VOICES OF STRENGTH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE PROCESS OF LEAVING DOMESTIC VIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS

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By

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ABSTRACT

Voices of Strength: A Qualitative Study of The Process of Leaving Domestic Violent Relationships

Melanie Renee Berru

Every nine seconds a woman is battered by her male partner (Roberts and Roberts 2005:4). Many people ask, “Why do they stay?” In reality many women leave. My thesis will explore this very process.

This thesis is an exploratory, qualitative study of the process of women leaving abusive relationships with a special interest in the various support, techniques, and experiences that aided them to flee. In addition, I have incorporated my journey in gaining access to my participants. I enrolled in a domestic violence training program where I documented my observations as a researcher attempting to gain access to the local domestic violence shelter. Finally, I interviewed seven women who left abusive partners. These interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. I utilized grounded theory to analyze the data. I rigorously searched for common themes that turned into categories and recorded them accordingly.

Findings included identifying past barriers to leaving that included two types of fear; undifferentiated and differentiated fear, pressures of traditional gender socialization, and economic dependency on their partner, all supported by the existing literature. The women’s motivators for leaving included experiencing an escalation of abuse; others reflected on the relationship and realized they needed to make a change. Finally, one
woman experienced her partner demanding that she leave their home. All women experienced support from either formal or informal sources. The agents of assistance helped the women in the various ways; rediscovery, validation and emotional support, some provided the women with securing their basic needs for them and their children. Some persons of support advocated for them with formal channels of assistance and some people and agencies employed distance between them and their partner. Throughout the violent relationships the women demonstrated resistance from either the violence they endured and/or their partner’s control. When the women left their partners they were able to rediscover themselves and look forward to new possibilities. While most of the women felt empowered and experienced a new-found freedom, one was paralyzed by her situation.

While women experienced many sources of assistance, others ironically experienced a lack of help from organizations that were designed to help them. These “ironies of help” are explored. Finally, women had the opportunity to reach out to other women and share with them their insight on leaving abusive relationships.
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DEDICATION

To my precious son, Malique Marquez Berru-Sanchez, may you learn to love and respect the women of the world and use your strength through gentle ways. I share this thesis with you, my love!
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

My seven years as an educator and advocate in the field of domestic violence have given me much insight into the lives of survivors. I see images of women speaking their truth and recall learning from their experiences.

“She was never like this,” said my client’s mother one early morning on our way to court. It was by chance that I had been able to assist this survivor with a court accompaniment. I can still hear that mother’s voice: “She was not always like this.” My eyes gazed upon a 30-something year-old woman. She wore a long summer flowery dress that fell right above her ankles. Her face was porcelain white and her bangs hung above her eyebrows making her appear like an overgrown child. A child she was not. She was a woman, a powerful woman whose strength I would later admire. Her mother was a lighthearted woman, mostly in good spirits, but occasionally overcome with the seriousness of the situation.

The mother had grabbed my elbow and told me about her daughter. “You know she was a school teacher; a damn good one. She loved it. She walked with her head up high. NOT like this!” She pointed in the direction of her daughter. “Look at what he has done to her. Just look at it!” Her voice filled with pain and disbelief. I stared at my client. She had her own story filled with great moments and devastating realities. She hung her head low and was trembling. I walked over to her, placed my hand on her shoulder and asked her what was wrong. And, she simply replied, “I am scared!” She had never been to court and now was charged with felony domestic violence for
attempting to protect herself from her abusive husband. I gave her shoulder a squeeze and told her that I would be by her side to comfort and cheer her on. I continued, “You will do just fine. I believe in you.” She slightly picked up her head and cracked a soft smile. When I looked at her I wondered what had happened to her that made her so incredibly fearful. I could see the fear in her being and the tremble overcoming her body. What had happened to her that had changed her into a woman not even her mother recognized? And how did this fearful woman manage to flee from the claws of her husband’s grip?

My thesis is an exploratory, qualitative study of the process of leaving abusive relationships. I draw on participant observation and interviews as I pay special attention to the support, techniques, and experiences that aided women to flee their violent relationships. The thesis chapters include Theories of Domestic Violence and Leaving, Methods, Staying, Leaving, and Sources of Assistance, Discussion, and References.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will be utilizing Ann Goetting’s definition of battering: “Battering is the systematic abuse, by a man of society bestowed male privilege to exploit a wife, or female intimate companion” (Goetting 1999:5). I will use the terms domestic violence, abusive relationships, wife battering, woman battering and battering interchangeably. Both terms will refer to an intimate partnership where a male abuser is disproportionately directing the abuse to his female partner. Battering includes but is not limited to yelling, threatening, stalking, beating, and harming his partner (Goetting 1999).
CHAPTER TWO
THEORIES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND LEAVING

Feminist Frameworks in Woman Battering

A feminist understanding of woman battering examines marriage as a social institution within a historical perspective. To understand today’s marriages and today’s intimate violence is to explore the history of marriage and the changing roles of men and women. It is important to take in consideration the power relations between the men and women, emphasizing the imbalance of power and control in intimate relationships among the men and women in a heterosexual relationship. According to feminist scholars, the inequalities in power explain violence in today’s intimate relationships. According to bell hooks (1984), feminism is defined as the “struggle to end sexist oppression” (p.26).

This chapter will highlight the key features that are common to all feminist perspectives on battering. First, gender and power constructs are identified and explored. Second, family is seen a social institution and given a historical context. Third, feminist theory validates women’s experiences. Finally, feminist theory utilizes scholarship for women (Yllo 1988). It is quite impossible to write about and clearly understand woman battering today without addressing the history of female/wife subordination (Belknap 2001; Chang 1996; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Goetting 1999, Kurz 1989; Yllo 1988). It is safe to say that many people including professionals disconnect from our history. As an educator I often have people tell me that they would never let any man beat them. They ask, how could “these” women “put up” with such abuse? It is quite evident that
women experiencing battering are marginalized and battering is seen as isolated acts or an exception to the rule. Yet feminist research has documented that woman battering is by no means a new phenomenon (Belknap 2001; Bowker 1986; Goetting 1999; Kurz 1989; Peterson 2002; Yllo 1988).

Domestic violence has a long history. According to Bowker, woman battering has historically been seen as an accepted part of everyday living (1986). It was so accepted it became a taken-for-granted part of life. Rights to battering are grounded in women’s historical position as “property” of a male family member (Belknap 2001; Chang 1996; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Yllo 1988). It is crucial to mention that patriarchy, “an institution or organization in which power is held by and transferred through males” (Random House 2001: 971) is at the pinnacle of gender inequality outside and inside the home. Patriarchy relies on gender stratification.

Women’s subordination was a product of the patriarchal system. Under English Common Law, husbands had the power to “correct” their wife’s behaviors. Violence was not an option for wives. This discrepancy in power and status between husband and wife reduced their relationship to the equivalent of a parent and child relationship (Kurz 1989). Men used violence against their wives as a means of control in marriage (Kurz 1989). The two most important roles for women were that of wife and mother. Marriage, which was expected, was a means to achieve some status in the world even though it abetted her subordination. Dobash and Dobash (1979) state, “in the family, the parameters of women’s behaviors were set, her undifferentiated nature reiterated, her relationships with men defined, her subordination taught, and her deviations controlled” (p.33). Becoming
a wife meant that one was legally and morally bound to obey one’s superior counterpart, her husband. She was ultimately subject to his control (Dobash and Dobash 1979). The core of wife battering is a woman’s subordination and her exposure to male power and control.

The woman battering legacy continues. Since the early seventies public attention to domestic violence has increased. More and more homes continue to be a place of shameful violence and sadness. The public scripts refer to home as a place of comfort, support, and love. The data shows otherwise. The image and scripts of home life have been glorified and for the most part are myths (Chang 1996).

Society was and continues to be dominated by those who hold the power in society. In this case white, heterosexual men are at the root of the patriarchy and enjoy the advantages created for them by them. The patriarchy includes both structure and ideology (Chang 1996). The United States society is set up in a hierarchical fashion, with power filtering top down. Social relations are patterned that regulate select individuals, groups or class positions with greater power, privilege, and prestige (Dobash and Dobash 1979). Ideology is of utmost importance, for ideology justifies inequality. Ideology is set up to create acceptance of an oppressive state among the subordinate (Chang 1996). The patriarchy, both its structure and ideology, permeates all basic social institutions: religion, education, politics, economics, media, and the family. These institutions interact with each other and all support the imbalance of power and status between men and women (Goetting 1999; Lawless 2001; Yllo 1988)
Our society is structured to encourage violence against women (Yllo 1988). We are socialized to be victims and perpetrators. It is estimated that 50% of all women will experience battering during their lives (Walker 1980). It is reported that intimate partner abuse is the leading cause of injury to United States women (Goetting 1999). All this violence committed by men against their female partners has a historical context. Feminist theory places this very inequality between men and women at the root of their analysis of domestic violence (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Goetting 1999; Kurz 1989; and Yllo 1988).

The social institution of the family links societal oppression to intimate partner violence (Yllo 1988). Battering is not seen as a consequence of a pathological family unit; rather, it is a common element of typical family life— a product of an oppressive social structure (Chang 1996; Yllo 1988). In homes that experience this violence family members are aware of the power discrepancy between husbands and wives. The oppressive structure in which they live, both the larger social context and the individual home in which they reside, is key in understanding the interactions that take place in such a setting. Without context, individual behaviors may appear crazy.

The oppressive familial structure that places the man above the woman is a dangerous place for a woman to live. She lives in a place where nothing she does is right. She is an open target for physical, verbal, mental, sexual, financial, and social abuse. Her life is characterized by fear, isolation, money deprivation, mental control, emotional control and a lack of resources. She receives blame from the abuser, family, friends, community agencies, and more importantly, herself (Walker 1980). The abuser’s reality
becomes her own as the abuse progresses. The ideology that supports the male partner’s dominance in the home may come from multiple sources: religion, science, or many other institutions.

As long as there has been oppression there has been resistance. Battered women are not necessarily helpless and weak. If they appear that way, it is symptomatic of the abuse. It’s not the cause of abuse. It takes great strength to survive. Woman battering has a history of great pain and “forced subordination in her life [that] is accompanied by the history of resistance” (Hyden 1999: 467). Women resist in multiple ways often times utilizing several strategies at any given time (Bowker 1998). Several of these forms include trying to talk to their husband out of battering, insisting on promises from the abuser to end the abuse, threatening to gain outside help from the police or a lawyer, hiding or escaping from the abuse, using passive defense to protect themselves from severe injury, and avoiding their husbands during times of high intensity moments. Finally, some women physically fight back (Bowker 1998).

Schools of Thought in Domestic Violence

In the field of domestic violence research there are two main theoretical perspectives; the family violence perspective and the feminist perspective. While they have some common elements they also differ in important and distinct ways. The main thesis of the family violence perspective is that sexism is one factor contributing to spousal violence. More importantly, it is the family unit itself that leads to violence in the home leading men and women to both acts abusively. A feminist perspective
maintains that sexism is the central reason for a disproportionate amount of violence against women. A review of the existing literature will elaborate on each perspective in the field of domestic violence research.

Family Violence Perspective

A major highlight of this school of thought is that violence is a part of the family unit and occurs between all family members. “Spousal violence”, a term widely used in this perspective, includes violence perpetrated by the various members in a family (Gelles 1974; Gelles 1979; Gelles 1983; Gelles and Straus 1988). In this perspective men and women are both considered victims and perpetrators of violence.

A research approach widely used in this perspective involves the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS). In this research one member of a married couple is asked about how many time he or she took part in specific acts against their partner in a twelve-month period. Their answers are measured against a continuum of tactics ranging from non-violent tactics to the most physically violent acts. The scale operationalizes a violence continuum from calm discussion to use of a weapon (Kurz 1989; Straus 1979). Research using this methodology and paradigm reports 49% of participants (both men and women) took part in violent acts against their partner (Kurz 1989). Husbands committed 12.8% of the violent acts against their wives and 11.7% of the wives took part in violent acts against their husbands (Kurz 1989:491). Proponents of this perspective claim to dispel the myth that men are the aggressive party in a heterosexual marriage. Ten years after the research was conducted it was repeated with no changes to its methodology: Results show an increase of violence perpetrated by wives. Proponents of this school of thought
interpret this data to suggest that women have become more violent in their relationships (Kurz 1989).

According to Straus et al. (1980), Gelles (1985), and Gelles and Straus (1988) there are three causes of American family violence: Stress on families, cultures of violence and sexism. Family stress is created by unemployment, poverty, and health conditions. In addition American culture socializes us through violence in the media and at school and in other places. This open display of violence shows how violence is a common option to solving conflict. Finally sexism is seen as an explanation to violence in an American home.

Family violence proponents argue women should receive special attention in spousal violence. This attention is warranted not because women are more commonly noted as victims, but because women are subject to more dangerous acts and more serious injuries. Husbands are also more likely to repeat violent acts against their wives. There are other reasons to give women special interest in spousal abuse. Some women physically fight back in self defense. Pregnant woman’s fetus is at high risk from repeated acts of violence. And finally, women experience greater economic and social barriers to leaving an abusive relationship (Straus et. al. 1980).

Straus (1980) does acknowledge that our sexist society influences the family and is one of contributing factors in the high levels of wife beating. They note that “violence is used by the most powerful family member as a means of legitimizing his or her dominant position” (1980 p.193). They identified three categories of family organization: husband dominant, wife dominant and democratic. The person holding the
power in the relationship is the most likely partner to beat their partner; therefore, women are equally theorized as the abuser (Straus et. al. 1980).

The Feminist Perspective

Feminist theorists of violence against women center in a historical context the cultural and structural power imbalances between men and women. They are also critical of traditional family violence methodologies. Feminist scholars have found that domestic violence does not stem from a pathological family or individual. Violence against women is a social norm that extends beyond the family. Practices support the use of violence as a means to reinforce male dominance. This culture of male violence explains why some males adopt violent behaviors to control women.

Male violence is a means to control their female partners (Dobash and Dobash 1979). Dobash and Dobash (1979) found in interviews with 109 women experiencing battering men used tactics such as intimidation, isolation, and psychological abuse to control their partners (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Walker 1984). According to Dobash and Dobash (1979), when batterers were interviewed, these men felt justified in their choice to use violent acts against their female partner because violence was a norm and because of their wives behaviors (Kurz 1989).

Another important distinction that sets the feminist perspective apart from the family violence perspective is the inclusion of an historical explanation of the current state of violence against women. Historically institutions have allowed and/or overlooked the use of physical violence by husbands against wives. English Common
Law essentially gave the husband the right to discipline or “correct” his wife’s behavior. The only limitation was that this violence was to be used in moderation.

In 1874 the courts limited the type of cases in which they would intervene. In cases where no permanent damage was done nor “malice dangerous violence” was shown by the husband, the courts decided not to intervene. Because of these “curtain rule” cases, litigation was minimized. (Kurz 1989; Browne 1987). “Curtain rules” allowed for a justification to not act on behalf of the battered wife.

While the institution of marriage and related laws changed since the 1800’s, feminists argue that the institutional history of marriage, along with current social and legal norms, reinforce the use of violence against women (Kurz 1989). The inequality rooted in the power structure of husband and wife supports the husband’s dominance in the relationship and the household. Structural economic dependence of the wife upon her husband, along with the husband’s higher status and the acceptable use of male violence, all make the wife an “appropriate victim” (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Kurz 1989).

Legal norms are hard to change. Attitudes supported by the legal system (police officers, lawyers, judges) are deeply rooted in the residue of the “curtain rule” mentality. Many professionals in the legal, medical, and other fields believe that battering is a manifestation of the idea that families or individuals are pathological and domestic violence is a private issue (Pryke and Thomas 1998).

Feminist theorists of domestic violence have critiqued the CTS instrument. This devise does not define a context of the situations in which “violence” was conducted. For example, cases of self defense were not identified and treated differently than aggressor.

behaviors (Kurz; 1989). With this said, the validity is called into question (Kurz 1989; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Stark and Flitcraft 1985). Another concern for the validity of using the CTS instrument is the under reporting of male violence against women. Men are more likely to under report the accurate amount of violence used compared to women (Kurz 1989).

Given critiques of self report data, feminist scholars use official crime statistics from hospitals and the criminal justice system. It is estimated that 90% of victims of domestic violence are women (Roberts and Roberts 2005:4). It is estimated that 5% of the violence is directed to men by women (Kurz 1989: 495). It is also reported that when women commit homicide it is in response to the repeated violence inflicted on them by their male partners (Gagne 1998).

Leaving an Abusive Relationship

As an educator of domestic violence the most common questions that I hear are, “Why does she stay? Why doesn’t she leave?” Questions often include a tone and attitude that blames the victim. These questions share a common assumption that a woman is either staying or leaving. Most women in an abusive relationship do both: They stay and leave during the lifetime of an abusive relationship. The majority of women who divorce or obtain legal separation list physical violence as a reason for their request to legally end a marriage (Fleury, Sullivan, and ByBee 2000).

A feminist understanding of woman battering frames leaving as a process rather than an event (Dobash and Dobash 1979). It is estimated that a woman experiencing
battering will leave approximately seven times before fleeing successfully. The act of leaving often includes varying intentions on the act of leaving. The meaning of leaving, to the woman experiencing abuse, changes during the abusive relationship along with her self-perception and the perception of the relationship (Bowker 1993). According to Dobash and Dobash (1979) both leaving temporarily and the intentions to leave permanently need to be examined. “The pattern of staying, leaving, and returning reflect the complex pushes and pulls of the numerous personal, social, and material factors that motivate the battered woman” (Dobash and Dobash 1979:144).

Leaving temporarily often means that the woman experiencing battering does not necessarily want the relationship to end, but wants the violence to stop (Dobash and Dobash 1979). This hope is understandable when in fact her abuser is not always violent. Her hope is to end the violence and maintain the relationship. Her hope for change remains his anchor to the relationship. It is often times the reason why she may initially return. Many women experiencing battering may temporarily leave as a respite from the abuse. As the relationship continues she may temporarily leave and return without any hope for her partner’s change. Her short absences from the home may be the sole break from the abuse (Dobash and Dobash 1979).

Like non-battered women, many women that experience abuse feel obligated to keep the marriage together. As noted by feminist scholars, historically women’s status in American society has been linked with her roles as mother and wife. Her value in society has always been connected with her relationship to her children and her husband. To end
an intimate relationship with her husband is to suffer the loss of status and value as a woman and endure blame from others (Dobash and Dobash 1979).

Even survivors who intend to permanently leave may need to return to their relationships due to insufficient resources. Many women encounter lack of support from friends and family, uninformed social service providers, a lack of economic resources and the terror of looming homelessness (Anderson, Gillis, Sitaker, McCloskey, Malloy, and Grigsby 2003).

There are also other personal and external barriers to leaving. A woman may have internalized a negative self image. At the same time she may lack childcare, feel isolated, fear both living independently, and the escalation of violence (Senter and Caldwell 2002; Fleury, Sullivan and ByBee 2000). Learning to live independently is often times frightening and quite difficult. Domestic violence survivors have been told by their abusers what to do, how to do it and when to do it (Senter and Caldwell 2002). Leaving permanently means that for the first time in perhaps years a survivor will have to figure out what to do by herself, often times with very little emotional and financial support. This in itself may be quite overwhelming for a woman experiencing battering (Senter and Caldwell 2002).

Children play an important role in the survivor’s contemplation and determination to leave or stay in an abusive relationship. Survivors both stay and leave for the “sake of the children.” When they consider staying for their children they may give reasons such as not wanting to “break up” the home. Survivors may prefer that their children grow up in a two-parent household. They may also not want their children uprooted from school,
friends and their regular daily routines. While a husband may be abusing his partner, she may continue to see him as a good father to their children (Dobash and Dobash 1979). Also, women experiencing battering often understand the costs of leaving including providing for the material and emotional needs of her children in the context of trauma and limited resources. They note the difficulty in starting a new life in these circumstances. Survivors rarely consider leaving their abusive relationship without their children (Dobash and Dobash 1979).

Leaving for the sake of the children often occurs when the violence has spread to her children. There is a “hierarchy of worth” in the family unit. Women or mothers are often at the bottom of the hierarchy, while their husbands occupy the top and the children are sandwiched in between. This devaluation is internalized by the survivor and reinforced by society (Dobash and Dobash 1979). Her concerns are ignited when violence is carried over to her children who have greater worth in this violent home. When taking this concept of relative worth into consideration, survivors typically feel they have no right or very little right to leave the marriage and escape from the violence. Women endure if their children are not being abused as well. Women experiencing domestic violence also are moved to action as they contemplate the effects on their children. They may become concerned about their children learning to be violent by witnessing, hearing, and living in a violent home (Dobash and Dobash 1979).

While leaving an abusive relationship is a process rather than an event, many people see it otherwise. A survivor is allowed one attempt to successfully leave.
Rather than being seen as a necessary part of doing so, leaving a marriage and then returning is usually viewed as a sign of capriciousness or lack of sincerity, resolve, or determination on the women’s part (Dobash and Dobash 1979: 159).

When she returns back to the violent home people begin to judge that behavior as expressing a lack of seriousness to the violence she is enduring. She is then expected to accept the violence in her life (Dobash and Dobash 1979). This plays an important function. If outsiders say to themselves that it must not be that bad, or she must like it, then they have no other reason to worry or care about the plight of battered women!

Strube and Barbour (1984) found three factors influenced a woman’s likelihood to leave an abusive relationship. First, the frequency and severity of the abuse: The more frequent and more severe the violence, the more likely she was to leave. Second, history of abuse: women without a history of abuse as a child were more likely to leave the relationship. Finally, availability of resources: women with more resources were more likely to leave the relationship. Strube and Barbour also found that the longer a woman was in an abusive relationship, the less likely she was to leave her relationship. According to Strube and Barbour (1984) women who left were more likely to have had several previous abusive relationships, had filed assault charges and obtained restraining orders. They tended not to be married, were women of color, and had few children. Also those who had attempted various ways to end the abuse and failed were more likely to take other action and flee.

With every form of oppression, resistance is present. Break ups and leaving are also understood as resistance by survivors (Bowker 1993, Hyden 1999, Fleury, Sullivan,
Bybee 2000, Senter and Caldwell 2002). Other forms of resistance are also taken by women experiencing battering. These include passive defense, threats to call law enforcement or involve the court system by obtaining a restraining order, hiding and avoiding their partners, escaping, attempting to talk their partner out of the abuse, obtaining promises for change and fighting back (Bowker 1993). According to Bowker (1993) women that experience battering are “active agents in trying to make their environments safer” (155).

According to some scholars the theme of resistance has been practically overlooked or omitted from the literature in leaving an abusive relationship (Hyden 1999). In the World of the Fearful: Battered Women’s Narratives of Leaving Abusive Husbands, Hyden (1999) interviews ten women in a two-year span. According to her, women that experience battering leave immediately during an episode. There are two types of leaving: psychological and physical. Women immediately leave psychologically during the violent episode. According to Hyden (1999) leaving is the consideration of staying alive or accepting death. She associates her abusive partner to death. In her research she categorizes fear into object of fear, extent of fear, and fear as resistance. When women decide to leave either temporarily or intend to leave permanently, this process costs her further torment and struggle.

Hyden (1999) criticizes the binary notion of the power structure often attributed to abusive relationships. For example one partner is powerful while the other is considered powerless; one is dominating while the other is dominated. Her Foucault-influenced perspective is to say that resistance is always present by groups that experience
subordination, but it’s rarely openly displayed. Hyden states “they may be presumed to accept the dominance of their superiors. Beneath the surface, however, the dominated people create their own space in which the resistance is expressed in a hidden transcript” (Hyden 1999:461). Breaking up by the survivor demonstrates both her power and her powerlessness. Her power is expressed when she breaks up with her abusive partner, while her powerlessness is evident when she can’t make him stop the violence (Hyden 1999). Victims of domestic violence are typically more able to tap into their resistance when they are in touch with their “inner resistance” and not overpowered by their feeling of powerlessness (Hyden 1999).

Senter and Calwell’s (2002) identified several common experiences of women after leaving an abusive relationship. First, the survivor accepts the support of others. Second, a survivor experiences the need to make adjustments to a new way of living. She experiences a reconnection to the self: herself. She experiences a new freedom to self reflect and to engage in self discovery. She develops supportive relationships that help her when needed. And, finally, in the midst of her recovery and her fight for survival she displays a willingness to help others. She wants to make a difference in other women’s lives; the lives of women and children who have also experienced abuse (Senter and Caldwell 2002).

When fleeing abusive relationships survivors turned to informal and formal channels of assistance for support, advice and sheltering. Many turn to members of their own family. To a lesser extent some turn to in-laws and neighbors.
Many women have found it most helpful to use a combination of formal and informal resources. According to Bowker (1993), the top three formal channels of assistance for battered women include support groups, shelters and lawyers (1993).

My thesis explores the various types of assistance utilized by the women I interviewed. The next chapter will elaborate on my process of finding participants through attending a volunteer training that allowed me access to shelter clients who I interviewed for this study. I documented my participant observation in the training and included it in my thesis. The women I interviewed were a combination of women residing in the shelter and Humboldt State University students invited through an email on the sociological listserv.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODS

The purpose of this study was to understand the process of leaving abusive relationships. My goal was to examine the various supports, techniques, and experiences that aided the survivors to flee their former violent relationships. I chose qualitative methods because qualitative measures are known for their thick description of social reality (Berg 2001). They are tools used to paint a picture of what is being studied. This approach cannot be reduced to the statistical data (Debbs 1982). My research is based on participant observation and seven semi-structured interviews with women who had left their male partners.

Foundations of Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative techniques are derived from the symbolic interactionism perspective where the analysis of meaning is attached to objects and actions in the social world (Berg 2001 and Thomas and Swine 1928). Qualitative researchers strive to understand lived experience and meaning that participants give to objects and symbols in this social world (Berg 2001). Qualitative approaches include but are not limited to participant observation, interviewing, photographic techniques, historical analysis, content analysis, sociometry, sociodrama, and ethnographic research.

This thesis includes research methods in the area of interviewing, participant observation, and ethnographic research (Berg 2001). My goal was to gather rich, thickly
descriptive research that addressed the concept of leaving abusive relationships. I chose to use interviews and ethnographic methods to compile rich experiences.

While qualitative research has historically been devalued, the methods usually require routine for data collection and even longer for analysis (Debbs 1982). Numbers tend to fall short of capturing the essence of meanings attributed to objects and symbols. I wanted to hear and share life stories and experiences rather than produce percentages and graphs of behaviors.

As previously mentioned, qualitative methodology has its foundation in the symbolic interactionism perspective. According to Thomas and Swaine (1928) the core fundamentals of social interactionism are that it is through social interaction where data is created and the ability of the researcher to take the “role of other” is significant in qualitative research. Persons in a social setting define their situation and act accordingly. Their behavior reflects a person’s definition of the situation and the meanings attached to the social facts in that environment (Berg 2001). Ethnography is a qualitative process that examines social construction of data, frequently requiring the researcher to “take the role of other”. There may be many “others” in this type of research. It also values, explores, and analyzes meanings and definitions given to objects, people, and situations.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a form of participant observation. It is the written accounts of a researcher’s observation. According to Berg (2001) an important aspect of ethnography is how the “practice places researchers in the midst of whatever it is they study. From this vantage, researchers can examine various phenomena as perceived by participants
and represent these observations as accounts” (Berg 134: 2001). Ethnography is the means in which qualitative research achieves its thick description. Researchers provide a detailed account of what they encounter in the social setting. While quantitative research strives and holds objectivity to the highest standard, qualitative methodology, ethnography to be more specific, embraces subjectivity to the point where the researcher becomes part of the research. In this “subjective soaking” the researcher debunks the notion of neutrality in social research and embraces the act of merging oneself in the setting that is being studied (Ellen 1984; Geertz; 1973; Wolcott 1973). Ethnography is the documentation between the interaction between the researcher and the observed (Clifford 1980). The text in ethnography is the source of importance. The field notes, in as notebooks and memos, log the researcher’s experience in their environment and the “textual content” (Clifford 1980). Quality research dives beneath the surface of what is being observed or studied. It requires systemic participation observation and several types of “conversation interviews.” These interviews are a form of verification (Berg 2001; Boyle 1994). You will note in my study that I “soak” myself in the research process to gain access to my participants. I overtly expressed my interest in volunteering and covertly expressed my interest in research during the required training I was required to attend.

Reflexivity plays an important role in ethnographic research. It is the act and process of the researcher having an internal dialogue with the observed. This dialogue is documented and becomes part of the research (Berg 2001; Hertz 1997; Van Maanen 1988). I break out in comments, sharing my thoughts and feelings with my readers. I
believe that it humanizes the researcher and connects me to what is being studied. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative schools of thought have an orientation towards taking a value neutral approach to research. Often the word “I” is removed from written text to demonstrate a sort of separation between the researcher and the researched (Berg 2001). A subdivision in qualitative research does the exact opposite. Feminist research under the qualitative school of thought embraces and incorporates the “I” in research. It contests the idea that he or she is able to actually separate oneself from influencing and being influenced by the social research he or she conducts (Berg 2001; Hertz 1997; Ribbons and Edwards 1998). Instead of denying that this influence exists, it is made central to the research text and is accounted for in analysis. Feminist researchers continue to say that the mere selection of a subject matter reflects a bias or a slant towards something. Feminist scholars are known for taking this direct approach. This also shows a sense of ownership and responsibility for research subjectivity.

Feminist scholars also may incorporate a personal biography in their research. Personal disclosures by researchers provide readers of this research a fuller understanding of several areas: why a subject matter was chosen in the first place, how the research was conducted, and finally a context of who did the study (Berg 2001). It also gives a peek into the researcher’s experience that will shed light onto the subject matter itself (Berg 2001).

I am feminist researcher and find it imperative to introduce myself to the readers. It is by no accident that I came to study domestic violence as my thesis subject matter. Past experiences have led me on this path.
Bringing My Identities and Background to the Field

It is important to me to acknowledge to my readers that I understand data collection and interpretation as subjective processes. I do not hide behind a cloak of imaginary (absolute) objectivity. While I used systematic means to identify questions and collect and analyze data, these processes were shaped by my own biography.

My work and social interests are influenced by my identities. I am influenced by my social experiences as a woman, a Latina, and a heterosexual. I acknowledge and share the oppression of women of color. At the same time I benefit from the privileges of growing up middle class and being a heterosexual, able-bodied woman. My social identities influence and are influenced by society and are a part of who I am. I am an accumulation of life experiences and lessons.

My identities are in fact part of who I am, but they are not all of who I am. My upbringing, my education in social science, and my professional experience working with disadvantaged populations all play a role in my worldview. My experiences are meaningful and vivid. My passion for working with disadvantaged populations is related to my upbringing. I lived a middle-class lifestyle in a working class and poor neighborhood. My young eyes were able to see the differences in livelihood and realized that my experiences were quite different than theirs. The struggle of poverty was quite visible: It was only an arm’s length away.

While growing up I admit that I blindly enjoyed and exercised my class privilege. I also started to question, at an early age, why some groups of people were valued more than others: “What made people act a certain way?” My young mind always wanted to
know what was *really* going on over here and why might that be? Growing up, I have experienced privilege and hardships. I was bullied about unimportant high school matters and experienced dating violence. Years later I received education in domestic violence and was able to label my experience as a young teenager. I had been in an emotionally abusive relationship.

As I developed into a mature teen and later into a young adult, I continued to ask, “What made people act a certain way?” and “What was really going on over here?” My interest in power relationships and group behavior are in some part because of these experiences. It is my upbringing and life experiences that lead me to examine injustices.

I sought out professional positions in working with teen mothers, economically disadvantaged youth, runaway teens, communities of color, and finally survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. They have added fuel to my fire. They have made me step out of my experiences and challenged me to think differently and act in accordance to my new found knowledge. It is all these experiences that led me to this research endeavor.

My experience as a domestic violence and sexual assault educator, in particular, played an essential part in choosing domestic violence as my field of study. Domestic violence education and the stories of women’s plight and survival are compelling. My professional experience in domestic violence grabbed a hold of my very being. After hearing women’s stories and pleas for understanding and help, I felt it was impossible to turn my back on what I had just learned. I knew something was not right. It is this
injustice and experience with survivors that has been a catalyst for me to strive to understand the dynamics of abusive relationships.

It is these identities and experiences that will consciously and unconsciously influence my interpretation of the data. The experiences of these identities manifest, to some degree, in the work researchers produce. I am no exception. I do not devalue subjectivity, but acknowledge its existence and include it in my process. I believe being open and up front about the subjective nature of research enhances the richness and textures of the research. It also allows the reader to have a comprehensive understanding of the research studied and a deeper understanding of the researcher who is responsible for preparation, layout, and discussion of the research produced.

Securing Access: Becoming a Volunteer

In August 2002 I began graduate studies at Humboldt State University. I had recently moved to rural Humboldt County that was seven hours from my home in the Central Valley and the domestic violence agency where I once worked. Although I had decided to study domestic violence locally-I had no contacts. This chapter is an ethnographic documentation of my journey in gaining access to the rural Northern California community. I draw from methodological theories of auto-ethnography (Ellis, Carolyn & Berger 2002) and the confessional tale (Van Maanen 1988). To this extent the account of my experiences are interwoven between internal dialogue and analysis of the setting and events.
On March 7th I called Empower in quest of information regarding volunteer opportunities. My interest in Empower was to have accessibility to a local agency that works on the front line with domestic violence survivors. I spoke with a woman by the name of “Pearl.” I told her that I was interested in possibly volunteering for this agency. I wanted to know the services they provided and the volunteer options that I would be accessible to me. Before answering my questions she said that she had a few questions for me first. She began to ask me about my situation. I told her that I was a graduate student at HSU. I told her that I possess a Bachelors degree in sociology, which has a concentration in human services. She then asked me how I knew about their agency. I informed her that my previous experience working at a domestic violence/sexual assault agency in another county gave me the knowledge about sister agencies throughout the state so, I looked them up. Even though her mood was pleasant from the start, I felt an increase in her excitement. She quickly asked if I would be interested in applying for a paid position. I told her for now I was not.

Pearl insisted, “With your qualifications it would be ideal for employment at the agency.” I thanked her for her complement and said that I would keep that in mind. She said that she would like me to come in for an informal meeting and that I would need to meet with “Tina” the volunteer trainer and added that she would be delighted to meet me as well. Her energy was contagious. We scheduled a time for me to come in later that evening. “This site that you will be coming to is confidential and you are not to disclose this location to anyone.” She then gave me the address along with the directions. She
ended the conversation with saying, “I can’t wait to meet you.” Throughout the conversation I heard and felt the enthusiasm in her voice. I was flattered by her eagerness to meet me and felt as an equal.

I only had a few hours to pick out an appropriate outfit, gather necessary documents (volunteer certificates, training certificates, scholastic awards, resume). I wanted to make a professional first impression. I soon realized that my resume had not been updated. It took me awhile but I brushed up my resume, printed two copies and as Goffman (1956) would say, I was ready to turn into my professional self.

The Initial Meeting

I showed up at the confidential location ten minutes early. Pearl answered the door with a warm greeting. I extended my hand as I introduced myself. Pearl looked like a free spirit. She had a smile ear to ear. Her hair was half up with wavy locks around her face. She was adorned with a silver Turquoise, Native American necklace and Sterling Silver rings. She wore pants that looked like they could be Wranglers, country boots and a white cotton t-shirt. Her handshake was firm to the point of slightly painful. The room that I was in was cluttered to the brim. Donations were in the kitchen, piles of pamphlets lined and the hallway and the air in the room smelled musty. It was a typical site of a non-for-profit organization. Instantly I felt overdressed.

Pearl pleasantly informed me that Tina was still in a meeting with someone and would be with me shortly. She walked me upstairs and shouted to Tina that her next appointment was here. She led me into a room that looked like it could be a crisis line
center. There were three old wooden desks, three or four phones in the room, files were on the floor and the walls were covered with artwork and posters. I sat in this room for a short five minutes. Tina popped her head in and introduced herself. I was immediately struck by her strong resemblance to Linda the executive director at my former job. I extended my hand to formally greet her. She had thick coarse hair, wore no makeup, and had a bright red two-piece outfit. She led me into another room that was filled with old furniture, plants, piles of books and paper, and bumper stickers that lined the walls. I remember feeling uncomfortable with the clutter.

Here we go again! This uncomfortable feeling reminded me of my non-profit hang-up. I don’t understand how social workers do not apply their learning to their immediate environments. It bothers me with the way in which many of the agencies neglect their own appearance. I would think social workers would be more sensitive and accepting of the idea that our environment affects the way we feel and that the appearance of each agency gives off messages to workers and more importantly to clients or guests they serve. I’m disappointed once again!

I sat down. She quickly handed me a personal profile sheet that is given to all potential volunteers. As I sat she stood right in front of me (which made me feel uncomfortable). She told me to fill it out and give it to her at orientation. She then gave me a schedule of the upcoming 40-hour mandatory training. “Classroom” dates were to be scheduled on Thursday evenings and all day Saturdays for approximately four weeks. She informed me that all staff and volunteers must go through this procedure. She was speaking so quickly I felt that she was rushing me. Her approach was authoritative in style and I began to feel disrespected and angry.

Hold up, wait a minute! Isn’t this a contradiction to the philosophy of empowerment; a contradiction to this type of agency. Two words came to my
mind: power and control! I did not like how this was going! I felt my defenses go up.

She said, “Ok what are you interested in?” I said, “I have no idea; that is why I thought I was here.” She sat down and rushed through the volunteer opportunities. Tina then said that I could tell her what I was interested later. I replied, “I already know but I do have some questions for you.” She glanced at the clock. I told her my programs of interest. I continued, “I do not know if you have had the opportunity to speak with Pearl yet but” at that moment I heard Pearl yell out from an adjacent room, “honey I haven’t had the chance to talk to her, she doesn’t know anything.”

I told Tina about my education, my experience at Stan, and my 75 hours of domestic violence and sexual assault training. Pearl popped in, wrapped her arms around mine and said to Tina, “Isn’t she great? I knew that I had to catch her and not let her get away. She is a keeper.” She then exited the room. Tina stood there emotionless.

Hee hee..I smiled inside. I thought that serves her right for underestimating me; giving me no importance. I was also still bothered with the idea that she may treat others like this and at a place where many volunteers are survivors. Dangerous!

I told her that I would be unable to make the trainings on Thursdays due to a class that is held at the same time. She said that she will try to work things out and informed me that I would have to take as much of the 40 hours of training possible and twenty hours of practicum before working with clients. She asked for my training certificate, I handed it to her and she made a copy for her record. I handed her my resume that showed my previous experience in various fields. I told her that I hoped that my schedule would not
hinder my possibility of volunteering. She said she doesn’t see this as too much of a problem.

Yes! I felt a great sense of relief. I was worried for a second that that I would be unable to do both experiences. I felt instantly excited and nervous about this new path I was about to take.

She stood up and told me that is all she had. I told her that I would get permission from my instructor to attend the orientation that was held during her class period. If all goes well, I will see her there. As I was walking back down stairs I saw Pearl reenter the room Tina was in and said something. Tina said in an annoyed tone, “not right now, I have to be somewhere. It won’t take long” insisted Pearl. “OK, but hurry.” After that I was out of earshot and glad I was going home.

Throughout the entire meeting Tina looked half-interested. I felt rushed, dismissed, and as if I was in her way of going somewhere or doing something. It is my perception that she initially saw me as “just” a volunteer. I remember thinking that this is not how a volunteer should be treated.

Orientation-Monday March 24th

Overall, the orientation was a get acquainted with the agency meeting. We did have a space of time that was dedicated to volunteer introductions. Most people seemed to have similar interests and agendas. There were two categories of volunteers. One group seemed to have plenty of time to spare and decided that their time would be valued, and/or needed at this agency serving this clientele. The other group was younger in age and was doing this training as an internship or had some tie to the local university. We had three handouts to work on by Saturday. Different speakers spoke for about eight minutes each: a person from the Board of Directors, the executive director, and the volunteer coordinator. We also had a tour of this confidential office.
Not much here for me. At this point I am going through the motions to get towards the meat of this experience. I had very few thoughts regarding this evening. I sat, listened, and pretty much went home. This meeting functioned as a preliminary meeting. Maybe there will be something new and exciting to learn next time!

Saturday, March 29th

We watched a video, video clips, and had group discussions. This day seemed to drag. All material discussed was previously learned. I found it hard to keep away from the facilitator’s teaching style. Sometimes when she spoke I saw her lips move up and down in slow motion but nothing came out. My attention was on how she facilitated the group. At times, I got caught up on sections that I thought she could have emphasized to paint a more comprehensive and multidimensional picture of domestic violence. It was hard for me to be on the other side for once. I am so accustomed to presenting, leading discussions and doing workshops on domestic violence that I found myself biting my tongue all the time. Throughout the day I monitored how much I would say. I had no intention or interest in overpowering the facilitator. Holding back was incredibly unbearable.

When I did my initial 75-hour training at Stan the time went by so quickly and I was empowered by the vision of the organization as well as the women’s movement, of which it is a part. The bottom line is that it was all new to me. This time around was starting off differently. Sitting down for eight hours hearing the information that I once presented seemed redundant and made the time drip by. I am open to this experience and hope, and expect to learn from it. Next Saturday I wish for something new.
Saturday, April 4th

I arrived at the training at approximately 8:45 am. I purposefully dressed in comfortable attire, knowing this would be another long day. Everybody started rolling in around 8:55 and the chairs were full around 9:05. Tina formally greeted us and informed us that snacks were provided on the counter in the back of the room. Everybody seemed to get excited about the food. I heard “yeah” and “great” all around the room. Some people even stood up and headed straight to the snacks while in the middle of Tina’s sentence. The day began with a video, which was composed of various perspectives regarding the role of the church in domestic violence homes. The views utilized were from religious leaders such as rabbis, priests, preachers, pastors, and from the survivors themselves. The video’s main message was how religion has historically revictimized survivors through their messages. As I looked around the room I noticed everybody’s torso’s leaned forward and their eyes glued to the T.V. Video clips of survivor stories seemed to grab many of the volunteers attention and evoke emotional responses of sadness and more profoundly of shock. At times I saw people’s eyes widen, mouths drop and their hands covered their mouths. I have seen this video before but it actually has been quite some time ago.

I felt a couple emotions. I was grateful and relieved to hear representatives from religious organizations admit that many religious leaders do not know how to handle these situations and often times blame the victim for the battering or abuse.

A common way of dealing with such situations was for the religious leaders to ask her what she was doing wrong and telling her to be a better wife and mother.
Good, it was out in the open! To me that is a small but very important step. I also felt myself becoming angry at the church (unfortunately it doesn’t take much). Religious leaders have tremendous influence over survivors and their outreach or dismissal may have profound consequences. Good, I am glad we talked about this! It made me happy!

After the video finished Tina announced a break. Everybody gathered in two important places: the bathroom and the snack area. It seemed that people naturally broke into groups of two or three while very few remained seated down and kept to themselves. I made a conscious decision to be social, which often times is difficult to do. I headed to the snack area, picked up crackers and cheese and said to the female next to me, “Gosh these look good (in hopes to start some type of conversation).” “They are,” she replied. We continued to talk for the remainder of the time about food and the length of Saturday trainings. Tina then requested everyone to resume to their seats. Everybody slowly walked to their seats and eventually settled into their chairs.

Tina asked one general question, “What are your reactions to the video?” It seemed as if everybody that responded related the video to their personal victimizations. It was interesting to see the facilitator and the volunteers interact. It was as if they were playing a game of tug a war in the training room. Tina would ask a question regarding the video and expect responses from an advocate standpoint. Volunteers tugged the communication in the direction of their pressing issues as survivors.

A middle age female volunteer admitted that she related with a survivor from the video. “I married into what was known as a good family.” Everyone thought he was such a nice man. One day I was sitting in a chair in the living room when my husband came up to me and threw me across the room. He began to kick me over and over and
stopped only when he heard his soccer team made a goal. He yelled… GOOOAL and ran over in front of the T.V while I laid there bloody on the floor with, what I didn’t know at the time to be, a broken rib.” Other volunteers, along with myself cringed at the very thought of this incident. Tina replied, “So the video brought up some personal issues but what could we do as advocates to help survivors?” There it went again a tug back in the direction of advocacy. One volunteer announced what she would do and Tina took a minute to educate us on how to handle certain situations. Tina asked again, “what are other thoughts of the video?” An elderly lady said that it reminded her of her childhood and the suicidal feelings she had as a five year old from the physical and sexual abuse she endured. Tina again made a comment in the direction of advocacy but had little luck. A young man agreed with the previous volunteer about the video bringing back memories he said, “I am remembering experiences that I thought I forgot. It’s like, oh yeah that happened and oh yeah I remember my mom begging my father to not harm us kids. It’s crazy man. It’s hard.”

Tina then decided to switch gears and lecture on the remaining material on domestic violence, religion and our role as advocates.

Should I say something? I can’t believe this keeps happening. She is simply not addressing the survivor issue at all. It is obvious that people feel they need to share their experiences. Why is she not seeing what is so obvious? I’m becoming very bothered.

I battled with myself when to interject and when not to. Again, I did not want to make Tina uncomfortable nor did I want to overpower the conversation. As Tina continued to lecture I continued to be surprised that a context of wife abuse was not given
and that there was no mention of gender inequality. I raised my hand, Tina looked at me turned away and kept on talking. I put down my hand for a few seconds then she called on another volunteer. I remember thinking that was strange so, I raised my hand again. She continued to talk for a while then looked over at me and said, “Melanie, you have a question?” “Yes” I replied, “I find it interesting that we are not addressing the issue of the imbalance of power women endure and how this is connected to and plays out in religion.” I gave my input on gender inequality on the various levels; interpersonal, community/local and in the institutional level. When I spoke Tina stared out the window, at the walls, and at other volunteers.

*What is going on over here? I am surprised and disturbed that Tina made very little eye contact with me when I spoke. She looked at everything else but me. Her body language was dismissive to me. Did I say something to offend? I don’t think so but maybe I did. I hope not!*

After I was done with my input she quickly moved on to lecture about crisis intervention, the empowerment model, active listening, empathy and the history of the movement. Unfortunately, many of these issues were not discussed with us but rather lectured at us. When I did ask a question or commented on something Tina gave me similar treatment as before; very little eye contact and seemed disinterested to the point of appearing to not be listening. Tina would speak for thirty minutes, ask if there was any questions with a pause that lasted no longer than two seconds and then quickly moved on.

*I hate to admit that I found myself annoyed and frustrated that I was required to take part in this 40 hour classroom training and 20 hour practicum when I have a 75 hour training certificate and have worked at their sister agency for little over one year. I guess it is probably a touch of arrogance on my part. Every day, since the first day of training, I have forced myself to swallow my pride.*
One important element in today’s training was a guest speaker who shared with us her experience with domestic violence and with this particular agency. When she approached the podium I noticed her great big trembling smile. Her body seemed stiff in nature and when she spoke her head was slightly facing downwards. “Hi my name is Marsha”. She received a warm hello from the volunteers. She began to share her experiences while occasionally looking over at Tina for approval. “Is that what you wanted me to talk about? You are doing fine replied Tina.” She didn’t detail her experiences but referred to him as a physical and emotional abuser. She talked about playing the role of a “good wife” but was confused with the conflicting comments between her husband and friends. She said, “My friends always complemented me about how wonderful I did things but my husband complained about everything I did. I thought I was being a good wife but my husband did not think so.” As she spoke she giggled. Her hands were in constant movement. One moment they were on her lap then they moved to the table and back to her lap. “I wanted to know what I was doing wrong. Now I know thanks to Tina that I wasn’t doing anything wrong. He had the problem not me. It took me almost two years to successfully leave him, but I did.”

Yes! This is why I am in this field. Marsha put more flame to my fire and for that I am grateful. For a moment I was overjoyed with excitement for her and felt a sense of confirmation that I was on the right path for my thesis, for my life’s work.

Marsha continued, “I have a boyfriend now and I am so happy. He’s so kind and he is very patient with me. Sometimes when he approaches me suddenly I flinch. He would often be surprised by my reaction and said, he must have been a real jerk.” Marsha addressed the issue of displaying a public front to the outside world. Her husband was
and continues to be respected by and influential in the community, but at home he became someone very different. Her disclosure included missing the “old him”, the person she fell in love with in high school, but doesn’t like the person he became over the years. She informed us that her husband tries to guilt her into going back. His means of control was and continues to be her religion. He would often interpret the Bible’s messages to make her feel guilty for leaving and to coerce her into returning to the relationship. “Tina helped me understand that God wouldn’t want me abused because my God is loving. He still thinks I’m coming back. I had to go over there (to his house) recently and I noticed that the house is how I left it. Which is kinda scary. My pictures are still up. My knickknacks are in the same place. He refuses to give me back my things. I don’t know what he wants them for.”

The audience was polite and seemed to be more conscious when speaking. One young woman paused in mid sentence, raised her head slightly while looking up in the air (as if to grab down a word) She continued with her question, “How is your relationship with your new boyfriend? And, what does your son think of all this?” Marsha was clear and direct. “My boyfriend is great to me and very patient. My son loves that I am no longer with his father.” From her body language it was clear that she had to be going. She peaked at the clock and reached for her purse. Instead of asking her a question, I asked if I could make one brief comment before she left. I thanked her for coming and told her that she showed great strength today by sharing her story with complete strangers. She looked proud and empowered to take part in the training.
Yes, I am ready to do more work in this field. I was truly empowered by her strength. There is something about domestic violence that ignites this fire in me, maybe it is the underlining factor of gender inequality and the imbalance of power that derives from this disparity or maybe it is simply that nobody deserves to be abused. I feel reenergized to get started on my work in domestic violence.

Saturday, April 12

The conference room was unusually cold today. Volunteers, including myself were bundled in their coats and those with sweaters wore the hoods over their head. Tina started the day off with Diane (a volunteer who started her practicum) talking about her first day of hands-on experience. She admitted that she spent her four hours of training reading the crisis log. She added that she did notice that policy and practice seemed to contradict one another. As she looked around the room at the rest of the volunteers, she told us that it is very clear that we were being taught policy. Tina appeared to be caught off guard and scrambled for answers to the contradictions revealed. She insisted that everybody has his or her unique style, but that it almost always goes back to what is actually feasible for that moment of crisis. Diane continued, “I found out that the business office is really not a confidential site even though it is said to be.” She told Tina that she wondered why she stressed the issue that the business office is a confidential site when in reality the location is given out quite easily.

I also had this concern when first speaking with Pearl over the phone. She gave me a short talk about confidentiality and told me I was unable to disclose the location to anyone and then quickly gave me the address. Two thoughts popped into my head. I found it to be different and interesting to have a confidential business office and secondly how did they know they could trust me, they did give me the location quite quickly. I thought I would have to sign a document when getting there but to my surprise I did not. Confidentiality was as good as anybody’s word.
Tina quickly thanked Diane for sharing and began to lecture about suicide calls. She admitted that she had only received one in the past year and it was non-domestic violent related. She spoke for about twenty minutes before addressing us. She asked, “does anyone have any questions?” I did. In her lecture she briefly mentioned that we are mandated reporters. I was curious when she wanted us to bring this fact up to our clients, especially if they are in the middle of a crisis. To my surprise she told us that it would be appropriate when the client has already disclosed some type of child abuse (to her children or any other children). She continued, “You are going to want to tell the client at that moment, I am a mandated reporter and explain what that is to her and inform her that if she goes on with her story you will have to report it to the authorities.”

I found this to be disturbing. I asked her if it would be more appropriate to inform the client at the beginning of contact so she would know where we stood and she wouldn’t feel trapped when we tell her that we must report an incident. She responded by saying something about that is why they inform the client before she elaborates on the story. I said, “Then won’t it be too late? It is my understanding that we as mandated reporters are liable at the moment of any disclosure.” Tina disagreed with me and told me that I would be able to make a report but Child welfare services would probably laugh and throw the case out.

I guess my concern was on our liability as advocates. In the past I informed the client on the onset of contact, so there were no surprises. We had to report any abuse inflicted on children no matter how general the statement. Unfortunately, the liability lay on the backs of workers. I am not fully satisfied with her answers for one reason. I have
been informed by the child welfare agency in another county that many agencies are 
misinformed. I would have appreciated and would have been more at ease to hear the 
requirements of reporting from the agency itself. I will be making a phone call later.

This topic left a feeling of uneasiness in the pit of my stomach. My intuition said 
that something was quite right about this. I instantly worried about the workers 
who work to assist survivors and the possible liability they may have to 
experience.

It also made me realize the very different nature of Stan and Empower. This 
agency has a “confidential” business site, 30-day shelter and emergency shelters. Stan 
has a disclosed business site, a 30-day shelter, and long-term transitional units (one year). 
Empower relies heavily on volunteers while Stan is in an economic position to rely on 
paid staff. At Empower, when a person is interested in seeking services they are required 
to first meet with an Empower volunteer or staff member at a neutral location before 
meeting at the business office. The agency representative then does an initial assessment 
of their “trustworthiness”; to keep the site confidential and to determine if they qualify 
for services. At Stan, clients were allowed to freely come and go to the business site as 
they pleased.

In regards to the training Stan had many speakers from the community for 
example Child Protective Services, Adult Protective Services, Sheriffs, police officers, 
survivors and managers from their respective departments talking about their expertise. 
Empower has had approximately two so far. Empower has given me approximately two 
handouts thus far while Stan provided their volunteers and staff with a 3inch, 3ring 
binder filled with educational handouts and resources. I believe that Stan was seen as
more “radical”. It had an openly feminist standpoint and gave an overall context to the issue of domestic violence where Empower has not. I do acknowledge the size and resources available to both organizations. It appears that Stan has been fortunate with government aid. Empower in many ways appears to be in the stage of getting on their feet. The heavy reliance on volunteers appears to be an indicator of the lack of funds and overall resources available to them.

We took a short break; everybody went to their normal break locations: the restroom and the snack area. I spoke with several women, one woman in particular about her job at the boarding room in a veterinarian hospital. She spoke about the “foo fooness” of the business. She was fun to speak with and her stories were amusing. Tina calling everyone back to their seats interrupted break. We continued the training with a former employee, who currently holds a position on the Board of Directors. She was soft spoken and her smile lit up the room. She spoke in lecture format for about one hour and then we broke for lunch.

For lunch I would usually stick around and force myself to be social with anybody who may have decided to stick around for the break. Today was not one of those days. I decided to sit in my car, eat lunch while listening to some good old Motown music. I ate, listened to good music, and relaxed from the day. When I looked at my watch I noticed I had four minutes to be back in the training room. I rushed back to the training room.

When we returned from lunch we were assigned into groups and were given a hypothetical situation. I was grouped with Cathy and Steve. Our scenario was regarding children fighting, one of which was using physical force. The question was how would
we handle the situation as advocates? All three of us gave our opinions and made a plan to include all three ideas. We finished earlier then most of the groups so we began get to know each other. Steve started to ask us about our majors. He informed us that he was a psychology major but was caught between two disciplines; psychology and sociology. I told him that I too was once a “psych.” major. He said he was concerned about employment opportunities in the field of sociology and I told him that I would bring in a pamphlet of career opportunities that sociology has to offer. He told me that would be great when Tina asked who would like to begin sharing their resolution plans.

Cathy, in our group volunteered us. After we shared our conflict resolution strategy we sat quietly while others had their chance to share. Most groups did not know how to respond and Tina had to walk them through a plan. By the time all the sharing was over people’s attention spans appeared to be shot. As my eyes scanned the room I noticed people’s heads laying on the table, others decided to stand rather than sit in their chair. One young man was balancing his weight on two legs of his chair. Tina must have realized the boredom and tiredness of the room and allowed us to leave early.

Finally! I was thrilled to go home and relax. Eight hours is an incredibly long time when sitting down for 95% of it. I tend to be continuously frustrated with the lack of interaction that I am encountering. I have continued to hope that the next day of training would mirror that of a seminar and I become disappointed every time.

I am finding out how difficult it is to take field notes when we are sitting so close to each other. I have caught one women glancing at my notes. From then on I have kept my field notes on a completely separate sheet from that of my volunteer notes and have them either turned over or have my body angled enough to cover them.
Saturday, April 19th

Today I walked into the training room excited. It was not only the last day of training but my family was coming into town for the holidays. In the last meeting we decided, as a group, to have a potluck. I entered into the room with fresh fruit and peanut butter cookies. I paid my hellos to the people in the room, placed my dishes on the back counter and sat in my usual seat. We started the training at approximately ten after. Tina informed us that we would be having some speakers and would then have the opportunity to leave early. This news automatically brought a smile to my face. As Tina spoke we heard a familiar ring, the noise the elevator makes when someone is approaching our floor. A couple seconds passed and the elevator doors glided apart. There stood a tall thin Caucasian woman with short blonde hair carrying brochures underneath her arm. She had a great big smile on her face as she waved to the crowd. Tina excitedly announced, there she is now our very first speaker of the day.

She waved her over in her direction and the woman sat next to where Tina was speaking. Tina announced, “everybody this is Francine. She is the executive director of X organization.” Everybody said hello at the same time, which sounded like an off-key choir. Francine began to talk about the services that her agency offers and informed us when it would be appropriate to refer a client to her organization. She was a dynamic speaker. When I looked around the room I noticed that people were listening intently with their backs bent forward with their eyes fixed on her. Francine’s used a high degree of nonverbal communication. At times I felt as if I was watching a ping-pong tournament. Her hands flailed in the air moving left to right, up and then down and
around again. When she finished one young volunteer asked her about their success rate and Francine admitted that she did not know those numbers but was in the process of creating a mechanism to track such data. Francine thanked us for having her and passed around her brochures. Everybody then gave her a warm applause. Tina then announced that we could take a break before the second presenter arrives. It was no surprise that almost everybody headed to the back table for the potluck goodies.

I served myself some food and returned to my seat. I began a conversation with the volunteer next to me. I asked her what her plans were after the volunteer training was complete. She informed me that she was taking the training for a women’s studies class. She needed eighty hours of volunteer time. She continued to tell me that she was extremely into body care and planned to develop some type of class that rebuilds women’s self esteem through their bodies. She appeared to be excited. She told me, “survivors have continuously been beaten down and their body has been used against them I want to change that.”

Wow! What a great idea. How creative and needed. I was impressed by her maturity and inspired by her confidence.

She quickly asked me about my plans and I told her that I hoped to volunteer any extra time I have and that I am planning on doing my thesis research on domestic violence so any experience is good experience. She told me that this subject was a noble cause to dedicate one’s life too. I responded with a small smile. We heard that familiar ring and waited for the elevator’s double doors to open.
There stood a tall Caucasian sheriff. His legs were in a traditional law enforcement stance (feet far apart). His sunglasses were on top of his head, which covered his crew cut haircut. He immediately spotted Tina and approached her. A few minutes passed before she asked everyone to return back to their seats. She introduced the officer as Sheriff Stone, a good friend of hers. His role was to discuss his perspective on domestic violence and how and why they handle these type cases. He began saying that domestic violence calls are the worst calls to go out on and they are the most common.

Sheriff Stone emphasized that he had an extensive training in domestic violence (one week of study) and was responsible for training other officers. When speaking of domestic violence he referred to the households that he regularly visits. He commented, “Use your head lady and get the hell out of there. You need to leave (referring to a survivor)”. By this time I felt a knot in my throat. He continued to tell us that, “many, if not most victims don’t want help.” He continued, “we can even speak to her outside away from him (the abuser) and ask her how we could assist her. Many will flatly refuse and say they don’t need our help, just get out of here, they say, just go away…okay whatever lady.”

Wait a minute! This is the lead domestic violence officer? I instantly felt a pit in my stomach and a worry in my heart for all of the survivors who lacked compassion and understanding from this officer and from the officers he “trained”. I thought it was clear that he might have been sleeping in his “extensive” training. I wanted to yell, Out of sight doesn’t mean out of mind. Fear can follow you anywhere. I believe that many law officers do not understand that they may help for a moment. In the cases of domestic violence they may in fact hinder the situation. If arrested, the survivor unfortunately is the target of further reactionary abuse. The survivor’s acknowledge that they may
have to endure a more severe assault for the actions of law enforcement and the failure of the court system.

Throughout his talk he continued to make similar comments that made me cringe. I looked around the room and noticed that everybody was listening intently and to my surprise laughed at his jokes and sarcasm. I became increasingly more upset with his attitude towards victims of intimate violence.

Who does this guy think he is? I know that my upbringing heavily influences my view of many law officers and the beliefs I hold in the structure of the criminal “justice” system. As a child law enforcement was not always a symbol of service and protection but of harassment, fear, beat downs, and an overwhelming abuse of power. My work in domestic violence and sexual assault has given me the opportunity to work beside various law enforcement agents and unfortunately my view has not changed much. Maybe I was being too hard on him? I challenged myself to be open to hearing him out.

While Sheriff Stone spoke I remained quiet. I knew I had to keep it together. I need this agency. I attempted to be on my best behavior. Questions were being raised about emergency protective orders and self-defense. It was quite evident that when a woman fights back in self-defense many times she got arrested with the perpetrator. If the survivor’s self-defense is successful (meaning she has the ability to physically stop the abuser), She may in fact be arrested for appearing to be the “dominant” aggressor. Whatever the situation the survivor gets the short end of the stick.

Officer Stone wrapped up his presentation and was given a generous applause. Tina thanked him and waited for him to enter the elevator before asking what we thought. One woman said that she liked him and that he seemed quite compassionate. I was thinking compassionate from where his toes? Did I miss something? Another volunteer agreed with the previous woman’s comment. I was baffled even further when Tina
agreed with both of them. She said, “yeah he is a great guy.” Wait up, hold a minute! I couldn’t take it any longer. I raised my hand and said that I felt otherwise. I continued, “he appeared to have victim-blaming overtones! I am concerned that this was the domestic violence liaison that trains other law officers about domestic violence”. I heard giggles from across the room. I was so overcome with emotion that I stammered and felt that I was wearing my frustration on my sleeve.

I was completely surprised that others felt the exact opposite, especially Tina. This brings my mind back to the idea of interpretation and how the act alone is quite selective and biased in its nature and I am no exception.

Tina listened to what I had to say, paused and announced that we had one more activity before we were able to leave for the day. There she goes again; dismissed one more time! Something is obviously not right here. She began to hand out a sheet of paper with a T-shirt sketched on it that read at the very top, “I Love Me”. We were instructed to place our name in the heart and pass it to the person to the right of us. The goal was for everyone to write a positive comment on everybody’s shirt until all shirts were circulated and we received our own “shirt” back.

The process was amusing and extremely thoughtful. I wrote comments like nice smile, warm and genuine character, strong and insightful. When my shirt came back around my eyes had to first get adjusted from the loudness of the writing. Comments were in various colors and they were spread out on the shirt with no particular order. I believe most, if not all, comments referred to my strength, compassion and independence.

I was taken back for a moment. At that moment my mind became a whirlwind of thoughts. I remembered just one year ago I would have not been surprised with such comments because that is the way I felt about myself. Since graduate school
I have been thrown a curve ball. I have realized that I need to learn so much more to be an effective teacher and researcher. I am constantly running into things I don’t know how to do and have reoccurring feelings of doubt, so when I read these comments I realized that I felt like I was reading someone else’s shirt not mine but maybe the self that I once knew not so long ago. I found it touching that people saw these great qualities in me when I no longer saw them in myself!

As far as the training went, I was open to and hoping for new information, unfortunately I did not encounter much. But, as a new researcher, I have learned quite a bit from this experience. I found out how difficult it was to jot down field notes within the room without looking obvious. We were nearly sitting on top of each other. I learned how to use my body as a shield from my notes. I also acknowledged my limitations as a novice researcher such as fighting memory loss, challenging boredom, and deciphering what to note. When I looked around the room I tended to see the same scene; people either sitting or standing listening attentively to what was being said with very little else to note. It is my opinion that the type of structure utilized in the training (classic lecture) did not welcome much dialogue. I also must state the obvious. Maybe I was overlooking a goldmine and did not know it!

It was this experience of becoming a “volunteer” that allowed me to secure shelter participants for my study. I was required to attend this 40 hour training before working with clients. A 20-hour practicum was waived due to my previous experience in the field. This training provided me with an introduction to the culture of the agency along with exposure to the policies of the agency which I compare later with the actual procedures from the perspective of interview participants.
To find as many women who were open and willing to share their experiences of leaving abusive relationships, I created a short email introducing myself, my research objective and an invitation to all female survivors of domestic violence to participate in my thesis research (Appendix D). This email was sent to the sociology secretary and placed on the sociology graduate undergraduate listserv. I communicated with potential participants via email, answering any questions they had and set up dates and times to meet with those that were interested in taking part in the research.

Participants

Participants were female survivors of domestic violence who had left abusive partners. Their ages range from 31 to 51. Two women are Indian/Native American, three are white women, and two are bi-cultural. One participant is both white and Native American and another was half white and Latina/Hispanic. All women interviewed were in heterosexual relationships. For this reason, my research is limited in scope and unable to speak to the dynamics of violent homosexual relationships.

There were a total of seven interviews. These numbers were contingent on the flow of people that utilized the Empower shelter and that responded to my email invitation. Their time free from their abusers ranged from one week to twenty-three years. Most women had some college experience. Below is a brief introduction to the participants in my study.
Case One; Rose

Rose was my very first interviewee. She is a white woman in her mid 30’s with two children. At the time of the interview, she was a senior at Humboldt State University and held part-time employment. She is a survivor of child molestation, of past abusive relationships and is in recovery from her addiction. Her interview was held in a private room in the university library. Throughout the interview she was a matter of fact. At moments she filled with anger about the violence she had endured from her ex-husband. Her goals for the future were to graduate and apply for graduate school. She wanted to work in the area of juvenile justice and program evaluation. She wanted to make programs better.

Case Two; Aimee

Aimee is a white woman in her early thirties with two children. She is an adult child of professional parents. She herself had some college education and grew up in a family with financial resources. At the time of the interview Aimee was unemployed and staying at a shelter. Our interview was held in the living room of the shelter. Her son played immediately outside the house. She supervised him while we talked by the sliding glass doors. Throughout the interview her three-year-old son regularly checked on her, asking if she was okay and giving her kisses. At times she became overwhelmed with sadness.

We never completed Aimee’s interview, she had an appointment requiring us to end our initial interview early and soon thereafter she exited the shelter and entered into
another program at another agency that provided her with temporary housing for three years.

Case Three; Evaline

Evaline is an Indian woman from the Hoopa Tribe in her early thirties. At the time of the interview she had four children, some college education, was unemployed and was a shelter resident. She graduated high school early, signed up for various career opportunities but withdrew her participation because of her partner’s dislike of her obtaining a higher education which often came in the form of a lack of help with the caretaking of the kids. I interviewed her in the back yard of the shelter. We sat a few feet from her small children and watched them play. They occasionally came to check on her during the interview. At various times she had to ask them to stop playing a certain way. At one point Evaline threatened to call shelter staff if the children would not listen to her. Evaline was for the most part matter of fact except for moments were she talked about her abuser threatening to kill her and her kids. Evaline most wanted to be independent from her partner. She also wanted to reenter college and work in the area of health or become a teacher.

Case Study Four; Connie

Connie is an Indian woman in her late thirties with one child. At the time of the interview she was a senior at Humboldt State University and worked part time. Connie is self-described as a strong, independent, intelligent woman. At one point she owned her own business earning well over $4,000 a month in community that struggles financially.
Her interview was held in a private room in the university library. Connie appeared to be a bit nervous about the interview, but warmed up quickly. Connie had many goals. She wanted to go to graduate school and continue to heal from the violence in her life. She planned to help other domestic violence survivors. Her long term goals were to buy a house and car. She thought that if she met an equal partner she would be happy. If not she thought she could be just as content.

Case Five; Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a white 35 years old woman with two children. At the time of the interview, she had her GED, was unemployed and residing in the shelter. I interviewed Elizabeth in her room at the shelter. The room was tiny and her possessions were overflowing from her closet into her room. We sat on her day bed through the interview. Elizabeth had an excitable energy about her. She cursed often and was still very angry with most of the people around her, including shelter staff. When I asked Elizabeth about her short and long term plans for the future, she did not know how to answer. She told me, “(I’m) still trying to figure it out.” She did mention that she wished to be the person that she was before the abuse. She made several references to internalizing the behaviors of her abuser and alluded to the idea that she had become that which she hated.

Case Six; Alex

Alex is a Native American and white woman in her early fifties with one adult child. She grew up in a home with financial resources. At the time of the interview she had a doctorate degree and held a professional position at the University. While she
always felt confident in her intellectual abilities she struggled with insecurities about her attractiveness. I interviewed her in her office on campus. The room was dim as we sat across from each other. While she had been divorced from her abusive husband for many years, she appeared frail at times and deeply saddened throughout the interview. While she did not cry in the interview, she did have a constant mood of sorrow and pain. Alex’s short and long term goals consisted of buying a house and entering into a committed relationship. She talked about never having the ability to settle to a geographic area and for the first time she has done just that. She believed that her past inability to settle in one place may have been due to her fear of commitment. She felt committed now to a place and wanted someone with whom she could share her life.

Case Seven; Tammy

Tammy is a white and “Hispanic” woman in her mid-forties with two children. At the time of the interview, she had some college education and was residing in the shelter. Prior to the abuse, she was self-described as self-sufficient, independent and strong willed. I interviewed her outside on the front steps to the shelter. Tammy was raw with emotion. She cried almost through the entire interview. At several points she began to shake with grief. I stopped the recorder several times giving her time to work through her emotions. I also asked her if she would like to stop interviewing, but she insisted that we continue. Tammy’s immediate goal was to find housing. The shelter was helping her with that need. She wanted to begin focusing on herself and to take care of her wellbeing. She shared that she felt called to work with women; to work for a women’s shelter. She said that she felt that she had experienced that abuse for a reason: Maybe it
happened so that she would help other women. “I feel that I have a voice that needs to be heard and there is so much that needs to be done out in our community.” So far she didn’t feel that she has left a positive impact on the world, but wanted to change that. “I want to be…I want to be …I want to leave some…something behind that says I’m here.”

The Interviews

I interviewed the women in my study in one of two locations. The women who responded to my email request were interviewed in a private room in the university campus library. The room had rows of chairs facing a chalk board at the front of the room. Between the chairs and the board was a rectangle table. I arranged chairs at the table where I held my interviews. The beige walls in the room gave a feeling of coldness. Thankfully, I do not believe this affected the connection between the participants and myself.

I also interviewed women at the domestic violence shelter. This was a warm and inviting setting in contrast to the campus classroom setting. We talked in the yard, the living room or in a private room in the house. Artwork hung on the walls and color splashed every room. It had a quiet and calm feeling.

Each interview began with me explaining the interview process. I used a semi-structured guide (Appendix A) to organize the interview, but often our conversation was organic. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes with informal conversation continuing after the formal interview had ended. These informal conversations averaged 30 minutes and usually led us to further discuss their situations and lives. All women were eager to
share their experiences with me. I felt honored to have the opportunity for them to open up to me and share such personal details of their lives with me.

Confidentiality

Measures to protect participants from harm included creating a consent form for all participants (Appendix B). I explained this form to them before signing. They were given a copy for their possession. I also informed the participants that their participation was on a voluntary basis. They had the right and power to refuse to answer any questions and they had the option to opt out at anytime during the interview. All participants were informed that all documents produced from their interview would be confidential. All participants were either given or chose their fictitious names. Participants were informed that all recorded interviews would be destroyed 30 days after transcription. Transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet at my home office.

Data Analysis

I transcribed and made additional notes on my interview experiences. Later I again read through the transcripts identifying themes in the data. I relied on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in this process, staying close to the data as I coded and recoded the data. I then organized the emergent themes in developing an understanding of the leaving process to domestic violent relationships.
CHAPTER 4: 
STAYING, LEAVING AND SOURCES OF ASSISTANCE

My study explored the process of leaving abusive relationships with taking special interest in what aided women in fleeing. I first start with how women define domestic violence relationships and move toward past barriers to leaving, look into the motivators behind fleeing, and explore their support systems. Leaving an abusive relationship is more complex than it appears on the surface and the survivors of this violence are warriors in their own right. I explore their resistance to the violence endured and their fight from the controlling grip of partners.

Domestic Violence; In Their Own Words

All participants were asked to define a domestic violence relationship. All women characterized their former relationships as having an imbalance of power and control or they described this reality. Some participants provided accounts of the types of partner abuse inflicted as a means to control their behavior. Examples of fear were ever present. All three themes were tightly interwoven.

Power and Control and Tactics of Abuse

One person controlling another one. Financially, sexually, physically, emotionally, intellectually, the challenge of an argument. I mean, in every way…without you even realizing it- addressing subtleties (Aimee).

Like the couple is unequal, like one has more power over the other… in any way like physical or emotional or mental, anything (Evaline)
My idea of domestic violence is a situation where one partner, either one, it could be the man or the woman, is being violated either verbally or physically and it doesn’t have to even have to be a punch, it can be a grab, a shove...giving people, not addressing people’s needs. It is an aggressive act from one partner to another…it’s demeaning. It’s a… it lowers self esteem, it can freeze someone (Tammy).

The Element of Fear

It is also about power and control. One partner has more or is trying to exert more power over the other individual through the physical or the emotional abuse. It's about degrading someone, about putting them down. hitting them, not hitting them, pushing them, just the whole idea of exerting power over another individual through fear (Rose).

Some people break things. Some people hit you. There are so many factors…when people are disrespectful they manipulate you, whether it be by force or actual violence or some form of fear is what I would call it. (Elizabeth)

If one begins to feel small…nothing…uh diminished umm…or fearful, constantly fearful (Alex).

Anybody that has control, who tries to manipulate you, puts you down, degrades you, marginalizes you, so that could be anything from emotional and then to physical you know. Um…where they’ve got control of your finances, or threatening your job…threatening your livelihood…your family members. It could be very little or extreme (Connie).

Past Barriers to Leaving

From the existing literature one would be aware of the many factors that acted as barriers for women to flee from their abusive relationships (Dobash and Dobash 1979, Bowker 1993). Several themes emerged that were included in the existing literature. The main barriers for women that I interviewed were fear, traditional gender socialization, and financial dependency on the abuser.
Undifferentiated and Differentiated Fear

Fear was a major barrier to leaving. Two types of fear emerged from the data: undifferentiated and differentiated fear. Borrowing Hyden’s (1999) concepts of undifferentiated and differentiated fear are helpful in understanding how fear in different forms acted as a barrier to leaving her relationship. The former type of fear was not necessarily directed at any specific person or reason. This type of fear covered many sources and did not focus on one particular source.

Rose is a white woman with two children who had been abused as a child. Her account illustrates undifferentiated fear:

Fear, I mean fear, it would have to be fear. That was the only thing stopping me from leaving. I financially supported myself towards the end of the relationship. My husband didn’t even sell drugs anymore. He did more drugs than he sold so he just put us in more debt, so I was carrying us financially. It was fear; it was just fear, fear of leaving, fear of having to live on my own, um fear of having to put my kids elsewhere because my son couldn’t live above the bar, you know what I mean, I mean so it would just…fear, just fear of everything (Rose).

Other fear was directed at a specific person or experience. Tammy, a white woman living with a physical disability that does not allow her to work, relied heavily on her partner for economic support. This differentiated fear was Tammy’s real possibility of going bankrupt and experiencing homelessness if she left her partner.

I was really hurting and lonely and afraid. Bankruptcy was knocking at my door. I didn’t want to live in the streets. And I wanted bad for this relationship to work.
Others specifically feared the wrath of their partner if they would leave. He was the main object of fear. Out of the seven interviewees, five lives were threatened by their partners.

Rose expressed many fears including fear of her violent partner.

He would tell me, get the fuck out, if you leave, I’ll kill you. I mean all in one breathe.

He chased me around the house. He threatened to kill me and told me that I couldn’t leave.

I had been thinking about leaving him for a couple of weeks, but I was just too scared to leave.

When Rose did leave him, she stayed in her house, above the bar, for two weeks because she feared for her life.

Aimee, a white woman in her thirties with two children, experienced extreme cases of physical abuse. From being thrown down a flight of stairs to being woken up by a beating to her head while she was recovering from her miscarriage. She feared his violent episodes. While I was unable to finish the interview with her, she did say that he would threaten her saying, “I just want to stick a knife in you. I hate you so much.”

Evaline, an Indian woman from the Hoopa tribe, also experienced violent physical as well as mental abuse from her partner. He took her and their son into the mountains and threatened to kill them. As for Connie, her abuser would “joke” about killing her, saying “I’ll kill you if you don’t do it like that.” Elizabeth’s abuser was typically an emotional and mental abuser. When she did leave she was fearful that if he found her he would get physically abusive with her.
Whether the women experienced either form of fear, both forms acted as barriers to their freedom from the violence. While some participants had a general sense of fear, most had a concentrated fear that made their partner the main object of fear.

Pressures of Traditional Gender Socialization

Gender socialization and the historical structures of gender, subordinate women to men were factors in my research. I found in my study that women today continue to feel the pressures of traditional gender roles and socialization. Their perceptions of gender roles acted as barriers that confined them in their abusive relationships.

Connie and Alex, both Native American/Indian women, spoke about their role as wife and how they felt as if they were “failing” in this role. While Connie was financially secure from owning her own business, she maintained traditional gender role expectations for herself. Connie expressed her previous views on her role as wife.

Part of the barriers was probably emotional or mental. In a sense, all my life I had been lacking in support and companionship. I had grown up in an era where I was raised to be a housewife and that was what I was going to be all my days. I wasn’t, so I was failing my role. And, I guess I just felt like I needed somebody and hey this guy was perfect and how come this is going on? I can’t believe it.

Alex expressed similar sentiments about her husband’s rational gender role expectations which she later internalized.

*** would do something nice or something wonderful…a gift…or treat me well, tell me how much he loved me. He told me that if I wouldn’t rifle him up, if I just wouldn’t set him off, he wouldn’t lose his temper. And, so I was sort of set up to believe, I must be causing all of this. So, I think maybe part of me believed for a while that if I was just really good, a good wife, a good mother, please him, then everything would be okay.
Both women by today’s standards would be viewed as self-sufficient and independent women. While Connie owned her own business, Alex earned her PhD and had a professional position at the university. Yet both still felt the social pressure of traditional gender role expectations.

Economic Dependency or Homelessness?

Much of the literature on domestic violence stresses the economic dependency that barricaded women in their relationships (Senter and Caldwell 2002, Bowker 1993, Dobash and Dobash 1979). My study was no different. Both Elizabeth, a white woman and Tammy, a bi-ethnic woman, talked about economic dependence as a major barrier to leaving their partners. When I asked Elizabeth about her personal barriers to leaving her partner, she mentioned the following.

Money. The financial aspect of being stuck because of finances, and nowhere to go and no way to go. Financially dependent.

Tammy was in a similar situation. She was struggling with a debilitating disease at a fairly young age that affected her ability to make her own living.

Not having a phone (lived in a rural area), no income, because I am waiting on social security. I had no job because I can’t work (Tammy).

While Tammy and Elizabeth experienced the same barrier they articulated them with different emotions. Tammy was filled with raw sadness. Elizabeth was clearly angry and expressed it throughout her answers. Her tone was consistently frustrated and angry and she cursed often.
Motivators to Leaving

Despite the many barriers to leaving, all women that I interviewed had escaped
the abuse. What made them take action? What was different this time to convince them
to flee their relationships? The emerging themes in the data are characterized as the
following: escalation of abuse, examination of the relationship, and feeling pushed out.

Escalation of Abuse

A solid theme that explained the reason for many of the women to flee their
relationship was the escalation of abuse they were experiencing. For the women that had
children the violence began to extend to them and affected them in new ways. The
existing literature supports these findings (Dobash and Dobash 1979).

For approximately 50% of my participants the last time of abuse was the worst
time of abuse. For Rose two incidents aided her to leave the relationship. Her partner
humiliated her in front of a loved and respected sister. This verbal and emotional abuse
was in related to her partner’s command that she come home at a specific time.

We went back home and he just went off on me in front of my sister. I mean
just off, out of control and I was so… I felt so humiliated. The humiliation
that was it. After that, that to me was the worst because my sister watched
me be humiliated and she had a lot of respect for me and she was clean and
sober which added to my humiliation because I was too chicken shit to get
clean and sober. My sister had seen me go through the physical abuse in the
very first relationship. She saw me stand up for myself and so she knew that I
could stand up for myself and the fact that I didn’t or couldn’t stand up for
myself against this person had so much power and control over me that
I couldn’t do anything. My sister saw me at my weakest point.

The second part of this pivotal point in her life happened a few days later. Her husband
again began to yell and humiliate her in front of her son over a television program about
whales. At that moment she knew she would be leaving him. She did not want her son to continue to see his mother being treated in this manner. She feared he would learn to do this to other women when he grew up.

As for Connie she found out her fiancé was already married. She threw her engagement ring at him and told him that the relationship was over. When they occasionally got together after that event, she got pregnant. When he found out about the pregnancy, the abuse escalated and he forced her to get an abortion.

He took me to the abortion clinic with a gun. I don’t agree with abortion. It’s not something that...uh...that I believe in but, I felt my baby was in jeopardy. He had a gun and he stuck it in those fanny pack things that men carry.

Connie continued to say that while she did not personally believe in abortion, she did not openly contest the operation since her former partner’s behavior showed the kind of father he would be to their unborn child.

Aimee expressed that while she continued to experience extreme physical abuse at the hands of her partner, she was motivated to leave when her partner took their son from her after a violent episode. He had never fled before with their son. She realized then she needed to make a change to keep herself and her son safe.

Tammy’s experience also included an escalation of abuse, although it did not involve her child. Tammy’s last time leaving was also the worst episode of abuse she experienced from her partner. The various types of abuse she endured from her partner were typically, emotional and financial. She was completely dependent on him financially due to her inability to work. He would typically leave her for long periods of
time without money and little food. This last episode escalated to physical abuse. They had an argument about not spending enough time together and her suspicion of him taking drugs.

He went into the shower. I followed and said, what are you doing now? I’m going to Eureka he said. I said good then we can have our day together. He goes, we aren’t going anywhere. I’m going alone. I wouldn’t take you for anything. And, I grabbed his pants off the floor, apparently he could see through the shower door. I was gonna look for drugs. Well, he got so nervous and quickly jumped out of the shower like there was something in those pants he didn’t want me to see. I grabbed his wallet there was a struggle and the fight and physical interaction right there. He grabbed me so hard on my arms that I got a huge bruise, just unreal, threw me in the chair. That’s all that I found. I didn’t find drugs. And, I found $38 and talked to him later. I said you were willing to throw me around for $38. That’s how much I mean to you?

According to Hyden (1999) women begin to equate leaving to living and staying in the relationship to death. The escalation of abuse she experiences is her getting closer to death on the life-death continuum. Alex was also motivated to leave her marriage after examining her relationship. As Hyden noted, Alex also equated staying in an abusive relationship to dying. She witnessed her mother’s slow “death” as she remained with her abusive partner.

Examination of the Relationship

For Alex, the first time she left was her final. They had weeks of arguing about their marriage and about the need to go to counseling. By the time her partner decided to attend sessions and try to make the marriage work, she was already preparing with her counselor’s help to leave the marriage. Alex shared with me that through counseling she
reconnected with herself. Counseling also helped her motivate to leave this emotionally abusive relationship.

   I watched my mother die inside (referring to her parents’ abusive relationship). For years I had dreams that she’s dead, that people hadn’t, that she hadn’t been buried yet. And, when it came time for me to look at my relationship, I just bolted because I didn’t want that to happen to me.

The above quote is a clear example of Hyden’s life/death analogy. Alex chose life.

   Evaline also fled after the examination of her relationship. She had been lied to by her partner about money he saved from work. His lies almost led them to homelessness. Evaline expected this dishonesty due to his history and the lack of support he offered her. She had secretly set aside money for escape. They initially went their separate ways. They got back for a short length and during that time he returned to physical violence with her and their children. It was the examination of the relationship in conjunction with the abuse inflicted on her and her child that motivated her to leave her situation.

Pushed Out

   Finally, Elizabeth was the only participant that was pushed out of the relationship. Their arguments usually led to the destruction of property. While he would verbally attack her and destroy her property, she would counteract with physical aggression. After a violent rage he demanded her to leave his house. She came to stay at the local shelter, with her teenage daughter, while he remained in the home. She was angry that she was the victim of his abuse and he was able to have a home and have stable life. She was on
the verge of living in the streets. Being pushed out by a spouse is one form of control, it is also final.

Support From Others

Women do leave abusive relationships but they do not do it alone. There are many sources of help both informal and formal (Bowker 1993). During their process of leaving the women interviewed encountered assistance through rediscovery, validation and emotional support, the providing of basic needs, advocacy and finally assistance that employed distance.

Rediscovery

As mentioned before, Alex also had great support from her therapist. Going to therapy provided her with a rediscovery of self and self-value. When Alex was asked what helped her in the process of leaving she had this to say:

Therapy. She took me through a therapeutic process that’s called recounting. I guess…it’s the beginning to have a sense of self.

Despite Alex’s extended education, she felt with the birth of her child, she continued to lose herself. With the help of her counselor, she was able have an awakening.

Validation and Emotional Support

The women interviewed expressed the importance of the emotional support they received by formal and informal sources of assistance, during the various stages of leaving. This support was important in preparing to leave, as well as during and after they had left. Others extended their help in various ways that either validated their
feelings and/or provided them with emotional support during this difficult time in their life.

Rose’s close friend at the time was great help. She stayed with her at her place as emotional support. Evaline frequently visited her sister on the weekend while she resided at the shelter. Since the shelter was closer to her sister’s than her place in Hoopa, she was able to see her more frequently. Evaline also received validation from child protective services when she reported her husband inflicting abuse on their son. As for Tammy she met up with a woman who went through a similar situation with her husband and recommended that Tammy call the local domestic violence shelter. She sat with her, for emotional support, while Tammy made the call. While Connie did not receive any help from family or friends, she did receive help from formal organizations such as a group of private investigators who gave her free information about her husband. She also received validation from Planned Parenthood, who testified for her in court that she appeared under distress during the abortion.

Basic Needs

A strong theme that emerged from the data was the assistance from others that cared for the basic needs of the participants. The various sources of assistance came from family, friends, and the domestic violence shelter. Family members provided financial assistance at various times during the process of leaving. Child care was provided by family members while the women worked. Friends provided temporary shelter while she initially left her partner. Finally, while Aimee, whose professional family had financial
resources, provided temporary shelter and financial assistance. Others did not have the option to stay with family and needed to turn to a women’s shelter.

The women that utilized the shelter were asked about the role that it played in their fleeing experience. Some women expressed a sense of freedom and self-control. One mentioned how it brought her safety. Others expressed validation that they were not blamed for the abuse.

Evaline

Oh yeah …well my kids are way healthier and…it’s like no more…like worried about how he’s going to react about everything you do, or if we want to go get ice cream or go to the store. We can just go. We don’t have to worry about his dad being an asshole or saying you don’t need to do that. He always had control of that; he always had to have money. If I wanted to go to the store before, I had to go, well can I have some of my money and he’d be like …he’d give me like five buck, how the heck am I suppose to buy dinner for six people for five bucks? Well, now we could do anything our own way. I want to buy my kids new shoes and I can. I don’t have to ask somebody.

Connie

They are the nicest people. They didn’t pass judgment. You know they were just right there for whatever I wanted to do. If I felt free to have run, to have left the area completely, at the different times that I did go into shelter and henceforth I am bound to the community by a court order. And I felt safe when I could get a place to sleep safely for the night.

Tammy

I always thought that people thought it was my fault. I don’t feel that here anymore. I am worthy of being loved and I didn’t feel that for a long time either. I used to think I brought it on myself, that he had the right to do what he did, because I was unworthy and I am worthy. The way we’ve been programmed to think, isn’t always the right way.
As the women expressed above the shelter experience provided, for most of them, a safe place to be that assisted them while not blaming or judging them for what they were experiencing.

Advocacy

Advocacy was another type of support that was highly valued by the participants. Rose’s mother called the police and informally advocated for her to attain an emergency protective order. And Evaline’s mother and sister assisted her in fleeing past abusive episodes and ultimately assisted in her leaving her partner. Aimee was provided advocacy by the shelter that resulted in temporary shelter for three years at a local agency.

Employ Distance

Rose took advantage of the opportunity that was extended to her by her employers (bar owners) and law enforcement. Both sources helped her to create physical distance between her abuser and herself.

They (employers) let me move in, like right now. They didn’t charge me any deposit, no first, no last (apartment above the bar).

Law enforcement helped Rose with the emergency protective order and they provided special assistance.

We’re in a small town; you know they just would check on me to make sure I was okay, you know. Yeah, it was really. It was nice.
Shelters provide advocacy distance between women and their abusive partners. They provided them with a safe place to get on their feet and raise their children without the immediate threat of violence.

Resistance as Power

The dialogue of women experiencing battering can itself be understood as resistance (Hyden 1999). Through a Foucault-inspired lens, survivors have power (Hyden 1999). They use the little power that they have left to extract themselves from the abuse and attempt to stop the violence. All of the seven women displayed various resistance techniques to either resist the abuse or their partner’s control.

Managing the Violence

As previously mentioned, women’s acts of resistance include behavior that both resists the violence and/or the partner. In my study cases where women resisted the violence included techniques as housecleaning and communication strategies. Some women attempted to avoid possible confrontations by knowing what made their partner tick and made everything as perfect as possible in hopes that he would not be bothered by anything. Unfortunately, no matter what they did their partners always found something to be upset about. Aimee’s account illustrates this very point.

If I could keep everything the way he wanted it to be there was a chance of there being an argument or me getting in trouble, which means, meant that the laundry was done. His outfit was ironed and ready for the next day. You know the floor was scrubbed. The trash was taken out. The kids were fed. He could watch the history channel. I mean I knew everything that he liked and I kept thinking well if I just figured it out and keep everything the way that he likes it, then he won’t be mad and we can just have a normal life.
Others resisted by attempting to get their needs met by using various communication techniques. For example, Evaline would write her request or wishes in a letter rather than ask verbally. This sometimes helped her to avoid confrontations. Others would craft careful framings for their requests hoping to sway their partners to agree with them. These techniques were attempts to avoid confrontations and were mechanisms to get their needs met.

Realizing Her Power

Other techniques went a step further from resisting the abuse to resisting the control of her partner. Some women maintained personal rules that they did not allow their partner to manipulate, even when it increased their personal danger level. For example, Rose made it a point to keep working despite the anger that it evoked in her partner:

He felt less power over me, because I had a job. He tried to be more powerful. His whole way he talked to me, the way he treated me, just the whole dynamics of the relationship were at that point. I don’t want you working. No, I’m going to work. I have to support myself. My having a job really provoked a lot of anger in him.

Rose was not alone. While Aimee could not control her husband’s use of drugs, she was able to enforce rules about his drug use. She was able to keep him from using in the house. Aimee wanted to keep the drug use and the drugs themselves away from their children.

I know that you really can’t tell somebody what to do with their body. I said that if you absolutely insist and you’re going to do this just don’t bring it home. Get it out of the house or I would even offer to pay for a hotel out of my work money.
Other acts of resisting the violence were episodes where participants fought back by physically fighting back. These tactics are supported by the literature (Bowker 1993).

As you may recall, Elizabeth is an example of one participant who would physically fight back during violent episodes.

Um…that’s my shit he’s breaking, because he came with nothing. So, naturally it was very defensive and aggressive back, in a sense I wasn’t taking it and you weren’t going to do this to my shit. You wanna see crazy buddy let me show you (referring to her getting physical with him).

Other participants used other techniques of resistance, also supported in the literature (Bowker 1993), such as obtaining restraining orders, filing for divorce, and attending counseling. Rose used various techniques from above but also included others that none of the other participants included in the interviews. She talked about emotionally controlling the person who is physically abusing her.

Some women don’t know that they can exert their own power. But, on the flip side, personally for me, as sick as it sounds, um I felt that I was able to exert certain amount of emotional power over the person abusing me physically. I know the buttons to push. I know it really pisses you off when I call you a bastard so instead of not doing that, I am going to do that. It gave me some sense of power thinking that I had a certain amount of control over someone’s emotions.

She continued to say that in the midst of the physical violence she would maintain mental control of herself.

I am disassociating from myself because the abuse is so extreme. I have no other way to deal with it. I have no other defense mechanism but to allow you to control my mind so I’m going to step outside of myself. And, you have no idea that I am doing that. It’s one area that I will not let you have control. The only way that I cannot let you have control is if I disassociate from my actual physical being.
Hyden (1999) states that women leave both psychologically and physically. Rose would psychologically leave during violent episodes. It gave her a sense of self-control in the midst of his physical control. Rose talks about how her small acts of defiance helped her when she was ready and able to leave the relationship. She said that it helped her build up her courage to end the abuse she was enduring.

Finally, the major act of resistance from the abuse and the control of their partner was leaving their abusive relationships. Data shows that leaving an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time in a woman’s life. All of the participants displayed this heroic act to end the violence in their lives. Leaving for some of them meant leaving their possessions, leaving their normal routines, going to a shelter, experiencing homelessness, going bankrupt, being separated from children and experiencing the fear of the unknown. All these they endured for the freedom from violence for them and their children!

Free

After examining their situation having left an abusive relationship, most women felt empowered. They increased their self esteem, began to find their independence and were able to look forward to new things in their life.

In this study women’s self-perception transformed from before the violent partnership, to during the violence and finally after having fled the relationship. Most women expressed positive self images prior to the relationship, with the exception of Rose. You see a dramatic drop of self worth during the violence and a surge of positivity after fleeing the relationship. When Rose was asked about how she viewed herself during
the abuse she described herself as a “perpetual victim” referring to her past traumatic experiences such as child molestation, various abusive relationships, addiction and finally, her most recent abusive relationship. When she was asked how she saw herself after the abuse she had this to say.

Oh wow, geez. I am totally different now. I have self back. For so long I was stupid, that I wasn’t capable. And uh, I’m graduating in May (4-year university). I worked really really hard. I haven’t quit. I have not let anything prevent me from obtaining my goal. And, I am changing. I am constantly changing. The more educated I become, the less I know, but the better person I become; If that makes any sense? So, I am not a helpless little victim. You know what I mean?

Connie had similar sentiments. She also put her new knowledge of domestic violence into action.

I am back to myself. I am a whole lot more intelligent. I didn’t think it would happen, but it did. Actually, I just had a date…uh …with a friend, recently and red flags went up. I was able to communicate that it wouldn’t go any further.

Connie and others expressed then a restored sense of self and growth from having made it through domestic violence.

New Possibilities

Other women expressed their wishes for the future. Alex, a university professional, felt diminished during the relationship. She felt as if she transformed into a “boring matron.” Now she is able to see new possibilities in her life.

I guess I see myself on a threshold cause I’m 51 and so for the first time in my life it is very clear to me that my life won’t last forever. I figure I have 25 or 30 years to do all the things I’ve always wanted to do. So, I feel real positive about that.
Evaline talked about how she lost herself in the relationship. She shared with me, with hope in her voice, that she was now happier and she added, “I just want to be independent and get a house for my kids.” She expressed the freedom she felt from her partner and that she was able to do as she pleased without direction, or control from her partner.

Lost

Tammy felt otherwise. Her emotions were still fresh and raw. She was overwhelmed with the grief of the relationship and yearned to find her old self again.

Injured (she laughs). I see this woman who has been beaten down and I don’t mean physically beaten. I just mean one way or another. I keep saying I just want my life back, but I know that won’t happen until I get well. It makes me so god damn angry that people can do this to you and their walking around out there living productive lives and I am sitting here (shelter) with my life a mess. It makes me feel unworthy.

Tammy’s place and sense of self can be understood as one of a range of emotions and places that women who have left abusive relationships will experience. The process of leaving, and of having escaped, is not linear. It is likely that even the women who I interviewed who spoke positively of new found selves will experience future dark times. Building strong networks of support are critical steps to distancing themselves from frequent returns to self doubt.

In Senter and Caldwell’s (2002) research they identified several main themes when women left their abusive partners. Their participants, as well as my participants, accepted support from others. They reached out to family members, friends, and strangers. They made adjustments to a new way of living; a life without their partner. The women were transforming themselves from a person controlled to a person in power...
of her life and that of her children. Most women are beginning to reconnect and rediscover their self and their wants. As in Senter and Caldwell’s research, the women that I interviewed also talked about “giving back”. For the most part, they did these interviews with me in hopes to touch other women’s lives.

Women feeling free and those that felt lost both wanted to give back to others. Women experiencing the feelings of being lost may turn to “helping agencies” for partial explanations for their feelings of confusion. Not all women looking for help received it, yet there continued to be a sentiment to want to assist others.

Ironies of Help

The main function of service based agencies is to provide services or some type of assistance to the community. Participants and I both experienced ironies of the helping system: That is we experienced the exact opposite of what the service was designed to do. The shelter’s main function is to employ distance from the abusive partner, help the client to leave permanently if they choose to do so, and help them to obtain life skills needed to gain independence.

When I asked Elizabeth about the role the shelter had played in her leaving, she was short on her answer during the interview. When the interview ended, we continued to talk for awhile. She continued to express frustration with her shelter experience. Her answer was not supported by the existing literature, yet it was a profound glimpse into her experience. I took mental notes while she spoke and immediately began to jot them down when I entered into my vehicle.
In a frustrating tone, she expressed to me that she was tired of “jumping through hoops for different agencies.” She had to fill out various paperwork and had to qualify for eight different agencies. She said that these agencies treated her like she “doesn’t know anything.” She told me that she went to get assistance from a specific organization. They gave her the incorrect paperwork. She knew it and tried to tell the worker. The employee insisted that it was correct. When she turned it in, she was told that she filled out the wrong paperwork. Because of that mistake she missed the deadline and no longer could receive services.

My conversation with Elizabeth was insightful. She shared that people/staff don’t see the whole person. “What they don’t get is that the whole person needs to be looked at. At this point DV is not even the issue. The issue is the likelihood of living on the streets.” She said she was most concerned about housing, employment, gas vouchers to get to the various destinations she is required to go to sustain a livelihood. Her words rang clear when she told me: “Shelter is the place where you realize that you’re going to have to go back (to your abuser).”

I asked Elizabeth if she had received help from the shelter and she said, “Not much.” She knew most of what she needed to do to the point where other residents were coming to her for help and direction. She said, “If you don’t know what to do, you’re screwed. Nobody will help you.” She again stressed to me that going to required meetings about domestic violence sometimes got in the way of setting up meetings to find housing and other resources that would keep her off the streets. Elizabeth was not alone in her ironic experience of shelter assistance.
Tammy, with little to no resources and a debilitating disorder, turned to the church community for help and received nothing but blame and judgment. She expected an offer of help or the very least compassionate words.

Tammy: I've reached out to more than you. And I get the same thing. So you know what? It’s okay. I shouldn’t expect anything anymore. And she didn’t like that, but I hung up.

Melanie: “Did she belong to an agency?”

Tammy: Nope, Christian lady down in Ferndale, goes to church every single morning, eight o’clock every morning to say hello to God. And, I am a Godly person. I don’t know if God would be looking so nice down on her that day.

Rose also had experience with the religious aspect of help. Rose talked about how the church has instilled guilt in her. She acknowledges that she was molested as a child, was in several previously abusive relationships and that she did not know how to heal from the trauma. Instead of the church being a source of help, it was another source of pain.

You know I’m guilt ridden, like I was raised devout catholic, so I was just always consumed with guilt about everything. Guilt, guilt, guilt, I mean God I was guilty because I woke up, it was just so overwhelming for that was the only way I knew how to get out of it was through addiction.

My personal experience with the “ironies of help” were documented in my ethnographic piece on “Securing Access: Becoming a Volunteer.” The officer lecturing on his experience with domestic violence survivors is a direct example. As an agent of an organization, his main function is to serve and protect. But he ignored or at least minimized his role due to a lack of understanding of the complexities of violent relationships. His poor training in domestic violence, coupled with positional power as a
white male, allowed him to make a joke of a woman’s “choice” to remain in a violent relationship. His words “use your head lady” blamed the victim. Women encounter officials and staff such as this police officer at many levels in formal criminal justice and social service organizations. In many ways, the official nature of their positions and the associated power exasperate and extend their experience of abuse.

I also observed other examples of these ironies of help at Stan, the domestic violence and sexual assault agency at which I had previously worked. Examples include the service, or lack of service to monolingual speaking women of color. Stan serviced approximately half Caucasian women and other half were mainly Latinas. The shelter required only one staff member to be bilingual. Most times monolingual Latinas, as well as other monolingual women of color, shared space with Caucasian monolingual staff and residents. I personally heard women of color advocates speak of the inequality of services the women experienced. The average stay at the shelter is 30 days. I saw many, if not most women of color that left in a few days for many years. Women of color also experienced an inequality of services when staff would be conducting support groups. Stan had any bilingual staff interpret support groups regardless of interpreting abilities. Staff repeatedly brought to the attention of upper management that they did not feel comfortable interpreting because their skill did not permit them to interpret all that was shared. And, we were concerned with the clients experiencing isolation in the shelter, at group, and with staff. Instead of the shelter being a source of assistance for women of color, monolingual speakers, it was a place for further isolation and of an inequality of service.
A Message From Survivors

At the end of the interview all participants were given an opportunity to reach out to other women by sharing with them what they want others to know about leaving abusive relationships. I left these narratives intact serving as a direct contact from survivors to the reader. Here are some of their powerful words.

I think that if people had an out that they could see that was feasible and doable and you know, they could count on it, more people would actually go through with getting out. I felt like, gosh, you know if she (employer) could just pay me a livable wage then I could, but I was making $10.00 an hour (supporting two children)-Aimee.

I walked away from everything and I’ve pretty much been homeless for two week with the kids. He cut off all my checking accounts, even my phone card. He cancelled my cell phone, cancelled my email and it costs $.75 to call at the pay phone with two screaming kids, you know, to try to do anything. I had enough cash for three days at a hotel and then I called here (shelter). Now, with absolutely no other option except to go back or sleep in my car. But, I wasn’t going back. It took me a long time to get to that point. I had a beautiful home, but it’s not worth it. It’s getting better. It’s the first time in my life that I have ever had my own bank account or felt like what freedom is, to wake up and realize no one’s going to tell you what to do –Aimee.

Leave, like completely leave. Don’t talk to him anymore because it’s so easy for him to talk to you into coming back. I tell my daughter that when she’s old enough to um…make sure that you’re independent enough to, in your life before you go depend on somebody else, because you will get stuck-Evaline.

You need to plan for it (leaving) and you need to do it quietly. You need to make the arrangements before you actually make the break. You need to go quickly, quietly, and have a good distance there –Connie.

It’s not as cut and dry as they seem to think it is. Some people think, Well what is wrong with you, duh? But it is not that simple. There’s a lot more factors involved than people realize and there’s a lot more levels of abuse than people realize are there. There’s just a lot more factors of how you get trapped and there is a trap–Elizabeth.
That it is (leaving) essential for survival, any kind of survival; emotional survival and physical survival—Alex.

There are people out there who can help, before you leave the house. There are people who can help after. You are not alone and it’s not your fault. Get help, get out, and get help—Tammy.
It is important to note the themes and patterns that emerged from this exploratory study. All participants defined their intimate relationships with an imbalance of power and control in their abusive relationship and included tactics of abuse. Most women characterized their relationship as fearful. Most of their lives were threatened by their partner.

Past barriers to leaving included undifferentiated and differentiated fear; the difference being the focal point of fear. Other barriers included pressures of traditional gender socialization and economic dependency on their partner. Some of the women had a few options. They could possibly go homeless, live in extreme poverty or stay in their existing relationships.

Motivators to leaving for the women included a notable escalation of abuse and examination of their relationships. One woman was forced out of the relationship by her partner. The participants did not leave the abuse without assistance. Friends, family, and professionals helped the women rediscover themselves, validated them while giving the necessary emotional support, helped them meet basic needs, advocated for them or provided them with a mechanism to put distance between themselves and their partners.

The role of resistance also was evident. While the participants were experiencing violence, they themselves were able to exert some aspect of control over their own lives. All women demonstrated heroic acts of courage and resistance by leaving their partners. While most women talked about their sources of assistance in the process, some also
pointed to the lack of help from the helping field. Most women rediscovered themselves and looked forward to new possibilities. Finally, participants ended with advice for other women about leaving abusive relationships.

While I was in the middle of my research I soon realized the importance of future research for myself and for other researchers to interview and survey women who experience domestic violence in the agencies other than domestic violence agencies or domestic violence shelters. These agencies are for people currently seeking services. This might have been their first time leaving or their seventh time. Women who left their abusive relationships years ago or even possibly recently may not return to a shelter, especially if they are successful in leaving. These women would need to be accessed at other locations. Most of the research I reviewed interviewed women at agencies such as a domestic violence shelter. This may skew the data. We know many, many women leave abusive relationships. As an educator one of my biggest joys is when I hear from the many women who have successfully left their abusive partners. I have been blessed with hearing so many successful stories of heroism from women in the various communities I have worked. More women, outside of domestic violence agencies need to be interviewed. Their stories have the power to shed light on the process of successfully leaving abusive relationships.

There is hope for change! In the following paragraphs I outline my recommendations that will facilitate the process of leaving an abusive relationship. Most discourse in the field refers to secondary or even tertiary prevention and rarely speaks to primary prevention.
What are we doing to stop the abuse from happening in the first place? Since there is a disproportionate amount of violence against women by men, I strongly recommend that government, private contributions and other monies be channeled into male circles. The objective of this type program is to access young males before they perpetrate; before the possibility of violence begins in their adult lives. These male circles would be a place where they explore and heal from family trauma, a place where they define or redefine the role of being a man, intimate partner and father. It would stress the building up of character and self esteem; examine the role of power in relationships and nonviolent alternatives to conflict. I continue to believe that girls would also benefit from girl circles to explore the same elements as their counterparts. They should also explore the importance of independence while being in a relationship and engage in dialogues about violence in intimate relationships.

In addition, I would like to extend the mandatory education to service providers. It is imperative for companies and organizations to review their existing policies and inform their employees of their rights as domestic violence survivors. It is also crucial to hold organizations and companies accountable for their responsibility to inform their employee’s of their rights. When employers are educated on their responsibilities, they are more apt to be supportive of the plight of their employee experiencing violence. They would be less likely to revictimize the victim and be a place of support rather than act as another barrier of leaving or facilitate the staying in an abusive relationship.

Most women that left their abusive relationship utilized assistance from caring family or friends and formal channels such as counselors and domestic violence shelters.
Some women did not turn to loved ones because they felt like they could not go to them for whatever reason. I believe that support groups and workshops should be extended to significant others. The more educated and prepared significant others are, the more helpful they will be in helping survivors prepare to leave, aid in the process of leaving, and be persons of support during the aftermath of leaving.

Finally, I encourage the funding of existing domestic violence agencies and shelters. Instead of budget cuts to already shrinking funds, I propose an increase in government monies to these agencies that assist millions of women in the United States. Without funds to support programs such as a shelter, where would women go if they had nowhere else to flee? They would need to choose homelessness or decide to stay in the abusive relationship? Unfortunately, there are many women currently experiencing this circumstance. It is not much of a choice. I will go even further to say that women, people, need to be paid a livable wage. I think of Aimee and her troubles fleeing her partner while taking care of two little ones making ten dollars an hour. How can one live and maintain a basic household, with children, without being paid a livable wage?

I strongly believe that the above recommendations would drastically assist women experiencing domestic violence and would assist women to successfully flee their abusive relationships. The women I interviewed are voices of hope and are examples of strength, courage and determination. Let us all be open to learn from their experiences. Listen to the voices of survivors.
REFERENCES


Author.


APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

General Questions
1. How would you define an abusive relationship?

2. What would you like a person who has not experienced domestic violence to know about leaving an abusive relationship?

3. When did you meet (abuser)?

4. Tell me about relationship prior to the abuse?

5. How were decisions made in your household?
   A. Who made them?
   B. Did you have a say so?
   C. What happened when there was a disagreement?
   D. Who won?

6. What types of things did you two argue about?

Experiencing the Abuse
7. Take me back to the day your ex-partner first abused you?

8. When was the first time you left?
   A. What took place?

9. When did you return?
   A. What was behind your decision to return to your partner?
   B. What happened when you returned?

10. Take me down an average day of abuse in your home?

11. Tell me about the worst time he abused you?

Leaving the Abuse
12. Tell me about this last time you left?

13. What made it possible for you to leave?
A. What emotions were you experiencing?

14. What kinds of support did you receive?

What barriers/obstacles were in your way from leaving this relationship before?

15. Has the abuse ended?

16. What difference, if any, has the shelter experience had on your situation?

17. Tell me about yourself, prior to the abuse.

18. How did you see yourself, during the abuse?

**Present Day**

19. How do you see yourself now?

20. What are your plans for the immediate future, for long term?
APPENDIX B:
CONSENT FORM

CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Humboldt State University
Arcata, California 95521
Department of Sociology
(707) 826-3139
Graduate Student & Researcher: Melanie Berru
mb65@humboldt.edu

You are invited to participate in the research project, The Meanings Behind Intimate Violence: Through the Eyes of Survivors, by Melanie Berru, a graduate student at Humboldt State University. The goal of the study is to understand the realities of the many struggles within domestic violence. Your part in this study will involve taking part in a one-hour interview. The interview will consist of your personal experiences with domestic violence. This interview provides you the time and space to talk about your thoughts. This discussion may bring you comfort or it may be upsetting. You have the right to refuse to answer any question(s). You also maintain the right to terminate the interview at any time. This interview allows you to share your experiences without being judged. Your words and experiences will teach others about real life truths behind domestic violence. Referrals for counseling will be offered.

Your participation in this study is strictly on a volunteer basis. You have the absolute freedom to refuse to answer any question(s). You also maintain the right to terminate your participation at any time for any reason.

Your identity in this research will remain confidential. Your privacy will be respected and upheld in all written documents resulting from the study. You will be referred to by a fictitious name in transcripts and other written documents. The interview tapes will be destroyed within 30 days of transcription. Records and files will be kept in secure locations.

CONCERNS:
If you have any concerns regarding this interview or if you are not comfortable communicating with the researcher, you may contact confidentially Dr. Mary Virnoche in the sociology department, Humboldt State University, Arcata, California, 95521, (707) 826-3139.

I understand and agree to the participation in this study.

__________________________  _____________________
Signature of participant      Date
APPENDIX C:
INTERVIEW FLYER

SHARING YOUR EXPERIENCES!

Who am I?

Let me introduce myself. My name is Melanie. I am a graduate student at Humboldt
State University. My professional and educational background is in domestic violence. I
am excited to announce that I will be conducting informal interviews with survivors of
intimate abuse. My interest and passion lie within learning the daily experiences of
domestic violence survivors. I am working towards a better understanding of domestic
violence and would be honored for you to share your experiences with me. Your interest
and time is appreciated. This research is done purely on a volunteer basis. Measures will
be taken to secure confidentiality.

Eligibility

- Have experienced domestic violence
- Have previously escaped or are currently escaping the violence
- Female
- At least eighteen years of age
- Are willing, on a volunteer basis, to share your personal experiences with domestic
violence

*Domestic Violence may (and often does) include physical, emotional, psychological, verbal, and sexual
abuse

Contact

If you are interested in taking part in this endeavor or have questions please contact me
between 8:30 a.m.-8:00 p.m. at (707) 840-0769. Voicemail will pick up if I should be
unavailable. Please feel free to leave a message along with a callback number. I hope to
hear from you soon!

Note: This research is independent of Empower. Your agreement to r
decline to take part
in this research has NO affect to your exiting services.
APPENDIX D:
LISTSERV EMAIL

Are you interested in sharing your experiences with domestic violence?

My name is Melanie Berru a graduate student whose professional and educational background is in domestic violence. If you are a female survivor interested in being interviewed or have any questions, you can contact me at mb65@humboldt.edu.

I truly hope I hear from you!