanings, and diverse processes.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	iii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	v
<b>Dedication</b> .....	vi
<b>Quotations</b> .....	vii
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
Defining the Terms .....	5
A Movement Toward Social and Political Concerns Regarding Battering .....	9
The Role of Media as Providing Context.....	13
Locating Myself .....	15
<b>Chapter Two: Introducing the Women, the Experiential Experts</b> .....	19
Contextualized Self-portraits .....	22
Narratives of Victimization Experiences .....	37
<b>Chapter Three: The Theoretical Experts</b> .....	52
Theories of Victimization .....	52
Intrapersonal Perspectives .....	52
Interpersonal Perspectives .....	53
Sociocultural and Feminist Perspectives .....	56
Texts that Attempt to Hear Women's Voices .....	58
Therapeutic, Self-help and Popular Media Texts .....	60
My Subjective Concerns .....	65
<b>Chapter Four: The Research Defined: Methodology and Methods</b> .....	68
Methodology .....	68
Listening to and Hearing Women's Voices .....	68
Qualitative Research .....	70
Feminist Research .....	72
Social Constructionism .....	73
Language .....	73
Method .....	75
Co-researchers/participants .....	75
Interviews .....	76
Listening and Hearing as Method.....	79
Narratives .....	81
The Process of Analysing the Interviews .....	83
<b>Chapter Five: Hearing More From the Women</b> .....	86
Family of Origin Experiences .....	87
The Role of Friends' Perceptions and Others' Responses .....	94
Cultural Mandates Defining the Public and Private Nature of our Lives .....	99
Conclusion .....	102



<b>Chapter Six: Struggles and Management Strategies</b> .....	103
Adjustment and Coping .....	103
Analysing as a Strategy .....	107
Experiences of Disbelief, Minimizing, and Acts of Denial .....	112
Ambivalence Linked to Struggle .....	116
Explorations of the Oft Forgotten/negated Feelings of Attachment .....	119
Conclusion .....	122
<b>Chapter Seven: Issues of Leaving</b> .....	123
Responsibility and Blame .....	123
Structural Barriers .....	130
The <i>Process</i> of Leaving .....	140
Leaving the Relationship .....	150
Conclusion .....	155
<b>Chapter Eight: Analyzing Victim Discourse</b> .....	156
A Social Construct .....	156
Subjective Responses to the Victim Construct .....	158
Victim as a Temporary Self-Perception .....	165
The Problematics of Self-Identification: If Not Victim, Then What? .....	167
Victim as a Single Identity .....	172
Conclusion .....	174
<b>Chapter Nine: Issues Pertaining to Counselling Practices</b> .....	176
Hindering Responses from Counselling Professionals .....	177
Primary Focus on Relationship Issues and/or on the Individual Woman .....	177
Circumventing Appropriate Naming of the Violence .....	185
Safety and/or Escape Plans .....	187
Additional Concerns .....	188
Beneficial Counselling Practices .....	190
Other Issues that Warrant Consideration .....	194
Inner/Counter Voice .....	194
Cognitions Are Not Enough .....	198
Mind/Body and Myself/Others Dichotomies in Popular Psychology .....	200
Choiceless Choices .....	204
Shame .....	205
Fear and Terror .....	207
Conclusion .....	209
<b>Chapter Ten: Some Summary Thoughts</b> .....	211
Conclusion: An Overview .....	211
Limitations .....	214
Implications .....	215
<b>References</b> .....	218
<b>Appendix A: Invitation to Participate</b> .....	228
<b>Appendix B: Telephone Protocol</b> .....	230
<b>Appendix C: Consent Form</b> .....	233
<b>Appendix D: Interview Guide</b> .....	235

## Acknowledgements

Completing the research and writing up this thesis represents a long and intense journey for me. I am grateful to the various individuals in my life who remained supportive and constant throughout this time. I wish to thank my son Alex for his computer talents, for his willingness and his creativity in rescuing me from the perils of a technology that at times was beyond me. I am grateful to Simone for her unending hope and trust that I would someday finish this work and get a "real" job. The two of you provided delightful relief, daily grounding, and important challenges for me, and to the academics that at times seemed far too removed from our day-to-day situations.

It is with pleasure that I thank my committee members for their enthusiastic support and genuine interactions. I appreciated Bonita Long for her tireless and repeated perusals of the manuscript, for her comments with respect to necessary changes, and also for our many sensitive and discerning discussions with respect to the content in this thesis, as well as other related issues. My thanks also goes to Sally Thorne for her warm and insightful responses that spurred me on.

There were others who provided support, encouragement, and intellectual stimulation. I am very grateful to Waltraud and Ulrich Schaffer for their unending faith and their ongoing practical and emotional support. I would like to thank Annaliese Vanderbijl for her reading of the manuscript, her comments and clarity, as well as for our various stimulating and penetrating discussions. A deep appreciation goes to Gwen Sullivan for her supportive interactions, her trust in my ability, and her eagerness to read and discuss the material at the eleventh hour. A great appreciation also goes to Cheryl Heinzl for her continuous confidence and untiring willingness to hear about the process and the contents. I would like to thank my sister Hermina Louwersheimer for her consistent emotional support and for those years of growing up together to view others with respect and care.

Finally, I wish to thank the women who participated in the research for this thesis. They took the risk of speaking with me without fully knowing how I might respond nor what my perspective might be. They taught me much about intimate suffering, about the manner in which a particular kind of suffering is handled in our society, and about the problematics of labels. I was inspired by their courage and moved by the depth and intensity of what they shared with me. Without them this thesis would not have been possible.

**Dedication**

It is with thankfulness and appreciation that I dedicate this work to my children,  
Alex and Simone. It is my hope that you will continue to think critically and  
feel compassionately in your various endeavors.

## Quotations

### The Tao of Pooh (excerpt)

Now one rather annoying thing about scholars is that they are always using Big Words that some of us can't understand ... and one gets the impression that those intimidating words are there to *keep* us from understanding. That way, the scholars can appear Superior, and will not likely be suspected of Not Knowing Something. After all, from the scholarly point of view, it's practically a crime not to know everything.

But sometimes the knowledge of the scholar is a bit hard to understand because it doesn't seem to match up with our own experience of things. In other words, Knowledge and Experience do not necessarily speak the same language. But isn't the knowledge that comes from experience more valuable than the knowledge that doesn't? It seems fairly obvious to some of us that a lot of scholars need to go outside and sniff around - walk through the grass, talk to the animals. That sort of thing.

"Lots of people talk to animals," said Pooh.

"Maybe but ..."

"Not very many *listen*, though," he said.

"That's the problem," he added.

In other words, you might say that there is more to Knowing than just being correct. ... To the Desiccated Scholars, putting names on things is the most vital activity in the world. Tree. Flower. Dog. But don't ask them to prune the tree, plant the flower, or take care of the dog, unless you enjoy Unpleasant Surprises. Living, growing things are beyond them, it seems.

Now, scholars can be very useful and necessary, in their own dull and unamusing way. They provide a lot of information. It's just that there is Something More, and that Something More is what life is really all about. (Hoff, 1982, p.28-31).

### Storytelling: A constellation (excerpts)

Storytelling stands at the edge of the campfire, listening in, part of, but not in control of whatever's going on. ...

*Storytelling is a constellation of powers, an alignment of energies, a transitory cohesiveness and integrity of focus and purpose, a force created almost entirely through the act of listening.*

Listening is the ground of being upon which stories grow, against which story exists, and out of which Storytelling weaves her particular magic. All voices have access to stories, all beings have access to voices; it is the act of listening that makes story manifest, makes it happen.

*Storytelling is the Keeper of tales which encompass history, meaning, truth, for whole families, whole communities, whole societies, and fragments thereof. Storyteller is a role that includes intimacy with Storytelling, but is not the same thing. The tales of Storyteller carry the bony structure for new life to gather on, to gather around, to grow over in a distinct, culturally particular, pattern. The tales of Storytelling are the ever-changing answers to the questions, what's happening, what's going on right here, right now. Storyteller teaches, trains, heals, with stories that change slowly and recreate, endure. Storytelling tumbles the heart's truths onto the dirt floor. (Arnott, 1994, p.25, 26, & 28)*

## Introduction

Self preservation is a full-time occupation  
 I'm determined to survive on this shore  
 You know I don't avert my eyes anymore  
 in a man's world - I'm a woman by birth  
 and after nineteen times around I have found  
 they will stop at nothing once they know what  
 you are worth -  
 Talk to me -  
 - Ani Difranco

*Why*  
 You forgot to recognise my value  
 You neglected to nurture my love  
 I can no longer struggle in this barren wasteland  
 I turn to discover self.  
 - Kathleen

In this study I problematized the notion of victim in the context of women who have experienced battering in their intimate committed relationships. Using the women's narratives, I explored how they constructed and interpreted their experiences of victimization, as well as how they perceived themselves, and I linked these explorations to broader sociocultural discourses with respect to the word 'victim.' This thesis, therefore, manifests accounts of particular thwarted social relations, those of women who have experienced coercive control in their significant intimate relationships. Although the narratives presented here echo the women's voices and record their subjective experiences, they also make it possible to explore these women's historically located processes as linked to a wider web of sociocultural beliefs and practices that interacted with their experiences. That is, their stories are embedded in larger contexts, in socioculturohistorical contexts that had an impact on how these women entered and negotiated intimate relationships, and that also affected their understanding and interpretation of these experiences. Additionally, contemporary awareness and analyses of intimate relational violence mirror broader political and historical shifts. In this introductory chapter, subsequent to a discussion of the working definitions used in this thesis, I briefly address these shifts, followed by an outline of some of the media events surrounding the time of my research, thereby contextualizing the occasion of my work. I conclude this chapter by locating myself.

In the second chapter, in keeping with my commitment to privilege the voices of the women who participated in this study, I introduce the women through their narratives. I

present these narratives as potentially linked or interacting with coexisting and seemingly parallel or competing voices that I saw or heard in popular media, culture, and society at large over the time of my interviews. Much change has occurred that reflects the strong political activity by organized individuals, particularly feminists, and much of this activity and change was also made possible by the contributions of the sometimes unnoticed women who were or are being victimized. In this thesis, I hope to participate in the literature that gives these women recognition for their tenacity, ingenuity, and courage. Their lives have important implications for those who work in the helping professions, notably regarding the constructions of what it means to be a victim and an agent, and how these constructions are used.

In the third chapter, I present a review of the available literature, highlighting existing dominant approaches to women who have experienced battering along with a critique of each model. The existing literature focuses primarily on explanations, descriptions, and prescriptions in their analyses of women who experience violence. For example, researchers have investigated the women's personalities, their personal histories, and have questioned why they stay. These examinations have not attempted to understand the *subjective* meanings of the woman's experiences, her self-perceptions, her processes, the shifts that she alternatively or potentially engages in, or the language she uses to describe any of these. In addition, the literature tends to present analyses that stress oppositional, polarised, exclusionary labels such as victim versus survivor, or victim versus agent without recognition of a continuum of experience, or the possibility that each experience includes a variety of other seemingly incongruent, contradictory experiences. Being a victim, being perceived as a victim, or labelled as a victim must not be taken lightly given the trend in recent years toward impatience and dismissal regarding women's accounts of intimate abuse. Furthermore, much research and theorizing in the field of psychology lacks any analysis or recognition of power differentials, social contexts, or social structures. Recognition and understanding that victimization is part of living in our society is imperative to nonjudgmental, effective intervention strategies. Those who share in the experiences of people who are or have been victimized can hopefully make a compassionate effort to hear and make sense of those experiences. By hearing and understanding the impact that language and the meaning of the word victim has on

individual women, we will choose our words more carefully and caringly, in ways that connect and create meaning between us, rather than further isolating and shaming women with respect to their experiences of victimization.

In the fourth chapter, I launch into the methodology and methods employed in my study. I begin this chapter by contextualizing this research with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that informed my work including ethnography, feminist research, and social constructionism. This is followed by a clarification of my method, my use of semi-structured interviews in order to listen to and hear the narratives of these women's lives. As Polkinghorne (1988) states, narratives are schemes that enable us to give significance to our personal experiences and our behaviors. They provide a means of gaining insight into how events and processes are understood and interpreted. Hence, listening to lived experiences told in story-form is the method used in this study because it is suitable to investigating the meaning and subjective perceptions of victimization as articulated by women who have experienced battering in their intimate relationships. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the analysis I conducted on the women's narratives.

The focus in Chapter five is on the women's interpretations concerning the roles of their families of origin and the roles of others in their lives in relation to their intimate relationships. This chapter concludes with a discussion based on my thoughts and concerns resulting from a variety of interesting statements made by the women that suggest cultural imperatives that both circumscribe and prescribe particular kinds of behaviors, especially regarding marital-type relationships.

In Chapter six, the focus is on those aspects of the women's narratives that indicate their struggles and strategies. The women delineated their experiences of adjusting to and coping with their relationships, as well as speaking of intense and ongoing analysis of their situations, their relationships, and their partners' behaviors as indicative of strategies that gave them a modicum of management. In their narratives they addressed powerful reactions of disbelief, whereby they consequently minimized and/or denied the seriousness of their experiences. Their behaviors of minimizing or denying took place within a larger context of others who minimized and denied their experiences. The women described their struggle as intimately defined by ambivalence and the frequently forgotten, but deeply

rooted attachments central to the relationships. Their experiences of victimization were multifaceted and intersected with a variety of issues in these women's lives. Their explorations complexify the meaning of the word victim.

The focus in Chapter seven is on issues that relate to the women leaving those relationships in which they experienced battering. A dominant assumption about leaving is that it is a time-bound event whereas these women described shifts and transitions that took place in the relationships sometimes over long periods of time. The shifts were linked to various events, behaviors, and/or individuals that were importantly interconnected with the issue of leaving. The women spoke of feeling responsible and at fault in the context of a society that assigns women the primary responsibility for maintaining and sustaining healthy, vital relationships. In their attempts to seek outside help the women formulated experiences with professionals in which they felt shamed, invisible, invalidated, and negated. Consequently, their struggle reflected a more complicated process of leaving.

In the first seven chapters, the women's narratives unfold with respect to how they *spoke of* and *defined* their experiences of emotional, psychological, and/or physical violations in the context of an intimate relationship in which they also encountered diverse and deeply moving experiences of intimacy and emotional attachment. By implication their stories problematize the current dominant definition of the word victim because these narratives infer that the meaning of 'victim,' particularly with regard to intimate settings, is not a simple, easily reducible one, but instead indicates complex, multifaceted and interactive factors. Although the intent or focus of these earlier chapters was not primarily to analyse victim discourse, this is nevertheless a derivative of presenting these women's discourses as the women annotate their various and overlapping experiences of victimization in their own words. The narratives permit *outsider* glimpses into the *insider* experience of what it means for these women to encounter victimization, potentially enabling us to gain insight into their deep struggles, as well as their strengths in the face of conflicting contradictory experiences and adversity. The women's discourse regarding victimization is reflected in their narrations wherein these women define their self-perceptions and their process of meaning-making.

The first seven chapters, with the exception of chapters three and four, present interview content that was co-constructed and arose spontaneously in talking with the



women. Chapter eight, in addition to presenting the women's perceptions, also highlights my impetus for doing this thesis, that is, my interest in problematizing the word 'victim.' Whereas in the previous chapters the focus is primarily on the women's narratives with minimal interaction from me, in Chapter eight, still grounded in the women's words, I interact with and extrapolate from the content of the interviews, making links to dominant pertinent literature and a broader context. In this chapter, I examine more closely these women's employment of the victim construct and the usefulness/uselessness of this construct as defined by the women. Additionally, I examine their self-conceptualizations in the context of speaking about their victimization versus dominant constructions. Similarly in Chapter nine, predicated on the women's articulations and explorations with respect to their encounters with helping professionals, I discuss implications for counselling practices, again turning to relevant literature where appropriate.

The attendance to and treatment of experiences of intimate violence have gone through significant historical shifts in recent years. In part this is linked to changes in the language employed and in shifting definitions. Clarification of language employment and operating definitions are central to insightful understanding, especially of critical experiences. Hence, I clarify my usage of particular words and/or phrases in this thesis, to be followed by an examination of the historical context encompassing the issue of battering as experienced by women in intimate committed relationships.

### **Defining the Terms**

It is essential to define the terms as they are used in this project because although definitional differences may appear subtle or superficial, different words do have different meanings and consequent implications. Terms or labels have an historical context, and increasing public awareness of widespread familial violence noted over the past few decades has resulted in clearer identification and naming of the various forms of violence. Consequently, for example, there has been a shift in terms from spousal assault or family violence (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980) to wife assault and wife battering (Walker, 1990). This implies a recognition of a gendered problem that has aided the process of assessment, and has resulted in improved identification of specific needs. The use of explicit terms, such as "battered woman," came primarily out of the feminist movement, based on their analysis that the terms "spousal assault" and "family violence" masked the

violence perpetrated against women and obscured the power imbalance. I concur with Levin's (1992) analysis that the term "battering" connotes violence in intimate partnerships, whereas the words abuse, violence, assault, or beating, are applied to a broader range of social contexts in which women or children in particular experience violence. Straus and Gelles (1988) echo my perspective when they state:

there will never be an accepted or acceptable definition of abuse, because abuse is not a scientific or clinical term. Rather, it is a political concept. Abuse is essentially any act that is considered deviant or harmful by a group large enough (*or person*)\* or with sufficient political power to enforce the definition (p.57). (\*my insertion)

Hence, my preference for the specific words "battering" or "battered" throughout this study rather than broad spectrum terms.

Political and social implications of naming the battering and recognizing it as a gendered experience have resulted in more appropriate assessment of the frequency and severity of wife assaults, and also in acknowledging the limitations of prevailing structures to adequately protect the women, or to effectively place sanctions against the offenders (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dutton, 1984; Walker, 1979). A less recognized implication of naming the battering, however, is the tendency to essentialize the women who have experienced violence in their intimate relationships, that is, referring to these women strictly in terms of their battering experiences when we speak of "battered women." My personal preference, therefore, is to use the phrase "women who have been battered" as I think it is critical to remember that these women are much more than their battering experiences, nor should they be categorically grouped together in a manner that implies all encompassing similarities, disregarding diversity in their subjective experiences and interpretations. I do not assume that these women, based on their experiences of battering, all had the same encounters, nor that they have the same interpretations. Moreover, any similarities that are present are not presumed to be either precipitant or resultant to their experiences of intimate violence per se.

In spite of my preference for the longer and sometimes seemingly cumbersome phrase "women who have experienced battering," I do recognise and have used the term "battered women" in other contexts although I attempt to maintain consistency. For example, I acknowledge that there is research that endeavors to assess service needs as well as gaps in services, and such research requires the use of identifying or descriptive terms in

order to establish the figures and facts regarding incident rates. In order to assess the need for shelters, or changes in protection and justice policies, we need statistics that frequently (hopefully temporarily) reduce people to apparently impersonal labels and faceless categories. This seems necessary, however, if we are going to maintain and continue to increase public awareness, enable access to funding, and increase necessary protection. Nevertheless it is both strategic and imperative that we remember that these women do not limit their self-definitions to their battering experiences.

Finally, regarding terms used in this paper, the idiom "battered woman" is used interchangeably, in the literature and amongst those working in the field, with the terms wife battering, wifebeating, wife abuse, and wife assault, constituting heterosexual experiences. It is consequential to use a term that includes women in heterosexual and in lesbian relationships in which battering occurs. Whereas the term "spousal abuse" masks the power differential between the aggressor (most often the man) and the recipient (most often the woman), the term wife assault masks the salient concern raised more recently, that battering occurs in some intimate woman-to-woman relationships. A process of clearly naming the battering that women experience requires avoiding naive assumptions that power differentials and experiences of violence do not occur in intimate female partnerships (Hart, 1986; Lobel, 1986).

It is pertinent at this point that I briefly address the heterosexuality in my research regarding the women I interviewed. In the Invitation to Participate (Appendix A) in my research, I avoided exclusionary or limiting language, thereby inviting women in heterosexual and in same-sex relationships to participate in this study. In spite of my open invitation, the women who called and became involved were all heterosexual. Given my aversion to inclusion attempts that simply imply token representations, along with my time constraint, I did not pursue this issue further. Notwithstanding the interviewees being heterosexual, my commitment to inclusive language remains because I believe that this has potentially important sociopolitical consequences salient to issues of visibility. Moreover, based on my intention to be inclusive in this project, I had hoped to connect with women from diverse backgrounds in the Lower Mainland area. While I was not able to achieve ethnic or cultural diversity within this small sample of women, the participants were diverse in age and social circumstances. I concur with Opie (1994) who posits that a recognition of

diversity and an attendance to differences are ways of more fully representing the complexities of our society and our lived realities.

For the purpose of this paper, battering is defined as the events in which a woman is the recipient of physical and/or sexual abuse, or threat thereof, in which there is coercion of involuntary behaviors (e.g., sexual acts), or the restraint by another adult (e.g. from escape) with whom she has established an intimate relationship (Browne, 1987; Lobel, 1986; Walker, 1979). Battering behaviors are often repetitive and include pushing, shoving, slapping, hitting, kicking, burning, choking, throwing, or hitting with objects, forced sex, and threats of, or attacks with dangerous weapons (Margolin, 1987). The battering is frequently accompanied by verbal and psychological abuse, including threats to harm the children, other family members, friends, pets, prized possessions, and to damage the recipient's reputation. These behaviors are with the intention or perceived intention of inducing fear, establishing control, or maintaining power (Hart, 1986; Sinclair, 1985) and causing pain or bodily harm to the other person (Gelles & Straus, 1988). Although the literature largely focuses on multiple events, it must be noted that even a single event qualitatively changes the nature of a relationship, threatening the woman's sense of physical safety, shattering her trust, and heightening the meanings of previous threats and verbal aggression. Threatened or experienced violence establishes and affirms a power differential. It must also be noted that psychological and emotional components often occur without necessarily being accompanied by physical violence. Psychological and emotional assaults are defined as any acts that intend to cause psychological or emotional harm, or communications made that are perceived as having such an intent. The communication may be carried out actively, passively, verbally, or nonverbally and includes behaviors such as name-calling, ongoing put-downs or criticisms, threats, slamming or smashing objects, and obdurate silence or sulking (DeKeseredy & Hinch, 1991). Notably, each of these behaviors has the capacity to establish a power differential.

Finally, with regard to the word "victim," the same feminist sociopolitical movement that highlighted the need to define and name the battering also established clear recognition of "victims" of such unidirectional violence (Rodning, 1988), although primacy was given to women experiencing battering in heterosexual relationships. The recognition that these women were victims reflected the feminist agenda to obtain appropriate help and

services for the women who were, or are, being battered. The psychodynamic use of the label "victim" implies a needy, helpless, dependent woman who fears abandonment, lacks self esteem and somehow unconsciously desires exploitation (Koss, 1990; Symonds, 1978). In contrast, feminists use the term victim to connote violence in the context of a power differential. This struggle for recognition and understanding of these women as victims of violence, resulted in the victim construct acquiring new status thereby enabling access to much needed services. Recognition of or naming oneself as being a victim increased potential access to various resources. The implication, however, is again a tendency to essentialize or to identify the total woman in terms of one aspect of her life, that of experiencing victimization and therefore being a victim. This is not to say that the experience of victimization is not an all-encompassing kind of ordeal, but rather that there is a danger of denying or ignoring the woman's greater complexity, as exemplified by her active will to survive, and by her changing, growing, interactive humanity in spite of her victimizing circumstances. Of interest over recent years is that the word victim appears to have made an additional shift in meaning whereby it no longer refers primarily to a set of behaviors or circumstances external to the individual but rather it has come to refer to an implied psychological state. Statements such as "stop being a victim" or "stop acting the victim" shift the focus from the victimizing experience to the person, implying something internal to them that needs to change. This seems to be a return to the victim-blaming inherent in psychodynamic approaches that focused on individual characteristics. In this particular form of dominant discourse, the woman is viewed as *being* rather than doing, and *being* a victim is equated with being passive.

In contrast to the above use of the term victim, throughout this thesis victim is intended to refer to those women who have been harmed or injured in any way, psychologically, emotionally, and/or physically, in their intimate relationships, by one or several of the violating behaviors described in the above definition of battering. I recognise that the use of any descriptive term is not a neutral event, but rather that it has significant social, political, and psychological consequences, in accentuating or ignoring certain aspects of the problem. This is also true historically and is further illuminated by briefly considering the development of analyses and terms relating to violence as experienced by women in intimate relationships.

### **A Movement Toward Social and Political Concerns Regarding Battering**

In the 1960s, the women's movement engendered awareness of widespread violence against women and children, of previously unrecognized proportions. By the mid 1970s research and information became available regarding the frequency and severity of wife assault, forcing the recognition that existing legal and social structures were inadequate in addressing the issue or in providing help and protection to the women and sanctions against the offenders (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dutton, 1984; Walker, 1979). The increase in public awareness included a shift in terms, from spousal assault or family violence (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980) to wife assault and wife battering (Walker, 1990) permitting greater clarity and specificity in assessing the problem and identifying the women's needs. Although mainstream literature has predominantly presented a hegemonic heterosexual focus, there is recent literature that addresses battering in lesbian relationships (e.g., Eaton, 1994; Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992).

Although mainstream statistics that spurred public awareness are limited to heterosexual relationships, they nevertheless provide important information regarding the seriousness of battering, particularly since several authors posit that the rate, frequency, and type of violence found in heterosexual and lesbian relationships are comparable (Eaton, 1994; Hart, 1986; Renzetti, 1992).<sup>1</sup> According to two national victimization surveys, 1 in 10 women per year is physically and/or sexually assaulted by a husband, ex-husband, or common-law male partner and it is estimated that by the time of the first police report the woman has already been assaulted 35 times on average (CACSW, 1991). The British Columbia Task Force (Gran, 1992) reported that women are 13 times more likely to be abused in their homes than by a stranger and more likely to be injured by a male partner than in a car accident. In the Lower Mainland alone, it is estimated that four to five

---

<sup>1</sup> I concur with the critique coming out of the lesbian community regarding their invisibility and marginalization, and therefore include the following information. Studies revealing intralesbian battering suggests that the rates of violence are comparable to those occurring in heterosexual relationships (Eaton, 1994; Renzetti, 1992). The violent and coercive behaviors utilized in lesbian battering are similar to those recorded in male-on-female battering (Hart, 1986). They include assaults with knives, guns, and household objects, destruction of personal property, threats to injure self, the partner, and/or third parties, economic control, as well as psychological and/or emotional abuse. Unique to intralesbian battering is the threat of "homophobic control," a threat to tell family members, friends, and others that the victim is a lesbian, a powerful reminder of society's homophobic responses (Eaton, 1994; Hart, 1986). Given prevailing assumptions that lesbians are nonviolent, the effectiveness of this threat is intensified by triggering shame grounded in her own intimate knowledge of society's homophobia and a fear that no one will believe her.

thousand women are beaten severely enough to cause serious injury each year, the injuries include broken nose, arm, ribs, black eye, strangling marks, knife wounds, burns, dislocated neck, spine, or collar-bone, internal injuries such as bleeding, damaged spleens, kidneys and punctured lungs. Regarding homicides in Canada, it was found that in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s 39% were categorized as domestic homicides, with men who killed their wives or cohabiting partners forming the largest cohort of offenders (Johnson, 1988). Most, that is 50%, of the legally married offenders used guns to kill their wives, whereas cohabiting husbands used guns 34% and beatings 30% of the time (Johnson & Chisholm, 1989). Hence, in contrast to dominant assumptions, Canadian women are more likely to be killed by their husbands than by strangers on the street (Johnson, 1988). It appears that the major motives for these killings include anger, jealousy, revenge, and quarrels (Daly & Wilson, 1988).

Based on the frequency and seriousness of battering incidents in intimate relationships, it is highly likely that people working in the helping professions, such as counsellors and therapists, will be confronted with issues of intimate violence or battering in their work. It is critical that we be able to respond appropriately, caringly, with understanding, and without judgment of women who experience such violence. This requires a critical awareness of the dominant assumptions that frequently plague women who experience battering and have also informed counselling practices. These dominant presumptions frequently interfere with the women's efforts to obtain appropriate help and disrupt the efforts of professionals to interact effectively and empathically with the women.

A lack of understanding and prevailing pejorative, judgmental assumptions reflect five long-standing myths regarding heterosexual women who have experienced or are experiencing battering: (a) wife assault occurs only in lower socioeconomic classes (Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Hofeller, 1983), (b) wife assault is linked to alcohol abuse (Straus & Gelles, 1990), (c) the woman must have behaved in some manner to provoke the violence (Caplan, 1987; Pagelow, 1984), (d) the violence really cannot be that bad if she stays; she must get some gratification from such behaviors (Browne, 1987; Caplan, 1987), and finally (e) the myth of mutual combat (Saunders, 1988; Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Contrary to these myths battering crosses all social and economic boundaries (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). Although excessive drinking has

been found to be associated with higher rates of battering, alcohol is not an immediate antecedent to violence, nor has it been found to be a necessary or sufficient cause (Kantor & Straus, 1987). Many women never know what provokes an attack, particularly as the supposed provoking factors constantly change (Browne, 1987). Certainly women explicitly and implicitly disapprove of the violence and there is literature supporting that the women do *not* find it gratifying (Caplan, 1987). Last, studies reporting mutual battering reflect faulty methodology and analysis (Saunders, 1988), as they are based on quantitative counts of individual acts of violence without recognizing preceding events, the issue of self defense, or consequent injuries (Browne, 1987; Margolin, 1987). Furthermore, the literature suggests that the experiences of these women are complex, as indicated by the fact that leaving the relationship does not guarantee their safety (Browne, 1987; Straus & Gelles, 1990). By focusing on the women or such factors as socioeconomic status and alcohol, these myths shift the responsibility away from the individual who batters and as such they imply victim-blaming. Further, these myths are not grounded in the women's voices, nor in their subjective understandings or interpretations. Instead the meaning and understanding of the violent events is made external to the women by those not directly engaged in the events.<sup>2</sup>

These problematic myths or relational assumptions regarding battering result in additional victimization experiences for women already in vulnerable situations. They represent problems of misunderstandings that result from labels and constructs that include

---

<sup>2</sup> Again, I wish to state that these myths pertain primarily to heterosexual relationships and the myths surrounding intralesbian violence have their genesis in a somewhat different set of operating assumptions. One myth is linked to our reproductive capabilities, therefore assuming that women are life-giving, and generally less capable of violent or destructive behaviors. More specifically, for many lesbians, assumptions about lesbian nonviolence are grounded in the hopes and visions of aspiring to a distinct alternative community for women, permitting alternative non-violent choices and styles of living (Eaton, 1994). For many women their coming to the realization of a lesbian identity was through working within feminist politics, giving primacy to egalitarian, nonhierarchical, noncompetitive relationships, ones that were devoid of the power struggles they had identified in many heterosexual relations (Renzetti, 1992). Additional factors that result in cloaking intralesbian violence with silence include the mainstream narrow definition of family, society's difficulty in acknowledging and responding to battery, sociocultural homophobic norms, and finally the feminist and lesbian communities themselves that have failed to recognise and respond appropriately to intralesbian battering. For example, transition houses were designed to accommodate women needing safety from male-on-female violence with a policy to "believe the woman." This policy became problematic for many of those working with same-sex domestic violence cases, particularly if both women claimed to be victims of battering (Eaton, 1994). Because of such operating assumptions, some lesbians requiring shelter report having access denied (Hart, 1986).



some individuals while excluding others because labels are often predicated on mainstream definitions and policies. This reflects my concern with the construct 'victim,' a term initially intended to signify a serious social problem that may have lost its effectiveness, becoming instead a construct that limits our understanding of women who experience violence in their intimate relationships, and constraining these women's self-perceptions.

### **The Role of Media as Providing Context**

The media, a sociocultural structure that often plays a mediating and critical role in its choices of re-presentation, has more recently made the public increasingly aware of some women's disturbing experiences of victimization in their intimate relationships. Yet the issue of naming the victimization and inciting potential understanding of the experiences of victimization in response to various frightful traumatic news or media stories of women who live under the ongoing effects of spousal assault, remains a vexed one both in the media and amongst the public. What does it mean to be a victim, to be named a victim, to be thought of as a victim, to think of oneself as a victim in this context?

In addition to the attention given via media portrayals of women who experience battering, the word 'victim' has been bantered about in the lay public, and amongst professionals working out of judicial and therapeutic communities. Responses vary from sympathetic horror and supportive understanding to impatient disbelief and judgment often aimed at the woman as victim. The complexity and intensity of this issue may have been reinforced by particular media portrayals of the victim and victimizer. The trial of Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka, for example, raised questions of whether Karla was indeed subject to such severe intimate abuse that she became psychologically and emotionally enslaved to Bernardo, losing her sense of self and all ability to exercise her own will, or was she simply a self-serving, conniving, disturbed, and weak young woman? Moreover, the well publicized trial of O.J. Simpson divided the public along lines of those who believed that evidence was circumstantial and that Simpson was simply an unfortunate, debased, and ruined celebrity who had acted inappropriately in his marriage, but was incapable of murder, versus those who believed he was a cruel, jealous, and violent husband, someone who was very much capable of murder.<sup>3</sup> In the spring of 1996 the

---

<sup>3</sup> There was evidence Nicole Simpson had suffered multiple beatings by her ex-husband O.J. Simpson and had expressed fear for her life while still married to him. They had been apart for some time at the time of her death. The jury acquitted him.

media followed the trial of Dorothy Joudrie, a 61-year-old woman who shot her husband six times. Her acquittal once again elicited the gender debate, arguing that had she been a male she would not have been exonerated.<sup>4</sup> On April 12, 1996 Chahal, the estranged husband of Rajwar Gakhal killed nine members of the Gakhal family as they were preparing for a wedding in Vernon, B.C., approximately 16 months after they had separated, thereby raising questions about safety and protection in conjunction with leaving, and challenging the oft-held belief that leaving a violent relationship ends the violence.<sup>5</sup> I mention these media stories as they preceded and evolved over the time period of my research, thereby identifying some of the social climate and public response to various stories of intimate violence at the time of my study.

Contemporary focus on women who have experienced battering is also evidenced in popular movies such as *Thelma and Louise* (Khoury, 1992), and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Flagg, 1992), both portraying more positive images of women who leave partners who batter. Movies made for television such as *Life with Billy* and the more hollywood-styled movie *The Stranger Beside Me* depicted relationships in which the men's violence was not limited to their partners, while also attempting to convey the women's struggles of not being heard or believed by others external to their relationship. Additionally, *When Women Kill*, based on Ann Jones' (1980) book by the same name, was made into a 1994 National Film Board documentary by Barbara Doran, and shown on television across Canada. In this documentary Ann Jones speaks with women incarcerated for killing the partners who beat them and this film is a further example of efforts to educate the public concerning the complexity of the issues.

Such media portrayals raised public awareness and provoked challenging questions and heated debates. The debates, at least in part, reflected the dominant preference for polarised re-presentations of victim and victimizer as separate and distinct, whereby one is portrayed as clearly innocent and the other clearly guilty. Yet this simple duality fails us

---

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Joudrie and her husband Earl Joudrie, a prominent businessman in Alberta, were going through a divorce after a lengthy marriage, at the time of her attempts to shoot him. As part of the court proceedings, it became known that he had a history of abusing her. In her acquittal in May 1996, she was found not criminally responsible for the shooting but was ordered to spend time in a psychiatric hospital.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Province (April 14, 1996) the R.C.M.P. had noted the family's complaints of threatening calls made by Chahal at the time that R.C.M.P. processed his permit for a pistol.

when we begin to hear past stories of abuse and victimization in the offender's life. For example, the victimizer is described as also being a victim, hence potentially neutralizing issues concerning responsibility and guilt. Moreover, the questions frequently focus on the woman as victim. We find ourselves looking for flaws in the woman's character or looking to her past for identification of some kind of potentially pathological relationship or repetitive familial pattern. We question why she chooses such a problematic relationship, why she stays, and why she does not press charges or demand a criminal investigation.

Furthermore, the accounts of women such as Dorothy Joudrie and Lorena Bobbitt <sup>6</sup> tend to challenge prevailing assumptions that equate the victim with passivity and the victimizer with activity, seeming to invert the issues. Public ambivalence was evident regarding both these women. On the one hand we may understand a woman's deep anger, resentment, and wish/need to retaliate or to act in self defense, yet the nagging thought entertained by many was that, at least in these scenarios, the husbands were the final "victims." Although it is potentially interesting to examine the readiness with which public sympathy shifts to the male "victim" regarding these complex depictions, that is not the purpose of this paper. I recount these various events here because they provide a sociohistorical context to the timing of my research, locating my interviews within a particular social climate wherein issues of intimate abuse have increasingly received media attention. These public accounts allude to the role of broader contexts and demonstrate that the definition and use of the term victim may be more complicated than is often assumed. These events, as recorded here, also reveal how readily we dismiss women's experiences of intimate violence, simplifying the issues into an equation in which her leaving results in her exoneration, whereas her staying pathologizes her. Each of these stories leaves much unanswered and in keeping with the purpose of this thesis, these stories problematize the word victim, that is, they imply that the meaning of being a victim is not a simple, easily reducible one.

### **Locating Myself**

A somewhat related concern with respect to issues that should be problematized or made questionable is that of locating myself regarding this study. Although I agree with

---

<sup>6</sup> Lorena Bobbitt was a woman who cut off her husband's penis. Her husband was known to the police because he had a history of abusing her and had been charged previously.

current critiques of traditional psychological (and other) research in which the researcher, the researcher's perspective(s) and bias(es), as well as the reasons for doing the research remained invisible, justified by assumptions of researcher neutrality and objectivity, I hesitate to assume that statements of location are ultimately necessarily satisfying or even accurate. I agree that this debate has raised critical questions regarding researcher attitudes and implicit power imbalances in research and has challenged the purpose, function, and appropriateness of many, if not all, research projects. The critique in part was aimed at researchers who have traditionally been protected by ivory towers that support and mystify the meaning of research and the acquisition of knowledge. I believe, however, that this issue of author or researcher location is at least twofold. First, I have an obligation to the women whom I interviewed to answer any questions they had with regard to my own personal experiences, my reasons for doing this work, my underlying assumptions, and how I might use the information. I acted upon this by addressing these issues during the initial contacts and encouraging the women before and after each interview to ask me any questions they wished to have answered. Second, although potentially interesting to have insight into my various locations with regard to the forms of privilege I do or do not experience within a larger sociocultural context, I question how completely satisfying this ultimately is. Further, my criticism is that this kind of locating implies masking the struggle of authors who are not in the same privileged positions as others who are indeed, white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and so forth. Congruent with my criticism and concerns regarding the simplicity and potential superficiality of locating myself, I have attempted to clearly articulate my assumptions, my perspectives, and my biases throughout the construction of this thesis. Despite my critiques, and however inadequate this may be, I also attempt to present my personal experiences in coming to this project.

Throughout the construction and completion of this thesis, I have endeavored to express myself in an accessible and meaningful fashion. Nevertheless, it is my particular construction and someone else may have approached or structured this material differently. In doing this research, I have also struggled with and been committed to non-conventional (certainly within psychology), social constructivist, and feminist perspectives that have intermittently challenged me personally to the point where I questioned whether it was possible or appropriate to do research at all. I came to a place where I believe it is possible

to do research, research that reflects my struggle with integrity and that exposes my voice as the writer even as I attempt to make visible and stay true to other women's voices. I have made frequent efforts to openly explore and expose my framework, my thoughts, opinions, and perceptions in my writing but also in the interviews, giving the women opportunities to ask me questions and to discuss any aspect of either the interview or my research. This was a learning process for me and I appreciate the apparent willingness of the women to interact with me.

I came to this project as a divorced, solo mother of two, with an understanding based on my own experiences that any given picture or story is not simply the sum of its parts, and that in fact when we look at the parts we often miss the more complex or subtle nuances that might bring us closer to genuinely, empathically participating in another's world. So it is with words like victim, and the many varied widespread assumptions that it triggers, frequently rendering the victimized individual invisible. Although it was not a relationship in which I experienced battering, I was in an important intimate committed relationship in which I experienced behaviors that have given me some understanding of the critical dynamics that occur between two people intimately connected with each other. I grew up in a White, Western-European family in which at a young age I became proficient at discerning the atmosphere as I walked in through the door. Unpredictable, unexplainable, uncontrolled, and seemingly uncontrollable male anger outwardly directed was somehow simply accepted as a part of *private* family life. In terms of making sense of this family picture, it often seemed that the behaviors were predicated on beliefs that these were important lessons from God, along with notions of presumed appropriate discipline indicative of a particular kind of western European pedagogy.<sup>7</sup> I frequently think that the religious ideology by which my family was trying to discern the daily lessons we were supposed to extrapolate from our experiences has found a new avenue in contemporary New Age ideology, whereby we are once again commended to look for the individual lessons to be learned in the face of various sufferings or hardships.<sup>8</sup> In any case, although

---

<sup>7</sup> Alice Miller (1983), for example, has attempted to address and expose what she believes to be the roots of violence in our society, that is, in the harmful and often cruel child-rearing practices dating back to the 19th century.

<sup>8</sup> My critique of this movement is not with regard to the potential for meaning-making (i.e., making meaning out of one's lived experiences) but of the individualizing and inherent latent capacity to dismiss serious inequalities operating in the lives of struggling individuals.

my experiences triggered fear and vigilance at times, they seem minor in the face of many women's experiences of violence, specifically those women with whom I talked. I wish to thank the women who participated in this study, for having the strength and willingness to talk with me. I have attempted to stay true to the content of their stories and to honour the spirit of their lives. I also want to express my support to women who are struggling with the issues addressed in this thesis. I hope that this work is a manifestation of that support.

I approached this research and the women who participated, with the assumption that women experiencing victimization in their intimate relationships also experienced agency, although this agency varies and may seem contradictory or inconsistent. I think there is mystery in the ways in which people act or respond and the dilemmas or quandaries that such agency brings to the fore, particularly for academics in the face of attempts to establish coherent, consistent social and psychological theories, strikes me as inspiring and challenging, implying the hope that not everything is reducible or predictable. In recent years these issues of complexity and irreducibility have further been mirrored through the media. I now introduce the women, by way of hearing/reading their narratives.

Stories are a kind of cultural envelope into which we pour our experience and signify its importance to others, and the world of the story requires protagonists inciting conditions and culminating events. A near universal form for ordering our worlds, narrative allows us to make connections and thus meaning by linking past and present, self and society. (Riessman, 1994, p. 114).

## Chapter Two: Introducing the Women, the Experiential Experts

.. cultural ideals are powerful forces, shaping not only our ways of thinking and doing, but our ways of being as well, giving form to both the conscious and unconscious content of our inner lives. - Rubin (1983, p.2-3)

I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a mode of "telling" about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing" - a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. .. Writing from our Selves should strengthen the community of qualitative researchers and the individual voices within it, because we will be more fully present in our work, more honest, more engaged.

- Richardson (1993, p.516)

### *Always and Forever*

Always and Forever  
Etched in rings of gold  
A statement,  
A promise,  
    made when love and joy were new  
Faded, barely visible now  
    the love, drowned in tears  
Remembered Always  
Lost Forever

- Kathleen

Throughout this project I deliberated over various ways in which to present the women's narratives such that the intent and the heart of their accounts would be captured. Riessman (1993) echoes my concerns when she posits that in qualitative research, in spite of commitment to attentive listening and verbatim transcriptions, there are several subtle ways in which the communicated experiences are altered primarily because *all* forms of representation are ultimately limited re-constructions of the original experience. Two examples based on my own experience may suffice. First, as I was transcribing the interviews I became aware of having lost subtle but nevertheless important nuances that were integral parts of each interview such as a smile, a nod, or other nonverbal cues, and these nuances remained just that -- an important and meaningful component of each interview, impossible to reconstruct. My awareness of such nuances was heightened upon sitting back, listening to the interviews, and reading the transcriptions, the most significant difference being between the felt sense *in* the interview and the felt sense *outside* the

interview context. Our communications were much more than an exchange of words. I further recognized that any attempts to put these nuances into words would not do justice to the actual experience simply because of the inherent nature of nuances. Second, it is difficult, in spite of my efforts, to fully preserve the emotional content in the interviews as implied by changes in voice, gesturing, or showing emotions. No transcription technique preserves all the subtleties or particulars of the participants' narratives. Knowing that these aspects would be lost, I felt even more compelled to incorporate direct quotations or what Opie (1992) calls the "writing in of the women's voices" in order to maintain the integrity of the women's explorations as much as was feasible. Consequently, I decided to present the women's voices early on in this thesis, introducing them immediately after the introductory chapter as they are, after all, who this thesis is about. In my transcriptions I retained, as much as possible, the women's own articulation, indicating their pauses, their hesitant or broken speech (as indicated by ".." and "-"), and various utterances in order to maintain the authenticity of their process as they spoke with me.<sup>9</sup> Seldom do most of us speak in a manner that sounds completely polished and unfaltering, and this was also true for the women I interviewed.

One more issue needs clarification before launching into the women's narratives. Although the interviews represent a co-construction of the women's narratives, with the women deciding and defining how they wished to proceed in answer to my facilitative interactions, I found from time to time that there were ideas that concerned me, particularly for women living in victimizing circumstances, and one such umbrella concern regards the role of sociocultural and historical contexts. Over the 2 years that I have been engaged in this research project, examining the construction and use of victim discourse or of words such as victim with regard to significant intimate partnerships, I have become cognizant of news stories and issues in popular media that seemed reflective of, or linked to, women's experiences of violence. As might also be expected, the women, in turn, used descriptive words reflective of the culture in which we live. Given these linkages or interactions between our private and public spheres, I present the women's narratives in an interactive fashion, using a combination of insertions that include my reflections, as well as pertinent

---

<sup>9</sup> I make this clarification because my approach represents a shift from traditional research in which authors tend to present a summary of key themes, using "cleaned-up" quotes from the participants, and presenting these quotes or excerpts later on in the body of a thesis rather than this early on.



news and/or popular media items along side the women's words, as it seemed appropriate to me. These notations regarding culture and media serve to contextualize and ostensibly, to validate the women's experiences of victimization. My aim here is congruent with my concern, as indicated in my introduction, that much psychological research and theorizing lacks recognition or analysis of any social context or the sociocultural structures that have an impact on the very lives being investigated. Frequently, even where there is an analysis of power, there is an omission of the practical politics of such issues as ambivalence, choice, strategizing, error, transformation, or other subjectively experienced shifts. It is hoped that in this thesis these complex aspects of what it means to be socially contextualized human beings will regain visibility and understanding as this is critical for those persons turning to the helping professions for insight and compassion, as well as for the professionals to be truly competent in their work. This thesis has been prepared with a steadfast discernment to attitudes and perspectives in the field of counselling because I think an ongoing sensitivity to both individual contexts as well as broad spectrum contexts is critical to compassionate effective work.

In order to achieve the above, I required a presentation that permits and encourages some grasp of the interweaving of personal lives with social structures without collapsing or dichotomizing towards biological determinism and categories on the one side, or to relativism and pluralism on the other. The narratives, as presented in this thesis, are examples of a dialectic in which the women describe experiences of the constraining powers of thwarted gendered intimate relations, not abstractly, but rather as personifying all the qualities of very real people's lives including the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions, as well as the sense of ongoing transformation and change, both satisfying and dissatisfying. Foucault (1982) posits that power "is always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects" (p.789). In other words power is relational and always in the context of resistance, whether this resistance is visible or invisible.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the women I spoke with articulated the complexity of their lives and their experiences, with their struggles sometimes clearly visible and at other times less readily discernible.

---

<sup>10</sup> This is not to minimize or obscure the profound experiences of powerlessness realized by those who experience victimization, nor is it my intention to glorify resistance. Instead an understanding of power as relational upholds and honors people as more complex, as able to resist, persist, and move, and appears to be more congruent with the accounts of the women with whom I spoke.

In my initial contact with the women over the telephone, after introducing myself and my project, I used a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). The women appeared to speak easily about themselves and the following introductions include parts of these earliest telephone communications as well as excerpts from the in-person interviews that followed. The women were asked if they had a preferred alias and hence the names used here reflect these women's choices. It is hoped that these introductions permit an entry into these women's experiences, thereby forming a contextualized understanding of their struggles and triumphs. Although there may be some similarities, each woman's self-portrait is unique, reflecting what she volunteered in telling me her story. The general themes in these initial excerpts include the women's self-perceptions, perceptions of marriage, and their perceived roles within their marriages. Finally, this chapter concludes with their narratives of victimization.

My interjections and my use of cultural images or popular media vary in response to the women's texts. The media messages are intended to explore, establish, and render visible the sociocultural climate that potentially interacts with women's self-perceptions and with gendered relations. They are not intended to imply a direct, immediate, or one-to-one relationship with the women's words although they may appear as such at times. Instead, they establish an awareness of particular kinds of perceptions and messages. I am grateful to MS Magazine and to Mediawatch for their attention to popular media and to advertisements. Many of the advertisements that I refer to in the rest of this chapter were drawn from their publications as indicated. Most often I have left the popular media or advertisement insertions to stand on their own without my reflection because I do not think they require further explanation. The reflections and insertions reflect my subjective choices and someone else might have arranged the material differently.

### **Contextualized Self-portraits**

Elsie is a Caucasian heterosexual woman in her mid-fifties, living in the Lower Mainland. She heard about my project through a Women's Centre and she expressed eagerness to participate because "if it helps even one other woman I would be pleased." Elsie grew up in Western Europe immigrating to Canada with her family as a teenager and moving in with a supportive aunt while completing high school. She married her first husband as a young adult and after approximately 11 years of marriage, he left her to solo

parent their four children. Elsie described herself as an energetic, creative, venturesome, and tireless mother. In her forties and before marrying her second husband, Elsie pursued post-secondary university training in the health profession, and is somewhat able to rely on this as a limited source of income. In her second marriage, she was able to travel and enjoy some of the comforts lacking in her earlier years. At the time of our first interview she had been separated from her second husband for approximately 7 months. Elsie's story begins with her struggle as an immigrant young woman:

I came to Canada .. I was just a teenager, and my parents - first of all they couldn't afford to keep me which was a blessing 'cuz I lived for a little while with an aunt and she was kind. That was the first person in my life that had really showed me some - some love and kindness - so that was really good. (pause) - I was just sort of married because he happened to come along at the right time - but I was very naive and I didn't understand .. thinking .. Cinderella .. and the prince comes along (laughs) .. I remember feeling lost and I thought - oh now, I'm going to be married, now I'm never going to feel lost again. I'm going to feel good, there's somebody there to take care of me, but *this is silly* <sup>11</sup> you know. (My husband) rescued me, he definitely rescued me, 'cuz I remember the night before I got married, I thought - oh, (in a whisper) I'll never have to sleep alone again, there's always going to be somebody there and I thought that was just such a relief.

Elsie's description and her reference to Cinderella and the prince echo our many culturally entrenched images in childhood stories, in folklore, in popular songs, and in the media, that, starting from a time we are very young, shape our understanding of what it means to come into a relationship, and how such a relationship will meet our needs and end the search. She laughingly refers to a "prince," a cultural symbol of someone who enabled her to escape an undesirable situation, someone who symbolized a change in her life's circumstances, and with whom she envisioned spending the rest of her life. In sharp contrast to her expectations, he left and for many years she alone parented four children, managed on her own, working long and hard:

.. so I worked day and night - I had four to five jobs. On the weekends I delivered papers .. the kids would sit on the bumper of the old car - we'd deliver newspapers and then we'd clean offices and I worked downtown and then during the week I worked at another office near my home. In the summer I volunteered - so the children could go to camp - I said I will be the cook. I can't pay - but let me cook. So somehow I adapted to that - I survived because I was able to do a lot of different things .. so I'm a survivor I guess. I didn't go on Welfare or anything - I'd just work, work, work, work. But then the children suffered because they didn't see

<sup>11</sup> Elsie's phrase "this is silly" reflects her judgment that she should have known better. Anderson and Jack (1991) address this issue referring to it as "moral language." There are numerous examples of such self-judgments throughout the interviews and these will be given special attention later on. Suffice it to note that they imply a gap between two subjective voices; one that was in the experience and a more distanced one that stands outside the experience.

their dad and their mom had to work all the time, so that was really - that wasn't so great either .. but there wasn't a thing I couldn't do. I had to - with four kids. I could fix the toilet, painted the house, painted the outside, whatever I had to do, I did. I looked after myself and my kids - I *had* to. I had no parents, I had nobody, nobody, not one single soul in Canada. So it was just me and the kids (sigh). Then along came this other knight (smiles). I felt better - when I got into that relationship - because I had felt kind of lost when my first husband left. I was really lost because I'd only been in this country for a few years .. I was so naive. I thought (very quietly, sucking in her breath) - oh god - now I've finally found somebody that - that was interested just in me, even to talk to, that cared .. I thought he cared. Like (at first) we spent a lot of time going for walks.

Elsie became a 'Jane' of all trades, stressing the element of necessity as a driving force in her recurring statements of "I had to." Yet her abilities did not compensate for the lonely solitariness, and hence Elsie's second husband appears to present a hopeful (knightly) possibility of an end to her struggle as a single mother, of coping alone financially, of feeling terribly alone and completely responsible. Again, like the prince image, she uses the knight to depict potential change in her circumstances congruent with symbolic cultural expectations regarding relationships. She mentions her children in the context of a pained awareness that they too suffered as a result of her circumstances in spite of her varied and dedicated efforts. Her many competencies, however, did not erase her yearnings for someone to communicate with and feel cared by, someone to share her responsibilities with. Elsie's yearnings are congruent with normative expectations regarding marriage as representing a relationship that is unequalled in the rest of society, and regarding the nuclear family as a unit presumed to meet the needs of children and provide various comforts. For Elsie, marriage was to be a resting place, where she would experience solidarity with someone, a connection in which she would be valued. In her words marriage meant:

.. security and - belonging - and it mattered to matter .. 'cuz I've never felt that I'd mattered (tears up). Someone to talk with .. and - I'll never have to sleep alone again, there's always going to be somebody there and I thought that was just such a relief.

Elsie indicated that her role in the marriage was "to fix it" particularly as her later career training was linked to the helping professions. She described that prior to and throughout their marriage she was:

.. the giver and always accountable to him. I had to keep a 24 hour journal, otherwise he had a fit. He had to know what I did every minute while he was away .. I thought that was love - he was being attentive .. I never saw it as a controlling thing. He paid me money, then I had to contribute so I contributed by giving up all my friends and staying by the phone and even in those days - only living for him.

Elsie's words imply a subscript wherein the relationship was defined by a contract, a contract that maintained peace and order. Her narrative additionally suggests an equation frequently made in the broader sociocultural and media portrayals that link love to control, portrayals in which women take on a subservient role, one intended to satisfy a male need. The popular Calvin Klein clothing producers provide a poignant illustration, one that I noticed in a Lower Mainland department store:

*Calvin Klein Advertisement: 'Obsession for men' presents a two-thirds body-length picture of a slim, innocent-looking, young nude female stretched out on the sofa lying chest down looking into the camera. She could be child or woman.*

By implication the Calvin Klein ad normalizes a particular kind of male-female relations, that of men's female-focussed obsessions, linking *his* obsession to *her* desirability portrayed as acquiescent compliance. By implication, the women's role is one of satisfying his fixation. Elsie's words, as does the ad, attest to female self-perceptions wherein a sense of identity is tacitly linked to issues of control, approval, self-worth, and availability as perceived through the gaze of another.<sup>12</sup> We now meet Kathleen who had experiences that both overlapped with and were unique to Elsie's.

Kathleen, a heterosexual Caucasian woman also in her mid fifties and living in the Lower Mainland at the time of the interviews, became aware of my project through a counselling service that specializes in working with women who have experienced violence. She generously gave me a few of her poems that she said were an expression of her healing process and, where it seemed fitting, I have included these in this thesis with her permission. I think they reflect an important example of the varied ways sought by the women in this study to come to terms with their pain and healing. Kathleen was married to her husband for over 30 years, leaving him once just prior to 25 years of marriage. She now sees that action as "a plea for change" and she ultimately left her husband just over a year before our first meeting. Kathleen worked part time for much of their marriage, being successful at a number of different jobs. In her marriage they were able to travel and in spite of some intermittent financial struggle, Kathleen was used to a certain amount of self-described comfort. She is the mother of two, now adult, married women. While still

---

<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that male identity is not similarly formed or shaped in our culture. I believe it is, and consequently it is also both similarly and differently problematic. I am, however, focussing strictly on the link between media messages and women's identity because the purpose of this thesis was to hear the women's voices, and these voices did not occur in a vacuum.

married, she pursued specialized training in the field of health and fitness, and is currently happily employed using these skills. She described herself as someone who generally has lots of energy, is outgoing, takes initiative, and has perseverance. These qualities date back to earlier years and Kathleen describes herself as a teenager:

I think I felt pretty good about myself in .. from Junior High going into High School .. socially I felt very happy. I had girlfriends that I liked .. Not happy with my home life though and my family though - (I was) middle daughter, younger sibling was pampered, older sibling had health problems and has always been babied too .. and then there's me whose kind of feisty, looks like I can stand on my own two feet and feeling very needy for affection - I never seemed to get it. I remember being accused of being all sorts of things - cheeky and-um (pause) - and actually it was - standing up for myself. I can remember chewing celery (laughingly) - just chewing it - I have teeth right? - my parents don't - they have false teeth and I'm chewing it and my father said 'stop that racket' .. this was an act of defiance - I was 13 years old. I picked up the celery, leaned over and went chomp, chomp, chomp, chomp and then promptly got batted over the head. I'm also kind of stubborn .. I had a temper - when I was little I used to pass out. One time my mother threw cold water in my face, and my feeling is that I wasn't allowed to kind of grow out of that expression of anger. I was the one who - even in grade 11 - I couldn't go to school if I forgot to kiss my mother I'd come all the way back from the bus stop and give her a kiss. It was important to have their love and to show them that I loved them. They kind of labelled me the bad girl - (almost a whisper) I was not a bad girl - my younger sister did things that uh - I wouldn't even have dreamed of doing. But I was feisty - I didn't give up.

Like Elsie, Kathleen described some troubled relations with her family, feeling misperceived, apparently in response to her spirited character. She recognized that her appearance of "being tough and hard .. was just a front," stating she was also affectionate. She entered marriage believing:

.. that my husband was going to be with me for all of my life - so my children - I love them dearly but he came first - and now I'm sorry I ever thought that way (tears up).

*.. forsaking all others .. till death parts us.*

Kathleen goes on to define her hopes and expectations regarding a husband and father of their children, one that stands in sharp contrast to her lived experiences:

I wanted a husband who was proud of me, who would help me, who would be supportive of me, who would share my experiences with me .. just be supportive and kind and you know - looking after me - and-um-um (pause) being really supportive of me .. when it came to our children - (pause) - to be a team - and we talked about that but whenever it happened he took over .. there shouldn't be a division here, there should be some unity.

Kathleen's words are congruent with frequently held aspirations regarding intimate and parenting relationships. She mentioned the confusing discrepancy between their

discussions and the lived experiences regarding the children. She clarified in the second interview that being married is no simple task, but contrasts her marriage with her present experience:

Nobody says that marriage is going to be completely smooth - it isn't going to be - you've got two different people here - with different moods and temperaments and - dislikes and likes and - um (pause) - so it's not going to be smooth but it shouldn't be like a roller coaster all the time - the relationship I'm in now - nothing doesn't get discussed between the two of us - I mean, we can sense when something's not quite right and then we check it out and we talk about it, we really do.

She went on to define her role:

..my role was to be his wife and that - not you know do anything to cause a problem for him (at work) meaning I've seen women who drink too much and make a fool of themselves and that's not appropriate .. what happened at work was none of my affair. Of course I was supportive of him - I always was.

In her words Kathleen indicated that her husband's work world was separate from her, and her only connection to that world was one of providing support to him. She was expected to be a "good girl" and not to interfere with his world of work.

*Bumper sticker: Anything with tits or wheels is going to give you trouble.*

She went on to describe her understanding of their roles in marriage and to locate these within a larger sociocultural perspective, linking her experiences to gender socialization, and suggesting that these are historically significant, hoping that the experiences of contemporary younger women might be different:

In the marriage I think you carry the responsibility - I think that women - I think it's a part of who you're supposed to be as a woman - coming from my era .. and it's the mother and the - and the - keeping home fires burning, keeping things pleasant, and - so you take responsibility for his behavior too. I envy young women today because they know that that's not the case - at least, I think most of them do. I came from an era where you don't even talk about it so of course you put up with it .. and you come from an era where marriages are supposed to last forever. You make a commitment ..

*.. for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health .. til death parts us.*

I mean - how stupid - at 19 you're making a commitment that's supposed to last a life-time. It might have worked in 1859 but-uh - even then I wonder.. My parents were born around the turn of the century and they brought a lot of that mentality into their marriage. I happen to be a child of older parents and that was passed on too .. and in my ex's family - um - (pause) - I would say it was very much the same way. Women are second class citizens. ..

*Nickels' Calderone Babydoll shoe: A schoolgirl shoe so naughty, they gave it a strap. (as quoted in Mediawatch Newsletter, 1996)*

.. and at 19 you were still not an adult - you had to be 21 .. and-and even going for my driver's license - I had to have my parents or my husband sign for me for heaven's sake - so you're a child. That's how I entered the marriage .. the week before I got married I had to be home at 11 o'clock to go on a trip with my parents - 11 p.m. Well, I was old enough to know that if I didn't get home until 2 in the morning that I would suffer for the drive to (--) the next day, but I was treated like a child, and then I got married.

*Advertisement for Suzuki motorcycles: A brand new black sleek non-conservative looking motorcycle standing in the middle of a contemporary, dimly lit, spotlessly clean kitchen with the caption: She's beautiful. And she cooks. (as quoted in MS. Magazine, Vol. IV(6), 1994)*

.. I think in my era or women my age, that everything that happened in the home - and most of us were at home - that it was your responsibility to make sure that things ran smoothly. You kept the children off when dad was angry .. Um - we allow men - in general to dictate to us because that's what we learned. We learned that - in my family - that was the modelling - the father, my father did the same thing - that's his chair. And my husband - it was the same thing, and his chair was so much his chair that no one even dared sit in the damn thing. Um - and - when my 2-3 year old when we had boarders from the university staying with us - and she said you're going to be in big trouble when my daddy gets up because that's his chair. Daddy's the boss ..

Kathleen's narrative indicates the impact of historically located gendered messages on shaping her marriage and her interaction with her husband. Alongside her very deep commitment to her marriage Kathleen also had other desires, in particular an ongoing yearning for further education. She clarifies:

To me education is really important for a woman, I don't care where she's coming from - um - and maybe it's not just education - it's - you have to develop this - in a woman - a sense of that she doesn't have to be - I-I was raised with - well, you're going to get married anyway - I wanted to go to university terribly - my parents said no, for one thing we can't afford it, for another you're just going to get married and what is it going to do for you.

*Bride & Your New Home Magazine Ad: (A picture of a young long-haired attractive young woman beside a smaller picture of cookware with the bold caption on top): Today's Farberware Bride (and in small print on the side): Today's bride - committed to quality, and full of expectations. She looks forward to a long-lasting relationship. And that's what the bride who chooses Farberware's Millenium "Never-stick" Cookware will enjoy. Millenium is the only stainless steel cookware with the incredible Excaliber "Never-stick" surface, guaranteed not to rub, scrape or scrub off for a full 20 years, even if you use metal utensils. No ordinary non-stick can make the same vow." (as quoted in MS. Magazine, Vol. IV(3), 1993)*

Kathleen's story conveys the prevalent gendered beliefs of the mid 1900s, whereby it was assumed that a married woman would not need or use post-secondary education. This issue had an impact on Kathleen and remained unfinished for her, resurfacing again later:

.. the children were in school all day - I had a choice to do something all day - (pause) - and for me really that would have been going to school but - for him - and



for the sake of keeping the peace, and pleasing - and - making the right choice would be - (pause) taking a job. I've always considered - I think - everyone, everything (sigh). The payback to me and what is it going to cost .. You know, I even think at times that I put him first - I remember saying it to him - to people, that my husband was going to be with me for all of my life.. When I went and actually had myself (career) tested - I told my husband about it. He said what would you want to do that for - what do you need a career for? You've got me. .. (Later in their marriage) .. I decided to go to school - it was only a 3 month program to be certified - and - and again this is where he said why do you want to waste 75 bucks for? So - I did it anyway - defied him and went and - he said to me you're so stupid, they're just waiting to take your money .. you're going to just throw it away .. but I wanted to - badly enough. So I did it anyway ..

In keeping with sociocultural injunctions particularly in the 50s and 60s, it was assumed that her happiness and sense of fulfilment would be met in a marriage in which her needs to achieve were presumed secondary. She was expected to experience vicarious fulfilment through the accomplishments of her husband and those of her children.

*Advertisement in Time for Macy's:*

**THE BEST 100% COTTON, EASY-CARE,  
NO WRINKLE MEN'S SLACKS AVAILABLE.  
THE PERFECT GIFT FOR YOUR WIFE.**

*(a picture of the wrinkle-free slacks nicely folded with the following caption in small print below it)*

*Now available in finer department stores everywhere.*

*You know, those places where your wife shops.*

*(as quoted in MS. Magazine Vol. V(3), 1994)*

Kathleen's statements implied her conflict between the sociocultural expectations of what it meant to put her husband first (i.e., negate her own goals), and wanting to realize her own achievements -- to focus on her husband versus a focus on herself. Her determination and desire, with due consideration, enabled her to follow through with her wishes to obtain further training in spite of his opposition. I now turn to Care's self portrait.

Care is a Caucasian heterosexual woman in her 30s, living in the Lower Mainland at the time of the interviews. She heard about my study through a support group for women who had experienced battering, that met at a Women's Centre. Her family was originally from Great Britain, immigrating to Canada when she was elementary school-age. She told me she moved out of her parent's home at age 18 to attend university where she completed 2 years of science courses wanting "to be a veterinarian .. then I wanted to do something in environment or biology and I just took a whole lot of science - science was always my thing." She left university in order to work, to have a good time, and because "I think I was feeling my freedom." Care has always worked successfully, stating that

being financially independent was important to her. At the time of the interviews she occupied a managerial position in a predominantly male business. She lived in a common-law relationship for approximately 10 years, leaving her partner the first time after he had beaten her, nearly 3 years prior to our first interview. She has one child from that relationship and she returned to the relationship primarily because she lost custody of their child to him when she left the relationship the first time. At the time of the first interview 8 months had passed since her final leaving-taking. She described herself and her circumstances at the time she first met her long-term partner as:

I was young and inexperienced - I think I did have confidence because I had-um - I moved to B.C. for a job and I lived on my own. My employer had seen that I was ambitious and- and you know, I could do the job and I was advancing but I think I was very young still in here (points to her head and her heart) - in my head. I think I was feeling my freedom - I didn't feel that when I lived with my parents. It was very controlling .. I mean all of us kids were great! We were very good at school and we did have outside interests .. but .. then I was away from my parents and-um - um I guess I discovered I was a woman and that I was attractive and that men wanted to be with me and it was party .. but I was young .. I was the oldest but most people think I'm the youngest - because I'm quiet. In my early 20s I think I was having a good time .. now that I'm older and I think back on some of the things that I did - my god .. I'm probably lucky to be sitting here - that kind of wild and dangerous .. I met (--) when I was 23 through a co-worker .. kind of a matchmaking. I was needy for a relationship and so was he and it was - it was fun - for a while (pause) - (defines needy as) - I guess I wanted a man in my life .. I think that's the whole purpose of being - of going with this girlfriend to the bar - to meet somebody. I wanted to meet somebody. I met him and we got - we got along and - and I was attracted to - he was streetwise - he was very - I guess macho - he was a hunter and had a truck and a very big man, tall - um - had a beard when I met him - um - almost like a cowboy I guess. I guess I was attracted to the ruggedness or the outdoorsy - I am attracted to that .. the risk-taking ..

*Ad in Rolling Stone advertising "SYN jeans for men" depicting a young female pressed with her back up against a mirror looking down into the camera. She has on a short revealing t-shirt, her breath appears sucked in, showing her ribs, and her hair falls across one side of her face. She is standing beside a machine that has many buttons, with the following caption: "PUSH MY BUTTONS I'm looking for a man who can totally floor me, who won't stop till the top. You: MUST LIVE in SYN. (as quoted in MS. Magazine Vol. V(1), 1994).*

Care's story as a young adult is congruent with normative and various popular media messages that set the scene for socioculturally designated meeting places (e.g., the pub or bar), that define what it means to be attractive and attracted, and that clarify the age-related mandate to be coupled. Media portrayals in which daring, risk-taking, and availability are linked to females who are depicted as slim, young, passive, and vulnerable, are frequently dismissed by both the producers and the general public as simply innocent

ads or a play on words, and not to be taken seriously. Again, my intention is not to suggest that there is a one-to-one direct correlation between the ads and the women's words or experiences, rather, my contention is that these images circumscribe a particular climate, and that relationships in which women experience intimate violence do not occur in a vacuum. The ads do not account for, nor does the public often acknowledge, the potential of real lived danger in the very real lives of females as also implied in the ads. Care goes on to describe herself as having agency, being independent, and able to care for herself, plus simultaneously enjoying herself:

..because at the time I thought I had some control over what danger I could be put in. .. I mean I had my job and I made good money and my employer was pleased with the work I did - and I was having fun. I was very responsible and I kept advancing. Um - I was able to travel - I mean I took the train across Canada alone and had a great time! Then I took some courses at B.C.I.T. - um - to get some business education because I didn't have that. I think (my husband) knew I was independent - he clutched onto me - saw my qualities - I was independent, I had money, I lived in my own apartment .. and at the time - I was fun to be around .. (and) he was something new, the hunting trips and the rough and tough ..

*Ad for Request Jeans shows a man pinning a woman to the wall of a shower. He looks muscular and his skin looks shiny. He is two-thirds naked with his pants appearing to fall off and the woman, who has her face turned away from him, is dressed in what appears to be a swimsuit. The caption REQUEST is printed across the bottom. In response to Mediawatch Request Jeans defended their ad as reflecting a "passionate encounter". (As quoted in Mediawatch Newsletter, 1996).*

.. I guess I'd been watching too many movies and just thought that - you know that - that that was attractive. The danger was attractive.. the woman who falls in love with the (pause) - the bad guy and helps him - but then they always show another side of the bad guy in the movies. She rescues him - changes him. I thought that maybe that was my role as a woman, you know - 'cuz as a mother it's to teach my child to - to be a-a good person, and to be well-rounded - but when I was younger it was - my role as a woman is to make these men decent men and-um - I think I tried to do that .. I mean all the work I had to do for him to go out and work or find a job. I mean I found many a job for him.

*Popular film Dead Man Walking with Susan Sarandon as a nun and Jean Penn as a rapist and murderer, advertised on the radio as "the man on death row and the woman who stands by him."*

Care made the link between the imperatives operating *outside* immediate male-female relations and her internalized expectations regarding her role *inside* the relationship. A beneficial role is one that contributes to society as a whole, one that should have a positive impact on her male partner, assist him to also be a contributing member and achieve his full potential. In their roles she became the "responsible one .. holding the house together and paying the bills .. making sure the house was spotless and .. that there was always a

meal.”<sup>13</sup> For a while at least, she felt that this arrangement worked:

I didn't see anything wrong with that - I was quite happy with it. I thought that - that this was great. I was good at it, I was, I was but then .. things started to get bad when I didn't pay so much attention to the housework.

Their roles were clearly divided, and although she worked full-time she was also expected to meet all the house-keeping and relational responsibilities. It has been known for sometime that although women are increasingly sharing the financial burden in the home, they are also still predominantly responsible for all the diverse tasks and obligations that ensure smooth running of a household as well as interpersonal interactions.

*“boys will be boys”*

Care appears to have all that she needed to take care of herself; her work, her financial independence, her own apartment, and her outgoing, apparently confident personality. Cultural dictates plus her own wish for an intimate relationship propel her into a relationship that is intended to meet this desire. There are influential social forces at work, forces that not only reinforce certain kinds of decisions, but in critical ways also propel and incite us to make those decisions. Cultural ideology draws out behaviors that in turn reinforce the cultural ideology such that it seems natural, authentic, and appropriate. Sometimes this is done under the guise of humor and dismissed as not intended to be taken seriously, thereby making it more difficult to challenge or critique the underlying ideology or the consequent behaviors. Kali spoke to her struggle with this obscurity and the difficulty of naming an experience in her narrative, and I turn to her now.

Kali is a Caucasian heterosexual woman in her late 30s, born in Canada to northern European parents, and living in the greater Vancouver area. She heard about my study through a women's centre and offered to participate. Kali described having been in two very differently abusive marriages; “one was much more physically violent, whereas the other centered more on emotional, psychological, and spiritual - which is not recognized by many and is harder to name.” Her first marriage lasted approximately 8 years and her second approximately 5 years. She has two, now young adult, children from the first

---

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly her statements echo Kathleen's words even though Care is much younger than Kathleen. There is also a striking resemblance between these women's words and the research that explores the division of labour in the home over recent years when more women work outside the home, and also examines current role expectations among young people. These studies indicate that young people's role expectations are still predominantly traditional and that women working outside the home still additionally carry much of the motherwork and housework responsibilities (Hochschild, 1989, Shainess, 1980).

marriage and one young child living with her from the second marriage. She terminated the second marriage close to 4 years ago and is currently in a 2 year, mutually considerate relationship in which "we have an incredible respect for each other and an incredible desire to try and communicate what our issues are to each other." After the birth of her two oldest children, Kali returned to college and continued to study at university, even after leaving her first husband, in the area of social and community psychology. For a number of years she has been actively involved in politics, more recently including advocacy work for women in violent relationships. In addition, for several years Kali has made music, and she shared with me three songs that reflect her journey. As with Kathleen, I have inserted her songs or excerpts from them, where I thought they were best highlighted in this thesis. She began by talking about her teenage years around the time of meeting her first husband:

I was very young when I-um got married the first time - I was-um 17 years old - and I think .. I had a fairly reasonable childhood, early childhood - and I'm kind-of thankful for that. My leaving home and marrying someone that young had to do with just wanting to get away from that situation (home) which was not positive and was verbally abusive at times, especially because - um - like I said, I couldn't have asked for a better mother when I was a little kid. (When I left home) I probably had the self esteem of a gnat. I had been a fairly confident kid - uh - so puberty had not done good things for me I think. I don't think I felt particularly lovable per se. .. The man I married - he had a really close relationship with his mother - the violence in his family was more between his father and like - he had several brothers.. I had this silly notion that (pause) he didn't like the way his father treated his mother and he wouldn't necessarily treat me that way, - um - but-uh of course eventually he did exactly - exactly all the same things .. I was also coming at it from - uh - a 17-18 year old's perspective .. and for the first year that we were married I kind of just kept up to whatever he was doing so it was - it was okay. If he was out drinking, I'd go out with him .. it was at the point where I was concerned about him having that kind of relationship with his sons that his father had with him that I actually left that relationship. His behavior was like night and day - like when he was sober he was kind of quiet and a soft-spoken person - um (pause) - when he was drinking he was just way off the map ..

*Advertisement for skateboards in a California-based skateboard magazine intended for young people ages 8 to 18 is formatted like a road sign with **bitch** in bold above a male figure (wearing pants) holding a gun to the head of a female figure (wearing a dress) and **bitch skateboards**, again in bold, below the figures. In fine print readers are urged to send in a dollar for analogous stickers and information. (as quoted in Mediawatch Newsletter, 1996).*

Kali suggests, like Kathleen, that her age along with his father's modelling probably played a role in their relationship. Like Care, Kali attended to the culturally approved, socially acceptable meeting and drinking places. Her experience that his drinking brought out his violence, thereby linking his violence to his drinking pattern, makes it clear why she saw

the violence:

in the framework of alcohol, .. not recognizing that this was the way this person controlled my movements .. which worked for a very long time.

She responded by leaving, making it clear to her husband that the continuation of their relationship was contingent upon him addressing his problem with alcohol. Kali indicates her own unequivocal and assertive clarity:

.. he actually quit drinking - that was my condition - that unless he did that I would not - um - you know, I would not return to the relationship, and he did and things were fairly uneventful .. a relative period of calm .. (after which) he started drinking again. ..

Later in the same interview Kali elaborated on what she defined as others' perceptions of diametrically opposed sides to her personality, because she described those aspects of herself wherein she both challenged or resisted her husband's behaviors in her marriage, as well as remained committed in the relationship:

I've always been you know outgoing .. and able to speak my mind .. it's a bit of a dichotomy for people that - well how could you be outgoing and all of that - and then be subjected to all of this. Well - it's-it's not - I don't see it as so unreasonable.

Kali hints at the complexity of herself and people in general, indicating that we all have seemingly contradictory or incongruent sides, which speaks to peoples' inner diversity. Notably, she indicates that she, as the one who contains these diverse aspects of herself, does not see these as contradictory but rather as reflecting her (and potentially others') myriad ways of being. As she states above, it was when she recognized that her husband was repeating his familial pattern of abusive interactions with their sons that she left this relationship. She described herself after leaving as:

I was starting to feel a whole lot better about myself and I certainly didn't feel like I would, you know, end up on the rubbish heap and - in that I was .. I had left saying to my friend - no one will ever love me again and - yet here were men being attracted to me. That did a lot for my self esteem and granted, a lot of it was probably just male gratuitous kind of, you know, schmooshing .. I had no intention of having any kind of serious thing happening with anybody. I found men to be very funny in their - you know - they're immediately in-in-in love with you and I could tell - well, I know when I'm in love and when I'm in lust and I wish you guys would get with the program .. I just found that really odd .. I wasn't prepared to be tied into anything and I was so much enjoying such simple simple things that people would take for granted - like just going to the Island .. or going out for dinner..

Kali infers the pain of lost love at the end of her marriage and, hence, her surprise at still being viewed as attractive. She distinguished, however, between feeling deeply connected

versus feeling desire, whereas the men she met did not appear to make this same distinction. In leaving her marriage she was aware of appreciating anew some simple joys and freedoms, and was unwilling to forfeit these too quickly. Thinking back over her relationships she goes on to briefly reflect on their roles in each relationship:

.. in my first - he was an alcoholic and I was his conscience - all of that stuff .. the total enabler and-uh, you know, fixed it 'till it's - you can only forgive somebody so much and-and that's all you're doing is just that .. (I thought) I should be able to - to help this person work his things out .. I felt obligated to stay and sort all of these things out.. and with (2nd husband) - I took the responsibility for everything and he took the responsibility for nothing - it worked really well - I mean I was the caregiver. I think that he saw himself as the provider and he was wrapped up in material things and his stuff. He found it hard to reconcile kids around the house - kids and stuff - stuff was much more important and if his stuff got broken or misplaced .. (pause) I'm not a stuff person .. and I'm not a rules person. I'm a guidelines person ..

*Advertisement for Eastpak backpacks reads: Who says guys are afraid of commitment? He's had the same backpack for years. The ad shows four square pictures with the same fellow in the same food booth eating pizza with four different young women. The caption below states: When it comes to choosing a lifelong companion, lots of guys pick one of our backpacks. Each one comes with a lifetime guarantee not to rip, tear, break, or ask for a ring. (as quoted in MS. Magazine, Vol.IV(3), 1993).*

Kali's words mirror the experiences of Elsie and Care regarding their presumed roles to "fix" or to help "make these men decent men," and, like Kathleen, she expresses feeling the responsibility to sort through their marital issues. In addition to articulating their differing roles, Kali attested to her own changed self images as linked to differently informed choices regarding first and second husbands:

With my first husband - he was just there. I responded to him because my home life was not happy and because he showed me - he-he-he said he loved me and I didn't feel lovable at that point - not from my family, not certainly from other teenage boys or whatever. I mean, you know, I was not a 110 lb whatever and-uh and when I met my 2nd husband it was a whole different ball of wax in terms of where I was and who I was and yes, I was enjoying myself and I was, you know, feeling fairly confident, independent and not - um - he seemed at the time to be kind of like your tall, dark and handsome - and with a brain - I think that one (the brain) would probably catch most women, you know (laughs) .. he was articulate, we talked, (had) all the right jargon, .. loved kids and animals .. but even though it was like wow - (it was also) I'm doing this in my life and I'm not really wanting to get into anything serious .. I was cautious .. and yet I also still went ahead - even though there were also issues - there were always issues between us .. he was just so different from the first ..

Kali clarifies that at age 17 her choice or decision for a partner was a very differently shaped and informed one from the one she made in her late 20s. In her 20s she was more self-assured and able to articulate specifically the qualities she valued in him such as his

attitude towards children, and she was aware of the qualitative differences between the two men. Kali's words convey the complexity of many major decisions where there may be strong ambivalence and hesitation, and yet continuation of the relationship. She also implies dominant sociocultural expectations whereby it is assumed that conflicts form an integral part of any relationship. We generally believe that relationships do not just happen, rather that they require commitment and hard work. We live with the idiom "no pain, no gain" in many arenas of our lives. Over recent years some of the most valued aspects of our lives have been conceptualized in the media, in New Age discourse, and in marriage workshops in terms of lessons, and of struggles that require blood, sweat, and tears. These lessons are viewed as providing insight into ourselves as well as furnishing potentially deeper encounters.<sup>14</sup> Kali's next words resonate with sociocultural assumptions regarding the power and possibility of love:

I guess I felt that we could overcome our differences.. you know - love will find a way..

*Song by popular singer Amanda Marshall: Trust me (This is love) (1995): I look at this mountain. So many heartaches wide And I can't help but wonder Where's the other side I've got to be honest I've got my doubts These tears are asking me What's this got to do with love? Baby, I'll tell you something To help us through this long dark night. (Chorus) When this trouble passes over You and I will walk away Knowing that our love survived Another test of faith. You and I can walk on water The river rises, we rise above It may not look that way right now But trust me, baby .. this is love Love isn't easy I'm torn, I confess When a heart is uncertain It's bound to second guess. This love won't forsake us So dry up your tears I promise you. (Chorus) I'm here for you baby There's nothing I want more Our day is coming And we'll reach the peaceful shore When this trouble passes over You and I will walk away Knowing that our love survived Another test of faith Cause you and I can walk on water The river rises, we rise above It may not look that way right now but trust me baby .. this is love One more mountain Hey .. so what Trust me baby .. this is love*

The draft or map of our desires to be in an intimate relationship and the roles within that relationship are drawn by the society and culture wherein we live. Moreover, the cultural mandates and ordinances in any society are reinforced by the institutional structures (e.g., marriage) and mediated by personal experiences of the people who negotiate these arrangements. In other words, although the person lives within historically located

---

<sup>14</sup> I recognise that this issue is a somewhat vexed one. In the past few decades we have also seen a movement toward looking after ourselves, making sure that I count, that I am happy, and there is a more general feeling of entitlement to leave if the relationship does not meet our expectations. The paradoxical shift is one in which the prescription to fall in love and the belief that love requires hard work are simultaneous messages, and underpinning both of these are additionally strong and specifically gendered messages regarding the meanings of attraction and attractiveness, of success and failure in intimate relations.



sociocultural contexts, s/he is actively engaged in negotiating her/his worlds as well as mirroring these worlds. Hence, it is by observing both the subjective experiences and the institutions, along with the interaction between these, that we gain insight into the depth and breadth of our experiences. This is particularly true with respect to committed intimate relationships. There are no other institutions in which relationships are presumed to be as long-term, as intense in contact and expectations, as predicated on interactions linking emotions, personalities, economics, subjective goals, and conflicting issues of power and resistance, as those found in our dominant cultural structures of marriage and family. Yet, in recent years these structures have been subjected to increasing investigation and critique predicated on the exposure of turmoil, suffering, and harm hitherto hidden and protected by prevailing beliefs that marital and family relationships are sacred and private. In spite of the historical shift toward uncovering and paying attention to issues of intimate violence, for those who are in the grips of it, it remains a difficult and painful issue to reveal to others. The women I spoke with were willing to share their stories of pain in the hopes that these might potentially help others, and in the self-knowledge that this was not all that there was to their lives nor to them as people. I now present the women's explorations of their victimization experiences.

.. an ethical response to another's suffering begins when  
we enter their world in order to experience that pain ..  
Bakhtin (1981)

### **Narratives of Victimization Experiences**

I think when you love someone - (pause) - um - (pause) -  
you-uh really believe what they're telling you. You really,  
you know, trust them. (Pause) And you may - learn ways to  
avoid um-um the physical abuse but I don't think you ever  
get right - how to stop this on-onslaught of-um put-downs  
that you get. It becomes so routine you don't even know  
it's happening to you - you don't even know it.  
- Kathleen

#### *The Desert (excerpt)*

You made my name a word - I was ashamed to say  
You took my spirit and you gave it all away  
To any stranger passing by  
You wanted me to fill up each and every need  
It didn't matter in the filling that I'd bleed  
Like a river, but the river's run dry  
My expectations were that  
Our love would be strong  
Wouldn't believe that you  
Could do me or mine wrong

Ever faithful, true and right  
 The more you pushed me down  
 The harder that I tried  
 I couldn't see it even when my children cried  
 Oh my babies, I let too much go by ..  
 - Kali

In speaking about their experiences of victimization the women described a variety of key factors that provided insight into their subjective experiences and into their definitions of what it meant for them to be in a relationship in which they experienced battering. As Kathleen voiced above, feelings of love penetrated deeply, yet often these feelings are forgotten or negated by the outsider listening to the painful intimate experiences. It requires entering their worlds and suspending judgments to hear and grasp more fully the complexity of these women's experiences. The manner in which the women narrated these factors included both similar and dissimilar experiences, each woman going about it in her own unique way. The key factors articulated by the women include: (a) a shift in the relationship after a deepening of the commitment either by moving in together or by marrying, (b) the complexity of the relationship as defined by both "good and bad" experiences, (c) the role of alcohol, (d) the psychological and emotional aspects, and (e) issues of control.<sup>15</sup> In keeping with my recognition that these women's lived experiences are grounded in a sociocultural context, I have continued to insert items from the popular media and the news, sustaining my operating belief that their experiences do not occur in a void.

In their portrayals of intense and complex relationships, the women verbalised a change or shift in their partners' dispositions and conduct once a deeper commitment had been made. Elsie found this shift confusing particularly in the context of both good and bad, gratifying and ungratifying, painful and joyful experiences in her relationship. In Elsie's words:

After we married - after a year and he had upscaled the abuse and the raging and I was feeling frightened and confused .. then after an awful year, he said let's go on a trip. While away we bought a (retreat home) - we had so much fun, painting, and

<sup>15</sup> I am aware that there is available literature that explores these factors. I present them along side of introducing the women because these women's voices both substantiate and are substantiated by the work already done by such feminist writers as A. Brown (1987), R. E. Dobash and R. P. Dobash (1979; 1992), M. A. Dutton (1992), A. Jones (1980), although not necessarily presented in the context of women's narratives. Although these factors were not central to my reasons for doing this research, they were important pieces in the women's narratives, establishing a context for the remainder of this work. Furthermore, they inadvertently participate in problematizing the term victim.

fixing it up, and it was lovely and I had so many good memories - and then we came home. .. So we got home and he starts with how can I afford to pay the taxes, I can't afford that place. And I said we'll sell it, then just sell it .. he's screaming and yelling and then two days later he comes up and puts his arms around me and he says I'm going to take you on a trip. I said I thought you said we couldn't afford it. Oh yeh (he said) - it's okay, we're getting along now.

The shift, as Elsie described it, involved inexplicable and unpredictable mood changes. She found his outbursts difficult to reconcile with the "good times." Sometimes she responded by removing herself:

.. The situation was very tiring - he would withdraw his affection, pretend I wasn't there and I'd think I can't stand this, I'll go to bed and he'd come in 'why are you going to bed, what kind of a bore are you?' - so like I can't win. So I was scared to go to bed, I was scared not to go to bed and then I'd read for a while - 'are you not going to be any kind of company - you're just reading.' Then in between there were lots of good times - and - so many good times, I guess that's what also made it hard - because he - he's he's not sort of like this and this (showing one hand only) - he's like this and that (alternating with her hands) - totally extreme.

Elsie's words suggest that he could withdraw, whereas it was not permissible for her to withdraw in response. She indicated that his extremes, the incongruity between the "many good times and the bad times" were "crazymaking." Throughout the interview she expressed that it was the "many good times" that "made it hard."

Kathleen spoke somewhat differently about the change in her relationship. Before she married:

.. he was using sex as a way of hanging on to me - because um - if he wanted it and I said no he'd threaten to leave, get another girlfriend ..

*Bumper sticker: To all you virgins out there, thanks for nothing.*

.. he wanted to have (sex) and I was raised in the 40s and 50s - good girls don't .. he would protest to love me, he wanted me ..

Her words indicate that her response to him was embedded in a larger context of gendered expectations, that is, what was considered proper female behavior in contrast to what was expected or ignored with regard to male behavior.

*Advertisement in Guitar, Guns & Ammo: A male skeleton holding an electric guitar lying in bed beside a woman whose face is in the dark, wearing a t-shirt with 'guitars' on it, under dark satin covers with the caption across the top: You haven't tried anything till You've Plucked a VIRGIN. At the bottom the caption reads: THE ALL NEW B.C. RICH VIRGIN GUITAR ... Unused, Untried, Untouched, Untamed .. UNTIL NOW! (as quoted in MS. Magazine , Vol.IV(6), 1994).*

She went on:

.. but-but I guess to keep me (sigh, pause) - what he did then was was-um criticize

my body and it made me feel like no one else would want me. Another guy, when I was 15 or 16 tried to have sex with me - I just - threw him on the floor, stood up and said don't you ever try that again - don't you dare! So - at first using sex and then when we got married it was using my mental ca-ca-capabilities - it was other things ..

Kathleen's description conveyed a change in his focus of criticism. She hinted at the particular historically prevalent double standards<sup>16</sup> regarding sexual activity for males and females when she was a young adult and the impact this had on her. Once again she indicated her initiative and spirit when she was able to throw off one young man. In her story, she also implied her own complexity as well as the intricacies of what it means to be deeply involved with someone, because although she was able to challenge this young man, the same issue with her future husband appears to have been a more delicate one. She continued regarding the change:

I was married for about 2 months and he gave me shit because he'd thrown a sweater purposely behind the chesterfield to see how long it'd take me to find it there. I remember - coming home from work one day and seeing "this is dirty" written on the mirror of our bedroom suite. (So) now it was other things..

As did Elsie, Kathleen went on to emphasize that in her marriage the situation was not a simple one because (a) if she attempted to communicate with him or defend herself "I got hit," (b) there were children such that when he became threateningly angry, or, for example:

.. he would say these goddamn porkchops taste like shit - threw it at the door. I'd clean up and the kids were saying is daddy mad, why is daddy mad? It's alright, he's had a bad day today - and carry on just breaking my heart (pause) -

*In the movie Fried Green Tomatoes, a woman who experienced battering says "the heart may break but it keeps right on beating."*

and (c) there were other aspects to their relationship:

.. what made it difficult was I had all this commitment to this person and this family and there were good times and you know - it wasn't all bad.

These women conveyed portrayals of their relationship as multifaceted, with these many diverse aspects all impacting the overall significance of the relationship.

In contrast to the other women, Care spoke less of the positive aspects of the relationship but did indicate a change in her partner's attitude and conduct approximately 2

---

<sup>16</sup> Although Kathleen is speaking to a time more than 40 years ago, I noted the above bumper sticker on at least three to four occasions over the past 5 years. The double standard may have changed but I think there is an interesting similarity in the attitude and lack of respect for individual (possibly gendered) choices or preferences.

years after they began living together. She sets the scene of living together by establishing a picture in which she saw herself as being in control of her life. She goes on to relate her partner's change to his interactions with his friends and to his drinking pattern:

I was 23 .. I was independent, had a job, I was making money, and I was having fun. We moved in (together) and it was fun - for a while .. I was working and making sure the house was absolutely spotless, and that the meals - there was always a meal ... I was good at it, I was - but then ..(after about 2 years) things started to get bad when I didn't pay so much attention to the housework, and the friends were starting to come into the house and stay overnight and - his friends - I was not liking it .. that's when things started to change. I mean I was letting go of keeping on top of the housework and I was trying to scoot the friends out the door .. that was one of the first violent incidents (after 2 years) - once I interfered with a friend of his - then I got it ...

*On the radio news: Two men in North Vancouver started up a company they call **Wifebeaters Inc.** The label or logo on the inside tag of the undershirt apparently bears this name and it appears on the front of the undershirt as well. Immediately upon setting themselves up, the two men had 12 requests for the **Wifebeaters** tanks.*

.. or (he would go out and) I would get these phone calls - 'well, I'm going out with so-and-so for a couple of beers and in my head I'm going you mean a multiple of couples - it was never - a couple. .. I mean like he'd be coming home late at midnight and I would get all these phone calls in between - well, I'm on my way and I'm like - well, you said that an hour ago. What do you mean? I would say what about me? It would be the same answer, you know - I-I'm the reason he's not with me ..

Care spoke of alcohol as being problematic as it took him away from her and away from their relationship. Instead of looking at his drinking pattern, her partner framed her as the source of the problem.

Kali's narration of the change in her first partner's behavior after they married implied it was related to his alcohol consumption and to her being pregnant. Again, she stressed that the relationship was not totally defined by his abusive behaviors and that there were other aspects to their interactions:

.. for the first year that we were married I kind of just kept up to whatever he was doing so it was - it was okay .. He was very keen on having children (but) it was just after I, you know, got pregnant, that it was like - oh, you know, um - he didn't know if he was prepared for this and it was at that point like where he's - you know, stopped coming home at night - uh - on time from work. .. it was always the same thing - he was, you know, he was out getting drunk and then when he came home he was not very nice. ... I saw it through the framework of alcohol .. plus it - I loved this person - it wasn't like - uh - it wasn't all like that - it's not ever black and white ..

A dominant myth, discussed in Chapter three, regarding the lives of women who experience battering in their intimate relationships is that the battering is associated with

alcohol misuse. Clarified in that chapter is that this myth is unfounded. Congruent with this later discussion, although alcohol played a critical role in Care's relationship and in Kali's first marriage, it was not mentioned in relation to battering experiences by Elsie, Kathleen, or in regard to Kali's second marriage. In addition, the alcohol functioned differently in Kali's and Care's relationships. It appears that in the former the alcohol brought on the violent behaviors, whereas in the latter it appears to have functioned more as a problem of keeping him out late, interfering with their ability to spend a different kind of quality time together, as well as consuming large amounts of their money, and preventing him from seeking work. This is not to minimize either of their experiences of course, but simply to point out that their experiences, as they described them, were different, although alcohol played a role in each.

Kali also conveyed a change in her second relationship after being married, a relationship that was not influenced by alcohol:

.. (going out is) not the same as living together, it's not the same as being married to each other and so for the next year we saw each other but it was only after we finally, like after I finally moved in with him that all kinds of other things started to come up. Once we started living together he would do things like go into a rage - like a total rage - and then for 3 months everything might be quiet ..

Kali stated that living together resulted in a change in his behavior. Importantly, she clarified that the violence she experienced was not a daily occurrence. It must be remembered, however, that once violence has occurred, it changes the flavor of any relationship, yet at the same time the infrequency (or even absence of physical violence) complicates the overall experience and the women's assessments of the relationship.

*In the schoolyard of an elementary school, around the time of O.J. Simpson's trial, I hear one boy to another: "I'll O.J. you if you don't watch out" seemingly intended to indicate that he was getting mad, would use aggression, or maybe even become violent. This presents as an example of how a serious crime of violent behavior becomes normalized.*

The women additionally described experiencing less tangible psychological and emotional aspects to the changes in their relationships. Elsie's experience included a great deal of fear and anxiety. For example, after they were married, her husband began to disapprove of her going to work:

I'm on call - like they'd call at 6:00 and I'd have to look over at him and I was so scared - and I-I was thinking - now what do I do - do I go to work to make this little bit of money 'cuz my daughter really needs a little bit of help and I need this or do I please him .. he'd scream .. you care more about your work than me ..

Kali reflected on such fear in her relationship when she stated:

.. we were all walking on eggshells all the time and waiting to see.

Elsie further exemplified the psychological and emotional elements when she spoke of her attempts to intuit how her husband might respond in order to avoid future conflicts.

.. when we were first married I could never understand - one day he's um - can't believe how wonderful I am and the next day he's just ripping me apart and I remember when we were first married that was totally confusing to me - just no warning. Anxiety was constantly there because I always had to outguess him - to stop the anger, to stop the - because there were all these mixed messages ..

Such interactions shifted the focus of responsibility and placed a critical and negative focus on her, implying that if she was different than everything would be fine.

Kathleen expressed experiencing a similarly critical gaze, one which first focussed on her body and later established a gendered hierarchy predicated on his ability to earn more money:

At first .. what he did was-um criticize my body - um and it made me feel like no one else would want me. (Later) I was indoctrinated about how stupid I was. (He would say) 'we know who makes the money in this family, I do. You're just a secretary .. he had a very good job and to him that was proof that he was a better person than me .. I'm not agreeing with that but that's how he saw himself .. I think when you love someone - (pause) - um - (pause) - you-uh really believe what they're telling you. You really, you know, trust them. (pause) - And you may - learn ways to avoid um-um the physical abuse but I don't think you ever get right - how to stop this on-onslaught of-um put-downs that you get. It becomes so routine you don't even know it's happening to you - you don't even know it.

In her words, Kathleen linked various factors including uncertainty about herself, proclamations of love, the role of a prolonged period of time, and her attempts to deal with their relationship, as masking the underlying problem and the overall impact, thereby implying the complexity of the situation. Looking back she stated that:

He was verbally abusive - that was probably the worst - the put-downs - um - how stupid I was - how-how I have alzheimers, how I'm following in my family's footsteps, you know. I'm stupid and - worthless, useless - um - you name it.

She went on to describe how she and her attitude became the focus of the problem for him. Her experience echoes what we so often hear in response to a supposed joke that is in poor taste: "It was only a joke" - "I'm just drinking with the guys." In addition to her exclusion from his time "with the guys" her concerns are minimized in the face of being accused of overreacting, of not understanding, of making a mountain out of a mole hill:

- so when sex no longer became the problem - now it was other things - and-and he was staying out - and needing a reason why it was okay and so throwing it back on me how - how awful of me to get angry with him when he stayed out all night - drinking with the guys - "I'm just drinking with the guys" ..

*Ad in a computer magazine: Picture of tree house in a tree in the fall time. A young blond-haired boy making a face holds a sign saying NO GIRLS ALLOWED! Along side of the picture is the caption: A piece of cardboard. Paint and brush. Hammer and nails. When access control was this easy, nobody needed reliable, sophisticated systems, Responsible dealers, Fast, off-the-shelf delivery, Toll-free lines for easy ordering, Comprehensive system training, Or expert advice from a dedicated team. Fact is, life is no longer this easy. Nor is access control. Unless you choose the company committed to making it easy for you. Northern Computers. Because access control should be as simple as it used to be. (As quoted in MS. Magazine Vol.IV(6), 1994).*

Care similarly experienced a critical gaze, but one expressed in the context of her partner's justification for the time he spent out drinking with his friends:

.. I'm the reason he's not with me - because I'm acting the way I'm acting - I'm jealous - well - or I don't look good anymore because I'm - I don't look after myself - I'm not wearing make-up anymore, - the house isn't clean ..

*Advertisement in Macweek: A very thin old woman wearing a tiny black bikini, swim goggles, swimcap, and black shoes, is sitting on a bench. (It is questionable whether she is actually a female or a male in disguise). She has her hands on her hips. Across the top in bold print: You never thought you'd lose your looks, either. Then in much smaller print down the side: BUT YOU WILL, AND THE ODDS ARE YOU'LL LOSE YOUR DATA, TOO .. (and so forth)*

Kali addressed the issues of psychological and emotional abuse by comparing her experiences with her two husbands in the following manner:

.. with my first husband - it was more like - he was a drunk. With (second husband) - it was so incongruous that he could be one way and then another way that when he was abusive, you know, or physically threatening, or whatever, it was almost like - no people don't talk to each other like that .. I couldn't see that as - because it was didn't look like what it looked like in the first relationship - it was emotional and psychological and I think that's far worse - in terms of - just far worse - I really - I had no self worth by the end of that relationship, none at all. (My second husband) would tell you these things stone cold sober.

Kali further assessed the difference between her two husbands by clarifying that she thinks there was intent in her second husband's behavior, followed by her description of the "crazymaking" element central to the abuse:

(My second husband) is a much more abusive person .. malevolent abuse .. it's intentional - what comes from (him) - he wants to hurt you, he wants to undermine you, he wants you to feel like dirt. He used anything - all of my vulnerabilities to be controlling and then to say well I-I-I - you know - it's like I want to intimidate you but I don't want you to be afraid of me when that's sort of what it's about .. I want to intimidate you with my size but then why would you be afraid of me - of course I'm not - I'll-I'll never hit you - I'll never - (pause) - well, but if uh - will you or won't you, it doesn't matter and he had - also - in the past. It's not like it was an everyday occurrence but it doesn't have to be.

Kali describes her first husband as exercising control through his alcohol misuse and her second husband as using intimidation. The women's narratives also identified other



experiences of control defined as, or by, their partners' possessiveness, jealousy, frequent senseless criticism, as well as unpredictability and inconsistency as common features of their partners' angry eruptions.

Elsie formulated her husband's jealousy and possessiveness in terms of his requirement to know about all aspects of her life, his distrust of her regarding other men, and his isolation of her:

He was very jealous and possessive. I had to explain all my activities in detail. .. He didn't allow - no-no close friends. In the beginning of the marriage, if I looked at another man - I never even did look at other men - I would never even talk to another man 'cuz I know that would start something - 'you're just a big flirt' -

*Advertisement for Wonderbra: picturing a fully bosomed woman clad in lacy black bra and panty beside the large bold caption: **HELLO BOYS** with a tag and small print declaring: the one and only **wonderbra**. (as quoted in MS. Magazine, Vol.V(4), 1995).*

Women perceived as untrustworthy and disloyal has deep cultural roots, dating back to various folklore but also present in such popular films as *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1988) with Glenn Close and Michael Douglas, in which the "vengeful other woman" is portrayed as deceitful and treacherous. Elsie felt deeply misunderstood by his assumptions:

- that wasn't me. I had had one husband and I was with one man. I never chased any man. We never went to any parties, the kind of party where you danced with anybody - he kept me away from that, he kept me away - totally to himself .. he had to know what I did every minute .. (and we) thought that was love.

*Advertisement in New Yorker for Jaipur, a perfume made by Boucheron, Paris. Depicts the mid-back to thighs portion of a nude woman with her hands held in place over the center of her buttocks by a watch that appears to have a solid non-adjustable band.*

In addition, Elsie makes the critical point that "it went so slowly that I just totally - I just adapted all the way along." She further described her husband's inconsistent and unpredictable behaviors, with her attempts to understand or anticipate them in order to prevent his outbursts:

Nothing was ever consistent and what made him mad was never consistent. He would take things - move things. It was okay on Monday to ask when on Wednesday you couldn't ask because he became angry. I would think, okay, I must never ask again where things are, I must start looking for them myself because that's another point that makes him mad like. So I was constantly trying to guess .. I always had to out-guess him - to stop the anger - and because there were all these mixed messages .. then he'd come and hug me - 'oh, I'll take you out to dinner.' He screamed - never about anything in particular - it would be about leaving a nail there or why did I say this or - or it was that kind of thing that I couldn't put my hand on - it was nothing, nothing logical.

Elsie's statement that it was "never about anything in particular .. nothing logical" links

back to Kali's earlier indication that her partner's behaviors were crazymaking. Elsie further alluded to the effects of the isolation imposed in many relationships in which women experience battering, when, after leaving:

.. you have nobody and of course you've been abused so he wouldn't allow you to have friends so there really is nobody and even if you have a couple of friends, I think they get tired and they don't want to hear about it. Like nobody wants to listen to somebody's sad tales - they want to feel good - so eventually there's nobody that wants to listen.

*Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone.*

Elsie's reflection attends to the difficulty many people have in listening to another person's struggle, not an uncommon experience, particularly for people who have suffered. She also mentioned the need to be heard, possibly to be heard often, even repeatedly, in order to get through this aspect of the struggle.

Kathleen describes somewhat different circumstances, yet similar experiences regarding her ex-husband's attempts to isolate her, his unpredictable and illogical angry eruptions, and her experience of living a "guessing game":

.. he used to go on fishing trips every year, and that was fine, and I started going on a - on-a-uh what started as a 2-3 day vacation with colleagues from work. He was livid I would do this - but it was okay for him to go fishing with the boys. ... I went out with him and had friends with him but going for lunch, going for dinner with my girlfriends was - *I went* - it just meant that um - I paid for it. And .. we had 10 (including guests) for dinner and (10 minutes before) the first people arrived. We'd had a good day putting the dinner together - I did all of it - again, I wanted to prove that I am a good cook, and-um - and I came into the kitchen, everything was ready, perfectly on time, no hassle - we were going to have a drink and-and I said where's the top to the lid (of a jar) and-um .. he said I threw it out, and I said Oh (-). you don't - he said goddamn it you fuckin' bitch - (pause) - he came and he grabbed me over to it, went into the garbage and said the goddamn thing's here .. and he cut my knuckle with it and then threw it back in. But - you know - that was just - that was - we were having people for dinner in 10 minutes. He knew I couldn't do anything ... you know, problems kept popping up (laughs somewhat cynically, raising her hands questioningly) - there's no end to it - no end to it. What might be right one day isn't right the next. You can't - you - it's a guessing game - you're a yo-yo.

Linked to the "guessing game" was the element of surprise indicated by Kathleen's words of "it was always - it would always be a surprise." She went on to verbalize a related experience one evening when they had been invited out for dinner and therefore she had no dinner ready for him when he came home:

.. he didn't show up 'til 9:00 at night .. the kids and I had to eat - they were just little and-um I was all dressed up in case he still wanted to go - and-uh I tried to offer him coffee. He dumps it down me and then he goes to the fridge 'cuz there was no dinner for him and he took everything he could find - glass - and he (points

across a fairly large room) - smashed it on the fireplace.

In her description Kathleen used words to defend the (normal and expected) necessity of feeding their children as implied by her tone of voice, thereby alluding to the tone of a relationship in which she had to defend her actions. Like Kathleen, Kali spoke of similar encounters in which she had to defend her behaviors, with both her husbands. Both her husbands complicated and interfered with her relationships with others. She provided the following violent example with respect to her first husband:

He was also very jealous, you know - didn't like me going out to school and it would be like - you're putting make-up on, are you going out to meet your .. Or one evening after we'd had some friends over he to me, well, well, you know you better tie me to the bed because I don't know what I'm going to do, and that's - that was just terrifying, and - and -he-he passed out and I called the police and they were like - well, is he doing anything now? .. <sup>17</sup>

*Song by popular songwriter and singer Tracy Chapman (1988) called Behind the Wall:*

*1. Last night I heard the screaming  
Loud voices behind the wall  
Another sleepless night for me  
It won't do no good to call the  
The police - Always come late  
If they come at all.*

*2. And when they arrive  
They say they can't interfere  
With domestic affairs  
Between a man and his wife  
And so they walk out the door  
The tears well up in her eyes.*

*3. Last night I heard the screaming  
Then a silence that chilled my soul  
I prayed that I was dreaming  
When I saw the ambulance in the road*

*4. And the policeman said  
"I'm here to keep the peace  
Will the crowd disperse  
I think we all could use some sleep"*

Kali went on to speak about a similar theme with her second husband:

Then my second husband always scrutinized and called into question the way I interact with other people. So there was this stuff about me and my friends all the time as a thread running through things.

Kali further provided an example of the unpredictable and unexpected nature of her second husband's response to a situation in which she felt rather vulnerable:

.. when the baby was 6 weeks old - um - I was utterly exhausted because he was nursing like every hour on the hour and we'd just gone to bed and I was just exhausted and he started to cry and I was just like no - I, you know, - I'm not getting up with him. You can go walk him around, you can do whatever but I'm - and his response to that was to slap me in the face (pause) - well, yeh, it was just totally devastating and it - but it - but it was when I was at my most vulnerable always in that relationship was when he was most abusive ..

*On the news: A 79 year old woman is robbed, assaulted and raped in her apartment by a man wearing a T-shirt that declares: the only reason you're alive is because there isn't a law yet that allows us to kill you. (October, 1996)*

<sup>17</sup> I return to this issue of violence or the threat of violence and (inappropriate) police response in Chapter seven.

Care's narrative described her partner's controlling behaviors somewhat differently.

One aspect of the control she experienced in her relationship was:

.. I think that the things became tighter around me - I mean I didn't - (long pause) - because he didn't have (sigh) his work or - and I was the income earner he had time to be at home, to be on the phone, phoning me at work - when are you coming home. When you - on your way home do this or that - I was starting to get agendas and my time was starting to be controlled by him .. and he managed to run up big bills .. and I just became overwhelmed because - (pause) - I'm working to pay the bills - in some cases I had taken on double shifts, I had taken on second jobs .. in order to make ends meet ..

Later in their relationship, however, his controlling behaviors became more threatening and violent:

The other episodes of violence were to control me because they were always - revolved around - I was standing up for myself and it was like you cannot treat me this way, with the verbal and the emotional. I've had enough, I'm going to phone the police and have them remove you. That's when the physical game would start .. he would just physically abuse me to immobilize me from seeking help.

*November 1995, on radio news: A jealous husband strangles his wife in Whitehorse saying he snapped and lost control. A year later he is sentenced to 5 years imprisonment for manslaughter. His defense was that he had lost control after his wife "nagged him" and "attacked his manliness."*

Care's words reveal her partner's use of violence to silence her. Her words are reflected further in Kathleen's formulation of how her husband silenced her:

.. we had met someone (from his work) and-um - (pause) he thought I'd say something out of place and I-I was never like that. I recognized that his job was important, and I couldn't speak about what he did, so - but he was frightened and what he did was he stood on my foot, he stood on my foot - and- and of course I didn't do anything. I was in - I'm sure I gasped - I looked at him, I had tears in my eyes but I had no idea what was going on here, and then it became a thing where if we were - like he finally moved on, got into management .. and if we were with people at a cocktail party he'd grab my hand and he'd squeeze my knuckles together. After - of course I asked him 'why did you do that?' Well, I was afraid you're going to say something you shouldn't .. (emphatically) I would NOT do that because ultimately, if I said anything wrong, it would jeopardize my life too, not just his career.. Anyway, it got to be - um - that he would under the table kick me in my shins if he thought I might say something, um - or again, squeeze my hand, but finally, and this was I guess towards the end of my rope, when it got to be (clears her throat to demonstrate) - he'd clear his throat and I knew, that was the signal not to say any more.

In keeping with the atmosphere in the relationship, Kathleen's description included a self-defense in which she portrayed herself as someone who was thoughtful and considerate in her interactions, in contrast to her husband's erroneous assumptions. She challenged him, but to no avail. Additionally, Kathleen remarked that control came in the form of:

He never wanted me to have any kind of cash on hand .. (he) made sure that my

inheritance was used up - um - in purchasing a home .. so financially he controlled me ..

And similarly Elsie stipulated:

I worked hard (but) he would not give me any money. He took every pay cheque and when I worked he would give me \$4.00 - \$2 for parking and \$2 for lunch - that was all the money I had. I had a chequebook and I could write the grocery cheque .. everything was monitored. He knew where everything was .. all the drawers were set at a certain angle.

Two of the women spoke of their partners' attempts at maintaining or regaining control by using sex, linking violence and sex.

*April, 1996, on the radio, they spoke of a new movie called Crash in which a man has a heightened sexual experience at the moment of a life-threatening car crash. The movie continues with his attempts to reconstruct other such life-threatening crashes in order to reexperience the profound sexual encounter.*

Elsie describes her experience toward the end of her relationship:

.. he was getting high from abusing me - definitely - he would yell and scream and rage and I would shiver and try to defend myself for all this and then he would finally flop down and I would see the relief kind of come over him and then every time he would want - sex after. (At the time) I felt relief - he stopped raging. .. (Another time when I said) I don't want any part of this anymore, this has got to stop, he went berserk - 'you know how much I need this?' He says 'I need to feel wanted, you're not making me feel wanted' and he went to the bathroom and he slammed the door until the wall just about fell apart.

*Advertisement for the popular Pepe Jeans portrays two side-by-side pictures of a muscular bare chested male with a female wearing a sheer see-through top. In the first image he appears to be putting his hand up the front of her see-through top and in the second image he has succeeded. Only their torsos are visible, no jeans to be seen. Across the first image is the caption: wear it out and make it scream. (As quoted in MS. Magazine V(1), 1994).*

Kathleen describes her experiences in this regard as:

I'd be angry that he'd been out all night and (ask) where have you been and I'd get pushed around - called all kinds of names or he'd force himself on me. So you start avoiding to do-doing some things ..

and later in their relationship:

he withheld sex from me .. he-we would go for 5-6 weeks - and he was just never interested - and that is very - that's cruel - it's really cruel. No talking about it - no nothing.

Both Elsie's and Kathleen's words imply experiences of being objectified, of not being fully visible or treated with respect in a particular kind of intimate interaction, as well as inferring the power imbalance within these experiences. Their words appear congruent with cultural portrayals of women as weaker and available, and cultural representations that

link sex and violence in an attempt to make each more exciting.

Three of the women further described fear of violence in the context of their attempts to leave the relationship, implying that leaving the relationship did not automatically equate with safety for them. This issue of safety and leaving is dealt with in greater depth in Chapter seven, and is addressed only briefly here as integral to their narratives of victimization, and as an introduction to the women and their array of experiences. Kali, for example, described her husband moving in next door when she left him after he threatened her, and Elsie spoke of notifying the police the second time she left in order to ensure her safety.

*Sunday April 14, 1996, Province Newspaper reports: "Stalked, shot by ex-boyfriend. She lived; many don't. Despite her calls to police, jilted beau shoots her in her driveway." The Province report continues: "did everything she could think of to stop her ex-boyfriend from stalking her. She complained to the RCMP, changed her routines, even cut the shrubs outside her house so he'd have nowhere to skulk. It wasn't enough. Her ex-boyfriend greeted her in her driveway one night with a sawed-off shotgun ... Then he walked up to her, put the gun to her back and fired. "... I realized I had to play dead, make him think I was dead or he'd go on shooting until I was." She lay as still as she could with her eyes shut and heard one more blast when he fell dead on top of her.*

Kathleen spoke of her ex-husband's ongoing harassment and stalking after she left him.

When she returned to the house to gather up some of her belongings:

He'd let me take some things out of the house but in letting me take things out of the house he did rape me, he forced me to have sex with him .. I had my restraining order - like never mind (pause) - he did still try - he's broken the restraining order many times.

*On the news, July 1994: Dave McCarthy is charged with killing his (ex)wife, Peggy, in her Port Coquitlam home, with their 3 children asleep at the time. It was the day before their divorce was to be granted. She was stabbed 11 times, her throat slit, and her right arm nearly severed. November, 1995, in the Coquitlam Now Newspaper: Dave McCarthy, not yet convicted of killing his ex-wife, is attempting to gain custody of his 3 children who have been living with their mother's sister and husband since the slaying. January 1997, Province Newspaper reports that Dave McCarthy has killed himself on the second day of his trial for the murder of Peggy McCarthy. This latest article reports that "there was a witness to the murder and McCarthy, covered in blood, was arrested 20 minutes after the slaying." It was the first time that any news release indicated there was "no question he had done the murder."*

These depictions suggest that leaving is not a simple or definitive act, it does not ensure the end to violence or necessarily secure the women's safety. Additionally, of interest is that the courts maintain(ed) a separation between his arrest in relation to the murder and his attempt to obtain custody. This event in the news was echoed in Care's experience to be

explored further in chapter seven.<sup>18</sup>

The above excerpts from the women's narratives convey some of the intensity and depth of their experiences as embedded in wider social structures that construe women's identity within a particular gaze. Probably for the average reader the popular media insertions are easily critiqued and dismissed on the grounds that they were not *intended* to harm, that they were simply playing with words and images, and we (or ought to) know not to take them seriously. My contention, however, is that these women's experiences of violence did not occur in a vacuum. Presenting the various media and popular cultural insertions in a concrete and clustered fashion as done here, is intended to establish an awareness of the cultural messages that otherwise frequently and regularly slip by us. This illustrates that we are inundated with particular images and messages about women in the popular media and in the news to which we pay little serious or critical attention. I do not propose that there is a *direct* relationship but I do suggest that a relationship exists between the attitudes towards women in the public sphere and those played out in some private spheres.

Some of the issues that have been addressed in this chapter resurface in later chapters in greater depth when they are revealed in the women's experiences. As will become clear in these further explorations of the women's narratives, the women themselves echo this subjectively experienced relationship in their explorations when they articulate the link between their pasts and the broader sociocultural contexts to their lived experiences of being battered in an intimate relationship. Having heard from these experiential experts, I now turn to the theoretical experts to see how the available literature formulates and addresses the issues of women's experiences of battering in their intimate relationships, that is, I examine dominant theories with respect to women's encounters of victimization .

---

<sup>18</sup> Recently a woman told me of her encounter one Saturday afternoon while driving down a main street in Vancouver. She saw a man beating a woman and trying to push her into a van at the side of the road. She stopped her car and honked her horn, hoping to draw attention to this event. People continued driving by, however, without stopping. Not knowing the context of the relationship between the woman and the man, she nevertheless told the woman she did not have to go with this man, nor put up with this his behavior. Another woman finally stopped to help. They managed to get the woman safely to a police station where it became clear that this man was the woman's ex-partner. They had been apart for over 3 months but he had been stalking and harassing her. In relaying her story to me I commented that one reason this man could physically assault her in public was that he knew no one would stop to help. She answered "that's what the police said as well."

### **Chapter Three: The Theoretical Experts**

In order to address women's experiences, their subjective understandings, and their self-perceptions during a period in their lives when they were being victimized in their intimate relationships, I examine the relevant literature. There is no research that focuses directly on the ways in which women who have been battered make meaning of these events, on their self-conceptualizations, nor on whether these women identify themselves as victims or as battered women. To date the literature does not clarify the pertinence or utility of these labels for women who experience intimate violence. There is, however, a vast amount of literature and research that attends to women who have lived in or are living under such circumstances, as well as literature that uses the term 'victim' as descriptive language. I have divided the literature into three main categories: (a) texts that present the dominant theories of victimization, (b) texts that attempt to hear the voices of women who have been battered in their intimate relationships, and (c) current self-help, counselling, and popular media texts. It must be stated that subscribing to any particular paradigm or perspective is not a neutral act, but rather signifies social, political, and psychological implications in either discounting, or highlighting certain aspects. This is also true for existing theories of victimization and hence I include a critique of each perspective.

#### **Theories of Victimization**

Dominant theories of victimization regarding women in heterosexual relationships in which battering occurs present three levels of analyses: (a) the intrapersonal perspectives that focus on the individual, (b) the interpersonal perspectives that focus on the interactions between the individuals, and (c) the sociocultural or feminist perspectives that focus on the larger impact of historical, sociocultural, and specific contextual factors, all of which are competing and interactive factors intersecting with experiences of violence in intimate relationships. Perceptions, interpretations, and conclusions about a woman who experiences battering in her intimate relationship shift depending upon the theoretical approach, the methodology, and the analysis. These perspectives reflect mainstream's preoccupation with heterosexual relationships and, in addition to briefly discussing each of these perspectives, I review the recent available literature on intralesbian battering.

#### **Intrapersonal Perspectives**

The psychiatric and psychodynamic paradigms are examples of intrapersonal



theories of victimization that focus on personality traits of the victim and individual pathology (Gayford, 1983). These accounts, which rely primarily on case studies (e.g., Shainess, 1984), assume pre-existing character structures, whereby the woman's personality is believed to be predisposed toward masochistic tendencies that originated in early childhood painful experiences (Snell, Rosenwald, & Robey, 1964; Symonds, 1978). The literature, as well as the research, focus on individual pathology in heterosexual relationships with descriptions of the sadistic, aggressive male, and the masochistic, passive female (Shainess, 1979). In 1985 the American Psychiatric Association (1985) proposed to establish a psychiatric diagnostic category for the DSM-III-R (1987) called the "masochistic personality disorder." A "masochistic" woman would be defined as selfless, dependent, passive, other-focussed, and unable to stop being victimized or taken advantage of. After much debate and critique of this label as victim-blaming (Caplan, 1985, 1995; Walker, 1987), this category was replaced with "self-defeating personality disorder" in the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-III-R (1987), which Caplan (1995) contends is similarly victim-blaming because self-defeating implies "she brought it on herself" (p 91).

The intrapersonal perspective has triggered much debate regarding assignment of responsibility. Recent literature has challenged notions of predisposition, positing instead that individual traits and personality profiles of women who have been battered reflect sequelae rather than precursors to abuse (Walker, 1985), that women who have been in relationships in which battering occurs are no different than women in the general population who have not been in battering relationships (Pagelow, 1981), and that the only constant among these women is that of being female (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). Nevertheless, in spite of various critiques (e.g., Caplan, 1995; Walker, 1987) individuals using the psychodynamic approach continue to focus on women's personality traits and other characteristics as explanation for the women's experiences of victimization. Furthermore, from this perspective women in relationships in which they experience battering continue to be viewed as passive, dependent, masochistic, potentially responsible for and desiring of the battering, and it is presumed that therefore they will go on to enter future victimizing relationships should they succeed in terminating the one they are in.

### **Interpersonal Perspectives**

Interpersonal theories of battering rely on social learning (Ganley, 1989) and

systems (Giles-Sims, 1983) theories. Social learning theory focuses on observational learning, modelling, and reinforcement that takes place primarily in families of origin, and these concepts are employed to explain both the woman experiencing the battering and her partner's battering behaviors. Both are perceived to be repeating their family patterns or fulfilling a psychological need not met in their families of origin. The individual learns when, where, and against whom a behavior is functional and effective (Gelles, 1983). Transgenerational violence is believed to result from witnessing or experiencing violence in childhood (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

Critiques of social learning and transgenerational explanations stems from the literature that examines the diversity in degrees, frequencies, and types of familial violence. Although many adults grew up in homes where diverse forms and degrees of violence were experienced, not all of these adults demonstrate the transgenerational continuity of violence either as recipients or perpetrators implied in the theory (Dobash & Dobash, 1979), nor has it been found that family patterns of violence necessarily determine marital choices (Gelles & Cornell, 1985). Social learning theory may describe how the learning takes place but lacks an inclusive analysis of the many males and females who have been abused or who have witnessed violence yet do not grow up to be violent or victimized (Browne, 1987).

Another interpersonal perspective, that of systems theory, is grounded in assumptions of equitable male/female relations, and posits that the (heterosexual) family functions as a relatively stable system (Giles-Sims, 1983). One violent incident can change future dynamics within this microsystem. To maintain or return to a stable system, the event may be minimized and hence the battering partner has achieved a desired outcome without sanctions against his behavior, thereby increasing the likelihood of a recurrence. Systems approach to battering relationships implies that there is a chain of events such that the actions and reactions represent links in a chain, with each reaction also representing a potential precipitant for future behaviors. There is no simple cause and effect equation because the response to any particular behavior may also reflect the ongoing pattern of inter-relationships. An underlying assumption in the systems approach is that the battering occurs in an interactional context, that it is characterized by specific structural relations, and that the battering functions to maintain the system or to reestablish equilibrium (Bograd, 1982). Giles-Sims (1983) reports findings that the interaction or victimizing relationship is

often broken when a new person who represents an alternative, or competing feedback to the woman, is introduced to the family system. The woman may leave, although usually only after a gradual process, and the permanency of leaving is often contingent upon the quality of this alternative feedback.

Therapists working from a systems approach attempt to maintain a position of neutrality regarding both partners, presuming that this permits the therapist an unbiased perception, that the therapist will appear less threatening, and will therefore be able to work more effectively with the couple (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980).

Systems theory has been critiqued for its narrow focus on the family microsystem, thereby neglecting to account for the role and impact of larger social systems, as well as obscuring the personal responsibility of the males who batter in heterosexual relationships (Giles-Sims, 1983) and females who batter in lesbian relationships. Further, it implies that the battered woman is a naive collaborator, rendering her very real victimization invisible, and the fact that her only 'collaboration' is her circumstantial presence at the time of the batterer's violent behavior (Bograd, 1984, 1988). Inferring her complicity in his battering behaviors echoes the prevailing provocation myth. In the systems theory framework, the dispersion of responsibility between the partners of an intimate dyad obscures the oft *felt* and *experienced* power inequities that exist between the aggressor and the victim (Margolin & Burman, 1993).<sup>19</sup> Regarding neutrality, Walker (1989) posits that many women who have experienced the terrors of being victimized have such an intensified sense of danger, that any therapist or other interaction that is not clearly one of advocacy and anti-violence, is perceived as lacking in appropriate support and validation. Moreover, Bograd (1984) critiques joint family therapy suggesting that such work implies colluding with the batterer because the woman is prohibited from speaking freely with her partner present, knowing the potential subsequent consequences, thereby further silencing the woman. Joint therapy further conveys the notion that the violence is a joint problem, reinforcing the myth that the woman is at least partially/equally responsible. Last, Martin (1983) critiques family systems therapy for their focus on solving relational dysfunction that ignores critical safety

---

<sup>19</sup> A myth of mutual combat presented by investigators who argue that "women do it too" (e.g., Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988), is grounded in notions of equitable heterosexual relationships and also represents an interpersonal perspective. This myth has been disputed by authors who critiqued these studies with respect to their methodologies and analyses (e.g., Margolin, 1987; Saunders, 1988)

issues, and disregards the woman's need for protection.

With respect to labelling, family therapists have tended to stay away from such individual-focussed pejorative terms used within the intrapersonal paradigm already mentioned. They have, however, resorted to the use of such terms as enmeshed, dysfunctional, and co-dependent, intended to reflect relational interactions but nonetheless applied to an individual in that relationship.

### **Sociocultural and Feminist Perspectives**

The third theoretical perspective to address women who experience battering is one that includes historical, sociocultural, and political factors in its analyses. From this perspective wife assault is perceived as being on a continuum with other forms of violence against women, and is analysed as being indicative of a grave widespread phenomenon reflecting a pattern of coercive subordination of women including psychological, physical, and sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1983; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Yllö & Bograd, 1988). Violence is believed to occur typically in situations of conflict over control, power, authority, and resources, and is due to *perceived* threats to male privilege evoked by women attempting to achieve greater independence and equality. Historical antecedents, cross-cultural factors, and an examination of those aspects of our society that support and sanction wife assault are critical to a feminist perspective. Historically, wife assault has been accepted practice in Western society since the Middle ages (Hofeller, 1983), written into religious codes as a justification for chastisement and correction (Dobash & Dobash, 1979), and supported by a legal system that, until 1874, permitted a man in America to beat his wife with a stick, choke her, pull her hair, spit in her face, or kick her without reproach (Browne, 1987). In 1866, a restriction in the law that limited wife assault to the use of a "stick no wider than a thumb" was considered a "compassionate reform" because it changed the weapons that were used. In 1874 the legal right to beat your wife was rescinded, although the courts maintained that family violence was a private matter (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Historically wife assault has been perceived as a "misdemeanor," even though the same assault against an acquaintance or a stranger was and remains a criminal offense (Roesch, Dutton, & Sacco, 1990). Laws have changed, but attitudes take longer to change. Feminist analyses posit that a complete restructuring of social institutions is needed to eliminate hierarchical and gendered relations at all levels, in order to effect

meaningful and lasting change in violence against women. The battered women's movement has sought to clearly differentiate between aggressor and victim, and emphasize both the micro and macro contexts in which violence against women occurs. In spite of a feminist commitment to expose women's experiences of intimate violence, in the area of women's shame and their reluctance to report, feminism's impact appears to have been a somewhat mixed one for women in relationships in which they experienced battering. The delegitimization of wife assault increased women's guilt about their inability to escape, thinking of themselves as somehow flawed or lacking in strength, and adding to their sense of shame (Gordon, 1993).<sup>20</sup>

Professionals working from the sociocultural and feminist perspectives focus on

---

<sup>20</sup> Again, I recognise that these theories of victimization are limited to heterosexual relationships. Currently, there are three still somewhat incomplete perspectives attempting to explain battering that occurs in some lesbian relationships. The first defines battering as a gendered construct, defining the battering as socially derived rather than biologically determined, with all relationships mirroring a hetero-normative hegemonic construction of human relations in which females are devalued and same-sex relationships lack recognition and dignity. These prescriptive norms are internalized through socialization processes even by those who appear to resist these norms by entering same-sex relations. It is assumed that lesbians in relationships in which battering occurs, behave in gendered ways, congruent with societal assumptions linking aggressive, threatening, violent behaviors to socially masculine characteristics (presumably the "batterer") and passive, dependent behaviors to socially feminine characteristics (presumably the "victim") (Eaton, 1994). Gender traits and gender oppression, believed to be internalized, are re-enacted in the relationship. Eaton critiques the heterosexist assumptions in butch/femme (aggressive/nonaggressive) stereotypes put on lesbian relationships, as insulting and limiting many lesbians' self-perceptions. A second explanation posits that intralesbian violence instead reflects pathological individuals who, regardless of gender, are and will be violent in a society that does not hold them appropriately accountable (Eaton, 1994). Studies supporting this perception report that male-on-female violence is virtually indistinguishable from female-on-female violence in frequency rates or in form (e.g., see Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992). Based on the dearth of material on intralesbian battering, however, one cannot assume that the purpose or function of intralesbian violence is directly comparable to the battering experienced by women in heterosexual relationships. For example, heterosexual women who experience battering, frequently report sexual violence such as rape, as part of the battery, whereas this has not been consistently reported by lesbians who experience battering (Eaton, 1994; Renzetti, 1992). Finally, Eaton suggests an alternative theoretical perspective, one that links intralesbian violence to the larger societal context. Rather than subscribing to mainstream hetero-normative explanations of violence, such a theory focuses on the particularities and specificity of lesbian battering whilst interweaving these with larger antilebian policies, practices, and other structural barriers experienced by lesbians. Rather than assuming that there is something inherent about lesbianism that results in violent outbreaks, the interpersonal difficulties may instead reflect the impact of daily living in a homophobic society, of being invisible, of being closeted in parts or all of one's life in order to guarantee some measure of safety. A starting point for such a theory is listening to these women's stories and their self-perceptions.

recognizing the strengths of women who have been battered (Margolin & Burman, 1993), and on issues of safety and survival rather than on maintaining the intimate relationship (Hart, 1988). Labels are critiqued as indicating power differentials between the one who diagnoses and the one who receives the diagnosis, as obscuring issues of diversity and complexity in women's lives, and as ignoring the sociocultural and historical contexts in which we live. With regard to women in relationships in which they experience battering, labels are viewed as constructs that benefit those in the position of power to use the labels, and masking the multiple reasons and conditions under which women stay or leave their relationships. Psychodynamically-oriented authors use the label "victim" to convey a woman who is dependent, lacking in self esteem, engaged in self-defeating behaviors, overly compliant, and subordinating herself in her relationships, whereas feminists and socioculturally-oriented authors employ the term "victim" to define women's externally imposed experiences whereby they are indeed being victimized. Furthermore feminists attempt to explicate the power inequities that women experience in relationships in which battering occurs, as being on a continuum with other forms of exploitation and hierarchies that operate in society at large (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Dutton, 1992; Lamb, 1996).

The three levels of analyses reflected in heterosexual theories of victimization along with the explanations of intralesbian violence are not predominantly grounded in women's self-explorations or self-definitions. This presents a gap between the theories and the women's experiences that the theories attempt to address. This gap is critical for those professionals who rely on a dominant discourse and theorizing to provide a theoretical framework along with insight and understanding from which to work effectively and empathically particularly with respect to intimate violence. The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the available literature by hearing the women's self-definitions and perceptions.

### **Texts that Attempt to Hear Women's Voices**

A text that presents the voices of women who have experienced violence in their intimate relationships is that by Angela Browne (1987) in which she describes and quotes the women's personal stories. She carried out extensive interviews with women who killed their violent male partners, asking them about their experiences in order to gain insight and understanding into these women's lives and behaviors. Her research is

comparable to conducting numerous case studies that provide a comprehensive portrait, one that does not simplify or dismiss the women's voices or their experiences.

A somewhat different research project is that of Ferraro and Johnson (1983) who employed a participant-observation approach in order to examine the language used by 10 women as they described their battering experiences. These researchers formulated a typology of "rationalizations" for why these women stayed in abusive relationships based on the women's narratives. Although the title of their project states that their purpose was to understand "How women experience battering: The process of victimization," their focus instead seemed to be one of asking and capturing why the women stayed or left relationships in which they experienced battering.

The phenomenon of intra-marital violence was also examined by Margareta Hyden (1994). She relied on the heterosexual marriage as providing the interpretative framework for understanding the violence. Over a two-year period she conducted 143 in-person interviews with both partners of marriages in which the women experienced battering. The purpose was to uncover how each partner interpreted and made sense of the husband's violent behaviors. Her narrative analysis focussed on the differing accounts of the wives and the husbands. Whereas the husbands spoke primarily of the purpose or the 'why' of the violence, the wives emphasized the nature or the 'how' of the violence and its effects. Hyden links these two differing reconstructions and interpretations to the larger sociocultural, gendered, constructions in marriage. She focussed on the violent events and the subjective interpretation of these events. In her analysis, she first examines these interpretations in the context of the marriage on a micro level and then takes this analysis to the institution of marriage on a macro level. Hyden did not intend to capture the women's self-definitions nor how they constructed their identities, which the present study does. Her study took place in Sweden and is limited to white heterosexual middle-class couples.

Finally, Susan Levin (1992), for her doctoral dissertation at The Union State University in Michigan, sought to give visibility to the experiences of women who have been battered. In her study, Levin carried out in-depth unstructured interviews with nine women, rarely using an interview guide that she had developed prior to initiating the interviews. She found that she did not need to rely on her interview guide, as each interview developed its own unique process of interaction, sharing, and "storyline."

Where necessary Levin asked questions for further clarification or for expansion. In addition to some demographic questions, the interview guide focused on the women's interpretations of when and why they shared their battering experiences with someone, what it was that enabled them to feel heard, and how this differed from when they did not feel heard or understood. In her final text, Levin took the data from the interviews and examined some mainstream questions directed at women who experience battering such as "why won't they leave" or "why does she provoke him" in light of the women's words. This study was limited to white, heterosexual women living in Michigan.

### **Therapeutic, Self-help, and Popular Media Texts**

Counselling, therapeutic, and self-help books were examined for their use of the term "victim" and the consequent implications of that discourse. An example from the therapeutic community is Miriam Greenspan's (1993) text in which she presents an analysis of "Victim psychology" as defined by "victim traits." These include "indirect communication, indirect use of power in the passive/aggressive mode, internalized anger that emerges in acts of unconscious hostility" (p. 185). Greenspan's analysis implies that the woman is a victim due to her own thoughts and actions, that she victimizes herself, and as such Greenspan collapses the victim and victimizer into one and the same individual, the woman herself. This represents a shift in the definition of what it means to be a victim, a shift away from even the broader mainstream definition of the victim as someone who has been harmed by another individual. Second, her working definition of victim in this therapeutic discourse masks whether these "traits" reflect the sequelae of having been victimized or result in being victimized. Third, her description and operating definitions do not address the very real experiences of women who have lived with violence and hence she renders their experiences invisible. Her analysis focuses on individual women's behaviors with the implication that these women are responsible for, or at least play a key role in their own pathology. This is not to suggest that there are not some women who may behave in ways that are detrimental toward themselves and/or those around them, but it does suggest that the language used to describe such events must be clear and distinct from the language used to describe very different, painful, other-imposed, injurious behaviors in women's lives.

Notably, an award-winning self-help anxiety and phobia workbook (Bourne,



1995) characterizes the victim as:

that part of you which feels helpless or hopeless. It generates anxiety by telling you that you're not making any progress, that your condition is incurable or that the road is too long and steep for you to have a real chance at recovering. The Victim also plays a major role in creating depression. The Victim believes that there is something inherently wrong with you ..Characteristically, it bemoans, complains, and regrets things as they are at present. (p.176).

suggesting that there is such an entity as a victim characteristic, implying directionality in which this characteristic results in other problems such as depression or anxiety in one's life, thereby decontextualizing very real victimization experiences that *result* in depression and/or anxiety. The victim in this text is linked to other "incorrect" and "negative self-talk" or beliefs, the focus is on the individual, presuming that individual change in the form of "different tapes" is the only necessary and effective ingredient in determining a meaningful and potentially lasting shift for oneself. Again, my criticism is not intended to suggest that this is always problematic, and indeed I recognise that some of the exercises in the book are potentially empowering. My critique lies with the shift in definition of what it means to be a victim, along with the problematic links between this simplistic definition and plausible interpretations or management of lived experiences of victimization, and victim-blaming tendencies. Similarly, Beattie (1987) in her popular self-help book makes the problematic claim that "We *allow* people to victimize us and we *participate* in our own victimization" (italics added). In the context of these self-help books, the meaning of being a victim is completely internalized, obscuring and negating any prior externally imposed experiences. Moreover, these constructions lack an analysis of sociocultural, economic, and historical contexts as interactive factors in the experiences of those who are victimized.

Other self-help literature stemming from the co-dependency movement perpetuates a victim discourse by proposing numerous ways in which we have all presumably experienced victimization as an inevitable consequence of growing up in dysfunctional families, thereby laying the groundwork and defining the need for recovery and recognition of ourselves as survivors (e.g., Beattie, 1987; Bradshaw, 1990). Adult children are portrayed as the innocent victims of their dysfunctional families and the overriding emphasis on victimhood becomes a primary source via which to organize one's identity. The co-dependency literature both describes and prescribes the recovery process as a life-long commitment (Kaminer, 1992). This pervasive preoccupation with addiction and

powerlessness impacts our self-perceptions as well as our perceptions of others. Kaminer posits that this is poignantly demonstrated in the inclusive nature of contemporary victimhood notions such that smokers are the victims of tobacco companies, troubled teenagers are the victims of the music they listen to, men are the victims of feminism, and of course almost everyone is a victim in some manner of the now dominant dysfunctional family. Such common and ubiquitous reference to potential individual pathology becomes problematic in the concurrent maximizing and minimizing of genuine suffering. One would begin to question the integrity and meaning of any term that on the one hand is posited to have such detrimental and longlasting impact and is simultaneously employed so extensively.

Central to the victim discourse implied in the co-dependency movement is the process of identifying and labelling. Co-dependency must be diagnosed and treated by the "experts," thereby setting up a hierarchy and a focus on the individual, without an analysis of this movement as historically and socially situated. Interestingly most of the behaviors ascribed to co-dependents equate traditionally feminine behaviors in our society (Tallen, 1990). In addition, the particular use of language, the labelling process, the inclusive definitions, and the pathologizing all echo the processes found in the descriptions of women who experience violence in their intimate relationships. Women who live with violent partners are presumed to be co-dependent, and to "love too much" (Norwood, 1985), whereby the locus of responsibility is shifted away from the abusing partner to the woman being victimized. Tallen critiques the dominant boundary discourse and focus on boundary invasions as, for example, having spurred a redefinition of rape as indicative of "weak boundaries on the part of both the victim and perpetrator," thereby neutralizing the victimizing experience and implying victim-blame.

In contrast to a feminist analysis of the family as being a site of oppression for many women, the construction of dysfunctional families is grounded in the belief that a loving, close, nuclear family is possible in a racist, classist, sexist, heterosexist, capitalist society (Tallen, 1990). Alternative families that stray from traditional conceptualizations of the family are then promptly prone to descriptions of and prescriptions for their dysfunctionality. The focus on the individual and individual families, ignores the larger, systemic, contextual barriers in place experienced by many individuals and many families.

Naomi Wolf's (1993) critique of "victim feminism" exemplifies an account of victim discourse in a popular media text that sparks further concerns for women who have been victimized. Her analysis is premised on the construction of a dichotomy, victim feminism versus power feminism (p.136-137). By polarizing the words "victim" (i.e., powerless) and "power" as opposites, each defined/constructed by a separate, mutually exclusive descriptive list, she oversimplifies and negates many women's experiences of having or lacking power, or of being victims to violence. Furthermore, Wolf makes it abundantly clear which side of this dichotomy is preferable for feminists (or any woman). The "victim" is portrayed as passive, masochistic, self-serving, and powerless. Such pejorative and limiting language is strikingly similar to that found in the psychodynamic paradigm that minimizes, individualizes, pathologizes, and decontextualizes the very real experiences of women who have been victimized.

From a critical perspective, the aforementioned examples including Greenspan's analysis, the co-dependency movement, victim labelling, and Wolf's account, all indicate the dangers of overly describing women as victims. This is, however, a difficult issue because an important feature of the feminist agenda has been to expose women's experiences of oppression and victimization, to give visibility to the violence that has been rendered invisible such as in battering and incest, or naturalized as in date rape (Mahoney, 1994). The feminist movement is committed to exposing women's victimization, and did so in part by portraying women as lacking agency, predicated on the very real lack in resources that was indicative of a variety of interactive factors such as economics, class, race, physical ability, safety concerns, and social supports for women experiencing violence.

Current critiques of victim discourse can be misleading if the issues are not clearly stated. First, it *is* important to name women's experiences of violence without defining individual women *by* their experiences of violence. Second, we need to hear women's self-perceptions, understand their immediate contexts, and defend these realities by locating the experiences within the larger sociocultural patterns of structural oppression. Third, I concur with Mahoney (1994) that the underlying assumption predominantly informing the victim discourse is the victim-agency dichotomy. As indicated in the above therapeutic, self-help, and popular media accounts, our society sets victim in opposition to agent, each

conceptualized by the absence of the other. As such agency does not include notions of struggling and the definition of victim does not permit acts of agency. Society, as reflected in these accounts, is generally quick to judge and dismiss any form of weakness. Being a victim implies weakness and triggers assumptions about the inability to care for oneself appropriately. Due to our restricted definition of agency and the focus on the individual in our society, there is a tendency to view experiences of struggle or hardship as further implying weakness (Mahoney, 1994). Personal admissions and confessions of struggle that integrate acts of agency with experiences of pain are often kept for our close friends.

Dichotomous constructs oversimplify the many complex issues, the diverse strategies, and self-descriptions used by women who experience battering. Social expectations, cultural stereotypes, and psychological explanations of the behaviors of these women render their varied acts of resistance, their struggles, and their agency invisible. A woman who trusts herself to be an actor in her own life may not be able to understand the links between her experience(s) and those of other women experiencing violence (Mahoney, 1994). Given the demoralizing psychological impact this word can have, she may not be able to afford to see herself as a victim because she cannot reconcile her self-perception as having agency while simultaneously struggling. bell hooks (1984) states "women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as 'victims' because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess" (p.45). We need definitions and analyses that encompass agency *and* oppression, wherein acts of resistance and of struggle are given recognition.

The dichotomy in victim/agency is mirrored in the dominant focus on staying or leaving violent relationships. Exiting the relationship is equated with safety, appropriate self-care, stopping the violence (i.e., agency) and blurs very genuine concerns for threats and separation assault (Giles-Sims, 1983; Mahoney, 1994). Browne (1987) states that more than half of the women who leave violent heterosexual relationships are harassed, stalked, and even attacked after leaving. Mahoney goes on to say that the label "failure to leave" obscures the numerous ways in which women act to protect themselves and/or their children, and assumes that we are, at all times, free actors who can move about as we need

to, change our place of residence, our work, our support systems, while ignoring the many accounts of stalking and harassment that continue long after separation. By focusing on the individual woman's responses to the violence and on leave-taking, we ignore the multiple responsibilities in a woman's life, minimizing her commitment and her work toward establishing this intimate relationship, a family, and other relations.

In addition, the categories of leaving versus staying, are predicated on the equation of leaving with safety, rendering any other actions a woman takes in her attempts to stop the violence as simply illegitimate. Because her attempts to deal with the violence do not yield the desired outcome, her efforts are pathologized, thereby further stripping her of her equality and agency (Mahoney, 1994). The victim is the woman who stays, whereas the agent or survivor is the woman who leaves (see for example Riessman, 1989). In summary, the victim-agency and staying-leaving splits collapse women's activities and behaviors into categories that mask their many acts of self-assertion.

The psychological and research literature to date focuses primarily on: (a) understanding or providing a model for understanding, (b) establishing explanations for how and why the victimization occurs, and (c) defining why the women stay or leave violent relationships. The lack of insight into the subjective conceptions of how the women construct their experiences of battering or how they saw themselves at the time that the battering occurred, represents a gap in the existing knowledge base. The current literature does not permit an understanding of how these women defined or constructed their identities at that time. There is no study that has examined the meaning or the relevance of the concept "victim" to the women's self-identification process. It is this gap in the literature that I addressed in the present study.

### **My Subjective Concerns**

In keeping with critiques and concerns explicated by several feminist methodologists (see for e.g., Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Lather, 1991), I briefly explore the genesis of my subjective interest in doing this research with regard to investigating victim discourse. When I first heard the term "victim" many years ago, it seemed to serve the purpose of naming painful, disempowering experiences; it helped define the seriousness of the problem, and to identify particular needs. In recent years, however, this term has taken on a pejorative feeling and I hear it increasingly being used in judgmental ways in phrases

such as "she is acting the victim" or "just stop being the victim" by both members inside and outside the therapeutic/counselling community. These phrases appear gendered as they seem to be employed primarily in relation to women. Recently, upon her return from attending a conference, a friend informed me of her experience there where, as part of a group, she met a woman who was staying in what appeared to be a somewhat unsafe district of town. Someone in the group cautioned this woman about locking her doors to which she scoffingly responded 'no, I'm not the victim type.' Increasingly I hear the term 'victim' employed in ways such as this, that implies individual pathology, suggesting that a particular attitude or mentality results in having a victim stance or becoming a victim, the implication being that in some way the victim has "asked for it." In this light it is interesting to reconsider my earlier quote from bell hooks' (1984) and Linda Gordon's (1993) words stipulating that frequently women who are being victimized prefer not to use the term victim, their reluctance originates in an understanding that using it may only make their lives harder, preferring instead to conceptualize themselves and to present themselves as strong.

Victim discourse has at least four implications. First, it individualizes the problem, placing the focus and responsibility on one person whereas the notion of being a victim always implies that there was at least one other individual involved. Second, by collapsing all subjective experiences of violence into one, using one term in an all-encompassing sweeping manner and assuming common understanding of this term, we obscure the many forms of victimization, decontextualizing the varied, complex experiences of what it means to be a victim or to think of oneself as such (or not to think of oneself as such). Third, we remove the empowering potential that this word seemed or seems to have had for many who have been victimized. Last, we pathologize and diminish the experiences of victims in a variety of settings.

I come to this project with a concern that the term "victim" has historically been beneficial but that this meaning has been transformed and collapsed into a discourse that defeats its original purpose. I would like to "re-cognize" the meaning and the usefulness of this term, to restore dignity, respect, and care to the word and to the manner in which it is utilized. Words and language are important because they influence how we perceive ourselves and our worlds, as well as how others come to understand us (Flinders, 1992;

Tannen, 1986). Pejorative victim discourse is congruent with a lack in the prevailing, available, and broadly understood narratives. Such limited discourse marginalizes the women who experience victimization in intimate relationships because it renders their complexity, their diversity, and their acts of resistance invisible; it buries the victim's voices. Marginalization further occurs because women who experience battering are perceived as living outside society's norms, as being atypical, in spite of statistics that contradict normative assumptions. This study problematized the current, dominant use of the term "victim," examined its usefulness, and questioned who benefits in the current prevailing use of this term.

## **Chapter Four: The Research Defined: Methodology and Methods**

I too think the intellectual should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressures and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be the witness to their mendacity ... An intellectual is always at odds with hard and fast categories, because these tend to be instruments used by the victors. (Havel, V. 1990, p.167).

This study problematized the notion of victim in the context of women who have experienced battering in their significant intimate relationships. The purpose was to gain insight into how these women conceptualize or construct their experiences and how they define themselves. All phases and stages of research are inevitably informed by subjective philosophical beliefs, conceptual systems, and theoretical frameworks (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Sanjek, 1990). A formulation of my conceptualizations regarding research methodology, as well as the theories that shaped my research project, are the subject of this chapter. I begin by explicating a tradition of research conducted by women, for women and intended to hear women's voices. This is followed by a brief clarification of my use of a qualitative approach, and the theoretical perspectives that informed my work including feminist research, social constructionism, and the importance of language. Last, I review the method employed in this study, examining my use of interviews, and the role of listening as method to hearing narratives that spontaneously arose in the interviews.

### **Methodology**

#### **Listening to and Hearing Women's Voices**

Current interest in hearing women's voices within the social sciences has its genesis in the feminist agenda to render visibility to women's developmental and socialization issues previously not considered, particularly in psychological research and theorizing. Feminist critiques of traditional psychological research as being ethnocentric, androcentric, and limited to middle-class and upper-class mainstream populations, spurred research that turned to women's voices in order to develop theories and understanding about women, based on women, and for women. Feminist researchers have challenged dominant assumptions about women's psychological and moral development (Gilligan, 1982; Porter, 1991), and proposed alternative conceptualizations of women's identity formation and



psychological processes (Josselson, 1987; Miller, 1986). They critique dominant privileged theories that equate healthy psychological development with increasing autonomy and independence, with greater self-boundedness and self control, and increasing use of reason and cognitions, positing that these conceptualizations are limited and limiting constructions of human growth. Feminist researchers argue that these standard theories simultaneously pathologize female development by defining women as 'naturally' dependent, passive, emotional, and irrational (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). In addition, from traditional standpoints, intense interpersonal and social relations have tended to be constructed as women's domain, and defined in regressive terms such as undifferentiated, symbiotic, or merged, implying that significant social relations for women indicate a regression into more primitive behaviors and connections (Jordan, 1991). Alternatively, feminists propose that women's psychological development is relationally based, and address women's experiences of empowerment in important social relations, asserting that their re-construction of women's development exemplifies potential healthy empowering *human* relatedness.<sup>21</sup> Surrey (1991) defines empowerment as indicating negotiated understandings in which both participants in an interaction feel mutually heard, validated, and responded to:

Each feels empowered through creating and sustaining a context that leads to increased awareness and understanding .. each participant feels enlarged, able to "see" more clearly, and energized to move into action. The capacity to be "moved," to respond, and to "move" the other represents the fundamental core of relational

---

<sup>21</sup> I am well aware of the literature that critiques any constructions that potentially essentialize women's nature such as implied by the analyses stemming from the Self-in-Relation theorists who propose women's development and socialization processes as primarily relationally focussed (see for example Holmstrom, 1986, Porter, 1991, & Spelman, 1988). They reflect, however, the ongoing politically motivated debate regarding gender differences and similarities, as well as indicating various attempts to depathologize the dominant constructions regarding women's development. I too exercise caution with regard to such constructions of women's identity, particularly given the lack of exploration of problematic relationships in women's lives, and lack of critique of some of the problematic implications that a 'self-in-relation' identity potentially signifies for many women. Particularly with respect to this thesis and the women with whom I spoke this is a relevant issue and concern. Intimate relationships with their husbands or partners had significant importance to the women I interviewed, yet these women experienced judgment and dismissal by other important individuals in their lives during the course of living with and attempting to leave an abusing partner. I present these theorists here because in spite of my caution I also think they provide intuitive understanding for many women's experiences regarding the role of relationships in their lives, particularly regarding the desires for empathic shared understanding. In addition, I addressed these alternative researchers/theorists here in order to provide a historical and contextual backdrop regarding alternative constructions to conventional research and theory-building, thereby contextualizing my research and analysis.

empowerment. .. This is truly a creative process, since each person is changed through the interaction (p. 167-168).

Such historical shifts mirrored in the widening scope and approaches of research and theory development influenced the nature of my research. These shifts provide a framework for engaging with and listening to women's experiences. These critiques that exposed issues of hierarchies, exploitation, and the role of empowerment in standard methodologies and theory production also speak to the manner in which I interacted with the women who participated in my project; an interaction in which it appeared that each of us was affected, "moved," and potentially empowered.

Importantly these shifts in theorizing have been accompanied by parallel shifts in methodologies with increasing attention to alternative modes of investigation and analyses including a greater focus on subjective stories or narratives (Gergen, 1985; Laird, 1989; Riessman, 1989, 1993). These authors recognise the interactive and intersubjective processes in research, and endorse collaborative and mutually empowering research. From this perspective hearing is not simply listening, rather "hearing is a process involving a negotiation of understandings" (Levin, 1992, p.48). These negotiations of understanding include multiple exchanges of statements, questions, thoughts, and clarifications. Such theoretical and methodological accommodations have had further important implications for the manner in which I conducted this study, recognizing that I am not a neutral, objective bystander, nor assuming that a shared language means a shared meaning or understanding.

This study has documented the ways in which women who have experienced battering make meaning of these events in their lives, how they interpret their victimization, how they define their identities, and perceive themselves. The women I interviewed informed me of their willingness to participate, based first on their expressed wish to help other women in similar situations, and second, three of the women stated they hoped it would enhance public awareness and understanding that experiences of victimization were not the defining features of their relationships, nor of them as women. They indicated some curiosity regarding the destiny of my research, but aside from this the women did not voice particular concerns or specific expectations of me or this project.

### **Qualitative Research**

The nature of my focus required a methodology that would enable the subjective material to surface and capture the potential diversity, complexity, and richness of the

women's experiences. Qualitative research lends itself well to an intersubjective, interactive, collaborative approach for this research focus. More specifically, narrative analysis (Mishler, 1986a; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993) permits sensitivity to and attentive interpretation of personal narratives for illuminating individual self-perceptions and courses of action, as well as the effects of larger social structural-level constraints, comprehending lives simultaneously as individual and as socially or contextually embedded (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). This approach is especially appropriate to this project because narrative analysis emphasizes and privileges the interpretive process that individuals go through in attempting to make sense of complex and painful events in their lives (Riessman, 1988). Consequently I chose to use the ethnographic interview because the focus of ethnography is the study and description of culture, rendering visibility to contextualized lives and experiences (Wolcott, 1985), making certain voices audible (Reinharz, 1992), and employing the Self as research tool in seeking to understand in a self-reflexive manner (Adler & Adler, 1994). Qualitative methodology is congruent with my feminist and constructivist theoretical concerns because it gives prominence to reflexivity in the work, and also because it is most likely to capture the subtleties, complexities, and richness of the women's potentially similar and varied understandings of their victimization experiences.

In addition to ethnography, feminist research and social constructivist perspectives have informed my methodology. Each of these paradigms brings different critical challenges to existing universalizing frameworks and research methodologies. For example, researchers working from a feminist perspective have attempted to privilege women's articulations of their subjective experiences and their interpretations, endorsing the explicit belief that subjectivity is an asset and worthy of attention. This is in stark contrast to the positivist framework that distrusts subjectivity, and instead stresses objectivity. Traditionally the distant, presumably more neutral observer was assumed to be capable of presenting a less 'distorted' version of the 'truth.' No perceptions or constructions, however, are completely neutral or objective. Further, although I agree that one can argue that there is a reality outside the Self, it is the Self that organizes this reality and gives it meaning (Stivers, 1993). Women's subjectivity has been central to the construction of this thesis, and is congruent with feminist research.

## **Feminist Research**

Feminist research, although not a hegemonic perspective, does have some consistent features including: (a) efforts to produce knowledge that is useful to women themselves, relying on methods for gaining this knowledge that are not oppressive (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983), (b) a commitment to research by women and for women, explicitly locating the researcher on the same critical plane as the participants (Harding, 1987), (c) a political commitment to account for and recognise marginalized individuals or groups (Adler & Adler, 1994; Jacobson, 1989), and (d) an ethic of "believing the interviewee" (Oakley, 1981).<sup>22</sup> These concerns are mirrored in my subject matter, my choice of female co-researchers/participants, my subjective reflection on and awareness of my own experiences of marginalization, and my recognition that women who have experienced battering represent a marginalized<sup>23</sup> group in our society.

This project is grounded in women's real lived experiences without making claims that this is the definitive or authoritative text on the issues addressed here (hooks, 1988). I attended to both the feminist concern to intercept hierarchies by conducting collaborative interviews, and to the constructivist agenda to challenge traditional assumptions about the

---

<sup>22</sup> I respond here to critiques of qualitative research and narrative inquiry that question the "consistency," "reliability," or "truth" of participants' stories that reflect positivist constructions of reality as necessarily objective, consensual, replicable, and grounded in singular, unchanging truths. Positivist assumptions are the antithesis to narrative inquiry wherein focus is on subjective, multiple, constructed truths, open to ongoing change, that capture the complexities and create "the evocative true-to-life and meaningful portraits, stories, and landscapes of human experiences that constitute the best test of rigor (and 'truth') in qualitative work" (Sandelowski, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> I feel compelled to clarify my use of the terms marginal and marginalized individuals and/or groups. I think there are at least a couple of ways of looking at the meaning of these terms. Marginalization is usually intended to imply individuals or groups considered at the margins of society based on any one or a combination of: class, race, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual preference, etc. It seems to me that an operating feature of each of these factors is that the individual or group does not meet certain criteria defined by the dominant culture. In this regard, I think that the definition of marginalization could be expanded upon to include many varied experiences of marginalization and this is my link to women who have experienced battering. These women do not fit mainstream notions of marriage, of wife-hood, of intimate partnerships, of romantic relationships, and from within the lesbian community women who batter or who experience battering do not fit assumptions of what it means to be a woman, of woman-woman relationships, nor of intimacy. We have all internalized these mainstream ideologies, which in turn make it difficult to "come out" about being in a relationship in which battering occurs. Second, I think society in its various structures (e.g., legal, medical, nuclear family) has negated, or has inadequately attended to this issue, and as such has also marginalized women who experience battering, that is, pushed them to the margins by an unwillingness to attend to these issues with appropriate concern, consideration, and care.

knower and the known in research by taking the interview material back to the women for their corroboration and elaboration. This research renders visibility to the ways in which these women's stories are unique, complex, and diverse, as well as how they overlap and are similar. Feminist perspectives are congruent with social constructionism.

### **Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism posits that humans construct what we know and this construction does not occur in a vacuum. Rather it occurs in a variety of social exchanges, in shared language, and in conversations (Gergen, 1985). As humans we interact with each other in a variety of settings including families, educational structures, work places, and various other sociocultural structures, all of which have an impact on how we come to understand or know ourselves and how we make sense of the world around us. Consequently the ways in which we interpret events, make meanings, and integrate knowledges into our lives is socially constructed (Lather, 1991). There is no single, objective, or fixed truth. Instead there are multiple, diverse truths, and people construct meanings in unique and complex ways (Ayers, 1989). I presumed no clear distinction or separation between fact and interpretation (Stiver, 1993). From a social constructivist perspective the implications for research design are that the research must reflect interaction, subjectivity, context, and the recognition that all knowledge and understandings are socially constructed (Lather, 1991) and open to ongoing change (Gergen, 1985). All methods are distrusted as being incomplete, partial, culturally bound, and historically located. Hence all knowledge is also only partial, incomplete and located. From this perspective personal narratives from non-mainstream groups often provide counter hegemonic insight because they expose the mainstream perspective as being partial, situated, historically bound, and they reveal lived experiences that resist or contradict mainstream rules and norms. One way in which we construct this knowledge and understanding is through language.

### **Language**

Language is the invisible force that shapes oral texts and gives meaning to historical events. It is the primary vehicle through which past experiences are recalled and interpreted (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p.44).

Language is the means through which we clarify and share meaning, and through which we construct our experiences. Full and meaningful participation in various

sociocultural structures and systems implies a need to communicate with and understand each other. To this end we use language, a potentially shared and mutually comprehensible system (Gergen, 1985). Obviously this does not imply perfect communication and understanding at all times. Sometimes clarification is needed and meanings must be negotiated in order to continue social interactions. There is no single way of hearing and understanding, and each individual brings her or his own experience, subjective understandings, and meanings to any engagement. Given the variety of exposures to and expectations from various sociocultural settings, any one person is in effect the site of multiple and diverse discourses. As such language is a place of struggle. Language enables us to reconcile ourselves, to renew, as well as to re-connect and to re-member. Words are meaningful, they are an action and they imply resistance (hooks, 1989).

Subjective understandings and meanings may shift or may be radically different (Richardson, 1994). The meaning of language or of words is contingent upon our time and place in history and culture. Language simultaneously reflects and informs our subjective interpretations and responses. For example, Richardson (1994) states that the *meaning* of violence in an intimate (heterosexual) relationship depends on whether this behavior is perceived as indicating "normal" male violence, the "husband's rights," a "normal marriage," "wife battering," or "wife assault." In contrast to the former phrases that normalize the behavior, the latter two suggest that the violence will be interpreted as inappropriate, reflecting an abuse of power, and hence not to be tolerated. Clearly the same experience may give rise to different interpretations, different meanings, and different responses. As such, language is both internally and externally constitutive, meaning that language is a vehicle that simultaneously enables us to define a Self and to construct our realities, as well as it constructs and delimits our lived experiences. Thus language and the use of language is not a neutral or empty act. Tannen (1986) additionally states that language is multidimensional, and permits communication at several levels. Words at an explicit level provide information about people, ideas, and things, and words at a tacit level convey interpersonal, relational information including notions of having or lacking degrees of privilege, power, and status.

Language is important to my method as it is the vehicle through which the co-

researchers expressed themselves.<sup>24</sup> Polkinghorne (1988) points out that language enables us to re-enter our subjective and emotional experiences, to explore our realities, to give them verbal understanding, thereby providing a subjectively meaningful interpretation of this primary level of our existence. This process of finding meaning in our experiences and giving verbal expression to the meanings via language permits the individual and others in society to *think* about experience and not just *live* it. The language chosen mirrors our subjective world and it is this subjectivity in personal narratives, this groundedness in personal experience, located in time, in place, and in perspective, that is considered significant (Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Riessman, 1993).

### **Method**

#### **Co-researchers/participants**

When we construct texts collaboratively, self-consciously examining our relations with/for/despite those who have been contained as Others, we move against, we enable resistance to, Othering (Fine, 1994, p.74).

Traditionally research in the natural sciences has stressed a dichotomy between the researcher and the participant, a self-Other relationship (Fine, 1994), with the participant-Other being the object under study, being observed, quantified and analysed by the researcher-Expert. In recent years this imbalance has been challenged in various disciplines and attempts are being made to address this inequality in theories and in practices. This project reflects these changes in re-conceptualizing their role as co-researchers, co-creators, co-knowers, and/or narrators, reflective of a different understanding of who is the knower or the expert, and indicating the interactive, intersubjective process central to the interviews (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Levin, 1992; Reinhartz, 1992). In order to establish greater equity and a more collaborative interaction during the interviews, I spoke openly with the co-researchers regarding this project, indicating that they are the experts in their lives, and that my role was one of learning from them, as they shared their knowledge and understandings with me.

For the purpose of initiating this research, I did have specific selection criteria that provided explicit guidelines for determining participation (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), and my criteria were as follows: (a) heterosexual female or lesbian who has experienced

---

<sup>24</sup> It seems fitting at this moment, to clarify that, based on the fact that both the researcher and the co-researchers in this project are women, female pronouns are used in this paper except where it would not be appropriate.

battering in an intimate relationship as defined and stated in the Invitation to Participation in a Study (Appendix A), (b) being at least 25 years of age in order to have had some life experience, (c) having fluent English in order to articulate her thoughts and discuss her experiences, (d) not being involved in a relationship in which battering is occurring at the time of the interview, (e) having sufficient distance from the experience(s) of battering to be able to discuss this, (f) having appropriate counselling or other support currently in place, and (g) the ability and willingness to discuss her experiences with the understanding that she can withdraw at any time. In stressing that eligibility for this study meant the ability to discuss her experiences yet have distance from the kind of immediate trauma that is usually connected to the experience of violence, each woman was asked about the recency of her battering experiences in the telephone screening interview (Appendix B). Given the sensitive nature of this topic I also discussed access to counselling or meaningful support with each woman.

I advertised through different Women's Centers in the Lower Mainland by distributing letters describing this study, and inviting women who had experienced battering in their intimate relationships to participate (Appendix A). The term "battering" was defined in the letter as well as in the invitation, and I did not question each woman's subjective definitions or interpretations of her experiences regarding battering (Oakley, 1981). A telephone screening interview was then carried out with the women who volunteered. Four women responded and all four women met the selection criteria.

### **Interviews**

Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 18).

The interview is an instrument used to gather information or data. It is also an interaction, a sharing of experiences, of thoughts and emotions, and a discourse between two people (Mishler, 1986a, 1986b). The interviewer initiates and responds in a searching manner, following the co-researcher's lead as implied by the information shared, thereby reflecting a joint endeavor (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Reinhartz, 1992). The oral interviews provided a means of uncovering these women's experiences in order to gain understanding from their own points of view, and to gain insight into their subjective formulations. The interviews represented a point in the life of each woman when she was being asked to think



back over the events that took place in her intimate relationship, to give a retrospective account of the meaning of her experiences in that relationship, and to reconstruct how she saw herself. Each woman chose how to verbalize or articulate what she believed was important or relevant. I found, as stated by Mishler (1986a, 1986b), that each woman readily shared her experiences in storied form with me as an attentive listener enabling her as narrator to continue rather than cutting her off with a specific set of pre-constructed questions.

Some literature suggests that in order for a woman to genuinely speak her story, to feel heard and understood, it may be best for her to be interviewed by a woman. It is, however, important to keep in mind that women interviewing women does not automatically presume common understanding. Catherine Riessman (1987) in her research found that "gender was not enough." Women may have difficulty trusting those of us carrying out the research due to various differences such as class, race, ethnicity, age, ability, education, and so forth, as well as differences in the experiences of battering (Reinharz, 1992). I did not assume a common understanding regarding language use or word choice, asking for clarification as deemed necessary so that each woman had an opportunity to explain what she meant. I came to the interview with the assumption that careful listening and hearing with an empathic presence are central to an effective interview process. Using attentive, empathic listening and hearing can enable another woman to develop her thoughts, construct her meaning, and use the language she wishes to use to express herself with authenticity. As such this was a collaborative labor.

In the brief telephone screening interview (Appendix B), the conversation was permitted to meander thereby providing an opportunity for the women to voice their thoughts, questions, and/or concerns regarding this project. The goal was to (a) introduce myself and explain this project, (b) ask how long it had been since she was in the relationship in which she had experienced battering, (c) clarify her support system and ensure that she had access to counselling if necessary, and (d) explain her rights as a co-researcher (see Appendix B for Telephone Screening Schedule). My intention was to establish a degree of comfort and rapport. Based on my past research experience, and supported by the literature, participants frequently want to know something about us (see Lather, 1991; Mies, 1993). Furthermore, the "goal of finding out about people through

interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest ... her own personal identity" (Oakley, 1981, p.41). It was made clear that participation was completely voluntary, that any questions they had at any time were welcome, that they could end or break the interview at any time or choose not to respond to or expand on particular experiences (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). The co-researchers were not viewed as passive participants.

The telephone screening was followed by an in-depth semi-structured interview (Appendix D) for which I prepared some questions in advance. This type of interview permits freedom within the interview itself, yet also provides some guidance (Bernard, 1994). The semi-structured interview is flexible enough to foster a sense of being participant-guided, while concurrently supporting an interactive relationship in the interview. Before we proceeded with the interview I provided each of the co-researchers with a consent form (Appendix C) that I reviewed with her and again, answered any questions that arose. She was given a copy. Following the semi-structured interview, having completed the transcriptions and analyses of this round of interviews, I again contacted the women in order to clarify, elaborate, and/or corroborate what I had heard the women tell me. When I attempted to contact the women for this second interview, two of the women had moved, three of the women had new telephone numbers, and one of these was an unlisted number. Nevertheless, I was able to contact all four women, but despite this contact I was able to set up a second interview with only three of the four women. The fourth woman was in the process of moving and asked that I call again at a later date. Due to unsuccessful further attempts, however, I did not complete a second interview with her in spite of her expressed eagerness to meet again. The other women, too, verbalized that they were happy to meet for a second interview, and the second interview with each woman seemed even more comfortable and congenial than the first interviews had.

In the second interview, my questions reflected both the uniqueness of individual women's responses based on their first interview, as well as questions that focussed on the commonalities among the four women. I had generated the latter questions based on my analysis of the first interviews and these questions primarily initiated a clarification process whereby I had the opportunity to check that I had understood what the co-researchers had told me (Sandelowski, 1993), reflecting my concern for accuracy of representation of the

women's stories and self-perceptions. This interview permitted an occasion to negotiate meanings, to seek clarification and mutual understanding, thereby further empowering the co-researchers. This second interview in part reflects my belief that this material belongs especially to them and that they should be given an opportunity to comment. The women were given time to reflect on and respond with regard to the completeness and accurate representation in my questions or points of analysis (Flinders, 1992; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Lather, 1991; Sandelowski, 1993). My intent and purpose was to involve the co-researchers and to further encourage reciprocity within the practical and ethical considerations of doing this research.

### **Listening and Hearing as Method**

Listening is the ground of being upon which stories grow, against which story exists, and out of which Storytelling weaves her particular magic. All voices have access to stories, all beings have access to voices; it is the act of listening that makes story manifest, makes it happen. ... Sometimes it is difficult to imagine even a single listener (Arnott, 1994, p.28).

Oral interviews are important for uncovering women's experiences as these experiences have often been rendered invisible in our society. This may be particularly true for marginalized individuals or groups. With this in mind listening and hearing are tools to comprehending the thoughts, ideas, and experiences of the narrator. Anderson and Jack (1991) caution that the woman whose own voice has been "muted ... may be speaking two conflicting views in her life," that of the dominant and that of her own. It requires attentive, empathic listening to hear both of these voices. We have learned to construct our experiences in mainstream language and dominant concepts because that is what is available to us.<sup>25</sup> It is important to listen for the different levels from which the narrator responds. This is done by asking, exploring, and listening to the meaning that she attaches to the words she uses, uncovering her interpretation of the events in her life. Anderson and Jack (1991) suggest a listening that hears what the woman implied, intimated, started to say but stopped, a listening that pays attention to the pauses, encouraging the woman to interpret

---

<sup>25</sup> I am well aware that authors (e.g., Anderson & Jack, 1991) would probably say "women" instead of we, but I hesitate to do this because I think men too have internalized the dominant language and self-concepts. I also realize that structural inequalities in our society have permitted white middle-class men as a group greater privilege, and as such this experience of having internalized a dominant view and dominant self-concepts has very different gendered consequences, further complicated by issues of race, class, sexual orientation, and so forth.

and explain what she means in her own terms. Listening and hearing reflect a process of negotiating meanings and understandings, and it is critical to do this work explicitly throughout the interviews, rather than relying on assumptions of common meanings or understandings with regard to the use of specific words or language.

The telling of one's story is never simply the end-product of that story. What happens with that story depends upon the listening. Anderson and Jack (1991) suggest three ways to listen. The first is listening for the person's "moral language" because this reflects the gap between what that person values and what others value. Central to my interviews was my attempt to permit each woman as narrator to define her construction of her self-image/identity and her perceptions of how others construct these. She is the expert on her experiences, and on her psychological and emotional well-being. Additionally this permitted hearing the two levels of self-descriptions, one centered in her own perceptions and the other centered in external perceptions or expectations that she has internalized.<sup>26</sup>

The second way of listening suggested by Anderson and Jack (1991) is to listen for "meta-statements" in the interview. Meta-statements are indicated in moments when the narrator stops talking, thinks about what she is saying and articulates these thoughts as though she were watching her own thinking processes. Meta-statements are indicated by statements that begin with "do I sound like ...." and they indicate the narrator's experience of a potential discrepancy between what she is saying and what she thinks might be

---

<sup>26</sup> These statements are somewhat problematic to me as they raise the question of whether it is possible to separate out how I see myself/what I want/hope for me (i.e., my internal voice) from how others see me/what they want from/for me (the external dominant voice about women or about anyone), given that at some point, these really are inseparable and not simply a neat dichotomy. Nevertheless, I think there is some intuitive/reality-based "truth" to the experience that we often do function out of two distinct/overlapping voices in us, reflecting the struggle of the dominant versus my subjective voice; the culturally acceptable mode versus my own. [See, for example, Michelle Fine's (1994) analysis of working at the hyphen (self-other) in research but which I think can be extended into other arenas in our lives]. To further illustrate a similar point, Jack (Anderson & Jack, 1991) refers to an interview in which she asks a woman to clarify what she meant by stating she was "very dependent." The response was "I like closeness. I like companionship" (p.21). A similar example came from my own work in a women's clinic 2 years ago hearing women refer to themselves as "codependent." Asked to clarify this term, their self-description simply did not imply the pathology inherent in the dominant codependency literature. Hence I was struck by the dominant voice that was re-presented in the use of such terms, and simultaneously recognizing that at times the use of such terms played a facilitative role. In other words, I respect the potential of the word(s) to be personally meaningful and/or functional. The point here is to illustrate the tension between the notion that on the one hand our use of the language cannot be easily divided up into the "dominant" or "subjective" voices, while on the other hand these constructs reflect a lived reality.

expected of her in the interview. This process implies the underlying difficulties this person has in trusting and accepting her own perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and values.

The third way of listening is reflected in attending to the "logic of the narrative" by noticing internal consistencies and inconsistencies. These may reflect specifically salient issues for the woman or indicate dichotomous ways of thinking, such as either/or statements. Again, this is a method for uncovering her underlying processes, or understanding how she attaches meaning to her experiences and how she identifies herself within those experiences. The narrator must be given an opportunity to explain her meaning in her own terms.

In addition to careful listening, it was critical to use a self-reflexive, self-listening method throughout the interviews, and, in part this concern reflects my training as a counsellor. In the interviews I was aware of my own thoughts in response to what was being said, I trusted my internal responses, and chose when to articulate this in a nondisruptive manner in order to foster further exploration. In addition, I was aware of any feelings and thoughts indicating discomfort and/or confusion for me, using these as internal indicators or guides in the interview in order to obtain clarification (Anderson & Jack, 1991). Finally, based on my work as a counsellor, I know it is prudent to respect and honor the narrator's appropriate need for privacy, to value her sense of integrity and limits, and not to pursue what she did not wish to share. I recognise that the context of these interviews was such that they were not therapy or counselling sessions and consequently I refrained from responding to the narrator in a manner that would be more in keeping with counselling work. Nevertheless, on two or three occasions I felt compelled to respond, based on my personal ethical considerations not to turn a blind eye, by providing what seemed to be appropriate and necessary information.

### **Narratives**

Sometimes it is difficult to imagine even a single listener. Sometimes, it is painful to remember having been received, heard, accepted, for the contrast made to the usual responses we gather from the world and her people. When we invite Storytelling to come through, sometimes we can't hear anything at first. Then a stutter, cough, choke, like rusty old pipes that have long lain unused. The first trickles of wet sound may carry such brilliant red dust that we are fooled into thinking we seeing wounding rather than healing .. When we invite Storytelling to come through, and we hear silence, coughing, sputtering, see something wet and red, it is necessary for us to keep listening. The unpredictability of Storytelling is sure to come through, to honour us. ( Arnott, 1994, p.29).

Narratives, according to Polkinghorne (1988), are schemes that enable us to give significance to our personal experiences and our behaviors. They provide a framework for understanding temporal events and deciding on further actions. They are a fundamental widespread means of making the events in our lives meaningful. Narratives are ubiquitous, occurring readily in our families, amongst friends, and in our culture. In shared dialogues, personal narratives recapture every detail of an event or exchange in our attempts to engage another.

In addition to narratives being a widespread, familiar, and accessible practice, they have strategic benefits. Narrative retelling in the counselling or therapeutic context enables an individual to make sense of various events or behaviors by making the appropriate links (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1989). Storying our lives permits us to connect with other ongoing stories, to deconstruct and reconstruct our own and larger narratives in the context of our culture and to see how our stories are socially embedded (Laird, 1989). The self-narrative is a process of exploring and affirming one's identity, strengthened by making sense of our experiences and understanding their coherence. As already stated, the interviews for this project are not therapy sessions. Notwithstanding this, I concur with Riessman (1989), that the process of understanding how we construct our identity and how we come to attach meaning and coherence to specific, even painful events from our lives, in any therapy session, could well be similar to the process in narrative interviews given the focus in these interviews. The interviews, however, were not therapy sessions.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, for women who have experienced marginalization, this process of storying, of giving voice to their experiences, is potentially validating and empowering. I

---

<sup>27</sup> I believe there are many therapeutic (i.e., empowering and healing) exchanges that occur outside therapy sessions under conditions where there is a genuine authentic caring interaction between two people, and in which either and/or both feel heard. Hence I come to these interviews with a broad understanding of what is potentially therapeutic without minimizing the impact that a specific interview intended with my particular focus, could have. The early consciousness raising groups initiated by the Women's Movement are a practical example of empowerment and healing that occurred as a result of women listening to each other's stories. Furthermore, the proliferation in counselling and therapy services over recent decades is potentially a critique of a society wherein individuals have forgotten to engage in genuine empathic listening such that therapy would not have become the industry that it has. With respect to the four women in this study, I was struck by those aspects of their stories in which they experienced not being heard or being seen, of being rendered invisible and inaudible by those people close to them in their lives at times when they were experiencing battering. Had they been genuinely heard they may not have needed to seek out "professionals" who, based on the women's narratives, it must be said were also not all necessarily consistently helpful, empathic, or empowering either.

am referring here specifically to the degrees of privilege reflected in the politics of narrativization or of storymaking (Laird, 1989). Certain narratives in our society are privileged over others; some are given hearing whereas others are not; some are remembered and others are not. Relatedly, Mishler (1986b) posits that empowerment is experienced as a consequence of an interview setting in which the narrator is given more latitude and control over the interview content and direction than is traditionally done in conventional interview-based research. Mishler (1986b) also states that empowerment may occur as a result of a participant's deeper understanding initiated by the experience of speaking in one's own voice, making sense of one's experiences, affirming one's identity and knowing oneself to be a contributing member of society.

Narratives in my project are defined as stories told by the women being interviewed, reflected in the process of the women storying their experiences. Polkinghorne (1988) defines narrative as a kind of organizing scheme that is expressed in story form. "Human agency and imagination determine what gets included and excluded in narrativization, how events are plotted and what they are supposed to mean. Individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives" (Riessman, 1993, p.2). Narrative analysis is appropriate for studies looking at subjectivity and identity precisely because it focuses on and gives credence to human agency and imagination.

### **The Process of Analysing the Interviews**

The goal here was not to predict but perhaps to extend our sense of the possible by portraying some of the breadth and scope ... (Ayers, 1989, p.4).

Eroding the fixedness of categories, we and they enter and play with the blurred boundaries that proliferate (Fine, 1994, p.72).

In my analysis of the transcripts I was not seeking a grand narrative or a comprehensive theory, nor did I wish to tidy up contradictions. My intention in the analysis is to document and present the voices heard throughout the interviews. After each interview as well as throughout the process of analysing the transcripts, I kept a journal in which I reflectively wrote any thoughts, questions, and/or responses I had for possible follow-up. In this manner the process of analysing starts early on in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The first step toward analysing is transcription of the interviews and I followed closely Bell's (1988) format of transcribing interviews. I

retained as many features as possible of the narrator's expressions, noting nonverbal expressions during the interview. Nonlexical utterances, "ums" and "uhs," hesitant speech, stops and starts, as well as repetitions were left intact because this degree of detail demonstrates how their stories emerged and reflects how we commonly construct and articulate our thoughts.

Analysing the women's narratives initially required reading and re-reading their transcripts several times in order to become intimately familiar with the contents (Mishler, 1986a). Reading through the transcripts I underlined words, phrases, and sentences that appeared to stand out. I then read through the underlined transcripts pulling out these underlined sections as possible quotes. In this second step some of these potential quotes became longer than the initial underline may have indicated because the longer version seemed more complete. All quotes were arranged in a left-hand column on the computer such that I could carry out the analysis on the right. I read through these quotes, frequently referring back to the original transcript to check for accuracy, and I made notes in the right hand column based on the co-researcher's words, often using her words to capture her point. I then highlighted these key words and went through the columns of quotes pulling out some of the highlighted words that appeared to imply repeating themes. In pulling out these themes I noted counter-themes, that is, the ways in which each woman spoke differently with respect to a particular theme and also ways in which her own narrative addressed diametrically different aspects of a theme. In this fashion the boundaries of a theme were kept flexible and in my many readings of the transcriptions I often added further content from the transcripts where it seemed appropriate to extend the quotes or add new quotes. Last, I read through the quotes and the highlighted words, inserting comments and thoughts for writing up the analysis. My frequent return to the original transcriptions and re-reading of the quotes reflected an attentiveness to the content of the women's narratives in order to allow the complexity and diversity in the material to remain intact. Narratives are meaning-making structures and therefore it is critical that the narratives be preserved, not fractured, by the researcher, during the analysis (Riessman, 1993). The respondents' ways of constructing meaning and self-perceptions must be respected. To avoid imposing my interpretations I relied primarily on direct usage of the co-researcher's words.



Narratives are socially embedded and historically situated, and therefore the analysis must also address the impact of the broader sociocultural context on the women's narratives (Mishler, 1986b). This further analysis was conducted using "disciplined abstractions" (Lofland, 1976) that were grounded in the concrete articulated realities of the women's words, that is, I moved back and forth from the concrete episodes, events, actions, and so forth in the women's lives, to the broader, more abstract context and meaning of their everyday lives. bell hooks (1989) states that all theory

emerges in the realm of the abstraction, event that which emerges from the most concrete of everyday experiences. My goal .. is to take that abstraction and articulate it in a language that renders it accessible - not less complete or rigorous - but simply more accessible. (p.39)

The process of abstraction permits us to create and name realities, to see and understand what might otherwise be left invisible. Isolated abstractions not grounded in social realities, however, can become disorienting, debilitating, and meaningless. Therefore these abstractions must be grounded by "continual reference to and interplay with concrete" qualitative content (Lofland, 1976). The interplay between abstractions and concrete episodes/events, results in an emergent portrait rendering visibility to both the situation and the strategies that are grounded in the everyday world. In this thesis, using the women's own words, I explicate the events, actions, interactions in their day-to-day experiences, and extrapolate from these experiences to the broader sociocultural context in which they/we live.

## Chapter Five: Hearing More From the Women

We all know we are unique individuals, but we tend to see others as representatives of groups. It's a natural tendency, since we must see the world in patterns in order to make sense of it; we wouldn't be able to deal with the daily onslaught of people and objects if we couldn't predict a lot about them and feel that we know who and what they are. But this natural and useful ability to see patterns of similarity has unfortunate consequences. It is offensive to reduce an individual to a category and it is also misleading.

- (Tannen, 1990, p.16)

In my interviews with the women who participated in this study, although I asked some basic questions to facilitate their story-telling, I was not looking or listening for one consistent story nor was it my intention to elicit particular kinds of experiences or subjective interpretations. Hence, the women's narratives vary as they each chose different stories to exemplify what they wanted to portray and what they felt was relevant or important. The combination of similar and diverse subjective descriptions of their experiences challenge any presumed homogeneity of women's experiences in relationships in which they experience battering, yet each woman also contributed to a larger understanding of their overlapping experiences of what it might mean to live in a relationship in which battering occurs.

The women's stories, taken from their larger interview narratives, have been organized around recurrent and similar themes that arose in speaking with the women. In contrast to Chapter Two, where I focus on the women's self-introductions within a cultural context, the purpose here is to go beyond these self-portraits. In that earlier chapter the women simply presented stories of their family relations, whereas in this chapter I focus on the ways in which the women interpreted and spoke about the impact of their families of origin, their personal histories, and the role of friends or others as relative to their relationships. I conclude this chapter with a discussion based on excerpts from their narratives that indicate cultural dictates with regard to the public/private split, particularly regarding intimate relationships.

Although the women described oppressive experiences regarding their families and their partners, based on their stories they did not portray themselves as merely passive victims of hegemonic relations of oppression. Instead, they provided accounts of why and how they responded and acted, constructing their choices as rational, reasonable, and understandable within their circumstances. Hence, they actively negotiated the boundaries

of what is considered normalcy, presenting their decisions and their behaviors as means of attempting to make changes, to maintain or take charge of various aspects of their lives, and to make sense of their contexts.

### **Family of Origin Experiences**

Each of the women volunteered in their own words descriptions of their families of origin indicating the important role this played in their lives. They stipulated that a meaningful part of their understanding the events in their lives included looking back to their original families and thinking about the various messages they had received. They spoke of these histories as implying a piece or pieces in a puzzle. Elsie described strained family relations, and in particular spoke about the pained relationship with her father, indicating the hurt she felt, stating that this relationship has remained abusive to this day:

..I came to Canada .. and my parents - first of all they couldn't afford to keep me which was a blessing 'cuz I lived for a while with an aunt and she was kind. That was the first person in my life that had really showed me some - some love and kindness - so that was really good .. I've never felt that I'd mattered because my dad just - because he always told me I was stupid and good for nothing I was, and lazy and that I'd never amount to anything. And then when we moved to Canada, he told my aunt - he says - she's stupid, she's no good for anything, just - she's 16, just send her out to be a waitress (teared up - pause). And so she says no way, she's going to High School and I-I graduated in 2 years on the university program - I wasn't even speaking English so I did alright. That was good for me but - he would never admit that that's what he said ..

Later in the interview she went on to describe her current still painful relationship with her father whom she does not like to visit:

.. my dad abuses me every time I go down there. He still abuses me - (since marrying) I very rarely went down there (to parents) for Christmas because the minute I got in the door my father would start after me. Even when he came up here to visit - you can't make coffee, that's not how you make coffee. See those pictures - they shouldn't hang like that, what's this? - this is a mess - you should do it this way, and I would say, can you see that flower up there, it's red, (he'd say) - it's not red, it's blue - like that - everything I'd say, nothing, if I'm - before I finish the sentence it's no .. even to this day when I see him I just - I actually hate him. Even-even, you know, on the phone he'll start abusing me - well, how's your weight - like - not how are you, or how are you feeling - how's your weight.

Elsie described being the focus of and receiving much criticism, which in turn, resulted in her turning against her father.

Elsie spoke of her family of origin experiences as having an impact on her sense of self, as providing a schema from which she had learned how to interpret or handle later experiences. For example, Elsie stated:

.. I guess I blame my dad and it's not a nice thing but I sort of blame him for my

weakness, for making me like this. Why did he not treat me so I wouldn't be like this and take abuse from the next person so - so I could have my self esteem so I would have been able to-to-to lead a quote "normal" (indicates the quotations with her fingers) life, the strength to stand up to some of this or even to recognise it for not being right.

In addition to focussing on her father figure as Elsie had, Care also spoke about her family more generally:

I think I was very sheltered when I lived at home .. it was very controlling. My father would - you were to be seen and not heard, you do as I say, not as I do - um - we never discussed anything in the house about how we felt - (pause) - um - I guess it was abusive at home too- emotionally abusive. I can remember my dad coming home from work and we'd all scatter because, you know, we were afraid of him and my mom - my mom didn't seem to do anything - um - but she would always try and push us - well, go and talk to your dad or go and ask your dad. I remember that - (thinking) I don't want to ask him (said between clenched teeth and very softly) .. Then it got to the point where you didn't even ask, you just didn't bother to ask and you missed out on lots of stuff but - (pause) - we got no encouragement - no - (said with a smile) even though you know all us kids were great!

Care's description of the overall impact of her family of origin is somewhat different than Elsie's. Her experience of feeling controlled in her family resulted in feeling she had to:

.. cut them out of my life - because I was embarrassed - I wasn't going to tell them what was going on - 'cuz I knew better somewhere in - (points to her head and her heart) - in there, you know ..

Despite this she also mentioned that her family had provided her with a foundation of what she was capable of and of specific values:

.. they had taught me differently even though their relationship wasn't wonderful either - I had a building block - a pretty good one (pause) .. I mean even though in those years I did participate in all that garbage and stuff (with my husband) but in my head I knew this isn't right, this isn't the way I was brought up, this is not how I wanted it to be - (pause) - (and later) .. I knew I was a smart person - I mean my background. I mean I came from a family where education was important and I went on to college and university - mind you, I didn't finish but I went and I could have - if I hadn't gotten involved in these relationships. So I think I had a good building block ..

Care's words suggest that in spite of parental struggles this did not and does not necessarily interfere with her internalizing alternative messages, and in spite of her other relationships the:

building block.. just didn't get smashed to pieces. It was still there and I can keep building on it ..

Her formulation implies her own resiliency and ability to move on. In the second interview Care made her past family experiences contiguous with her present by describing the

orderliness in her life now:

I think my past was linked to my future - I was just thinking that I have gone back to my family - to how it was at home, because my life is much more under control now. I don't go running around and - it's disciplined - um I mean a situation came up where I - um (pause) - on very short notice somebody wanted me to go somewhere and I-I said well, no, I'm sorry, you need to give me more notice. I mean I have to get a sitter ..

Care indicated that her life as a young middle-aged adult has changed and that she feels more in control of her life.

Echoing Elsie and Care, Kathleen also indicated that her past experiences in her family of origin were linked to her later choices. She described this as:

I was labelled as a bad girl - I was not a bad girl ... I didn't feel - lovable. Well, it's based on the fact that it's been said to you that you're not a very lovable person and that you're the problem - you're the reason there's a problem. So you're the problem in the home and then I became the problem in the marriage. Something made me feel like the third and least loved daughter and-uh - I went from the problem child to the problem wife. I didn't see it that way at the time - I thought this was like a new beginning and that I would be accepted for whom I am and boom! - I wasn't! That's why I stayed - because you're learning this behavior, you're learning this attitude about yourself from him and it really was like - I was only 19 and he was 21 and it really was like he became my parent. Those were the kinds of things he did to me - do this, do that. It became the same kind of control that my parents had because in those days at 19 you were still not an adult - you had to be 21.

Her family experiences provided a dominant thread in her life's cloth and Kathleen went on to narrate how in stepping back she began to be able to recognise this dominant thread as it had interwoven with other threads in her life.

It was important for me to understand the role my family had for me, to understand what my relationship with my husband was about. All I can say is that I had tried every avenue to try and figure out what was wrong with this marriage and then my thought processes were that I had left home - that was to get away and to become myself - to be an adult - to be in control of my life - not answering to parents and in doing so I walked into something that became exactly the same thing and I wasn't happy with that. I wanted to have some control in my life. I didn't want someone dictating to me about every aspect of my life .. I tried to stand up to (husband) but standing up to him got me hit - got me hurt - got me - emotionally battered - uh - calling me names .. and my reaction to everything now is that they started this off - as a child and so thinking over it all - that's how I sorted out why I was behaving the way I was ..

Kathleen indicated that she had internalized a way of thinking about herself with which she came into her marriage. She went on to convey an example of how past learning surfaced in her marriage:

Oh, it was helpful for me to see the similarities between my family and my husband - and one of them was my response to anger and-um - um battering. I'd seen my

mother abused .. there'd be arguments but my mother would do something that I learned I did - um - she'd go away quietly by herself and cry and get ov-get it out of her system and then come back as if nothing was hap-would happen and that's what I would do .. you don't even know you're doing it, but that's what you learned. So that was an insight. (She added) I *did* try to stand up to him but that got me hit ..

Kathleen suggested that standing up for herself brought out more violence so that one of the reasons she withdrew to deal with her response was to prevent her husband's violent outburst. She also indicated that the picture was more complex than this, however, based on having children and wanting to protect her children as much as she could at the time. So when he:

took everything he could find - glass - and he (points across a fairly large room) - from about that fridge to that wall - smashed it on the fireplace. I was frantic - and I looked at my little girls - they woke up and they were holding hands in the hall - looked at them .. thought what am I going to do. I'm going to get my brother-in-law .. I knew the girls were safe - he would never hurt them - got in my car, a few blocks away, bring him back and he-he calmed him down .. He was drunk and he finally went to sleep - and the next day - I mean our house was a mess - I - I got up early and just cleaned it up. I did it because I didn't want my children seeing that.

When Kali spoke about her family of origin in the context of her marital experiences she handled this somewhat differently than the other women. In the first interview she focussed more on her first husband's family as portraying a pattern which at that time was not readily recognized:

That family was just a series of-of-of-uh - like the grandfather and father before that - alcohol in that family, um - majorly .. but I guess, you know, you didn't recognise that then .. and (besides) he had a really close relationship with his mother, the violence in the house was between his father and like he had several brothers .. (and) I had this silly notion that (pause) he didn't like the way his father treated his mother and he wouldn't necessarily treat me that way ..

Kali indicated that she had believed, based on his positive relationship with his mother and his criticism of how his father behaved, that he would be different. Furthermore notions of family patterns were not as prominent, particularly in the lay public, at that time, given that she is talking about a time almost two decades ago. About her own family she mentioned that "it was verbally abusive at times" and consequently she was eager to leave home as an older teen. In terms of linking her marriage to her parents relationship with regard to modelling violent behaviors she made the point that:

I think in my first relationship it was like .. I guess this is what happens in relationships and yet that wasn't my parent's relationship ..

In the second interview, she developed the issue of one's past influencing future behaviors

further. By exploring this issue within a larger sociocultural context with regard to women who are in relationships in which they experience battering, she addresses the fact that there is no simple correlation between our experiences in our families of origin and our future relationships:

Sure there is a link, but that is part of our socialization as women as well - um - in terms of the family of origin stuff - lots of women who have had no traumatic things in their pasts end up in abusive relationships as well, and stay in them because we're socialized to stay in them, you know, so there's - socialized to stay in them in that we're supposed to be the-um - the emotional glue that keeps relationships together .. so that can happen to any woman but I think what happens with - and I'm just speaking for me and my experience of having those things from my childhood or my past that actually made me just that much more vulnerable to staying in that kind of a situation. I think it can happen to-to any woman just because of the kind of culture that we live in - but-um - for women that have had other issues like sexual abuse or whatever - that just leaves them that much more without protection from that and feeling more responsible also - um - to make things - to make things work out (pause) ..

Kali clarifies that although there is a link between our pasts, current, and future experiences, there are other factors that interact with our expectations about relationships and our learning how to negotiate intimate relationships. Other factors include the responses that the women received when they attempted to talk about their relationships with various family members. With respect to the response from her parents, Elsie said:

They won't listen to it .. they said what do you want us to do about it? .. I got no support from my parents - nor my brother, who works as a counsellor with people. (My husband) is charming - everyone loves him .. so nobody believes you.

Elsie indicated a lack of support or validation from family members, even from her brother whom she thought would understand given his occupation in the helping profession. Care described an initial similar lack of understanding and compassion, but then went on to speak of a shift that happened within her family towards her when she left the second time.

.. they didn't understand abuse and the issue of abuse and - and sometimes - well, the first time around they would make judgmental statements - like you should be doing this and you that - (and) I told you so - and I couldn't handle that, (and) the support had strings attached (meaning if I didn't comply I heard) then you can't stay here anymore or you had better find somewhere else to live - on your own, but this time around they're - they're educating themselves. My mother is educating herself, his mother is educating herself - not-not as overtly as my mom .. my dad doesn't understand but he - I think he admires my strength because he had - he sees how well (son) has turned out - okay - despite all of this and .. he's pleased about that and he sees that I'm-uh stronger this time.

Care conveyed a process and interaction involving both her and her family. Initially, sensing their judgment, she became isolated but later was able to shift this isolation from

her family back to being connected with them. In addition to portraying her own process, she described the effect her family's alternate responses had on her. She narrates the shift that moved from at first:

I'm just trying not to be seen, I don't want anybody to see me, and make judgment or criticize or anything .. within my family .. I didn't want any attention drawn to me because I didn't want to have to explain anything .. I just didn't want anybody to ask me anything. I didn't want to say that there was something wrong .. because it was like 'I told you so'

to later including her family:

... towards the end of our relationship I was getting out more - um - with my family and that and I was - letting uh-uh towards the end of the relationship I was letting them know - well, he is hurting me ..

at which point her family, as well as his family, were able to be more supportive of her.

She described her visit to his mother:

I went to visit (his) mother 'cuz she was - I told her that he had broken my nose because they had encouraged me to go - don't let this one get by you .. arrest him, leave him, charge him. He can't do this to you anymore.

In our second interview, Care described the overall development within his family, shifting from not knowing what was happening between Care and their son to knowing, and how they responded:

I didn't want others to know .. even his family. I didn't want his family to know 'cuz we went to all his family functions - all of them. They always thought everything was okay because I'd always worked these double shifts or whatever .. and there was always - everybody had a Christmas present, and - I mean - I worked really hard and-um - and when it came crashing down - um - their family - you see my family always knew and their family didn't know and now they really know and they are experiencing their stuff now - I mean - the mother is in denial and the daughters are just - but that family is divided - very divided. The mother has changed her position. She went into court with him on the custody issue - she had changed her position. She holds a double standard - and now I don't speak with her. I try and maintain contact for (son) - some of it's his dad's responsibility now but I make sure that (son) remembers their birthdays and sends cards and that sort of stuff. That's just with the mother, not with his siblings - it's different. I get along with them and I feel safe - they've been very good to me. That family's divided - the daughters have a concern about my son whereas his mother has a concern about her son.

In her statements, Care explored her difficult process as she meandered between letting family members know and getting the support and validation she needed. These factors interacted with her ability to include her family members in her painful experiences at different times.

Kathleen gave one example of turning to her parents and her feelings of being



spurned away:

I had reached out for help when I was 21. My daughter was - um - just a year old. I went home, and my husband was being terrible and had been hitting me and staying out and I - I'd go to my parents on Friday nights - 21 years old with a baby - it's like your life is over .. I wanted to go out with my partner but my partner was the one who was out, going out, having a good time, and I'm the one who's being the mom .. I'd had enough - and I didn't like being hit either. So I told my parents - and my father said - Kathleen, go back and try one more time .. and I saw that as being - (teared up) - that they didn't want to get involved, didn't want to be bothered, so we actually ended up living with them for about 2 years while we purchased a home ..

She went on to talk about her somewhat confusing experience wherein, although she had turned to her father for protection from her husband, she then had to protect her husband from her father:

.. my father at that time was still drinking - like he could be nasty himself .. there'd been words between them but what (husband) didn't know is my father was approaching him with this - two by four - when his back was turned and he was going to clobber him over the head and I didn't think that was fair.

So, ironically, Kathleen stepped in and prevented a violent disaster in a situation where she was herself asking for protection. Many years later in Kathleen's life, when her mother was in her 80s and Kathleen first left her husband she did stay with her mother, apparently receiving acceptance and support at that time. By that time, both her daughters were grown up and had left home. During the years just prior to leaving her husband, Kathleen describes the rare occasion when in desperation, she would talk with her adult daughters about her marriage, and again, her experience was one of being rebuffed:

.. when my eldest daughter phoned and asked 'what's wrong' - I said I'm having a tough time and then I started to cry - (she said) oh for god's sake mother get off it .. (and in another phone call with my other daughter who said) 'oh jesus, well, what the christ am I going to do and hung up' - yeh, it wasn't fair to do that to her (voice lowers) but I didn't know where else to turn.

Kathleen found it difficult to obtain appropriate supportive help. If family members are unwilling or unable to provide help, then how much more difficult it must be to turn to someone outside the family. She spoke of the pain of experiencing her children's denial that their father had ever assaulted their mother:

.. why did my kids turn against me the first time (of leaving)? Why did they do this? They even said - no they'd never seen any abuse - (pause) - and, well, they did later acknowledge, yes - they'd seen it because they heard a scream, they came running in the house and here I am with a bleeding back ..

On another occasion when she was speaking with one of her daughters, she encountered a

somewhat different lack of support:

I remember my daughter when I was 42, and-and-uh he'd been nasty - she was calling long distance and she said mother-um - something about why d'you put up with that - and I said, well, I don't have to put up with it - I know that I could - I didn't say that I had choices but I did say - I could leave. She said, oh mother, for heaven's sake - you're 42 years old, who's going to want you - you're an old woman (laughs) - and well I was thinking - she doesn't know but there is a man who was calling me and writing me letters at the time so I thought - yeh, well what does she know? (laughs) It might have set me back another 10 years if there hadn't been - it was not that other men didn't, you know, become interested in me - I just wasn't interested - that was not what I wanted.

Kathleen indicated how her own alternative knowledge helped her remain immune to the lack of support and potential hurtfulness in her daughter's comment. She implies that sometimes alternative scripts or images are necessary in order to imagine different circumstances, without necessarily acting or wanting to act on them.

Kali too, articulated experiences of interacting with family members that were invalidating and lacking in support. She spoke of trying to talk with both her own and her first husband's families:

.. and I guess also a lot of stuff was going on - it's easy to see in retrospect - like trying to talk with his mom or his, you know, his sister, who was my best friend, about it and their attitude is kind of like 'well, that's the way men are' and 'take up knitting' or blah-blah-blah, you know, that kind of thing and not really saying a whole lot to my own family - um - for the simple reason - their attitude was, well, you made your bed and you lie in it, and so I did - for 8 1/2 years.

Her words suggest that finding no support in her family structures, she too experienced being dismissed. It appears that both families saw the situation from what are often unspoken widespread perceptions or generalizing assumptions about how men behave and how women ought to handle such men's behaviors, as well as assuming that having made a decision, she would have to live with it.

In addition to narrating their families' responses to their experiences of living in relationships in which battering occurred, the women also spoke of hearing a variety of other voices outside their families.

### **The Role of Friends' Perceptions and Others' Responses**

Although the women rarely spoke in the interviews about the responses of others to their experiences, they nevertheless, did mention a few voices that ranged from providing support and validation to judgment and shame. Elsie briefly described a friend who questioned:

.. why is she doing this, why is she torturing herself with this man? She knew I

could do a lot of things because I ran my own company while I was trying to raise my kids and I had done secretarial work, ran a party center with bar and (various activities). I did everything and in the summer when the (center) was closed I painted it. So she knew all those things.

Further to addressing her friend's perception, Elsie alludes to the complexity and multifaceted nature of being human, such that having accomplishments and being proficient in some areas of her life did not necessarily translate or take care of challenges in other aspects of her life. Hence, although Elsie was a 'Jane' of all trades, her diverse abilities and energies did not necessarily empower her to end the relationship at that time. Positive perceptions from friends may be helpful but they too may not be enough as indicated by Elsie's interpretation of her friend's challenges:

.. (she asked) why do you put up with this? I would never put up with this for two minutes, you've put up with it for 20 years - why? Why do you subject yourself to this - he's crazy. He wouldn't last 2 minutes in my house. Towards the end I felt good about what she was saying - (but) when she first started saying this .. when I would once in a while I would tell her about the spats we had, and she would say this is not normal, and I wouldn't believe her, I just thought she had a different reality than me maybe.

Elsie's interpretation of her friend's statements suggests that pacing and process were an important part of understanding what her marital relationship was about. Elsie stated it was important to hear positive and challenging perceptions, as these made her consider her situation further:

.. when I tried to talk to old neighbors and they validated me *somewhat* and even to hear what they thought about the situation - that was good. (They said) my god, he treats you like that? I never heard of anything like that - and that woke me up. I needed to hear that from somebody else. (As well as) I met somebody the other day that hadn't seen me for quite a while and she said you know, you had fear in your eyes all the time. She says your eyes look better .. (and) my friend - she says you know when you're not with him, you're a totally different person .. you're much more relaxed - 'cuz I wasn't on guard or scared to say something that I would get heck for later.

Elsie used the word "somewhat" implying hesitancy in her neighbor's validation. She experienced similar reluctance from another neighbor who had been friends to both her husband and herself, which may have been the reason for the hesitancy. She described:

It was a bad day the other day (teared up) and I phoned up these neighbors of mine - we used to have them for dinner all the time .. I hadn't talked to them in a long time. I told them I'm really down, do you mind if I come and talk for a while, and she said oh sure, come over, but I could tell she was distant. She had planted herself way down at the other end of the chesterfield and she says - well, just get out of there, just leave him alone and do your own thing and - you know you're not the only people in - the first in this situation, you know, - like she belittled me a bit.

In the above excerpt, Elsie addressed her need for genuine, unreserved support, particularly as she was still in the early stages of attempting to finish up and close off her marriage. Her vulnerability seemed to have made her more aware of body language, the non-verbal cues that were congruent with the verbal communication. In contrast to this experience she described staying at a Transition house where:

I'd come home and the girls and I - we could laugh about something .. that was a good experience .. where somebody waits, somebody cares, there is always somebody to listen to and somebody to share a story with ..

Elsie experienced a sense of community and connection. Instead of her husband directly isolating her as was Elsie's experience, Care recounted a more indirect loss of friends:

.. my friends had drifted away from me because they didn't like him, but they didn't tell me that they didn't like him, they just cut themselves out of my life ..

Care went on to describe the delicate problem of having friends speak honestly with regard to their perceptions of her relationship based on her sense of herself at that particular time in her life:

.. the friends that have come back into my life .. they say now that they didn't like him - and-um I'm not offended about what they say but I think I would have been offended in the relationship - them telling me what he was without me figuring it out first. I would want to figure it out because it would almost be like an insult - if they said you should do this - (and) I don't think I would have responded if someone had been gentle about approaching me that something was wrong - it was a catch 22. I didn't want them to lecture me but then I think at that time I would have been - had the need to be lectured .. if someone approached me on a nurturing level I wouldn't be listening .. it's too soft and I would go away and think why are they interfering in my life .. how do you do that when I'm fighting in myself ..

Care's words indicated two different issues. One is that she perceived a difference in vulnerability regarding others' perceptions of her intimate partner contingent upon whether she was inside or outside the relationship. Another issue inferred by her words is that timing, pacing, and approach appear to be critical factors. She went on to elaborate on this referring to her experience with her sister who:

came into town and .. said - we're going to go and find some information - whatever it is that we need to find out. She didn't know what we needed to find out but she said she had found this number in the phone book and I remembered that - I remembered that you could always find information - because then after that I just - I gobbled up things if I found them in the paper about um - advocacy or whatever ..

It may be of importance that her sister did not appear to be concerned about Care's potential response, she simply acted. In addition, the sister took her to a third, neutral source, rather

than “lecturing” or telling her directly, and this may therefore have circumvented triggering any potential hurt or defensive feelings. In any case, Care indicated as does Kathleen, that the responses of friends are sometimes perceived as a delicate issue.

Kathleen likewise had friends who either did not verbalize their concerns while she was still in her marriage and/or maintained some distance. Kathleen, however, had a somewhat different reaction. Here is how she described her experience:

.. it's amazing though, that people never really want to be (pause) - involved - (pause) - like my friends .. there's four of them .. we had lunch just before Christmas and um - and I had left, you know, and they-they wanted to know how I was doing, and they were concerned about me and everything else .. and another friend whom I've known since I was 2 .. she said you know, Kathleen, we've known for a long time that Kathleen's had problems but you can't say anything to anyone, you can't - you can only be there and be supportive but we all wanted her to get out of that situation. We'd wanted it for a long time. So they were there for me but i-it might have helped if I'd known. One of our very best friends said - I started not wanting to come to your place - who wanted to put up with that asshole, you never knew what you were going to get.

Although Kathleen wished that her friends had expressed more openly how they perceived what was happening in her marriage, in the second interview, however, she elaborated further, indicating that she understood the issue to be more complex:

I know this with my good friends - I would probably do it myself - you really can't tell another person because if you're wrong then you've destroyed something - and (pause) - I think if it was my sister - (pause) - and I saw her face battered - I would probably sit down and say - heh, do you really want to take this anymore? It's wrong - but if she isn't giving of anything it's really hard to break though - really hard, and you don't want to get involved between people, you just don't. I've found all kinds of people who have come out of the woodwork since having gone - and it's been a real eye-opener. It would have been helpful - it would have been ..

Kathleen indicated that in part the hesitancy to address this issue between friends relates to the possibility of being wrong, and, as in the example of her sister, she also clarified that she would need a particular kind of relationship as well as visible proof to confront the person, although she again suggested “it would have been helpful.” She went on to say:

.. when I did announce it to my friends they were all really - surprised - surprised at what I had to tell them but in a sense not surprised. They didn't know the extreme things he did to me but they did know from his behavior that he was not a nice man. So when I did allow myself to tell them, then I had all kinds of support. So part of it was I hadn't brought it up - they didn't feel there was an open door.

Although her friends had some indicators that her relationship was unpleasant, they found it difficult to say anything given Kathleen's silence on the subject. Thus, according to this account, it takes both sides to make it possible to discuss such an intricate matter. Kathleen

did, however, indicate that once she spoke the unspeakable, her friends were attentive and supportive.

Kali spoke somewhat differently about her experiences with her friends. In her first marriage she sketched a lack of alternative marriage modelling and of neighborly response:

I had a lot of people around me that were in situations like that so it looked like the norm - when the bizarre is normal. (And regarding my neighbors) I'd be dragged, you know, kicking and screaming down an apartment hall - like I had carpet burns, all over - people opening their doors and going - and not - and not helping - I mean I've had that experience. And I thought I'm going to die and they're not helping me..

This was contrasted by the responses of her friends during her second marriage when:

.. all of my friends were at their wits' end, they were. I mean - they could see me - being destroyed - literally and my kids and-um (pause) some of them just sort of quietly going crazy about it and others being quite openly - like, if you don't do something about this, we're going to have to do something for the kids' sakes.. which I understood ..

In the second interview, Kali explored in greater depth the meaning of her friends for her, along side of the cultural dictates that limit genuine open communication, particularly about delicate issues. She reflected on this as being:

.. cultural, it's family - all of those things (pause) - the cultural imperative is that you don't involve yourself - it's this sacrosanct - you just don't - and besides you're ONLY a friend. You see, women's friends are ONLY (pause) superfluous fluff to their REAL relationships in life with men, you know, even though women's experiences may be different - but men see our relationships with other women that way too - that they *should* be superfluous fluff and we don't take our - well, I take my relationships with women very seriously and I think that's what saved me - what kept me going even when I was living in those situations, is having those - those deep abiding relationships with women and with women who were courageous enough to - to say, to act, to do something and thank the goddess for them. And my ex- used to say, well, do you think so-and-so is going to be around - well, lo and behold she was and so were others. They were there - um - and I didn't have to sleep with them to have their support.

Kali raised two interesting points prevalent in our culture that she used to portray the role of her friends while she was in a relationship in which she experienced battering. The first point, congruent with Kathleen's words, is that we do not interfere with another's marital, intimate, or primary relationship. The second point is that women's relationships, in spite of the intensity, authenticity, and closeness that women may experience in these friendships, are not given the same credence or value in our society as are heterosexual marital-type relationships. Kali challenged this dominant assumption about women's

friendships, expressing gratitude for the depth and breadth of their impact in her life. I use Kali's analysis to springboard into my own discussion about the role of culture with regard to issues raised in this chapter.

### **Cultural Mandates Defining the Public and Private Nature of Our Lives**

As in Chapter two, I reiterate that although the interviews represent a co-construction of the women's narratives, I found from time to time that there were issues that raised my concerns, particularly for women living in victimizing circumstances. Such a concern was raised for me in the above section, where the women alluded to culture as circumscribing, as well as prescribing, particular distinct modes of conduct regarding what is private versus what is public. As a conclusion to this chapter, I expose and discuss my thoughts, grounded in a further interaction with the women's words.

We all live quite comfortably much of the time with a private world/public world split. It is reasonable to recognise that none of us could be consistently or continuously open and vulnerable about what goes on in our private lives, and we tend to make such choices carefully. The kind of private/public split that I would like to challenge, however, is one that speaks to the need for secrecy, for hiding, or compartmentalizing such that people close to us do not know about important details in our lives. Although I respect privacy, I think there are situations that challenge this split or compartmentalization, particularly situations that trigger such questions for me as: who really benefits, and, who is this actually for. These questions were raised for me when I heard the women speak about a component in their lives that appeared to silence them, to render their painful experiences invisible, and that in many ways could have put their lives at greater risk. As Kali stated above, intimate committed relationships are still considered "sacrosanct," that is, they belong to the personal and private sphere and we make a clear insider/outsider distinction. In their narratives, two of the women described how their partners appeared to utilize this distinction such that they displayed two different faces, one in public and one in private. For example, in Elsie's words:

.. I used to cook dinner parties .. I loved to cook - several times he'd come into the kitchen and he'd start a fight just before the people came. He would be mad .. a discussion over nothing .. he'd say, you phone those people, they're not coming for dinner .. The doorbell rings 3 minutes later - (he'd say) oh, how nice to see you, oh, it's wonderful .. or I'd be in the kitchen and he'd come in - smiling from the room - and I'd be there and he'd pick at something. The other people wouldn't see this. He would dig at things where nobody else could hear ..

and referring to excerpts from Kathleen's words partly alluded to in Chapter two:

..under the table - kick me in the shins if he thought I might say something .. (or the episode when) he cut my knuckle with (a canning lid) .. we were having people for dinner in 10 more minutes. (Another time) he came up with .. it was an ashtray .. marble and chrome thing and he came at me with this thing. I got to sleep at 4 in the morning. I had to go to work the next day. We took my cousin and her husband to a game that night - you would never have known anything happened ..

In the context of a culture that dictates that such behaviors are not discussed out in the open, the women are silenced. What would happen if they had announced their partner's controlling behaviors to the others present? In a culture in which we prefer not to hear or see, they might have experienced a reception similar to Kali's when her husband dragged her down a hallway, such that she sustained carpet burns, and the neighbors were "opening their doors .. and not helping."

Living within a particular culture we tend to subscribe to, consciously and unconsciously, the cultural dictates regarding certain expected behaviors and proprieties, and as such we sometimes unwittingly participate in sustaining or perpetuating these dictates. Kathleen provides an example, one she had seen in her mother:

.. I could be a mess in the morning. He could go out of the house calling me whatever and be angry for something dumb - and I would fall apart, and then I would just pull myself together, walk out the door and no one ever, ever knew ..

Kathleen went on to relate this to feeling shame. In his definition of shame, Kaufman (1985) aptly stated that there is a:

feeling of exposure and accompanying self-consciousness that characterizes the essential nature of the affect of shame. Contained in the experience of shame is the piercing awareness of ourselves as fundamentally deficient in some vital way as a human being (p.ix).

Kathleen recognized this was true for her saying: "there was shame--I didn't want people to think that--that I had any problem," as did Care: "I'm embarrassed--it's kind of connected to a sense of shame. I didn't want others to know." In addition to this subjective and privately painful interpretation of their victimization, the women experienced a silence or silencing around them echoing the notion that 'we don't hang out our dirty laundry.' Elsie expressed this as "nobody wants to listen to someone's sad tales, they want to feel good," and Kathleen verbalized it as "I think people genuinely liked me for being me--that I never talked about my problems, I never talked about how things were, I just did it." What does it mean to be genuinely liked when they do not know some critical aspects, and possibly do



not want to know about these critical experiences in our lives? Additionally, earlier in this chapter Care and Kathleen in particular, described how friends had withdrawn in response to their partner's abusive mannerisms. Kathleen indicated in the second interview "we don't interfere in people's private lives" and earlier that her friends said "you can't say anything .. you can only be there." For me this triggered the question, what does it mean to *be there* for someone if we do not speak up?

It is imperative at this point that I clarify that I am not criticizing these women, but rather that I am looking critically at a subtle yet powerful social silencing tool that we all participate in. More importantly, I think the implication based on their stories is that the struggle experienced by women who live in victimizing relationships is more complex than just whether or not they turn to others. From this discussion it would seem that the implied focus is larger. It must be remembered that these women were functioning in the context of their primary intimate relationships. Others who came into their lives were not in that same vulnerable position, and hence, I posit that the *risk* of addressing the issue is inherently based on being inside or outside that relationship. Given this distinction and the experience of three of the women who had been told to "just stop being a victim" (in which victim is equated with being passive),<sup>28</sup> I think it is interesting and worth consideration to challenge this with the alternative question: who in this situation is actually being (or acting) the victim? The women spoke of friends who withdrew because they felt uncomfortable around the abusive partner, yet they never said anything. With the exception of Elsie's experience, no one told these women that they did not deserve to be mistreated. In fact, it appears that some friends found it easier to slip away or withdraw than to provide clear alternatives or ask appropriate questions. It is not just in downtown New York that people turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to others' struggles. Probably a critical component in this issue is education and familiarity with the various appropriate questions or statements that would be helpful, and that nevertheless permit women who are being victimized the option to act when they are ready, thereby leaving their dignity intact with regard to outsiders as well as clearly indicating support and alternatives.

Finally, my discussion does not minimize or preclude the very real support that, for example, Kathleen or Kali indicated they received. Moreover, I would agree with

---

<sup>28</sup> In Chapter eight I address this equation in greater depth. My use of it here is not to imply agreement, but simply to indicate its dominant usage.

Kathleen's inference in the following excerpt that timing and sensitivity are critical components. Kathleen speaks about her experience with a friend:

.. we ended up working together and .. one day I saw her in the store and she had a black eye - and she wouldn't say anything and it was too long past saying hello for me to say what happened to your eye and she obviously wasn't going to tell me, and then a few years go by and we get together and yeh, her husband was a batterer - and she ended up leaving him. Now, there was a person that I could go to and she was very supportive because she knew. She told me after I finally confessed that I was having similar problems and she said and I knew that. So - and I obviously knew from seeing her but I also knew not to say anything because I didn't want to - you know - if the woman's ready, she's ready, if she's not, she's not.

I nevertheless think it is worthy to critically consider those factors that stop us from responding to a friend or acquaintance whose situation appears very troubling and may even potentially be life-threatening. More importantly, given the focus of this thesis, in this section I reflected on the issue that although these women are often seen as being "in denial," this presumed denial takes place within a larger context of denial.

### **Conclusion**

The silencing of the victimization as expressed by the women in this study, in the context of certain cultural imperatives, was threefold: (a) the husbands were frequently two-faced, masking certain inappropriate abusive behaviors, (b) the women experienced shame and conceptualized their experiences as a private matter based on cultural messages, and (c) friends did not wish to interfere. Regardless of whatever cultural dictates we ascribe to as ways to explain or justify a lack of honest response or verbalizing concern in these situations, whether this be out of respect, or beliefs about needing to be invited in, it seems cold and friendless to permit someone we know to suffer for any length of time without some acknowledgment or readiness to indicate that meaningful support is available. Given this broader context, I inverted the statement often directed at these women to "stop acting the victim" (reflecting the dominant operating definition that equates victim with being passive or docile) by putting forth the question, 'who in such a scenario is really acting the victim'? Last, in the helping profession, as counsellors or therapists, we need to be aware of sociocultural imperatives that play a critical role in silencing and shaming those who experience intimate victimization. Recognizing these factors and exposing them in our work can result in de-individualizing the issues and promoting healing.

## Chapter Six: Struggles and Management Strategies

### *I believe*

The lights came up the music died  
 I saw you from the corner of my eye  
 And I,I,I,I Could not believe  
 The magic that came over me  
 I walked into the opportunity  
 I stood before your disbelieving face  
 The words that I spoke I cannot recall  
 But the meaning is emblazoned on my soul  
 I heard a sound like fire in my ears,  
 It drew me close although I felt no fear  
 And I believed  
 The universe was in your eyes  
 The sun the moon the stars were in your hands  
 Hands that reached out to me  
 With endless possibilities  
 I want to make them my realities  
 I want to claim the magic lost so long ago  
 And I believe that you and I can make it so  
 I believe I believe  
 - Kali (1996).

As formulated in the previous chapter, families of origin and friends presented a composite picture of mixed ambivalent and empowering experiences for the women who participated in this study. The women further described various personal struggles, feelings of ambivalence, as well as deep attachments, all of which participated in establishing a complex understanding of their experiences and of them as individuals. In this chapter, I have clustered together portions of the women's narratives in which they spontaneously addressed these matters, implying in their words that they were engaged in a process of trying to adapt, trying to understand, and actively attempting to shift the dynamics, in their efforts to ensure relationship or marriage survival. The women, from a perspective of hindsight, also formulated thoughts related to disbelief and ways in which they had minimized and/or denied what was happening in their relationships in order to cope.

### **Adjustment and Coping**

Elsie described her process of trying to adjust in the context of this being her second intimate relationship, having four children and wanting very much to have this relationship succeed.

.. I learned, okay, so this is in your early marriage, you adapt, you adapt, you - you don't rock the boat and you adapt and I was only 30 at that time .. I'm trying to adapt to all these moods and this fear and not do something wrong ..

Elsie's words imply her struggle to gain a sense of understanding of what was happening in her relationship in order to prevent doing something that might provoke his anger, indicating that fear was a motivating factor. It would appear that in contrast to the dominant provocation myth Elsie exemplified how these women consciously and repeatedly laboured to avoid provoking their partners. She goes on to provide examples of how she discovered what appeared to her to be effective coping responses, indicating that the process of adaptation was not simply passive. Elsie's first example reflected socioculturally available means of trying to mend rifts in a relationship, that of using cards.

I didn't know what I'd done so I would write him love notes, or I'd go to the card store and I'd say I'm sorry, I don't know, I hope everything will be okay .. that snapped him out of it. So I learned this way of coping..

In Elsie's narrative she described times when she was able to circumvent or sort through the issues and therefore felt she was effectively coping. Her second example indicated her efforts to avoid conflict by attempting to communicate thereby feeling she had some control. She would ask:

what is it that I've done - that sort of - (his answer) - 'you didn't ask me to cut the roast, you let (x) cut the roast' .. at least .. I could stop the jealousy .. at least you had a handle on what it was.

The ability to make sense of an issue and feel effective was subjectively important. Elsie's reference to what would, for many, seem to exemplify a minor issue in a relationship, is an interesting one. The problem she addressed could be readily construed as easily dealt with and understood as exemplifying aspects of any new relationship that requires adjustment and simply becoming familiar with each others' preferences, ostensibly similar to the oft heard jokes about marital fights regarding how the toothpaste is squeezed or how the toilet paper roll is hung.

In contrast to Elsie's description of adaptation and coping, Care did not mention adaptation per se, although she did narrate three coping strategies: (a) her participation in aspects of the relationship that made her uncomfortable as a means of experiencing some control, (b) maintaining financial responsibility and control, and (c) providing alternative experiences for her son. She distinguishes between earlier and later acts of participation:

I mean even though in those early years I did participate in all that garbage and stuff but in my head I knew this isn't right .. but for me to speak out was not going to work for me because I would be threatened so I thought I could gain the control by participating in it ... I said I don't like it that your friends come here and stay but that never stopped.. he was going to do what - what he wanted to do and I would

either join in or keep my mouth shut (pause). I had financial power - yeh, I did ..

In addition to participating, she confronted her partner by articulating her displeasure, but her concerns were dismissed. In contrast to this experience of decreased control, having an income presented an alternative experience, enabling her to cope and to feel she did have some control.

I'm working to pay the bills - in some cases I had taken on double shifts, I had taken on second jobs .. in order to make ends meet .. trying to stay on top of the bills - um - (pause) - because I knew I had an edge that way 'cuz I had the money, I had the income, I had an edge. I mean I had some kind of control because there were some things he couldn't - could not do because I had the money - so I guess in a way I had found my little place where I had control and I was hanging on to that ..

In addition, in the context of returning to the relationship in order to be with her son after losing custody of him, Care formulated acts of coping that were focussed on providing alternative experiences for her son:

I could protect him and show him that things were nice and that i-it - (pause) that to be with mommy - that it's not always chaotic. ... (and when her husband found work) I mean I would do nutty things like move the furniture so that (son) would have a bigger play area and move the furniture back when (husband) got home ..

Care's portrayal reflect her contradictory experiences of both having and lacking control, within a context in which she perceived herself primarily as able to cope. Her activities of coping kept Care's focus on the relationship.

Kathleen, in her narrative, implied that the process of adapting to and coping in the relationship was linked to her ability to avoid triggering him and losing important connections in her life. She described herself as actively and audibly engaged in doing all she could in her marriage to improve and mend their relationship. In her words she clarifies, as did Elsie, that this amended the situation somewhat for herself:

So you start avoid to do-doing some things - it took me a while. Somehow I developed this, this-um way of knowing not to cross boundaries and needing to have him say it's okay, because that would avoid a problem for me. .. I did everything I could to try and resolve this, and-and part of that was just being very vocal ..

Coping for Kathleen was integral to her commitment, which, based on her words, implied hard work. Moreover, she expressed the intensity of wanting him to experience what she was going through, of wanting him to understand:

When I was inside the relationship I had my nose to the grindstone and outside I - well, I think that this - this-um - defiance I had - which was a really powerful feeling - wanting to stand there in front of him and risk whatever - um - it was

always part of me but like I said it-it (pause) - I can't say I sabotaged anything - but in my own mind I had - I had a feeling that I had - yeh - he beat me up but maybe it would just be a thought - one day - one day I'll .. One day meant one day I'm going to make you feel this pain - I'm going to hurt you this same way .. part of me did really want to get some justice here for myself - I mean knowing it was wrong. I wanted to have an impact - I wanted him to feel the same thing ..

Her process included attempts to avoid conflict and avoid loss:

.. because there's a pattern been set here - that I'm - I'm threatened with a loss of love, security, - um (pause) - children, whatever. All the way along something's been thrown at me so - and I don't want those things to happen to me ..

She described actively coping with those aspects of her marriage that were painful by trying to ensure his approval, by talking to him and involving him in her plans to obtain further training, as well as discussing her wish for a supportive or joined parenting style.

I was still trying to win his approval, just trying to do things right, and-and (in getting training) I was proving to him that it wasn't a waste of money .. I wanted to support him.

Her coping style was not void of voicing her anger or of confronting her husband, as indicated by Kathleen regarding parenting conflicts:

.. to be a team - when it came to our children .. we talked about that but whenever it happened he took over .. I was really mad - I was angry. How-how dare you again - I mean I talked about this - let's have a joined front with these kids. Don't be one-upping me .. I wouldn't do it to you ..

The above constructions reflect Kathleen's attempts to actively protect herself, to uncover ways that seemed to her to provide effective strategies, as well as continuously challenging and confronting her husband with the hope for genuine change. Finally, she indicated that "I guess how I dealt with it is I stored it up" implied that coping for her included a subjective history-taking of the situation such that the incidents were not easily forgiven nor forgotten.

Other than stating that in the first year of Kali's first marriage "I kind of just kept up to whatever he was doing, so it was okay," Kali did not directly address adaptation or coping but alluded more to her internal process in the context of "I felt obligated to stay and sort all of these things out .. I should be able to - help this person work his things out" and focussing on alcohol as providing her with an avenue of understanding and coping. In addition, Kali mentioned establishing outside contacts by attending a consciousness-raising group, taking courses at college, and making new friends in these places, which in addition to implying a coping strategy, enabled her to initiate a process that eventually led her to

leave. Kathleen spoke similarly of establishing connections outside her marriage, and these issues are given appropriate attention in Chapter seven, with respect to the women's discussions about the process of leaving. In speaking about coping with/in the relationships, the women spoke spontaneously about the activity of analysing.

### **Analysing as a Strategy**

Women implied that their attempts to cope often fuelled analysing their own behaviors as well as the relationship, and again, this was not an equivalent experience for all four women. In Elsie's words:

I was always analysing what I had done wrong and maybe - I - maybe an hour ago - I might have done something wrong but it took an hour (for him) to show the rage, so I would go back and sometimes I would even think about yesterday - well was there something yesterday ..

and in the context of yearning for the relationship and finding it very confusing, because his rage was not a characteristic that she could relate to. She states:

.. I needed to be wanted so badly and I needed to figure things out so badly - why-why-why - those 'why' things almost destroy you. Why his double messages. Abuse is a double message. .. I remember when we were first married that was totally confusing to me, just no warning. Especially when you're not like that yourself. I think most women are not like that.

Elsie suggests that his extreme responses and interactions made it difficult for her to know how to respond because they seemed contradictory and foreign to her. She presented herself as a quiet-spoken and gentle woman and she conveyed that, in part, her struggle was one of trying to comprehend his reasons for being so angry at times, as this would restore or repair meaning and direction to the relationship for her. Her husband could be frighteningly rageful but also a wonderful companion, and the existence of this range of qualities in him resulted in her unrelenting attempts to try and understand, particularly as a means of being able to prevent particular behaviors. Interestingly she refers to his behaviors as indicative of a gendered construction.

Care spoke somewhat differently about the role of analysing in her situation. She placed her experience of analysing in the context of gendered conditioning, linking her efforts to analyse to a potential sense of failure, to her partner's unpredictable behaviors, and to her desire to prevent an escalation of events:

I'm always looking to myself and he's always looking to everyone else. I think that I learned that - it's being a woman - we're taught to be responsible for his emotional well-being (pause).. I think it's our upbringing - there's this role that women have to play - we're nurturers of everybody, caretakers of everybody - our

parents, our children, our husbands, even some of our friends sometimes. So some of this caretaking and nurturing - we take this on and we think that's our job - I can do it, and I'm going to do a good job at it but - we can't - because - we can't control that other person. So then we feel somehow like we've failed .. and then it's something you do when you're victimized too because you're trying to keep the peace .. I was scared for (son), I was scared for me - I thought - I was trying to figure out what is the best thing to do here - I was scared to escalate things ..

Interestingly, Care noted a connection between her socialization as a woman and her experiences of being victimized. She went on to describe a complicated situation that occurred when she had returned to the relationship after a year's absence, with ambivalent feelings regarding reconciliation and the compelling desire to be with her son. Subsequent to an incident when her partner had beaten her she wanted to report and to lay charges but was halted by several daunting questions, particularly given her previous experience of losing custody of her son. She stated:

I thought, well, if the police come in what's going to happen? What's going to happen with everything? I mean is (son) going to be with me - because we had this custody order - I mean, the two of us are together but there is this agreement that he has custody. And (partner) is who (son) is supposed to be with - so - what's going to happen with (son) and what's going to happen with me? What if they don't do anything about (partner)?

In the context of her earlier experience of leaving the relationship on a weekend when her partner was away camping with their son making it safer to leave, but thereby losing everything including her son, she was unwilling to risk this a second time. So her focus of struggling with a variety of questions reflected her previous experience plus the reality that "I didn't have anything in place." This triggered her concern about the potential consequences of reporting or laying charges. The issue of leaving is complex, requiring further exploration and will be addressed in Chapter seven, where I explicate structural barriers as experienced by the woman. I briefly allude to it here because Care's process of internal questions and attempt to respond in an effective manner is relevant with regard to the role of *analysing* in these women's lives.

Kathleen formulated her process of analysing particular events both as a means of understanding what her husband's internal process might be, as well as a preventive measure, nonetheless with a note of expectancy:

I always expected an apology - well, it never came, but you see things would-uh - when it was really severe like that - the next day there would be peace, there would be no - I would expect that in his own head probably justifying why he had to do this, doesn't mean he is wrong but justifying it, so there'd be some calm and then that's when I would think - well, maybe this time he's figured it out - but they



don't. I did different things - but I didn't want to stir it up again, you know, that (incident) was a particularly scary one for me and I didn't want to um - get him going again, so to speak, and I also - when you've gone through, you know, - 5 hours of terror and fear and wondering what the hell he is doing - you're the next day - you're coping with a whole lot of things internally yourself .. I think for me is um - (pause) - probably that time was, yeh, maybe I shouldn't have been angry when he came home drunk, you know. If I had handled it differently maybe he wouldn't have done that..

She went on to deliberate further on the negative implications of analysing, tying this into her sense of responsibility and use of justification, with the latter serving to maintain the relationship:

.. analysing - it turned against me because you take that responsibility somehow of trying to figure things out. I don't know (pause) - I think it's - I mean I was in it so long (pause) you just do believe that somehow you could have changed what happened by behaving in a different way, and now I would say bologna - but at the time that you're living through it, that's what you do. You-uh - and if you love someone - it's also crazy but you have to justify uh - still giving that love to yourself, you have to justify why you still love this man and so - you-you tell yourself that if you hadn't done that he wouldn't have become angry with you, because you don't want to lose the love. Justification has been a big thing in my life and-uh - that's what I did - to make it easier for me to carry on - because in the first years I didn't want to leave and then in the next years I didn't know how to leave.

Kathleen's words infer the complexity that results from the intertwining of several issues eventuating in her attempts to analyse and make meaning both of the individual incidents and the overall relationship. In the above segment, she is clearly speaking from a place *outside* the relationship, a position that permitted her insight into the function of her justification and her underlying need as reflected in the justification. In her last sentence, she alluded to being engaged in a process, a process that reflected the sociocultural expectations regarding commitment and views towards women as centrally linked to the activity of analysing:

I think you carry that responsibility .. it's a part of who you're supposed to be as a woman .. you make a commitment and .. women are certainly second class citizens. And the analysing that you do - comes out of the same ..

A somewhat different aspect of this process and her ongoing attempts to analyse her husband's behaviors as well as their marriage was indicated when Kathleen spoke of turning to books. In this section of her narrative she reflects on the historical changes that she noted over the years she read books addressing intimate relationships:

(I would) go to the library and get books and read about midlife crisis and his problems and mine and .. I went to the store and I got books on husbands and on their behavior - and it was-um - it wasn't male menopause - but I started to see

behaviors - and I guess seeing it in print - it was some of the things that men do emotionally to women that I was seeing in print - it was that I was seeing it in print. Like I had done this in 1978 - gone to the library - and what I was reading then was - well, you know, dress nicely, and-um - make sure that he's not troubled and dah-dah and now I'm reading that men - you know - that men play around, that men do this, they do that, men say this, men go through their own traumas of middle-age and-and I actually did think at some point that part of his problem was that he was now 42 or whatever - and he must be - maybe he wants to have another woman and he's just being - but I was starting to see things that made much more sense to me ..

Kathleen discussed her process of analysing as engaging her in a search outside her home. She points out that early on the underlying problems of intimate abuse and battering remained invisible in the available literature, thereby steering her in a direction of trying harder in her marriage, with a greater focus on satisfying her husband, at least for a time. Interestingly, Kathleen's endeavor to analyse, or think, weigh, and question various aspects of her life, as exemplified by her search for reading material, however, also resulted in her increased awareness of historical and cultural changes. About this aspect of herself she remarked:

I started work for the (city) when I was early 40s - by 42 I had a 22 year old daughter and an 18 year old daughter - wasn't it time for me to have a life? Wasn't it time for me to do for me? .. It was getting to me when I should have had it all along. So there were experiences in the world, there were the historical changes around me, the changes in the books, in my reading, and then somehow integrating that - you know. I remember way back in 1969 living in India and you know you have to live in that society and see the position that women are in. Yet tell me why there was a woman prime minister and tell me why when you walked into their households that the woman had a lot of say in the family - the male's mother, and I thought that was really quite profound, that this country has very domineering, dominant men, yet a woman is in charge. I guess I've always - I'm not a libber, but I really feel that women have some - I've always felt that women should have - I never wanted to be a man - but I always felt that a woman has as much right to have what a man (has) - and maybe that's what - I shouldn't say that's what got me in trouble (laughs) but-um - but maybe if I'd been more compliant to the way I'd been raised - um - I would have just kept tolerating the situation - but - I didn't think those things were fair. Because like I said - all the information - one of the things I did in the 70s - I spent a lot of time reading biographies or autobiographies about women from the past like George Sand - women that did things that were different and really admired them because they - they - they took a stand for themselves and-um I guess all those things helped form my thoughts for the future that, you know, or where I wanted to be .. I just wanted to be Kathleen - I wanted to be me - not their mother and not his slave - not living on his coattails.

Kathleen delineated her manner of thinking about the issues, sketching how her analysis was culturally and historically situated. Above she described those aspects of herself whereby she was able to challenge dominant assumptions about women, implying a movement back and forth between her family and herself. She also linked her analysing to

self-doubt and uncertainty, indicating her struggle and ambivalence, reflecting a cumulative effect of "29 years of hearing (his) constant criticism." The example she gave was when she and her husband went to see a marriage counsellor and she remembers wondering if she should:

role play .. because I felt that he might be right - my husband might be right. I'm nervous - how do I handle this? I mean - what do I do, do I play my husband's game? I know what he's going to be like - he's going to deny, he's going to, you know, make it less than it is. What do I do?

Kathleen's varied descriptions provide a picture of a multi-faceted person, with different aspects that function both positively for her and snag her.

Kali described her process of analysing her first husband's behavior in the context of his alcohol misuse, indicating with hindsight that this understanding was limited:

.. that this person is doing this and it's alcohol, not recognizing that this was, this was the way this person controlled my movements .. he and I had a separation .. he actually quit drinking .. (and) it was a relative period of calm .. (but) he was the alcoholic and I was his conscience..

Kali further tied her various attempts at analysing the situation to taking responsibility. She reiterated Kathleen's link to doubting her own perceptions:

I doubted my perceptions of everything and constantly - I'm always trying to analyse things and see what my part in it is .. well, maybe I'm just misinterpreting .. I did all that kind of ridiculous analysing of things that just discounted my whole reality. I tried to make sense of it. There's no way to make sense of it though.

In both interviews, Kali discussed asymmetrical responsibility-taking as an important feature in her relationship, whereby her husband took no responsibility, and in fact denied his behaviors. She explored this in the context of what she referred to as psychological and emotional abuse, stating that in many ways these were worse than the physical abuse because they lacked concreteness or tangibility. She linked her numerous efforts to analyse her circumstances to these less tangible, but more detrimental aspects of her relationship, suggesting that the nature of psychological and emotional abuse results in the woman's repeated attempts to make sense of both the victimization and the overall relationship in order to halt his mistreatment. In her words:

.. all of the other - the emotional stuff - you constantly sort of go over and - and second-guess yourself and again go back to that - well, what did I - how did I - what did I do, and how could I have - um - you know, all of that kind of stuff. The women end up doing that - and that's the thing - you try and rationalize or analyse it (pause) - and make sense of something that just doesn't make sense and you can rationalize or analyse it 'til the cows come home but it's never going to make any sense. That's what I had to realize - is that - that there is no sense to this, there is

nothing that I can change or do to make it any different - um - it's a waste of my time to do that and to engage in that. But I think it's pretty *basic human nature* - you're trying to figure this out. Okay, how does this - how does point A get to point B - how does this work and it's - it's - people's behavior is so unbelievable that we're trying to make it believable in some way, to give them some out, to give them some justification, some - anything that just - so that we don't have to really look at - oh, there is no rationale for this, this is just ugly, and this is the way this person is. (Emphasis mine).

Notably Kali *normalizes* the tendency to figure out the issues as reflecting *human nature*.

In addition to her reflections on the interaction between the nature of the abuse and efforts to analyse and make sense of it, Kali in the second interview, similar to Care, further related the experience of victimization to women's socialization:

.. women are taught to be victims - to be passive and to accept responsibility for things and - so - you know, I think that that's part of growing up being female - um - and-uh (pause) - you know, I just don't have relationships with a lot of women that are like that..

The above excerpts variously presented the women's descriptions regarding their utilization of analysing as a tool to understand, to make meaning, and to cope in their relationships. Furthermore, the women delineated other ways in which they remained focussed in the relationship, hoping for effective, genuine change.

### **Experiences of Disbelief, Minimizing and Acts of Denial**

The women spoke of experiencing disbelief and described minimizing their partners' maltreatment. In current dominant discourse the word "denial" is frequently heard, and was also used by the women I interviewed. In part, their depictions of "denial" reflected their contexts of diverse experiences, wherein "it wasn't all bad" or "there were lots of good times" in the relationships indicating mixed and confusing messages. It is also congruent with the manner in which we tend to use discourse that is socially available and acceptable. Not all four women mentioned disbelief, minimizing, and/or denial as features of their responses and the following excerpts reflect this factor.

Disbelief was described by both Elsie and Kali in response to the incongruity in completely contradictory behaviors of their partners, often occurring contiguously. The disbelief led them to try and regain congruency often by trying to communicate. Elsie formulated an experience of disbelief that occurred after having left the relationship, with her disbelief shifting into an attempt to communicate, triggering her yearning, and resultant ambivalence:

But I thought you just called me a bitch - when he said will you go for a walk with

me? I said, Okay, let's just go for a walk .. and then we had dinner together - we actually had quite a good time, and just for a few seconds - you know, you have a glass of wine, and you-you for a few seconds you're in bliss again. I know you fool yourself that you're in bliss again. He's in a good mood now - maybe we can talk about it now and of course I - we did talk that night .. and he put his arm around me and I said do you really know what you have done to me, do you really know? He said - yeh, I know.

Kali, spoke somewhat differently about her experiences although she also related it to the incongruency in his behaviors. She spoke of her "disbelief" more in the context of finding it difficult to comprehend that someone would behave in this manner, and linked this disbelief to denying the full meaning of what was happening:

.. it was so incongruous that he could be one way and then another way, that when he was abusive you know, or physically threatening, or whatever, it was almost like - no people don't talk to each other like that. It was total disbelief and-and just like denial like - no you don't say look joe-fucking bitch and point at his mother in front of a two-year old. .. It's hard to describe - it's just that I didn't believe that every time he would do something more outrageous I would just go (very soft voice) - people don't do that to each other - part of it was like shock. .. He still did a whole lot of stuff that - that is just totally abusive but I couldn't even see that as - I couldn't see that as - because it didn't look like what it looked like in the first relationship - it was emotional and psychological..

Elsie, described denying the impact or continuity of negative events by making excuses for her husband, connecting her denial to her intention to "fix" the relationship:

I made excuses for him - oh, he's tired, or he's stressed, or - or there must have been something, or it won't happen again, and you just go through this on and on ..(or) we go away and have a real nice time and I thought, oh, this time it's going to work, he's going to be nice .. I denied it for a while because I - I still thought I could fix it for so long. I thought I'll read these books .. pick up this book and I'd get a little further.. (but) when I started questioning it - I started realizing that there definitely is something wrong here. I couldn't hide - you can only hide from this so long ..

Elsie's words imply a process, one in which she was actively engaged in trying to be understanding towards her husband, looking for resources to inform herself, and trying different approaches, believing in the potential for genuine lasting change.

Kali also addressed the way in which she understood and pardoned her husband's behavior by focussing on his potential:

He could be incredibly sensitive and nurturing and so I was focussing on the - that part and thinking - well, that's who he really is - that's what his potential is and not this other (pause), and you know - he's had a horrible childhood himself..

Although Kathleen also spoke of focussing on other aspects of their marriage she portrayed her focus in the following statement:

I was trying to stay like perfect parents .. I guess a lot of things I did - was I tried to

hide the truth - cover it up and make it be a perfect little family and (pause) and thinking for a lot of it I'm - I'm the problem.

Kathleen indicated her concentrated efforts and committed attempts to fulfil what she believed and wished her marriage and her family to be.

Care spoke somewhat differently about her process of denying what was happening in the relationship, providing three examples. First, she minimized the initial violent event based on his reaction:

.. when he saw my neck he was just (pause) - mmmm (groans) - you know, really upset about what he had done and trying to (pause) - I could see he was very upset by it so that I guess how I thought about it was that it wasn't that bad - he wasn't going to do it again - because he was shocked at his own action - yeh, because it was horrible ..

Her own sense of horror and his seemingly congruent response gave her cause to believe his words were authentic. Second, she turned to alcohol both as a way of coping and as a way of shutting out the pain and disillusionment:

I know I had problems with alcohol (pause) - but - now not to justify it - but I think it was because I was in the relationship - it was kind of - it was coping - it was numbing, you know, - it was easy, it was numbing, but I had no trouble when I left the relationship to stop using the alcohol and then after that - maybe it wasn't just the alcohol, but being away from him AND away from the alcohol - you can see the forest for the trees ..

Care, although taking responsibility for her drinking behavior, indicated that her alcohol misuse was limited to the relationship and with distance she was able to see and understand the issues differently. Third, she described staying and minimizing the issues in the context of otherwise possibly losing her important valuables and belongings:

I was the financial support, it was *my* apartment - I would have to leave *my* apartment and leave all the contents in it. I mean that bugged me, that bugged me a lot to do that - to just walk away from it. Why-why should you have all my stuff that I worked hard for ..

It is of interest that Care's voiced indignation and concern here was not unfounded, as she lost, in addition to custody of her son, most of the contents of the apartment both times she left the relationship.

The women narrated experiences in which denial was defined by *active* efforts to cope, to understand, to make sense of events in their intimate relationships, to effect meaningful change, as well as linking these efforts to women's socialization processes. Most notable were their explications that denial was not limited to their activities within the

relationship, but was mirrored to them by the worlds in which they lived and moved about.

For example Kali states:

We went for counselling, we did all kinds of stuff and you know, I would describe these scenarios and no one would say they were violent. No one would say that somebody trying to choke you to death is, you know, - you know, like no one would say that, you know, throwing you out, like lifting the bed up and tipping it over and you in it at 3 a.m. is you know inappropriate or - you know - after we separated, things like coming and smashing down the front door .. it was more focussing on the alcohol and how might we communicate better with each other or whatever..

Moreover, in addition to clearly confronting him, she spoke of her husband's denial exemplified in the following event that includes her response to him and his ongoing denial:

.. there was no way of making sense of it. I just said at that point though - if you ever hit me again (pause) - I'm going - that's right. So then a few months after that he acted like no he'd never, he'd never done it in the first place .. now he'll tell you he never did that - his attitude to-towards anything that - that I say now about those experiences, that I've made it all up, that I'm impugning him ..

Kali also referred to her friend's and parents' implied denial of both her experiences of violence and her role as having been the primary caregiving parent when she said:

.. like trying to talk with his mom or his, you know, his sister .. and their attitude is kind of like - well, that's the way men are .. (and later) I told my mother we had separated .. she said well, who's going to look after you and the kids and I was going (laughs and her voice more exclamatory) - who do you think's been doing it? .. (with respect to being a solo mom) - well, it's better for my children to have a-a dad and I mean he's .. he's gainfully employed, he's totally responsible that way .. but he's also this, this, and this, you know ..

or from the perspective of presenting a presumed cozy image:

.. others saying this isn't an issue, this isn't ah- this is - you're so lucky, you have such a lovely family, you know ..

Kathleen, too, experienced her parents' dismissal when she turned to them regarding her husband's violence early on in her marriage. Additionally, she similarly formulated the denial and lack of addressing the issue appropriately in a situation outside her immediate relationship:

.. we're going to the counsellor, we're going as a couple to try and resolve our marital problems. I understand that if you're trying to counsel a couple you can't really be taking one aside and saying you should be out of this or perhaps you need time apart (pause) - but to me it's wrong because th-that left me another 10 years of my life.

Echoing Kali's experience of her husband's denial Kathleen also stated:

.. even to this day (pause) - I mean - he did admit that he battered me - at one point (pause) - but today - it looks good on paper - the denial that it's ever happened - he

refers to the odd pushing and shoving match.

In a similar vein Elsie mentioned an incident with her husband when:

.. he says - you know my lawyer has told me what kind of woman you are .. we're going to make you bleed and .. it's very lucky that I didn't go for therapy 'cuz that wouldn't be very good for my case.

In this way, in their narratives, the women delineated situations in which they felt that their experiences were denied, minimized, or dismissed by others who may have been in a less vulnerable situation to genuinely listen to and hear the women. Often discussions of denial focus on the individual while negating the larger sociocultural context. In Chapter seven I return to this issue in greater depth regarding the sociocultural structural barriers experienced by these women with respect to their experiences of battering in an intimate relationship and their attempts to obtain help. The central theme in the above excerpts has been one of exploring the diverse ways in which the women's focus was primarily maintained internal to the relationship. The excerpts, in part, imply their struggle. The women furthermore spoke of ambivalence as indicative of their struggle and as implying the complexity of both their relationships and themselves as women dealing with these relationships.

### **Ambivalence Linked to Struggle**

Ambivalence and struggle was partially indicated in the women's discussions about "mixed messages." Kathleen points to this when she said that:

.. you know I was aware that a person shouldn't do this to you but that's not where it ended, and this person declares love for me - confusing messages, up and down ones, can be terribly passionate, just blow you away with it and I then - I don't mean just in-in bed - I mean things that they would do for you..

and in Elsie's words her ambivalence was linked to the experiences of having a positive impact on someone's life, feeling valued, and having activities that they enjoyed together:

.. there were all these mixed messages and then he'd come and hug me. (He would say) Oh, I'll take you out for dinner. You know you're the best thing that ever happened to me, I'm so lucky (because) I taught him art, I taught him opera, I taught him music .. and love of travel ..

Kali too, gave examples of her second husband's mixed messages, such as the gap between his words and his actions, or an articulated apology that seemed sincere:

He could talk the talk but couldn't walk his talk. He had all the right words ... (and a man crying on the phone, saying he's sorry, you know, - 'cuz he thinks -- that's pretty powerful stuff, especially for someone who is good at manipulating. They are consistently contradictory in terms of creating hope - yeh, in terms of one



minute it's one thing and the next minute it's you know, I love you, and then it's you bitch - so - and so you're constantly, I think, um-uh (long pause) - I want to believe that it's the good, the generous, the sensitive - that's what I want to believe is the real person, not the other part of it. Not that -- everyone has (different sides) - but they're so - there's no integration, they're so dichotomous ..

The act of listening and taking seriously their partner's words further triggered ambivalence, as indicated by Kali's words, and reiterated in Care's statements:

Somehow he got a hold of me and was .. and I was listening to what he was saying about - oh, I need you or whatever .. and .. When I went back I always really did hate him and it's - um - and I was fooling myself thinking that (pause, sigh) - if he had said things differently then maybe - but I was fooling myself 'cuz he wasn't changing. I had done the changing - even though I had been a bit of a mess at first I did learn something - um - but he hadn't changed ..

Care's ambivalence, as with Kali and Kathleen, was linked to the hope for genuine and lasting change in the context of communicating. Elsie's ambivalent behavior also revolved around what I refer to as 'communication as bait,' bait potentialized by a "good time" such as taking her out for dinner. She said:

.. if we could talk it out and if he could be reasonable - if he truly understands what he is doing and how much I'm suffering and if - he says he loves me all this much, surely he can see how much I hurt, how hard this is on me. He's in a good mood, maybe we can talk about it now ..

Elsie in contrast to the others, focussed more on her wish to have him understand the dynamics, his behaviors, and to validate her experience. The women explored ambivalence further in conjunction with feelings of guilt, particularly as they attempt to leave the relationship, or have already left.

Kathleen describes her experience in the context of having met another man with whom "nothing had happened" but who presented a hopeful alternative:

.. a month later I left my husband and-um (pause) - he just became a vegetable - he just - just - it was sad. I felt guilt - terrible guilt, for causing him this pain and problems, and - maybe now he understands, he's willing to get counselling .. I don't want to live with him. I'm living with my mother. We did go out for dinner - we did that a lot but he'd - he actually brought me to the house and-and he did everything - candles and flowers, you know, just really - and-um that was something I'd not seen- not-not for many many years, and just-um how special I was and- didn't want to lose me and-uh on and on, and I was torn because I felt guilty about him but on the other hand I really wanted to have a relationship or an attempt with this other man.

Kathleen's ambivalence is linked to what appears to be an effort on his part to make some changes, and an apparent willingness to seek counselling. Her ambivalence is intensified given the potential relationship on the horizon that does not have the painful history she has

experienced with her husband. She attempts to honor her husband's voiced willingness to change and his intention for a new start in their relationship, particularly when he suggests that they move to a completely new environment, with the following words:

.. I think it would be really good for us because we can get away from everything, all the past, the children, any problems. We'll just leave it all behind and start a whole new life with a whole new group of friends, and it seemed like that made sense to me - and again, that was - well, maybe he's right. It didn't take very long to figure that one out..

In describing a large family gathering, Kali echoed Kathleen's inner struggle, even long after leaving the relationship, mirroring the deeply rooted expectations and yearning regarding marriage and family life:

.. one of my sisters in particular - who is in a very unhappy relationship with someone I've certainly heard be very - verbally abusive .. and from my other sister's perspective it's like well, that's her choice, and she's - so we'll have to respect her choice and-uh - I mean even for a moment I thought, well - and that's probably what I should have done - see that's what I should have done with my relationship with my husband - is - I should have just stayed in it - that came to mind. I would have been a better person for staying and just sort of you know, wended my way through the mine fields and left it like that - um (pause) - and-uh it's scary that I can still have thoughts like that - that my son would have - as much as - you know he would have had his father and blah-blah-blah - but phew (sighs).

Furthermore, Kathleen spoke of her ambivalence as linked to her age and other secondary benefits that she would lose should she walk away:

.. in my deliberations about leaving or staying I-I took into account that - my age, uh - and my ability to find work and-uh poverty was a big aspect for me - uh - do I want it to be - do I want to just put up with this - maybe he'll die - um (pause) - or do I want out - but-but I finally decided I wanted out..

As Kathleen implies, there were a multitude of factors that intertwined with her experiences of ambivalence.

Kali spoke of a similar process of weighing the downside and the benefits of being in a relationship, particularly in the context of society's messages to solo mothers, and a lack of general public support. She stated:

I already raised 2 children pretty much without a lot of support and I guess at that point I had some physical illness and I had a lot of stress in my job as well, and I didn't feel like I was - would be able to cope with all of that if there wasn't that level of support there .. and it's better for my children to have a-a-a dad and I mean he's .. he's gainfully employed, he's totally responsible that way .. but he's also this, this and this ..

Both Kathleen and Kali formulate the various issues they pondered over in considering their options. These were critical factors and their deliberations were well founded.

### **Explorations of the Oft Forgotten/Negated Feelings of Attachment**

In the women's explorations, their ambivalence and struggles were interrelated with multifaceted feelings of attachment. Notions of attachment are frequently ignored in the face of a relationship in which battering occurs, concentrating primarily on the violence. The violence was not the only factor that defined these women's experiences in their intimate relationships with their partners, and they spoke of feelings of attachment in conjunction with yearnings for connection that were central to making the relationship a complex interaction. Elsie gave voice both to her yearning for connection and to feelings of attachment when she said:

I've finally found somebody that .. somebody that was interested just in me, even to talk to, that cared - I *thought* that cared .. (later when) .. he says you - I don't want to lose you anymore and I can just feel that I'm losing it - (bare whisper) oh my god .. I still love the good part of him.

She went on to define attachment as implied in a shared history of having experienced meaningful shared times together, and of having been touched by him in a somewhat inexplicable manner. These factors were not readily dismissed or negated for her:

.. even after 6 months I'm still - keep going back to him - I guess I still want to know why .. it's hard .. I put so much into the marriage and-and I did so many things for him, and with him. I worked so hard, if he could even come and tell me how hard I worked I could feel good..

She further exemplified her yearning and attachment in her efforts to confront him, to have the violence stopped, to sort through the issues, yet to maintain connection, rather than to permanently sever the relationship:

.. if we could possibly talk it out, if he could be reasonable - if he really understands how much I'm suffering and if - he says he loves me all this much, surely he can see how much I hurt, how hard this is on me .. he's in a good mood, maybe we can talk about it now so and of course I - we did talk that night and - oh we had saki, he put his arm around me and I said you really know what you have done to me, do you know? He said oh yeh, I know .. (as she continues to confront him) - he didn't come up with it - I had to and I believed it but when I look back at it I should have waited for him to volunteer but I kept saying - do you remember doing this or do you believe you did - and he said oh yeh, yeh I did this. We got all cozy and I said don't you want to see my apartment, like - like you know - I-I because you see he's been a part of my life since I was a young girl 30 years old and so I think I live somewhere and he should see where ..

In her words, Elsie clarifies that her yearning and sense of being connected to this man blinded her to the way in which she put words into his mouth such that she heard what she yearned to hear rather than being alerted to a lack of integrity and follow-through. Again,

she indicates the critical factor that all of this takes place in the context of a shared, longstanding, approximately 20 year history.

Kathleen discussed several interweaving factors that were happening concurrently in her relationship. Her husband's threatening statements and behaviors occurred alongside his affection. In addition she had strong feelings for her husband, a yearning to resolve any issues, and a hope that he would change his behavior, so that they could maintain their intimate connection:

.. psychologically still knowing that I love this person .. I-I had a relationship with this man and he was my husband and I loved him .. (regarding leaving) I'm threatened with the loss of love .. (upon leaving) maybe now he understands - he's willing to get counselling .. (and later) .. I would say that I loved him for 20 years - I loved him dearly - loved him to the point where I would do anything (laughs somewhat self-consciously) - and obviously I did. I put up with a lot of stuff that I wouldn't tolerate today. In my marriage I was also a pretty rational woman - like I thought and thought and thought - far too long. But I had to do it right - I had to do what was right for me .. I had to detach in my marriage.

and echoing Elsie's words that implied the impact of history and the yearning for change rather than termination:

.. I had all this commitment to this person and this family and there was good times and, you know, it wasn't all bad .. if only it could just change.

Kali, regarding her first marriage, and implying that violence in marriage is a complicated issue stated simply "... and I loved this person - it wasn't like uh - it's not ever black or white .. and I felt empathy for him.." She further addressed the depth of feeling in her second marriage in particular by describing how she felt when she thought of ending the relationship after a violent episode:

.. part of me was grieving incredibly because yes, okay, this relationship, we have our problems and everything - but he's still - it was just so different from (first husband) - like in terms of our, you know, interaction, you know, cognitively, sexually, whatever .. there was a lot - like just so much power in all of that. ... (Later regarding attachment) Attachment is too detached a word (laughs) for uh - and I think that makes again this situation so devastating is the amount of-um (pause) - uh emotional investment that you have in that person and then how vulnerable that leaves you and usually that is - well, for me anyway, his ability to capitalize on that attachment. Um - (pause) yeh, I was very connected to this person, you know, I really - and they were someone that I had actually chosen more consciously um (than the first) - you know, and-uh had a very deep commitment to .. (the connection is) on some much more subconscious physical genetics cellular level of - of connection and again that probably allowed me to block out a lot of other things. We call these things addiction - we call it a pathology - but then there are people out there who have got those same attachments to people that are in wonderful relationships - so-um - they are profoundly tied and just - they're not abusive to each other .. so I don't think the two things are related per se, and we talk about them as aren't they lucky and yet I feel that way about my

relationship now - I feel really close to him, incredibly intimate, all of those same things .. but then I think that's how I relate to relationships .. I don't think that's an illness, that's how I see someone and - you see people are attractive to me for whatever reason, whether they are male or female .. so then I respond to it, I reach out for it, whatever. Sometimes I get my hand bit off but that's - but that's just who I am - that's not a pathology, you know, although we like to make it so - my personality defect, that I'm - that I shouldn't trust everyone.

Kali's provocative discussion implies a process, one in which she examines the intense underlying dynamics that frequently fuel an intimate relationship, dynamics that are not well understood, even in the face of thinking one has made a "conscious" choice for that relationship. She describes the commonly operating assumptions and double standard whereby intense feelings for someone are often only judged or poorly understood when the relationship goes awry. In other words, intense intimate feelings do not come under the same (particularly public) scrutiny if the relationship represents, or appears to be, a success story. Of additional interest is her challenge to the pathologizing of any such experience but particularly under painfully thwarted circumstances, which is often when the pathologizing occurs.

In contrast to the above women, Care's narrative was almost void of statements addressing attachment or the depth of the relationship other than notably stating "what others don't understand - is the dynamic of it - I mean it goes so deep." Upon discussing further her possible feelings of attachment, Care articulated her process of struggling in the face of renewed contact:

.. it's a current thing for me - and it's because his probation is up and he has had contact with me and has been able to - we've been able to talk - there's this thing for me wanting to be with him to figure out whether I really do have feelings for him or not. I'm struggling right now with these feelings. .. I think that's what is going on for me now - is I want to know - even though I was treated so badly - did he really *hate* me? Was I really that - was I really - was I that horrible that you hated me? Like wasn't there ever a point where there was some love for me? - like that you cherished me? That's what it is - to know - (pause) - even though I'm feeling wonderful now I just want to know that I could be loved - from him. I think he represents intimacy - and that's it - because I know I am loved by my parents and I'm loved by my sister but it's not the same. It's (long pause) - it's this fairy tale thing that I think we see on T. V. and are taught that - you're, you know, that the man you're going to marry is wonderful and it's going to be fairy taling - but it's not - but I think that there can be and I think we go into these things - these relationships thinking - to *work* at making it wonderful and-and- we put so much time into it - I put 8 years into it - and I don't like being discarded. I'm having a problem with that - I don't want to feel discarded - um - I don't think I was in love with him in the beginning - not - um - there was a point in our relationship .. kind of in the middle when I said I love you and I think at that time I did - things were going well - but mind you - I think - there was violence but it was very short. The feelings towards him are kind of mixed up - I see his tricks and sometimes I don't

like seeing him - when I've had to pick up (son) from him and- but I don't even think I'm really looking at him when I am looking at him. I'm not - 'cuz really I don't think he's a very attractive man really .. he's had a hard life .. but I think I'm not looking at him when I'm looking at him - there's something else - I think I have this picture in my mind of what I'm looking at - I'm kind of projecting - and then he opens his mouth and then it's reality. It's like the difference between what goes on in my head and what goes on in my heart.

In her narrative, Care differentiates between her ability to reason and her non-rational experience, that of the heart, which is not so readily dismissed. She infers an interaction between her external world experiences and her subjective desires, and, having internalized certain messages and images about relationships, she explores this from the perspective that some aspect of her inner dynamic may have almost nothing to do with who he really is. Interestingly, she also states that having been connected, it is difficult to experience being discarded. Her statements reflect her desire for a deeper fully congruent understanding with respect to their relationship, implying the complexity of relationships in which intimacy has been experienced. Leaving a relationship in a physical context does not ensure leaving the relationship emotionally or psychologically.

### **Conclusion**

These women's narratives portray a variety of issues that fuelled and sustained their primary focus on or within the relationship as they found diverse means of coping, particularly in the context of multifaceted experiences with their partners, as well as certain sociocultural reinforcers. These various factors interacted with their struggles of leaving and this, along with the issues that the women tied into their struggles of leaving are discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Seven: Issues of Leaving

### *You Got What You Asked For*

Assailed with anger, humiliation  
                     and demands impossible to fulfil.  
 This bruised then shattered heart  
                     found comfort in thoughts of flight and freedom.  
 No, the arms of another did not hold the answer  
 It was the fierce, painful act of courage  
                     this leaving took,  
 To men heart and soul and give to you  
                     what you asked for.  
                     - Kathleen

The most commonly heard questions directed at, or spoken about women who experience battering is "why do you/they put up with it" and "why do you/they stay." The implications of these questions is first, that there is a simple, readily constructed, immediately available, consistent answer, and second, that the issue is a time-bound one. In talking with the four women in this study, I was struck that there are no simple consistent answers, and notably, all four of the women I interviewed left their partners, Kali leaving both her abusing partners. Hence it struck me that the more important critical questions relate to *how* leaving was made difficult, or *how* she was hindered, *what* made her leaving possible, *what* was the outcome, and *how* is she doing presently? In contrast to the former questions that imply an impatience, a lack of understanding, and a judgment, these latter questions suggest an interest in effective and supportive interactions and interventions. In this chapter, congruent with these latter questions, I explore the women's descriptions of how they experienced responsibility and blame, their struggle with structural barriers regarding leaving, and their explorations of shifts and pacing, each of which played a role in leaving. We can extrapolate from the women's narratives with respect to these issues, thereby inadvertently answering the 'why does she stay' questions. Relying on the women's explorations, however, this approach is not victim-blaming and harvests a more complexified portrayal than the original questions predominantly imply.

### **Responsibility and Blame**

Questions of responsibility and blame with regard to women who experience battering in their intimate relationships reflect dominant assumptions that women are relied upon for the quality and direction of intimate relationships, and, relatedly, that women who experience violence must somehow provoke the battering incidents. "Provoke" in the

Oxford Encyclopaedic English Dictionary (1991) is defined as "to rouse or incite, call forth, instigate" (p.1164) and so forth. The women in this study echoed, expanded on, as well as challenged dominant assumptions about responsibilities and provocation in their narratives pertaining to their struggles of living in relationships in which battering occurred. Echoing prevailing beliefs that they must be the cause or source of the problem three of the women in particular, spoke of questioning whether and how they might be provoking their partner's behaviors. Because they felt accountable they did everything they believed possible to avoid 'rousing' their partners, but eventually came to the recognition that they were not accountable for his violence, thereby shifting into a different understanding of culpability. Each of the women spoke somewhat differently about issues of blame and responsibility and the narratives imply various movements or shifts, from initially taking on much or all of the responsibility to gradually recognizing that regardless of what they did or did not do, their partners could become threatening and/or violent, and hence they could not be held accountable for their partners' abusive behaviors.

Elsie described how she took responsibility, linking it to her efforts to avoid threatening conflict in order to maintain the peace. She spoke of the meticulous planning of a carefully crafted and thought-out articulation regarding anything that she thought, based on previous experiences that might potentially cause conflict. Then:

when I was ready to say it I'd wait for the right moment - I'd look at him and I'd think now? - is now the right time? ..

Based on her experiences in the relationship she assumed his anger must be justified and hence she must have mishandled or misspoken in some way:

I just accepted it .. because what I said was obviously wrong - so I-I always felt that it was me .. I always had to outguess him - to stop his anger ..

Living in this culture, Elsie naturally echoed the current dominant assumptions about women provoking the violence when she described her efforts to anticipate what might make him angry, the link for her being that if something *she* did made him mad, then *she* was responsible and *she* needed to change her behavior(s). Elsie also pointed out that taking responsibility was linked to maintaining or regaining a modicum of control. Further supporting her sense of being responsible or at fault stemmed from:

When I started to rebel - to question his behavior - when I tried to stop him - it became worse and worse - it escalated ..



as well as him holding her responsible:

..if you're a (helping professional) you should be able to fix this - I mean (helping professionals) fix things - why can't you fix anything in this relationship?

and supported by the public/private split in his behaviors:

.. like totally a different person towards me .. the other people wouldn't see this.  
(For example) for the doctors he was always so pleasant - everybody loved him..

His friendly, charming nature with others fed her resulting concern that somehow the only problem was her. Her self perception was reinforced by his well-liked public persona, such that he never treated others in the same hurtful or detrimental manner. With regard to holding him responsible Elsie said:

It's hard for me to hold him responsible because I still think that he doesn't want to do it - but it just comes out - just like a compulsion (for him). I don't think he really wants to hurt me .. I guess I really should hold him responsible - it's a mixed up thing for me..

She agreed that were she speaking to another woman who was in a relationship with a man who is threatening or violent, she would hold that man accountable for his behaviors, thereby implying the complexity of *living* in a relationship, rather than just *conversing* about the issues. Her belief that he seems powerless to behave otherwise at those moments, that he does not truly want to behave in a hurtful manner, in conjunction with her "insider" experience of him as a kind, charming, caring man, changes the meaning of making him responsible for her. Elsie reported that seeking out relevant literature helped her see that the responsibility was not hers:

..the books - I got to learn the meaning of that word - control - and then I knew what control meant and .. it helped me stop looking for things that I had done wrong..

Seeing her story in print and experiencing insight into the dynamics enabled her to stop blaming herself. Interestingly, this understanding came from reading material rather than the various people she attempted to talk to.

Care spoke of taking responsibility somewhat differently than Elsie did, linking it to her role in the relationship of being the responsible adult, particularly that of being financially responsible, and trying to motivate her partner to take responsibility as well. For Care, taking responsibility was part and parcel to being in that relationship. During much of the relationship she was the primary wage-earner and therefore felt responsible for paying off their bills and debts. His ongoing misuse of money kept them in a perpetual

state of debt, and kept her focussed on this concern for clearing their debts. His violent behavior, a rare event, slipped to the background as this issue of finances consumed the foreground of their relationship. In her description, she indicated a shift in how she dealt with responsibility regarding, for example, their debts. This was significant because financial accountability kept Care focussed on the relationship:

I knew it wasn't my fault but I didn't blame him either - I just saw him as a horrible despicable person and I guess it was just a confirmation for me when he did that because I think somewhere I knew it wasn't right .. even in all this turmoil I had gotten myself into a position - I - somewhere along the line I had decided that he was gonna be responsible for his debts and I wasn't going to worry about his debts. I was only going to worry about mine and try and keep him from putting more debts in my name. So I managed to do that ..

Even though she did not blame him *in* the relationship she stated she did blame him when she was with others, particularly with family, although this in turn became a painful or shaming confrontation for her:

I would always blame him even though I didn't blame him when he was doing it - in-in the relationship - I was blaming him outside the relationship but I didn't - I didn't want to do that after a while because it was like - I told you so..

Care further tied responsibility into her hope for changes in him and consequently in their relationship:

The striving for change was kind of my responsibility - not for me to change - well, a little bit of both - for me to change and for him to change. I mean I was very important in his life in that I kept him on track as far as employment goes and being responsible - a responsible adult in the working world and so - to set him straight - then they don't fly straight..

In addition, she described intense feelings of responsibility toward her son, wanting to establish an alternative model of interacting, an alternative atmosphere for him, particularly once she had left the relationship and her partner had managed to obtain custody of their little boy. Of interest are Care's thoughts expressed in the second interview when we further discussed the issue of responsibility and blame. At that time she made linkages both to her socialization as a woman, and to the experience of being victimized, her latter thought being unique to her interview:

I'm always looking to myself and he's always looking to everyone else. I think that I learned that - it's being a woman - we're taught to be responsible for his emotional wellbeing (pause) and then it's something you do when you're victimized too because you're trying to keep the peace, so you're always catering to - to all that stuff and ex- and accepting the blame - yes it was my fault - just to keep it all together or yeh - or stop or quiet or whatever.

Care's words suggested that regardless of whether she actually agreed with her own action(s), she nevertheless recognized that simply taking on the blame, even only nominally, served the critical purpose of quieting down her partner. She contrasted her sense of taking *on* responsibility with his *projecting* it onto others when she told me that he frequently spoke in the following manner:

.. well I'm this way because my mother was on social services and I was in foster homes and my dad left when I was a little boy and I didn't have any male role models and the male role model I had was a big brother who taught me how to steal and he just goes on and on ..

When she addressed her attempts to make her partner more responsible, she implied a power struggle for her, connecting the overall issue of responsibility to her efforts to regain some sense of control and efficacy:

.. towards the end of the relationship I would - I mean I would think I was doing all my one-ups - I was pushing buttons to make him crazier. I thought I had found the secret because he was so paranoid - pushing his buttons made me feel one up - and it was almost like revenge. I mean I had some control to change my life, I just had control to be one up on him - and - I drew the moment of power where I could run but-um - I was making him responsible for his debts - I did it with other things too. I remember it used to enrage him when I went out and bought groceries and I used to - I can remember this in my mind too - it was - my payday was - thank god - I would either get paid at work or I had to go in on my day off and get my pay cheque. So if it was on my day off then he was away at work, and I would go and get my pay cheque and I would go and spend my pay cheque before he ever got home. I even made a joke one day at work - I said - because he was yackety-yack-yacking about what he was going to do with my pay cheque and I thought you son of a -- - I'm going to take my pay cheque and spend it all on groceries and we all laughed about how many groceries we could buy for \$1000.00 and would they fit in my car and (laughs) - but I would do things like that just to have that control - or in a way I guess to get back some of my control - but it was - now that I sit here and think about it - it wasn't a very pleasant place to be .. in relationship to him I was doing things differently .. I mean I had control of my pay cheque ..

Taking responsibility and attempting to make her partner take responsibility became a painful and thwarted issue for Care.

Kali, although speaking somewhat uniquely from the other three women about her sense of responsibility, did, however reiterate Care's analysis that this experience was gender-based. Additionally, in the first interview, she spoke of her first husband's accusations: "there was all this stuff around-um you know, that I think I'm better than he is," wherein she recognized that their different family backgrounds as well as their families having different status within the community, were potentially factors that played a critical role in their relationship. Hence:

.. I felt obligated to stay and sort all of these things out and I think I also felt like-a

(pause) somehow responsible that I should be able to - help this person work his things out.

Later in the interview she described feeling some ambivalence with respect to what was framed within the relationship as she was at 'fault.' Kali stated "there were always issues between us" going on to define this as an ongoing conflict based on her more liberal views versus his more conservative ones. She provided the example of her partner taking offense when she spent time with gay friends, or had deep and meaningful friendships with gay friends. She depicted her own struggle when she said:

.. I still felt like-ah somehow I was wrong - and that should have been a red flag for me right away but, you know, it wasn't .. you see I felt like it was my fault - I must be some morally, you know - (pause) disabled person that I can't figure out and yet part of me was like - uh - there's nothing wrong with this (my friends)..

Kali went on to clarify a shift in her understanding and placing of accountability since leaving the relationship:

Now I hold him responsible for his behavior - you bet. I won't take ownership of that at all. He had lots of different ways to-to chose to act and he chose those ways and I-I don't - I think they're wrong, and they hurt people and so yeh - I hold him responsible for his actions, yeh, as before I would say well, his mother was very abusive ..

In the second interview, Kali expanded on her analysis of responsibility indicating a more complex picture, one in which like Care she hints at women's roles as linked to taking responsibility, making it difficult for women to shirk such responsibility, yet notably and uniquely clarifying a particular aspect of answerability where she holds herself responsible:

It's our responsibility to keep relationships together and if we - if something isn't working then obviously it must be - there must be something wrong with us or we're not trying hard enough or if we only did this, that or the other thing, and (pause) ... I don't think I have ever been in a place where I off-loaded total responsibility to him - yeh, he's this, this and this AND I stayed - so taking responsibility in terms of there were other ways to go about that and I - um - but I guess - and I think this person is a sociopath who is incapable of - that's my opinion - of having any kind of-uh concern for what the impact of his actions is on others - so I think that's a different situation than another man who just - who might have some real feelings of remorse or some struggle with his behavior. I don't know if this person does. Um - (pause) but I don't think I've ever let myself off the hook for not having some responsibility for it - especially around bringing up children in that situation, you know. It was no matter what I did - it would not have made a whole lot of difference - but there was still a part of me that goes - I don't think I've ever gotten out of that - you know - a circle (demonstrates with her hands - pause) .. the sense of rescuing these guys, bringing them to some kind of conversion, no matter how absolutely outrageous and sick they are, we will stick by them - especially as a woman - that we can save them - (in a mocking kind of voice) - and that there's something worth saving!

Kali's words depict a distinction between what she now separates out as her part versus her ex-husband's part regardless of whether he accepts this. She indicated regret for her part of having exposed her children to such a noxious and unhealthy setting. Another aspect of Kali's taking responsibility is depicted in her description of, like Care, paying off the debts that they had incurred, such that after leaving her first husband:

I went and applied for Income Assistance and so I had money to pay the rent and the bills and I took on whatever bills that we had - I didn't - and I paid them off - um - you know, month by month for a couple of years after that ..

Concurrently Kali took courses, upgraded her education, and secured a job for herself, and continued to be independently responsible for herself and her children.

Sounding somewhat similar to Kali's expressed thoughts of "if only I did this or that.." Kathleen, in addressing issues of responsibility and blame in her relationship, linked her increased dissatisfaction within the relationship to feeling responsible, which in turn clouded her judgment of her husband's wrongful behaviors:

I'm knowing that this isn't right and I'm not happy with it - ah - and still believing it's my fault - still believing I haven't got something right here ..

When she tried to confront her husband about her concerns in their marriage, her experience was similar to both Elsie's and Kali's as her husband accused her, saying:

.. there's nothing wrong with me, I'm happy, I know how things are, it's you - you're the one with the problem..

In addition to feeling blamed and accountable in her husband's eyes, she further described a similar experience with her children:

I would fight back to a point but I think what they saw was dad always won out .. I was being blamed for this - so if I would just keep my mouth shut (pause) then there'd be no problem in our house, so it's my fault because I won't let it sit. (Our children) saw me as being the person that was perpetrating the problem .. so for a long time I tried to cover it up and make it be a perfect little family and (pause) and thinking for a lot of it I'm - I'm the problem. I was unhappy for a long time thinking it was my fault.

In this light Kathleen spoke uniquely of shame, linking it to feeling responsible:

.. there was shame for what he was doing to me because you know, I had to be responsible for that, and what the kids were doing, well look, I'm not a very good mother - so there was shame for that ..

Both from her internal and from an external perception she felt inadequate as a partner and as a mother, and the feeling that she was responsible for both of these roles with all their far-reaching consequences resulted in her feeling painfully shamed. Echoing the other

women's words, Kathleen, in the second interview, contextualized her experience as linked to women's socialization:

You carry that all - for a long long time. I think you carry the responsibility. I think that women - I think it's a part of who you're supposed to be as a woman - coming from my era - and it's the mother and the partner - and the - keeping the home fires burning, keeping things pleasant, and - so you take responsibility for his behavior too. I envy young women today because they know that that's not the case. At least I think most of them do. I came from an era where you don't even talk about it so of course you put up with it.

These narratives in which the women attended to their experiences of responsibility and blame inferred an interaction between various axes including the effects of socialization practices, internalized expectations, desires and attempts to positively effect the relationship, partners' perceptions of responsibility and blame, and in Kathleen's situation, her children's perceptions as well. In talking with the women they indicated it was, hence, not a simple matter of withdrawing or disengaging given the weight attached to these different interactive axes. The overall effect for the women, was one of experiencing the focus on themselves. Importantly, this sense that the ball was constantly in their court, was further accentuated by various structural barriers, as experienced by the women in their negotiations with several professionals.

### **Structural Barriers**

In their narratives, the women attested to experiences with professionals that Elsie so aptly summed up as:

.. that I did - I was so - I moved into many rooms - looking for doors - it took me a long time. Mostly it was walls, do you know that? (pause, continues in a whisper) - there were very few doors."

In their multiple efforts to obtain appropriate information and supportive help, the women encountered disbelief, dismissal, and judgment from assorted professionals. Kathleen spoke of the impact of such (un)professional structural barriers when she said "that left me another 10 years of my life (in my marriage)." In particular, the women described experiencing obstacles on three levels: (a) with those persons engaged in legal and protection matters, (b) with the medical profession, and (c) with persons in the counselling field (i.e., counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists). The women formulated concerns that within these three structures further education, increased understanding, and compassion are much needed. This is not to say that the women did not depict genuinely helpful and empathic individuals within these fields, but rather that supportive,

nonjudgmental individuals had to be sought out, sometimes over long stretches of time, and with repeated efforts. In this section, I present the women's stories as they addressed experiences relating to the former two, reserving Chapter eight for examining both their positive and negative experiences with counselling professionals.

The women spontaneously and variously highlighted assorted negative and critical experiences. Elsie formulated her experiences with her doctors as:

I went to my own doctor for 5 years with stomach aches, choking, all this and I said, please, I know there's something wrong. I'd tell him about the episodes - ah, you just need a holiday, there's nothing wrong. He wouldn't give me any help, he wouldn't suggest anything, so I changed doctors. I went to see a new doctor, and he was very sympathetic to begin with, very sympathetic. You can't live like that, you've got to get out of that marriage .. he listened and listened and (pause) - I'd let it go for a few months and then I'd come back again and he said, you know, I don't have much time - like he cut me off. I felt - not validated - I felt not believed. I asked him .. do you believe me? Well, I don't know, you've been in here a few times about it, but I don't take notes on things like that. (It seemed) when he prescribed the aspirin you better take it. He prescribed me to leave, so I was supposed to go and pack my bags and go, but I couldn't leave 'til a year and a half later - 'til that last incident because we all have different levels of tolerance .. because I was going to fix it.

Her experience with the medical profession vacillated between a doctor who ignored the problem or one who expected her to obediently and immediately follow his orders. Both sets of expectations dismissed Elsie's particular view or state, her need for nonjudgmental support, validation, and a vision of her as a multifaceted total-person rather than merely a body in need of a prescription. Her doctors ascribed to a hierarchy, establishing their authority, and lacking the recognition that Elsie had (expert) insight into her own situation, yet simply needed an empathic ear. Later in the same interview she went on to describe a time when she had attended a local feminist organization to obtain information regarding battering and discovered that:

.. the Federal Government allocated a large amount of money for these - not flyers but actually thick envelopes with information to go to each doctor and I felt so good, so when I went to my doctor that last time he just - he poo-pooed it .. he couldn't even be bothered with opening it. (In a whisper) oh that hurt. I would go to (doctor) and I'd say, am I the only patient, have you never seen this before? No, I've never seen this before. Now I think, he hasn't looked for it. He was the one that was quite nice to me to begin with but because I didn't leave the marriage - take the aspirin when I was supposed to - it turned.

Elsie's words portrayed ways in which women who have experienced battering have their experiences negated and denied unless they act in accordance with another's expectations, particularly with regard to a professional or 'expert' *opinion*. Her story implied the critical

elements of *time* and *relevant* response, attending her doctor for information and support, not for a prescription. The doctor and Elsie had two different agendas and in a hierarchical interaction, Elsie's viewpoint became irrelevant. Although an adult and equal as individual, she was not treated as such. These experiences were painful and shaming for her. She went on to briefly mention her related similar experience in court:

When I went to court the lawyer belittled it. He says, I don't believe it - battered women - I don't want to hear any of this stuff. I want you to see a psychologist.

Again, Elsie's experiences were rendered invisible as the lawyer's words inferred that, in addition to potentially fabricating her story, her psychological stability was questionable. Similar to Elsie, although describing different circumstances, Care too indicated experiences of invisibility with professionals.

In my first interview with Care, she delineated her story in which, through extenuating circumstances, the context of her intimate relationship and the violence that she was experiencing, had been drawn to her doctor's attention. Yet, when she went in to see him at a time when she described herself as feeling critically low, his assessment was limited to labelling her as depressed, and he "prescribed medication without asking further questions." Care furthermore discussed her experience with the local police when she made the report that her partner had assaulted her. The assault had taken place 2 days prior to her reporting. She had:

been mulling over this for 2 days, (because partner) had taken time off work to make sure that I wasn't going to do anything. He knew when - he was surveying me - he was watching what I was doing.

Two days later, however, she was able to manufacture an excuse to leave the house and ..

.. when I went in to report my incident of assault to the police - um - I-I went to the main police station here .. It was on a Friday night and they told me - well, we're sorry ma'am - um - all the officers are out on the road, it's Friday night - we're not going to call one in off the roads to take your statement of assault - yeh - so I had - and I was just - then I started to panic because I had told (partner) that I was going to the store. I had been gone longer than usual - now there's no help for me and I gotta go home and defuse something - I don't know what I had to def-I knew I was going to have to defuse something. I didn't know what - how it was going to go or if I could keep up the *powers of speech* and - you know, smooth things over or if - if it was gonna happen again and .. 'cuz I remember shaking ..

This incident reflects the gap between needs and services at a critical moment in Care's efforts to obtain some intervention. Her response of trembling was indicative of her knowing that she had possibly endangered herself to no avail. Care went on to describe



how the police further jeopardized her efforts because:

the police went around to my house when I wasn't there and-and you know - they spooked (partner) so (partner) took off with (son). They went the Saturday morning - we didn't have a phone - (partner) didn't pay the phone bills so it got cut off - um - so they went - I went to work as usual and in my mind I think I'm not going to let this get me down, I'm going to go again tonight - and this time I'm going to tell them that - no-no sorry ma'am - I'm going to tell them, yes ma'am, you're going to get somebody here .. I'm not going to be discouraged by this, I'll just go again. But - Saturday morning while I was at work the police went to the house - (pause) - and (partner) was spooked .. So the police said please let her know that we had wanted to speak with her. (Son) is with his dad, I'm at work in (city), he's got my car - he drove me to work .. (the police) are phoning me at work and saying do you want to press charges and I said, yes, I do want to press charges. Well, ma'am you'll have to come out .. so I'm taking the sky train from (city) to (city) to give them a written statement - give them a statement that I want him charged and arrested. They don't think he's going to go for it because he has the child. Well, he's got my car, he's got my son, he can go lots of places - and he did.

Consequently she spent the following approximately 2 days tracking down her partner and son, and letting the police know where they were so that they could charge him. Her description intimates the self-talk that kept her motivated. Her words draw attention to the manner in which the *appearance of rationality* is privileged in our society, in spite of the larger context that *he had broken her nose*, when she states:

.. so I finally located (partner) and um I told the officer and I said well, look this is where he is, arrest him, and um - so they talked to him. I guess he seemed very *rational - rational* at the time, and I didn't - I was - so they allowed him to have (son) and let him come in on his own recognizance for the fingerprinting and charging, and he still had (son). (*italics added*)

Care's narrative continued, explaining that her partner would not let her leave with their son, thus when he took their son camping one weekend, she decided to leave the relationship with the intention of obtaining her son through "the proper means," that is, the courts. She informed me of her subsequent legal experiences in the context of this very difficult personal choice:

I left the relationship - I didn't take (son) with me. I-he made sure that I couldn't take him with me - (pause) - so I thought, well, I'll just go to court - (pause). I was very confident that - that I would get him. I'm the mom, I'm a good person. Well, it didn't work that way. He went into court and got an *ex parte* .. where you go before a judge and without the other partner being there to get their side in - they can say whatever they want (pause) and I guess women do that too - I don't know - but he went into court, got an *ex parte* and they granted him interim sole custody (teared up - pause) - I retained a lawyer as quick as I cou-immediately actually. I worked hard all that day retaining a lawyer to go back into court and have that order stood down - (pause) - and-and it being you know - readdressed. The woman judge would not do that .. she thought her decision was the right one, so then I started proceedings to have joint custody .. He had the apartment, all the furniture,

he had everything - (pause) - he had everything. .. So I started up again - I found a place to live and a few bits of furniture - but - I had left - I had left the relationship and I didn't take the child with me so I think I prejudiced my case (pause) .. Twice I felt that I could leave and get my son through the right channels - the court system - twice... but even though I was in a better position this (second) time (pause) - because I knew more - I didn't know as much as I know now but I knew more than the first time - I knew more and I - this time I worked hard to make the courts work for me. I had the language - before I didn't have the language. It's an important thing to have the language 'cuz if you don't then you're just a bowl of jello and nobody is listening to you. I had the language and-um I had the documentation - that was very important .. (In court) you say well he was abusing me and it's like, well, if you don't have documented proof that he was physically abusing you then there's no abuse ..

Care went back into the relationship with mixed feelings spurred by her primary wish to be near her son and to regain custody, as well as her sense of struggle that maybe it was still possible to work at some kind of reconciliation. During that time, in response to her earlier court experience, she kept a journal documenting events in her relationship, causing her to feel some deep ambivalence regarding these various mixed and contradictory expectations and requirements. The second time Care left, her son was again with his father:

So he had (son), he went running back into court to get another ex parte, denying my access to (son) - (pause) - part of the agreement that we had was no drinking. He accused - said that I drank 26 oz of alcohol a day and that I was a useless drunk - it didn't matter that I went to work every day for 10 years - I was a useless drunk (pause - teared up) - and they gave it to him. They gave him another one - they gave him another ex parte .. (but) this time I was more focussed .. I had the language and I had the documentation but it didn't get (son) away from him because he had not been convicted of his assault yet. The custody arrangement came before the conviction - things went - it was - it's a mess. I just see it as a mess- (pause) - but it's not all over because I - got (son) - I got (son) back in that I could - I had joint custody and I could be with him half the time and the - the order also had in place some restrictions that I felt would protect (son) in one that his father was not to drink. Well, I'm finding out that that doesn't mean anything. His father continues to drink and when I phone the police and I say he's drinking .. they go, how do you know that ma'am? I know because I have a history with the man and his friend's truck is there, that's what they do. It's a family matter ma'am, take it back to family court. So okay, fine, I will ..

Care narrated a common experience for women dealing with custody and assault charges regarding their ex-partners.<sup>29</sup> She depicts the incongruous separation that the courts

<sup>29</sup> Both Care and Kali described the untenable situations in which, because of their partners' violence, they left him, yet the courts insist on maintaining that issues of conjugal (violent) relationships are separate and distinct from father-child relationships, meaning that both women, by law, are required to have their children spend unsupervised time with their fathers, in spite of child complaints, and in spite of recorded episodes where each of these men have been too rough with their children. Of interest is the current trial of a North Vancouver man who axed his two children on July 13, 1995, killing one and leaving the other with residual damage, three months into their separation. His ex-wife, the children's mother, testified to his various violent behaviors toward her during their marriage.

maintain between the two issues of parenting and partnering, in spite of the fact that they involve the same person who has behaved in a violent manner. Furthermore, in her words above, Care implied her experiences of powerlessness in dealing with those individuals working in protection and in legal matters; she portrays a situation in which the expertise of these professionals is established and employed in isolation and protection from real life situations, that the decisions appear to be made in ivory towers disconnected from the critically central issues themselves. Care clarified her concern to me regarding her son's unsupervised time with his father, particularly as he gets older and as with age, he will inadvertently be more likely to disagree with his father or stand up to him. As a society we stand in judgment of a woman who finds it difficult to leave the partner who abuses her, as well as looking askance at women whom we judge to be unable to properly protect their children from abusing fathers, yet those same women are expected to send their children to spend time without them in the presence of someone who is known to have violent behavioral problems with issues of power and control as though such issues do not arise with children. Both Care and Kali described these as crazymaking situations.<sup>30</sup> She additionally reiterated a statement her lawyer had made to her, followed by her assessment of the lawyers' process:

.. part of (my) fear of course had to do with he had pulled the rug out from under me with the other ex parte and getting custody. But I was different this time - I was centered, I was focussed - um - (pause) - and I felt good about that - getting myself together - and this is a comment that the lawyer had made - she said the hardest thing about dealing with abuse - abused women - is getting them straightened out first, getting them - so that they can get what they need to get.. and then the lawyers are fighting too. These lawyers (mine and his) have worked on other cases together so they knew each other - their - how they did things - so they're fighting and everybody's forgotten about (son). For varied access (partner) drew me - I hate to see my bill - he got an adjournment - we had a whole morning in court, we had to go back another day to finish it - just to vary access - 2.5 days in court and affidavit material - there wasn't that much paper work involved in the very beginning ..

In Care's words she described her long and costly encounters pertaining to the legal struggle, which in itself reflected a learning process as she engaged in her own subjective shifts that better equipped her for her second leave-taking from the relationship.

---

<sup>30</sup> The additional implication in the legal system's ability to separate these issues, based on the assumption that the father will not be violent with his children despite his violence with their mother, is that the children are not a problem. In other words, the message is that she IS the problem, she DOES trigger his violence. It is important to note, however, that men who are violent with their partners seldom refrain from using violence, increasingly so, with their children (Browne, 1987; Dutton, 1992).

It is of interest to note Care's words of warning to various professionals, as she attempted to indicate the complexity of the issues with respect to women's attempts to terminate a relationship in which they are being violated. She stated:

battering should be taken very seriously - (speaking very softly) - even if there isn't a broken nose, or there isn't a bruise, or anything broken. They need (pause) - now doctors are (sigh) looking for things physically but they should be well trained in what goes on emotionally .. I think (pause) - see 'cuz the woman can't articulate the experience when they're in the relationship. I think they should be asking questions - not of the woman's - but of her partner's behavior - not of her behavior. What was he doing? .. or even helping her with giving her words for it - um - I mean they (pause) - not that they would be putting words in her mouth, but I'm sure that they could say - they could give a scenario. Then (the doctor) could then say well, that is not right - perhaps, you could talk to - or go to this group or talk to this person who could help them..

Care went on to discuss that doctors must be careful in their advice and not oversimplify the issue of safety. Although it is important to articulate his violence and to name his behaviors as reprehensible, professionals must first know the full circumstances so that they they do not further endanger the woman.

.. what doctors say is what he's done to you is criminal, you should press charges. That's not right either because then there's the whole thing about well, he's going to be mad at me if I press charges you know - that's not helping her, it's too simplistic .. if she's not ready to leave. If she is not ready to leave she can't press charges. Well, they should know that too, they shouldn't tell her she - her - she has that right to do that but if she's not ready to get out that they will document this for her and - perhaps be able to support her in court proceedings with a letter. If she's not ready to press charges - and get out - they should give her information to inform herself - so that she can get out at her own pace - at her own pace.

Care indicated that doctors must be aware of their different options in helping a woman who is in a relationship in which she is being violated. She suggested that, given her experience with the courts requiring documentation that she lacked the first time she endeavoured to leave, the doctor should be prepared to provide documentary support to the woman and to articulate this clearly to her. This inadvertently implies both support of her in her situation and lets her know that her partner's behavior is not acceptable.

Kathleen too, described experiences with a medical professional and with those structures that are assumed to bring about protection, which indicate a gap between her needs and the available services. She located the former event historically when she said:

You know when I went to see my doctor in 1978 and said - heh, what can I do? What's going on here? - and he said well, again - well, try not to talk to him when he comes home, and make sure everything is in place, and dah-dah-dah (sigh) - and that was 1978 and he was a nice doctor.

Kathleen stressed that the doctor's advice was not a reflection of his personality, although certainly he lacked appropriate information and missed the critical issue. Like Care, she spoke of her lawyer's demand for documentation, indicating her vulnerability within that interaction:

.. the first thing I want you to do is to write down everything you know about - every detail, every time he has ever done anything to you and he showed me case histories .. so I had gone through this terrible time of writing this .. and (the lawyer) says - oh god, doesn't that just bring tears to your eyes, it's soooo sad - he just made a mockery of it, and I should have got up. I didn't like him then - I should have got up out of the chair and walked out of the office - but I - I was told he was good, he was tough ..

Kathleen went on to depict the legal process with her more recent, very supportive lawyer, whereby, like Elsie's partner, she indicated her ex-husband wants to "bleed" her financially:

.. the latest was him (husband) issuing affidavits for things like the toaster oven and given that each time I call my lawyer it costs \$50-\$100 we could each have had a new one. The lawyer said to me, and the counsellor has validated it too, that we're not talking about love here, we're not talking about respect or care, we're talking strictly financial - what he's doing now to you has nothing to do with him having any kind of care for you .. it's not about caring - it's-a-it's about control .. and to leave me penniless ..

Furthermore, she narrated more recent and ongoing struggles with fear, regarding the lack of appropriate protection since leaving the relationship, triggered, for example, by her ex-husband's verbal threats in front of her lawyer, of running into him in the mall when he made menacing movements toward her, flinging the words "greasy looking son of a bitch" at the male friend she was with, and his recent conviction of stalking her. Early on she told me that shortly after leaving the relationship he had hired a detective who had followed her and her own counsellor had warned her about her safety after leaving the relationship. Her counsellor pointed out that, based on his unwillingness to take responsibility for his behaviors within the marriage, it would be unlikely that he would take responsibility after their separation, and if he was going to injure her he would likely hire someone. In addition to her above experiences, she informed me in the second interview of the following interaction with the police after being stalked and having her car keyed:

.. even the police said to me - he's on the line- he's just on the edge here and there's really nothing much that we can do about it, and you know after the 2nd time that he keyed my car, they said - no, we can't go nail him for it but it's highly suspicious and that was the impetus for them to carry on in court- and then it did go to Crown and Crown said - well, he's just not really crossing over the lines, so -

but if he does - if he approaches you in the mall again, then you let the nearest detachment or whoever know about it and we'll go *talk* to him. .. My car has been keyed on every panel - every single panel right through the fibreglass. The policeman who saw it said this is - this is deliberate - this is not - keying usually means to go along and mark it on one side - and then - as well, on the very front of my car a stroke going down like this (she motions), one like that, and a faint one here - (the letter K) - my initial is K. I mean it's pretty obvious, and he must have thought twice about writing my name 'cuz then who would write my name. But - and it didn't miss a panel - didn't miss a panel - and then to go back out and find it done again - just blatant. My lawyer says to me - I mean she's very disillusioned by the system and she said - Kathleen - you know, literally what he has to do to you is knock you down, bash you in the head, he has to hit you in public, he has to do something to you before they'll do anything - and that's just really wrong - really wrong. It doesn't account for all the times that you're constantly looking over your shoulder.

Kathleen spoke to her frustration with the legal system saying:

I think it's ludicrous that we have agencies set up for women like me and that isn't even recognized in court as a place to - you know (pause) - there's this real split - definitely. After all those years it's just his word against mine..

She additionally described how her ex-husband "forestalled" the legal process with ongoing affidavits, costing her "more thousands of dollars - thousands of dollars that could support me." In our initial conversation she spoke of this as a vexed and convoluted issue, meaning that to let his affidavits go results in practical losses, yet dragging every issue into court results in huge financial losses, as well as being psychologically and emotionally taxing. Importantly, Kathleen narrated the complexity of her legal circumstances whereby, although she needs the legal support, it is not simply a clearcut win or lose situation.

Echoing Care's and Kathleen's narratives, Kali found police protection to be lacking at a critical moment. When her first husband was drunk and warned her with "you better tie me to the bed because I don't know what I'm going to do," she called the police once he had fallen asleep. Their response, however, reflected their focus on the moment, and at the moment her husband was asleep. She told them about his earlier threats "that he has no control over himself and - and this is 4 o'clock in the morning and with two little kids and no vehicle - what do you do, where do you go?" Although her husband was known to the police department, they disregarded the potential seriousness of the situation by minimizing and ignoring his earlier threat. Kali portrayed well the vulnerability of her situation, which in spite of the lack of appropriate response or support, she was able to leave the following day while her husband was out. Furthermore, Kali too, expressed her struggle with the debilitating expenses of attending court and the seeming futility:

.. He's been found in contempt of court and everything else - and of course it's difficult after spending huge sums in legal fees and - well, let's see - are we up to \$10,000 mark in child care? But why am I not doing anything?! - Well, I've done lots of things and so far it hasn't looked like it's done much good.

In addition to the costs incurred financially, Kali addressed the emotional and psychological toll that the court process takes, and the gap between her (*inside*) experience versus the stance of the (*outside*) legal systems regarding family relations, in this case father-son relations in the context of wife assault. In the second interview, she expanded on her frustrations and despair regarding the seemingly endless nature of having to deal with her ex-husband regarding their child, as well as the lack of understanding and the inability of the court system to deal with the complexity or depth of the situation when she narrated a current issue situation:

.. when you still have children that are there and you have systems that are not ever going to acknowledge or make the link between abuse of a partner as making someone who is not a very good parent either. They are never making that connection - uh - you know, unless your child is black and blue an bleeding to death. He may abuse you but the kids are okay - it's not that simple .. my son doesn't want to go to his dad's and he's asking me now, how many sleeps is it 'til I have to go there again and - why don't you want to go there, well, 'cuz he spansks me .. So really I think in my own situation I am in a really - a no win situation with this person in terms of how he continues to treat my child and use that to get at me - it's like - and-um - not just the child that we have between us but my two older children as well, and so - it's pretty fresh in my mind right now because I have a situation that I'm having to deal with right now in that my older son was laid off and he had to move and his stepfather offered him to stay with him for \$300/month. so he's not doing him any favors .. *(she describes a situation in which, because she lives far out of town and her ex-husband lives in town, her older son is considering living with him in order to obtain work in town)* .. which basically leaves me in a situation where I have got someone who is not paying child support for a couple of years now but I'm going to be paying him \$300/month for my son to live there? That's the kind of dynamic and and - it looks to others perhaps from the outside that he's doing my son a favor .. it's an untenable situation and yet we're not supposed to talk to each other directly about it, you know .. I'm just supposed to eat all of this .. there's no way to describe it or make it real. I've realized that there's no way for anyone unless they've lived through it to understand what I'm talking about. They just don't - they're not going to get it and they can't understand. - Why can't you guys just - just work this out and-uh - and the courts certainly as well. We have this notion that when two people fight, two people are responsible and that's not always the case. This is just an issue that has just emerged - and it's so ugly and it's so black and it's so - indescribable.

Kali, as did the other women, raise critical issues of the far-reaching implications of partners who batter, and that the abuse along with it's immediate impact, represent ongoing painful concerns for the women, beyond their attempts to terminate the relationship. These issues complexify the definition of what leaving is assumed to mean, as a finite event, a

juncture that attends to the most important factors, whereas, as indicated in these women's stories, although some aspects reflect positive change, others remain weighted ongoing issues that frequently mirror problematic understandings and constructions operating in our social structures. These factors prolonged and complicated the women's struggles of staying/leaving the relationships in which they experienced battering. In the women's narratives, these issues appeared linked to the women's descriptions that equated leaving with a *process* rather than indicating a finite time-bound event.

### **The Process of Leaving**

The women I spoke with consistently described leaving as a complex process, one in which, even with distance and hindsight, they employed language that inferred their inability to fully comprehend all of the components, thereby implying the depth and breadth of the relationships' impact on their lives. The women spoke of pacing and timing as key factors in this process of leaving, one which they felt was not often well understood or respected by others in their lives. In their narratives, *process* seemed to refer to a series of thoughts, behaviors, and actions for the women, all of which took place over variously extended periods of time. Within these general common features, the individual women's stories were nevertheless quite unique. To listen to each of their stories is to honor that their individual processes contained important shifts. Their stories implied that the recognition of and willingness to work with their subjective processes by those *outside* the relationship represented important junctures throughout their relationships. Elsie described three components as critical features of her process: (a) informing herself through reading, (b) beginning to question her husband's behavior, and (c) a critical transitional experience. Because her husband's behaviors toward her were primarily psychological and emotional in nature rather than physical, she stated that she found it difficult to name the seriousness of the problem, and it was through reading that she began to recognize particular problems and have her concerns validated. She challenged his behavior, and, in her attempts to gain further insight into their relationship, she continued to read books<sup>31</sup> that enabled her to understand that the manner in which she was being treated was not appropriate, was not her responsibility, as well as gaining a grasp of some indicators of abuse by which to

---

<sup>31</sup> In particular Elsie mentioned the two books by Patricia Evans (1993, 1996), Verbal abusive survivors speak out: On relationship and recovery, and The verbally abusive relationship: How to recognize it and how to respond, as important to her process.



gauge her intimate relationship differently. She recognised they had two different world-views. Importantly, she stated that she needed time to integrate what she was learning, time to integrate the theory, and to put it into practice in her life. In her words:

.. after marrying I started to rebel .. by rebelling meaning um questioning his behavior, and I read all these abuse books - I left them laying all over the place and he would hide them on me. And he kept saying why do you keep reading them for? .. And I would give him a non-threatening book - you know - The Road Less Travelled or one of those - that was less threatening. I would try and get him to read it but I could tell .. he would read something and get something totally different out of it, totally different. That was a scary thing for me. One book that I read where they talk about reality one and reality two, where they actually see life totally different .. just more and more things I could see that he could not put himself in my shoes at all .. I denied it for a while because I-I still thought I could fix it for so long - I thought oh, I'll read these books - I - pick up this book and I'd get a little further. ... Then all the books I read said the only hope there is for somebody that is abusive is if they get shocked into reality. And really basically that's why I left and filed for divorce immediately, 'cuz there couldn't be a bigger shock. The books - confirm what I - what actually happened - those books are good for that - you really need that as a first thing - yes. Especially because out there in the world, as I've said, nobody wants to validate you .. the books - I got to learn the meaning of the word control and then I knew what control meant and - it helped me stop looking for things that I had done wrong .. then when I started questioning it - I started realizing that there definitely is something wrong here. I couldn't hide - you can only hide from this so long ..

Elsie's words describe a mixture of more or less appropriate messages regarding leaving such a relationship as part of her process. She went on to say that, in the context of the relationship, she was influenced both by the *effects* of such a relationship, and also by other information that she was gathering. It was not simply a one-sided issue:

.. you learn to live with it - it's like just being slowly tortured - BUT also the knowledge increases step by step too. The knowledge that I have picked up - a little step up - and then I haven't fallen down with the knowledge, I have maybe fallen down with self control and denial again a little bit but - the knowledge that I know - that nobody can take away from me or the reality they can't take away. I understand what's going on. I haven't quite got a handle on it yet but I think - I want to put an end to it.

Elsie's process is further reflected in some changes she brought about in the relationship. The meaning of these changes indicated her hope for genuine improvement, her commitment, and her willingness to examine whatever she needed to do to improve matters. She stated that:

I was starting to stand up to him because I had gone for counselling and I started to use "I" messages and I said please don't talk to me like that, please show me respect, and of course that made him madder .. and (then) he's upscaled the abuse and the raging and - I was frightened and confused ..

Elsie used an interesting phrase whereby she referred to moments of insight or realizations as being similar to waking up, as indicative of some of her shifts within the relationship. For example, when she spoke of frequently having used cards or notes to apologize to her partner, using these notes as a means to halt rising tensions, she said:

"for 4 days he didn't open one, I thought he's pushing me too far now - I haven't written one since .. I must have started to *wake* up, thinking this is not going to work anymore. I'm not prepared to lower myself. There must have been some *awakening* at that point ..

In her story, Elsie indicated that she needed to know she had tried everything possible. Her realization that her efforts to bring about a desired effect but that his threats "were increasing and becoming a little closer" brought about another shift for her in the relationship. In recognizing his behavior as "crazymaking," she sought out a counsellor nearby and after a particularly meaningful hour, she experienced a seemingly critical, transitional, and almost mystical experience:

I went home and - this is a true story - I sat on the chesterfield like this in the living room all alone, and all of a sudden this side came (she motions with her right arm as though something came to her) - it joined up and for my whole life I realized I'd only been half - I've never known where that side was. I knew something was missing but I thought - god, there it is - I can leave. I was whole, I'd always been half - I'd always thought I can't live without him and it - it actually came physically - actually you could feel it, almost like a ghost-like - this arm - and it joined, and then I knew it was okay - it was a spiri-and I'm not religious or anything but - (pause) - wow, and it just took a few minutes and I thought (in a whisper) - now I can do it, and I looked at that painting and I thought - that's my mom's so I'm taking that ..

Elsie stated that one genuinely supportive hour with a counsellor played a critical role in her development towards leaving. Others too played important roles by providing her with opportunities to see her relationship from an "outsider" perspective. Linked to the time of ending her relationship, Elsie indicated a psychological shift in her fear of him as reflected in her ability to reject his advances towards her sexually:

I felt that I said it (no) and meant it and I felt good about saying it. I wasn't - before I was always afraid to-to say no to anything or disagree with anything - it was a shift - I'm not a sex object, I don't want you to come in here and - and just think you know - that you're going to use me like that. I'm going to look after myself - that's what I said. I don't want it now and I've never talked like that, never.

These shifts did not, however, take care of all aspects of leaving this relationship, as her leaving still required careful planning given his rages.

Care described her process by first speaking of her inner shifts whereby she

changed from "I didn't see anything wrong" with the way things were and taking full responsibility for the household, to her waning interest in maintaining an organized and well-kept household in the face of her partner's ongoing partying. After the initial violent episode she began to recognise that her sense of control had shifted, accompanied by a shift in her usual outgoing self, and her wanting decreased visibility:

At the beginning when I was young and I was just out there, then all of a sudden I didn't want to be .. I didn't dress - not even attractively or anything, not even for work .. I just didn't want to be noticed .. I didn't want any attention drawn to me because I didn't want to have to explain anything.

She described a point in the relationship, prior to which leaving had not occurred to her, when she began attempting to shift responsibility and started considering how she might become free of their debts so that she could leave. Her emotional energy shifted and she described feeling very angry at times.

(At first) I mean I never thought of those things that maybe I should move out or maybe he should move out - I - he - well - there was that whole money thing. I was the financial support, it was my apartment .. my friend as well as my colleague that saw what was going on from the beginning and she, she would say to me, look, why don't you just leave him and let him chase you .. but I didn't see that for some reason. I think I really got tied up in the money thing - that I couldn't just leave .. then somewhere along the line I had decided that he was gonna be responsible for his debts .. I was only going to worry about mine and try and keep him from putting more debts in my name. Then I would just be so angry and I-uh I wa-looking then to when I'm going to get out, when am I going to get out? I'm thinking, okay, it didn't work this time. I'll work hard to get the debts paid off and there'll be a next time when I can get out.

Anger seemed to function as a motivator for Care to consider alternative actions and possibilities. Her process seems to have been one that for some time was a distressing spiral until she came to a recognition that she was unwilling to continue in this manner in that relationship. In her story, she implied that she needed time to grasp the changes, to educate herself, and to integrate this information, and hence that pace and timing were important aspects to her process. She described a *transitional* period during the final year of their relationship:

.. the last year of our relationship he had to go to work .. I had time to myself and I had time to do things - I was using this time. I was using it for (son) 'cuz I could - I could protect him and show him that things were nice and that i-it (pause) that I can look after him - that to be with mommy is - that it's not always chaotic ..

This period of time was critical because in her efforts to establish an alternative space for her son within the home, she recognized and acted on the need for a more effective and

permanent change. In the second interview she stated:

It was very important to go at my own pace - it still is now - it's kind of connected to why you go back. .. When I went back it was a mixed-up kind of thing - at first I had gone for reconciliation - I really thought that I wanted to be with him - AND with my son - yeh, it was a mixed up bag - and to *get* (son) and - and in a way I thought I was protecting (son) 'cuz I was there - I could make enough noises and - or do things so that there was a safe space. Not even just a safe space but a space that (son) knew where things were different - those 3 days that we were together alone, he knew that things would be different and he could cope with the other days. I remember my lawyer saying - I looked after myself - it's important (pause) - um - to be smart and educate yourself while you're outside and fight still - and fight because - I had gotten myself together - and I think it takes a couple of times to do that - it took me a couple of times. I think that's the whole thing about women leaving and going back - they leave - they haven't got themselves together and it's not working for them. In their mind they know it should be working but they're not doing the things that really catapult it that it's working, so there's a sense of hopelessness again, so you go back - well, like I did to either (pause) uh - figure out the relationship and- or even to get what you need to make it the next time. I don't think you're always thinking about the next time but the next times does happen - 'cuz you get out there and some women don't have the money, I mean I didn't have to worry about that, but I can see why some women would go back because the men are holding it over them all the time - and then the huge legal bills .. There is so much criticism like 'why are you going back?' - like nobody understands that - it's like why don't you leave. That sort of thing always makes me angry when people say things like - people who don't know say things like that and I tell them to keep their mouths shut for not knowing what they're talking about. It comes out of ignorance.

Care clarified her analysis of why women frequently return to the relationship in which they experienced battering, stating that this reflects a process of integrating information, of affirming one's own understanding of the mixed messages and the pained ambivalent emotions regarding the partner, a family, and so forth. I return to this in the latter part of this chapter when I focus more closely on leaving. Care also defined the process as a time of informing oneself and that it is important for women in such relationships to know that:

.. seek information (pause) - because that is power - to have the knowledge and the information .. that you don't have to take this .. that you don't need to be treated like that .. and that it's not-um - it's not that scary to take a little bit of information and keep it for a while and work on it *within* the relationship - and you'll eventually get out .. to have a little bit of information to build on - to have as a building block. (italics added)

Care implied that knowledge and understanding came one step at a time, that it was important not to be pressured, and that time is required to process and integrate new understanding in order to make the drastic and necessary changes. Notably, Care spoke of this important process as taking place *within* the relationship.

Kathleen described a process in her marriage that began with her recognition that

she was not happy with herself, her marriage, and the general circumstances of her life.

Initially she interpreted this as indicating a need to make some changes within her marriage, her focus or interests, and possibly regarding her career. She reconstructed a specific example of one shift that took place inside of her when she spoke of the change she underwent from working to save money and surprise him to:

.. later, I still continued to save money but this time I didn't have any aspirations to save great huge lumps for him. I decided he was pretty adverse to my buying clothes, so I would save up whatever, and maybe buy myself some nice clothes.

Kathleen indicated a shift in primary focus from her husband toward herself, a shift that became part of her ongoing analysis of the content and meaning of their marriage:

.. by the time I was 40 or 38 I was feeling very unhappy with myself, feeling very inadequate .. I decided to go to school .. then (when I was working) I started to look around at the people - at the men I was dealing with and - and wondering what kind of husbands they were because mine was so negative .. I'd never had any interest in any other man, ever - but I did look at other men to see what - how they treated their wives .. I started to watch couples .. that's what sort of started it all .. there was a lot of difference .. I realized that I'd worked for (a civic organization) - I have gone to school - to you know, 5 years of - of-um changing, recognizing that I have worth, I have value, I am not stupid - um - there's all kinds of possibilities out there ... I started realizing - you know - it isn't me. However, it still took a *long time.* (italics added)

In her words, Kathleen suggested that her inner struggle, which was reflected in her comparing relationships, husbands, and marriages, represented a transitional period for her, a time of careful examination and consideration. She stated that another "trigger" for her was an event one evening with several friends, when, in a parking lot, she was ineffective in trying to stop her husband from starting a physical fight with another man. Prior to this point "I'd always been able to talk to him - this time he just shoved me out of the way." Now she recognized that there were aspects of this man that she could not comprehend. She summarized the effects of these occurrences when she stated:

I guess I stopped loving him a long time ago (pause) - um - probably when I first started doubting things about us. It was becoming more active - instead of shoving it out of my head - now I was just thinking it out .. and actually the man that I met made me sit down by myself and look at thi-why would you even think about this man - you wouldn't have looked at another man and then - investigating all my feelings - go to the library and getting books and reading about midlife crises and his problems and mine and deciding - I couldn't do this (leave)..

In the context of a marriage in which she was criticized and in which her husband had battered her, she experienced "somebody being nice to me .. nothing physical," an alternative experience that allowed her to see a different person in the mirror. Nevertheless,

she was still painfully aware at what she was potentially "throwing away," that is:

I had a job, I was on the board, I had friends, I had a family, children .. I remember walking past a jewelry store and seeing 25th anniversary and thinking (sighs) - tch god - did I do the right thing?

Thus, although on the one hand she could no longer negate the problems in her marriage, this did not automatically mean that she could leave. Leaving was pregnant with meaning, and she carried this weight full term as she processed the various interwoven issues, expressed by Kathleen as:

I started to question and-and-uh I don't think I was wrong in-um being attracted to somebody else and wanting to try that out, it's just that the way I did it was really foolish.. you can't - you can't leave a relationship, especially a long-time one that's got so many handles - yeh - and-and expect that you can just walk away from it - you can't. And so I had to deal with that and I felt that going back to my husband and feeling uncomfortable in the beginning, that-that slowly we could work this out again, we could bring it back, you know - I found out that that didn't work for me. I found myself thinking about the other man - as a possibility of escape - that maybe it would happen again .. and finally I had to let go of that. I had to see that this wasn't going to happen - wake up girl - you have to do something about your situation, you alone. You know, it was very scary.. I remember going - when I first met this guy, nothing happened - I told you that, and I came home and I wanted to know why - why I was feeling a tug here, and why was I thinking about this constantly, so I went to the store and I got books on husbands and on their behavior and it was-um - I started to see it in print - it was some of the things that men do emotionally to women that I was seeing in print - it was that I was seeing it in print. Like I had also done this back in 1978 - gone to the library but what I was reading *then* was - well, you know, dress nicely, and-um - make sure that he's not troubled and dah-dah and *now* I'm reading that men go through their own traumas of middle age and-and I actually did think at some point that the problem was that he was now 42 or whatever - or 44 - and he must be - maybe he wants to have another woman and he's just being - but I was starting to see things that made much more sense to me then ..

She went on to formulate the complexity of leaving, stating that in addition to emotional and psychological "handles," she had concrete financial considerations with respect to leaving, as well as various other factors that she weighed:

.. for me financially i-it has a lot to do with finances because - um - look at me, wh-what can I - I might have a fine mind, I might be capable of a lot of things but I don't have anything that says - there's no proof - there's no diploma or degree - there's just me and-and so- reality is right now - I, you know, I'm limited in how much money I could even make - it doesn't mean I'm not capable of it .. Toward the end - that created the ambivalence - there was also - in-in my deliberations in my head about leaving or staying I-I took into account that - my age, um - and my ability to find work, um and poverty was a big aspect for me - uh - do I want to be - do I want to just put up with this - maybe he'll die (pause) - or do I want out .. so in considering things, staying meant benefits that I knew I might not have when I got out and it - and that took me some time to-uh - to relinquish - even-even personal possessions - um - leaving behind treasured things - partly because I couldn't take it all, and-and it wouldn't be right that I did. He had entitlement to

things and-uh .. I want to be fair - sometimes I wish I wasn't ..

In the second interview, Kathleen spoke again to the role of time and the importance of pacing, this time linking it to historical shifts as well when she said:

I think that just times themselves have changed to the point where you're getting Erica Jong - you're getting people - women's issues are coming to the forefront and one of them was - I felt very unhappy, very inadequate, and going out and doing things really helped my self esteem that way, making me see - and it just seemed that it just kept on growing and growing and growing .. I'm sure that we could just have kept on going like my mother did. I'm sure from the day that my mother got married at 24 until the day she died her life was exactly the same as far as her husband was concerned - it never changed - and he battered her - not to the degree that I had but he did, and he was an alcoholic. Um - for me it was a whole different era and women have been progressing, and recognizing, and women are in the work force and women are becoming powerful and so - I'm not going to be left behind. I want to be a part of that - and part of that is that a woman has a right to feelings, a woman has a right to respect - a woman has a right to strive for whatever. So I'm getting a lot of information coming in this ear (she motions to one ear), and his voice is starting to diminish (shows other hand at other ear) - this knock me down, knock me down, knock me down - heh! wait a minute! I want to get on this path - AND I would like to get on this path with you holding my hand, BUT it wasn't there!

Kathleen encapsulated the issue of time both for herself and in a larger social context, along with speaking articulately to her deep yearning that it would not cost her her marriage, which eventually it did, given his unwillingness to respect and validate her as an equal person. She needed time to assimilate counter experiences and alternative messages, to allow these to become strong enough to outweigh her partner's controlling criticisms and ongoing abusive interactions. She managed this by creating an alternative space for herself within her own home, as well as seeking alternative experiences outside her home:

I'd made - I'd done the guest bedroom - made it so that it was a haven for me. I used the excuse that he snored but I went in there all the time to get away from him, and I realized that - these things had started happening even before I went to see (counsellor) - and I realized I was trying to create my own space .. and one of the things I did was I got into (my work) - I got busy with the (community organization) and started making some ground that I felt really like I mattered as a person. So my focus shifted from him to myself. And that didn't make the marriage any better .. but it also gave me the strength to realize that I was a strong person - that I did have a mind ..

When Kathleen entered therapy she took the information that she gleaned from her sessions and checked these out against her relationship at home. She became aware of issues of control and power and analysed it against her relationship at home:

There was a whole lot of things about getting out of it that I just didn't have the where-with-all to figure out - like first of all I got a lot of support that I wasn't to blame - so reversing some of that learning that I had done .. I still didn't have the

courage to get out - that was like a separate part for me..

Kathleen depicted the depth of her struggle, inferring that this was not just any relationship she was attempting to leave. She had to confront deep roots and long tentacles as part of her process. The new information affirmed and validated her own qualms and gave her a means to understand the dynamics of power and control. At her own pace, she was able to recognise that she was not responsible for his unpredictable and incongruent behaviors. She needed a means to put the whole relationship into perspective. In keeping with Kathleen's attitude, and her desire for a meaningful outcome, she ended the first interview with her expressed wish that she could have communicated her perceptions to her ex-husband and have him understand:

.. I wish I could sit down and tell him that you know .. I didn't give up.. I think there's two ways to look at it. One is that it's kind of sad because for me as a person maybe there's some potential that I never did get to realize and some way - I have to be realistic - it can't happen because there's no time, you know, and so it's sad - it's sad that a person comes out like a flower ready to do anything - I mean I-I don't think I've ever been accused of having a (pause) - um a bad disposition. I'm usually very pleasant and-um easygoing and - so I wasn't a difficult person and so here's this one (man), just waiting to be, you know, - just having him stomp, stomp, and never support, so-uh it's sad that that had to happen to me, but on the other hand maybe I have more insights to some things than other people because I've lived through some pretty awful times .. Everything that transpired, everything that brought me, every experience I had, brought me to that point. Um - (pause) - if I had hung on to - like I said - my upbringing and the standards of the day I might still be stuck back there but I also might have been more - I can't say comfortable with it but (pause) - I guess you would say that - if a person - if a woman has blinders on and-and thinks that she deserves this behavior - this being handed out to her, she can go through her whole like like my mother did with it, but there were things out there that would *shake in my head* and I was - all those things that happened to me had to happen for me to get to where I am now and this is where I'm supposed to be - this is what - this was the only outcome for me was to get away from him. I just wish it would have been sooner. But I think there was a *process* here and that was - even acknowledging the battering, and acknowledging the extent of it .. what women need is .. places they can go to that can help them name it - give them the information. You know it was back east, knowing he was hitting me - I still have it in my purse - it was a little pamphlet on what is abuse - does he do this to you and you know - that made me feel so strong - because there again - it was in print, reinforcing - this is now that little voice (my inner counter voice) has now become a piece of paper - it's now become people I talk to..

Interestingly, in her analysis, Kathleen states that the experiences in her life have led her to an important and valued current place, while concurrently giving voice to the yearning that it all could have occurred earlier in her life, thereby sparing her this prolonged and painful journey. Her words imply a way of simultaneously holding two seemingly disparate notions, indicating that she does not experience one at the expense of the other, but that



both of her perceptions stand side by side. In her own words, Kathleen has managed to translate a pained history into one that she knows provides her with vital insights and genuine empathy.

Kali focussed more predominantly on specific "mitigating factors" as triggering her shift toward leaving. These included (a) fearing for her own safety in response to one particularly threatening event, (b) joining a self-help group, (c) initiating post-secondary education, and (d) increased concern for her sons with regard to their safety and their male role model learning from their father that threatening behaviors and/or violence were successful means to an end:

.. a really mitigating factor I think was (when) he basically said to me well, well, you know, you better tie me to the bed because I don't know what I'm going to do .. another mitigating factor was .. I had started a group - it was like group therapy - men and women .. looking at all kinds of issues .. and I felt there was a lot of people in the group that I connected with - that had a similar experience, that were really helpful and also men in the group that were just as violent .. plus a good friend of mine who, you know, I'd started school with had moved here .. and I'd made more connections .. and I guess just also being at the point of this is - this is too scary and it's going to have an impact on - on the boys ..

Furthermore, Kali spoke of two key relationships that seemed to imply important transitional periods for her. The first was with a public health nurse:

A public health nurse that was really really helpful - um - actually who connected with me .. and just ended up - just coming around to visit and-uh um just kind of being there and probably recognizing a lot of issues but not talking to me about them directly but just .. she was just there .. I could tell that she liked me which I think is a - is a critical part of this, and-um she would just come over and we would discuss, you know, heaven only knows what we discussed - all kinds of - we talked about larger - larger issues ..

The second experience echoed that of Kathleen, whereby Kali met a man and, in the context of a marriage in which her self-perception had been badly damaged, this meeting in itself provided her with an opportunity to re-examine her marriage and what she had come to think about herself:

I did start to discover that I was attractive to men at that point too, and that was another thing that-um (pause) people were making overtures to me and things were so horrible in my marriage that I was responding to that, and I thought I can't be in a relationship with someone and-and have these feelings for people - um and that was another signal that something was wrong - 'cuz I was just so totally focussed on (husband), I couldn't have - I just didn't even think about another person .. I couldn't reconcile having those feelings and being with someone in a marriage and also feeling .. so there were several things that were happening in that situation .. I had been going to college .. I had made a group of friends there that he was incredibly jealous of ..

She indicated the psychological component of self esteem and her fear for her boys as consistent primary factors for her:

.. my self esteem - on some level I - it must have gone up enough for me to think that I don't have to deal with this, but I think it again related more to the kids, that - (pause) - this is - this is not good for them to see. This is going to end up with him being engaged in a battle with them and it was more in protection of them and still referencing it to them as opposed to how this is affecting me .. he was too scary ..

In discussing her second marriage, Kali addressed a shift in the relationship linked to her husband's behavioral changes of sudden intermittent rages, as having a deep impact on her. Again, she reiterated the children as precipitating her leaving this relationship:

.. also as the children started to get older, (he) was a lot more controlling with them, you know, and-uh, and just really demeaning of them, and that really started to erode our relationship as well, 'cuz I was trying all kinds of different ways to intervene ..

Kali went on to stress the importance of respecting individual women's unique timing and shifting at their own pace when she said:

I'd just started seeing a counsellor in the same month that he and I separated finally .. I think that was another fortunate thing. I think I started to see her because I knew I was preparing to-to to disengage and I probably had been doing that anyway - um - but I believe that everyone has to do it in their own time and their own process and it's - (pause) - I'm still doing it now. I mean, I can still - I can still be hooked in by the - the loving sense - there are still moments where I think, well, what if - because on some other level I still have an attachment to this person that transcends .. and we have a child that ties us together ..

In addition to implying that some of the process of preparing to disengage appeared to happen on a semi-conscious level in her usage of such tentative words as "I think" and "probably," Kali notably also addresses that leaving, or struggling with leaving, does not automatically sever the deeply established cord of attachment. Leaving, as narrated by these women, is a complex and multifaceted issue. They indicated that leaving required time to prepare and time to assimilate it's full meaning. Sometimes this spanned years of their lives. I now turn to focus more fully on the act of leaving itself and what this entailed, as experienced by the women.

### **Leaving the Relationship**

In the women's narratives they formulated a time in their relationships that implied a final shift, whereby their focus had shifted, their efforts had changed, and it seemed they had reached a point of no return. Elsie linked this time to her experience that the "abuse got a little closer, a little more threatening" and then used the phrase "breaking point," to

portray a time that more clearly defined her need to leave the relationship. Kathleen spoke of this time as being “towards the end of my rope” accompanied by her having “lost all hope.” They spoke of leaving as critically linked to two issues, one being the disengagement from the relationship, both within the relationship and after leaving, and the second, ensuring their safety. These were not ordinary relationships that they were leaving and their efforts to leave involved planning and strategizing due to their partners’ potential violence. Moving or leaving any relationship inevitably requires careful discussions and appropriate planning, but the women I spoke with indicated the complexity of trying to leave a relationship in which battering had occurred, for fear of further endangering their lives. The women spoke variously of these acute factors, accentuating different ways of handling them in the context of their own unique experiences.

Elsie spoke of her initial attempt to leave when, based on her experience that his threatening behaviors had increased, she decided “when I leave it’s going to be when he is out of the house” but when her husband “caught” her, she had to abort the leaving:

so I had to go back and act normal - I started painting .. saying I wasn’t going to try that again but the whole time I was planning it ..

The second time she took safety precautions such that he could not stop her, linking this additional measure she took as indicative of her inner change in preparation:

I phoned the police first to say - I’m leaving - I want you to know that if there’s going to be any problem, I’ll be calling you. So they knew I was leaving. So I got (friend’s) daughter came with her car, my car and a taxi and - and he came home in the middle of it. I said - don’t come near me and don’t stop me. I said I’ve called the police - I’m leaving. He took off .. I had definitely changed.

Elsie implied her process of disengaging within the relationship when she spoke of planning “for 2 months” while maintaining an appearance of being focussed on the relationship. Having the police know of her decision enabled her the safety to follow through with it.

Care spoke of anger as a tool to disengage from her relationship, with the anger helping her to maintain a distance:

.. once I got really angry and I thought I’m going to show you .. and I-um - I left one night and .. with me I took the telephone and the T.V. and the next day I was going to phone the Hydro people and cut off those things in my name .. I began looking to when I’m going to get out (and my perception of him was).. just how (long pause) how horrible he was, how despicable and vile he was - (pause) - I just saw him as a horrible despicable person and I guess it was just a confirmation for me when he did (things) because I think somewhere I think I knew it wasn’t right to - that he was using me, that he would never seek work .. it was just a

confirmation - it was saying it out loud ..

She went on to say that leaving was associated with acknowledging:

the feeling that I had some rights - because within the relationship I didn't have any rights and particularly the second time around, when I had gone back..

Care's struggle with leaving the relationship and issues of safety were more fundamentally associated with not receiving appropriate help from the police, fear of losing her son (again), and leaving her belongings behind. She described feeling caught in a catch 22 situation whereby she did not want to leave without her son, yet could not leave with her son, her own safety was at stake should she stay in this relationship, yet to leave was to jeopardize her son with regard to the role model he had in his father. In the end, Care was able to turn to family and friends with whom she was able to reside temporarily, at which time the court ordered no contact between them. After the child custody settlement, in a separate court hearing, her partner was charged with assault and sentenced, thereby further limiting her contact with him.

The delicacy of becoming detached was captured well by Kathleen when she spoke of her final preparation to leave her relationship. She indicated that it was a fragile and awkward time when she was preparing to leave because she had to maintain an exterior of normalcy within the relationship:

I was also becoming more detached from him and more - (pause) - not arrogant - but the last thing I wanted him to know was what I doing - or thinking - and-and I actually really made up my mind just before I left .. I was starting to shut him out - and I would just ignore him - and then he recognized, you could see - I-and-I was warned. I was warned not to trigger anything in him in case he suspected if - if you - you know - you don't want him to beat you up - you don't want to have a problem so you have to try and be the same way as you always were, it was real hard (pause) - when you're learning things about yourself and about him, and I would just sort of shut him off and-um carry on with what I was doing and next thing I knew he arrived - and this was after calling me terrible names, accusing me of being an idiot and you name it - and-um - he would say - I got you some tea. Well, to him that was a form of an apology - and I would want to throw it in his face - how dare you, how dare you assault me with those words and then expect me - to just have a cup of tea and everything's fine. It isn't fine! ..

She went on to address her concerns regarding her own safety, which has become an ongoing issue for her in spite of restraining orders put in place:

I had left, I don't want to live with him, I'm living with my mother .. he still wanted me, he's still come to my mother's house, got in the door - (pause) - and went right to the room that I was staying in, my mother's home, and went through the drawers .. my mother was in her 80s, I was with her - we were both there. He just barged in. I said I don't want to talk to you - he pushed the door open, walked

right in .. (and later when) he'd let me take some things out of the house but in letting me take things out of the house he did rape me - he forced me to have sex with him .. I was very concerned for my welfare .. we had some collector's (dishes) - you want this (dish) here?! - Okay, here it is - smash! I knew I was in trouble and I got out of there as fast as I could. .. I had the restraining order - like never mind (pause) - he did still try - he's broken the restraining order many times - even right in front of my lawyer .. (and) I mean I had left but he was on my doorstep .. he has stalked me, followed me .. has keyed my car ..

With regard to the act of leaving she said:

don't let him know - you can be indifferent but you can't let him know. It was very difficult to be sneaky for me - I'm a very up front person but you learn how to be sneaky, you really do, and it's amazing how you carry it off so that they don't really suspect. (*People think why be sneaky and not just leave?*) Well, that's not practical, that's not reality. I mean I think if the man has put you in hospital, yeh, I don't think you really want to go back but then you've got the law behind you then. You'll probably be allowed to go back and (and get your things) but a woman like me - I have to think about my financial future, I have to think about what I want, I have to think about the way I'm going to do it - and that you just don't do in an instant. And for me security was very important - it always has been. I think that's a big factor in why - why would I want to leave at 24 with a job as a file clerk and try and survive with 2 little kids? You know - I didn't have anywhere to go. It's very difficult. It's easy to say, yeh, get out, but I-I think if - I have a feeling if I had broken ribs or something - I probably wouldn't have stayed with him but he was just that - he probably knew that too - that's why - that's why he said to me after the 2nd black eye - no one is ever going to see it again. Then he took to battering me on the head and pulling my hair .. so that nobody could see the marks. You can only go so far with the black eye bit. One of the things that was probably a big help to me was that I did keep things under cover myself - even my own attitude towards him in that when I did leave him - boy was he shocked. He never would have thought - dreamed that I would do that - never, never. He thought he had me - so I could carry out a lot of stuff behind his back.

Analogous to Care's concerns, Kathleen stressed not wanting to lose all of her belongings when she attempted to walk away from her partner. Hence, she recognized she could not simply walk away from everything she had known for years; to walk out was not a simple act. She addressed the incongruency between "sneaking" and her preferred way of handling such a situation by simply talking about it. Based on previous experiences, however, she knew that to talk with her husband about leaving could provoke another assault. It has been more than 2 years since she left this relationship and her ex-husband still stalks her. Based on events reported in the news over the past year we know that Kathleen's concerns are not manufactured, but that they are grounded in reality. Dominant assumptions about leaving a relationship frequently equate terminating the relationship with determining safety for the woman, but this is clearly an oversimplification, as indicated by these women's experiences and reiterated by Kali.

Kali spoke of leaving her first husband in the context of fearing for her life, and narrated ongoing concern because her ex-husband moved into the same neighborhood. Even though “we never got back together again” moving out did not ensure final and complete termination of the relationship, described by Kali as:

.. not that we didn't have a whole series of things that we still had to go through and more instances of um - you know - but for the grace of god, go I, where you know, I'm on this planet and I'm - I'm really glad (laughs) - with lots of threats and lots of situations that I still allowed myself to be in that were dangerous - for me I think I felt empathy. We lived in a townhouse and our neighbors invited him to come and live there (pause) - that didn't last too long 'cuz they got tired of having their phone tied up and-uh, you know, him pounding on the walls and yelling out the window at 2 o'clock if I was coming home late from some place - that was pretty bizarre. Then he went back east and that was a really good thing 'cuz we had a break .. and .. it was such a relief - it was just - we could breath - to not always be wondering - well, when is he going to come home and how is he going to come home and what's going to happen.

Kali, echoing the other women with respect to concern for her personal as well as her children's safety, left her husband when he was not home, “trudging through the snow .. in the dark” in order to get to a friend's house. Leaving was not a simple event for these women, it was not an issue to be openly, carefully discussed, and although leaving in many relationships marks a painful change, these women shared the additional struggles with regard to potential violence linked to their attempts to terminate their relationships.

At the start of this chapter I began by addressing the questions frequently put to women who live in relationships in which battering occurs, and the dominant assumption inherent in these questions is that terminating a relationship is equated with safety. The very subject of leaving itself could potentiate a threatening or violent situation. In addition, there were/are (ongoing) concerns regarding children such as in Kali's and Care's situations, there was ongoing harassment whether verbal or otherwise as experienced by all four women, and there were unfinished legal disputes such as discussed by Elsie, Care, and Kathleen that forced the women to have to repeatedly face the person they were attempting to disengage from. These issues were painful and intimidating matters for the women, and, in addition to their struggles regarding responsibility for the relationship, and the structural barriers they faced with various professionals in protection, legal, and medical matters, they complicated and clouded the business of leaving. Last, leaving was not a single, simple, or time-bound event, but more accurately it reflected a process indicative of differing time-lines with unique and overlapping demands, experienced by

these women in a sociocultural context that seemed to offer little to expedite this process.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, based on the women's narratives, I have examined the various factors that impacted notions of leaving their intimate relationships. A primary consideration indicated in the impediments confronting the women is the focus on the woman rather than on the perpetrator. Let us briefly consider an alternative leave-taking with respect to a heterosexual relationship in which the male violates his female partner. Herland (1979), a feminist utopia and social commentary written around the turn-of-the century by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, provides such an alternative construction. Herland, due to a natural disaster is a land where only women dwell. It is inadvertently discovered by three men who, upon their arrival, are treated very well. The three men are attracted to three women who eventually marry them. When Terry, one of the men, forces himself on his wife Alima, she defends herself, manages to restrain him, and calls for help. The other women who come to her aide help overpower Terry and bind him. He is tried and subsequently ordered to leave, banned from their land forever. He is additionally prevented from even contacting or pursuing his wife prior to leaving. In this story the women neither simply devalue the men, nor do they ignore offensive behaviors. They trust themselves and their perceptions without having these perceptions held against them. In holding the men accountable, the women are able to orchestrate different kinds of actions, thereby enabling them to respond in an authentic and responsible manner. Alima is not shamed for what happened, she is not made responsible for his behavior, and he, rather than she, is forced to leave. Her dignity is left intact in a community context that fully supports her. With respect to the women I interviewed, I cannot help but question how different their experiences would have been had they encountered this kind of support and broader context response.

## Chapter Eight: Analysing Victim Discourse

Posted on the back of a city bus:  
*I don't buy this victimhood garbage. Get past it!*  
 - Dr. Laura ("the psychologist with an attitude")

I never felt like a victim. I didn't feel like a victim because I felt I was trying to stand up for myself. I just had to avoid getting hit - I had to avoid getting him angry but I was still trying to - to express my distaste, my dislike.  
 - Kathleen

Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves *solely* (italics added) as 'victims' because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess (hooks, 1984, p.45).

### A Social Construct

The role of victim is socially constructed (Lamb, 1996). As a construction it is not a neutral or stable term and its meaning and utilization shift and change contingent upon the historical and sociocultural contexts in which it appears. The dictionary states that to be a victim is to be victimized, to experience powerlessness and harm, inflicted from a source external to oneself. Alternately, in the therapeutic community and in the popular self-help movement, however, "victim" is frequently employed to indicate an internal psychological state, or even reflective of a personality type. Furthermore, whether the individual as victim receives compassion or judgment with respect to the experience(s) appears to be linked to the *context* and/or *nature* of their victimization, and reflects a variety of factors with gender being one probable subtext. For many years, for example, women who were victims of rape were scrutinized with respect to their dress at the time of the rape, the time of day it occurred, and the location of the rape. Moreover, the woman's socioeconomic status, her race, even her profession, were further implicated in public perceptions and in the handling of her victimization. In this context, being a victim had substantial shame attached to it because the woman's personality and character were considered suspect. These considerations are indicative of the provocation myth and exemplify victim-blaming. By contrast, a victim of theft or a victim of assault by a stranger is not assumed to have provoked the event and these experiences tend to be handled with care and understanding. Reports in the media about victims of violence change in flavor contingent upon the content. Victims of intimate violence versus victims of public violence trigger different



private and public responses.

The social construction of the role and meaning of victim is further evidenced in the past two decades in the codependence movement wherein we are all (or at least most)<sup>32</sup> perceived to be victims of bad parents and of dysfunctional families which is presumed to result in a wounded inner child. We are therefore encouraged to get in touch with our "inner child" in order to stop being victims of our pasts and stop the cycle of victimization. To insist that everyone or almost everyone is a victim is tantamount to asserting that no one is a victim.<sup>33</sup> It renders the word facile and insignificant. The usefulness of any label that includes so much of the population must be seriously questioned, particularly with regard to its clinical usefulness (Frank & Golden, 1992). This flaunting of the term ensures that those who truly are victims in our society, and those who do not have the economic means nor the privilege of time to work on their "inner children" have their experiences of victimization minimized, and/or they are held personally responsible for not pursuing these issues.

Whereas being a victim of any type of violence induces varying fear responses and potentially a sense of being singled out, the victim construct in the codependence movement has induced a sense of *proclaiming* the victim. Victim from this perspective is a construction that assumes commonalities across personal experiences and celebrates a renewed vision of personal goals and subjective well-being. Intrinsic to these constructions is a focus on the individual, with the underlying operating assumption that with personal effort and commitment, a completely healthy psychological state and pain-free existence is equally possible and attainable by all. The sociocultural context both to the movement and to individual experiences is rendered invisible in a discourse of victimhood and of personal responsibility.

In addition to the problematic lack of attending to a broader context, there is generally a lack of acknowledgement of the authorial voice, that is, *who* calls *whom* the

---

<sup>32</sup> Bradshaw on a televised show told the audience that 96% of families are dysfunctional to varying degrees.

<sup>33</sup> This is not to deny that a personal past can play a role in destructive relationships, but rather to assert the limitations of psychological explanations currently in vogue in the codependency movement (Haaken, 1992), and to locate the historicity of these explanations. Becoming aware of emotional difficulties and destructive behaviors is an important issue and certainly it must be possible to attend to this without victim blaming.

victim. It is noteworthy that the women with whom I spoke did not refer to themselves as victims, with one brief exception when Care described the second time she went into court after leaving her partner:

I was more (pause) - focussed, I was - I knew (pause) - I knew more about myself. I knew more about myself - that I was a victim of abuse and that was not a bad thing (pause) - and-um - and this is - and-and that he is the abuser and *I had the language* and I could name it *for the court* .. (italics added).

Care made it clear that the court language did not reflect her choice of words initially. The term victim was one she learned in order to address her circumstances within a court context. It is, therefore, of interest to examine the women's explorations of the word victim, to hear how they defined it, to consider their thoughts, concerns, and criticisms. In this chapter, I attend to the women's responses to this term, and I analyse their employment (or avoidance) of the victim construct, as well as its usefulness. Where applicable I refer to available literature, both in order to expand on the issues raised by the women and to gain additional insight from other perspectives. As will be obvious, each woman responded in her own unique manner although there are similarities across their explorations.

### **Subjective Responses to the Victim Construct**

Given that, with the above exception, the women did not spontaneously refer to themselves as victims throughout the interviews, I indicated curiosity that they had not used the word victim in talking about themselves or their experiences, and asked whether they would like to respond to this. The following excerpts convey the women's responses. Care began with her definition of victim, stating that being a victim is:

.. when you don't have power. I-I have some power now - it's not the power I want to have but I-I have some power. I'm not a victim anymore but for me to um - (pause) even though I entered into this consent order - if I - if I had just stayed in there, then I'd be calling myself a victim of abuse. If I'd be sitting on my three days enjoying myself with (son) and the other four days away from him complaining and woe is me, being a victim (pause) - if I were to sit around and do nothing about this situation - if I didn't try ..

Care structured her definition around her ongoing efforts to regain full custody of her son. She clarified that the experience of powerlessness is pivotal to being a victim and notes that to have even some power is better than the bleakness central to a total lack of power or control. She further described her powerlessness as intensified in the face of the courts' decision to give her partner full custody of their son. Her experience of victimization extended beyond the few physically violent episodes with her partner, encompassing a

psychological and emotional realm to which others seemed oblivious. Additionally, Care made a noteworthy shift in her definition from one that equates victim with being powerless to one that equates victim with being passive. This latter construction is congruent with the current dominant trend that likens victim to inactivity. Freud's legacy that defined women as passive, along with a prevailing psychology that has defined males as independent, autonomous, rational, and active; and women as dependent, vulnerable, emotional, and passive, are still detectable in current perceptions of women as whining or complaining when they actively protest against, and/or articulate their pain about their victimization experiences. Care's articulation exemplifies the interaction between dominant language that constructs our experiences and our subjective use of the dominant language to reconstruct our experiences. Living in a particular sociocultural context, we are all inescapably exposed to a dominant language that

involves the appropriation of the words of the collectives of which one is a member and how that collective appropriates the individual at the moment that the individual speaks any words. ... Each person speaks from the positions made available within those collectives through the recognized discourses used by the collective .. (Davies, 1991, p. 46-7, 51).

In linking passivity with being a victim, Care employed a dominant construction available to her, one that she also suggests is judgmental. Hence it is not a preferred discourse, nor does it provide a preferred self-conceptualization in its current dominant use.

Elsie also inferred this dominant understanding of what it means to be a victim, concurrently indicating her dislike for the word when she said:

I don't like the word victim - my lawyer - she attacked me with the word by saying, you know, quit being a victim as if somehow - all of a sudden I could do something about that .. it is a put-down - it definitely is a put-down .. because as I said I could feel it wasn't right but I didn't focus on myself, I only - I would keep focussing on him and fixing, fixing, fixing ..

Elsie challenged the shortsightedness of her lawyer who implies to Elsie that being a victim is simply a behavior that can, at will, be stopped, something akin to turning off a tap. She indicated that her sense of herself as actively involved, as doing everything she could creatively think of doing in her marriage meant she did not see herself as passive, and hence, not as a victim. Care echoed this same self perception when she said "in private you don't see yourself as a victim." As quoted from bell hooks (1984) at the start of this chapter, these women suggest that to see themselves as victims implies giving up or giving in to their pained experiences. Instead they focussed on what they believed they *could* and

*needed* to do, remaining actively engaged in their attempts to make effective changes in relationships that were important to them. These women could not afford to see themselves as victims because being a victim in its current construction indicates a passivity that has judgment and negative connotations attached to it. Elsie informed me that she has never heard the word used positively.

Similar to Elsie and Care, Kathleen mentioned that with hindsight she sees that she was a victim but that at the time she did not perceive herself as one. She went on to explore this in the following manner:

I guess I don't like to be considered a victim in the case of my relationship - um partly because *I did everything I could to try and resolve this*, and-an-an-and part of that was just being very vocal .. I knew that these things were wrong and - and I came from a family where I saw it happening and I saw how that was handled, so I was doing basically what I was taught, but knowing what was wrong and fighting back made me not feel like a victim.. I didn't really feel like a victim 'cuz I always thought I was sticking up for myself, may not have - it's sort of like having little mini - little mini wars and I lost a whole lot of those dam wars, but I think I won the major battle ..

Echoing the other women, Kathleen makes a link between victim and presumed passivity, and based on her ongoing efforts and struggles, she presumed she was neither passive nor a victim. In addition, however, Kathleen complexified the commonplace equation between passivity and victim when she spoke sharply to this link:

It depends on who is making that equation, but if it was with me, myself, I would say, heh - wait a minute, the first time this guy walked in the door at 4 in the morning, drunk, and I wanted to know where the hell he'd been, I was standing up for myself. Well, it didn't take very long before I got the first black eye - that you find another way to express your anger, and finally, it is so insidious - such a cancer that you get down to - you don't look the wrong way. You measure every word you say to avoid conflict and trouble, so - so inside you still feel you're fighting it, you're just doing it on a different level now, because standing up to him and being mad doesn't work! What's unfortunate for someone like me is that I didn't have the wherewithal to realize that - what it was doing to me. Walking would have been the best thing - but - in 1959, 1960, 1961 - it was what did you do to provoke him? Why did you cause that to happen? Battering wasn't even a word. It was almost a right. So (pause - sigh) - you don't even tell people. I don't think being a victim is being passive because (pause) - you haven't become mush to stay in this relationship. Yeh, you've diminished what you do but that's only to save yourself - it-it's survival. You've got to remember this - in my case - I also loved this man .. I never felt like a victim. I didn't feel like a victim because I felt I was trying to stand up for myself. I just had to avoid getting hit - I had to avoid getting him angry, but I was still trying to-to express my distaste, my dislike.

Kathleen's words challenge the pervasive dichotomy between passivity and activity.

Additionally she implied a significant difference between her *insider* view of activity and

the *outsider* perception of her activity or her agency. She inferred, as did Care, that there is a continuum of variations in activity and engagement. Like Kathleen, Care did not *primarily* perceive herself as a victim nor as passive, yet spoke to times when she pulled back in her struggle against her partner's abusive behaviors:

I remember times when I wasn't fighting back (pause) - but they weren't very long really - there were times (pause) - I can remember (pause) - th-there was a point in our relationship when I didn't do anything - like I think it was almost like a depression, where I-um (son) wasn't around then either .. I wouldn't have referred to myself as being a victim though. I don't think it's useful - well, I used it - I used it - I remember using it at some point but it doesn't work. What I mean is - I used it - the first time I left him - to be the victim - or I was internalizing it and just thinking that was gonna work for me in court but it-it doesn't work - um - in court - it was to make him an unfit parent - that he abused me and nah-nah-nah - all of that, but it didn't work - I was whining is how it's viewed and-um even though I was just describing his behaviors - yeh. They see that as whining and-and they don't have time for it, which makes you wonder when they let all this other stuff carry on in courts about your allowed to answer this allegation and that allegation and they have nothing to do with the child .. But you see I wouldn't want to use the word victim about myself anymore - I'm not - I want to fight - I'm gonna fight - actually you are fighting - almost all the time - like sometimes you fight a little less for a bit.

Care stated she initially used the word victim because it seemed to reflect the language of the courts, and hence described her resulting confusion when she felt perceived as simply whining and additionally was unable to regain custody of her son.

Kali also expressed a concern and dislike for the word victim, challenging the link between being passive and being a victim when she said:

I don't think that victim is a positive word - I think - again, we're talking about language - well, I just feel that there are - there is-um - just this incredible backlash against women's experience and now even a group of feminists saying that well, feminism just means like making women into these helpless victims and I don't believe that's true. I believe it's just naming women's experience .. because of the construct of our power imbalance in our culture .. I don't like the word victim, people are *victimized* - and I don't - I am not a passive person, you know. I don't view myself from that perspective and to be victimized you don't have to be passive to be victimized you can do absolutely everything within your power to make it a different situation and still be victimized - um - so you know ..

In Kali's reflections, the term victim is controversial. She addresses the difficulty of a word that on the one hand decidedly speaks to women who are subjected to violence, but on the other hand has become fraught with meanings that absolutely do not capture women's struggle. She warns against a faction in the feminist movement that equates victim with passivity, and that has additionally reconstructed women's outcry against the violence against women as indicative of passivity or presumably 'victim' behavior in its

(over) identification with powerlessness (e.g., Roiphe, 1993; Wolf, 1993). Wolf's rhetoric, in which she constructs a false dichotomy between victim feminism and power feminism thereby problematizing feminism, simply revamps the old established dog-eat-dog attaining of power *away* from the broader problematic issues of violence against women. Wolf (1993) defines victim as being an *internal* "identity of powerlessness" rather than reflecting an *externally* imposed experience of powerlessness. She wants to transform this psychology of powerlessness to a "psychology of plenty" while ignoring the exploitation and domination linked to various positions of privilege of those who live a "psychology of plenty." Her "power feminism" in reference to women's experiences of violence, implies a movement away from exposing obstructive sociocultural, political, and economic structures, to a belief in and focus on individual self-help. In effect, her diatribe can be summed up as 'look at what you have, quit complaining, and/or do something about it.' Kali, on the other hand, implies that women *are* examining what they have and what they live with in the context of violence, and consequently recognize the pervasiveness of the threat and/or experience of potential violence for women. This recognition has critically impacted how women structure their lives. In other words, what Wolf perceives as an *over-identification* with powerlessness is for many individual women and for feminists fighting against violence against women, a veritable *naming*, *exposing*, and a *proactive stance* against gendered experiences of violence, particularly intimate violence.

Moreover, Kali suggests that women's victimization in intimate long-term relationships is on a continuum with other forms of violence against women. Likewise, Graham (1994) states "male violence against women can be described by a continuum ranging from frequent to infrequent forms and from more to less severe and threatening (p. 84). Graham, congruent with Kali's narrative, notes that the concept of a continuum of violence means that women in this society experience violence or the threat of violence as part of their everyday lives, and that most forms of violence are no longer "conceptualized as violent or abusive or even unusual by most women" (p. 84). bell hooks (1984) also speaks to a continuum of violence against women when she states

violence against women in the family .. is inextricably linked to all acts of violence in this society that occur between the powerful and the powerless, the dominant and the dominated. While male supremacy encourages the use of abusive force to maintain male domination of women, it is the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root cause of violence against women, of adult violence against children, of all violence between those who

dominate and those who are dominated. (p.118).

In a parallel vein, Kali went on to contextualize her understanding by defining women's socialization processes as linked to passivity:

Women are socialized to be *passive* - not in terms of - that it connotes being totally inert and not - but um to - *the path of least resistance* - to allow things to - okay, yeh, this is happening but I can handle it, I can deal with it, um - uh - and not that we would - I struggled against the abuse that was happening in my situation - and then we're still into this whole thing of woman as-uh the emotional keeper of the relationship and-and-uh fixer of things, and the communicator and um I think that's still very present, but somehow we're responsible to figure these things out and work on them and - but - just in terms of what's okay for people to do to each other that aren't okay ... The passivity was not physically removing myself from it - the passivity was staying and - and you know, it's not inertia um (pause) - 'cuz there's a lot of energy happening there - that's what I'm saying - it's not that we don't assertively act against it - but it's part of being female - and it's also linked to (de)valuing female qualities, you know, like you put up the list of female qualities and you'll get, you know, victim could be written beside it.

Kali defined passivity as *staying* in the relationship, which to her did not mean being inactive, but rather very specifically referred to *remaining* in the relationship. By linking women's socialization process to a relationship-focus, Kali makes notions of passivity and staying more complex.

Kali's description of women's caretaking role is congruent with the view of feminist writers who have investigated women's psychological development and the socialization processes that define women as responsible for and fundamentally linked to relationships. Relational theorists posit that one of the implications of women's prevailing caretaking responsibilities within our sociocultural context is that female identity comes to be organized around and deeply engaged in relational concerns (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). Notably, the codependency movement wherein a woman who is a victim of battering is reconstructed as codependent (e.g., Norwood, 1985) "focuses on the pathology of attachments based on what it defines as excessive caretaking or assuming responsibility for others .. (disregarding) *reality-based conflicts and healthy capabilities*" (italics added) (Haaken, 1993, p. 321, 342), and without attending to the confusing and contradictory sociocultural messages or expectations placed on women. In this light, Norwood (1985) and other similar accounts focus on and pathologize the women in battering relationships without critically attending to the perpetrator or to the broader social context that in effect supports male violence. As Kali stated:

its making the woman responsible (when we say)- that's just another personality type or something else that, yeh, you just *want* to be a victim in life - as though it's

something against you - there's intrinsically something that is wrong with this person - um - and if we can fix her then she'll just go happily merrily on her way which is just crap because there's a whole pile of men out there that need major fixing and so there'll be another one - he'll look a little different this time. Just like men are socialized to uh - to feel that they can treat their partners in the way that they do and it works and they get what they want and they - they don't seem to have any interest in developing other skills to get what they want ..

Kali hints at the complexity of a term like victim in a society that minimizes and/or psychologizes the role of victim, particularly when this is linked to cultural mandates with respect to gendered roles. In their various interpretations, these dominant discourses participate in masking the problem of violence against women in intimate relations. As noted by Hillier (1995):

as laws were changed to make the assault of one's wife illegal, new explanations emerged, focusing on mitigating circumstances which excused men's violence as a loss of control, or blamed the dysfunction of the family or society. Intermittently, as women struggle to force men to take responsibility for their violence, new explanations have emerged in the battle for control of the meaning of wife assault, centering around gender, control, and perpetrator responsibility (p. 120).

When examined closely, 'new' constructions are often simply *re*-constructions of previous conservative conceptualizations.

The above conceptualizations of what it means to be a victim sustain the dominant definition in which victim is equated with being passive, and implies judgment of any *presumed* passivity; in this manner they are victim-blaming. Living in a culture that perceives victims as passive, the women I interviewed inadvertently participated in this construction, in large part because, living in this sociocultural context, they are aware of and have had to respond to this dominant construction. As indicated by these women, however, we must be wary of oversimplifying the victim construct, and we must distinguish between varying acts of agency, recognizing that some are more visible than others, without erroneously assuming passivity. These women expressed their concern that frequently the only act of agency that is considered appropriate is that of leaving -- everything else is perceived as inactive and lacking agency. Such a construction trivializes the various concerns both internal and external to the relationship.

In addition, the women's explorations suggested that there are a multitude of contradictory messages in our society with regard to women who experience battering. Women are socialized to be caregivers, to be sensitive to another's needs, and to assume responsibility for relational needs, yet in doing so they are judged for their presumed over-



investment,<sup>34</sup> once again placing accountability in their courts. On the one hand a woman who experiences battering is presumed to be *provocative*, yet, on the other hand she is concurrently perceived to be *passive* in the assumption that somehow she is putting up with the abuse. Furthermore, if a woman who has children seeks help with respect to leaving a relationship in which she experiences violence, she risks being perceived as an unfit mother who is unable to protect her children without any consideration given to the partner/father actually responsible for the lack of safety. Clearly the issues are contradictory, the messages confusing, and the implications problematic. The women in this study were victims of violating behaviors in their intimate relationships. They were certainly not passive women but were actively engaged in diverse aspects of their personal struggles. This does not mean that they did not have times when they were overwhelmed with the realization that no amount of activity seemed to make enough or any difference, or that there were times when they felt inadequate to the tasks at hand and hence seemed less active. To engage in a debate with respect to their presumed activity or perceived inactivity, however, is to perpetuate assumptions and judgments of what is *acceptable* activity and to support predominant linkages between being passive and being a victim. To argue the activity or passivity of a woman who has been victimized is to further support assumptions that only activity is valued in situations where 'passivity' might be the safer activity for the woman and her children. It is fundamentally questionable who benefits in these conceptualizations and debates.

### **Victim as a Temporary Self-Perception**

Although the women did not identify themselves as victims they did allude to brief experiences in which they recognized their victimization, and which provided valuable insight that enabled important internal and external shifts. Two of the women in particular addressed this very brief insightful process. Care articulated this in the following manner:

I saw myself - well, you do for a minute - you do see yourself for a minute as a victim - and there is some comfort in that because it makes you think - yes, and that makes you move to the next step which is to say that I'm not going to be that way anymore, I'm not going to take this anymore. I'm going to continue to fight - to fight differently - for myself. I think you can get caught up in it and then it's not useful anymore - or not - (pause) - it's useful at the beginning but it's not useful

---

<sup>34</sup> Although the meaning of 'over' is never clearly defined and remains ambiguous with respect to relationship expectations, in talking with women it seems that one common situation in which 'over' becomes the operative word is when women attempt to articulate their concerns or frustrations regarding day-to-day expectations placed on them in their caretaking/caregiving roles.

after that because you can really get in it and you're (pause) - I see my ex do this - he takes the victim stance all the time - he himself does - he says well, I'm this way because my mother .. Seeing oneself as a victim can be recognizing it and really feeling it - but you can get stuck there - it's a check and then you move on from there - that's important.

In her narrative, Care identified with being a victim as a moment of personal insight that provided the impetus to make some changes. Kathleen, too, expressed a moment of insight with respect to hearing her adult daughter refer to her as a victim in a judgmental manner shortly after her husband's violent outburst:

When my daughter said "stop being a victim" - she didn't want to hear about it - to hear what was happening - and I don't know if the word victim had - you know - I never saw myself as a victim - but it did have an impact - it did then - it did then. I thought - here am I, I can't get help from any other source, my kids - I don't want to drag them into it but they're my life and - and this man is beating me up and - and how come they know there is anger in this house, why doesn't somebody help me, why doesn't someone stand up for me and that's when I sat there at that table just so depressed and-and crying and I thought - okay, I know what I have to do. I am going to the doctor. That's where I'll go for help and that's what led me to other help. And that's when I recognized that, yeh - that's what I was doing - I was being a victim - this man - I didn't want him to hit me, it was disgusting what he had done to me, trying to wash out my mouth with soap - I don't want this anymore. I am being a victim - he's hit me, he's knocked me down - I'm being a victim - I'm *letting* him do this - well, actually I *wasn't letting* him - *he* was doing it - I don't have to do this - but now how do I stop this? When I saw my counsellor last week she reminded me .. when you first walked in here you were convinced that it was you. And I said yeh, I was. I thought I am going through menopause - I've been mixed up all my life .. it's gotta be me - I'm doing something wrong and it was so wonderful to hear her say it wasn't. It took a while but I'm not responsible for his behavior. But if I'm sitting there, and weeping, and crying, and upset - it's up to me to do something about it - it's time - to stop at that point being a victim - stop at this point letting this happen to you. I needed to understand that I was being victimized - I was accepting behavior that I didn't have to accept and all the little pieces put together made me see that very clearly..

Kathleen clarified that her moment of realization that she had been victimized was a turning point for her. Her shift from stating "I'm letting him" to "well, actually I wasn't letting him - he was doing it" is of interest in the context of dominant victim-blaming and reflects her process whereby she realized that he is responsible for his behavior. We might be tempted, based on Care and Kathleen's explorations, to justify employing the word victim as a challenge, as a form of immediacy, or as a wake-up call for women who live in relationships in which they experience battering. It must be noted, however, that in Care's experience it was through her own process that she reflected on being a victim and this reflection served to spur her on to a particular kind of response. In Kathleen's situation, her daughter was judgmental and hurtful and it must be possible to utilize this concept of

victim or victimization in a more compassionate and genuine manner, thereby achieving the same subjectively insightful end. Importantly, what these women raise in their explorations is the question whether employing the word victim is ever useful. This is not, however, intended to establish the word victim as a taboo word, rather these explorations are intended to note the complexities of the issue both for the women inside the relationships with respect to their perceptions, and for those outside with respect to the impact of language. Further, particularly for these women, the word victim is in some critical sense, already a taboo word and/or self-concept, due to their experiences of having this concept used to judge them.

In contrast to Care and Kathleen, Kali preferred to speak of recognizing the victimization, but suggested that if professionals employ the word victim, they must examine the meaning of that word and their use of it. All four of the women attested to the difficulty of perceiving themselves as victims. This raises questions with respect to their self-perceptions and their self-conceptualizations. It would appear that the word victim, when equated with passivity, is inadequate and becomes part of how women come to additionally question and loathe themselves. The women in this study expressed their aversion to the concept and use of victim, not because it did not reflect their subjective experiences, but because it has sociocultural and broader contextual meanings that trigger shame and that obfuscate the complexities of their behaviors and multifaceted efforts. Their struggles with respect to this term is an example of the limitations of speaking about our experiences within the terms of available discourses (Davies, 1991).

#### **Further Problematics of Self-Identification: If Not Victim, Then What?**

Throughout the women's narratives and their self-descriptions, they noticeably avoided speaking about themselves as victims of violence, and when asked about this word at the end of the interviews, the women variously analysed and criticized this construct. It is of further interest that they also did not refer to themselves as 'battered.' Their concerns noted in the absence of labels in their self-perceptions and narratives, support the views of other authors who question the value of labels. Labels such as "battered woman" or "victim" tend to stigmatize, to imply judgment and shame. hooks (1989) suggests that these labels "strip us of dignity, to deny that there has been any integrity in the relationships that we are in" (p.88). The women in this study certainly spoke to this dilemma and hence

did not identify themselves within these categories. Instead, as explored throughout this thesis, the women depicted themselves as multifaceted, agentic, struggling persons, living under alternatively pained yet intimate relational conditions. They described themselves in terms of their careers, their work experiences, their lives as mothers, and they portrayed themselves as hardworking, committed, spirited, tenacious, thinking, and feeling women who expressed strong thoughts along with intense feelings of love and concern, of anger and fear. Categories and labels limit self perceptions and the women did not engage in categorizing themselves nor their experiences. Kathleen spoke of counselling as providing the context in which she began to speak of being "battered" and Care spoke of her contact with the legal system as the context in which she began to use the term "victim." Kali made it clear that, although understanding that she had been victimized was important to her, she does not speak of herself in these terms, particularly not when she is with new friends. These women hinted at the stigma attached to these terms, a link to the deep sense of shame they felt about the violating experiences that they carried with them even after leaving, and that was readily triggered in the naming of the violence. Naming their experiences of victimization was not a simple neutral act:

You know in terms of immediately after we separated and what transpired there that to me - god knows why I was doing what I was doing and I don't think I was doing anything that was in my best interest at all at that point - and feeling totally responsible and totally like I had committed some horrendous crime by naming what had been going on and publicly doing that - I just felt I was just some thing that climbed out from under a rock and he certainly let me know that too ..

For many women speaking out about their experiences, or even having a language to do so, has not de-stigmatized the experiences nor the labels used to identify the experiences. bell hooks (1989) addresses this issue when she writes:

.. women who are victimized by male violence have had to pay a price for breaking the silence and naming the problem. They have had to be seen as fallen women, who have failed in their "feminine" role to sensitize and civilize the beast in man. A category like "battered woman" risks reinforcing this notion that the hurt woman, not only the rape victim, becomes a social pariah, set apart, marked forever by this experience. (p.89)

The women in this study articulated their resistance to such self-definitions and to constructions that implied shame rather than their day-to-day coping strategies. Instead they spoke of their deep feelings of *confusion*, of their awareness of the *insider versus outsider* perspectives of them, and of their experiences of *invisibility* both inside and

outside their relationships.

Violence in any form in an intimate relationship is fundamentally confusing because the one who is presumed to be, and at times is, a partner, supporter, and ally, at other times becomes a competitor and an enemy (Blackman, 1989). Kali captured this when she described her reaction as "it was just like how can you say these things, how can you." Elsie indicated her confusion when her husband, after calling her a "bitch," wanted to take her out for dinner. The women spoke of psychological and emotional components as having far deeper consequences with respect to their self perceptions than did the rare occurrence of physical abuse. The label 'victim' does not seem to capture these aspects of their experiences. Kathleen spoke to this differentiation when she said:

physical abuse justifies leaving - it was finding myself on the floor that really shook me up and that caused me to really hear what he says to me - to really see what he does to me on an emotional level - and it's pretty ugly. It was pretty disgusting. I didn't exist as a person (pause) - and - that's far worse - that's far worse. Because the physical battering could be (pause) - well, I said in the last year - 3 times - that's not a lot of battering - one is too many but the number of 3 is not - but everyday I was getting bombarded emotionally ..

Care spoke of the psychological and emotional components and their impact that "make it more difficult to leave because they are insidious," more difficult to name, and they do not fit our assumptions of what it means to be a victim. Kali also attended to this when she said that the emotional and psychological is:

also the stuff that goes on long after the relationship is over - it just goes on and on and on - and it twists you up in knots. (The physical abuse) makes it easier to leave because it's concrete, you can't second guess a slap in the head, that's what it is - although they do - they do try - like - what are you talking about - I never hit you. But that goes back to the crazymaking stuff - um (pause) - it is real and it is concrete and it's like a boundary whereas all the other emotional stuff you constantly sort of go over and - and second-guess yourself and again go back to that - well, what did I do .. the women end up doing that ..

Kali breaks down the additional assumption in current dominant victim discourse that the experience of victimization ends upon terminating the relationship. This is often reflected in the tidy equation of *inside* the relationship the woman is perceived as a *victim*, whereas *outside* the relationship she is presumed to be a *survivor*. The struggle of surviving or being a survivor is present long before leaving or terminating the relationship, and for some women continue long after because their ex-partners continue to threaten, harass, or stalk them. The terms victim and survivor lack the *fluidity* that reflects the women's lived experiences and hence they are inadequate and incongruous with their self

conceptualizations.

A related experience of incongruity surfaced when the women spoke of *insider* perceptions versus *outsider* perceptions. The women identified this as comparable to 'I know something that *you* do not, nor can you perceive or fully comprehend it.' Care attended to this issue when she spoke of her concern with respect to reporting her partner's assault to the police. At the time, her partner had full custody of their son. She had returned to the relationship in order to be close to her son, with the associated hope that maybe her partner had/would change. "The two of us are together but there is this agreement that he has custody - so what's going to happen with (son)? What's going to happen for me?" She has the insider knowledge of the complexity of this situation and is painfully aware of what her situation looks like from the outside to the police. From their perspective, her location within the relationship challenged her credibility. This perspective, however, ignores the extenuating circumstances of how or why she might be there, and additionally completely disregards her partner's culpability. Kathleen also spoke of this insider/outsider discrepancy in perspective and knowledge when she said:

the kids are doing okay in school, and we've got a nice home, and you dress okay, you got a job, and you've got a good job, and - but whoa - but he beats her up - so everything else - it wasn't part of the perfect picture I was trying to live ..

Kali addressed her insight as insider with respect to her *knowing* far more about the full dynamics with all the 'good and the bad' inside the relationship versus what those outside saw. The struggle for women who experience violence in their intimate relationships is that when 'outsiders' hear about their pained experiences there is a tendency to reduce all of the relationship to these pained experiences and to the violence, implied in the immediate question 'why don't you leave?' Common to other victims of violence or those in threatening situations, these women were so actively focussed *inside* the relationship that the luxury of thinking about the relationship as an outsider does not, and cannot, occur to the woman who is coping and surviving, and as well, is deeply connected inside the relationship (Graham, 1994; Herman, 1992). The women suggested that their insider understanding and insights were largely rendered invisible by those external to the relationship and to the experiences.

The women described various experiences of feeling *invisible* with their partners as well as with others. Elsie described invisibility when in response to her attempts to

communicate her concerns with her husband about his behavior, he answered with "oh, feeling sorry for yourself? Acting out again?" In talking to her doctor he denied seeing other female patients with similar issues, and her lawyer belittled her experience. Care aptly addressed feeling invisible when she said "I had no say," for example, about her partner's friends staying all night. Moreover, when she went back in to the relationship:

he would remind me that I didn't live there - you don't live here - because he had kept all the furnishing from the first time - it no longer was mine when I returned, so there was nothing new there that was mine that said that I lived there. It sounds very bizarre - I didn't live there, I didn't exist, there was nothing personal of mine there.

She experienced invisibility in the court when he spoke of her as a "useless drunk" in spite of the 10 years when she was the primary financial support. Nevertheless, he gained sole custody of their son and her sense of invisibility was intensified. Both Kathleen and Kali spoke about their husbands' complete denial of violating behaviors. They experienced their husbands' denials and efforts to silence or render invisible their realities as congruent with the broader context in which intimate violence and the women's efforts to obtain help, be seen, and be heard are dismissed, muted, and made invisible. The use of language participates in this muting, and dominant victim discourse participates in this muting and masking of the women's day-to-day lived experiences. When our subjective experiences and articulations challenge dominant perceptions and discourses, we begin to recognize the objectified forms of knowledge and the impact of this objectification on our self-conceptualizations becomes critically obvious (Smith, 1990). These women spoke in ways that disrupt current conceptualizations and prevailing discourses, and thereby create new and more complex articulations. In order to listen to and hear these new constructions, however, one has

to listen with another ear, as if hearing an 'other meaning always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them (Irigaray, 1985, p. 29).

The self-perceptions and various critical interpretations articulated by the women I interviewed position these women as "having the right to speak and to be heard .. and as *authors* of their own multiple meanings" (Davies, 1991), and as such these women exemplified agency in their lives.

Current conceptualizations of women in battering relationships as victims do not attend to their myriad acts of agency, because agency is generally constructed in opposition

to victim (Mahoney, 1994). Agency or the notion of being agents is not a widespread accessible term as is victim or survivor in the dominant or popular discourses about women who experience battering. Nor did the women in this study refer to themselves as agents per se, although they described copious and diverse self-perceptions and behaviors that implied their agency. Having agency and being agents does not imply a static or essentialist identity, but rather it indicates movement, the ability to change, the possibility for new directions, and the contradictoriness of persons, as change and contradictions are integrated, often imperceptibly. This construction is in contradistinction to the essentialist assumptions that operate in the social construction of victim as passive, in opposition to the survivor who is active.

### **Victim as a Single Identity**

The women's criticisms of victim discourse seemed primarily targeted at the essentialist and negative nature of this construct. They did not view themselves as victims because they knew so much more about themselves. The women's narratives implied this larger understanding of themselves when they described the comfort they derived from keeping their private and public lives separate. There was more to them than their victimizing experiences and they greatly valued places and spaces where the pained aspects of their lives were not in the forefront. In part, this reflected their shame but it also indicated their relief. Kathleen spoke of this when she said "people really liked me for who I was" and when she described her experiences of being effective and competent in her work. In these places she was someone other than her pain. Kali expressed her appreciation for the interactions she had with a Public Health Nurse who

just ended up - just coming around to visit and-uh um just kind of being there and-uh probably recognizing a lot of issues but not talking to me about them directly but just - she was just there .. I could tell that she liked me .. and we would discuss you know, heaven only knows what we discussed - all kinds of - we talked about larger - larger issues ..

This interaction enabled Kali to experience herself in a different manner, to perceive other aspects of herself. She expanded on this notion when she made the following analysis:

.. as opposed to focusing on the woman or naming them as a victim, instead talk about victimization and what that means. It's like (when we talk about) an illness - like well, I might have schizophrenia, but don't call me schizophrenic, you know, and that's what victim has that connotation on it for me. *It's not the sum total of who I am .. (italics added)*

Women who have experienced battering in their intimate relationships need to be validated



and recognized for their various realities.

Related to the frequent totalizing victim construct, is the victim ideology wherein everyone becomes or is a victim (Kaminer, 1992; Lamb, 1996). The critics argue that this trivializes the experiences of 'real' victims. Victim ideology has spurred a contest of various worst case scenarios in attempts to establish 'real' victimization. What degree of harm or incapacitation justifies using the label victim? Kali addressed the implications of a victim ideology that limits the victim's identity to one of submissiveness and rejects alternative behaviors when these behaviors contradict assumptions about victimhood:

Heaven forbid that a woman goes and aggressively seeks - or assertively seeks - services -- how could you possibly be a victim of wife assault, you know. You're in my face- um - if-if you stand up for yourself and your rights are - and what you need - well, wait a minute, you don't - you don't fit the picture of someone that would - you don't seem to be a victim, you're not enough of a victim - well, you can - again, I hate the word victim. You can be victimized and still have a shred of self-respect about yourself and still be able to assert that - what your entitlements are blah-blah-blah and still have someone victimize you. That's the - the two aren't impossible and yet somehow you have to be mush - and we also don't have much use for women who are mush, but in order to get anything, to be recognized that this might have happened to you, you have to be mush. It's like a rape victim, you had to have been to - well, it had to be a stranger, and you were bound, and gagged, and he had a knife at your throat for it to be rape - 'cuz otherwise, well, you're a strong healthy girl, you know - didn't you fight him off? It's the same concept. So - if you are mush - then you're a whining blithering idiot, your children aren't safe - see - that's the other thing that's happening to women as they talk about their experiences. Then the courts want to take the children away because they're not protecting them from this abusive person (long pause) - I just wish we'd spend a little more time on the men ..

Kali's analysis corresponds to my earlier exploration of contradictory meanings and messages when she explores society's contradictory messages with respect to women who are assertive and women who are victimized. Kali furthermore speaks from her various experiences with the legal system, and akin to Care's earlier discussion, she points out the displaced focus on the woman.

Based on these problematics of victim discourse and given that often those who have been victimized seem to avoid the labels, a relevant question would appear to be - who *does* use the victim construct. According to Care and Elsie's narratives the notions of victimhood is utilized by lawyers and the courts whereas Kathleen was confronted with it as an accusation from her adult daughters. It is additionally evident in the codependent literature, and it is widely used in the therapeutic community. The women in this study, in keeping with bell hooks' analyses (1984, 1989), however, unequivocally specified that this

label was detrimental and limited. These perceptions and experiences challenge us to re-examine the usefulness of this concept, and certainly they provide a cautionary note with regard to the manner in which this construct is used.

Being a victim did not capture the women's self-perceptions nor did it serve to capture the diverse and sundry ways in which these women conducted their lives, particularly with respect to all the discrepant experiences in their intimate relationships. Although the women's assertions make it clear that they did not readily identify themselves as victims, it would be naive and simplistic to argue that employing the term victim is infinitely detrimental or always foreign to the women's self-perceptions and identification processes. At unique critical points the term did provide a means to analyse their relationships to their partners, as well as give them insight into how their victimization impacted their self perceptions. In other words, even though being a *victim* did not essentially define their identity, their experiences of *victimization* did have an impact on how they structured their lives and unequivocally had an effect on their sense of selves. This was reflected in the women's 'talk' or discourse as they described their relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Problematizing the victim construct and discourse is not intended to suggest that the word victim should be avoided at all costs at all times. My contention with this construct, predicated on these women's narratives and the literature, is that its employment appears to have important consequences and implications. It is often used, however, by professionals as well as lay people, as though the various implications and broader contexts do not exist. Moreover, as stated by the women, others, particularly those in positions of privilege and power have employed the term in a derogatory and impatient manner, one whereby the women experience a disconcerting incongruence between their subjective complex realities and the social construction or simplification of their realities. As at minimal a controversial term, it begs the questions of who gets to use it, for whom is it useful, and under what circumstances might it be significant. The women throughout their interviews did not refer to themselves as victims, instead describing their experiences of victimization as occurring in the context of powerful relationships wherein their pain was intermingled with multiple varying other experiences. The women spoke about the significance of recognizing their victimization without having their self perceptions or their identities reduced to this aspect

of their lives.

The women's narratives indicated that there was no single experience of *being* a victim, although the various situations, processes, activities, and behaviors that they engaged in within their settings and in their relationships certainly had some distinctive as well as consistent traits that enabled them to later name the abuse and recognise their victimization. Although their victimization had such a deep impact on them that these experiences appeared to organize and structure their lives, it did not completely determine how they defined or conceptualized themselves, nor did they wish others to see them solely in terms of their victimization. Talking about themselves as victims was not a preferred construction in these women's narratives.

## Chapter Nine: Issues Pertaining to Counselling Practices

.. everything and anything is only a theory - the whole concept of this, - of owning one's response, *that's* someone's theory - how come it got to have this evangelical movement - it's this dogmatic 'this is it' - well, no, it's not, it could be this, AND it could be this, AND it could be this. - Kali

The places where I am hurt most mark the places I am least tolerant, most vicious. Where I have been gravely injured and am most healed, these form my scant geography of wisdom. Where I have never been hurt at all, where I have never lacked for resource or nurture, these are the stories I find it most difficult to perceive. (Arnott, 1994, p. 31)

In the interviews the women described both hindering and helpful experiences in their attempts to obtain help from counselling professionals, (including counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists), regarding their experiences of violence in their intimate relationships. The women variously spoke of ineffective, even potentially dangerous responses to their efforts to obtain information and help. Their narratives indicated that these incidents of unsuitable professional responses occurred both in relationship or couple counselling, as well as in individual therapy. This is not to say that the women did not eventually locate informative and appropriate counselling support; they did. All four women indicated that when they were able to locate a professional working within the *battered women's movement* they finally received supportive, validating, and effective counselling. An exploration of the range of responses, as narrated by the women, may spur us on to examine appropriate, effective interventions when working with women who experience violence in their intimate relationships, and to stop blaming the victims.

In this chapter, I extrapolate from the women's narratives in order to examine counselling practices. I begin with an exploration of those counselling approaches and interventions that presented as obstacles to the women, followed by a discussion of beneficial counselling interactions, and, last, an explication of a variety of issues that, based on the women's narratives, warrant consideration and awareness for anyone working with women who are/have been victims of violence in their intimate relationships. In this latter section each of the issues is simply highlighted, given the limitation of space in this thesis. They illustrate some substantial issues for further consideration with respect to effective interventions. Where fitting, I chose to reference available literature, because this provides additional sources that address similar concerns, and because these sources serve

to validate and expand on the content in the women's narratives as presented here. The literature utilized in this section, although relevant and current, is by no means presumed to be comprehensive in addressing this subject matter.

### **Hindering Responses From Counselling Professionals**

The women described ways in which their voiced concerns pertaining to violence or to relationship dynamics as experienced with their partners was minimized or ignored in the counselling setting. This served to silence them and to render their experiences, as well as their concerns, invisible. The implied message was that their situation was not that serious, that they needed to work harder, and that if particular issues such as communication patterns, self esteem, or alcohol were addressed, everything would be fine. It was not for lack of the women's (repeated) attempts to seek counselling, whether couple or individual, that determined the continuation and length of the relationship. In particular, three concerns raised by the women with respect to (problematic) counselling included: (a) a focus on maintaining an intact relationship by defining the issues as relationship problems and/or a primary focus on the individual women, not their partners, (b) circumventing appropriate naming of the violence or exploration of critical dynamics such as the role of power and control exercised by the male partner, and relatedly (c) lack of addressing safety issues. As will become clear in the following excerpts, the women did not speak to these concerns in a uniform manner in the interviews, nor did each woman address each concern. They did, however, give voice to parallel explorations with respect to similar concerns.

#### **Primary Focus on Relationship Issues and/or on the Individual Woman**

A primary focus on the relationship whereby the counsellor saw both partners in a couple together and did not see the partners separately, was described by Elsie, Kathleen, and Kali. The implication is that the problem is a shared or mutual one, that the adults involved exercise equal power, and that their engagement in the problematic issue is the same or at least complementary. Consequently, the women did not feel heard or visible with regard to their experiences of violence, including threats and various forms of psychological and emotional abuse within their everyday contexts. Consequently the women felt that their concerns were not taken seriously. Elsie's description of one last attempt to see a counsellor before leaving her husband inferred an experience of invisibility:

I thought I'll give it one try. Everything I read said you should not have abusive people, you know, in the same room. So I said, are you going to see us separately .. first? - oh no-no, just sit down on the chesterfield. I'll interview you and you'll

interview me and see if we're suited. So I - I spell out the abuse. (She asks) you think you're being abused do you Mrs. --, and she must have seen the plea in my eyes because I knew this was the last thing - I knew I was going to leave if this didn't work .. she never saw it and didn't *choose* to see it. Oh, you think you're being abused - oh, Mr. --, what do you think? Oh, well her kids drive me crazy and she - she doesn't know about money - total lies. He never sees my kids, I never had any money except my own.

Elsie's readings about battering and psychological abuse, gave her the insight and the fortitude at that point to walk out of the session and not to return. She felt, however, blocked, confused, and dismayed at the incongruency between her readings and this real-life experience. Her husband later accused her saying, "what is the matter with you and he's thrown that at me several times." This encounter was similar to other interactions with her partner wherein Elsie became defined as the unwilling partner and as the *real* problem.

Similarly, Kathleen spoke of counsellors who, predicated on beliefs that there were *relationship* problems, focussed on keeping the *marriage* intact, rather than addressing her husband's violence. She recognized the danger in such counselling work:

.. counselling 10 years ago <sup>35</sup> was to counsel the two of us - give me some warnings and give me some help with how to deal with you know, - when he gets angry - uh - tell him you won't tolerate it and then walk out. But that doesn't resolve the problem - and at times it got me into deeper trouble - now I see that but at the time I was trying to work on this marriage. Dangerous advice, really. I did have a psychiatrist tell me separately that I should have money set aside, that I should have a safe place to run to, yet on the other hand I'm trying to work on this relationship in the counselling - so these were two confusing messages. I don't understand how someone can see - I appreciate you're trying to keep a marriage together but when it's so blatant - I really think it's unfair to the woman to - to let her think that this is possibly going to - to be resolved - it isn't and he did at the very end tell us that we should divorce - go our own way and for me that was the end of it ..

Kathleen described her resulting confusion when the counsellor continued a focus that maintained support of the marriage, yet told her on the side that she had probably better leave. He continued, however, to work with the two of them as though he had never made this comment to Kathleen.

An important related problem voiced by Kathleen and already referred to by Elsie, pertains to safety with respect to couples' counselling. They spoke of the untenable situation in which women are inadvertently put at great risk when they attempt to openly

---

<sup>35</sup> Kathleen located her experience historically as happening some time ago and one might assume that counselling practices have changed. Elsie, however, spoke of similar very recent encounters with counsellors and based on my own experience of am aware of counsellors who do not view couple counselling as problematic.

address their concerns in a therapy session with their husband present, and then must deal with his responses later. Kathleen stated:

.. one session where -- (he) was obviously feeling intimidated, he got up off his chair and charged towards the counsellor. That was one of my clues and-and what happened was I could not be honest with this counsellor with my husband there because I didn't know how I'd pay for it later .. that's terrible - that is - that's what's wrong with the counselling of couples - when they know abuse is a part of it. So what I did was I booked appointments to go on my own when my husband was wanting to put me in the hospital, he wanted me on drugs, he wanted me sedated, so that I could come to my senses. I was losing it - I was having a nervous breakdown. I WASN'T having a breakdown .. My husband had to do the same thing - he needed separate counselling.

Kathleen was able to take her own perceptions seriously enough to schedule separate appointments. This insight, however, is not always equally readily available to women who are attempting to engender critical changes in their intimate relationships. It is noteworthy that the psychiatrist himself did not suggest separate counselling in spite of his own encounter with her husband.

Kali too, expressed the skewed attention to what were surmised to be relationship problems, assuming that attending to these issues would resolve their problems:

.. it was more focussing on the alcohol and how might we communicate better with each other or whatever.

In privileging the relationship, these professionals focussed on issues they presumed were relational, which resulted in the women feeling confused about their subjective perceptions. Consequently the women increased their efforts to resolve the issues, and thereby remained focussed on the relationship rather than being able to consider other possible options. It is of interest that alcohol, as indicated by Kali, was perceived to be a relationship issue.<sup>36</sup> In Kali's situation, the battering as with the alcohol, reflected the behaviors of her husband, yet his behavior nor his accountability were addressed; instead, they were seen as a couple and were believed to have a joint problem.

---

<sup>36</sup> This is in keeping with the codependency literature that has emerged in the past decade both with respect to relationships in which alcohol is a problem, as well as codependency issues presumed to stem from a variety of dysfunctional family interactions. Women are viewed as *part* (or sometimes *all*) of the problem, for example, as "enablers," or as *seeking* men with drinking problems (or battering issues). In relationships in which alcohol is an issue, as with relationships in which there is battering, the woman is thought to be at least equally accountable in a co-active or complementary role. He has the disease of alcoholism and she has the disease of codependency; she makes his disease possible, and it is assumed that they draw each other like magnets (Kaminer, 1992; Tallen, 1990). The women's acts of resistance and resilience are subsumed into a (re)conceptualization of their behaviors as pathological.

Additionally the women described working with counsellors whose focus implied that the women were the ones identified with the problem. Elsie's counsellor, for example, encouraged her to stand up for herself, to take more control in the relationship, and to lay down some boundaries by encouraging her to open her own bank account, to demand her own money, and "don't let him go through your purse," although these behaviors enraged him. Elsie described the results of her efforts to put into practice her counsellor's advice:

I was starting to stand up to him because I had gone for counselling and I started the "I" messages and I said, please don't talk to me like that, please show me respect, and of course that made him madder and madder, and he's upscaled the abuse and the raging and I was - frightened and confused .. it became worse and worse - it escalated ..

Elsie's words exemplify the impact and the inappropriateness of this potentially dangerous counselling intervention, an intervention that ignored Elsie's warnings about her husband's threatening behaviors. Elsie attempted to understand the counsellor's intention when she stated:

.. and I can't say she told me the wrong things, I guess that was the only thing to try, for us to try and set some boundaries, but it definitely did not work with this batterer. He was losing control I guess, and he was getting scared - I didn't know that at the time but - because she never mentioned control - that word never came into our conversation which is strange after a year and a half.

Elsie suggests that because the counsellor focussed on her, she missed assessing the potent underlying dynamics that, based on her husband's abusive interactions with her, was likely a critical factor in Elsie's withdrawal of boundaries early on in their relationship.

Accommodating her husband enabled Elsie to avoid certain conflicts and maintain some degree of peace and stability in the relationship. Of interest is the length of time that Elsie worked with this counsellor without appropriate attention paid to issues of control and power.

Again echoing Elsie's words, was Kathleen's elaboration of counselling practices that implied that *she* ought to change, the presumption being that this would positively impact the marriage, or at least give Kathleen the tools with which to experience increased satisfaction in her marriage. Kathleen spoke of her encounter with a "young counsellor:"

(who) was trying to build up my self esteem and build up my control but boy we - I'd be there for 50 years at the rate we were going..

She recognized that self esteem was not the critical issue at that point for her. These counsellors operated on the premise that Kathleen's *presenting* concern of self esteem, was



the *defining* one, rather than considering that self esteem may in itself reflect a larger, more salient, underlying, and ongoing issue. This interaction with the counsellor occurred despite Kathleen's depictions of her husband's violent behaviors. I am not suggesting that self esteem is never the issue because low self esteem is frequently experienced by women who have lived with men who batter (Jones & Schechter, 1992). We must, however, be careful about the assumed or implied directionality, that is, from the woman's low self esteem to her marital dissatisfaction or her partner's battering. Both Kathleen and Elsie described counsellors who assumed that their low self esteem caused them to be unhappy in their relationships. Counsellors have erroneously suggested that a woman with low self esteem triggers or causes her partner to abuse her, implying a direct relationship between improvement in the woman's self esteem and termination of her partner's abuse (Jones & Schechter, 1992). These faulty and simplistic links are harmful to the women, and rather than conceptualizing the woman's low self esteem as the cause of his violence, it appears more likely to be the result of her humiliating and undermining experiences with a partner who violates her. Of interest in this study was the finding that the women described themselves in various arenas in their lives as competent, confident, spirited, and industrious prior to and in the early years of their committed relationships, and even later their stories exemplified their resilience, perseverance, and resourcefulness. They noted, however, that their self perceptions were altered in the context of living with sporadic and unpredictable psychological, emotional, and physical violation.

Similarly, in view of an *individual* focus without consideration for the larger context, another counsellor missed an incident that was critical to Kathleen, a situation wherein her husband continued to harass her after she left him the first time by, for example, intruding into her mother's home where she was staying and rampaging through her bedroom. Yet the counsellor, because the focus was on marriage counselling, apparently ignored this issue.

In the case of battering, presuming that resolution of the issues is possible by focussing on the women, implies an isolation of the woman as the problem and exemplifies victim-blaming approaches. The individualism that prevails in counselling and in therapy is congruent with the broader North American sociocultural orientation of individualism (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). In the counselling setting, with the additional factor that

women (particularly women in relationships in which battering occurs) are more likely to seek counselling than men are, there has been a tendency to attempt to reshape individual women with the general intent of making them increasingly independent, presuming that consequently they will be safer within their community. Although not clearly stated as such, the general tacit thinking is that if women are better equipped emotionally and psychologically, they will be able to ensure their own safety from male violence. By implication the larger sociocultural climate and context with respect to gendered violence is ignored. Bobash and Dobash (1992) challenge these assumptions. They warn against assuming the following simplistic imbalanced perception:

By becoming less 'helpless' they will be better able to handle the men currently beating them. By securing mental and emotional strength, as opposed to material and social means, women will be able to escape and will, thereafter, be better equipped emotionally to avoid choosing another such male partner. Thus, the *solution to male violence lies in female psychology* (italics added) and women's transformation through therapy. (p.74)

In this manner violence against women in their intimate relationships, in addition to being individualized, is also psychologized, decontextualized, and depoliticized. This individualizing perspective is the central thread in the self-help handbooks that are full of advice to women, how to work on themselves, to take charge, and to "grow," (e.g., Beattie, 1987; Norwood, 1985; Schaef, 1986). This literature, in the context of women whose daily lives in fact do revolve around strategizing, taking charge, and taking responsibility, exemplifies victim-blaming. In relationships in which men batter, there is no simple link between male violence and female helplessness, and the battering frequently occurs in the face of the women's varied strategic acts of resistance.<sup>37</sup> The women who participated in this study demonstrated great emotional and psychological strength in their

---

<sup>37</sup> It is of interest to consider for a moment the double bind that appears to face many women who live with men who abuse them. For example, Kathleen and Kali spoke of counsellors who suggested they find ways to *pacify* their partners, to make sure that they did everything to ensure his comfort in the hopes that *their behaviors* would defuse and prevent his anger. Elsie, on the other hand, was admonished to challenge her husband. Both these sets of behaviors have more recently been conceptualized as "helpless" or codependent behaviors. Concurrently, these women were/are also berated with the questions of why *they* put up with their partners' transgressions and *their* behaviors are scrutinized for how they are triggering their partners' violence. Notably, all of these conceptualizations focus on and construct the woman as the problem. If the woman *appears* to resist she must be the root cause of the violence, and if she does *not appear* to resist she is also assumed to be the problem. All of these constructions present as theoretical (ungrounded) challenges to dominant definitions of femininity without fundamentally questioning or challenging the gendered values and structures with which we live.

resilience, in their unending efforts to explore alternatives within their relationships and in their efforts to seek help outside their relationships. To assume that transforming the psychology of an individual female without attending to “material and social means” is to participate in sustaining dominant beliefs that intimate violence is a private, individual matter. Acknowledgment of the larger sociocultural and practical contexts, both of the women and of male violence in intimate relationships, is only effectively addressed by the introduction of material goods (e.g., safe housing) and social measures (e.g., advocacy and changes in protection policies). Frequently and unfortunately, therapy seems to fall far short in attending to these other factors, in its primary focus of *one-on-one* therapy and in the lack of practical, proactive support of the women.

In the context of individual-focussed counselling, the women described feeling criticized or judged. Elsie spoke of the strained experience of working with a counsellor as well as with a psychologist, who openly expressed impatience with Elsie's ambivalence about leaving her relationship. She gave the following example:

I saw a psychologist and he said 'what the hell do you stay for - what did you marry him for? So then I let go of that after a while - I thought - this is not going to do anything..

From Elsie's narrative it would appear that these professionals had their own agendas and were unable to hear Elsie's voice, her considerations, her need to pace herself, or the time needed for her to integrate new information that would eventually enable her to take leave. Elsie spoke of these experiences as shaming and intimidating, making it difficult for her to return to these professionals, as well as inhibiting her from immediately seeking other more supportive and validating counsellors for fear of repeating such painful encounters. Importantly, these interactions with counselling professionals did not empower her to depart from her relationship. These professionals were not focussed on the relationship per se, nor primarily on keeping the marriage intact, and they pathologized Elsie's staying without understanding the nature of Elsie's ambivalence. Various prominent authors in this field suggest it is misguided to challenge the women with respect to why they stay. Rather it is critical and germane to address *why the men behave in the manner that they do*, and *why the men do not let the women go* (Browne, 1987; Jones, 1980). These men use violence because they can, and they can because no one stops them (Jones, 1994) (see footnote on page 51 for a recent example). The manner in which a woman who has

experienced battering is treated by public opinion, public institutions, medical and mental health facilities, as well as legal structures, both reflects attitudes commonly held toward women who are victims of violence *and* determines how effective these various establishments will be. Grounded in the narratives of these women, as well as other female victims of violence, it becomes apparent that society continues, in a variety of ways, to tolerate the criminal acts of assault and battery (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Jones, 1994; Rodning, 1988; Sipe & Hall, 1996).

Kali likewise spoke of encounters with counsellors in which she felt misunderstood and judged:

Another counsellor I saw - I saw her quite a lot one-to-one and I found that she was quite judgmental of me ..

In the context of various other's perceptions of her marriage, including her family and friends, the dominant thread was one of normalizing his behavior, predicated on the assumption that 'men are like that', with the implication that she has/is the problem at hand. These professional responses had an impact on Kali's self perceptions, playing into her already strong sense of self-doubt. In living with someone who battered, Kali had come to doubt her subjective perceptions and these interactions with professionals further clouded this issue for her. She exemplified an experience with a counsellor early on in her marriage when, instead of receiving support and help, Kali felt dismissed and rendered invisible:

I had a counsellor who was a woman and I can tell you very plainly - I was 22-23-24 - at the time - yeh, 24, (pause) it was more like - you're young, why don't you go into modelling and blah-blah-blah .. it was almost like on a level she empathized with my husband .. the poor guy who has this smart attractive wife .. *now* I can analyse that ..

These excerpts attest to critical, missed opportunities by professionals to appropriately assess and intervene in a distressing situation. Kali went on to explore the judgment sometimes present among counselling professionals indicated in their assumptions concerning when or how a woman ought to leave, and she warns counsellors to consider the complexity of the situations:

I think there's still a lot of judging of - if you don't leave and dah-dah-dah or if you go back and all of that stuff .. I think it's really important to recognize that there are so many factors contributing to this - that the person is emotionally invested in this - there's so many things that - that are a part of that - uh - it's really important to - uh - to recognize um - that how you feel about that person on a personal level is really important. It's going to have a great impact on how successful that counselling relationship is going to be ..

Implied in Kali's words is a critique of dominant beliefs about counsellor neutrality; a judgmental counsellor will not be effective, but neither can a counsellor be neutral and hope to genuinely support a woman who is experiencing violence in her intimate relationship.

### **Circumventing Appropriate Naming of the Violence**

It is of interest that although couple counselling focussed on the *relationship*, the women criticized various counselling professionals for their inattentance to *relationship dynamics* pertaining to issues of male violence, particularly with respect to power and control as a key feature of relationships in which battering occurs (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Graham, 1994). Kathleen, for example, criticized the initial counsellors she saw for their lack of pertinent knowledge concerning the underlying dynamics of relationships in which battering is experienced:

.. that was my whole life - was up here, down there, up here, down here (makes rollercoaster motion) - I felt like a yo-yo and (pause) - and nobody ever caught onto that - nobody ever said (pause) in counselling - of all the 3 we went to what this yo-yo effect really was - it was him getting scared off and dragging me back in - as soon as he felt secure again - boom! .. He had my emotions going like this (makes a circular motion, then up and down) - up and down - why does - how come I let him do that? Well, (much later) what I found out is that's how a controller works. He offers you the world - the world can be anything - it can be a flower - it depends on the degree of need. And as soon as you're comfortable and you think oh - this is wonderful, bam! When you understand that, then you can see it in your own relationship..

Kathleen addressed the need for relevant information that provided her with insight into her husband's behaviors. This insight paved the way for her to disengage from this relationship. In not naming the violence or the patterns of power and control, various counselling professionals also missed attendance to the issue of safety, and to establishing safety or escape plans.

Similar to Kathleen, Kali too articulated frustration at the lack of appropriate attention to the issues of violence with respect to her husband's behaviors. She stated:

we went for counselling, we did all kinds of stuff and you know, I would describe these scenarios and no one would say they were violent. No one would say that somebody trying to choke you to death is, you know, - like no one would say that, you know, throwing you out, like lifting the bed up and tipping it over and you in it at 3 a.m. is you know inappropriate or, you know - after we separated, things like coming and smashing down the front door ..

She went on to state that the counsellor should have addressed this issue with honesty and clarity, clearly naming the violence and the responsibility appropriately:

(what would have helped was) just saying that this is what this is - this is violence,

this is abusive, this is not, this is not how you re-relate to someone in a relationship and-and you can't blame alcohol for that behavior. You have to take responsibility for that behavior and that was just never named, ever.

Kali criticizes her counsellor for not naming the violence. The experiences of both Kathleen and Kali are indicative of how those in a position of power can often be blind to issues of power, and thereby support the dominant silence that cloaks and leaves intact power and violence. Connell (1987) contextualizes violence by examining it from the perspective of gendered power relations. He states "it is often difficult to see beyond individual acts of force or oppression to a *structure* of power, a set of social relations with some scope and permanence" (p.107). He further posits that *intimate* violence often constructed by the media (and I would argue, counselling professionals) as individual deviance, is relational violence that is deeply embedded in dominant ideologies of male supremacy and power inequalities, which "far from being a deviation from a social order, it is in a significant sense an enforcement of it" (p.107). Connell provides a threefold definition of power: (a) as force and the ability to use it, (b) as related to privilege and unequal access to resources whether this be within a global context (i.e., society at large) or within the local structure of the household, and (c) as the ability to define one's experiences and reality(ies). Lipman-Blumen (1994) correspondingly defines power as

that set of processes whereby one party (be it an individual, group, institution, or State) can gain and maintain the capacity to impose its will repeatedly upon another, despite any opposition, by its potential to contribute or withhold critical resources from the central task, as well as by offering or withholding rewards, or by threatening or invoking punishment. (p. 110)

These definitional explications of power point out the inherent relational component in power, as well as acknowledging that power is linked to, as well as systemically embedded, in larger structures. Particularly important to relationships in which women experience violence is Connell's (1987) analysis in which he goes on to establish a relationship between forms of power and their translation into embodied experiences. He states:

The social definition of men as holders of power is translated not only into mental body-images and fantasies, but into muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body. This is one of the main ways in which the power of men becomes 'naturalized,' i.e., seen as part of the order of nature. It is very important in allowing belief in the superiority of men, and the oppressive practices that flow from it, to be sustained by men who in other respects have very little power. (p.85)

These socially embedded, ideologically-loaded cultural messages with regard to actions and

meanings have an impact on our bodies because we incorporate these messages and act on them. This is not to suggest that change cannot or does not occur, but rather to expose the deeply rooted nature and impact of power in our social relations. It further implies yet another critique of the self-help and codependency literature in their tendency to treat these matters individually and superficially.

### **Safety and/or Escape Plans**

Counselling professionals working with women who experience battering are in a strategic position to address the issue of safety and to help the client draw up a safety plan. The implication of such work is first, that the woman receives the messages that her situation is serious, that she is being taken seriously, and that his behavior is in fact criminal. Second, having a safety plan in place increases the likelihood that the woman will use it (Dutton, 1992). As indicated by the women in this study, the task of leaving was a looming one. We only need to think of the enormity of moving from one home to another in our own lives, to gain some understanding of such an event in the lives of these women. They must additionally confront and attend to concerns or fears for possible violent responses. Moreover, as described by all four of the women in this study, leaving the relationship brought on a host of other problems, in particular, those of custody, and personal safety. Ann Jones (1994) demonstrates through the lives of various women, that in spite of doing "all the right things" including leaving the men that beat them, obtaining restraining orders, calling the police when the men came back or harassed them, and fighting in the courts with respect to laying criminal charges, women were still murdered by their ex-partners. Hence the need for counselling professionals to attend to all aspects of this issue without trivializing the women's concerns for safety with respect to leaving and sometimes long after.

The women verbalized their need for clearly articulated guidelines and support, found too frequently to be lacking when they sought professional help. Kathleen narrated her experience with a psychiatrist who lacked clarity in his attendance to the issue of leaving and therefore came across as confusing in his dual presentation:

The psychiatrist who said if you can find the courage - leave - and I thought if it's courage I'm lacking why can't you help me find the courage.. All I could think was - well, help me - and he didn't. If I have it why would I need you. I needed a clear statement like come back on Monday, Kathleen, and let's talk about how you can get out. Or a phone call later after we had walked out - some sort of help on his part recognizing - he's the professional - he sees this man, he's had him come

across the room at him, he's talked to him ..

Kathleen indicated she needed greater clarity with regard to what leaving her husband would mean, how this would take shape, and how she might proceed. She went on to question counselling ethics in the context of not only her experience, but the psychiatrist's as well when she said:

How can this man, a professional, allow me to walk out of there, back into god-knows-what because he knows I'm not even strong enough to get out of it. So the confusion was between "bye Kathleen, and yet you need to leave and this is what you need" - and they felt like empty words. He (psychiatrist) says your husband - there is not a psychologist or psychiatrist in town that can predict how far your husband will go with his rages. And then I had to take that as being?..

She found the psychiatrist's words to be "empty" because they were not attached to any concrete plan and because there were numerous unfinished and complex details that she would need to deal with in order to leave, particularly with regard to leaving in the context of potentially jeopardizing her personal safety. The psychiatrist did not attend to these factors. Her words suggest she needed support as well as clear practical guidance, given that she was not dealing with an ordinary situation, but rather a potentially violent and very dangerous one. Her situation reflects the difference inherent in *insider/outsider* experiences as linked to concerns for safety. Kathleen, being *inside* the relationship had concrete reason to fear for her safety, whereas the psychiatrist, standing *outside* the relationship, could afford, and indeed did have a less critical view of the situation with respect to personal safety. Kathleen's words suggest that to assume that the woman can walk away from such an intimate, delicate and deeply rooted situation is professionally irresponsible and naive. Further, the psychiatrist's words of warning that implied his understanding of the gravity of her situation, seemed incongruent to Kathleen with his lack of appropriate follow-up. Effective counselling work under these circumstances requires a thorough discussion about safety issues and the development of a concrete plan of escape (Dutton, 1992; Sipe & Hall, 1996), while concurrently respectfully recognizing the woman's own timing of this event.

### **Additional Concerns**

In contrast to the above women, Care's narration implied more limited contact with counselling professionals, as she found appropriate counselling through a women's centre. Although she describes a very different experience, Care did mention her conflict with a



family court counsellor whom she believed had a limited understanding of her situation specifically, as well as of men who batter in general. Care stated that this counsellor compartmentalized the issue of violence and failed to see future implications of her partner's violent behaviors. In her words:

.. she's just seeing that there - I see it that she sees there is nothing wrong with what - how things are set up now (with him having custody). What's wrong is that he is misusing it (pause) - he should not have as much time with (son) as he does. His time should be (pause) restricted and supervised - that he's a dangerous man. They should listen to the woman's voice - and the child's voice - because he is setting (son) up, for when he is 10 and 12, he's going to be big enough and old enough to take a hit (pause) - because (son) will be at that age when he'll start standing up and he's going to get it ..

Care declared that the violence she experienced from her partner was indicative of how he handled his frustrations and conflicts he encountered in general, *not* just with her.<sup>38</sup> She indicated that when his need for power and control was threatened he resorted to physical violence and this behavior would be re-enacted (indeed was already occurring) with their young son, particularly as he became old enough to challenge his father. She expressed her wariness at the court counsellor's readiness to keep her ex-partner's violent behaviors toward her as being separate or different from how he behaved as a father. Care suggested that this is a naive and dangerous distinction. She also insinuated that this perspective minimized the seriousness of his violence. There are several writers who support the women's concerns that when men are violent with their female spouses, they are also (if not immediately, then eventually) violent with their children (e.g., Browne, 1987; Jones & Schechter, 1992; Sipe & Hall, 1996). Kali too, suggested that this distinction between the man who batters and the man as nonviolent father is a false one, particularly as the children become older, and/or the father perceives the children to challenge his authority in some manner.<sup>39</sup> In Care's experience, this distinction made in the courts whereby her partner

---

<sup>38</sup> Of interest here is the implication that if his violence *only* occurs in her presence or with her, that she in fact *is* the triggering factor for his violent outbreaks, once again inferring her accountability. The women felt this to be a crazymaking assumption.

<sup>39</sup> Kali and Care spoke of their concerns that as children become older and begin to challenge their fathers' authority, they too will be targeted. Both these women also spoke of their experiences that the children remain (innocent) vehicles through which the men continue to attempt to get to them, and that the current legal handling of these situations ignores these ramifications. In this light it is of interest to again note the current trial of the North Vancouver man who "axed" his two children, killing one and causing permanent brain damage to the other, leaving his ex-wife a note stating that she would lose all three of them.

obtained custody of their child, resulted in her decision to re-enter the relationship in order to be near her son and to provide whatever protection or alternative parenting she could.

Last, with respect to counselling practices that were experienced as lacking in respect and impeding effective work, was Kali's concern that counsellors be able to set aside their own agendas, to work with each woman as unique, and to follow and support the woman as she defines her own journey. Kali articulated her concerns that in psychology we tend to sequentially link certain "problems" with certain "solutions," complete with a timetable, a prescribed step-by-step process and assumptions about the course and direction of events, presuming this is *the* route to healing. She stated:

.. it's like in the course of my counselling I was able to identify that when I was young that I had been sexually abused and not by my dad, and I like to say that up front because everybody assumes immediately it's your father .. I have a good relationship with my father .. (and) just because I've been able to identify that and deal with that, there's this whole - well, that explains this and that explains that and - I'm sorry, no, it doesn't. It doesn't at all. It-it is a key for me to figure out some things about myself but it isn't the sum total of who I am either. It's an experience I had and yes, so it led to maybe this experience and that experience .. It also doesn't mean that once I sort of started to work on this that I have to do this, this and this, in order to be healed of that - I don't believe that either - and so to sort of set up this agenda or system or whatever - um - I don't think it works .. you're not going to be able to be particularly helpful to them. Um - and also not to make assumptions about - oh well, X equals, you know - you've had this experience so this means dah-dah-dah. It's just - it's not linear - it doesn't work that way and again it's very disrespectful.

Kali in her narrative aptly critiqued simplistic cause and effect relationships so commonly sought and established in psychology, in the counselling field, and in the popular self help movement. She further problematized dominant assumptions that there is a particular order to the working through of issues in counselling, particularly when there a history of abuse. She questions the frequently prescriptive or recipe-style approaches in counselling or therapy with respect to 'confronting the issues' and 'working them through.' Her words suggest that the meaning of how people change or heal may vary greatly and empathic counsellors must be flexible to be effective.

In addition to these various expressions of what the women experienced as hindering professional practices, they also described experiences with counsellors that aided them in their struggles, and these are the subject of this next section.

### **Beneficial Counselling Practices**

Investigating counselling practices was not the goal of this thesis, nor were the

women specifically asked about counselling interventions, but they nevertheless spoke spontaneously and variously about their therapy experiences. Each woman mentioned aspects that they believed were important and positively impacted their process. They spoke of key counselling moments that were characterized as genuinely supportive, validating, and respectful. Such positive counselling experiences enabled the women to clarify the issues, to focus on their strengths, to develop a plan, and to clarify their options. The women intimated a qualitative difference between counsellors who appeared competent in working with issues pertaining to women and violence, versus counsellors who did not seem well equipped. Having seen a variety of counselling professionals, both Kathleen and Elsie described the quality of being heard, in the presence of a counsellor who appeared to have 'insider' understanding. As Kathleen put it:

I knew immediately when I talked to a counsellor from a battered women's service - not because she said - that he was bad - it was that she said things that only a person who's been through it knows - that's where I started to understand things.

And Elsie, too, described a critical session with a counsellor who told her:

I'm going through it, so I know exactly what's happening to you. For all this therapy I have gone to, all these years I've suffered and then this one hour. That was the most fantastic thing.

The validation in these counselling sessions was not a superficial token, but seems to have been grounded in experience based on personal insight. Being listened to and heard with compassion and acceptance, without impatience or judgment, was central to effective counselling practices.

Another important feature, that of reconstructing the history of abuse, was also described as being critical to the women's subjective understandings of their marital histories and the manner in which their husbands had treated them. Both Kathleen and Elsie described the act of history-taking by the counsellor as an opportunity for a reality check. As well, in Kathleen words:

.. a history-taking that resulted in naming the violence and saying you're not doing anything wrong. He's worse than typical and I - that was - I couldn't believe that - I mean that was incredible to hear that. Now I needed some proof though - it was huge but it was also - I needed some validation myself - you show me how this is - can be, and we worked on it for 2 years, it's been 2.5 years now.

The history-taking enabled them to express a range of emotions in a safe space, heretofore not experienced with counselling professionals. In other words, although they had

previously doubted themselves and their perceptions, had questioned the "badness" of the events, and had wondered about the justification of leaving, they found that in telling their stories in a safe environment, they were finally able to begin to disentangle and free themselves from the confusion of the relationship and to gain a more accurate perception of their partners' behaviors (Dutton, 1992; Sipe & Hall, 1996). These women described counsellors who addressed the issue of violence, who did not cause the women to feel ashamed of their experiences of victimization, and who utilized "skills and tools" in attending to diverse concerns. Kathleen put it like this:

All she did was she removed a lot of things that were scary for me. We worked on a lot of questions. How will I support myself? How can I do it? How can I get out of the house and take things and how can I leave things behind? .. We had to go through the issue of money and how will it - what if he finds out - Will movers - phone movers, find out what they do, find out that they are more than willing to help you - they'll send the biggest guys they've got .. breaking it into little chunks for me to digest and then also learning about my kids - why did my kids turn against me the first time? Why did they do this? They even said - no they'd never seen any abuse (pause) - and, well, they did acknowledge - yes - they'd seen it because they heard a scream .. and here I am with a bleeding back ..

Kathleen's words depict a counselling focus on external considerations in conjunction with a focus on internalized issues. To divide these foci into a dualism of *practical* (external) versus *psychological* (internal) issues is too simplistic because, as Kathleen indicates, both have *practical* implications and are intertwined with each other. Competent, balanced counselling attends to all concerns without necessarily privileging one (for example the psychological) over the other (for example the practical). Kathleen summarized components of therapy that she believed were important when she stated:

Counsellors definitely need to see you alone, without your partner - you can't say anything in front of your partner - you don't know what the consequences will be. They need to be able to tackle the fear of leaving and all the practical issues. Just the fact that maybe the movers will phone and say "oh, is Mrs. X. there? I'm calling about the move" (laughs) - one dead lady. Don't let him know - you can be indifferent but you can't let him know. It was very difficult to be sneaky for me - I'm a very up front person but you learn how to be sneaky, you really do, and it's amazing how you carry it off so that they don't really suspect .. why by sneaky and not just leave? - Well, that's not practical, that's not reality. I mean I think that if the man has put in hospital, yeh, I don't think you really want to go back but then you've got the law behind you then .. But a woman like me - I have to think about my financial future ..

Kathleen drew attention to the issue that these are not ordinary relationships that the women are attempting to terminate; these are not relationships in which separating and divorce can be rationally addressed and carefully considered. The potential for violence

changes the fundamental handling of critical issues. She alludes to fear, a fear not only of changing substantial life circumstances (from being in a relationship to continuing solo), but also a fear linked to significant safety concerns. Each woman in her own way formulated the predicament of not being able to communicate with their partner due to his volatility. Although they expressed their willingness and desire, with whatever attendant stress and strain, to attempt to sort through the various issues in a carefully, thought-out, sane manner, this was not possible. I return to this issue of fear in the latter part of this chapter.

Care, Kathleen, and Elsie mentioned the usefulness of written information that they were able to tuck away and refer to later. Care spoke of obtaining a pamphlet that she kept:

- it was at a transition house - those lists - where they show signs of being similar to being in a prison camp - what captors did to captives - which at that time I found very helpful because it was - there were all these little things like the nitpicking and this and that and-um (pause) - that was useful for me 'cuz then I thought - then I saw that none of this was me - and that it wasn't just a personality quirk kind of thing - they were - like they were real things to be watching for and they were doing something to me and then after that - I just kind of knew - I just kind of liked it because then I had a language - crazy-making and all of that and I was understood - and knowing it had nothing to do with me.

Kathleen spoke of the validation that comes from knowing that such a painful and hidden aspect of her life was being properly addressed in print, and suggested this is important for other women living in similar circumstances:

what women need is places they can go to that can help them name it - give them the information. You know it was back east, knowing he was hitting me - I still have it in my purse - it made me feel so strong - because there again - it was in print, reinforcing - this is now that little voice in me - has now become a piece of paper - it's now become people I talk to. Somewhere it's been recognized.

Kathleen's words speak to the common wish to have our experiences validated by society at large, to know that the "little voice" in our heads has a larger sociocultural context that validates what we think and feel when we want to make fundamental changes in our lives, especially when these changes contradict dominant sociocultural values. Kathleen indicates the need for validation, particularly with regard to confusing and thwarted experiences.

The women articulated the immeasurable importance of validation as a therapeutic experience. Validation for Elsie came in the form of a therapist who spent:

just one hour (when) she never took her eyes off me. Validation was what I needed .. when someone confirms what I - what has actually happened - and those books are good for that - you really need that at first .. especially because out there in the world, as I've said, nobody wants to validate you ..

Kathleen linked validation to support that challenged some of her internalized messages:

.. first of all I got a lot of support that I wasn't to blame - so reversing some of that learning that I had done .. recognizing I wasn't what he was saying I was .. having a bunch of voices saying you're okay - you can do it - instead of this (husband's) constant one. But there's, you know, that's been 25 years of hearing it - well, 29 years .. I didn't really start to make sense of it all until I started getting validated - getting - getting away from him - it was just a little tiny drop you know - a drop ..

Kathleen made the connection between receiving validation and being able to distance herself from the partner who violated her. Validation and distance permitted her a different perspective. She additionally described that these therapeutic interactions spurred her indignation and her anger expressed in "how dare he do that." Kathleen narrated the complexity of sorting through the painful issues of an intimate relationship due to her deeply felt commitment and connection to a man whom she had presumed would be her lifetime partner and companion. In addition, their relationship is embedded in the broader context of a society that both upholds the marriage as an institution and, until recently, largely ignored and minimized the issues of violence against women in intimate relationships. These factors made it difficult to have a dispassionate or unclouded perception of the relationship and its dynamics. There were too many conflicting messages both inside and outside the marriage. In her capacity as outsider, the counsellor played the role of tipping the balance. Of interest is the role of validation in tipping this balance, because the word *validation* implies a connection with an existing inner knowledge, however tenuous this knowledge is. In this respect the women all spoke of having an inner voice that intermittently reminded them that their partners' violating behaviors were not appropriate. Validation served to tap into these inner voices in the women.

### **Other Issues that Warrant Consideration**

#### **Inner/Counter Voices**

The women recounted the role of an inner or counter voice as an anchor, and however small or weakened this voice was at times, it appeared to challenge their partners' transgressions. They described this internal voice as solitary, as lacking external substantiation or larger context legitimation, and hence the women doubted this voice. Each woman spontaneously spoke of this inner voice. Elsie reflected on it in the following manner:

I didn't consciously, you know, how-how you notice something inside, where-

where you didn't really, I didn't really analyse it at the time .. it's something - this little - inside voice - again told me ooh - something is wrong here, something is not right .. I could feel it wasn't right but I didn't focus on myself ..

Similarly Care spoke of her inner voice that challenged her external circumstances:

.. in my head I knew this isn't right, this isn't the way I was brought up, this is not how I wanted it to be (pause) .. somewhere I think I knew it wasn't right .. I think it was different from when I was trying my wings - it-it came up on me and then I realized when it was there I couldn't do anything about it because I didn't have a voice ..

Kathleen, too, mentioned a deep but obscured belief that her husband's abusive behaviors were inappropriate. Her words give import to the role of hindsight as providing a different perspective than is possible when one is steeped in the immediacy of the relationship:

I would say basically, looking back, that I always knew what he did was wrong, and tried to stop it and it was like a-a battle of the strongest one .. But all the time, from day one and wanting something else - I would often say to myself - this is not right, this isn't right, somebody's got to hear me, god do you hear me? This isn't right?! .. I'm not a religious person but somewhere, somehow, something knew I was a good person and I didn't deserve this and it wasn't right.

Kathleen echoes many women's experiences of not being able to trust themselves, their own inner voices, their own perceptions. Women have been socialized to *listen* to others, to tend to others, and much less often to listen to themselves. It was therefore easier, for example, for Kali to leave the relationship based on her concern for her sons, or for the women to *hear* their partners when they apologized or attempted to make amends, and therefore return to the relationship.

A parallel consideration for helping professionals is to recognize the position of privilege entailed in that of the 'outsider,' not only because it is a completely safe one in contrast to these women's threatened existence, but also because standing outside and distant from any dilemma always permits a different analysis and response by the very nature of not being immediately involved in the complexity of the issue. Both Kathleen and Care alluded to the positive effect of distance in enabling them to listen to her own inner voices. Too readily outsiders speak with ease and confidence regarding personal impasses, when this ease reflects the privilege of distance, not empathic insight to the content or nature of the issue.

Finally, Kali spoke of a counter voice that was difficult to listen to in the context of her inner quandary with regard to her responsibility when her partner became outraged at her having spent time with a gay friend:

.. you see I felt like it was my fault, you know, I must be some morally, you know - uh - (pause) - disabled person that I can't figure this out, and yet part of me was like - uh - there's nothing wrong with this - this shouldn't be a problem and besides it's my choice, you know, but there's still all the thousands of years of connotations on my behavior.. and .. I wasn't listening .. it was a teeny teeny voice..

Kali's words implied silencing of her inner voice by the society around her as well as by her intimate partner. Counselling professionals should be aware of this inner voice, be sensitive to their ability to connect with it, and attempt to strengthen it. The women indicated that it took time to reconnect with their inner or counter voices, particularly in the face of their internalized history of negative critical voices and the void of supportive counter voices in a larger sociocultural context.

The women explicated their understandings of the difficulty of heeding these inner voices. They each spoke uniquely to this issue. Kathleen addressed her inability to listen to her counter voice due to the absence of any kind of support. She experienced it as a lone counter voice:

I couldn't go with that voice - because that was uh - it seems like there was no one, no parent, there's no - it's almost like when a child is saying he's bad, punish him or stop him - but there's nothing out there to help you do that. There is nowhere to go. Nothing was support that little voice. Nothing answered back - just myself (laughs). Also - it was like a plea.

Kathleen's inner voice became a tentative one.

Kali also referred, although differently, to the difficulty of attending to the faint inner voice, the warnings, the variety of "red flags" in her experiences with her husband that were indicators of her inner voice. She linked this struggle to a larger context in her life when she said:

.. what stood in the way was - oh, I don't know - about 10,000 years of patriarchy - there's just this little - this little voice is me - that's me in there, but women rarely pay attention to their 'me' you know, because - because there are so many other things that are compelling us to go against what 'me' wants - everything compels us to not be me - me might want to run naked through the streets, but oh, my goodness, I don't think that's going to be a good idea, you know, and that's just an extreme example, and yet that's not *that* extreme. What's extreme about being a human animal and wanting to just be in the world like other animals? - nothing wrong with that but it's .. there's layers and layers and layers of how we should be between us and ourselves, and so we live this experience that is so inside and in touch, and yet the exterior - and it's also knowing that nothing is dichotomous, nothing is black and white, that everything is just - there are so many possibilities - um - and yet we live in a world that has everything in black or white, and I think that's more crap as well. There is no black and white in terms of day and night even - there are progressions and um - so for me that little voice of who me is - uh - is constantly being - is being out there more - but to pay attention to it all those



times - it just wasn't strong enough ..

Care too spoke of the voice not being strong enough, but this lack in strength was due to potentially hazardous consequences should she heed her counter voice:

It wasn't enough because - in the relationship that little voice - like that little voice is talking and it's also telling you the consequences of what you're going to do - what that - where that will take you and that's kind of scary because he's standing there telling you that-um (pause) - so my little voice is saying get out and everything will be alright when you're out - which happened for me this time around, but he's standing there telling me - you'll never have this, you'll never have that - I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that, and somehow (pause) you're listening to that - and it's very scary - it is because well, I'm thinking there's a whole body language going on too .. I mean if they um - (pause) - if they were rational and talking to you that this isn't working .. it would be different but that's not it.

It is also of importance to recognize that having this voice, even heeding it, does not necessarily imply having the ability or the understanding to act on it, particularly for individuals or groups who experience having less power and therefore are silenced (Connell, 1987; hooks, 1984; Miller, 1986).

The women also explored those factors that made it possible to attend to their counter voices. For example, both Kathleen and Care spoke of alternative experiences that implemented their ability to attend to their counter thoughts. In Care's words:

What helped me to listen to my inner voice was well, I was very lucky that I had a different work shift that last year, that allowed me to have time with (son) by myself in our house, away from him - so having the distance. I had it 3 days a week and I did whatever I wanted ..

Kathleen articulated counter experiences that validated her counter voice and lessened the impact of her husband's critical words:

What made it possible to hear that voice was when I stepped out in the world - not-not just - like I had a job for about 7 years and-um and enjoyed it. It got me away from the home but then I got in with - other people in the class - other people asked me to do things and - I was a participant and I was asked if I wanted to teach and-and that made me see myself as a different person - like not a failure, not a useless - so that was the road to finding myself. There was still a long way to go ..

Interestingly Kathleen's words imply that in the ongoing negative experience of her husband's criticisms there was, in addition to her counter voice, also a negative internalized voice that caused her to doubt herself, and to feel like a failure. This negative voice in Kathleen's history had long tentacles, dating back to parents who saw her as "the bad girl" and continued on in her marriage. Kali spoke somewhat differently when she described what made her counter voice strong enough:

.. just survival - survival - that's what brings it to the fore, you know, the

consequences if you don't hear that voice are death. It's getting right down to that sense of desperation ..

Relatedly, in addressing their experiences of an inner counter voice, the women inferred that these voices (in the form of cognitions and questions that challenged their partners' transgressive behaviors), were not enough to answer to all the complexities of their day-to-day situations.

### **Cognitions Are Not Enough**

In speaking about their thoughts, perceptions, or cognitions the women indicated that although these were often linked to insights that sustained them through terrible times, they were not enough. Despite the privilege given to cognitive abilities and rationalism in our society, particularly with respect to change, these women implied that no one is only the sum of their thoughts or perceptions at any given time. Mahoney and Yngvesson (1992) posit that the continuity between very early meaning-making experiences that are embedded in pre-linguistic patterns of affective communication between infant and caregiver(s) and that are further supported by cultural constructions of meaningful gendered intimate relations, may provide insight into the strength and depth of such relationships in adulthood. They state that this could infer

both why meaning systems are difficult to change at the level of rational argument and why change is possible in moments of social experience that calls forth deeply embedded affective structures that move subjects emotionally

and therefore to change one's mind and strategies. These authors suggest that cognitive reasoning does not necessarily bring about desired change because internalized affective responses and meanings have both longstanding continuous subjective and culturally-informed histories. They further propose that change or shifts can occur, however, when we are deeply moved. This analysis seems congruent with the women's explorations. In addition to our reasoning abilities, we are also psychological and emotional beings particularly with respect to relationships. Connell (1987) states:

An emotional commitment of any force comes to structure not only our social interactions but also our fantasy life, our self-concepts, our hopes and aspirations. One can only switch them off at a cost that for many people is intolerable, the cost of making a great void in every aspect of our life. We know what this feels like for people who have suffered it involuntarily - the abandoned lover, the bereaved. Few people would choose to be in that position. (p.212-3)

As Kali put it "knowing things in my head - rational statements didn't take care of it all."

Moreover the women stated that their perceptions and cognitions were not enough because their attentions were frequently divided amongst a variety of issues. Both Care and Kathleen described how hard they worked cognitively to ensure their own and their children's' safety and to avoid certain conflicts, all the while maintaining vigilance. Near the end of the relationship their vigilance was maintained in the context of "learning about myself," about issues of violence, "trying to keep everything normal," and simultaneously cautiously "distancing" from their partners. In addition, their cognitions were not enough because the women were repeatedly confronted with situations that created cognitive dissonance. For example, the lack of appropriate support from professionals including the police, the court system, and counselling professionals left the women feeling confused, disempowered, and doubting their perceptions. Therefore, it is important that a counsellor re/view previous help-seeking efforts with a woman who has experienced battering because by the time the counsellor is seeing the woman, she may in fact, have already made various attempts to seek help from others (counselling professionals included), and this re/view enables the woman to begin to view herself differently within her larger sociocultural context (Dutton, 1992; Sipe & Hall, 1996).

Care described her cognitions as not being enough because these occurred in the context of ongoing threats that she would lose everything. Twice she did lose everything, in spite of her attempts to go through the "right channels" in order to avoid endangering herself or her son. Toward the end of their relationships, Care, Kathleen, and Kali inferred that their desperation and fear of not surviving enabled attendance to their thoughts. Kali articulated her challenge to the privilege given to cognitive abilities and to reason as limited and as limiting our understanding of ourselves when she said:

What the hell is reason, I mean what is that? Without balancing it with what you know (points to her whole body) and your feelings, it's useless information. It is sooo isolated from anything that is real for it-it - to be really pointless and worse than pointless - to be detrimental to the whole person. If there is going to be such a human - to be able to live in everything, to be in everything - like understanding my body's reasoning - 'cuz your body will stop you or make you do things .. it doesn't matter how much you reason them away, you know, it's overwhelming and-um you have to listen.

In this excerpt from the second interview with Kali, she declared that cognitions form only one part of our reasoning abilities and of our knowledge about our worlds. Her contention was that she experienced an embodied component that was equally important and also

warranted her attention. In our culture, however, we have tended to ignore embodied reasoning, instead constructing a dichotomy between the body and the mind, one in which the mind is privileged. Therapy that primarily focuses on cognitions simply perpetuates this split and does not address the total person. The women I spoke with problematized this dominant mind/body duality.

### **Mind/Body and Myself/Others Dichotomies in Popular Psychology**

This tendency to dichotomize, to make separations or distinctions was further formulated by Kali in her critique of popular psychology and of the self-help movement for their primary focus on individual cognitive responses in negation of embodied experiences, particularly with respect to addressing threats or subsequent fear and anxiety. Her narrative was unique in addressing this issue and she raised valid concerns for counsellors, regardless of whether they work specifically in the area of violence. In Kali's words:

.. it is also a physical thing. It's um - there's no doubt about that - it goes so deep. It's not just stuff - it's not just thoughts, you know, tapes running in my head - it's not - it's like when people say if we only change the tapes - well, I can't change the cells in my body automatically, you know. Maybe we need to do biofeedback for that one but-um (pause) - you're a body too. That goes back to this idea that somehow mind and body are separate and they are just NOT separate. Your body holds everything that is up here (points to her head). It has memories of whatever, and all of those words can trigger those feelings, those body reactions and-uh (pause) - a situation can trigger the same because basically you're repeating the same situations over and over with this individual, so you've already been conditioned by the actual experience. It's no different than post-traumatic stress disorder or whatever you want to call it - um - so your body is going to react, not just your mind, it's not just a thought process, and how long it takes a body to rid itself of that - like yesterday I just went and took a shower - it felt like I needed to clean this stuff off, you know, and in fact that's what I'm trying. I have - I have a very dear friend - a First Nations woman and we're trying to think of some kind of ceremony, some kind of cleansing thing that I can do to really rid myself of this ..

Kali suggested there is an *experiential* link between mind and body and we must learn to hear and listen to signals from the body that, first, provides us with important information and, second, rather than separating the mind from the body, reunites them. Moreover, Kali implicates the depth, the strength, and the historical aspects to her embodied learned experiences or responses. She referenced this to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), indicating that the PTSD components of fear and anxiety along with recurrent "intrusive recollections of the event(s), including images, thoughts or perceptions" as well as intense psychological distress associated with anything that is related to the traumatic event(s) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) can remain long past the *initial* events that

seemed to trigger this condition. Although Kali makes a link between embodied experiences and PTSD, her analysis is also of interest with respect to less severe physical reactions, and to a variety of day-to-day experiences.

Kali and Levine (1992) challenge the position taken by such prominent cognitive theorists as Beck (1985). Cognitive theorists posit that it is the individual *assessment* of a situation that informs the degree of a fear or anxiety response, that is, the intensity of a fear or anxiety response is primarily predicated on individual *cognitive* appraisal, and that because anxiety and fear *represent* such powerful physical reactions, they tend to mask the less easily perceptible associated underlying cognitions (Beck & Emery, 1985). Therefore, both cognitive theory and practice, which are based on the assumption that all embodied fear or anxiety responses are equivalent, focus on uncovering the presumed associated, underlying cognitions in order to treat fear or anxiety responses. Levine (1992) on the other hand constructs a more complex picture in his challenge to cognitive theorists:

.. they overlook the fundamental role played by body responses and sensations ... According to Beck's reasoning, the same body signal is relayed to the brain's cognitive structures for all forms of threat. The "head" structures are then somehow expected to decide on an appropriate course of action. This top-heavy, Cartesian<sup>40</sup> holdover goes against the basic biological requirements for an immediate, precise, and unequivocal response to threat. We have tended in the Cartesian view of the world, so much to identify with the rational mind that the wider role of instinctive, bodily responses in orchestrating and propelling behavior and consciousness has been all but ignored... (p.93-4).

Kali echoed Levine's words when she pointed out that her embodied responses were/are immediate and involuntary, and frequently cannot simply be stopped, interrupted, or dismissed. She further suggested these physical responses are integral to stressful situations. Similarly, Levine (1992) states that the body has critical information that warrants attention. Rather than masking cognitive responses he posits, in contrast to cognitive theorists, that embodied fear and anxiety notably occur in response to failed attempts to resolve a threatening situation:

Where defensive behaviors are unsuccessful in actively resolving severe threat, anxiety is generated. It is where active forms of defensive responses are aborted and incomplete that anxiety states ensue. *The monolithic experience of anxiety camouflages a wealth of incomplete underlying and identifiable somatic responses, sensations, and bodily feelings.* These body experiences represent the individual's genetic potential or resource of underlying defensive capabilities. The recognition

<sup>40</sup> Cartesian refers to the work and philosophy of the French mathematician Descartes advocating the mind/body dualism, whereby the body is constructed as mechanical, understood in terms of mathematics and physics, and the mind is constructed as rational, and understood through reason.

that these instinctive orientation and defensive behaviors are organized motor patterns, that is, prepared motor acts, helps to *return the body to the head* (italics added). (p.94-5)

In keeping with Levine's conceptualization, Kali testified that, in her experience, attending to her embodied messages has been a critical part of her healing process.

Gendlin (1992) calls the experience that takes place in the body a "felt sense," proposing that it reflects a language of the body that is crucial to assessing our total experiences in the world. "The body can always give the words more feedback than can possibly be derived just from concepts or forms or distinctions" (Gendlin, 1992, p.193).<sup>41</sup> In agreement with Kali and Levine, he posits that the body provides important information that is much more than a "head" experience. This "felt sense" is indicative of a language we do not often articulate in a society that privileges the mind *over* the body. Gendlin goes on to provided two examples:

(1) someone says hello to you as you walk down the street, and you don't know who it is, but you certainly *know* (italics added) the person ... Now you feel that you don't particularly like that person, something odd, yes, sort of uhm .... You rotate your hand. The dislike has no words either; it is your uniquely *felt sense* (italics added) of knowing that person. .. (2) When one stands before a painting that hangs crookedly, one feels a certain unease. One can straighten it, then stand back and sense very exactly if it needs finer adjusting. Symmetry, you say. Learned, of course. But by now a *bodily* demand. (p. 198-9)

These conceptualizations do not separate the body from the mind, but rather the body is perceived to have it's own language and vitally functions with/in our thoughts.

Kali went on to articulate her criticism of a distinction frequently made in current popular psychology between personal responsibility and a responsibility that she suggests is better conceptualized as occurring *between* people. She addresses this in the context of her own experiences of violence, particularly with respect to challenging the assumption that she was/is able, at any time, to *choose* her response to violent behavior:

.. this whole thing that you're only responsible for your own feelings and no one can make you feel something - that's just bullshit. Well, just this idea that somehow, you know, that what people are doing immediately around me is not supposed to have (an impact on me) - I have a *total choice* in how, you know, how I'm going to be responding to that - I mean that just flies in the face of - if

<sup>41</sup> Gendlin (1981) in his book *Focusing*, constructs an alternative approach to cognitive theories and practices, that of integrating our embodied experiences. The philosophy that informs focusing is fundamentally different from therapeutic or self-help modalities that suggest "getting in touch with one's feelings." Instead Gendlin speaks of the body's wisdom and the importance of learning to listen to the ways in which bodies can inform and resolve the personal issues that have become located in the body as part of anyone's day-to-day lived experiences.

someone's raising their fist over your face - well, I have a choice about how I can respond to that, and even though they're physically not present anymore to do that, that is still within you, so to have this silly notion and-and I've swallowed that - I've bought that idea too, that well, you know, I'm *just* responsible for my feelings and blah-blah-blah - that's just a bunch of clap-trap. We're not separate - and again, that goes back to some idea that somehow all of everything is separate and it's not, you know. Our interactions are going to influence- you know, you're going to walk out of here feeling better or worse or whatever because of how we've interacted or you're going to go outside and you're going to drive and you're going to be in this beautiful (countryside) - and that's going to have an impact on how you feel - um to feel that everything is just compartmentalized or separated out and if we only use our minds to - forget it, your body's here too - hello - and it's taking in everything as well, and that's how - part of how we make people crazy is to make them feel like they have this autonomy - this ability - living from the neck up and it's just ridiculous and it does a lot more harm than good because than people feel like - if they weren't already feeling totally responsible, boy, do they feel responsible now - well, if I feel like a bag of shit, well, that's - that must be just because I've brought that on myself, it doesn't matter that someone just treated me like dirt - I shouldn't let that bother me..

Kali offered a challenge to dominant discourse in popular psychology and to the codependency literature that isolates, individualizes, and psychologizes our reactions, noting that subjective reactions never occur in a vacuum. She presents an analysis in which she contends that people are interactive, and that people as well as events in our immediate environments have an impact on how we perceive or experience ourselves and our worlds. Her words imply a larger contextualized and shared responsibility, and removes a tendency in dominant therapeutic discourse to focus on and pathologize the individual, particularly individuals who struggle with painful thwarted relationships in their lives.<sup>42</sup> As with responsibility, the construction of choice in our society and in counselling discourse often reflects an over-simplification and decontextualization.

---

<sup>42</sup> Therapists and counsellors who tap into codependency conceptualizations assert that no one can control any other person's behaviors and that you can only be responsible for your own behaviors. Ann Wilson Schaef (1987) posits that "responsibility is the ability to respond" and that women's responsibility is to look at their own behavior. That is, they can neither blame nor hold men accountable for their abusive behaviors. By extension any problem is redefined only in terms of the individual/victim. It is believed that anyone can get "well" without fundamentally changing any of the institutions that created or participated in some of the situations in the first place (Tallen, 1990). Beattie (1987) goes even further, stating that the very engagement in fighting the underlying injustices is indicative of an addictive or co-dependency personality. Proponents of the codependency movement tell us that the bottom line is that we are individually responsible for our destiny and that advocacy, social activism, and critical dissatisfaction are simply further "syndromes" of a codependent state. Within this movement, individuals are encouraged at great expenditure to get well, while ignoring the larger contextual issues whereby millions of people are continuously born into a society that is sexist, racist, homophobic, and privileges physical ability and youth.

### Choiceless Choices

Kali criticized the ideology of individualism that is prevalent in therapy discourse and relatedly she problematized the notion of choice. In the current ideology of choice, it is assumed that, as free individuals, everything we do is a matter of choice. Regardless of circumstances each person retains the freedom and the right to choose, and everything we do is indicative of individual choice. Kali captured and critiqued popular notions of choice when she said:

you can't just say, well now, people have choices and you - if you don't *know* you have any choices then you *don't* have a choice. And if you are emotionally invested in someone - it-it's not like you're just kind-of (pause) at a smorgasbord and can go, well, I'll have this, this, and I won't have any of that. It just doesn't work that way.

Kali addressed the complexity of choice within an intimate relationship, and in the context of the sociocultural construction of marriage in which we presume to take 'the good with the bad,' which in itself places certain expectations and limitations on our choices. She implied that choice in the context of *any* relationship has different implications than, for example, a choice made outside the context of a relationship. Nevertheless, women living with violence are presumed to have made a choice, the choice being conceptualized as occurring in the context of two equally consenting adults (Herman, 1992). Inherent in this "discursive inflation" of choice (Probyn, 1993) is a complete disregard for the host of subjective and contextual factors related to such issues as personal circumstances, economics, access to resources, a knowledge of potential alternatives, as well as other matters of privilege. Kathleen spoke to a *choiceless choice* with respect to leaving when she said:

the fact that (he) was never going to change, his behavior was never going to change. There was no choice - I had to leave.

Kathleen insinuated that she preferred the alternative of change in her husband's behaviors but this was not an option. Her choice in the context of a relationship did not feel like a genuine choice. Probyn (1993) posits that the word 'choice' needs to be problematized to expose its discursive impact and its sociocultural and historical embeddedness. This is not to deny representations of choice that encourage understandings of alternative possibilities. In the ideology of choice, however, choice reflects the privilege of reason and individual agency and as such choice is linked to a broader ideology of individualism. The women in



this study expressed that individualizing practices triggered deep feelings of shame.

### **Shame**

To feel shame means to feel intensely vulnerable, exposed, naked, wounded, defeated, and without worth or dignity (Lamb, 1996). Shame results in wanting to hide oneself, symbolically as well as literally. Three of the women named experiences of shame that caused them to want to isolate themselves. Kathleen attended to this experience, reflecting on the pained incongruence in her relationship, when she said:

.. there's something very shaming about being beaten in itself. You know, I never used the term beaten - I would say hit - but (pause) - yeh, he w-was a batterer - he was - he was beating me and it-it took counselling before I could even say it. It was almost diminishing what he did to me by saying, well, he hit me (sigh) - I'm talking a fist in the back of the head and smashing me to the ground - that's a beating - though I wouldn't say that back then. Inside my own heart I knew this man is doing something terrible - um (pause) - I just didn't want other people to know that it was happening to me - because there was a certain amount of shame - I was flawed, otherwise this wouldn't be happening - 'cuz I seemed to have everything else so together.

Kathleen needed assistance to overcome her shame and to be able, with dignity and without judgment, to assess her thoughts and her responses, as well as the deleterious situation she was living in. The shame about her experiences tended to silence her and she needed to find her voice and a language germane to her encounters. Relatedly, Kaschak (1992) links the experience of shame to a broader sociocultural experience of living in a woman's body and the embodied experiences of being silenced and disempowered. She quotes Chernin (1985), who wrote about Emma Goldman's attempt to speak publicly against conscription when the crowds shouted "strip her naked" (p. 32). Kaschak (1992) asks readers to consider the following questions:

Would a man be threatened (in) this way by a crowd of women? How does this come to be a way both to humiliate and to silence a strong and visible woman? It reminds her of her place - in a woman's body. And that is equivalent to vulnerability and *shame* (italics inserted), that in itself puts her in danger and diminishes her. (p. 85)

In this fashion the potential for experiencing shame is grounded in what it means to be female and vulnerable to gendered violence.

Kali similarly spoke of her experience of shame, as being intrinsic to the experiences of living in a relationship in which battering occurs, exploring the confusion she felt when the same person who claimed to love her (and who could indeed be very affectionate and caring), also behaved violently toward her:

.. shame was a part of my experience. It's shameful that the person who purports to love you - um - would you treat you that way. It fills you full of shame, you know. How can - how can I be so unlovable to the one who is supposed to love me, I mean there is a - there is shame involved when your children see someone talk to you that way, uh - there's no way of getting around that .. I think shame is an intrinsic piece of this that keeps the whole thing going, you know .. and then even when you're out of it, um - it's not one of the first things you want to tell your new friends about .. We wouldn't have the same difficulty talking about just being in a car accident. But it's again - it reflects on me as a person - um - people wonder, well, again, if it's so horrible, why do you stay there, there must be something wrong with you in order for you to be able to ..

Kali described the experience of violence as in itself being a deeply shaming one, the shame linked to feeling defiled and somehow flawed (Herman, 1992). She experienced shame as isolating her because the mere thought of talking about her experiences with another person additionally triggered the shame, causing her to feel naked, exposed, and vulnerable. Her words reveal the pain of being pulled outside of her own experience and into the shaming (judgmental) perceptions of another. The feeling of shame seems to feed and spiral in on itself. She implies that the need to hide this aspect of her personal history further serves as a painful reminder of having these shameful events as part of her identity. Physical and/or emotional/psychological assaults shame and demoralize because they interfere with a sense of personal autonomy and integrity (Herman, 1992), which may be more significant in a society that especially values autonomy. The women's narratives resonate with the analysis that the victim's internalization of her abuser's belief that she deserves the abuse, is experienced by the victim as shame, and further serves to isolate the victim from others, also, unfortunately, including others' perspectives who differ from the perspective of her abuser (Graham, 1994).

Three of the women alluded to shame in the context of later (after leaving the relationship) considering the horror of what she experienced. The hindsight that comes with having distance from the relationship provides an opportunity for integration, but this distance may also trigger the full meaning of his abusive behaviors. All of the women spoke with a degree of amazement and disbelief at their "putting up with" their partners' offensive behaviors. Their articulations in this regard implied their shock at the full meaning of all of the events in their relationships and appeared linked to the *aftermath* of having lived in the context of violence. It is also reflective of the uniquely different positions of being an 'insider' versus an 'outsider' to the immediate experiences. These realizations and questions require careful sensitive handling including realistic assessments

of their formidable circumstances and a clear examination of the continuum of their responses (Herman, 1992).

### **Fear and Terror**

In addition to addressing their experiences of embodied fear and anxiety as indicated in my section about the dominant mind/body dichotomy, the women also spoke both directly and indirectly about the role of fear and/or terror in their relationships, even after termination. *In* the relationship fear served to keep them alert, at times able to anticipate and circumvent their partners' abusive outbursts. Once they had withdrawn from the relationship, however, fear still intermittently resurfaced as a painful reminder of their thwarted intimate relationship. Elsie alluded to her fear when she stated she knew she had to leave the relationship when her husband was not home in order not to endanger herself. In taking her fear seriously the second time she left, she notified the police to ensure her safety. She went on in her interview to delineate the fear she experienced from her husband's threats to "make you bleed," fear that she would lose everything, that she would live alone, and at her age live in poverty, without enough income, and without an adequate pension.

In addition to experiences that mirrored Elsie's formulations, Kathleen addressed the aftermath of fear, experiencing intense fearful flashbacks long after terminating the relationship. She had not expected these and counsellors/therapists working with victims of violence must be aware of this possibility. Kathleen exemplified such fear in the following:

I was at a friend's house the other day - um .. they have a sideboard and they had a telephone on it and they had all this cord, and I was sitting here and like my chair was here (points). I was on the phone and I got up and went over here and I - put the phone down and when I came back, I tripped and I went huh-oh-uh - I'm sorry- I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do it! - I didn't mean - that's the kind of thing I had to be afraid of all the time (teared up) - or be on guard for - and that's probably going to take some time to go away 'cuz-uh - (pause) - you don't even know you're doing it. The horror though is that there's so many of them - the aftermath ..

Kathleen further implied both the experience of fear and the awareness of no longer having to live directly under its influence when she said:

.. after I got out and this wonderful feeling of - freedom - didn't mean that, hey, I'm going out and doing whatever I want - but it was walking in this door and knowing no one is going to assault me with where the hell have you been, what have you bought, what do you need that for, why did you buy that for, what's this - and on and on..

In this scenario Kathleen draws attention to the blissful absence of fear in her recognition of what she had lived with.

Relatedly, Care spoke of panic rather than of fear. She described panic as subjective anticipation of rising tension, experienced bodily in response to her partner's behavior:

I don't think there was fear for me. There was more panic for me - absolute panic - sort of like I could see where things were going and it was like where do I go - where do I position myself now? I don't think really - fear - because I remember once I did taunt him and it was just like - you - I dare you to hit me - and (sigh) - yeh, it happened but it was always like when things were going - okay, this is going - escalating - where do I go now, where do I position myself, what do I do? I felt the panic - like in my stomach - and just - there was a physical thing that went with that ..

Care's description implies that panic served as antennae to sense escalating problems, and alerted her to consider her options while she still could.

The implication of these women's words is that, in the context of unpredictable and uncontrollable volatile behaviors, they came to live in fear of the unforeseeable. Phrasing it somewhat differently, Kali spoke of terror and of emotional terrorism:

Terrorism - that's the only word that I can use to describe (pause) - what I-I've gone through and what I see other women go through and what I'm still continuing to go through. It's emotional terrorism and um - (pause) - especially when you - you still have children that are there and you have systems that are not ever going to acknowledge or make the link between abuse of a partner as making someone who is not a very good parent either ... the terrorism is that it is an unwinnable situation and you're stuck with it ..

Kali suggests there is a bigger political context to the terrorism she experienced at the hands of her partners, the context mirrored in the lack of congruent, well defined, and understood zero tolerance for violence. She went on to further define terrorism and to establish it as an accepted part of life in our society:

... terrorism - it's a good word to describe it because you don't know what's going to happen. You know something's going to happen, but you don't know when, and you don't know where, and you don't know how. And that's how you live constantly, and that to me is terrorism. When I think of bombings and - it's the same - the same kind of concept of never being sure of - of anything and also then having this huge emotional attachment to the person that's going to determine when, and where, and how - so for me it's a very real thing - it's not um - someone's theory or concept - and-and when the car blows up in the street, you know, and all the body parts are flying and you're there and you're disbelieving that people do this - how could they - why would they - how did they get from here to there .. it's that same shocking - like this is shocking, this is appalling, this is outrageous and yet as with terrorism, it happens all the time, and it just keeps happening..

Kali's concerns imply the stress of a situation that appears interminable and continuous, particularly in the context of still having the common responsibility of parenting a child. Both Kali and Care each addressed the struggle of disengaging in the context of having to maintain contact as parents. Kathleen spoke to the fear and persistent uncertainty she experiences because, in spite of having terminated the relationship, her ex-husband still intermittently and unpredictably follows and harasses her. These women reflect the stories of many other women who live with intense fear long after terminating their relationships (Brown, 1987; Jones, 1994), who experience a perceived inability to completely get away from their ex-partners (Graham, 1994) and who experience deep struggles of what it means to live without fear (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Graham, 1994). Their narratives imply a critical challenge to simplistic dominant assumptions about leaving, about choice, and about individual responsibility.

### **Conclusion**

Historically women have been challenged with respect to why they enter and/or stay in relationships in which they experience psychological, emotional and/or physical assault. The women themselves have had to challenge the violence, seek support, and organize their escape, whereas few men have been confronted with their assaultive behaviors. The counselling profession too, has duplicated dominant assumptions, conceptualizations, and approaches concerning women who experience intimate violence. This reflects deeply entrenched cultural beliefs and dominant social patterns of responses embedded in the "cultural psyche" (Hillier, 1995) manifest in assumptions about intimate relationships, about choice, and about women's psychological, mental, and emotional stability. Psychology has tended to establish norms, to look at individuals who do not fit these norms as aberrant, abnormal, and deviant, without questioning the norms or the psychological practices that generated and established the norms. Additionally, psychology and the popular self-help movement have detached emotions from states of mind/body or reasoning and, moreover, both emotions and states of mind have become detached from the lived actualities and practices in our everyday lives (Smith, 1990). Paying careful attention to these women's narratives reveals the ideological rupture between known lived experiences and textual realities representing those experiences, with the latter indicative of "apparatuses of power" (Smith, 1990). This thesis has captured the women's perceptions

and their interpretations of their experiences of victimization in an intimate relationship, consequently exposing the gap between the complexities of their lived realities and the dominant constructions in textual realities. It signifies the importance of re-membering the actualities of women who have lived or are living within complicated dire circumstances, ensuring that they are the authorized speakers of their accounts. Language that does not reflect our experience is alienating.

## Chapter Ten: Some Summary Thoughts

.. the oppression of women is something women do not choose. Those of our activities and attitudes which play into women's oppression are themselves strategies we are forced into by the circumstances of oppression we live with. A woman may continue to live with the man who batters her, but the choice to remain is not a free one; it is a choice among evils in a severely constrained situation, and she has not chosen that situation. The oppression of women is something consisting of and accomplished by a network of institutions and material and ideological forces which press women into the service of men. Women are not simply free to walk away from this servitude at will. But also, it is clear that there has always been resistance to female servitude, taking different shapes in different places and times. (Frye, 1985, p.215)

### Conclusion: An Overview

With respect to women and intimate violence, the last two decades reflects a time both of change and resistance to change. At times it appears that change is consistently accompanied by a reaction that attempts to re-assert traditional conceptualizations wherein the 'old' is simply masquerading as the 'new' with respect to labels and constructions regarding women who experiences violence in their intimate committed relationships. In other words, the history in which wife assault and battery were justified and minimized is revisited in the literature that conceptualizes women's psychology as one that is naturally inclined toward masochism or victimhood (e.g., Shainess, 1984) and whereby it is assumed that women who leave one violent relationship will simply enter another one (e.g., Shainess, 1984; Norwood, 1985), and is further revisited in the literature that states "women do it too" (e.g., Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988). These analyses individualize, psychologize, and pathologize the women who experience intimate violence without examining the broader sociocultural contextual factors that encircle and interact with women's experiences of violence, and without appropriately attending to the violent partner's behaviors. Common to all of these perspectives with respect to women who experience battering, is a dominant victim-blaming tendency with the focus on the woman maintained by questions such as 'why does she stay.' Contemporary employment of the word victim with respect to women who experience violence in intimate committed relationships appears to participate in this historically embedded debate that shifts between a challenge to and assertion of traditional notions. Current dominant use of the word victim also implies a psychologizing, pathologizing, and individualizing construct rather than a

term that is descriptive of an externally imposed event and experience, and this construct thereby participates in the maintenance of dominant assumptions about women who live in relationships in which they experience violence.

In this thesis I have problematized the word victim in the context of narratives from women who have experienced battering in their intimate relationships. I have argued that the term victim is not a neutral or simple one, but rather that it is a social construct that has important implications both in our counselling practices and in its common usage in society at large. I have complexified the notion of victim by presenting the various points offered by the women in their storied conceptualizations of themselves and of their experiences of being violated in relationships that were important to them. Throughout these narratives the women did not spontaneously *refer* to themselves as victims and it was apparent in their narratives that neither did they *perceive* themselves as victims. In addition, when prompted to explore this, the women indicated their repugnance for the word victim, and they reflected critically on its current dominant use in which it is equated with passivity. The women adamantly spoke of themselves as not generally being passive. Grounded in their stories, the meaning of victim was not a simple easily reducible one. In contrast to the dominant polarization, one defined by exclusion in which the *victim as passive* is set in distinct opposition to the *agent/survivor as active*, these women spoke to experiences of victimization that revealed their acts of agency as well as their acts of agency in the midst of victimization experiences. In this latter equation, struggle, hardship, and ambivalence is not equated with weakness or passivity. The women depicted inclusive, fluid, and complex self-definitions and conceptualizations, and hence the word victim, indicative of a limited social construction, was not fitting. Importantly, the women were much more than their victimization experiences.

In problematizing the victim construct, the women defined various struggles along with their management strategies, they explored and complexified notions of leaving a coercive intimate relationship, and they attended to the impact of diverse broader sociocultural structures including their families, their friends, the police, the legal system, and counselling professionals. Moreover, they spoke of the intricacies of being victimized in an *intimate committed* relationship, a relationship in which they experienced diverse conflicting and contradictory experiences and messages, a relationship which moved them



deeply as well as painfully. Their subjective explorations intertwined with their analyses of their wider contexts in a society that tends to turn a blind eye and deaf ear to this kind of suffering, or alternatively stands in judgment of someone living in such circumstances. Their explications offer the possibility of insight into the impact of dominant language, of language that does not subjectively appear to capture the full extent and complexity of their lives. Language that does not feel like our own ostensibly confounds the issues, masks the diverse problems, and tends to shame and alienate us.

Additionally, in problematizing the victim construct, these women inadvertently problematized notions of leaving which are also frequently tied into the victim versus agent/survivor dichotomy. It is generally assumed that exiting a relationship in which a woman is being violated indicates appropriate healthy self-care and is moreover presumed to be the only valid genuine indicator of her attempts to end her experiences of violence. In effect, this renders any other actions the woman takes to protect herself or her children as invalid and potentially indicative of her personal inadequacy and pathology. As powerfully voiced by both Kali and Kathleen, and to a lesser degree by Elsie and Care, leaving did not necessarily put a stop to their partners' behaviors. Instead, for example, Kathleen has been repeatedly stalked and harassed over the more than two years since exiting her relationship. Further, this gendered focus on the woman's management of the violence and her leaving, sustains the dominant focus on the woman, and ignores her various responsibilities, minimizes her commitment and her work toward establishing this intimate relationship, her family, and other important relations. Notions of leaving an abusive relationship are predicated on a dominant ideology that presumes freedom, mobility, and choice. These women's stories challenge this dominant ideology as they narrated the intricacies and multifarious factors that interacted with these concepts.

Finally, although this was an academic endeavor I must add that I was aware of and moved by the women's stories of tenacity, pain, joy, and sadness. Each woman indicated in her own way a wish to share her story and I became an outsider participant in the reliving and retelling of important life experiences and insights. I was frequently struck by those moments when they hesitated or halted, showed pain or sorrow in their faces, sighed, groaned, stuttered, began to cry, or raised their voices in anger or excitement as though the experience was happening right at that moment. My attempts to leave the

excerpts from the women's narratives as intact as possible represents my efforts to recapture the very 'real' or felt aspects of their storying as they spoke with me. I am grateful to them for their strength and willingness to participate in this work.

### **Limitations**

For the purpose of conducting this study I had hoped to connect with a diverse group of women with respect to background or orientation because attending to diversity permits a fuller, more authentic representation of the complexities of our societies and lived realities. I was not able to achieve this diversity with respect to ethnic or cultural diversity, nor with regard to sexual orientation within this small sample of women. The women I interviewed, however, were diverse in age and in social circumstances.

This study is limited by its small sample. Small samples in research are predominantly challenged concerning the generalizability of results. In qualitative research, however, generalizability refers to the authentic capturing of the experience that is under investigation. In this thesis the focus was on the critical examination of the term victim, and its utility or meaning(fullness) as indicated by four women who have experienced battering or victimization in their intimate relationships. The women were approached as the *sources* of meaning and are considered cultural representatives with respect to their experiences of victimization. Although the focus of this thesis does not attempt to encompass or speak to the entire population of women who experience battering in their intimate relationships, it does provide a pivotal point for further discussion with respect to the various intersecting and interacting axes with regard to dominant victim discourse and subjective meanings of the term victim.

In addition, this study is limited by the lack of previous similar or related research to which it could be linked. At the time of conducting my research there was no other available research that examined the construct of victim in the context of the day-to-day experiences of women who have experienced battering in their intimate committed relationships. There is, furthermore, no literature available that critically attends to the social construct of victim, or links this to other dominant discourses.

A final limitation is one that is ostensibly present in all research and literature. Reconstructing or reiterating and committing to paper what the women told me means holding fast and freezing what they said in in any moment of interaction while suspending

the time and context in which it was said, heard and understood. This practice of recording cleanses the processes indicated in the ambivalences, the complexities, and the ambiguities present in the manner in which the women spoke and in the women's daily lives. It mystifies the potential for ongoing process and change. Aware of this concern I have attempted to stay as true as possible to the women's articulations. Incidentally, there is also a relationship, however tenuous, between who we are, how we conceptualize ourselves, and the broader available discourses and conceptualizations. This is not to suggest that we are finitely limited by the dominant language, but instead to recognize its impact. The women's narratives in themselves exemplify how we challenge and make alternative choices to dominant discourses. Moreover, it must be stated that I am not primarily critical of these limitations but merely conscious of them with respect to their potential informing influences on various responses including the women and myself, as well as the readers. This acknowledgment is intended to simply emphasize the fluidity, flux, and shifting changes that occur in spite of attempts to capture meanings and knowledges in research and resulting literature.

### **Implications**

The implications of this study are twofold, clinical and theoretical. Clinically, and for counselling psychology, this study challenges the ways in which we use labels or rely on labels to inform our work and our understanding of our clients. It implies the need for self-reflection, for asking ourselves who ultimately benefits by the use of the label "victim." This has broader implications regarding how *any* label is used, as well as the ways in which labels become constructs through which people's behaviors and lives are interpreted, obscuring and over-simplifying the complexities of people. Hence for clinical and counselling work this study implies the need to re-examine whether these labels and constructs clarify or mystify the issues at hand. This thesis presents a challenge to the construction and function of labels such as victim, the purpose they serve and whether this purpose changes contingent upon the context in which they are being used and by whom. Further, a somewhat subtle implication is that it restores a sense of dignity to the woman who has been victimized by conveying a resistance to defining her in the limited terms of her experience of violence.

This thesis implies the importance of critically examining our participation in

dominant, mainstream language of any kind without examining the origins of that language, the broader sociocultural context and historicity of that language, and how we might inadvertently subscribe to and participate in maintaining the dominant language. This is particularly critical with respect to language that may, as language often does, have different meanings for different people in different contexts or at different times. We need to ask self-reflective questions such as: whose language are we speaking and who benefits by it, how aware are we of participating and perpetuating a particular dominant social construction, and how does our use of such language professionalize a deficit model?

Additionally, for helping professionals this thesis implies a strong and effective commitment to believing, validating, and empathizing with a client, and learning and engaging in a language that is meaningful and supportive to her. Avoiding essentializing and totalizing terms implies the need to access and privilege those aspects of the woman's life that challenge dominant assumptions and enable her to recognize her ongoing inner strengths, to acknowledge and build on alternative self-perceptions.

This thesis, in the context of violence, implies the need for ongoing social and broader contextual analyses in order to understand the individual in the context of society, and to understand the implications of the language we use to define or conceptualize violence. For practice this implies a critique of practices that primarily focus on the individual woman, that rely on an adaptive model, and hence participate in dominant victim-blaming tendencies.

Theoretically and from a social constructivist perspective, the significance of this project lies in its potential to challenge and expand on the available dominant discourse regarding victims and victimization predicated on the exploration of multiple meanings and self-perceptions. By implication this study challenges the notion that our identity is primarily formed along any one axis at any given time, instead proposing a perspective that our identities are complex, that we are the site of multiple discourses and multiple processes. This study implies a challenge to the existing theorizing in which identity is constructed as primarily coherent, singular, and constant, without consideration for larger contexts. Finally, this study provides a means to further examine the function and meaning of dichotomous constructions in theory, wherein a term such as victim stands in opposition to the term agent, such that one is defined by the absence of the other. Theories that rely

on such simple constructions lack the complexity, inclusivity, and flexibility necessary for a theory to reflect the dynamic processes in human lives.

Implications for further research are generated by the women's narratives. The women articulated different usages of the word victim and it would be of further interest to investigate further complexities with respect to this construct as related to class, race and other issues of diversity. From my own somewhat limited experience the word victim is employed differently and has distinct results contingent upon one's location within society at large.

Second, the women in varying ways, spoke of embodied experiences that had an impact on them beyond the concrete presence their partners. They articulated embodied experiences linked to living in a threatening environment that appeared to be tenacious and have a deep hold on them. Kathleen mentioned such an experience in the context of describing the aftermath of living with violence, Elsie and Kali attended to this in the context of speaking about their physical reactions to their partners, and Care raised this point in talking about her physical reaction whenever she could feel a threatening tension rising. These present as noteworthy issues for further consideration.

A concluding implication for both research and helping professionals is that this work contributes to the visibility of those individuals in our society who are more readily dismissed or more often rendered invisible and inaudible in the context of mainstream or dominant constructions and research both in psychology and in other disciplines. Change and the potential for change is frequently instigated and brought about by those whose lives challenge and disrupt prevailing discourses and systems. Due to the sociocultural and historical nature of intimate violence against women, research, analyses, and interventions must include an examination of gendered violence in society generally, and of social institutions and political structures that impact directly and indirectly on this issue. The eradication of battering and other forms of intimate violence requires individual, social and political action, and responsible therapeutic approaches.

## References

- Acker, J., Barry, K., & Esseveld, J. (1983). Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research. Women's Studies International Forum, 6(4), 423-435.
- Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1994). Observational techniques. In N. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 377-392). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- American Psychiatric Association. (1994). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (4th ed.). Washington, D.C: Author.
- Anderson, K. & Jack, D. C. (1991). Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses. In S. Berger Gluck & D. Patai (Eds.), Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history (pp. 11-26). New York: Routledge.
- Arnott, J. (1994). Storytelling: A constellation. In W. Waring (Ed.), By, for and about women: Feminist cultural politics. Toronto, Ontario: Women's Press.
- Ayers, W. (1989). The good preschool teacher: Six teachers reflect on their lives. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Beattie, M. (1987). Co-dependent no more. San Francisco, CA: Harper/Hazelden.
- Beck, A. (1985). Theoretical perspectives on clinical anxiety. In A. Hussain Tuma & J. D. Masser (Eds.), Anxiety and the anxiety disorders (pp. 188-201). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Beck, A., & Emery, G. (1985). Anxiety disorders and phobias: A cognitive perspective. New York: Basic Books.
- Bell, S. E. (1988). Becoming a political woman: The reconstruction and interpretation of experience through stories. In A. Dundas Todd & S. Fisher (Eds.), Gender and discourse: The power of talk (pp. 97-123). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Bernard, H. R. (1994). Unstructured and semistructured interviewing. In Research methods in anthropology (pp. 208-236). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Blackman, J. (1989). Intimate violence: A study of injustice. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bograd, M. (1982). Battered women, cultural myths, and clinical interventions: A feminist analysis. Women and Therapy, 1(3), 69-77.
- Bograd, M. (1984). Family systems approaches to wife battering: A feminist critique. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 54(4), 558-568.
- Bograd, M. (1988). Feminist perspectives on wife abuse: An introduction. In K. Yllö & M. Bograd (Eds.), Feminist perspectives on wife abuse (pp. 11-27). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Bourne, E. J. (1995). The anxiety and phobia workbook. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

- Bradshaw, J. (1990). Homecoming: Reclaiming and championing your inner child. New York: Bantam.
- Brown, A. (1987). When battered women kill. New York: The Free Press.
- Caplan, P. J. (1987). The myth of women's masochism. Scarborough, ONT: Signet.
- Caplin, P. J. (1995). They say you're crazy: How the world's most powerful psychiatrists decide who's normal. Don Mills, ONT: Addison-Wesley.
- CACSW. (1991). Male violence against women: The brutal face of inequality. A brief to the House of Commons Subcommittee on the Status of Women: Violence against women. Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women.
- Connell, R.W. (1987). Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1988). Homicide. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Davies, B. (1991). The concept of agency: A feminist poststructuralist analysis. In K. Garbett (Ed.), Postmodern critical theorizing (pp.42-53). Bedford Park, Australia: Flinders University of South Australia.
- DeKeseredy, W. S., & Hinch, R. (1991). Woman abuse: Sociological perspectives. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1979). Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy. New York: The Free Press.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1992). Women, violence and social change. London, UK: Routledge.
- Dutton, D. G. (1984). Interventions into the problem of wife assault: Therapeutic, policy and research implications. Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science, 16(4), 281-297.
- Dutton, M. A. (1992). Empowering and healing the battered woman. New York: Springer.
- Eaton, M. (1994). Abuse by any other name: Feminism, difference and intralesbian violence. In M. A. Fineman & R. Mykitiuk (Eds.), The public nature of private violence: The discovery of domestic abuse (pp. 195-223). New York: Routledge.
- Etter-Lewis, G. (1991). Black women's life stories: Reclaiming self in narrative texts. In S. Berger Gluck & D. Patai (Eds.), Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history (pp. 43-58). New York: Routledge.
- Evans, P. (1993). Verbal abuse survivors speak out: On relationship and recovery. Holbrook, MA: Bob Adam.
- Evans, P. (1996) The verbally abusive relationship: How to recognize it and how to respond. Holbrook, MA: Adam Media Corp.
- Ferraro, K. J., & Johnson, J. M. (1983). How women experience battering: The process of victimization. Social Problems, 30(3), 325-339.

Fine, M. (1994). Working the hyphens: Reinventing self and other in qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 70-82). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Finkelhor, D. (1983). Common features of family abuse. In D. Finkelhor, R. J. Gelles, G. T. Hotaling, & M. A. Straus (Eds.), The dark side of families. (pp.17-28). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Flagg, F. (1992). Fried Green Tomatoes. In Universal City, CA: MCA Universal.

Flinders, D. J. (1992). In search of ethical guidance: Constructing a basis for dialogue. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 5(2), 101-115.

Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. Critical Inquiry, 8(4), 777-789.

Frank, P. B. & Golden, G. K. (1992). Blaming by naming: Battered women and the epidemic of codependence. Social Work, 37(1), 5-6.

Frye, M. (1985). History and responsibility. Women's Studies International Forum, 8(3), 215-217.

Ganley, A. L. (1989). Integrating feminist and social learning analyses of aggression: Creating multiple models for intervention with men who batter. In P. L. Caesar & L. K. Hamberger (Eds.), Treating men who batter: Theory, practice and process (pp. 195-235). New York: Springer.

Gayford, J. J. (1983). Battered wives. In R. J. Gelles & M. B. Scott (Eds.), International perspectives on family violence (pp. 123-138). Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Gelles, R. J. (1983). An exchange/social theory. In D. Finkelhor, R. J. Gelles, G.T. Hotaling, & M. A. Straus (Eds.), The dark side of families: Current family violence research (pp.151-165). Beverly Hills: Sage.

Gelles, R. J., & Cornell, C. P. (1985). Intimate violence in families. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Gelles, R. J., & Straus, M. A. (1988). Intimate violence. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Gendlin, E. T. (1981) (2nd Ed). Focusing. Toronto: Bantam Books.

Gendlin, E. T. (1992). The wider role of bodily sense in thought and language. In M. Sheets-Johnstone (Ed.), Giving the body its due (pp. 192-207). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. American Psychologist, 40, 266-275.

Giles-Sims, J. (1983). Wife-beating: A systems theory approach. New York: Guilford Press.

Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. (1984). Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research. San Diego: Academic Press.

Gordon, L. (1993). Women's agency, social control, and the construction of "rights" by battered women. In S. Fisher & K. Davis (Eds.), Negotiating at the margins: The gendered discourses of power and resistance (pp. 122-144). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Graham, D. L. R. (1994). Loving to survive: Sexual terror, men's violence, and women's lives. New York: New York University Press.

Gran, C. (1992). The British Columbia task force on family violence. Victoria, BC: Queen's Printer.

Greenspan, M. (1993). A new approach to women and therapy, (2nd ed). Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Tab Books.

Haaken, J. (1992). Beyond addiction: recovery groups and 'women who love too much.' Free Associations, 3(1), 85-109.

Haaken, J. (1993). From Al-Anon to ACOA: Codependence and the reconstruction of caregiving. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 18(2), 321-345

Harding, S. (Ed.). (1987). Feminism and methodology. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.

Hart, B. (1986). Lesbian battering: An examination. In K. Lobel (Ed.), Naming the violence: Speaking out about lesbian battering (pp.173-189). Seattle, WA: The Seal Press.

Hart, B. (1988). Beyond the "Duty to warn": A therapist's "Duty to protect" battered women and children. In K. Yllö & M. Bograd (Eds.), Feminist perspectives on wife abuse (pp. 234-248). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Havel, V. (1990). Disturbing the peace. New York: Vintage.

Heilbrun, C. G. (1988). Writing a woman's life. New York: W.W. Norton.

Herman, J. L. (1992). Trauma and recovery. New York: BasicBooks.

Hillier, L. (1995). How language betrays us: Explaining violence against women in the 1990s. Feminism and Psychology, 5(1), 118-125.

Hochschild, A. R. (1989). The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home. New York: Viking Press.

Hofeller, K. H. (1983). Battered women, shattered lives. Palo Alto, CA: R. & E. Research.

Hoff, B. (1982). The Tao of Pooh. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Holmstrom, N. (1986). Do women have a distinct nature? In M. Pearsall (Ed.), Woman and values: Readings in recent feminist philosophy (pp. 51-61). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

hooks, b. (1984). Feminist theory: From margin to center. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1989). Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black. Toronto, ONT: Between the Lines.

Hotaling, G. T., & Sugarman, D. B. (1986). An analysis of risk markers in husband to wife violence. Violence and Victims, 1, 101-124.

Hyden, M. (1994). Woman battering as marital act: The construction of a violent marriage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Irigaray, L. (1985). This sex which is not one. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Jacobson, H. E. (1989). Speaking from the shadows: An introduction to feminist thinking in anthropology. The CRIAW papers, No. 22. Ottawa: CRIAW.

Johnson, H. (1988). Wife abuse. Canadian social trends, Spring, 17-20.

Johnson, H., & Chisholm, P. (1989). Family homicide. Canadian social trends, Autumn, 17-18.

Jones, A. (1980). Women who kill. New York: Fawcett.

Jones, A. (1994). Next time, she'll be dead: Battering and how to stop it. Boston: Beacon Press.

Jones, A., & Schechter, S. (1992). When love goes wrong: What to do when you can't do anything right. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Jordan, J. V. (1991). The meaning of mutuality. In J. V. Jordan, A. G. Kaplan, J. B. Miller, I. P. Stiver, & J. L. Surrey (Eds.), Women's growth in connection: Writings from the Stone Center (pp. 81-96). New York: The Guilford Press.

Jordan, J. V., Kaplan, A. G., Miller, J. B., Stiver, I. P., & Surrey, J. L. (1991). Women's growth in connection: Writings from the Stone Center. New York: The Guilford Press.

Josselson, R. (1987). Finding herself: Pathways to identity development in women. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Kaminer, W. (1992). I'm dysfunctional, you're dysfunctional: The recovery movement and other self-help fashions. New York: Vintage Books.

Kantor, G. K., & Straus, M. A. (1987). The "drunken bum" theory of wife beating. Social Problems, 34(3), 213-230.

Kaschak, E. (1992). Engendered lives: A new psychology of women's experience. New York: BasicBooks.

Kaufman, G. (1985). Shame: The power of caring. Rochester, Vermont: Schenkman Books.

Khoury, C. (1991). Thelma and Louise. In Culver City, CA: MGM-Pathe Communications Co.

Kirby, S., & McKenna, K. (1989). Experience research social change: Methods from the margins. Toronto: Garamond Press.

Koss, M. P. (1990). The women's mental health research agenda: Violence against women. American Psychologist, 45(3), 374-380.

Laird, J. (1989). Women and stories: Restorying women's self-constructions. In M. McGoldrick, C. M. Anderson & F. Walsh (Eds.), Women in Families: A framework for family therapy (pp.427-450). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Lamb, S. (1996). The trouble with blame: Victims, perpetrators and responsibility. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lather, P. (1991). Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern. New York: Routledge, Chapman, & Hall.

Levin, S. B. (1992). Hearing the unheard: Stories of women who have been battered. Doctoral Dissertation, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services.

Levine, P. (1992). The body as healer: A revisioning of trauma and anxiety. In M. Sheets-Johnstone (Ed.), Giving the body its due (pp. 85-108). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Lipman-Blumen, J. (1994). The existential bases of power relationships: the gender role case. In H. L. Radtke & H. J. Stam (Eds.), Power/gender: Social relations in theory and practice (pp.108-135). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lobel, K. (Ed.). (1986). Naming the violence: Speaking out about lesbian battering. Seattle, WA: The Seal Press.

Lofland, J. (1976). Doing social life: The qualitative study of human interaction in natural settings. Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.

Lyne, A. (1988). Fatal Attraction. In Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures Corp.

Mahoney, M. (1994). Victimization or oppression? Women's lives, violence and agency. In M. A. Fineman & R. Mykitiuk (Eds.), The public nature of private violence: The discovery of domestic abuse (pp. 59-92). New York: Routledge.

Mahoney, M.A., & Yngvesson, B. (1992). The construction of subjectivity and the paradox of resistance: Reintegrating feminist anthropology and psychology. Signs: Journal of Women in Cultural and Society, 18(1), 44-73.

Margolin, G. (1987). The multiple forms of aggressiveness between marital partners: How do we identify them? Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 13(1), 77-84.

Margolin, G., & Burman, B. (1993). Wife abuse versus martial violence: Different terminologies, explanations, and solutions. Clinical Psychology Review, 13, 59-73.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1989). Designing qualitative research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Martin, D. (1983). Battered wives. (3rd ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.

Mies, M. (1993). Towards a methodology for feminist research. In M. Hammersley (Ed.), Social research: Philosophy, politics, and practice (pp.64-82). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Miller, J. B. (1986). Toward a new psychology of women (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Mishler, E. G. (1986a). The analysis of interview narratives. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), Narrative Psychology: The storied nature of human conduct (pp.233-255). New York: Praeger.

Mishler, E. G. (1986b). Research interviewing: Context and narrative. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Norwood, R. (1985). Women who love too much. New York: Pocket Books.

Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), Doing feminist research (pp.30-61). London: Routledge & Kegan.

Opie, A. (1992). Qualitative research, appropriation of the 'other' and empowerment. Feminist Review, 40, 52-69.

Pagelow, M. D. (1981). Woman-battering: Victims and their experiences. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Pagelow, M. D. (1984). Family violence. New York: Praeger.

Personal Narratives Group (Eds.). (1989). Interpreting women's lives: Feminist theory and personal narratives. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). Narrative knowing and the human sciences. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Porter, E. J. (1991). Women and moral identity. North Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Probyn, E. (1993). Choosing choice: Images of sexuality and "choiceoisie" in popular culture. In S. Fisher & K. Davis, (Eds.), Negotiating at the margins: The gendered discourses of power and resistance (pp. 278-294). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Reinharz, S. (1992). Feminist methods in social research. New York: Oxford University Press.

Renzetti, C. M. (1992). Violent betrayal: Partner abuse in lesbian relationships. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 516-529). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Riessman, C. K. (1987). When gender is not enough: Women interviewing women. Gender and Society, 2, 172-207.

Riessman, C. K. (1988). Worlds of difference: Contrasting experience in marriage and narrative style. In Alexandra Dundas Todd & Sue Fisher (Eds.), Gender and discourse: The power of talk. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.

Riessman, C. K. (1989). From victim to survivor: A woman's narrative reconstruction of marital sexual abuse. Smith College Studies in Social Work, 59(3), 232-251.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). Narrative analysis: Qualitative research methods series 30. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Rodning, S. A. (1988). Victim: Family systems and feminist perspectives. Affilia, 3, 83-97.

Roesch, R., Dutton, D.G., & Sacco, V.F. (Eds.). (1990). Family violence: Perspectives on treatment, research and policy. Burnaby, B.C: British Columbia Institute on Family Violence.

Roiphe, K. (1993). The morning after: Sex, fear, and feminism on campus. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

Rubin, L. (1983). Intimate Strangers: Men and women together. New York: Harper & Row.

Sandelowski, M. (1993). Rigor or rigor mortis: The problem of rigor in qualitative research revisited. Advanced Nursing Science, 16(2), 1-8.

Sanjek, R. (Ed.), (1990). Fieldnotes: The makings of anthropology. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Saunders, D. G. (1988). Wife abuse, husband abuse, or mutual combat? In K. Yllö & M. Bograd (Eds.), Feminist perspectives on wife abuse (pp.90-113). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Selvini-Palazzoli, M., Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., & Prata, G. (1980). Hypothesizing-circularity-neutrality: Three guidelines for the conductor of the session. Family Process, 19, 3-12.

Schaef, A. (1987). When society becomes an addict. New York: Harper and Row.

Shainess, N. (1979). Vulnerability to violence: Masochism as process. American Journal of Psychotherapy, 33, 174-190.

Shainess, N. (1980). The working wife and mother: A new woman? American Journal of Psychotherapy, 34(3), 374-386.

Shainess, N. (1984). Sweet suffering: Woman as victim. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.

Shainess, N. (1987). Masochism or self-defeating personality? Journal of Personality Disorders, 1(2), 174-177.

Sinclair, D. (1985). Understanding wife assault: A training manual for counsellors and advocates. Toronto: Ontario Government Bookstore.

Sipe, B., & Hall, E. J. (1996). I am not your victim: Anatomy of domestic violence. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Smith, D. (1990). The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.

Snell, J. R., Rosenwald, R., & Robey, A. (1964). The wifebeaters wife: A study of family interaction. Archives of General Psychiatry, 11, 107-113.

Spelman, E. V. (1988). Inessential woman: Problems of exclusion in feminist thought. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Stark, E., & Flitcraft, A. (1988). Violence among intimates: An epidemiological review. In V. B. Van Hasselt, R. L. Morrison, A. S. Bellack, & M. Hersen (Eds.), Handbook of family violence (pp.293-317). New York: Plenum Press.

Steinmetz, S. K., & Lucca, J. S. (1988). Husband battering. In V. B. Hasselt, R. L. Morrison, A. S. Bellack, & M. Hersen (Eds.), Handbook of family violence (pp. 233-246). New York: Plenum Press.

Stivers, C. (1993). Reflections on the role of personal narrative in social science. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 18(2), 408-425.

Straus, M. A., & Gelles, R. J. (1990). Physical violence in American families. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press.

Straus, M. A., Gelles, R. J., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1980). Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family. New York: Anchor Books.

Surrey, J. L. (1991). Relationship and empowerment. In J. V. Jordan, A. G. Kaplan, J. B. Miller, I. P. Stiver, & J. L. Surrey (Eds.), Women's growth in connection: Writings from the Stone Center (pp. 162-180). New York: The Guilford Press.

Symonds, M. (1978). The psychodynamics of violent-prone marriages. American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 38, 213-222.

Tallen, B. S. (1990). Co-dependency: A feminist critique. Sojourner: The Women's Forum, April, 20.

Tannen, D. (1986). That's not what I meant. New York: Ballantine.

Walker, G. (1990). Family violence and the women's movement: The conceptual politics of struggle. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Walker, L. E. A. (1979). The battered woman. New York: Harper & Row.

Walker, L. E. A. (1985). Feminist therapy with victim/survivors of interpersonal violence. In L. B. Rosewater & L. E. A. Walker (Eds.), Handbook of feminist therapy (pp.215-225). New York: Springer.

Walker, L.E.A. (1987). Inadequacies of the masochistic personality disorder diagnosis for women. Journal of Personality Disorders, 1(2), 183-189.

Walker, L. E. A. (1989). Psychology and violence against women. Meeting of the American Psychological Association (1988, Atlanta, Georgia). American Psychologist, 44(4), 695-702.

Wolcott, H. F. (1985). On ethnographic intent. Education Administration Quarterly, 21(3), 187-203.

Wolf, N. (1993). Fire with fire. Toronto: Random House.

Yllö, K. (1988). Political and methodological debates in wife abuse research. In K. Yllö & M. Bograd (Eds.), Feminist perspectives on wife abuse (pp.28-50), Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Yllö, K., & Bograd, M. (1988). Feminist perspectives on wife abuse. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

**Appendix A: Invitation to Participate**



**Appendix B: Telephone Protocol**

Are you involved in a relationship at this time in which battering occurs?

How long has it been since you have been in the relationship in which the battering occurred?

Given that this is a vulnerable issue I want to make sure that you have the appropriate support in place, in case our discussions bring up painful feelings or thoughts for you. Can you give me an idea as to what kind of support you have in place?  
(Possible probes if necessary)

- have you had counselling with regard to the battering?

- do you have access to counselling should you feel that you need it?

Do you feel that you would be willing and able to talk about this experience or experiences in an interview with me?

**Appendix C: Consent Form**

**Appendix D: Interview Guide**

## Interview Guide

As I indicated on the telephone, I am interested in understanding how women who have experienced battering in their intimate relationship, interpret and make meaning of this experience. In other words I would like to hear from you in your own words how you experienced that time in your life and how you would describe yourself then. I want to know what you think. The main purpose of this interview is to enable you to tell your story in as much detail as you would like (pause).

1. By way of starting I wonder if you could think back to that time in your life and tell me how you might describe yourself to me as someone who does not know you? (this question stems from Riessman's work and I would want to make sure to obtain clarification should the woman use phrases or terms to describe herself.) These and other questions listed here serve as a **guide** to the interview rather than a specified outline of how the interview will proceed. Outlined here are some questions that I will have in the back of my mind and will seek answers to where it seems fitting. I will use attentive listening, gentle probes, empathy, advanced empathy, and clarification questions in order to proceed through the interview. If the woman I am interviewing shares various experiences without speaking of her battering experience(s), I will gently probe by reflecting back to her a summary statement of what she has indicated has had an impact on her and ask whether she can tell if battering has also had an affect on her.
2. How would you describe yourself at a time in your life before you experienced battering?
3. Can you tell me about your relationship in which the battering took place?
  - when did the battering begin?
  - how long were you together in this relationship?
  - how would you describe your roles in that relationship?
4. Thinking back to a time in your relationship when battering occurred can you describe to me what that was like for you?
  - what happened?
  - how did you respond? - or what would you do?
  - how would you make sense of what happened at that time?
    - is this similar or different to how you make sense of it now?
    - if so, how/why?
  - how would you describe yourself during that time
  - how would you describe yourself after the episode?
  - how might someone who knew you at that time describe you?
5. Do you think that the way you saw yourself changed during that time in your life?
6. How might you describe yourself now that is similar or different from how you saw yourself then?
7. How did the relationship end in which the battering occurred?
8. What do you think enabled you to leave
  - were there individuals who were helpful? How?
  - what was critical to you at the time of leaving?
9. Can you describe to me how you have dealt with any thoughts, if you had them, regarding responsibility and/or blame.
  - how have you experienced with respect to how others have viewed you?

10. Can you describe to me how other people (family, friends, colleagues, professionals, etc) responded to you while you were in the relationship in which the battering occurred?

- what was not helpful?
- what was particularly helpful?

11. Looking back, would you say that there are any identifiable ways in which this experience of having been battered has impacted you very deeply?

12. (Other than completing the demographics, this is the last question in the interview. If she has not used the word **victim** throughout the interview I will ask her to tell me what this term means to her). Did you ever see yourself as a victim? What does the term "victim" mean to you, how would you describe a victim?

Do you know another woman who might be willing to participate in this study - would you be willing to let her know about it?

**Demographics:** (these may have been answered either in the telephone protocol or throughout the interview - they simply serve as a guide to make sure that I have the data)

**Name:**

**Age:**

**Description of relationship** under question (e.g.: live-in partner, married, heterosexual or lesbian):

**Description of current relationship** status:

**Children** (number and ages):

**Occupation** (includes work in and out of her home; include a description of her current situation with regard to work):

**Income** (approx.):

**Ethnic and/or cultural** background