

**TRANSFORMING 'SELVES': A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOUTH AFRICAN  
SHELTER RESIDENTS' STORIES OF LEAVING ABUSIVE HETEROSEXUAL  
RELATIONSHIPS**

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*DECLARATION*

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	5
CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND SIGNIFICANCE.....	6
Rationale .....	6
Violence against women- A definition .....	7
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORIES OF WOMAN ABUSE AND THE PROCESS OF LEAVING .....	10
The Psychology of abused women .....	10
Violence against Women in South Africa-The context of woman abuse.....	12
Cultural ideology of married life .....	14
Gendered constructions of masculinity, femininity and heterosexual relationships.....	15
The economics of gender identities .....	18
Agency and negotiation .....	20
Agency within the abusive relationship.....	20
How do women leave?.....	22
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW:.....	27
WOMEN’S SHELTERS-A CONTEXT FOR LEAVING .....	27
The emergence of women’s shelters in North America and Europe .....	27
Shelters as social support.....	28
The paradox of shelters.....	31
Women’s shelters in South Africa.....	34
Aims and motivations of the current study.....	37
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS .....	38
Qualitative epistemology .....	38
Theoretical framework- feminist poststructuralism.....	41
Feminist Poststructuralism and ‘gender’ .....	42
Feminism post-structuralism and research on woman abuse.....	43
Feminist approaches to research .....	44
Reflexivity.....	46
Personal life experiences.....	47
Narrative research .....	48
A narrative- qualitative method .....	49
Research participants .....	49
Data Collection Procedures.....	50
Ethical considerations .....	51
The research interview .....	52
The shelters .....	53

Analysis of data.....	53
Thematic narrative analysis .....	53
 CHAPTER 5: “LOOKING BACK”: A REFLECTION ON THE DECISION TO LEAVE AND ‘CONTRADICTIONAL SELVES’ .....	 57
Themes on the “past” and the decision to leave .....	58
Managing Anger .....	58
Recognising the Danger.....	61
Identifying the power dynamics of the relationship .....	68
 CHAPTER 6: THE PRESENT: LEAVING AND THE SHELTER ENVIRONMENT- ‘SELVES IN TRANSITION’ .....	 78
Post-separation abuse.....	78
Post-separation abuse at the shelter .....	78
The potential for abuse post-separation .....	81
A shift in power: shifting constructions of self and partner.....	85
Shift in constructions of partner: ‘He’s just not all there’ .....	86
Shift in perception of partner’s omnipotence: ‘I actually pity him’ .....	87
Shift in constructions of self: ‘I am a conqueror’ .....	89
Developing a ‘critical self’ .....	92
The validation of abusive experiences .....	93
Questioning of the abuse.....	95
Challenging traditional gender constructions .....	98
 CHAPTER 7: ‘LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE’: CONSTRUCTIONS OF ‘A POWERFUL SELF’ .....	 103
The self as active agent.....	103
Taking on a helper identity .....	110
 CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS .....	 115
Summary .....	115
Gendered power dynamics.....	115
The social context and gender identities.....	116
‘Selves’ in transition .....	118
Limitations and recommendations .....	121
Limitations of the current study.....	121
Suggestions for further research .....	121
Implications for policy and practice .....	122
Conclusions.....	123

REFERENCES ..... 125

LIST OF APPENDICES:..... 141

## ABSTRACT

Woman abuse is a pervasive social problem in South Africa. There is a severe lack of South African research that explores women's experiences of leaving abusive relationships, especially within the context of women's shelters. This study looks at the process of disengaging from abusive relationships. It has examined women's experiences of leaving within the context of these shelters. In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 women shelter residents. The data was analysed using a feminist narrative approach which looked at the content of the women's stories of leaving. The findings showed that the women's narratives fluctuated between the past, the present, and the future. The women's narratives of the "past" involved a process of reflecting back on the abusive relationship and their decisions to leave. The women constructed their decision to leave as being a result of the managing of their own anger and the recognition of the danger that the abuse posed. They also identified the unequal power dynamics of the abusive situation and identified contradictions of 'self' that arose as a result of the abuse. In their narratives of the present the women's stories were centered on themes of post-separation abuse in which they constructed themselves as 'vulnerable victims'. The women's narratives also indicate a shift in constructions of self and partner as well as the development of a 'critical self' as they began to question their own abuse as well as the abuse of women in general. In their narratives the women drew on hegemonic discourses of femininity but also at certain times resisted these discourses. Finally, in their narratives of the future the women drew on discourses provided by the shelter in their constructions of self as powerful agents. They also took on a helper identity as they describe their dreams and ambition to take an active stance in the fight against woman abuse.

**Key Words:** Woman abuse; South Africa; feminist narrative approach; women's shelters; disengaging.

# CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND SIGNIFICANCE

## Rationale

Violence against women was declared a human rights violation by the United Nations over ten years ago. The World Health Organisation also identified domestic violence as a public health issue. These definitions have been significant developments in the issue of violence against women globally. As a result, several international initiatives focused attention on the problem of intimate partner violence targeting women. Perhaps the most significant moment both for scholarship and in the campaign against domestic abuse was the “Beijing conference”, in 1995 and 2000, which highlighted women’s rights to live without violence in their homes.

Recommendations at the Beijing conference led to UN declarations focusing on private abuse. In addition to the feminist movement, these international declarations focused the research agenda to issues that place women at risk of violence.

The National Survey of Violence against Women shows that approximately 1.3 million women are assaulted by their intimate partners annually in the United States (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Intimate partner homicides make up 40-50 percent of all murders of women in the United States (Campbell et al., 2003, as cited in National Institute of Justice, 2008). Worldwide estimates suggest that violence against women is as serious a cause of mortality as cancer and a greater cause of ill health than traffic accidents and malaria combined (World Health Organisation, 1997, as cited in Jacobs and Suleman, 1999). The high frequency of violence in relationships indicates how in fact violence against women is a *normal* part of society globally (Wood, 2001).

South Africa has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the world. Extrapolation from community –based studies has indicated that this kind of violence affects as many as one in two women in certain parts of the country. In a study of 1306 women in three South African

provinces, Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, Levin, Ratsaka, and Schrieber (1999) found that 30% of the women reported experiencing violence from their male intimate partners. A study done by Jacobs and Suleman (1999) found that, of women who were attending a community health clinic in Mitchell's Plain, a staggering 48.5 % reported experiencing abuse (either current or past abuse) at the hands of their partner. Research suggests that the problem of woman abuse is even more extensive in the rural areas of the country. It is these areas in which the extremely high levels of unemployment and poverty play a significant role in entrapping women into inferior power positions. The Crime Information Analysis Centre of the South African Service (SAPS) (as cited in Vetten, 1999) estimates that 80% of women living in rural areas are victims of woman abuse. In 1999 statistics showed that 8.8 out of every 100, 000 South African women die at the hands of their abusive partners (Ludsin & Vetten, 2005).

The above statistics may however be underestimates of the extent of the problem. Domestic violence has been identified as one of the most under reported crimes in South Africa. Up until recently there has been no official statistics that separate this kind of violence from other crimes such as assault, attempted murder and pointing a firearm (Vetten, 2000). Reasons for this under-reporting include a lack of adequate support structures in the country, shame or embarrassment on the part of the abused woman, and an economic dependence on the abuser. These factors work together to enforce a 'silencing' of women's experiences of abuse in the country.

## **Violence against women- A definition**

Only recently has there been a global trend towards the acknowledgement of different forms of violence against women. Feminist investigations of this kind of violence hold the consensus that women are disproportionately affected by gendered forms of violence and that this violence affects women's general quality of life (Fedler & Tanzer, 2000). The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence in the United States estimates that 95% of reported victims who are physically abused by intimate partners are women (Hasenauer, 1997, as cited in Wood, 2001). In

addition, the National Violence Against Women Survey in the United States found that 85% of women and 25% of men reported experiencing either physical or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). This kind of violence happens to a larger or greater degree in all countries of the world. This could be violence condoned by the state, violence that happens at the hands of men outside of the family, and violence that happens in the private confines of the family (Fedler & Tanzer, 2000).

The type of violence against women that will be looked at in the current research is woman abuse, a type of violence that is directed toward women at the hands of their intimate partners. This kind of abuse often happens in the women's own homes. This research will follow from McLeod's (1987) definition of woman abuse, namely,

“the loss of dignity, control, and safety as well as the feeling of powerlessness and entrapment experienced by women who are the direct victims of ongoing or repeated physical, psychological, economic, sexual, and/or verbal violence or who are subjected to persistent threats or the witnessing of such violence against their children, other relatives, friends, pets and/or cherished possessions, by their boyfriends, husbands, live in lovers, ex-husbands or ex-lovers” (p.16)

Firstly, this definition acknowledges the gendered nature of woman abuse. It is inclusive to women who are not married to or living with their partners. It also acknowledges that women are vulnerable to post-separation violence once they have physically left their abuser. In addition, it highlights the multidimensional nature of abuse that occurs in non-physical forms such as verbal degradation, emotional threats, or threats of harm to significant others in the woman's life.

The present study examines the process that women go through when they disengage from an abusive relationship. A specific emphasis will be placed on the role that the shelter has played in helping the women to leave. The high rates of woman abuse reported in South Africa provide support for the need of a study that addresses women's experiences of leaving. The exploration of the meaning that the women make during the process of disengaging as well as a focus on the challenges that they experience can help to shed some light on the process of leaving within the

context of women's shelters. These findings could be useful in helping women to leave abuse in general as well as to inform shelter services of the implementation of practices that can be most beneficial to these women. Ultimately, a study of this nature is needed in the South African context to add to the information and insight that the country can use to focus on better support structures for women who are trying to go out on their own and to begin a life that is free of abuse.

Chapter one has outlined the background significance this study. This included a rationale for the current study as well as a definition of violence against women. Chapter Two and Chapter Three examines the literature in the field that looks at woman abuse as well as the context of women's shelters for helping women leave these relationships. Chapter Four describes the methodology and methods that were utilised in the research process. The results of the study are outlined and discussed in chapters Five, Six and Seven. Each of these chapters refer to specific temporally classified themes of the women's narratives. These chapters deal respectively with the themes of 'looking back', focusing on the present, and looking forward towards the future. Finally, the concluding chapter provides a summary of the results as well as recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORIES OF WOMAN ABUSE AND THE PROCESS OF LEAVING**

### **The Psychology of abused women**

Early understandings of woman abuse focused on characteristics of the abused woman to explain why abuse occurred and why abusive relationships were maintained. For instance, the theories of Freud described the masochistic woman who, consciously, or unconsciously, enjoyed the abuse. This intrapsychic perspective labelled abused women as being narcissistic and passive, two traits that were explained to be factors that contributed to their abuse. Ultimately, these views conceptualised violence against women as being a result of so called 'pathological' personalities of abused women (Dobash & Dobash, 1992).

The growth of feminist lines of thought since the 1970's led to an acknowledgement that women did not enjoy abuse. This led to theories that moved away from the overt blaming of the victim towards views that explained that certain deficits in coping of abused women, rather than being inherent personality traits, were a result of the abuse itself.

Walker's (1979a; 1979b) highly acclaimed battered woman syndrome explains how the negative effects of the abuse render the woman unable to respond effectively to the violence that they are exposed to in their intimate relationships. She identified the concept of learned helplessness as being a central characteristic of the battered woman syndrome. This term, which stems from animal research, describes the absence of an attempt to leave a painful situation after learning in a previous similar situation that escape is not possible (Barnett, 2001). Slowly over time the abused woman's repertoire of safety enhancing behaviours is diminished. This is compounded by the woman's belief that it will be ultimately dangerous to engage in help seeking behaviours, as this might further enrage her partner and lead to severe violence. According to Walker

(1979b), women who experience the deficits of the battered woman syndrome often minimise their experience of violence and they blame themselves for their partner's actions.

Other theories have focused on the attachment that occurs as a result of the power dynamics between the abuser and the abused. Herman (1992), for instance, outlines the notion of 'captivity' in which the woman victim becomes a passive prisoner that is under both physical and psychological domination by her male abuser. The prolonged contact with the abuser sets up the power dynamics in which the victim is, paradoxically, dependant on her abuser for survival. The isolation of the victim leads to a strengthened bond with the abuser who might be the only person in this woman's life. The presence of intermittent rewards (such as food, luxury items, or other moments of kindness) is further used to strengthen this ambiguous balance of power and to trap the victim into the situation.

Along a similar vein, Dutton and Painter (1981, as cited in Lystad et al., 1996) have coined the term traumatic bonding to describe the simultaneous positive and negative feelings that the victim has toward the abuser. They indicate that the abused woman experiences both enhanced self-esteem through identification with the abuser and impaired self-esteem because of feelings of disempowerment. Intermittent positive and negative reinforcement cause a victim to develop strong emotional attachments to the abuser. The woman's feelings of disempowerment result in the positive reinforcement being strengthened, these positive attitudes are directed towards the abuser and a cycle of dependency is created (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

Drawing on Bowlby's attachment theory, Henderson, Bartholomew, Trinke, and Kwong (2005) examined the relationship between adult attachment orientations and the presence of intimate abuse. A consistent link between preoccupied attachment and intimate abuse was found. The authors suggest individuals with preoccupied attachment are torn between a severe need for love and a fear of this need not being granted. Ultimately, individuals such as these will be more willing to tolerate abuse from intimate partners as this disparity of experience sets up an ambiguity that might blur the reality of the abuse.

The above research runs in line with dominant discourses of woman abuse that tend to focus on the passive and negative qualities of abused women that fits neatly into existing stereotypes of 'femininity' (Shefer, 2004). For example, Berns and Schweingruber (2007) found that the narratives of nonvictims of abuse were shaped by a common archetype story of abused women as having low self esteem, passivity, and weakness. These theories tend to perpetuate negative stereotypes of abused women as helpless victims. The victim perspective ignores the power that these women do have in their lives (Kirkwood, 1993). Ultimately, an understanding of woman abuse is limited by applying the terms "syndrome" or "pathology" to abused women.

In addition, the interactions of a couple on a micro level cannot be extracted from the broader social context within which it is embedded (Boonzaier, 2006; Yoshioka, 2008). It is from this broader context that the individual couple assimilates patriarchal ideologies and values that direct the power dynamics of the relationship. The meaning and acceptability of violence is shaped by particular cultural contexts and their dominant discourses about violence (Wood, 2001). Violence is legitimised by these social discourses that shape individual behaviours as well as individual interpretations of violence. Yoshioka (2008) highlights how the cultural context within which abuse takes place shapes a woman's perceptions of violence as well as her perceptions of the costs and benefits of dealing with the violence. Thus, an examination of the woman's experiences and the meaning that she gives to abusive relationships cannot be done without an analysis of the socially and historically institutionalised relations of power that both inform and shape her experience.

## **Violence against Women in South Africa-The context of woman abuse**

Violence against women happens in many forms in South Africa. Women have a secondary status within South African society and many South African women suffer discrimination and disadvantage in almost every sphere (Goldblatt & Meintjies, 1997). A common thread of these forms of violence is the man's use of force, threats, and intimidation to control the behaviour of

women (Vetten, 2000). Common forms of violence against women in the country are domestic violence, rape, femicide<sup>1</sup>, sexual harassment, and forced prostitution (Vetten, 2000). The context in which these severe levels of violence take place is one of complex anxieties about power and stability. South Africa is a context that is characterised by high levels of poverty, crime, unemployment, and a various lack of social opportunities that are associated with race and class (Boonzaier, 2005). These aspects of South African society are the footprint left behind from the Apartheid era of separatist and racist constructions.

The end of the apartheid era in South Africa in 1994 saw a significant move toward the eradication of the past injustices of racial oppression and violence. This has however not encompassed the freedom from gender oppression and violence in the lives of South African women. Violence against women in the country seems to in fact be increasing (Vetten, 2000).

South Africa has developed a culture of violence that has its origins in the apartheid era. Violence has been legitimised as a primary means of conflict resolution. This can be seen by the former nationalist government's means of repressive control and by the violent retaliation strategies made by activists such as the ANC. The severe torture and violence that thousands of people in the country have been exposed to has been identified as a possible contributor to the high levels of woman abuse that is permeating South Africa today (Goldblatt & Meintjies, 1997).

Research in South Africa has identified socio-cultural factors as playing a role in the generation of abuse (Boonzaier, 2006). More specifically, research suggests that women of colour are more susceptible to becoming victimised by men. These groups of women could, however, be experiencing more abuse because of factors such as a lack of opportunities and institutionalised racism that are related to their marginal status in society (Boonzaier, 2006). The high rates of violence against women in the country have also been linked to an increased risk of HIV among women who are sexually violated. Women who live in relationships in which infidelity occurs are also exposed to increased risk to the virus (Strebel et al., 2006). This cycle of violence, when paired with factors such as employment, lack of education, and a lack of resources deeply affects women of colour who are amongst the most disadvantaged sector of our society. Gender

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<sup>1</sup> A woman being raped and murdered by her partner or by a stranger

oppression interacts with other forms of discrimination such as socio-economic status, skin colour and HIV status to produce complex patterns of dominance and resistance (Vetten, 2000).

## **Cultural ideology of married life**

Feminist streams of thought have highlighted the way in which the macro system of cultural norms in society sets up particular standards that marriage and family is the ultimate goal. Hegemonic discourses depict that being a wife and mother is a woman's primary role and the main source of her self-realisation (Weedon, 1987). These societal expectations can provide a significant challenge for women who are trying to leave abusive partners. A woman who tries to leave might be looked down on in the eyes of her community who places value on the institution of marriage (Choice & Lamke, 1997; Ludsin & Vetten, 2005). Thus, cultural discourses such as these can lead to others engaging in certain levels of victim blaming (Ludsin & Vetten, 2005). This is compounded by the fact that matters of the home are often viewed as being private matters that should be kept in the domestic realm. Ultimately,

“(Abused women) may be stigmatised for airing private problems, yet condemned for staying silent. They are expected to leave at the first sign of abuse, but also to keep their families together and to stand by their men” (Ludsin & Vetten, 2005: p. 52)

Dobash and Dobash (1980) discuss how the social positioning of marital partners sets up a relational structure that supports the domination of men over women. The social construction of the family sets up everyday interactions that instigate woman abuse. For example, the men's narratives in their study suggest that the victim (the wife) is constructed as the one who is to blame for the violence. The men often justified, or explained away, their violence as being because they were not getting enough sex or that the women were not carrying out their particular 'duties' within the home. The men's reasons for violence ranged from describing

specific instances that 'pushed' them to violence to a more general description of the wife as 'bad'. The powerful nature of these narratives is the potential for the wife to internalise that the abuse is in fact her fault. This could demobilise the women from leaving as it could lead to a negative sense of self that does not feel capable of going out into the world.

A study of men and women's narratives in the Western Cape in South Africa has shown that these kinds of traditional gender roles are a pervasive part of the everyday life of community members (Strebel et al., 2006). The specific gender roles set out the standards that a wife must stay at home and that the husband must go to work and to be the breadwinner of the family. In the above studies, men were also described as the decision makers of the household, from whom the women must ask permission to engage in certain activities.

These findings are consistent with those of Shefer et al.'s (2008) study of two communities in the Western Cape, South Africa that found that the women in her study often endured abuse at the hands of their partners because of pressures from their families and communities to make the marriage work. The women also described staying in the marriage so as to avoid social stigma.

## **Gendered constructions of masculinity, femininity and heterosexual relationships**

Traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity provide for the backdrop on what behaviours are appropriate for men and women in society. In essence men and women draw on these constructions which shape and give meaning to their gendered experience. Hegemonic discourses of femininity define women as being naturally passive, a woman's place being first and foremost in the home (Weedon, 1987). Men on the other hand are constructed as dominant, aggressive, and authoritative (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). In many cultures (such as in South Africa) violence plays an important role in the formation of a man's social role and identity (for example of protector). Gendered cultural representations of romantic love form our

consciousness of what is expected and what is acceptable behaviour in romantic relationships (Power et al., 2006).

In a study using in-depth interviews in the United States Wood (2001) found that women drew on culturally established gender narratives and romance narratives as a coherent frame that helped them to narrate themselves and their relationships as well as to construct these relationships as being acceptable. Fairy tale narratives involved constructions of the 'perfect relationship' that consisted of minimising the abuse, focusing on the positive aspects of the relationship, and excusing the men from their violence. The dark romance narrative constructed violence as a normal part of romantic relationships. Here the women drew on discourses that women are of no worth without a man and they blamed themselves for the abuse. Ultimately these narratives served to justify the abuse and to lock women into abusive relationships as the meanings that they created from these cultural discourses served to mitigate, obscure, and minimise the violence.

Power, et al. (2006) conducted a secondary analysis of interview data using a feminist poststructuralist approach in an Australian study. The findings showed that the women drew on discourses of romantic love in their constructions of their stories of their abusive relationships. More specifically, the women positioned themselves as being 'desperate for a man' and the majority of the women interpreted jealousy as a sign of love. The women constructed themselves as lacking if they did not have a man. They also took on the feminine position of the vulnerable, weak woman who needs a man for support. Thus, cultural constructions of 'romantic love' played a role in obscuring the reality of abuse within the relationship.

Gendered constructions of typically male sexuality and typically female sexuality are infused with an imbalance of power. These constructions have set up the norm that men should be sexually active and dominant while women should be passive with regards to sex (Vetten, 2000). There is a double standard as men are urged to master many sexual partners while women are expected to remain faithful to one husband. Women are also expected to be sexually pure but at the same time be available to fulfil their husband's sexual needs and fantasies whenever necessary (Vetten, 2000). If a woman is not openly available to her husband or if a man feels that

she is paying 'too much' attention to other men, it could often lead to the man becoming jealous and falsely accusing the women of having affairs.

Research on sexuality in the South African context has shown that violence plays a specific role to maintain traditional sexual roles (Shefer, Strebel, & Foster, 2000). It is through this violence that women are 'kept in their place'. These acts are to exert power over the women who have, for example, chosen to take more than one sexual partner (Conco, 1996, as cited in Shefer et al., 2000). Gang rapes of women are a common form of this kind of punishment at the hands of men. A particularly sobering example is a group of youth in Sebokeng who formed an association called the South African Rapists association who raped women who they thought 'needed to be disciplined' (Goldblatt & Meintjies, 1997).

More recently, the rise of feminist streams of thought has led to an increase in the discourse on the rights of women. This has resulted in the traditional gender-roles being challenged (Strebel et al, 2006; Shefer et al., 2008). Firstly, there has been a shift toward greater economic power for women. Many women are working and some are even taking over the role as the financial head of the household. In addition, there has also been an improvement in the conceptualisation of women's legal rights. The legal system has become increasingly more geared towards working in the interests of abused women. For example, the Domestic Violence Act of 1998 provided a standard by which women should receive easier access to protection orders (Strebel et al., 2006).

As women leave the home and gain power in certain spheres, dominant masculinities come into question (Vetten, 2000). Challenges to the male's privileged position might be met by violence towards women (Machonachie et al., 1993). Shefer et al. (2008) found evidence both of support of and resistance to these changes. Strebel et al. (2006) found that men were often reluctant to accept these changes and often blamed women for their social downfall. Ultimately, the narratives of this study voiced the opinion that the overturning of traditional gender roles is a contributing factor to violence against women in the country. The men feel threatened as they can no longer fulfil their role of the dominant head of the household. In this sense violence against women can be seen as a reaction against challenges to men's status in South Africa. Men

use violence as an attempt to control women and to maintain the unequal, gendered social relations.

## **The economics of gender identities**

It is extremely difficult for a woman to achieve economic dependence in a patriarchal culture that supports the needs of the two-parent, nuclear family (Kirkwood, 1993). A culturally supported gender hierarchy exists that leads to a greater distribution of wealth to men (Vetten, 2000). The traditional gender power relations assign women to the unpaid work of the home and men to receive economic benefits at work sets up the situation that many women become economically dependant on their partners. Ultimately, the fact that women have less access to resources on both social and cultural levels results in skewed balance of power that benefits men (Lempert, 1996). Also, when women try to leave this situation they have a lack of skills that will enable them to successfully enter the workforce. Even when women are working, they often earn a meagre salary that is not enough for them to survive on. For example, in South Africa 59% of women earn less than R1600 a month, while 40% earn less than R800 a month (Oranje, 2002, as cited in Ludsin & Vetten, 2005). Women are at increased risk for violence when their incomes are below the poverty level (Ham-Rowbottom, Gordon, Jarvis, & Novaco, 2005). A lack of economic freedom acts as a barrier to many women leaving abusive relationships, it could also act as a significant 'pull back' to the relationship for women who have already left.

In his study Gelles (1976) identified employment as being a motivating factor for women who are obtaining outside assistance for the abuse. Abused women who called the police, went to social services, or who left their abusive partners were significantly more likely to be employed than those who remained in the abusive relationships. These findings could, however, be due to the fact that employment might mean a higher level of education which might in turn mean that a particular woman is more aware of her options outside of the relationship.

In his study of why abused wives in shelters return to their husbands, Aguirre (2001) found that a husband being the sole source of income was significantly related to women's decision to stay in the relationship. Eighty four percent of the shelter residents in the study who were unemployed stated that they intended to return to their abusive husbands. Thus, the unemployment of these women resulted in a lack of options that she could resort to once she had left the shelter. This study generates the question of the utility of shelters as mere short term-solutions as they cannot directly solve the situation of poverty that many women experience on a day to day basis.

Similar findings were identified by Strube and Barbour (2001) in the United States who conducted a follow up interview with shelter residents after an eighteen month period. The authors found that economic dependence is directly related to decisions about the termination of an abusive relationship. The authors do, however, suggest that other factors played a mediating role in the women's decision making process. Fear, the presence of young children, and the level of social support when combined with financial independence significantly influence the woman's decision about leaving her abuser.

In a study done in England and the United States, Kirkwood (1993) highlighted the economic obstacles that women faced at the termination of an abusive relationship. She suggests that these obstacles have a direct influence on the freedom that a woman has to leave. The findings indicated that the women expressed concern about obtaining initial finances that would make it possible for them to leave their partner as well as the problem of achieving long term financial independence over time once they had left the abuser. These financial concerns were especially prominent if the women had children who needed to be supported financially.

In sum, much research has highlighted the social-economic, cultural, and psychological challenges that abused women face. More recent feminist work, while acknowledging the obstacles that these women face on a day to day basis, has moved towards a focus on the ways in which these women cope with these obstacles and practice agency in their abusive relationships. The resistance and agency of abused women has been highlighted by studies that explore how women remain in abusive relationships (Baker, 1997; Boonzaier, 2006; Hydén, 1999). These

studies focus on how women engage in a number of dynamic strategies that increase their sense of control and power in the abusive relationship.

## **Agency and negotiation**

Feminist research on women's resistance adopts a dynamic approach and recognises that a women's victimisation is a process by which she actively works against her oppression in a multiplicity of different ways. According to Hydén (2005), agency is "the relationship between power, responsibility, and activity" (p. 24). Women's agency does not only happen on an individual level. For example, Proffitt (2000) has highlighted the social dynamic of resistance by which women can work together on a collective level towards promoting social change.

### ***Agency within the abusive relationship***

Green (1990) outlines a type of resistance that she calls 'negative activity'. This kind of resistance occurs when all other forms of resistance are blocked for the women (due to low economic status, institutionalised racism and so forth). An example is the withdrawal from certain activities. The wife will refuse to cook, clean, or engage in sexual intercourse with her partner. Ridd (1983, as cited in Green, 1990) suggests how coloured South African women refuse their husbands sexual relations instead of going to seek help from social agencies. These acts of resistance serve as an ordinary weapon for women who have no power in other spheres of life and may help to instil a sense of dignity in the women as the abuser may begin to feel that he does not have the maximum control over the woman as he would like to have.

In a qualitative study in South Africa, Boonzaier (2008) found that women drew on traditional constructions of the pure victim but that there was also the possibility for agency and resistance in the women's narratives. The women moved from descriptions of a passive role at the beginning of the relationship toward a more active role that encompassed specific strategies that

they used to cope with the violence. There was a blurring of the roles of victim and perpetrator that Boonzaier (2008) describes as a disruption of the binary opposites of masculinity (authority) and femininity (submission). This can be seen in the number of strategies that the women in the study took on to end or decrease the violence in their lives. Ultimately, these active constructions of self allowed for a resistance of traditional forms of femininity as passive and submissive.

In the United States Lempert (1996) conducted in-depth interviews with abused women to explore the way in which they cope with the violence and the contradictions of love and abuse in the intimate relationship. The findings showed that the women moved from initial face-saving strategies that maintained the invisibility of abuse to strategies that helped them to contain the violence and to make it visible to others. Strategies of managing the violence included self-blame, rationalisation and minimisation. The women's narratives suggested that they negotiated various levels of agency during the course of the abusive relationship. This agency was manifested in various strategies that the women engaged in to create change in their relationships.

In a qualitative study, Baker (1997) used in depth interviews and participant observational techniques to explore the experiences of women who obtain help from social and police services. Baker posits that a dominant cultural script has emerged that pressures women to leave their abusers and to engage in strategies that will maintain this position. Findings showed that the women resisted this cultural script in various ways. The women chose to stay with the abuser, they ignored or lifted protection orders, and they refused to co-operate with the police. Baker's study reinterprets understandings of why women stay with the abuser (pathology of the woman, social pressure). Thus it can be seen that they were making active, reasoned choices that suited their specific needs at a particular stage in their lives. They negotiated certain choices via the complex realities of their lives and gained a certain measure of control.

In another qualitative study in South Africa, Boonzaier (2001) found that women experience shifting subjectivities that allow them greater power in their relationships. The results outlined that the women drew on cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity to give meaning to their violent relationships. Women did however draw on varied discourses and took on different

subject positions at different points of time in their violent relationships. The narratives were structured around past, the present, and hopes for the future with an element of change. The women's narratives indicate shifts in identity that in turn facilitated changes in the particular strategies that the women used to deal with the violence. These changes allowed the women to achieve particular goals and to gain a certain level of power in their abusive relationships.

These studies suggest that staying in abusive relationships could be an active choice on the women's part. They show that women are not inherently passive in this situation but rather they continually engage in behaviours and strategies in which they negotiate their position in the relationship. Other studies have defined leaving the abuser as an overt fracturing of the abuser's sphere of dominance. These studies have largely addressed the question of how women leave abusive relationships (Farrell, 1996; Mills, 1985; Taylor, 2002; Wuest & Meritt-Gray, 2001).

### *How do women leave?*

Research has shown that the process of dealing with violence provides a drive for personal change in abused women. A shift in identification from victim to survivor as well as a shift away from the violence as being a central aspect of the woman's life leads to women developing a more activist consciousness (Boonzaier, 2006). These positive changes could help a woman gain more power in her situation and thus facilitate her in the process of leaving. The literature indicates that disengaging is a process in which an abused woman resists her oppression by re-interpreting and negotiating her identity constantly and in various ways.

Many women return to their abusers after the initial exit from the abusive relationship (Griffin, Ragin, Morrison, Sage, Madry, & Primm, 2005; Kirkwood, 1993; Landenburger, 1998). This often happens many times as the woman goes through a process of negotiating her power. Kirkwood (1993) conceptualises this process as one in which the abused woman actively obtains resources each time that she leaves. Thus, the process is described as being rational and strategic for the abused woman (Tiefenthaler & Farmer, 2000). Here each experience of leaving adds something to the woman's knowledge about living independently in the world and strengthens

her self efficacy about leaving (Patzel, 2001). Eventually, when the woman has built up the required personal resources, she will be able to leave for good.

Studies have shown that the process of leaving an abusive partner is one in which a woman takes on multiple, contradictory subjectivities. In Sweden, Hydén (2005) found that shelter residents drew on three different storylines in their narratives of leaving. Firstly, the women spoke from the storyline of the wounded, innocent victim. They then spoke from a self-blaming position in which a woman accords herself more power and critically evaluates her behaviour in the relationship. Lastly, the bridge-building position is one in which the woman focuses on comparisons between past and present and constructs herself as an active agent. In the United States (Profitt, 2000) interviewed survivors of abuse. Findings of the study showed that the women worked through contradictions in subjectivities, developed a critical social analysis, experienced shifts in subjectivities through increased self-acceptance, and transformations of identities occurred that can lead towards collective action.

Research in the United States has shown that leaving an abusive partner consists of a process of restructuring the self. Wuest and Meritt-Gray (2001) have identified a 'reclaiming of the self' in which women go through a dynamic social-psychological process of restoring self in social context. The four components of this process were identified as counteracting the abuse, breaking free, not going back, and moving on. Here the woman engaged in strategies to minimise the abuse, tested different opportunities of leaving, and maintained physical separation from the abuser. Shifts in identity occurred along the way and resulted in the women acknowledging their needs regarding future relationships. In a similar vein Mills (1985) identified a final stage of leaving as a restructuring of self that involves a move from a victim identity to a survivor identity. Her analysis shows that a survivor identity was enhanced by the presence of social support. Shelters were identified as being central to this restructuring process.

In her study in Stockholm, Sweden Hydén (1999) suggests that leaving an abusive partner is a process in which women experience different kinds of fear at different stages. The women moved from a general, undifferentiated type of fear that dominated their lives toward a differentiated fear that was aimed specifically at their abuser. Finally, fear as a background

emotion was experienced some time after leaving the abusive situation. Thus the author concludes that fear is the resistance of those people who are presumed to be without power. According to Hydén (1999), this fear was an active acknowledgement on the woman's part that what was happening was not what she wanted to happen. If a woman receives help in articulating her fear then it could be possible for her to achieve a more active type of resistance.

Research in the United States that has interviewed women who have left abusive relationships has identified that specific events occur that help the woman to begin to reconceptualise her abusive relationship. For example, Patzel (2001) has identified turning points within the relationship that lead to an increased awareness and insight into the seriousness of the abuse. These turning points can also lead to the women reframing the abuse as they begin to name and identify their experiences. Taylor (2002) has identified 'defining moments' as occurrences in which the woman listens to other women's stories of abuse and receives encouragement from these women. Here the woman also observes the impact that the abuse had on her children. Ultimately, these defining moments help to change a woman's consciousness regarding the abuse and thus help to reinforce a woman's decision to leave.

In two qualitative studies in the United States, Wuest and Meritt-Gray (1999) and Farrell (1996) have found that the process of disengaging from abuse consists of the woman actively working to maintain boundaries between herself and the abuser. The first authors found that women experienced an increased sense of their own control and ability to set social boundaries. This involved the woman learning to better negotiate her way around legal and other social systems and making use of available support to limit her contact with the abuser. It was also found that the woman constantly reviewed and replayed aspects of her abusive relationship and questioned her own credibility in an effort to defend her decisions of leaving. Farrell (1996) identified a stage of healing called flexibility during which the women actively engaged in the setting of boundaries that helped them to feel less vulnerable in terms of interpersonal relationships. This stage consisted of an increased self-awareness and the women's awareness that they possessed choices in their lives. In this study the final stage of healing was empowerment in which the women became more confident that they were making the correct choices in their lives.

In her study Landenburger (1998) identified a two-phase process of recovering from abusive relationships. She describes the initial phase as a woman begins to make concrete steps in a direction to leave the relationship. The second phase encompasses components that lead to a woman restructuring her life. This phase consists of struggling for survival, grieving, and searching for meaning. A search for meaning involves a woman engaging in an examination of her past relationship as well as the role that she may have played in the situation. Similarly Wuest and Meritt-Gray (2001) identified the last stage of moving on emotionally as one in which the woman searches for reasons about why the abuse happened and why she stayed in the abuse.

In Australia, Davis and Taylor (2006) identified that two components in women's stories of leaving was the 'inner journey' and the 'outer journey'. The 'inner journey' was a journey with self that consisted of naming or acknowledging the abuse, rejecting myths surrounding the abuse, rejecting negative emotions and 'moving on' emotionally, forming a new identity, and mapping out a journey for the future. The outer journey was an extension of the journey of self that involved a journey with others (perpetrator and others in social sphere). This outer journey consisted of naming the violence specifically to the perpetrator, sharing stories with others, and making use of informal and formal support systems. The authors conclude that healing from abuse occurs on multiple partial levels. It does not end in a specific point of arrival but rather is 'a process-orientated journey of growth' (Hoff, 2001, as cited in Davis & Taylor, 2006).

In sum, studies that have explored how women leave abusive partners have highlighted that leaving is a process that often occurs over a lengthy period of time. The process of disengaging begins when the women is still living with her abuser. Research has shown that women engage in many acts of resistance during the process of disengagement that helps them to achieve a greater sense of power. Also, the women's identities shift over time during the process of leaving. These shifts move from the identity of the victim toward identities that encompass a greater sense of agency and strength. This occurs when the women are able to enforce and maintain their positions of staying away from the abuser.

This chapter has outlined some of the early theories regarding woman abuse and why women stay in abusive relationships. It has then gone on to explore theories that move away from victim

blaming and that examine some of the social, economic, and cultural factors that serve to lock women into these kinds of relationships. Lastly, it has outlined more recent feminist theories that highlight the abused woman's potential for strength and agency in her relationship and how women use this agency to leave abusive relationships. The next chapter will look at women's shelters as a specific context that facilitates this process of leaving.

## **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW:**

### **WOMEN'S SHELTERS-A CONTEXT FOR LEAVING**

#### **The emergence of women's shelters in North America and Europe**

The growth of the women's movement in the late 1960's had a direct impact on the establishment of shelters<sup>2</sup> as well as the functions that they assume today. Feminist thought transformed the understanding of woman abuse. Rather than being seen as mere 'family violence' it became interpreted as being a result of patriarchal control over women. The movement led to the identification of battered women as a social concept. Since the concept of shelters originated in 1972 in England, thousands of shelters have been established throughout Europe and North America (Maconachie, Angless, & van Zyl, 1993). These early shelters ran with the goal of fostering independence and self acceptance in battered women (Cannon & Sparks, 1989). They also led to the emergence of the Battered Women's Liberation Movement that served to break the socially induced silence surrounding woman abuse.

The identification of woman abuse as a political problem led to the use of consciousness raising and political action as tools that are required in attempts to eliminate the problem. In a study of transition houses in Canada MacLeod (1987) found that more than 42 000 women and 55 000 children stayed in crisis shelters in 1985 and that, in the same year, an estimated equal number of women and children were turned away due to a lack of space. Feminist organising thus opened much needed avenues for women to get out of abusive situations (Haaken & Yragui, 2003). The ultimate goal of these types of shelters is to change the patriarchal structures of society (McDonald, 1989, as cited in Pahl, 1985). The establishment of shelters stood for a political

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<sup>2</sup> The early shelters in North America and Europe were often called transition houses. This term connotes a sense of the feminist goals of providing women with a space of transition within which they could begin to build a life free of abuse.

demand for female-only spaces. Haaken and Yragui (2003) describe shelters as being 'the womb of feminism'. They were maternal spaces of protection that ran along egalitarian principles rather than more hierarchical, paternal ones. Along these lines, feminist shelters stress informal organisation that is both non-professional and non-bureaucratic.

## **Shelters as social support**

The beneficial role of women's shelters has been highlighted by a vast amount of research. Shelters represent a critical point of crisis intervention. They provide a support system to women and children by offering them a starting point for regaining control over their lives (Cannon & Sparks, 1989).

In the United Kingdom, Pahl (1985) found that women's refuges provided helpful support networks for the residents who often, as a result of the abuse, had few social support resources left. In this study the environment of the shelter was described as being warm, sharing and compassionate. The women spoke about the other residents being supportive listeners that became like family. In addition, women have spoken about the relief of being able to talk about their experiences to other women who had experienced the same thing.

In her review of 12 studies, Gordon (1996) examined the type of community service that was contacted most often by abused women as well as how effective the women perceived these services to be. She highlighted that the majority of studies found that these women find different types of resources helpful; this differed according to the different types of abuse that were experienced. Studies indicated that women's shelters were not one of the most commonly used resources. They were, however, rated as the most helpful and effective means of coping with abuse. The women indicated that the services (such as support groups) that were run by shelters were helpful in raising self-esteem, and in fostering a sense of independence.

In Canada, Orava, McLeod, and Sharpe (1996) conducted a study that looked at the relationship between women's histories of abuse and current psychological health problems. They specifically explored the women's perceptions of control (internal or external), symptoms of depression, and levels of self-esteem in a group of abused women who were residing at a shelter and a comparison group of non-abused women. Although this study did not initially focus on the dynamics of the shelter stay, it did explore the impact that the stay in the shelter had on the women's psychological health. The researchers found that as the shelter stay increased, the women's belief in control by powerful others decreased and so did their levels of depression decrease. These results were statistically significant. Also, the authors found a significant positive relationship between length of transition house stay and self-esteem.

In their study of the psychosocial adjustment of shelter residents post-shelter, Ham Row-Bottom et al. (2005) conducted both structured and unstructured interviews and administered psychometric tests to women who had been living post-shelter for a minimum of 6 months. All of these women had utilised either first stage or second stage programs of women's shelters in the United States. The results of the unstructured interviews showed that the women reported highly positive aspects of their shelter experience that included emotional support from the staff and physical safety. The women also spoke about the benefits of referrals that the shelter provided in the fields of employment, childcare, education, and housing. The amount of partner abuse that was experienced by each woman was not found to be significantly related to their levels of depression or trauma symptoms post-shelter. The authors suggest that shelter programs that are geared towards directly addressing experiences of partner abuse may have helped to reduce the level of distress that the women experience post-shelter.

In a study in South America, Krishnan, Hilbert, and Newman (2004) studied 102 shelter residents using structured surveys. Their aim was to identify certain characteristics of shelter residents who reported an intention of returning to their abuser in comparison with women who reported that they did not intend on returning. The results showed that women who indicated that they intended to remain away from their abuser's also had significantly less emotional difficulties (suicidality, alcohol use) and reported engaging in more help-seeking from formal institutions (medical, law) than the women who intended to return to their abusers. The authors

of this study propose that the two different groups of women sought help from the shelter for different reasons. The women who did not intend returning went to the shelter to receive information about community resources and for support that would help to change their lives. The women who intended on returning to the abuser entered the shelter as a place of respite in which they could rest and become stronger so that they could cope better on return to the abusive relationship. The authors suggest that the diverse needs of women shelter residents should be recognised and respected in order to meet the needs of all shelter residents.

In their empirical study on the effects that shelters have on battered women Berk, Newton & Berk (1986) found that the beneficial effects of shelters on the woman residents depends on attributes of the abused woman. If this woman is actively taking control of her life then a shelter stay can provide for positive effects that contribute to the reduction of violence. If a shelter stay is not characterised by commitment to capitalise on outside opportunities then it could, on the other hand, provoke more violence as a kind of retaliation for disobedience. Here, the authors state that shelters are not necessarily beneficial in all situations. In order for a shelter to have an impact on the reduction of violence the victim needs to reflect a commitment to utilising outside resources. Also, they need to communicate this commitment to the violent partner.

In a study in North America Tutty, Weaver and Rothery (1999) conducted in-depth interviews with 63 first-stage shelter residents. Approximately half of these participants were interviewed a second time at follow up interviews that took place within six months of the women leaving the shelter. In their narratives the women highlighted the emotional support that they received from the other shelter residents who were described as being 'like family'. The women in the shelter acted as informal support systems for each other and they describe feeling able to share their stories and to have their own experiences validated. The women also spoke about the valuable information and emotional support that they received from the shelter staff. This included information about different types of abuse, information of their own rights, help with aspects of the law, and information about certain resources in the community. Ultimately, the women described the shelter as being a turning point in their lives that helped them in their transition toward a life that is free of abuse.

Literature that focuses on the beneficial aspects of shelters tends to oversimplify the multiple challenges that women face when leaving abusive relationships. Although shelters may be beneficial for many women, factors such as culture, class, education level and economic dependency need to be taken into consideration in terms of how these factors interact with and shape the shelter experience. These factors function as complex sites of the multiple oppressions of women that serve to maintain an ongoing cycle of violence. These factors can also function to re-victimise the abused women on certain levels within the space of the shelter.

### **The paradox of shelters**

McDonald (1989) distinguishes between the two types of shelters that exist; the protectionist type shelters that wish to provide safety to individual women who are in trouble and the feminist type shelters that focus on the empowerment of the women. Many shelters do not fit a perfect archetype but are a combination between these two perspectives that is constantly in flux to meet specific needs that arise. Most shelters today are a combination of empowerment goals, individual counselling, and run by a central hierarchy.

Proffitt (2000) speaks of “the politics of interpretation” as being the influence that dominant family violence discourse has on shelters. She says that apolitical understandings of woman abuse have an effect on the way in which shelters respond to the needs of abused women. For example, these understanding might be rooted in dealing with the individual problems of the women and ignoring the material and social problems of the environment that the woman lives in (and will return to) on a day to day basis. Traditional social service perspectives may focus on the women and her immediate situation (individual counselling) or on family problems that have led to the abuse (family counselling) at the exclusion of the social and political structures that cause woman abuse (McDonald,1989). From this perspective shelters are viewed as being an end in themselves.

The secrecy of the shelter location as well as a requirement that shelter residents do not disclose any information about the shelter to the outside world has been identified as being a problematic aspect of shelters. The demarcation of physical and social boundaries means that the shelter becomes isolated from the wider community. This is especially prominent in critiques that suggest that long-term shelters have the potential to create a sense of dependency for the abused women (Park, Peters, & De Sá, 2000). Shelters, as gendered sites, are feminised as a space of 'protection' in which the vulnerable, potential victims are housed (Haaken & Yragui, 2003).

Furthermore, this isolation creates a space in which gender-based violence is neutralised along general lines of male violence and female victimisation. This leaves no room for the analysis of the different impacts that this kind of abuse has on women from different races, cultures and socio-economic classes (Haaken & Yragui, 2003). Studies have shown that women of colour negotiate meanings about their abuse that encompass a broader set of influences that move beyond the mere analysis of male power (Crenshaw, 1994, as cited in Haaken & Yragui, 2003). Women of colour are often burdened by poverty and lack of job skills; consequences of the gender and class oppression that exists. These women often experience more pressure to maintain family ties and to keep the family together (Haaken & Yragui, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Isolated shelters may not serve the needs of many women of colour as they promote a severing from the cultural and community ties that are so important in many women's lives. Inattention to factors such as these could result in a decrease of the shelters usefulness as it leads to the exclusion of women who face a variety of different obstacles related to race and class.

In their study in the United States, Tutty et al. (1999) found that the women's narratives of their shelter stay portrayed multiple challenges with regards to shelter life. For example, many of the women felt upset that as they thought that the counsellors harboured negative attitudes towards their abusers. The women displayed tensions about keeping their location private (most women wanted to keep contact with the abuser). They spoke about problems with communal living that was largely centred on women neglecting their duties in the shelter. Tensions also arose with other women in an environment in which anger was let out. The misbehaviour of children was a common issue of concern. A significant problem was the fact that the staff were overworked and

the women often did not feel that they could go to the staff member for help as they were 'too busy'.

Also in the United States Cannon and Sparks (1989) conducted a case study research project that assessed the impact that a particular shelter had on the residents of the shelter. They used documented analyses, participant observation, and questionnaires in an attempt to obtain a multidimensional perspective of the shelter impact. In this study structured questionnaires with 19 women at shelter entry and just before shelter exit did not show significant changes in the women's acceptance of self. The authors propose that the relatively short shelter stay of the women (4-6 weeks) might have been an insufficient amount of time to bring about significant changes. The use of questionnaires in this regard is questionable as this form of inquiry presupposes what constitutes 'self acceptance' and might miss out on the women's valuable subjective experiences.

Kirkwood's (1993) study in Britain and the United States have shown that living in a shelter can be extremely stressful for the women concerned. This is due to the overcrowded nature of these facilities, which perpetuates lack of privacy and conflict between residents. Many women are forced to share private space with total strangers. In addition, the initial period at the shelter is often chaotic for a woman and her children. They have to adapt to new people as well as to the rules of the shelter (Stephens & McDonald, 2000). Many are often experiencing a general disorientation as a result of their relocation.

In addition, shelters can often only offer a limited amount of time stay to each particular woman and her children. These safe houses often function as havens for women who have no other place to go to. Thus the utility of shelters can be questioned as many can only offer the women a short term relief from the abuse (Loseke, 1992)

## **Women's shelters in South Africa**

Although sheltering services have existed for decades in other countries, the first shelter to open in South Africa specifically designed to help abused women was opened in 1984 by the organisation People Opposing Woman Abuse (Park, Peters & De Sá, 2000). This was followed by the Rape Crisis Centre in 1986. South African shelters have also been established as part of the initiatives of feminist organisations (Maconachie et al., 1993). Shelters expose the problem of violence toward women and it is important that shelters be viewed as a strategy towards a larger goal of ending violence against women rather than being a means to an end in itself (Schechter, 1982, as cited in Maconachie et al., 1993). Many shelters in the country provide a diverse range of services to abused women such as individual counselling, group work and educational programmes (Maconachie et al., 1993).

In the year 2000 there were only 25 shelters in the country with only two of these shelters being situated in rural areas (Park, Shaik, and Rasool, 2000). Most of these shelters were established after 1990. The limited number of shelters in the country mean that the long term shelters have long waiting lists and are often full to capacity (Ludsin & Vetten, 2005). This dearth of shelters makes it extremely difficult for many women to receive this kind of support and accommodation as there is simply not enough space. Thus, many women in the country cannot be protected at a shelter from the immediate abuse at the hands of men. The shelter stay is on average a 3-6 month stay and this has led to accusations that shelters are only short term solutions and that many women may return to their abusers on shelter exit as they have nowhere else to go (Ludsin & Vetten, 2005).

The central debates around shelters in the country involve questioning the suitability of shelters in a South African context. Critics have argued that women should not be forced away from their homes, families and communities and hidden away in a shelter (Park et al., 2000). As Susan Schechter says,

“It is an indictment of our society that battered women need to lock themselves away to ensure their safety” (as cited in Park et al., 2000).

These views are quite radical; however, they fail to capture the central problem of abuse, which is that women *do* feel a sense of entrapment and feelings of self-blame in abusive relationships. Battered women often perceive themselves to be isolated, not only in their homes, but also in their communities. The absence of family or community support, whether this is perceived or real, has been shown to predict the degree of self-blame among women survivors of abuse (Barnett, 1996; Barnett, 2001). Several studies have demonstrated the critical significance of shelters for the social support they provide women in times of crises, which allows women to move beyond the abuse and to regain their strength.

Critics have also challenged the role of shelters in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic South African society and argue that the principles on which shelters are established sometimes clash with the cultural backgrounds of the women survivors of abuse that they serve. For example, the values of secrecy, privacy and isolation of shelters would seem to be at odds with the more communal worldview of some cultures in South Africa. These critics ignore the fact that patriarchy is often very strong in collectivistic cultures, where men are custodians of culture and communities, because of allegiance to culture, “participate” in the legitimization of the abuse.

Pro-shelter activists state that shelter organisations in South Africa have the potential to be dynamic and to respond to the diversity of needs of abused women (Park, Shaik, & Rasool, 2000). For example, a few shelters in the country have made the shelter location public and have allowed visits from friends and relatives to occur. These views posit that shelters, more than being havens of safety, function to empower women by providing psychosocial and emotional support. Also, on a macro-level some shelters are involved in strategies that serve towards eliminating violence against women<sup>3</sup>.

In a South African study, Maconachie et al. (1993) conducted in depth-interviews with 21 ex-shelter residents. The women reported that the shelter provided for a safe space in which they

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<sup>3</sup> These strategies include awareness campaigns, research, and education about abuse.

could reflect on their lives and their complex traumatic experiences. This reflection facilitated a move toward independency. The women discuss the emotional healing that took place as they shared their experiences with other women who had experienced the same thing. This sharing of experiences led to changes in the way that the women understood battering. The narratives also show that the women experienced growth with regards to their personal identity as well as their identity of being a mother. The shelter experience helped to instil a more positive sense of self in relation to the world. This study showed that the shelter served as a significant positive factor in the process of disengagement. Ultimately,

“The strength and self-confidence, and the perspective that the women gain about battering empowers them to persevere in spite of enormous social, emotional and economic problems” (Maconachie et al., 1993: p. 42).

This chapter has outlined the central debates around women’s shelters in general. Studies have shown that shelters can serve as beneficial sources of social support for the women that help to facilitate the process of leaving by helping the women reconnect with others. The shelter environment also serves as a sphere in which the women’s experiences of abuse can be validated. Shelters have been critiqued for locking women away from social life. In particular the secrecy regarding the shelter location has been critiqued for the way in which it cuts women off from the broader social context. Also, shelters that adopt a purely individual approach to the treatment of battered women ignore the social context that contributes to woman abuse and place less focus on empowering the woman within this social sphere. Shelters in South Africa are a fairly recent phenomenon. Central debates of shelters in the country centre on the suitability of shelters for women of different cultures. Finally, this chapter has outlined the dearth of South African literature that focuses specifically on the role and impact of women’s shelters.

## **Aims and motivations of the current study**

A review of the literature highlights the fact that there is a particular need for more local, South African based studies that address the processes that women go through when they leave abusive relationships. Globally, there is a severe lack of research that focuses on the work of battered women's shelters (Ben-Porat & Itzhaky, 2008) and women's experiences of shelters (Tuffy, 1999). This lack of literature is particularly evident in the South African context as most of the studies have been done in the United States or Britain. There is a particular lack of qualitative studies that address the women's in-depth experiences with regards to the process of leaving in this context. This highlights a need for studies, especially those of a more in-depth nature, that address how women make meaning within the context of South African shelters.

The current study will address these gaps in the literature. It explores how the broad South African context has shaped women's meaning and also how the shelter, as a micro-culture, has shaped the meaning in the women's narratives. Ultimately, the women's process of leaving will be explored within the context of the shelter within which the women are situated. The questions of the study follow from those outlined by Kirkwood (1993), it will explore what it means to free oneself from an abuser in a society that condones woman abuse. What are the practical and emotional implications of this? And how do women free themselves in this context? The central research question of the current study addressed how women residing in shelters experience disengaging from abusive relationships.

In the following chapter I will outline the methodology and methods that I have used to carry out the current research. In the next three chapters I will present my analysis of the women's narratives of leaving abusive relationships. Lastly, this thesis will end with some brief concluding comments and recommendations for further research in the area. A list of appendices is attached that will provide the reader with background information on the current study.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

### Qualitative epistemology

The epistemological approach underlying my research is qualitative. At the root of a qualitative methodology is a critique of the notion of objectivity that puts forward a rational, detached and value free researcher (Edwards, 1993). Many feminists and qualitative researchers put forward the argument that the perspective of the researcher as separate from the perspective of the researched is an unconscious male intellectual bias that promotes the hegemonic nature of male values and science (Edwards, 1993). Here the detached practices serve as a denial of subjectivity and leads to the objectification of the people who are being researched (Powell, 1996).

Quantitative methodology guides what is considered 'relevant' information by using tools (such as structured questions of a survey) that control the nature of the information that is elicited (Powell, 1996). Qualitative work on the other hand, gives agency and power to the research participants. The traditional 'subjects' of scientific enquiry become participants that are actively involved with the researcher in the co-construction of knowledge (Gergen & Gergen, 1992).

The aim of my study, to explore women's experiences of disengaging from abusive relationships, lends itself to a qualitative paradigm. The philosophical roots of this paradigm stress the importance of understanding the meanings that underlie behaviour as well as acknowledging that social interaction is grounded within a particular socio-cultural context (Patton, 1987). From this view reality is seen as comprising of multiple, fluid perspectives that are ever changing. This is in contrast to the quantitative view that sees reality as a single, stable type of knowledge that exists 'out there' (Patton, 1987). Qualitative methods permit one to study events in detail, as the data is not constrained by rigid, predetermined categories (Patton, 1987). These open-ended methods allow one to understand the world as seen by the respondent.

Quantitative work is well established as the dominant method of inquiry of social research. It has however also begun to be critiqued as gender-neutralising violence against women in certain

ways. For example, much of the work has used statistics in static ways that do not accommodate for women's voices on the issue. Also, much quantitative work (as is true of work from other philosophical perspectives) has erased an opportunity for an analysis of power imbalances by, for example, naming this type of violence "family violence", "domestic violence", "spouse abuse" or "partner violence" (Bart & Moran, 1993). Quantitative work minimises the importance of the social context and also obscures systems of power imbalances. Ultimately, the nature of quantitative work has largely neglected the exploration and legitimation of women's experiences of abuse (Powell, 1996).

What fundamentally distinguishes a qualitative research approach from its quantitative counterpart is its primary focus on the researcher's role in interpreting the meaning of the respondent's experience, the embracing of subjectivity. This type of work acknowledges and highlights that the researcher is not removed from that which he/she is studying. The researcher constructs meanings of events from the range of different discourses and subject positions that are available to them (Boonzaier, 2001). In this respect it is crucial for the researcher to examine the values, background and personal experiences that they bring with them into the research process.

Debates around the applicability of the constructs validity and reliability in qualitative work have abounded in the last two decades. Many qualitative researchers have moved away from these constructs as they posit that validity and reliability are philosophically consistent with the rationalist quantitative paradigm (de Wet & Erasmus, 2005). They have argued that as qualitative work does not share the same philosophical underpinnings, it needs to develop its own criteria for 'trustworthiness' (Morse et al., 2002). The criteria that developed did however lead to confusion and the reliance of post hoc techniques that judged the research at completion (Morse et al., 2002). Kvale (1989, as cited in Morse et al., 2002) calls for the constructs of reliability and validity to be applied to qualitative work as,

"To validate is to investigate, to check, to question, and to theorise. All of these activities are integral components of qualitative inquiry that ensure rigour" (p. 14).

Furthermore, the move away from these constructs results in qualitative work becoming marginalised from mainstream scientific inquiry. The authors argue that a return to these constructs should be made with the use of verification strategies that are applicable to all methodological approaches and that at the same time will embrace terminology that is applicable to mainstream science. They suggest criteria for evaluating reliability and validity that occur through actions that take place right through the research process and can thus redirect errors and enhance the research as one goes along.

These strategies of verification are investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, appropriate sampling, collecting and analysing data concurrently, and thinking theoretically. Firstly, the researcher needs to be able to be flexible and to 'listen to the data' in a dynamic way. This involves being willing to throw out any initial ideas if they do not receive much support in the data. Methodological coherence demands that the research question match the method and that this in turn fits with the analytical tool. Appropriate sampling deems that the researcher must have obtained the most suitable respondents that are experts in the field to be studied. Data collection and analysis must occur together; this often involves note taking and early analysis beginning during the actual interview situation. Finally, thinking theoretically involves being able to link data to relevant theories without making cognitive leaps. The current research project has aimed to closely adhere to these criteria in a way that optimises the integrity of the research and thus can establish the piece as a rigorous contribution to scientific inquiry.

Ultimately, the assumptions of a qualitative framework see the researcher as a crucial part of the knowledge production at all levels of the research process as they bring into the research process their own conceptual orientations and cultural understandings that influence both their decisions as well as their interpretations (Lyons, 2007). The goals of this inquiry are to understand women's experiences of disengaging from an abusive partner through a critical feminist lens. This perspective has much in common with critical approaches to qualitative inquiry and it is outlined below.

## **Theoretical framework- feminist poststructuralism**

The theoretical framework that underpins the current study is that of feminist poststructuralism. Weedon (1987) has defined feminist poststructuralism as being,

“a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (p. 40).

Feminist poststructuralism is a stream of post modern thinking that critically challenges traditional assumptions of what constitutes ‘self’ and ‘reality’. This approach directly criticises Liberal Humanist assumptions that there is an essential human nature that is fixed and that has universal meanings and it rejects the possibility of understanding the ‘truth’ of human nature (Weedon, 1987).

This approach posits that it is through language that we can think, speak, and give meaning to the world around us (Weedon, 1987). For feminist poststructuralism it is language in the form of conflicting discourses that constitutes our thinking as thinking subjects and also enables us to give meaning to the world around us (and to transform it). This view assumes that there is no unitary, pre-given subjectivity and that language is not a transparent medium which expresses pre-given meaning (Weedon, 1987).

Subjectivity has been defined as the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of a person, their sense of self and their ways that they relate to others in the world (Weedon, 1987). Poststructuralist theories propose that an individual’s subjectivity is ever fluctuating, precarious, and contradictory. This kind of subjectivity is described to be forever in process as it is constantly reconstituted in discourses of thought and speech. These theories posit that discursive practices provide the subject with different subject positions and individuals can take up a variety of different subject positions within different discourses (Moore, 1994). Ultimately, Weedon

(1987) posits that poststructuralism stands as a theory of 'subjectivity in progress'. From this view subjectivity is seen as being socially produced in language.

This understanding of subjectivity opens up the possibility of changing subjectivities as our subjectivities are now seen to be products of the particular socio-cultural context within which we live. A woman's sense of self is thus relativised by making it an effect of discourse which is open to continuous redefinition. Individuals take up multiple subject positions within a range of different discourses and social practices (Moore, 1994). These subject positions very often run in contradiction with each other. According to this view an individual is always the site of multiple, conflicting subjectivities (Weedon, 1987). An individual may produce new versions of meaning from the conflicts and contradictions between existing discourses. In situations in which the choice of positioning in a discourse is not possible, resistance is always a possibility.

### *Feminist Poststructuralism and 'gender'*

Essentialism views gender as being an inherent quality of an individual that describes one's personality and cognitive processes (Bohan, 1993). These views portray gender as a stable internal attribute that exists separately from the socio-political context within which an individual is situated. In contrast to the "essentialist" perspective which tends to be too narrowly focused on the individual, social constructionism offers a useful alternative by exploring experience in social context. These views do not see gender as a trait of individuals that is separate from their social context. From this viewpoint gender is seen to be a social construct that identifies certain transactions that are understood to be appropriate for members of a certain sex (Bohan, 1993). This approach to research has provided an important methodological framework for feminist research in general and for research on woman abuse in particular.

More specifically, feminist poststructuralism, a strand of postmodern thinking, provides opportunities to re-theorise gender in dynamic ways. This involves an examination of the social construction of gender and gendered subjectivity via certain discourses in society (Shefer, 2004). In her illustration of the value of a feminist-poststructuralist approach Shefer (2004) explains that this kind of theorising provides us with ways of understanding ourselves as being, , " both

subjected to the dominant discourses of gendered subjectivity and also as active subjects who are constantly reinterpreting ourselves, sometimes in resistance and rebellion to ‘others’ and the dominant discourse”. This view disregards the notion of a static ‘male’ or ‘female’ and it rejects the notion of binary male-female. It posits that multiple gendered ‘selves’ exist with multiple, interchangeable sexualities. These many selves are shifting and highly fluid. The identities of an individual are socially and historically constructed and are thus ever-changing. Ultimately, these views posit that we ‘do’ gender as we constantly negotiate our identity in relation to mainstream discourses.

Central to the poststructuralist notion of the subject are the notions of agency and resistance (Shefer, 2004). Here identities are not fixed and people can negotiate multiple gendered subjectivities and challenge dominant gender discourses. Power is not one sided, in relations of domination power is always exercised in relation to resistance. These understandings of power suggest that power can shift and change in different contexts. Instead of seeing power as an unchanging quality of people of a certain group, these lines of thought posit that there are multiple sites of power. As individuals we are both subjected to the dominant discourses of gender and we are also active subjects who can challenge and resist these blueprints of ‘who we should be’ as gendered beings (Shefer, 2004).

### *Feminism post-structuralism and research on woman abuse*

The advantages of a feminist poststructuralist approach in the analysis of research involving woman abuse has been recognised by researchers in the area (Boonzaier, 2001; 2008; Power, 2006) This approach makes visible the ways in which women negotiate their identities in the discourses of femininity (Power et al., 2006). More specifically, the notion of subjectivity that encompasses conflicting subject positions provides ways of understanding the complexity of women’s experiences of leaving abusive relationships that might consist of the co-occurrence of both positive and negative feelings toward the abuser and acts of compliance to and resistance of traditional gendered ways of being (Power et al., 2006). The focus of this study will be on how women construct their identities within the particular socio-historical context during the process of leaving. These goals fit well with a feminist poststructuralist approach that moves away from

conceptions of a true nature of experience that exists in isolation from the social and linguistic sphere.

## **Feminist approaches to research**

Feminist research aims to address imbalances of power in our society that are structured according to positions of gender, race, and class. The major object of investigation of feminist work is a focus on the experiences of women and an attempt to see the world from their particular viewpoint. Feminist research also takes a critical stance toward oppressive social structures and aims to improve the lot of women by acknowledging and giving privilege to their previously silenced voices (Seibold, 2002).

Bhavnani (2004) draws on Donna Haraway's notion of a feminist 'objectivity' that requires accountability, positionality, and partiality to be dealt with in the research process. Firstly accountability means that research within a feminist framework should not reproduce the researched in similar ways in which they are represented within the dominant patriarchal society. This would be perpetuating the discourses that reinscribe the power imbalances through the act of research. Positionality deals with the way in which the micro-politics of power are dealt with in the research encounter. Lastly, an element of partiality needs to be present in research whereby a researcher deals with questions of difference that run throughout the research process. Thus, feminist work needs to reflect upon an analysis that gives women the power and agency that mainstream representations have omitted in research on women. It also needs to deal with the positions of power and difference that are inherently intertwined in the relationships that constitute the research encounter. The current research deems itself as feminist by adherence to and respect of the above criteria.

As discussed above, the power dynamics between researcher and the respondent is an important focus of feminist research. Harbison (2007) discusses how the interactional dynamics between

the researcher and the researched in the interview situation might influence the kind of narratives that the women produce. A common assumption with regards to interviewing posits that women-to-women interviews are non-hierarchical and thus facilitates a space in which women feel more comfortable talking about private matters (Edwards, 1993). This is, however, not applicable to all situations as factors such as race and class structurally divide the female researcher and the female researched in ways that manifest different identities, interests and priorities (Edwards, 1993).

Feminist debates have questioned whether black women can adequately be represented by the voices of white women (Boonzaier, 2006). These debates of representing the other generate underlying tensions between on the one hand acknowledging that we need to hear the experiences of all people while on the other hand saying that we cannot represent the other's experience in our own narrative as this would be another form of colonising their voice (Lyons, 2003). These tensions are inherent in all research relationships as we all come from different backgrounds and have different subject positions. They can however be eased, I think, by Parker's (2005) suggestion of evaluating from a political perspective what we have said in our research and what we will do with it. From here one can begin to focus on the particular benefits that the research might have for the group of women that are being studied. Thus, as a feminist researcher it is crucial for me to anticipate what impact my research might have for abused women in South African society. I attempt to evaluate the potential impact and significance of my work in my conclusions and recommendations chapter. A crucial element here is an acknowledgement of the way in which I have represented these particular women. Palmary (2006) writes of the feminist standpoint theories,

“All writing is political, and acknowledging this politics of representation and reflexivity puts us in the position of considering how our representations of those on the margins of society can be most politically useful” (pp. 41).

## Reflexivity

As outlined in the above sections, as a feminist qualitative researcher it is crucial that I adopt a reflexive position in my research. Reflexivity involves more than a mere confession of one's race, gender, class or age. Rather, it is a continual consideration of how these identities have been historically produced in ways that make them central to the topic under investigation (Palmary, 2006). Also, it is crucial to explore how these identities have been brought to the fore or hidden in certain stages of the research process (Palmary, 2006). Parker (2005) defines reflexivity as,

“A way of attending to the institutional location of historical and personal aspects of the research relationship” (p. 25)

The women in this study differ from myself in terms of race, culture, socio-economic status and education level. Most of these women are poor, coloured women who come from underprivileged areas surrounding Manenberg in the Cape Flats. The average educational level of the women is standard eight (see Participant Information: Appendix E). Many are currently destitute and have a lifelong history of violence and other forms of oppression that are tied to their race and class. How do I, Samantha van Schalkwyk, a white, middle class female with a record of tertiary education begin my interaction with these women? These multiple, intersecting subjectivities have an impact on what the interviewees say during the interview and shapes the making of meaning in their narratives (Palmary, 2006).

The different subject positions that are socially constructed with regards to race (white researcher, coloured participant), and class (middle class privilege of the researcher and working class economic deprivation of the participant) are products of the history of apartheid and racial segregation that is tied with the notion of white privilege and power (Palmary, 2006). These subject positions could have shaped the women's narratives in significant ways. Firstly, to what extent did the women trust me in the interviews? No matter how much rapport was gained, the construction of my 'whiteness' and her 'colour' could set up the possibility in a particular

woman's mind of the potential of exploitation. A woman could ask herself, 'what do I get out of this?' This is particularly pertinent when considering that I, as a university student, will be obtaining a postgraduate degree as a result of the work.

When grappling with these issues, I found Lyon's (2007) blurring of the concept of 'other' an encouragement. She addresses the many different categories and identities in life and questions which group membership is the defining one to regard someone as being a rightful 'other'? I believe that the subject positions that I do share with these women are the most important with regards to my research. Firstly, I share the identity of being a woman in a patriarchal society. I have a feminist agenda which, as my analysis has shown, many of these women have begun to develop. In this respect, we share common ground. As a woman I am part of the same group of people whose experience I am trying to understand (Kelly, 1990). This assertion is in no way trying to minimise these women's experiences of racial and socio-economic oppression that are worlds away from my own sense of reality, but rather to suggest a sense of cohesiveness due to our identities as women. This could have shaped the women's narratives in terms of instilling a sense of admiration and pride in being included in such an endeavour.

### *Personal life experiences*

It is at this point that I think it is best to discuss my personal life experiences that I have brought with me into the research process. For me the initiation of a research project of this nature stems, I think, from part of me that is trying to explore the feeling of pain that I have associated with intimate partner heterosexual relationships. It is also to try to more fully understand this feeling of fear as well as the occurrence of many avoidance strategies that automatically fall into place when a threat is perceived. I have witnessed forms of abuse and maltreatment in my family and this has led to the development of my consciousness surrounding woman abuse. I feel that it is these experiences that have led to my preoccupation to protect myself from this kind of treatment as well as in my quest to deepen my understanding of what women go through when they try to leave, love and to understand. I believe that it is this passion that has connected me to the women in my study on an emotional level.

My psychological background has also played a role in influencing my interpretation of the data. My analysis was largely centred on perceptions and personal levels of growth of the women. Somebody with a different academic background could have interpreted this data in a very different way. During a masters level research course run by the sociology department myself and a fellow student were assigned to each code one of my interview transcripts separately. We then had to get together and compare coding. Our resulting codes were very different and my partner pointed out how she could not grasp some of my coding categories as they required a certain level of psychological background. This exercise made me aware of how I see the data through a psychological lens and this of course shapes how I interpret and present the data.

## **Narrative research**

The study of narratives came about as part of a general trend towards an interest in language that occurred within the social sciences in the 1980's (Murray, 2003). This approach takes a social constructivist turn that critiques traditional or mainstream psychology's conception of self and identity. Rather than conceptualising a unitary self that can be discovered 'behind the scenes', social constructionist approaches such as narrative sees identity to be inextricably tied up with language structures that lead to an interpretation of 'self' that is constantly in flux and ever-changing in response to different social spheres (Crossley, 2007a.). In essence, our 'selves' are shaped, reshaped and renegotiated in different historical, social, and practical contexts.

People engage in narratives as a way of constructing reality and of bringing sense to something that is obscure or unusual (Murray, 2003). Ultimately, a person's narrative gives order, meaning and structure to everyday life (Murray, 2003) and to create continuity between past, present, and imagined worlds (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Narrative is central to how one conceives themselves in the world, their identity and their sense of connectedness with others. A focal concern of a narrative psychological approach is the exploration of identity and self-construction (Crossley, 2007a). This exploration happens in a reflexive manner and it is the act of reflecting that links

the individual's subjectivity with the social world. Thus, in narrative research stories and language not only play a central role in one's identity construction but also in how this subjectivity can be made 'visible' to others in a coherent form.

Narratives are an ever-present part of our social world. The narrative psychological approach is however especially beneficial for traumatic research topics or people who are going through a certain life transition. This is when the respondents may be experiencing a sense of disintegration and they may need to adopt narratives to make sense of the events in their lives (Crossley, 2007a). Thus, a narrative approach is well suited to the study of abused women's experiences of leaving. This approach has been utilised by other researcher's studying violence in intimate relationships (Boonzaier, 2003, 2008; Hydén, 1999, 2005; Profitt, 2000) More specifically, the benefits of this approach to research that looks at the process of leaving can be seen in the way in which this type of research is able to succinctly illuminate the changes in the ways in which the women construct their 'selves' over time.

## **A narrative- qualitative method**

### ***Research participants***

The data of this study is made up of 16 interview transcripts. Sixteen women who had experienced long-term physical and/or emotional abuse at the hands of an intimate partner participated in this study. The average length of relationship with the abuser was 11.2 years. The women were recruited from two shelters located in two different coloured townships near Cape Town. These are both poor, coloured areas characterised by high levels of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment and general economic deprivation. At both shelters the initial access to the participants was gained through an introductory meeting with each of the shelter's supervisors and research co-ordinators who consequently agreed to let me conduct my research at their centres.

Fourteen of the participants were coloured South African women. Of the remaining two participants, one was black and one white. The age range of the participants was 24 to 57 years old. The mean age of the women is 35.4 years old. The average education level is grade 10 (standard eight), and only five of these women completed their high school education. The duration of stay at the shelter ranged from three weeks to 23 months, with an average stay of 4.2 months. For four of the women this was their second time at a shelter (Fatima, Jolynn, Beth, Lillian<sup>4</sup>). All but three of the women had, prior to the shelter, lived in poor, marginalised areas of the Cape Flats, in which predominantly coloured people resided. One of the women lived in a low socio-economic area called Khayelitsha that is traditionally occupied by black people<sup>5</sup>. Two of the women came from low income areas in the Southern Peninsula of Cape Town near Muizenberg and Simonstown. At the time of the interviews six of the women were currently working, these jobs were however often casual jobs with a minimum wage. All of the women interviewed experienced severe levels of economic strain and deprivation that characterised their lives (See Appendix E: Participant Information for a more in-depth background to the participants).

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

In this study semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with the 16 women. Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. The questions were designed in an open ended fashion so as to facilitate less guided or restricted answers. In this way the women were able to talk about their particular experiences of leaving that hold meanings for themselves. These kinds of interviews allow women to speak for themselves and thus helps to guard against data being misinterpreted and used to pathologise certain groups of women (Edwards, 1993). By making the women's experiences central to the data gathering, one can begin to counteract the assumptions and values of the researcher (Edwards, 1993).

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<sup>4</sup> These names are pseudonyms provided to ensure the women's anonymity.

<sup>5</sup> Even though apartheid has been officially abolished, the spatial landscape of Cape Town to a very large degree still reflects the ethos of the Group areas Act.

The central research question of the study was how do women residing in a shelter experience leaving abusive relationships. The theoretical questions were what challenges do women deal with when they go through the process of disengaging? Do the women experience any kinds of personal changes/growth at this particular stage in their life and what role has the shelter played in this process of disengaging? The corresponding interview questions were constructed with the general aim of eliciting information about the research questions above. Following Patton (1987), I have used an interview guide approach. Here the interview schedule served as a broad framework for the interview process and was not strictly adhered to. As suggested by researchers such as Kvale (1996) and Wengraf (2001), the questions were constructed as short and devoid of academic language in order for them to be easily understandable to the respondents. At specific points of the interviews prompts were used to direct the responses towards the specific theoretical questions of the study. (see Appendix F: Interview schedule). All of the interviews were conducted in English with respondents often switching into Afrikaans on occasion.

The interviews were tape recorded after obtaining permission to do so from the women concerned. The tape recording of each interview was transcribed verbatim. This transcription includes pauses, exclamations and the emphasis that a respondent has placed on certain words, or groups of words (Murray, 2003). Emphasis was added to the transcriptions with the use of bold text (**Bold Text**). A detailed description of other modes of transcription can be seen in the transcribing conventions document (Appendix G).

## **Ethical considerations**

This research project obtained ethical approval from a professional panel of researchers in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town in June 2007.

Following Marshall and Rossman (1995) I maintained a continuous sensitivity towards the interest of potential research participants. At my initial visit with the women living in the first

shelter I explained the aims of my research (to look at women's experiences of leaving abuse) as well as why I believe that my research is important (it can help people to better understand what women are going through when they are leaving). I also explained what participation in the study would entail (telling a private story about one's life and experiences of abuse). At no time during this meeting did I pressure any of the women to take part in the research. I merely indicated that whoever was interested can sign a roster that will be kept at the social worker's office. I let the women know that if at any time they changed their mind about participating in the study, they could advise the social worker to take their name off the roster<sup>6</sup>. I felt that both social workers respected the women's decisions about participating in the study and did not pressurise them to get involved.

### *The research interview*

Each interview took place on the property of the respective shelters. In both of the shelters a private room was provided that was quiet and comfortable and that served as a space within which we could speak without any disruptions. Also, this location was convenient to the women as they were all currently living at the shelters and did not have to travel to the interview.

The women were given full disclosure of information regarding the details of the research project. Each woman was informed in a clear and concise way about their rights as a participant of the study. They were informed that they have the right to refuse to answer any question. They were told that they have the right to turn off the tape recorder at any point in time where they might be discussing a particularly sensitive issue that they would not like to be recorded. They were also told that they could delete certain parts of the interview if they so wish. In addition, they were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time (Kvale, 1996). The women were ensured (verbally and in writing) about the fact that the confidentiality of the interview situation will be upheld at all times. Anonymity was achieved with the use of pseudonyms that were used in place of women's actual names

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<sup>6</sup> The procedure at the second shelter was slightly different with the head social worker introducing my study to the women and setting up an open roster onto which the women could sign up for participation.

Lastly, I explained to the women that there might be certain risks involved in taking part in this sort of research. For instance, a study of this nature might cause the emergence of emotional distress or other negative feelings. I advised the women that if at any time during the interview they experienced any negative emotions they could go to the shelters' counsellors for immediate counselling. I also encouraged the women to go to the shelters' social workers at any time after the interview should any of these feelings emerge. The women were also given a small gratuity for the time that they spent participating in the study<sup>7</sup>.

### *The shelters*

The interactions with the staff at the shelter also followed particular ethical codes of conduct. Each shelter was provided with a copy of the initial research proposal. They were also ensured anonymity and confidentiality during the research process. The shelter staff was ensured that the shelter's name will not be used in the final write up and that a concerted effort will be made to eliminate information from the final report that might disclose the location of the shelter. It is the responsibility of the shelter staff to uphold the best interest of their clients. In this regard I also ensured the staff that an ethical conduct with the women will be upheld at all times. Finally, I also briefed them on my proposed aims of the research. The shelter consent form was a written agreement of informed consent (Appendix D). Each shelter was also kept informed of my general research progress and will be provided with a final copy of the research for their perusal.

## **Analysis of data**

### *Thematic narrative analysis*

In this study I have used a thematic approach for the narrative analysis of my data as outlined by Riessman (2008). Here the participant's "story" refers to a brief, bounded segment of interview

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<sup>7</sup> The 9 women from the first shelter were given packs of food items. The 11 women from the second shelter were given gift vouchers. In both the shelters these gratuities were distributed via the head social worker who contacted the women if they had already left the shelter.

text rather than an extended biographical account. Thematic analysis involves searching across a data set (in this case the transcribed interviews) to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006). The process of this kind of analysis involves familiarising oneself with the data. During this process I engaged in a close reading of the interview transcripts as suggested by Murray (2003). This entailed reading and re-reading each transcript in a repetitive way. This close reading can help the researcher to gain a sense of the spirit of the text before they begin to categorise the data (de Wet & Erasmus, 2005). Then from this close reading an initial coding list was developed that helped to capture the overall meanings of the narratives and clarify particular issues that emerged (Murray, 2003).

The process of coding consists of the researcher identifying units of data that are then clustered into similar themes. Here I drew together segments of texts with similar meanings. These were excerpts of the women's responses with some central themes that best addressed the questions (outlined above) that I was interested in. During this process I made use of Wengraf's (2001) pyramid model that links the central research question, theory questions and interview questions. More specifically, I worked through a transcript in its entirety identifying segments of the interview material that answered my first theory question. These segments were then coded and I worked through the whole transcript once more in the coding of my second theory question. These segments were differentially colour coded as answer to theory question 1 (ATQ1), answer to theory question 2 (ATQ2) and so forth.

The importance of a theme in this kind of work is not if it occurred many times but if it captures something important in relation to the overall research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With this in mind, my analysis involved the identification of themes that shed some light on the women's process of disengaging from the abusive relationship. Themes were modified, expanded, and compounded together as my research process progressed. Finally in my results and discussion chapters I will develop these thematic clusters and make sense of what they mean and how they answer the questions in the study. As is consistent with a thematic analysis, I provide a detailed, nuanced account of the group of themes that I identified within the data and explored how they relate to the question of how women leave.

The form of analysis used in this study was informed by a narrative approach. One of the main aims of narrative research is to explore the social construction of experience and the way in which implicit cultural narratives are used to make sense of such traumatising events or transitional periods (Crossley, 2007b.). A central feature of narrative is sequence (Parker, 2005). An analysis that deals with thematic sequence has been called a topic centred narrative genre (Reissman, 1993, as cited in Boonzaier, 2001). This study has dealt with the thematic narratives of the women that have centred around a particular theme (abuse and leaving abusive relationships). Imagery and themes were identified in relation to each theoretical question of the research (Crossley, 2007a). Narrative psychology has a strong interest in the actual content of the narratives that are being researched (Crossley, 2007a.) A narrative method of analysis is more concerned with detailed description of the data rather than explanation (Lyons, 2007) and can thus be more responsive to the particular concerns of individual respondents (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, Spiers, 2002).

A narrative approach with regards to the analysis breaks down traditional binaries of the psychological/social and develops a more complex psycho-social subject. The narrator is seen as an active agent that engages with their social world (Murray, 2003). Ultimately, by examining a person's narrative we can begin to understand the respondent's and their worlds (Murray, 2003). Crossley (2003) describes the essence of narrative as being an ability to understand and appreciate the personal and cultural meanings conveyed within the respondent's narratives and to be able to identify the socio-cultural resources that they have used in this process.

As is consistent with a social constructionist framework (and a narrative approach), attention was paid to the language that the participants used in the telling of their stories. Prevalent discourses on abused women and leaving abusive partners was identified. Discourse analysis involves an examination of how the women's language reflects the way in which her thought is structured by the surrounding social system (Collins, 2003). More specifically, discourse analysis highlights how both culture and society provide the abused woman with ideas that structure how they experience both themselves as well as the situations of violence to which they are exposed (Collins, 2003). Once again discourse analysis does not work with the assumption of a

representative data set. Rather, it posits that all discourses are relevant regardless of the number of times that they occur in the interviews (Shefer et al., 2000).

In the next three chapters of this thesis I will outline the analysis and discussion of the women's narratives of leaving their abusive relationships.

## **CHAPTER 5: “LOOKING BACK”: A REFLECTION ON THE DECISION TO LEAVE AND ‘CONTRADICTIONAL SELVES’**

In the following three chapters of this thesis I will present the results and analysis of the women’s narratives in the study. The women’s narratives have been analysed according to three broad categories. Firstly, the women’s narratives were structured in terms of themes that capture the women’s experiences of the abusive relationships and themes describing factors that contributed to their subsequent decision to leave the abusive relationships. These themes depict the participants “past” where they reflect on their decisions to leave and how they see themselves now that they have left the abusive partners. The women’s current self-perception was often at variance with how they saw themselves when they were still in the abusive relationships. These findings are consistent with those of Wuest and Meritt-Gray (1999) who conducted a study of how women leave. They found that women who are disengaging from abusive relationships constantly engage in retrospective strategies to justify their decisions. Chapter five will present the results and analysis of these stories of the past.

The second broad category concerns the women’s transition from their decision to leave their abusive relationships, through their journey from their homes to the shelter and to their current experiences of the shelter. The women’s narratives of the present are framed by their reflection on the transition from abusive home to shelter. The women narrated their experiences in a way that showed fluctuation between their current circumstances at the shelter on the one hand, and their past experiences of abuse and the initial stages of leaving on the other. This fluctuation in the women’s narratives suggest a kind of transition during which women seem to have begun constructing a “new” meaning of ‘self’ that was different from the ‘self’ when they were enduring abuse. Narratives that fall under this second broad category will be discussed in the next chapter.

The third broad category of results show the women looking towards the future in a positive way, constructing themselves as powerful agents who can achieve certain dreams and goals. These results will be discussed in chapter seven.

The women also drew on cultural discourses to give meaning to their experiences. For example, many women drew on discourses of the passive, vulnerable woman and the powerful male in their reflections of their abusive relationship and their continued struggles to disengage from this relationship. These discourses are products of the culture of South Africa (as in most cultures in other parts of the world) that condones women abuse by depicting women as inferior in relation to men. In this sense then culture, as Wood (2001: p. 241) states, provides language that the women can draw from, “to construct the meaning of ‘personal’ experience”.

## **Themes on the “past” and the decision to leave**

In this section I will present the results and discussion of the themes that fall under this broad category based on the participants’ reflections on the past. The following sub-themes emerged from the narratives: managing anger, recognising danger, and identifying the power dynamics of the abusive relationship.

### ***Managing Anger***

Studies have shown that an increased awareness of the dynamics of the abusive situation leads to a surge in emotions (anger and fear) and it is this surge of emotions that stands as a resource to leaving (Hydén, 1994; Kirkwood, 1993). Women’s reasons for leaving are often constructed as being the result of the women constructively managing their own anger. Campbell, Rose, Kub, and Nedd (1998) have found that a woman’s recognition of her own potential for enacting violence was a turning point in her decision to leave the relationship. These thoughts of violence

were often brought about from intense feelings of anger and rage towards the abuser that the women felt in response to the abuse and maltreatment that they experienced.

An examination of the women's narratives in the current study showed that many describe their decision to leave the abuser as being one that was fuelled by recognition of their own feelings of anger toward him. For instance, Maleka identifies how her feelings of anger led to thoughts of harming the abuser.

I was having so much anger against..against him. I was starting to have these thoughts I must do something to this man when he's sleeping. I can throw him with boiling water or something and, you know when I was...when I'm alone I used to think now, 'hey this is wrong. I'm going to end up in jail and my children will suffer. Let me rather leave him'.

(Maleka: pp. 7).

Maleka constructs the act of leaving as being the result of a rational choice on her part in which she engaged in a strategy of managing her anger. She actively resisted playing out her anger through specific actions toward the abuser as she acknowledged that the consequences for herself and her children could be highly negative. Her narrative highlights the contradiction between her thoughts of harming the abuser and her moral stance that this action would be wrong. Here Maleka names and describes her feelings of anger and discusses how the contradictory feelings that the anger produces provide for a motivation to leave the relationship.

Along a similar vein, Jolynn talks about how her thoughts of harming the abuser run in contradiction with the kind of person that she is. She constructs herself as being someone who is driven to think of violence but that this is not an inherent part of her nature.

There comes a time when you sit and you think to yourself...I was also in that state already when I sit and I look and I..I'll sommer stab this man with this knife you know. But why? And um why must he make me do things like that and I've got children and that's not the type of person I am. So rather leave.

(Jolynn: pp. 20)

Jolynn works through this contradiction by deciding that the best decision will be to leave. She constructs the abuser as being the cause of her negative and violent feelings that lead to her considering violence and she questions the morality of the abuser causing these emotions. The narrative suggests that Jolynn resisted being the vehicle for such emotions and intentions and managed these feelings by deciding to get out of the situation.

The women also described how they managed their feelings of anger because of the presence of children. Beryl describes how her daughter was a significant reason why she did not act on her feelings of anger and rage toward the abuser.

I just sit there and I tell for myself today is the day that I'm going to do something to this man. And I take the tablets and the ratex in my hand. And that's the day I decided I want to kill him. And um...but you know what Samantha? When I was standing there and I see my daughter's face, the disabled one, and I think who's going to look after her if I (am) going to do something like that.

(Beryl: pp. 9)

Here Beryl describes the intense emotions of rage and anger that she feels towards the abuser for the way that he has maltreated her. She names her anger and constructs her decision to end the violence (by killing the abuser). This strategy is modified as she thinks of the consequences that it will have for her child. Beryl describes how her sense of duty as a mother led to her managing her anger in leaving rather than harming the abuser. Ultimately, the women's narratives illustrate how they construct their decision to leave as being a result of managing their own anger and thus

resisting being caught up in the cycle of abuse and maltreatment. Another reason that the women constructed as contributing to their decision of leaving was the recognition of the danger that the abuse posed to themselves as well as their children.

### *Recognising the Danger*

During the cognitive process of reflecting back on their abusive relationship many of the women began to pinpoint specifically bad aspects of the abuse. By focusing on these negative aspects the women gained more insight about the danger that her and her children were exposed to at the hands of the abuser. The recognition of the seriousness of the danger that is posed for themselves as well as their children provided an impetus for the women to make the decision to leave. This recognition occurred on a number of levels during the process of disengaging. The narratives suggest that the recognition of the danger helped to reinforce the women's decisions to leave and it helped the women to maintain their position of being away from the abuser.

Lillian speaks of the fear that mobilized her to leave her relationship. She constructs her abuser as being 'crazy' and thus dangerous and unpredictable. Here she describes leaving as being a result of her increase in fear of the abuser. The fear that she describes is linked to her realization of the danger that the abuser poses.

I was just thinking, 'What is this? This man is crazy. I really need to get away from this guy and I need to get my children away from him cause I'm really scared of him now.

(Lillian: pp. 5)

These findings are consistent with those of Hydén (1999) who has conceptualized fear as a form of resistance in which a woman realizes that what is happening to her is not what she wants to happen. This kind of fear can thus be seen to be an emotion that helps the abused woman to focus on the direct potential for danger that the abuse poses. The women's narratives in the

current study suggest that fear acts to mobilize the women to get out of the abusive situation as they focus on the reality of the risk that they are exposing themselves to by staying.

Beryl describes her reason for leaving the relationship as being because of a specific violent incident that involved the abuser using a knife for the first time. Here she constructs the reason for leaving as being a realisation of the serious consequences that could have resulted if the knife had gone into her neck (possibly resulting in death).

You know Samantha the reason why I leave him is because it's the first time he stabbed me with a knife. And you know if I'm not pull the knife it (would have) go into my neck. Yes, that's the time. That's the first time he stabbed me with a knife.

(Beryl: pp. 10)

Here Beryl not only names and describes her reason for leaving but also constructs herself as having agency in this process. She drew the line to what kind of violence she would tolerate and this kind of violence that could possibly threaten her life was deemed unacceptable. These findings concur with those of Tuffey et al. (1999) who found that the women in their study reached a specific point in the abusive relationship where they described that they could simply not tolerate any more violence and maltreatment. For Beryl this point was the introduction of the knife into the abuser's repertoire of abusive behaviours.

Altoise describes how she felt that she had to leave when, after years of abusing her emotionally, her partner began to be physically violent with her.

He take me one night here by the arms. He's a big man. He take me..that was a blue mark and you know things like that...and he throw me against the wall there. There was a knock here, my eye was blue, he slapped me..you know. Then I thought to myself, 'Oh well, this is the last straw. I have to run for my life. This guy is gonna kill me'.

(Altoise: pp. 11)

Her narrative succinctly describes the force used by her partner. His size and strength as he threw her against the wall is emphasized in her construction of herself as being the helpless victim who stands no chance against the physical force of the abuser. This led to her decision to 'run for her life' and get out of the relationship as she has realized that her partner could kill her. This is what Senter and Cadwell (2002) call, 'acknowledging the reality of the abusive relationship' when the acknowledgement of the possibility of one's own death mobilized the women to leave.

Maleka describes the escalation of physical violence that led her to re-evaluate the status of her relationship.

I was telling you things started slowly building up and up. Up to a stage where he started drinking a lot. He..he was not only pushing me around anymore, he was like punching me with his fists and choking me. Especially the choking....but he used to say, "I am going to kill you"

(Maleka: pp. 6)

In the above narratives, Beryl, Altoise, and Maleka discuss how specific turning points in the relationship led to a shift in awareness and an increased insight into the abusive situation.

Research with women who have left abusive relationships has identified a turning point in which a specific incident of serious violence or an escalation of violence changed a woman's perception of the relationship and thus influenced her decision to leave (Campbell, 1998; Patzel, 2001).

Here the women realised the danger and the life threatening nature of the violence with regards

to their own safety. They often described this as 'the last straw' that acts as a catalyst for leaving. Along a similar vein, in a study of women residing in a shelter in Canada, Tuffy et al. (1999) identified that a women's fear of being killed was described as being a significant reason why women decided to seek out emergency shelter.

In her study Kelly (1990) also found taking the violence seriously was a factor that prompted women to leave abusive relationships. When women begin to realise the serious danger that exists it means that there has been a shift away from minimising the abuse. Minimising the abuse is a common strategy that involves women limiting the importance and impact of violent incidents (Kelly, 1990). This has been interpreted as an adaptive strategy as it helps the women to deal emotionally with the fact that her loved one is hurting and violating her. It does however hinder the women from recognising the reality of the dangerousness of her situation. When women move away from minimising the abuse they can begin to realistically assess the potential danger of their situation.

Shaida speaks about how being at the shelter meant that she could listen and learn from other women's stories. This helped to her to recognise the seriousness of abuse in general and the fact that it could result in fatal consequences.

One of these ladies she left then she came in while I was still here in the shelter actually. I felt heartsore for her because the way she came in and when she told me her husband was also on tik and what he did to her. He actually wanted to take her life. And that made me..made my mind up men won't change, especially when they on tik.

(Shaida: pp. 12)

Her narrative also indicates how the realisation of the danger of abuse involved a move away from minimising abuse. A common form of minimisation is to blame the abuse on drugs or alcohol. This sets up a situation in which the woman does not see her abuser as the dangerous

entity. He is seen as a 'good guy' who only engages in violent behaviour because the drugs make him do it. Drugs blur the picture and might cause the woman to question her decision of leaving. This is due to the fact that drugs are often constructed as the problem at an expense of a realistic assessment of the seriousness of the abuse at hand. In the above narrative Shaida begins to realistically assess the potential danger of the situation. She now becomes aware that women cannot wait around for men to change as there might be serious consequences. This realisation that occurs via exposure to the other woman's story helps to reinforce Shaida's decision to leave the abusive relationship.

The women in this study often describe a concern for their children as being a significant reason for their decisions to leave the abusive relationships. Mercia reflects back to the severe physical and sexual abuse that her young daughter was exposed to at the hands of her partner<sup>8</sup>.

He put a towel..just wrapped a towel around a fork and (put it) down her throat to choke her and he used his fingers up in her private part.

(Mercia: pp. 6)

Here Mercia describes that the turning point in her decision to leave was an incident when she found her child had been severely sexually abused. Later on in Mercia's narrative she also describes how she became aware that the abuse of her daughter had been going on for years behind her back.

(I left) when I asked him did he abuse my daughter because I came onto the scene where she was bleeding. And he stood there lying in my face and he say (said) it wasn't him. But she was full of blood. So I just turned around. I left the house and I never looked back.

(Mercia: pp. 5)

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<sup>8</sup> This man was not the child's biological father but had been married to her mother for six years.

This specific incident helped Mercia to realize the danger that her daughter was in. This realisation of danger could threaten the woman's identity of being a mother. Mercia's narrative portrays the pain and contradiction between her identity as a mother and the fact that she had not prevented her daughter from being hurt in such a way. As a mother she needs to protect her children and do what is best for them. It is this contradiction that led to Mercia leaving and 'not looking back'. A return to the abusive relationship would threaten her identity of protective mother as she is placing her child in a dangerous environment. Thus, the realisation of danger and the act of reflecting back on the danger could play a significant role in keeping women from going back to their abusers once they have left.

Other women describe a concern about more indirect effects that the abuse has on the children. Noleen describes how a realisation of the potential impact that the abuse could have on her children provided an impetus for her to leave.

And the main reason why I left I didn't want my children to think that is the way to treat a woman. Because they are boys, tomorrow they also going to treat somebody like that.

(Noleen: pp. 9)

Here Noleen draws on social learning discourses in her construction of the dangers that the abuse poses to her children. These discourses posit that the children's exposure to violence in the home could lead to the children learning these kinds of behaviours and thus perpetuating violence against women in their adult life. Noleen describes her concern that her sons' exposure to abuse might normalize the abuse in their eyes and they might perpetuate abuse against women when they are older. Thus her decision to leave can be interpreted as an active effort to thwart this intergenerational transmission of abuse.

The group sessions in the shelter also helped the women to begin to recognise the harmful effects that the abuse had on their children. Catherine describes how, by listening to other women's

stories, she became more aware of how the exposure to abuse can shape the rest of her child's life.

We had a group session on Valentines Day and the women spoke about how their kids..one women said for eight years she didn't realise it but he (the abuser) was abusing her kids. And um that many times even if he doesn't abuse the kids, he's fighting with you and arguing with you in front of the children and that's how they learn to treat people. And uh I'm looking at my own past and just seeing the patterns, the cycles that happen. I realise that it (was) not just for me to leave but also the child. It's important to get him out of that environment.

(Catherine: pp. 4)

Here Catherine engages in an evaluation of her decision to leave that involves a retrospective looking back at her past experiences in the abusive relationship. She describes how the stories of other women in the shelter groups made her more aware of the negative effects that the abuse can have either directly or indirectly on the children. After hearing this story she applies it to her own life as she analyses her experiences of abuse. She can now better identify the harm that the abuse poses to her child. Thus, the exposure to social learning discourses that the shelter has provided has helped Catherine realise how her own abuse can affect her child. This realisation has helped strengthen and validate Catherine's decision to leave. She constructs the decision of leaving as being part of her responsibility as a mother to get her child 'out of that environment'. Thus, the act of leaving has helped Catherine to feel as if she is fulfilling her duty as a mother and protector of her child.

The naming and recognition of the effects that the abuse had on the children could cause conflict in the women's identity of being a mother. On the one hand she is positioned as being responsible for keeping the family intact. Many women may internalize the deeply entrenched societal attitudes that it is the woman's role to keep family ties intact and that children need both parents. This might make the women stay in the relationship but as she becomes more aware of the children's safety being compromised, she may feel pressure and responsibility to protect her

children. These two facets, or pulls, might create contradictions in the woman's sense of duty as a mother in the abusive situation.

Research has identified that the initial phase of disengaging from an abusive relationship consists of the woman recognising the impact that the abuse has on her children (Kirkwood, 1993; Taylor, 2002). Taylor calls this the defining moment in which the woman sees what the abuse is doing to her children and on this basis decides to leave. The women often experience conflicting and ambivalent feelings about their decision to leave the abuser. The realisation of the full impact that the abuse has on their children could help to resolve this ambivalence. By focusing on the harm that the abuse has had on their children, the women can now feel assured that they have made the safest choice in leaving.

Along a similar vein, in their studies Campbell et al. (1998) and Patzel (2001) have found that a focus on the effects that the abuse was having on the children changed the way in which the women viewed their relationship. The increased awareness might cause the women to look at the relationship in a more negative way. In the current study the education that the shelter provided about the effects of the abuse on children acted as a power agent to reinforce the women's decision to leave as well as to strengthen her resolve to stay away from the abuser.

### *Identifying the power dynamics of the relationship*

The narratives of the women in this study show that a crucial component of the process of 'looking back' involved the women identifying and describing the power dynamics of their relationship with the abuser. Often women focused on the unequal power dynamics to justify the fact that they had stayed with the abuser for so long (constructions of the helpless victim). The focus on the unequal relations of power also served to bring into awareness the negative impact that the abuse had on the women's sense of self. Here the women's narratives showed the contradictions that they experienced between their sense of self and the impact that their

experiences of abuse had on their selves. These contradictions in self were reflected upon and used to justify women's decisions to leave.

Beryl identified the power dynamics of her situation to explain why she had remained in the abusive relationship for so long. She also situates these imbalances of power within the broader context of relations between men and women in general.

You know what Samantha, sometimes abuse happens. You don't want to be with that partner but you so..they force you into that relationship. Sometimes you scared. Sometimes where people lay the..like we women haven't got the power to uh against the man. We feel powerless because everything they say is just the right thing.

(Beryl: pp. 9)

In her narrative Beryl speaks on a collective level constructing women in general as powerless in relation to men. She uses the word 'force' to construct the overpowering control that men have over women. She also describes women as being scared and thus passive and immobile in response to the actions of men. She draws on social discourses that construct men as the powerful agent and women as their victims. The end of Beryl's narrative does however highlight that these social conceptions of powerful men make a woman 'feel' powerless and thus she is indicating that women are not inherently powerless by nature but are made to feel as if they have no power due to discourses that generate notions of the all powerful male.

Jolynn also draws on social discourses of the weak, passive woman in her construction of herself as victim. This construction is however not clear cut as she constructs this submissiveness as being a role in a game. Submissiveness is thus constructed as a rational response to abuse and not an inherent part of her own nature. Jolynn identifies the unequal power dynamics of the relationship in which the abuser controls who she is. She also constructs the specific agency that she has in this relation of power. This 'game' that she is playing may serve to benefit Jolynn as she may be able to manipulate the situation to better serve her own needs (for example complying with the abuser and thus reducing the severity of violence).

Because a man...the way they abuse you it makes you scared. You get weak. You turn up to do everything that they want you to do. You get to be also everything that they want you to be. It's like a role you playing now. It's like..like a game you playing for them now.

(Jolynn: pp. 20)

Kim constructs the effects of living with the abuser as a loss of self in which she had no personal motives and values left.

It was just that you know when you live with someone you tend to lose all your values, what you live for. You just become whatever. You just go with the flow as they put it. I'd just do what he'd want me to do

(Kim: pp. 4)

Kim draws on dominant discourses of femininity in her construction of herself in the abusive relationship as passive and submissive. In this excerpt Kim constructs herself as an object and pure victim with no autonomy or power. She constructs herself as having a lack of personal autonomy and agency as she would just 'go with the flow'. Thus, she constructs a self that does not have the capacity to make her own choices in life. Here the abuser's power and control over her is highlighted by her statement that she would do whatever he wanted her to do. She justifies that it is the loss of her own values that resulted in her static position in the abusive relationship. Thus, in the state of having no values of her own, she constructs herself as having an inability to make reasoned choices about her life and her current circumstances.

A common theme among the women's narratives of their abusive relationships was the deeply embedded feelings of being 'crazy' or insane' that occurred as a result of the abusive experiences. Often it was the abuser who constructed the woman as being abnormal. Altoise describes how her abuser made her question her own sanity.

He started telling me also that I was not lekker in here (pointing to her head) and that's what was making me more hard inside....You know like I was so like I had put this thing away and then I don't know where I put it. You know so..my mind was so confused. So he said to me "You are not lekker here" (in the head) and so I feel yes, I am not lekker here. I am crazy. You know? I start believing that I am crazy.

(Altoise: pp. 9)

The above extract illustrates how the male abusers perpetuated the discourses of insanity. They positioned the women as being a 'crazy' entity with an inferior level of judgement. This gave the abuser more power as his perception of the situation was positioned as the dominant reality. This is especially significant when considering the isolation that many abused women experience in this kind of relationship. She has no outside resources with which she could gain a different, more realistic perspective about her circumstances. Thus, she often does begin to view herself as being mad and as being the one that is to blame as she 'deserves this kind of treatment'.

As the woman loses a sense of their own stable reality and the value of their perceptions, it becomes difficult for her to realise what exactly is going on in the abusive relationship. Instead of questioning the abuse she comes to accept the situation as she now perceives herself as being in the position of someone who cannot adequately judge what is going on. Also, her status of being 'mad' might make her believe that she is to blame for the abuse and if she leaves the abuser she will not be able to function in a normal world. Altoise constructs her 'self' in the abusive relationship as one that is confused and ambivalent and that cannot adequately judge the reality of her situation as her subjective experience is warped. In this way she is justifying the fact that she stayed in the abusive relationship for so long.

The women also focused specifically on the detrimental effects that the abuse had on their sense of self. Fatima looks back to her abusive relationship and identifies the lack of power and agency that was an ever-present part of her life.

When I was there (in the abuse) I used to feel like a small..like a small child.  
There you can't do things for yourself. You got no time for yourself. If you..if I  
bath now I do my hair just say (my daughter) come blow my hair, woah then it's a  
big thing. If I want to put makeup on woah it's a big thing.  
(Fatima: pp. 22)

She describes her sense of herself as being child-like in the abusive relationship where she could not do things for herself and was always dependent on the permission or the approval of the abuser. Fatima had experienced more than 30 years of emotional abuse from her husband by the time she arrived at the shelter. The ever-present shame and degradation that she felt as a result of her abuser's constant accusations can be seen by Fatima's construction of herself as a child who feels that she is not capable of making the correct decisions about herself in the world. Ultimately, her narrative shows how her partner restricted her of engaging in everyday activities and inhibited her from having the power to form her own sense of self and identity in the world as a woman (by wearing makeup, for example).

The identification of the unequal balances of power in the relationship included a focus on the way in which these feelings of powerlessness affected the women's lives. An exploration of the negative effects that the abuse had on their sense of self helped to validate the women's decisions of leaving as well as 'putting abuse in it's rightful place' (West & Meritt-Gray, 1995) by situating the abuse in the past and beginning to focus on the negative effects that the abuse had on their sense of self.

It's like nobody took any notice of me and it's like my life is going down as I also realised that life is passing me by because I didn't have a life. I was sitting in the house and being a maid and a doorman to him. A maid to everybody and to him and a doorman to him. So it's like..it's like you..you are a piece of nothing.  
(Lillian: pp. 3)

Lillian looks back to her abusive relationship and she constructs herself in the relationship as being worthless and devoid of identity. Her sense of self in the abusive relationship existed

merely in relation to the needs of others. Lillian's realization that 'life is passing me by' signals the beginnings of questioning her life in the abusive relationship as being something that is obstructing her from living her own life. Thus, Lillian's narrative of self in the past abusive relationship constructs a self that is in contradiction between the life that she is living (I didn't have a life) and the life that she wants to live (being her own person).

The contradictions in Lillian's sense of self were heightened when she focused on the specific negative effects of depression that were a result of the abuse. She talks about how her symptoms of depression helped her to identify the abuse and unequal power relations in her life that contributed to her low self-esteem.

(I) didn't realise that I was being abused by him until I started to have effects of depression and you know getting at the point where my self esteem was so low um..it looked even to everybody that I looked stupid. I looked like I had no confidence. Um..it's like my brains were closed up in a box.

(Lillian: p. 6)

Her narrative shows a contradiction between her perception of how others see her as a person and how she knows herself to be. She draws on psychological discourse of depression in her construction of herself as an abused woman. She highlights the effects that the abuse had on her self confidence that led to her 'looking stupid' in front of others. She highlights how 'it looked' as if she was stupid and 'it looked' as if she had no confidence. Thus, she sets up the disparity of how others saw her due to the effects of the abuse and the fact that she does not see herself as being either stupid or lacking in confidence. Lillian's view of herself is of a woman who is clever but the influence that the abuse had over her behaviour meant that her 'brains were closed up in a box'. Thus, there is a contradiction between her sense of herself as a person and her sense of how others perceive her as 'abused woman'.

By naming and identifying the unequal power dynamics of the abusive relationship, some women were able to take on the identity of 'abused woman'. This identity was often in contradiction with the other identities that the women took on in their lives. For instance,

Rochelle describes how the identity of 'abused woman' did not fit with the other identities that she took on in her life.

I also felt embarrassed and disgusted on the other hand to know that I was the one going through an abusive um...marriage. I was embarrassed to talk about it to anybody. Uh I felt like it...why I was embarrassed...to me it was people look at you and say you the independent type. You quiet, you do things by the book. And then you are faced with something of this nature and you know. So that for me was an embarrassment.

(Rochelle: pp. 8)

Here Rochelle's narrative highlights how her self is in contradiction. She constructs her self as being shamed. This shame is an echo of mainstream discourses of the abused woman being deficient or 'having something wrong with them'. She draws on dominant social discourses of abused women to understand her situation. Social stigmas construct abused women as being weak, passive and ultimately pathological (Kirkwood, 1993). In many instances these qualities are used as fuel for arguments that concern themselves with how women somehow 'cause' the abuse. Societal conceptions of abused women have run along the similar vein to that of previous academic work that have viewed abused women as being both passive and weak. Stereotypes of abused women describe women who are poor, downtrodden and 'deserving' of the abuse (Kelly, 1990). This is an especially prominent concern for someone like Rochelle who constructs her self as an assertive go-getter. In her narrative she describes the marked contrast between her status as an 'independent type' and the embarrassment and shame that she feels regarding the fact that she is in an abusive marriage. Ultimately, Rochelle describes how her identity of being a 'weak and deficient abused woman' does not fit with her identity of being a capable strong woman.

The narratives suggest that these contradictions in self led to many of the women questioning their powerlessness. For instance, Shaida's narrative below illustrates how she continually questioned this sense of self as nothing when she was in the abusive relationship.

Because my husband just did what he wants to and it made me feel like I'm a nothing. And I..I'm like it made me feel like a nothing but I said..always said to myself, 'You are somebody. Don't feel that way and say you are nothing. You can still be something'.

(Shaída:pp. 11)

Shaída constantly challenged the feelings of worthlessness that she felt in the abusive relationship. She resists positioning herself as worthless, passive object as she engages in a form of self talk that encourages and reminds herself that she is a person in her own right. Here Shaída constructs an alternative sense of self ('you are somebody') that gives her a sense of power in her situation. These findings run in concurrence with Hydén's (1999) notion of small acts of resistance in which the women engage in multiple acts of resistance that are often invisible to the abuser but that serve to instil a greater sense of power and dignity in the abused woman.

Noleen identified inherent contradictions between marital values and the mistreatment that she experienced at the hands of her husband. Her narrative suggests that she felt like a slave who had to serve his needs. Here she is questioning these contradictions.

What do they take you for? I'm mos a piece of dirt of an old shoe or something.  
That's not what he promised me when we got married. That's not what you promise the Lord when you get married.

(Noleen, pp. 8)

Noleen's narrative illustrates how she draws on discourses of the model marriage that connote love and protection and religious discourses of marriage that highlights faith and honour to highlight the contradictions in her marriage. Her husband's abusive behaviour does not fit with the ideology that these discourses instil. Men and women enter the relationship of marriage with socially created expectations and obligations. One of the promises made to the woman is that she will be protected and provided for in a relationship of trust (Machonachie et al., 1993).

A woman's partner is supposed to be her most natural source of protection yet in cases of wife abuse he becomes the threat. This is a paradox that causes a great deal of conflict of meanings in the abused woman's life (Machonachie et al., (1993). Instead of love, protection and trust, Noleen's partner is violating and hurting her. Noleen's identity of being an 'abused woman' does not fit with her identity of 'wife' as it is constructed by religious and social discourses of marriage. Thus, the meaning that Noleen makes of the violence is that it is irrational and abnormal with regards to the fact that it goes against the promises and ideals that come with 'being married'.

Romantic relationships are often desired and sought after by many women because of the perceived rewards and satisfaction that these relationships will supposedly bring (Power et al., 2006). When a woman's position of wife is more harmful to her sense of self than beneficial, contradictions begin to emerge in the women's understanding of her situation. In her study Profitt (2001) also found that when conflicts and contradictions in the meaning of experience become intense, many women begin to challenge what they had taken for granted as 'common sense' about the normality of abuse (abuse is a normal part of relationships) and they can begin to develop new understandings.

In summary, the women engaged in a reflective process of 'looking back' to their abusive relationship. This involved an examination of the turning points in the relationship that acted as an impetus to leave. The women also evaluated their own decisions regarding the abusive relationship. Lastly, the women identified and described the unequal power dynamics of the relationship. An examination of the dynamics of power provided the women with a means to reflect on why they stayed in the abusive relationship. Also, by naming and describing the unequal power dynamics of the abusive relationships the women were able to construct a sense of the impact that the abuse had on their sense of self. Many of these women constructed a 'self' in the abusive relationship that was passive, worthless, confused, 'mad' and ambiguous. These 'selves' contrasted sharply with the way that they knew themselves to be. The women's narratives also show that the women experienced many contradictions of self in the abusive relationship. It was these contradictions that stand as sites of resistance as the women

acknowledge that what is happening is not what they want to happen (Hydén, 1999). These narratives of 'looking back' also showed that by identifying negative aspects of the relationship and by assessing the relationship realistically from a safe vantage point the women were able to justify and reinforce their decisions of leaving. The following two chapters will explore the women's narratives of self in the present shelter environment and their constructions of a self in the future. The narratives in these chapters suggest that the women's construction of self moves through a kind of transition as they move from constructions of self as 'vulnerable victim' towards constructions of a more powerful, active self.

## **CHAPTER 6: THE PRESENT: LEAVING AND THE SHELTER ENVIRONMENT- 'SELVES IN TRANSITION'**

The discussion of the women's reflections of their current circumstances is organised according to the following sub-themes: post-separation abuse, a shift in power, and the women's development of a 'critical self'.

### **Post-separation abuse**

#### *Post-separation abuse at the shelter*

Research has shown that women experience many difficulties once they have physically exited an abusive relationship. Dangor, Alderton, and Taylor (2000) describe the departure from an abusive relationship as 'a crisis' for the abused woman. A common theme in the women's narratives in the current study was the women's experiences of continued abuse and manipulation after they had physically left the abuser. The narratives suggest that the continuation of abuse, or the potential for further abuse, impacts negatively on the woman's post-separation life and functioning. In their narratives the women constructed themselves as vulnerable victims who are exposed to further abuse. There is, however, also evidence in the narratives that by identifying certain aspects of this abuse, the women generated the potential to engage in strategies that would minimize or prevent these types of abuse from occurring.

Lillian describes that the fact that the children were staying with the abuser meant that he had greater levels of power and control over her. She succinctly constructs her post-separation life as being overshadowed by the victimization that was part of her abusive relationship.

(The children) they are not staying with me. They are staying with him. So you know even for this time and if he bring the children wherever I stayed I found that he was still abusing me and I didn't..I didn't know why certain things has been happening to me. I mean I'm not living with this man anymore but it's like the ghost of the life I had. It..it's it's following me.

(Lillian: p. 7)

This excerpt highlights the complexity of the power dynamics of this post-separation relationship. Lillian constructs the abuser as still having a significant level of power over her. She discusses a continuation of the feelings of victimisation that were experienced when she was in the abusive relationship as 'the ghost of the life I had'. Firstly, she most likely has had to give up her children as she did not have the economic resources to support them. It is likely that he refused to give her maintenance money. He has got custody of the children and can now use them to both punish and control the woman. For instance, he is assured to know exactly where she is staying, as he has to come and drop the children when they visit her. He is also in control of the nature and the duration of the visits. He is in control of her overall sense of identity as a mother as her relationship with her children is set by his terms and conditions. This kind of control reflects an extension of the abusive control she experienced when she was still in a relationship with the man. Thus, Lillian's narrative highlights the complex nature of leaving. Leaving the abuser does not automatically disconnect her from his sphere of power. Lillian constructs herself as being re-victimised in different ways now that she has left.

These findings are consistent with those of Humphreys and Thiara (2003) who found that the child contact arrangements meant that the women were more vulnerable to post-separation violence. Also, this undermined the woman's relocation as a safe strategy as the abuser was constantly informed of the location to which the women moved. In the above excerpt Lillian speaks about the fact that the physical separation from the abuser has not ended the abuse. She speaks about the 'ghost of the life I had' as the effects of her past abuse continue to haunt her. These effects are ever-present in her life. The continued exposure to the abuser (brought about when he brings the children to see her) as well as his knowledge of her current life and whereabouts sets up the potential for him to carry on exerting control over her life.

Catherine explains that her abuser tried to manipulate her back into the relationship by using his own interpretations of scriptures in the bible.

Um he started saying..he tried to convince me that we need to see each other to agree on an appropriate time that we should be away..and he just got so..he twisted scriptures in the bible and he tried to get me to (agree).

(Catherine: pp. 9)

The misinterpretation of scriptures in the bible has been found to be a common theme among women in abusive relationships (Senter & Cadwell, 2002). These scriptures are often used as tools to encourage family maintenance as well as the women's unconditional respect and obedience to their husbands. Here Catherine identifies what the abuser is doing and thus gains a significant level of power to maintain her decision of leaving. By identifying the abuser's behaviour as attempts for further manipulation and control, Catherine can begin to work with this knowledge and develop strategies to counteract, or limit, his attempts.

Much research has highlighted that violence often escalates at the time when a woman leaves her abuser (Boonzaier, 2001; Campbell, 1998; Kimmel, 2008). For example, Hydén (1994) has identified that the act of divorce in itself can be a preceding factor for further physical abuse. In a similar vein, McLeod (1987) argues that ex-husbands and ex-lovers need to be included in the definition of wife battering. This kind of post-separation violence can be seen as an ongoing part of the abusers' efforts to control the lives of the women and children (Humphreys & Thiara, 2003). Post-separation violence is especially significant in the lives of women who have low levels of social support and advocacy (Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). Women in this situation do not have foundations of support that they can turn to in times of crisis.

### *The potential for abuse post-separation*

A significant concern in the women's narratives was the potential for further abuse at the hands of their partners. These concerns often stemmed from the women's acute awareness of the potential for further control that existed.

Um..what makes me feel scared?...mmm..sometimes I feel intimidated by him.

That is scary because I'm afraid that he will manipulate me (back into the situation).

(Rochelle: pp. 19)

Rochelle describes herself as fearful victim as she identifies the abuser's potential to manipulate her back into the situation. Identifying this potential involves an analysis of the abuser's continued power over her. She constructs herself as being 'intimidated' and overwhelmed by her sense of his power. This evaluation of the dynamics of the post-separation relationship with the abuser could be an extension of looking back and identifying the power dynamics of the abusive relationship which now extend into the post-separation sphere.

Catherine identifies aspects of her abuser's ways of behaving in her constructions of her fear of physically coming face to face with him. She also describes her abuser's patriarchal ways of thinking as she acknowledges that he would not accept that the abuse was a legitimate reason for her to have left the abusive relationship.

The one thing um I knew that he would not accept it like he wouldn't realise that it's because of him that I left. So I was afraid to speak to him or go and drop the baby off for him to see him. I'd get someone else to take (the baby) to him because he's so argumentative and manipulative to try and persuade me to come back.

(Catherine: pp. 3)

Catherine constructs herself as potential victim as she identifies the potential for manipulation and control by her partner. Here she constructs herself as fearful of further contact with the abuser. An interesting aspect of her statement is her own agency in the situation which is reflected in her description of strategies to avoid the abuser. She arranges for other people to go and take the baby to see his father. This can be seen as a strategy of resisting the potential for further abuse as she is actively working to maintain physical boundaries between herself and the abuser. These boundaries can serve to limit the occurrence of further manipulation and control from her abuser.

Evident in the women's narratives was sensitivity to the potential for the experience of further abuse not only at the hands of the abuser but also by other men in society. Here the women constructed themselves as being vulnerable victims as they went out into the world alone. Lillian constructs herself in this way as she describes her perception of how others in the world will treat her because of her 'abused woman status'.

And at the end of the day I had experience that everywhere I went it's like people can smell the life you had been through. And you know that..that is very hard to..to handle also because how does people know about these things? Why are they treating me in such a way? You know. And now you find yourself going through that same abuse all over again.

(Lillian: p. 14)

Here Lillian constructs her own sense of worthlessness and vulnerability as a woman in the world. Her narrative is indicative of how her feelings of instinctual vulnerability and emotional insecurity may be part of the woman's identity in her post-separation life. The language that she uses is particularly significant, 'people can smell' signifies something dirty, tainted, and stigmatized. Basically she constructs a self that is stigmatized as an 'abused woman' and she describes how this vulnerability affects her sense of self in the world. She constructs herself as a vulnerable victim who is continually under threat because of her 'abused' status.

Farzana's narrative highlights the way in which her gendered identity of being a woman combined with her low socio-economic status in society shaped her construction of self as being worthless and co-dependant. Patriarchal discourses position women as receiving their status and value through a relationship with a man. Farzana draws on these discourses as she constructs a single self that is inferior in the world. These discourses have shaped her construction of her 'vulnerable self' that is at risk of further abuse and maltreatment at the hands of others.

Who is going to look after you when you pregnant? You know how the world is difficult outside there. Jo, if you don't work, if you pregnant.....people treat you like dirt. You know what I'm saying? And I'd rather prefer to ..if I was his dirt than other people's dirt.

(Farzana: p. 3)

Here Farzana discusses her sense of the difficulty and the dangers of going out into the world by herself. Farzana's construction of self is reflective of the limited options of alternative, more positive identities for women of her socio-economic position in South Africa. Her low socio-economic position is compounded by the fact that she does not work. She describes herself as being other people's 'dirt' and thus uses language that connotes a sense of worthlessness and being unclean and tainted. She also constructs herself as being inferior in relation to other people. She constructs her perception of how other will see her if she goes out into the world by herself; poor and pregnant. A prominent concern is the perceived stigma that others will hold against her as she is pregnant but does not have a husband. Here Farzana's narrative reflects a sensitivity to broader societal ideology of marriage and the family and the fact that a woman gains her value via the union with a man. This excerpt highlights her perception that she is nothing as she stands pregnant and without a husband. Farzana's meaning that she constructs about being alone in the world is shaped by broader hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity. Cultural scripts map out the roles of heterosexual partnership and depict women as being worthless if they do not have a male partner (Boonzaier, 2001). The challenges to leaving become illuminated when one looks at the social stigma attached to an unmarried woman with children. Social stigmas depict poor women as being 'loose', 'dirty', promiscuous women who are not in control of their lives.

In the excerpt above Farzana constructs her specific reason why she remained with the abuser for such a long period of time. She highlights that she has the potential to be treated like dirt by others in society because of her inferior status economically and as a woman. She says that she will then rather stay with the abuser and be his dirt instead of other people's dirt. Here she will rather be treated like dirt by her husband whose behaviour she can more or less predict. She constructs her vulnerability in the outside world as being much more dangerous. Without her partner's financial support she might land up on the street with nowhere to go. This would expose herself to further violence at the hand of strangers. This ironic sense of 'safety' that the woman constructs with regards to her relationship with her abuser may act as a constant reinforcer to pull the woman back to her partner. Ultimately, she constructs herself as being extremely vulnerable going out into the world alone as a poor, coloured woman.

These findings are consistent with research that has shown that women who are currently in violent marriages are more afraid of sexual assault outside the home (Russell, 1982, as cited in Stanko, 1990). They fear the unknown as opposed to the predictable. For example, they fear the unknown aspects of a life without marriage. They do not feel that they will be safe if they are out of the confines of marriage. These women also spoke about a kind of ingrained vulnerability that remained with them for a long period of time after they had left the abuser (Stanko, 1990).

There are many challenges that women have to deal with because of their position of being a woman in society and, more specifically, the South African context. In this country women are constantly under the threat of being potential victims of a violent act. Violence against women is a pervasive aspect of South African society. The mere threat of violence is a prevailing form of social control over women (Artz, 1999). The women's constructions of a vulnerable self suggest that they are acutely aware of their status as women in society. Mainstream discourses of marriage perpetuate the ideology that women become even more vulnerable in the world when they are partner less. These discourses stem from patriarchal values of a society that objectifies women and portray social messages that women are men's property.

Ultimately, the act of leaving is an overt fracturing of the abuser's sphere of dominance (Farrell, 1996; Mills, 1985; Taylor, 2002 ; Wuest & Merritt- Gray, 2001;) and this will threaten the

abuser's sense of power. The act of leaving and going out to succeed in the world by herself can be seen as a reversal of traditional gender roles that women are submissive and should be confined to domestic duties. It is when these gender roles are under specific threat that the man engages in more power to reassert his right over the woman (Fedler & Tanzer, 2000). When considered in light of the context of poverty and deprivation in which these men live, it is possible that the power that they exert over their female partners is one of the only spheres of their lives that they hold a large amount of power. In essence, "Women become the victims of the symbolic reassertion of male power" (Simpson, 1992: 13, as cited in Vetten, 2000).

In sum, the narratives show how the women have constructed themselves as vulnerable victims as they go out into the world in their post-separation life. These constructions of the vulnerable 'self' extend beyond the relationship with the abuser to other men in society to which the women are also vulnerable to abuse. These constructions of the 'vulnerable victim' are largely maintained by the women's sensitivity to the power imbalances of their relationship and the power imbalances between men and women in general. The next section will examine the way in which the women's constructions of self and partner begin to change. These changing constructions signify a general shift in power in which the women begin to construct themselves in a more powerful way.

### **A shift in power: shifting constructions of self and partner**

Evident in the women's narratives was a shift in the way in which the women constructed their self and their abusers. Firstly, there was a general shift in the women's constructions of their abusers. This entailed the women constructing their partners in a more negative light as an inferior entity. The women's narratives suggest that these shifts in constructions served to give the women an increased sense of power in relation to her abuser. The women also describe a shift in their constructions of self. This shift involved an increase in focusing on positive aspects of self that helped the women to position themselves in a more powerful way. Ultimately, these

shifts in constructions of self and partner, what I have called 'a shift in power', suggest shifting subjectivities of the women towards subjectivities that encompass a greater sense of power over their life and their current circumstances.

*Shift in constructions of partner: 'He's just not all there'*

The narratives show that the women experienced a shift in their constructions of their abusive partners. These shifts in constructions suggest a shift in the way in which the women perceived their abusers. They moved away from constructions of the powerful male toward constructions of the abuser as 'sick' that pathologised the abuser and rendered him less powerful in the women's eyes. Ultimately, the women constructed the abuser as being more inferior, pathological and disturbed.

I was willing to work at it but when I started realising that he's just not all there.

Like he's not..he's not a rational person. I just started to see through him.

(Catherine: pp. 2)

Here Catherine discusses how she gained a particular insight about the abuser. This realisation about the irrational nature of the abuser led to her decision that she should leave. She realised that she will not be able to make him change or better the situation. Catherine's construction of the abuser as being irrational has helped her to shift the responsibility of the abusive relationship from herself 'I was willing to work at it' to the abuser 'He's just not all there'. Thus, she was able to shift away from the self blame that often occurs among women in abusive situations. Her analysis and insight into her partner's behaviour gives her a sense of power over her choice to leave the abusive situation. By constructing her abuser in this way she also justifies her decision to leave.

These shifting constructions of partner often stemmed from the women beginning to challenge the abuser's perception as being the reality of the situation. Farzana, for instance, challenged her abuser's accusations that she was 'mad'.

He (He says), “you mad man, I don’t abuse you. You mad”. Then I say, “Mad, the person who’s mad are (is) you. You the one who should be in Valkenberg because the way you treated me it was like dirt.

(Farzana; p. 13)

Here Farzana challenges both her husband’s denial of the abuse as well as his constructions of her as being mad. She highlights that his abusive behaviour is abnormal as no human being should treat another as dirt. Often abuse is normalised as being part of the everyday life of an intimate heterosexual relationship. In this situation women have no power to begin to question the abuse and to justify their decisions to leave the relationship. Farzana challenges the ‘normality’ of abusive conduct. She constructs the abuser as being mad and belonging in a psychiatric hospital. Farzana draws on psychological discourses to position the abuser as pathological. This construction gave her a greater sense of power over the situation. By constructing the abuser and the abuse as abnormal, Farzana gained an impetus to leave. Thus, this shift in perception of partner is a crucial part in the process of disengaging.

***Shift in perception of partner’s omnipotence: ‘I actually pity him’***

Another trend evident in the women’s narratives was a shift in their constructions of the abuser’s power and omnipotence. A decreased sense of the man’s power often led to a decrease in the fear that the women felt for their abuser. The women describe how their feelings of fear have changed over time to become feelings of pity for the abuser.

But now I’m like um if I should see him, I won’t be scared of him. That’s how I feel now. And um I actually pity him.

(Lillian: pp. 15)

Lillian describes how her feelings of fear toward the abuser have dissolved to become feelings of pity. In this way she constructs the abuser as being less powerful. She constructs him as inferior and more unfortunate in relation to herself and thus being deserving of pity. Here Lillian

positions herself in a more powerful way in relation to her abuser. Her sense of power in her situation has shifted and she no longer sees the abuser as being the all powerful agent.

Noleen highlights the wrongs of her abuser's current lifestyle. She describes him as 'dirty' and 'unwashed' and constructs an image of the abuser as a streetperson. This recognition of her partner's self destructive behaviour serves to instigate the shift in feelings that she has toward him. Instead of fear she now feels sorry for him.

I still do feel something for him but it's not the same. I still do...I was now feeling sorry for him cause he looked so terrible about a month ago. He was dirty, unwashed and (had) broken clothes. He was drinking....

(Noleen: pp. 16)

By constructing her abuser in this negative light, Noleen positions herself as better off and in a more powerful social position in relation to her husband. Now that she is at the shelter she is physically away from her abuser. She can move on with her life and begin to claim more positive identities for herself. When she looks at the abuser from this new vantage point she becomes acutely aware of his personal shortcomings. She no longer perceives him as omnipotent and can accurately assess his social position. It is in this way that the abuser becomes stripped of power in her eyes.

The initial stage of this shift in constructions often involved the exploration of feelings of anger or hatred towards the abuser. Jolynn discusses that the social support that she received at the shelter helped her to deal with her feelings of anger and replace these feelings with those of pity towards the abuser.

There were times when I hated him. When I came here (to the shelter) I hated him. When I looked back to what he did to me I really hated him. You know I wished he were dead. But the support I got here and the friends I have here now...I really actually pity him and um and I think I'm a much stronger person now than I was a year ago when I came here.

(Jolynn: pp. 18)

In the above extract Jolynn discusses that, through the support that she gained at the shelter, her negative feelings of anger shifted towards feelings of pity for the abuser. She also reflects on how these shifts in feelings have helped her gain a greater sense of power in her position. She constructs herself as a more powerful person than she was when she first came to the shelter. This shift in perception of partner is a significant step for the woman to move away emotionally. The shift away from the fear is crucial as it suggests that she is breaking away from the hold of the abuser's control. Thus, she can gain a more complete sense of her own agency and ability.

*Shift in constructions of self: 'I am a conqueror'*

The women's narratives also show a shift in their constructions of self. This shift suggests that the women begin to perceive themselves in a more positive way as they became more aware of their abilities, strengths, and ultimately their own power as a human being.

He was actually the one that was so insecure when it comes to me because I think he..he knows cause it's not just he (him). It's a lot of people that could see that there is a lot about me um..that is good and I have a lot of potential and I'm not a stupid person. And you know it's like there's a lot about me that people can even come to me and you know and really pour out their things. And I can really give them advice.

(Lillian: p. 10)

Lillian reflects back on her abusive relationship and constructs herself as being a stronger person than her abuser who was 'insecure'. Lillian constructs herself as a strong, capable figure that

others can come to for advice. This focus on the positive aspects of her self serves to position Lillian in a more powerful way in relation to her abuser. She also shows certain awareness that her partner was threatened because he was not such a stable figure in life as she is.

Later on in her narrative Lillian also focused on her strengths and abilities in her changing construction of self in community.

And whoever knew about anything of my life in my surrounding areas where I was, I would...it didn't bother me because at the end of the day I would look at them and I would do this vision of thought. "if you would've been in my shoes you wouldn't even been handle...be able to handle half of what I went through". You know and that is where I would see myself as a conqueror.

(Lillian: p. 20)

In the above excerpt Lillian calls herself 'a conqueror, here she constructs herself as a powerful agent who has the ability to succeed. She also highlights the many challenges that she has overcome during her process of disengaging. A focus on her achievements has allowed Lillian to recognize her own potential in life. This means that she can now go out in the world with confidence and a sense of trust in herself that she is able to make it on her own. The construction of herself as 'conqueror' has also played a significant role in providing Lillian with a position from which she can challenge social pressures and discourses. In this way she protects herself from social stigmas of abused women as being passive or to blame for 'not doing enough'. She positions herself as a powerful agent in the community (which might be the source of much criticism) by saying that she has handled more than the average person would be able to go through.

The women's narratives suggest that their experiences in the shelter played an active role in facilitating these shifts in perception of self. Mercia speaks about how the activities and skills training at the shelter helped her to become more aware of the potential that she has as a person.

But I've learnt a lot..I mean I..I never knew I could do a home-based nursing course and I did it and I passed it. I did uh...uh life skills and abuse and assertiveness and I passed that test. I mean I got so lot of potential that I didn't know that I've got, which I learnt here by them and I thought that this is one place in a million and I will..I will never forget this place (the shelter).

(Mercia: pp. 7)

Here the life skills that Mercia received at the shelter helped her to focus on previously unacknowledged positive aspects of herself as well as to provide her with a greater sense of confidence. Ultimately, the knowledge and self-awareness and sense of confidence that the shelter training has provided for Mercia has given her the grounding by which she shifted to self constructions that are more positive and that reflect a more confident, capable self that is ready to achieve many things in her post-separation life.

Beryl's narrative also highlights the important role that the shelter courses played in providing her with information about her situation as well as instilling a greater sense of strength as a person.

When I first came here I was doing a home-based care (course) Samantha. Doing a first aid course. Doing assertiveness, how to stand up for yourself. And me and (friend's name) was doing the set course. We was graduating that here the 16th February this year. We did graduate. I'm a lot stronger Samantha.

(Beryl: pp. 14)

In the excerpt above Beryl talks about how her involvement in the educational activities in the shelter helped her to realise her own worth and potential in life. Before coming to the shelter many women were not exposed to these kinds of opportunities. The low socio-economic position

of the women in the study meant that the social and educational opportunities available to them are scarce. Completing and passing a course was therefore not part of the women's everyday realities. The shelter has changed this perception and has given Beryl a new outlook on her life, her capabilities, and her opportunities for the future. This change in perception can be seen by Beryl's construction of herself as a strong woman.

These findings are consistent with those of Farrell (1996) who has identified a final stage of healing as a woman realising her own potential as a person. He has termed this the empowerment stage. The women in the current study seem to be moving through what Patzel (2001) has identified as a realization stage that is characterised by a shift in thinking. This shift resulted in the women perceiving herself, her partner, and the power dynamics of the relationship in a different way. Ultimately, this shift resulted in the women gaining more power in relation to the abuser as his value in her eyes was drastically decreased. The analysis also showed that the women's narratives of self moved towards constructions of a self that is more critical with regards to abuse and unequal power dynamics. The women's constructions of a 'critical self' are unpacked in the next section.

## **Developing a 'critical self'**

The women's narratives provide evidence that the women developed a critical consciousness with regards to abuse. They began to question certain aspects of their abusive relationships and also challenged taken-for-granted gender constructions. In this way the women resisted social pressures and social stigmas that inherently support male domination. The narratives in this study also suggest that the shelter played a crucial role with regards to facilitating the women's development of a critical awareness of abuse. Firstly, the women's experiences of abuse were validated as they came into contact with other abused women and realised that their situation was

not out of the ordinary. The shelter experience also helped to reinforce the women's decisions to leave their abusive relationships.

### *The validation of abusive experiences*

The women's narratives suggest that a crucial component that facilitated the women's constructions of a 'critical self' with regards to abuse was the validation and affirmation of their own abusive experiences. This validation helped many of the women to acknowledge the reality of their own abuse as well as to situate their experiences within the broader social context.

Maleka describes how the sharing of stories among women in the shelter helped her to develop a sense of connectedness with women who had gone through the same experiences. Here Maleka's own decision to leave her relationship is justified as she realized that she was 'not the only one'.

You listen to someone else's story and maybe there's some similarities and then you..you can like understand her. You can relate to what she's saying. And um then we could support each other in a way like that and then you realize okay I was not the only one.

(Maleka: pp. 12)

Jolynn's narrative also suggests that coming into contact with other abused women at the shelter helped her to realize that there are other men out there who behave in an abusive way. Thus, her construction of her husband as 'crazy' can be placed within the context of male abusers in society in general.

And I said to this lady one night, "you know what? This is the first time that I actually hear that there's other men that's like my husband cause I thought that my husband's the only crazy man".

(Jolynn :pp. 17)

The realization that many women go through abuse could serve to help Maleka and Jolynn link their own experiences to the larger issue of violence against women in South Africa. This realisation can help these women to understand that their situations are not unique. Thus, they can begin to explore how their violent relationship is not a personal issue but rather an issue that involves unequal power between men and women in general. These findings are significant in the sense that the validation of the abuse can help women to move away from the self blame that victims of abuse often experience. Here they can also take a more critical stance with regards to abuse. This stance stems from the support that they are given that helps to instil the sense that abuse is wrong and unjust.

Along a similar vein, authors such as Mills (1985) have highlighted the important role that outside validation plays in helping a women to reject her husband's definition of violence and to begin to piece together her own definition. Here a woman can also begin to identify aspects of the unequal power dynamics of the relationship and link these aspects to the broader issue of violence against women. Dangor et al. (2000) discuss ego support as the action of validating a woman's perceptions of her internal and external experiences. The authors discuss how this action can reinforce the women's identity and lead to a kind of psychological empowerment. This validation is thus crucial for the abused woman that has come out of a relationship in which she had most probably lost a sense of her core identity.

For some women the connectedness with others that the shelter experience facilitated helped them to justify their decisions to leave the relationship. This is of utmost importance as this validation can serve to eliminate feelings of failure that are so often experienced by women who leave their relationships. Social expectations of the woman as being responsible for relationship maintenance put pressure on women who have decided to leave. They could feel like maybe they 'were not good enough' or they should have 'tried harder' to heal the marriage. Thus, validation is important as the women can feel justified in her decision to leave when she hears about the experiences and decisions of others.

Another thing that I'm remembering what's helped me is stories of the other women. I kind of sometimes doubted myself am I doing the right thing here?

Maybe I should just work at it and heal it..there's hope. But listening to the other women I realised that the story was so similar. That he's not gonna get better no matter how much I am nice to him.

(Catherine: pp. 4)

Here Catherine explains that she draws on the other women's stories at the shelter that help to reinforce her decision of leaving. These stories have also helped Catherine to reduce the ambiguity and uncertainty that is often characteristic of a woman's early stages of her post-separation life. In her study Patzel (2001) also found that validation and a sense of shared experience with other women played an important part in women's decision-making regarding the abusive relationship. Dangor et al. (2000) interprets this as a form of social empowerment by which the women are given a space in which they can engage in shared discussions and realise that they are not alone. The context of the shelter helped the women to come into contact with other abused women. Here their own experiences of abuse were validated and their decisions to leave were justified and reinforced. The women were also able to situate their own experiences within the broader context of violence against women in South Africa.

### *Questioning of the abuse*

The validation of abusive experiences mentioned above as well as the information that the women were given at the shelter helped them to become more aware of the variety of atrocities that women experience. The increased awareness of woman abuse in general instigated the development of a 'critical self' in which the woman questioned the abuser's behaviour, questioned the abuse of women in general by drawing on discourses of empowerment, and challenged traditional gender constructions of women as submissive and co-dependant.

Wendy questions in particular how men can behave in such a manner and then 'just go on with their lives' after abuse as if nothing has happened.

They (the shelter staff) learn us how..what kind of abusive (abuse) there are and what else and so on. But I didn't know there's so a lot of abuse or how you can abuse a woman. I think ne you hit a person and swear a person and rape the person..that's all and..and the kids and all that. But jo they can hit um..they can abuse you with their tongue, with words, anything. With money even. Ja, it's a lot. I can't believe ne all this womens go through all this and the men just sit um....at the..they just sit and leave it like that and just go on with their lives.

(Wendy: pp. 13)

Wendy's narrative suggests that the knowledge about abuse that she has gained at the shelter has helped her to develop an increased awareness of the unjust nature of abuse. This has led to Wendy developing a 'critical self' that questions the man who is largely unaffected in the aftermath of an abusive relationship.

The shelter groups played a significant part in bringing the women into contact with more positive discourses of empowerment that they can draw on in their struggle against abuse. For instance, Noleen highlights how a video that she watched during a shelter group inspired her to question the co-existence of love and abuse in an intimate relationship.

See now we saw this video the other day now (Social worker) showed us, 'love don't hurt'. So how can you say you love somebody and you hurt somebody? I can't understand it.

(Noleen: pp. 5)

Later on in her story Noleen's narrative suggests that the information that she was exposed to at the shelter helped her to move away from constructions of self-blame that have been prevalent during her lifetime narrative of abuse at the hands of men.

But I've learnt a lot here. I've overcome a lot. The depression..alot...the abuse of (by) my father and that..that I understand now only. Understood (now) only that I wasn't to blame. When my husband is concerned I learnt love don't hurt and you don't have to take it. There is a no, you don't have to.

(Noleen: pp. 11)

Here Noleen draws on the discourses of empowerment that she is exposed to in the shelter sphere. Noleen constructs herself as moving away from self-blame. By drawing on the discourses of empowerment ('Love don't hurt') she constructs herself as having agency with regards to her relationship with the abuser. She describes an increasing awareness of her right and ability to be assertive in situations of abuse. Thus, she moves toward a construction of herself that is more active with regards to setting boundaries to limit abusive treatment.

Love shouldn't hurt. Love should be good. It's a good feeling. It shouldn't hurt um.. I would say get out and find out what love..love is about..that it shouldn't hurt.

(Kim: pp. 12)

Here the women focus on the inherent contradictions of the abusive relationship. The abuser is the woman's partner in love and trust yet he abuses her. The above narratives are illustrative of how the women are beginning to question the abuse on a moral level. Noleen and Kim question abuse at the hands of an intimate partner as they draw on discourses of empowerment 'love don't hurt'. Common cultural discourses in South Africa portray the attitude that a man beats his wife because he loves her and is trying to protect her from wrongdoing (Jewkes et al., 1999). The narratives above suggest that Noleen and Kim have begun to resist these cultural discourses of the protective husband that beats the woman that he loves. They question how love and abuse can co-exist in a relationship and portray love as something that should 'feel good' by drawing on discourses of empowerment.

Mills (1985) calls this process re-evaluating the relationship. Here the woman identifies contradictions in the batterer's behaviour. She then questions his definition of the abuse and begins to create a new definition for herself. These findings are consistent with Dangor et al's (2000) notion of political empowerment in which the woman gains access to information and skills that can help her to evaluate the gender dynamics of her abusive relationship. Batliwala (as cited in Dangor et al., 2000) states that a prerequisite for women's political empowerment is women being given the tools to engage in an analysis of women's subordination and begin to formulate alternative sets of social and cultural arrangements.

In addition, these findings concur with those of Profitt (2000) who has identified a 'process of politicization' among survivors of abuse. Profitt (2000) found that her participants unravelled contradiction in their lives and that they drew on feminist and anti-oppressive discourses to elaborate a kind of critical social analysis of their experiences. This process was a critical element for the women to begin to construct alternative sense of selves in the world. In concurrence with these findings, the women in the current study engaged in an increased examination of how their abusive experiences were linked to broader social and material conditions that engender their experiences.

### *Challenging traditional gender constructions*

The narratives of the women in this study provide evidence that that they began to challenge previous 'common sense' gender constructions of what it means to be a female in the world. The challenging of these constructions entailed a re-evaluation of deeply embedded ways of being that had informed both their behaviour and their cognition.

I couldn't take it that a man must always tell me what to do and you know..they always in control. That's what I..we women must always think a man..I was brought up that's the way man (men) must you know man must be. But in my opinion right now, I also got a right. I also got a right. That's what I realise now on my age and I'm 43 now..44 this year.

(Altoise: pp. 4)

In the narrative above Altoise challenges the societal gender role of the submissive woman who is dominated by her husband. She describes how, when in relationships during the course of her lifetime, she did not accept that a man must be the one that holds power over the woman in a relationship. Also, she has come to challenge traditional gender relations that maintain the imbalances of power. She describes how these gender constructions were a 'common sense' part of her youth but at this particular point in her life she has begun to question these constructions. She now realises that, as a woman, she also has certain human rights. Her narrative changes from "I" to "We" signifying a change in her thinking of women's oppression from an individual to a collective level. She links her experience of oppression with those of other women who experience a similar lack of power. Thus, Altoise's 'critical self' is constructed as a part of a sense of connectedness and recognition of women's oppression on a macro-level.

Catherine's narrative also shows her construction of a difference between her past response to the abuse (being a 'doormat') and her current situation in which she is learning to be assertive.

So when I was little maybe it was ingrained in me to be submissive and be a doormat and just forgive him..no never mind what he does, you know. But now I watch my mom, she's a little bit more assertive (now) which is teaching me. So I didn't wait like 20 years with my husband. I've decided to leave before it gets too bad.

(Catherine: pp. 6)

Here Catherine actively challenges the ideals that she has been brought up with. Evident in this excerpt is a comparison between her past submissiveness and her present development of a more critical consciousness. She acknowledges that her socialisation entailed being taught that women should be subservient to men. She challenges this however by realizing what she wants and by resisting this domination 'before it gets too bad'. Here she constructs a self that is more active and assertive with regards to abuse. She also describes how she looks upon her mother's acts of resistance as inspiration and motivation to leave her own abusive relationship and is thus situating her abusive experiences within the broader context of woman abuse.

In their narratives the women also challenged cultural notions that every woman needs a man.

Women are generally just stronger. We are fighters. We are fighters and somehow we have coping mechanisms. I don't know where it comes from. It must be just a women thing. And we can cope on our own. Whether it..whether it should be on our own with our kids, we can do it.

(Rochelle: pp. 22)

In the above excerpt Rochelle challenges cultural notions that a woman needs a man to survive. She uses the words 'strong' and 'fighters' to describe women's coping abilities as well as to construct an image of women in general as independent survivors. Thus the importance of the man becomes minimised and he is no longer a central aspect of her life.

Rochelle uses an example of the way in which she has coped by herself without support from the abuser.

I mean I haven't received support from him (the abuser) over the years so that's proof that women can survive on their own. I had to be the motherly and fatherly role. So there we can. They must just believe in themselves.

(Rochelle, p. 22)

Here Rochelle constructs herself as having the dual identities of mother and father. Thus she fulfils her role as mother as well as the abuser's role as father in her everyday life of looking after the children. She is challenging the notions of a woman who needs a man. She is also challenging social pressures that promote the formation of the nuclear family that is supported and maintained by the male head of the household.

Evident in the women's narratives is the potential for change and the potential for the generation of new discourses that challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of the submissive and dependant woman. These findings support those of Taylor (2002) who identified the stage of moving away in which an abused woman resisted and avoided social pressures that function to maintain abusive relationships. In addition, studies such as those of Shefer et al. (2000) have identified various discourses that women use that stand as challenges to traditional gender relations. These discourses emphasise the potential for change and the need for a negotiation of the previous gender relations to take place. These findings are also consistent with those of Proffitt (2000) who has found that the shifting subjectivities that women survivors of abuse experience encompass increased levels of self acceptance as well as shifting structures of identity. These shifts in identity can be seen in the women's shifting constructions of self that have moved from static 'vulnerable victim' towards an identity that encompasses a greater ability to negotiate their positions of power in relation to their abuser.

In sum, this chapter has shown that the women's identities shifted from 'helpless victim' to 'powerful conqueror'. The women narratives and constructions of self suggest that they were empowered as a result of their shelter stay. Firstly, at the shelter the women were given the space and the alternative perspectives to begin to reconceptualise the way that they viewed themselves. The courses that the shelter provided also served to instil a sense of capability and pride within the women. These women's narratives indicate that they increasingly focused on positive aspects of self and they were able to recognise their own potential. Ultimately, the recognition of their own potential led to a shift toward constructions of a self that is more positive and powerful. The women also actively moved from a position of self-blame to questioning the abuse on a moral level. They challenged and questioned taken for granted gender constructions that position

women in a submissive position in relation to men. Overall the women's narratives suggest that they have moved toward a more critical and feminist consciousness with regards to abuse. The narratives also suggest that the shelter environment, as a specific culture, has promoted this reshaping of the women's narratives.

## **CHAPTER 7: 'LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE': CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'A POWERFUL SELF'**

In this chapter the discussion focuses on the women's narratives of the future and will be grouped according to two main themes: the self as active agent, and taking on a helper identity. "Self as active agent" will be discussed under the following sub-themes: discourses of responsibility, and the 'assertive self'. Finally, this chapter will end by unpacking the theme of "taking on a helper identity".

The women's narratives show that they looked towards the future in their constructions of a 'powerful self'. This construction of 'a powerful self' involved the women constructing themselves as active agents. Here their narratives suggest an increase in the women's sense of power and control over their lives and their circumstances. The constructions of a powerful self also consisted of the women taking on the identity of 'helper'. The narratives suggest that by taking on this identity the women gained a greater sense of power through recognizing their potential to create change. An examination of the women's narratives suggest that by looking forward towards the future the women largely moved away from constructions of the self as vulnerable victim as they moved towards a more activist self and increasingly focused on their ability to achieve their own dreams and goals.

### **The self as active agent**

#### *'Discourses of responsibility'*

The women in this study drew on discourses of responsibility in their narratives that looked forward towards the future. Here they positioned themselves as what Hydén (2005) calls an active agent. In this way they moved away from constructions of self as helpless victim and

moved toward constructions of self that signify a greater sense of power and control over their lives as well as their own decisions.

Many women constructed the belief that life is what you make of it.

I think I need some happiness in my life and I don't need him. I think everybody is responsible for their own happiness.

(Noleen: pp. 8)

I'm not planning to sit back and wait for things to happen. I'm going to go and make sure that things happen for me for the better. For me and my children.

(Maleka: pp. 15)

In the excerpts above Maleka and Noleen construct themselves as being active agents who are responsible for their own happiness in their lives. Here these women position themselves in the role of independent mother who is responsible for establishing a healthy life for their children. Ultimately, the women draw on an internal locus of control, constructing themselves as agents who have the ability and the responsibility to change their lives for the better and to break away from the abusers sphere of power.

In her narrative Beth speaks about the choices that she has in her life.

Like I said it's all about the choices. Ja, that's best for me. For me I want to be a good mother to my children..but first look after myself and sort myself out then I will be stronger and a good mother for my children because it starts by me.

(Beth: pp. 5)

Beth constructs herself as having the responsibility for making the right choices in her life. Here she positions herself as having the ability to actively take control over her life via the choices that she makes. Farrell (1996) has identified awakening as a theme that consists of the woman

realising that she has choices in her life. It is this realisation that gives the woman power and control over her life. She no longer exhibits a sense of helplessness with regards to her circumstances as she now knows that she can choose to make a difference. Also, she is no longer dependent on others for a change in her life. The locus of control is on her. In the narrative above Beth draws on this internal locus of control by saying that her choice to be a good mother 'starts by me'.

Along a similar vein, Wendy constructs her ambition to become a 'better person' as being her own responsibility. She outlines the sense of control that she has regarding her current situation. Here she has been able to control the factors of self that she feels have been negative factors in her life (her drinking).

I want I must self change my life. I wanna be a better person. I..I already stopped drinking and I already stopped all my shit that I do because why..I told the lady this morning, "I'm going to walk out of here maybe I'm going to turn a nurse (become a nurse) and he's going to look for me. Or he's going to see me somewhere and he's going to be in shock because he's going to think, 'Jo, is that really (participant's name) that's walking there? She change her..she really change her'".

(Wendy: 12)

Here Wendy's narrative indicates her hope that the control that she has already established over her life will help her to become a more powerful person in relation to her abuser. She constructs a scenario of the future that positions herself as successful agent in her life. By becoming successful Wendy will be able to experience a sense of a powerful self. She will also be able to show the abuser that she is worth more than the mere passive objects status that he ascribed to her. During the abusive relationship he treated her like dirt and gave her no respect. Now she constructs her goal to gain his acknowledgement and respect in her own way; through achieving a positive identity of success and status. These findings concur with those of Farrell (1996) who has found that abused women begin to look toward the future in a positive way. He calls this

inner strength as the women let go of the past and focus on the future. It is this taking on of positive responsibility for their own lives that helps the women to look forward with a sense of capability and ambition. The second component of the women's constructions of self as active agent was the women's constructions of an 'assertive self'.

### *'The assertive self'*

An examination of the women's narratives show that the women constructed themselves as active agents via their constructions of the assertive self that engaged in strategies to limit or combat the potential for abuse in their post-separation life. These strategies largely involved the women setting boundaries for personal interactions.

These acts of setting boundaries helped the women to limit, or control, the types of social interaction that they are exposed to. The women's narratives highlight the pinnacle role that the shelter information has played in helping them to identify and evaluate social dynamics. The narratives suggest that the shelter has helped the women to be able to take on a more assertive self and to set boundaries for these social dynamics.

I also learnt that you can't just care, you can't just give too much. There needs to be what you call it..boundaries or lines that you don't cross then you get hurt yourself. So ja I've also learnt with Auntie (shelter worker), she's a great inspiration. With the groups she helps us a lot with the topics and the boundaries and setting lines and standards for yourself. And teaching us to go into a relationship with your head and not your heart.

(Kim: pp. 7)

Catherine's narrative below suggests that the information about abuse that she received at the shelter helped her to identify certain aspects of the abuser's attempts to manipulate and control her during the post-separation stage.

What helped most of all is the all the hearing of the people and learning about how men, like these types (abusers), how they are. And..and when he did try to contact me then as soon as he started to get manipulative I could see it straight away. And I could just cut him short and not take it further and not get into an argument.

(Catherine: pp. 9)

Here Catherine discusses that the shelter information helped her to identify certain aspects of her abuser's behaviour and to begin to analyse the abuser's effort at continued control over her life. In this way she constructs herself as an assertive agent who was able to 'see the signs' and to set appropriate boundaries for further interactions with him. Ultimately, the shelter gave her the knowledge and skills to be able to cope more effectively with the potential for the continuation of abuse post-separation. The information taught by the shelter has thus given Catherine a greater sense of her own ability to cope with her abuser's behaviour. This can be seen by Catherine's construction of a more assertive self that is capable of recognizing the abuser's attempt at control.

The women also constructed scenarios in which they would take on an active role in establishing boundaries and conditions for their interactions with men in the future. Fatima discusses how she will agree to have contact with her abuser in the future but that this contact must adhere to her own terms and standards.

I forgive him. I don't hate him. He can be my friend yes but only if he will speak to me and have respect for me. Then he can speak to me. He can phone me anytime; I'll speak to him. Even if he wants to take me for a coffee, I'll go under one condition, you respect me and I respect you. Talk like decent people. Woman to husband nicely.

(Fatima: pp 24)

Here Fatima constructs herself as active agent who sets the rules for the future interaction with her abuser. She constructs herself as being the powerful one in these interactions and sets out the

conditions of respect that she demands from the abuser. In this way Fatima positions herself as being the powerful entity in the relationship with her abuser as she refuses to be subject to any disrespectful abuse from him in the future.

Maleka constructs her assertive self that will keep men in line in any future relationships that she might have. When asked whether she will ever again have another boyfriend, Maleka replied to a friend in the shelter,

“No, not yet. I am going to get myself a boyfriend at a later stage. But I pity the man whose going to be dating me now because I’m wiser. I am so much stronger. The first..the smallest thing that he’s going to do...say or do to me that is wrong...Oh my God I really pity him”.

(Maleka: pp. 13).

In the above excerpt Maleka constructs herself as a cautious, strong woman who will only get involved in another relationship when she feels that she is ready. She also describes the boundaries that she will set between right and wrong behaviour. She constructs an assertive self that will not tolerate any wrong and that will be sensitive to the potential for further abuse at the hands of a man. Maleka’s sense of personal power is signified by the words ‘I really pity him’ suggesting that there will be highly negative consequences for any man who mistreats her in the future. Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999) suggest that a woman setting limits on her ex-partners behaviour helps her to sustain her separation from him. In the current study the women’s narratives suggest that by taking on the identity of a strong woman who is able to delineate her own needs, the women engage in setting certain boundaries in which they may be able to resist against further abuse at the hands of men in the future.

Proffit (2000) suggests that shedding feelings of blame and recognising self-worth are important aspects of the abused woman’s self recovery. These aspects are also crucial in helping the women to move toward an increased ability to set personal boundaries and to demand respect. In the above narratives Maleka, Fatima, and Catherine all construct an active, assertive self that

stands up for their rights as a person and that sets boundaries for personal interaction in order to limit the occurrence of maltreatment that could threaten their sense of personal integrity.

Along similar lines, Farrell (1996) has identified flexibility as a stage that abused women go through during the process of healing from abuse. During this stage the women began to establish appropriate boundaries in their interpersonal relationships. These boundaries help to make the women feel less vulnerable in their relationships. They also help to allow the women to direct and foster the kind of relationships and interactions that they want in their lives. This includes recognising what kind of interactions will be most beneficial for their overall wellbeing at particular moments in time. In a similar vein, the women in the current study talked about setting boundaries that set out rules for further contact with the abusers and for future relationships in general. It is also evident that the information provided by the shelters played a role in facilitating this increased ability to set boundaries in the social sphere. This information helped the women to become more attuned to the power dynamics of their relationships with the abuser and with other men in general. Ultimately, the women constructed a more powerful self with regards to asserting themselves against abuse. These constructions suggest an increase in the women's overall sense of power in their lives.

In sum, the women in the current study drew on discourses of responsibility that mobilised them to take action for change in their future. The narratives were also structured around constructions of an 'assertive self' that actively engaged in strategies to resist further abuse in their lives. Ultimately, the women constructed themselves as powerful active agents that have the ability to make significant changes in their lives. These women moved away from constructions of self as 'vulnerable victim'. These findings run in contrary with those of earlier authors (such as Walker, 1979), who outline the helplessness of abused women. The above narratives highlight the sense of agency and independence that many women exhibit as they look toward a new life and a new sense of self for the future. The last section will explore how the women constructed a powerful self by taking on a specific identity of helper in their social sphere.

## **Taking on a helper identity**

A common theme in the women's narratives of the future and their constructions of the powerful self was the women constructing a will to take up a more activist stance with regards to abuse in their community. This encompassed the women taking on a 'helper identity' to assist others who had been through similar abuses. The narratives suggest that many women found a sense of meaning in their abusive experiences by taking on this identity as they gained a greater sense of their own potential to create change in their world. Mia, for example, looks for the meaning of why she experienced such atrocities in her lifetime.

God created me man and I can't throw my life away like that because I'm still young, I've got many things..Maybe there's a reason why I went through all these (things). Maybe I'll help abused women and children that have been through those things because if you have personal experience of it it's..it's easy for you to help someone else because that's how I got my leaveage (ability to leave Abuser).

(Mia: pp. 13)

In the excerpt above Mia searches for a sense of meaning and she constructs herself as expert on experiences of abuse who has the insight to help other abused women. Her taking on of the helper identity can be seen as situated within the context of her future goals and motivations. In her construction of self as helper, Mia finds a sense of purpose in her post-separation life. This sense of purpose may give Mia a greater sense of power in her ability to move forward as a successful agent.

Kim also takes on a helper identity in her quest to give back to the community.

Like I say I wanna take what I've learnt here (at the shelter) and make a difference outside. I want to be able to give to others what I got..um I want to give it to myself. I want to reach out to other children, other mothers and show them that their kids are actually a blessing. If that is all that I can do and could do, I would do that.

(Kim: pp. 11)

In her narrative Kim discusses how the education that she was given at the shelter now stands as a tool that she can take out into the world with her and help others. A prevalent theme in Kim's narrative was her concern with the way in which what she described as her 'emotional numbing' prevented her from being a caring mother to her children. In her construction of self as helper she links these experiences with her will to help abused women reconnect with their children. In addition, she constructs her 'helper identity' as stemming not only from a need to help others but also from a need to help herself heal ('I want to give it to myself'). This suggests the sense of fulfillment that Kim anticipates that she will gain from helping others. The information and exposure that she received at the shelter has given her the opportunity to begin to work through her abuse on another level. Thus, taking on the helper identity may be a crucial stage that abused women go through in their process of healing emotionally from their abuse and trauma and finding a sense of meaning in their suffering.

Beryl constructs herself as helper by focusing on the fact that she has been at the shelter for a long period of time. She talks about the fact that she is an 'experienced' shelter resident who can help newcomers to the shelter in their process of healing.

Samantha, I can teach them **now** what I went through. Some of the ladies in here (the shelter). Sometimes they cry and I say, "It's not easy but you must remember you's the one who's getting stronger by the day. Because God sees your tears".

(Beryl: pp. 4)

Beryl's narrative above suggests that she has gained a sense of purpose in her life by positioning herself in the role of emotional guider in the shelter. By positioning herself in this way, Beryl may gain a sense of power through her act of helping and advising others. Her narrative constructs a powerful self that is knowledgeable expert that can help other women overcome their feelings of ambivalence and pain in their journey of healing. These findings are significant when looking at how the length of Beryl's stay at the shelter (1 year and 11 months) and how her shelter experience has contributed to her construction of a 'powerful self'. Beryl's interactions with the other abused women during her shelter stay have helped her to gain knowledge about the process of healing. This knowledge has led to Beryl taking on the identity of informed helper. She positions herself as powerful in relation to the other women who have recently arrived at the shelter and who are only beginning their journey of healing. What distinguishes Beryl's narrative from those of Kim and Mia is her construction of self as a powerful agent in the now ('I can teach them **now** what I went through'<sup>9</sup>). This suggests that her long shelter stay (in contrast with Kim and Mia who had both been at the shelter for less than 3 months) helped to shape and inform her constructions of a powerful self. Ultimately Beryl's 'powerful self' is constructed from her acknowledgement that she has the capacity to promote change in other women's lives.

When asked if she would do anything in life differently when she leaves the shelter, Rochelle replied,

Um another goal that's actually a very important goal of mine, and..and this stems from having to be at (the shelter), I have compassion for what I see here. For what the women go through and the children. And when I spoke to a few of them..I mean we speak about the situation. I just had this..there was a feeling in me that I should either get in..either do motivational speaks, or talks, about my life itself um or..I know it's difficult to run a place like this because you need to have the..the infrastructure and the money and stuff like that but I want to be able to also help women out there that are in a situation like mine.

(Rochelle: pp. 17)

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<sup>9</sup> Emphasis added by the author

Rochelle constructs her shelter experience as being the driving force for the development of her compassion towards others. She discusses how coming into contact with other women and children who had experienced this kind of violence made her aware of the extent of the problem of woman abuse in her community. Her narrative suggests that this awareness as well as the exposure to other people's pain has shaped her desire to help others who are going through abuse. Thus, the shelter has made her more aware of the broader issue of violence against women in South Africa. She has taken up the helper identity in the context of joining in the fight against violence. Resonant in her narrative is a strong desire to make a difference. The taking on of a helper identity also serves to connect her more to others in the world. Here her powerful self is involved with the collective battle against woman abuse.

What is evident in the women's narratives is that during their shelter stay something in them has changed. There is an increased level of humanitarian consciousness that looks at the experiences of other abused women in society. The shelter stay has played a role in shifting the women's construction of reality. The narratives suggest that they have developed a particular sensitivity to the imbalances of power between men and women. It is this sensitivity that activates their drive to challenge the abuse of women in society. Ultimately, the construction of a helper identity helped the women find a sense of meaning in their experiences. It also helped the women to look toward the future with a sense of ambition and motivation. This identity may give the women an increased sense of power as they focus on their potential to make a difference in other people's lives.

Similarly, Dangor et al. (2000) conceptualised part of what they called the political empowerment of the women as being a move towards a more activist consciousness. The authors above discuss how this move gave the women a chance to develop a greater sense of connectedness and community with others. These findings also support those of West and Merritt-Gray (2001) who found that women moved away from identifying themselves as either 'victim' or 'survivor' toward a sense of greater meaning in their lives. When interpreted in light of the above findings, the women found a sense of meaning by taking on a helper identity that

has the power to create change. They focused on the positive outcomes of their situation and how it can help other people in the world and contribute to resistance against woman abuse in general.

Boonzaier (2006) has found that a shift in identification from victim to survivor and a shift from the violence as being a central aspect of the woman's life lead to her developing a more activist consciousness. The findings of the current study concur with her study in which she discusses how a shift in consciousness about abuse helps a woman to gain more power in their situation. The current findings do, however, suggest that this shift in consciousness from victim to survivor is not definitive or always permanent. The women often shift back to constructing themselves as 'vulnerable victims' simply because of the challenges that they face during the process of leaving. As single, coloured women with few socio-economic opportunities with which to better their economic status, these women face oppression and powerlessness on a number of levels.

Although women leave and they go to the shelters where they regain a sense of purpose and power, findings showed that the abuse and control at the hands of the abuser often extends into this sphere of the women's lives. Findings also show that the women do however negotiate their own agency within these structural constraints that allow them limited amounts of power in their lives. Here the women engaged in strategies that accorded them more power and control in relation to the abuser. This study has shown that the process of disengaging from abuse is one in which the women undergo a general shift in the way that they construct themselves in the world. Ultimately, within the context of limited resources of power, the women drew on their own resources of strength and the resources made available by the shelter in their transition to a new meaning of a powerful self in the world.

## CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Summary

This study has shed some light on the complexities of leaving an abusive relationship. The findings show that the process of leaving is one in which the women reflect on the past and their current circumstances and construct a vision about the future. Central themes of the women's narratives are as follows: (i) the women's reflection of their own sense of power along the course of disengaging (ii) the role that the women's socio-economic status and gender identity play in shaping the women's construction of self (iii) and shifting constructions of self that occurred that signifies a shift in the women's perception of their own power in the world. This shift was a transformation of the way in which the women perceived themselves as helpless and powerless in the past.

### *Gendered power dynamics*

This study found that women's stories of leaving abusive relationships were centered on issues of power. During the process of 'looking back' the women identified the unequal power dynamics that characterized their abusive relationships. As women gained more insight into the situation, they challenged traditional gender roles and began to question abuse in general. The women's narratives of the present as well as their constructions of 'self in the future' show that they moved towards more positive perceptions of their own power and control with regards to their abusive relationship (and abuse in general). This was particularly evident in the women's narratives about the future in which they constructed a more positive, powerful self as a woman in the world. In these narratives about the future the women construct themselves in a much more hopeful light as strong, capable, and ready to face the world on their own.

Mainstream explanations of woman abuse attempt to link the macro theories of a patriarchal society with the micro theories of why individual women find themselves in abusive relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1980). These explanations posit that the individual woman has absorbed the ideals and values of the patriarchal society and that she has taken on the specific roles and identities that this patriarchal value system demands of her. They do not however acknowledge the multiple sites of power that women make use of. They ignore the outstanding potential for change, growth and resistance that women display in their battle to free themselves from these relationships. The narratives of the women in this study have shown that women go against these values and ideals in various ways. They have shown that the women, when reflecting from the vantage point of being at a shelter, often take up a more active stance in which they take on responsibility for their own lives. The women also describe experiencing increased levels of self-growth in which they develop identities that are apart from those prescribed by the patriarchal culture as well as by their abuser.

The process of disengaging involves the women seeing the abusive relationship in a new light. They show an increased awareness of the nature of abuse as well as of the power dynamics involved in abusive relationships. These findings confer with those of Boonzaier (2001; 2008) and Green (1990) who have highlighted the potential for agency and negotiation of power that women exhibit in the abusive situation in spite of the significant economic and social challenges that they might face. While the above authors have highlighted resistance strategies that women utilise to cope with the violence while they are in the abusive relationship, the current study has extended the exploration of resistance by looking at strategies that women employ during the process of leaving.

### *The social context and gender identities*

Broader social factors have informed the women's stories of abuse and leaving in this study. The women drew on gender stereotypes of the passive, vulnerable woman and the powerful man in their constructions of the self as 'vulnerable victim'. The women's narratives of their own power were shaped by the constraints of the conditions of poverty in which they lived as well as their gendered identities of being coloured females in the South African context. The social context

informed the women's construction of self as 'vulnerable victim' and 'powerless woman'. It is this social context of poverty and deprivation that provides limited opportunities to the women when they are going through the process of disengaging and going out into the world alone.

These findings are significant when considering that the majority of women in this study (80%) lived in poor, coloured areas of the Cape flats that are characterized by severe poverty, lack of employment opportunities, crime and drug abuse. Childers (2002) discusses how a person's perception of self in the world is shaped by one's gender and class. In addition, Brock (1993, as cited in Profitt, 2000) suggests that the effects of social and material conditions of poverty shape women's experiences of abuse and also the stories of abuse that they tell. The women's narratives in this study indicate how their constructions of self were shaped by their experiences of day to day living in these contexts of economic and social depravity. Thus, one can understand the entrapment of women as a complex set of factors that include psychological factors and economic factors in interaction with continued violence and control expressed in different ways.

In their narratives the women construct their post-separation life as being caught in a vicious cycle of continued abuse. This exposure to continued abuse makes it very difficult for the women to maintain their position of being away from the abuser. In order for the women to be able to stay away they need to be able to recognise the abusers attempts at control and find their own way of gaining control of the situation. Pathologising discourses of woman abuse ask the question 'why does she stay?' This question ignores the complexity of challenges that occur at the post- separation phase and implies that there is a clear line separating the dangers of the abusive relationship and the safety and security for the woman once she has left (Humphreys & Thiara, 2003). Understandings of separation tend to focus on getting away physically and do not readily acknowledge that the abuse can carry on in both indirect and direct ways at the hands of her abuser as well as by other men in her 'universe'. This must be acknowledged so we can have a proper understanding of the challenges that women face when they go through the process of leaving.

The structural constraints of the women's lives stand as significant factors that influence whether women return to their abusive partners after leaving the shelter. Haaken and Yragui (2003) have

argued that when women move away from the shelter they no longer have the support that they need and that this throws them back into, “the pernicious fold of male abuse” (p. 53). Many women leave the shelter only to find themselves disempowered economically in the world and unable to support themselves alone. It seems therefore that the provision of shelters alone may not be an adequate solution to the problem of violence against women. Effective solutions should incorporate shelter services with a range of strategies that include education about abuse, training, and links in involvement between legal and health institutions. To address this issue of economic deprivation, women need to be exposed to training programs/levels of education that will help them to obtain some form of employment. Antidiscrimination laws will also increase women’s educational and occupational opportunities (Tiefenthaler & Farmer, 2000). The shelters can only house a particular woman for a certain amount of time. Thus, women need to be given skills that will help them to survive financially when they move out of the shelter.

### *‘Selves’ in transition*

The findings of this study show that in the women’s narratives of leaving their constructions of ‘self’ moved through a kind of transition. These changing constructions signify a shift in the women’s perceptions of their own power. During the process of ‘looking back’ the women saw themselves as ‘passive victims’ in the abusive relationship. This reflection on their state of victimhood seems to have provided some kind of justification for why the women endured the abuse for so long. At the same time, reflecting on their situation of passivity seemed to have sparked off a desire to move beyond their helplessness, and to take responsibility for saving themselves from the abuse by taking action and leaving the abusive relationship.

Findings show, however, that the passive victim identity did not always define the women’s responses to abuse. There is evidence that the women sometimes showed skill in “negotiating” the power dynamics in the relationships. They did this, for example, by finding ways of managing their anger, recognising the danger of the abuse and acting accordingly. The women also named the unequal power imbalances, questioned the abuse and identified contradictions between their ‘abused selves’ and who they knew themselves to be. This finding is interesting in

light of Dutton and Painters (1993) concept of “traumatic bonding”. Traumatic bonding is one of the theories that were developed to explain why women stay in abusive relationships.

The two main features of the traumatic bonding theory are the power imbalances where the woman is completely dominated by her abuser and the intermittent nature of the abuse. Findings in the current study suggest that while many of the women have stayed for years in the abusive relationships, they demonstrated an ability to shift the power imbalances in subtle ways that gave the women an increased sense of power in their situations. It is interesting to note that traumatic bonding is also defined as a survival mechanism in the context of abuse. Here women are *objects* of intermittent abuse and they *adapt* by passively accepting the abuse and maintaining attachment to the abuser. The difference between theories of survival strategies such as traumatic bonding and the negotiation of power found in this study is the notion of agency. Here the women seem to be engaged as agents by adopting the strategy of power “negotiation” as a means of counteracting, or warding off the abuse. Evidence from this research suggest a limitation in Dutton & Painter’s paradigm in that their theory does not account for the different responses that women take up. For example, these theories ignore the agency on the part of the women that is found in the current study. Even though the authors recognise that women do leave abusive relationships, they argue that they are likely to return to the abusive environment through a process that they liken to “an elastic band which subsequently ‘snaps’ the women back” (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

Psychological theories by authors such as Herman (1992) and Walker (1979a; 1979b) whose concepts of “captivity” and “battered woman’s syndrome” respectively, bear striking similarities to Dutton and Painter’s (1993) traumatic bonding theory, have been proposed as explanations for why women find it difficult to leave abusive relationships. While there is evidence of elements of these explanatory concepts in the present study, the findings of this study paints a more complex picture of women’s responses to violence. A problem with these theoretical perspectives they have advanced is that the theories seem to turn on the abused woman by seeking reasons for their circumstances of suffering *in* the women themselves. This way of theorising about woman abuse ignores the social context within which abuse is situated and could potentially be used as a

justification for men's violence against women. The reasons for why women stay in relationships such as these are attributed to aspects of women's weak, fragile and vulnerable self.

In contrast to these theories, the results of this study reveal that far from being fixed, the women's sense of self are multiple, contradictory, and discursively constructed at different points in time. This fluctuation in the women's construction of identity occurs throughout her experiences of abuse in the relationship, during the process of disengaging from abuse, post-abuse, and as part of their construction of self in the future. At some points in time during the process of disengaging the women constructed themselves as 'vulnerable victims; and at other times they constructed themselves as 'powerful agents'. These fluctuations in constructions signify a shift in the women's sense of self in the world. The conclusion can be drawn, therefore, that understanding how abused women construct ideas of the self and our assumptions about the women's subjectivity during and after they have left abusive relationships should take on a multiple level approach.

The single factor theory of understanding women's behaviour in response to violence limits our thinking about women's responses to abuse. A research approach that allows for a multiple level engagement with questions related to the experience of abuse and leaving is feminist poststructuralism. This approach provides a fresh perspective to understanding the relationship among socio-cultural organization, social position, subjectivity, and power in order to understand women's experience of subordination and abuse. Unlike the single factor views advanced by some feminist scholars (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Herman, 1992; Walker, 1979), which obscures the possibility of women's agency in these situations, feminist post-structuralism emphasizes the fluid nature of the subject and the ever-changing discursive constructions of self. Davies (2000) emphasises the significance of the concept of agency in feminist post-structuralism. Agency, Davies (2000) argues, is the capacity "to resist, subvert, and change discourses through which one is constituted" (p. 67). Davies explains that feminist post-structuralist theory creates the possibility for a new kind of agency in which a subject can fluctuate between discourses and "use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse, or go beyond the other" (p. 60). The findings of this study have shown that the women experience shifting subjectivities throughout their experience of disengaging from abuse. The present findings contribute meaningfully to the

call made by Boonzaier (2001) for research initiatives focusing on woman abuse in the South African context. With its particular focus on women in shelters, the study is an important contribution to the growing feminist studies on woman abuse in South Africa that take on a feminist post-structuralist approach.

## **Limitations and recommendations**

### *Limitations of the current study*

A limitation of my study could be the cross-sectional nature of its design. Hydén (1994) has highlighted the problems with a cross-sectional study. Firstly, it is impossible to say everything that one wants to say on one occasion. In addition, the informant's accounts are time-specific and retrospective (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998). For example, the woman's story might be centered on the violent event if you interview her a few days after leaving her husband but a later interview might be centered on reconciliation (Hydén, 1994). An alternative would be a longitudinal study that conducts a number of different interviews with the same person at different periods of time (Campbell et al., 1998). The advantage to this method is that it can make the interviewees stories fuller by combining the stories told during different interview sessions (Hydén, 1994). Here the listener can piece together a number of time-specific accounts and weave a bigger picture.

### *Suggestions for further research*

As suggested above, a longitudinal study in South Africa that addresses women's experiences over a number of different points in time could provide rich research data. A prospective study facilitates the women describing the processes as they occur rather than looking back after they have processed these things (Campbell et al., 1998). This would be particularly helpful in developing information that will provide insight into the different stages that women go through during the process of disengaging. With regards to methods, a qualitative study on the process of

disengaging that combines individual interviews with focus group interviews would be particularly useful. Focus groups as a supplementary technique can both enhance and enrich the data of a study (Morgan, 1997). They can help the researcher to expand particular themes that they identified in the individual interviews. Focus groups can also provide for valuable insights into the ways in which the women at the shelter engage with each other about abuse and their experiences of leaving.

Research should be done that looks at women's experiences post-shelter. There is a severe lack of scholarship, particularly in the South African context, which looks at what happens to women when they leave the shelter. Questions in this area should address if these women have gone back to their abuser and why. They should also examine the impact that the shelter has had on the women's post-separation life and functioning. For example, was the shelter merely a short-term relief from the abuser? Will a longer shelter stay be more beneficial for the women? Research should also be done to investigate how shelters (and maybe government institutions) can continue to address the needs of women who have left the shelter in order to help them to be able to stay away from their abuser (Park et al., 2000).

In addition, research relationships that promote communication channels between tertiary institutions and women's organizations (such as shelters) will be crucial in facilitating the development of integrated frameworks that will best help to facilitate abused women (Stephens & McDonald, 2000). Thus, more research should be encouraged in these spheres to promote the essential dialogue between shelter practices and academic theory. This will help to close the "inevitable gap" that exist between theory and practice (Haaken & Yragui, 2003).

### ***Implications for policy and practice***

Issues of sheltering in South Africa should be addressed and prioritized on a governmental level. The sheltering needs of many abused women are not being met due to the dearth of shelters and the limited space available in current shelters. These needs should be addressed in the form of funding and service provision to current shelters as well as funding being directed to build more shelters for women in the country. One of the biggest challenges facing shelters in the country is

a lack of sufficient funding. This is especially significant when considering the fact that most shelters in the country are NGO's and survive on donations from churches, the corporate world, international donors, or fundraising activities (Park et al., 2000). There is also a need for capacity building and training of community counselors that can directly access the needs of abused women in shelters as well as in the broader community.

A significant finding in this study was that during the process of 'looking back' to their abusive relationship the women justified their decisions to leave by exploring the detrimental effects that the abuse had on their children. The groups provided at the shelter often facilitated in this process by providing women with information about the impact of abuse on children. These findings suggest a need to run more educational programs that inform women of the dangers that the abuse has on children. Often women believe that if their children are not being physically abused then the situation is not so serious. Women need to be taught about the indirect effects that abuse has on their children. Social learning discourses need to be more thoroughly circulated into society. This could help to mobilise women to leave abusive relationships. As in the above findings, drawing on these discourses could also help to reinforce the decisions of those women who have already left.

## **Conclusions**

The results of this study have shown that the shelter has acted as a specific environment that has shaped the women's narratives of their own power. Through providing social support, educational programs about abuse, and the circulation of discourses of empowerment the shelter has facilitated the women's constructions of a more powerful self for the future that can act against abuse in their own lives as well as in the lives of others.

Combating woman abuse in South Africa is a monumental task. One which we can move closer to achieve by placing a focus on addressing poverty, unemployment, and the lack of education of many abused women (Haaken & Yragui, 2003). By empowering the women in these spheres,

shelters can help women to transcend away from perceptions of self as powerless victim towards a reconstituted self that encompasses a sense of strength and purpose.

I believe that what happened here at (shelter's name) even what they doing now, it's good because um..we can stop the cycle...the immediate cycle of abuse. We can start with ourselves and then our kids. It will stop..serious I've learnt a lot and I've got a brighter hope..or bigger hope for the future.

(Kim : pp. 12)

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## **LIST OF APPENDICES:**

- **Appendix A:** Acknowledgements
- **Appendix B:** Researcher's Inspiration
- **Appendix C:** Individual consent form
- **Appendix D:** Letter of consent to women's shelter.
- **Appendix E:** Participant Information.
- **Appendix F:** Interview Schedule.
- **Appendix G:** Transcribing conventions

## **Appendix A:**

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the women who spoke to me honestly and openly about their painful experiences of abuse and maltreatment. I wish all these women the best. I would also like to express my dearest thanks to the two women's shelters that accommodated my research. The staff were friendly and supportive and an absolute pleasure to work with at all times.

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To the Harry Crossley foundation that has assisted me with financial support that has aided my study.

## Appendix B: Researcher's Inspiration:

*I am a young African woman<sup>10</sup>*

*A unique individual with my own personal inspiration*

*Which is the Golden key to building my future.*

*With a heart that has been destroyed*

*I can still feel love and care for others.*

*With a mind so confused*

*I can still react politely to others.*

*With a pain that has cut deep down in me,*

*I can still feel sympathy for others.*

*With all that is in me*

*I can be the person I am*

*The one whose heart is filled with joy and passion.*

*I am me and that's what I'll always be.*

**-Anonymous**

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<sup>10</sup> Permission to use this poem was obtained by the author who wishes to remain anonymous.

## **Appendix C:**

### **Individual Consent Form**

Dear .....

My name is Samantha van Schalkwyk. I am a masters student in the department of psychology at the University of Cape Town. I am conducting research that is looking at how women leave abusive relationships. I am looking at how women experience the abuse and what makes them decide to leave. I am also interested in hearing about what your experience of being at the shelter has been like so far.

You will be asked to take part in an interview that will last for approximately an hour and a half. It is your right to refuse any question if you feel uncomfortable giving an answer. The interview will be tape-recorded. You have the right to switch off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. You also have the right to delete certain parts of the tape if you so wish. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Any information given during the interview will be completely confidential. Names will remain anonymous in the write up of my research. This is to ensure and respect both your privacy and safety.

The information that will be discussed in the interview could cause some distress as painful memories are brought to mind. During the interview there will be counsellors on standby from your organisation that will be made available if needed. You are also encouraged to discuss some of your feelings about the interview at your future counselling sessions.

I believe that this study is important, as it will help to create a better understanding of how women leave abusive relationships. It will also help the shelter to understand what services have helped women leave and what should be improved on.

Regards,  
Samantha van Schalkwyk.

I have read and understood what this study is about. I agree to take part in the study.

(please tick)

Name signed:

Date:

## **Appendix D:**

### **Letter of consent to women's shelter**

Dear...(shelter co-ordinator)

As previously discussed, I attach I copy of my research proposal for your use.

In addition to the ethical considerations included in the proposal, I would like to outline my commitments to your organisation, should I be involved in research at the centre.

Firstly, the utmost commitment will be to uphold the safety of the women concerned. I will acknowledge the women's rights to refuse, certain questions and to be able to turn of the tape recorder at any time during the interview. Also, the women will be informed that they will be able to withdraw from the study at any time.

Similarly, should you, or any of your colleagues feel that the research is harmful to your institution in any way, you will able to withdraw my access as a researcher. Any information about the home will remain confidential. The shelters name will be anonymous and will not be used in any write up of my research.

The centre will also have full access to my interview schedule. Copies of the final report will be given to the staff at the centre.

Finally, is my aim to generate knowledge that will be useful for your specific shelter as well as for shelter policies and practice in general. I also aim to contribute to general understandings of women abuse in South Africa.

Regards,

Samantha van Schalkwyk.

**Signature:**

Date:

## **Appendix E:**

### **Participant Information<sup>11</sup>**

#### **Participant 1: Beryl:**

Beryl is 45 years of age. She is a coloured woman from an area near Mitchell's Plein. She went to school in the same area and achieved an education level of grade 10. Beryl speaks both English and Afrikaans as home languages. She was married for 18 years and has 3 children. Her oldest child is from a previous relationship. Beryl has been at the shelter for one year and 11 months and it is her first time at a shelter<sup>12</sup>. She is an established member of the shelter 'community' who is staying at the second-stage accommodation. Prior to shelter stay she worked as a machinist at a factory and she now does odd jobs at the shelter such as general cleaning and catering. Her narrative is centred on the humiliation and pain of frequent incidences of sexual abuse at the hands of her partners. She was often coerced into engaging in sexual acts that went against her morals. Economic abuse was also a central feature of her narrative. Her fear of her partner was compounded by the fact that he had murdered three people. In her narrative she describes her relationship as being a slow build up of anger that in the end led to her 'wanting to kill her husband'. She managed this anger by leaving him. Looking toward the future, her goals are to start her own catering business when she moves out of the shelter. Beryl has a strong Christian religious base.

#### **Participant 2: Wendy:**

Wendy is a young coloured woman of 26 years of age. She has two children. Her home language is Afrikaans but she has a good English proficiency. She obtained an education level of grade 10. She left school as her mother died when she was very young and she could no longer afford the school fees. Her abusive relationship was seven years in duration. She was not married to her partner; he has another wife. At the time of the interview Wendy had been living at the shelter

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<sup>11</sup> These names are pseudonyms provided to ensure the women's anonymity

<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise specified, it is the woman's first visit to a shelter

for only three weeks. Prior to the shelter lived in the back of a bakkie in the garden of her partner's extended family (this included her partner's wife). She was destitute and had to move in with his family when she was on the streets. Wendy is registered at an agency that arranges jobs for her. Most of these employment opportunities include working in clothing factories or clothing stores. She was not currently working at the time of the interview. Her partner is abusing the drug tik. She describes the drug abuse as being the point when her 'good' relationship went 'downhill'. Also, she often blames the abuse on his drug problem. The relationship was characterized by severe physical and sexual abuse that often led to hospitalization. Her partner also had multiple affairs with other women. Her narrative shows ambivalence about getting back together with her partner. She constantly fluctuates between wanting to start her own life away from him and expressing hope or scenarios that depict them getting back together. She has no immediate family alive and therefore lacks this option of social support.

### **Participant 3: Fatima:**

Fatima is a coloured woman of 57 years of age. She has five children; none of them are living with her at the shelter. The duration of her marriage was 40 years. It is her second time at the same shelter. She was at the shelter for seven months on her first stay. Then she went back to her partner. Currently, on her second stay, she has been at the shelter for approximately nine months. She is staying in the second-stage housing. She has an education level of grade 4 and she speaks both English and Afrikaans. She was not currently working at the time of the interview. Prior to the shelter she was working as a domestic worker. At the shelter she does catering jobs as they become available. Her narrative paints a picture of ongoing, persistent emotional abuse at the hands of her partner, often in the form of false accusations, degradation, and strict surveillance. This abuse often led to her experiencing symptoms such as 'blackouts' that led to hospitalization. Also she describes experiences of ongoing attempts by the abuser to sabotage her employment, even though she was the only one who was working in the immediate family. A main concern in her narrative was the wellbeing of her disabled son as he is too old to live with her at the shelter (he is 31 years of age). She is a devout Moslem and she makes sense of many of her experiences by interpreting them through a religious lens. She also has a strong source of family support in

the form of brothers and stepsisters. A thread in her narrative is her self development that has flourished in the free environment of the shelter where she can, for the first time in her life, be herself. Fatima does however describe a pull back to the relationship that is due to her sense of duty as a wife. She describes how she will go back to the relationship and look after her husband if he is sick oneday.

#### **Participant 4: Mercia:**

Mercia is a 31 year old coloured woman. At the time of the interview she had been staying at the shelter for approximately three months. Her home language is English. She was married to her partner for six years and has three children. The eldest one is 11 years old and is from a previous relationship. One child is six years old and the baby is two years old. All three children were living with her at the shelter at the time of the interview. She achieved a grade nine education level. Mercia did not go back to school because of a drug overdose that left her like ‘a vegetable’. Her narrative indicates how she has used drugs as a mechanism to cope with the abuse. She is also preoccupied with her battle to stay off the drugs. Prior to shelter she worked as a casual at a toy store. She is not currently working. She is of Christian religion. Her daughter is experiencing a number of emotional difficulties due to sexual abuse at the hands of men and the exposure to her mother’s abuse. A concern for her daughter is a distinct feature of her narrative. She describes feelings of guilt as she blames herself for not being able to protect her daughter. Mercia experienced very brutal physical violence that often left severe injuries. Economic abuse is also a central feature of her narrative. She spoke about her dreams for her marriage faded away as the reality of their ‘party times’ took over. She describes a continual process of leaving and going back to her abuser over time. She often constructs the reason for going back as being, ‘for the kids. Her initial conception of the shelter was negative but during time she describes fitting in. Mercia especially enjoyed the training groups that took place at the shelter.

### **Participant 5: Maleka**

Maleka is a 38 year old black woman who comes from Khayelitsha in Cape Town. She was married to her partner for 11 years. She has two children who are both staying with her at the shelter. At the time of the interview they had been staying at the shelter for eight months and were at the second-stage housing. She did her schooling in the Eastern Cape where she received her matric certificate. She found out about the shelter through a 'friend of a friend' but before this was unaware of the existence of shelters. She was not working prior to the shelter as her husband would not allow her to obtain employment outside of the home. Currently she is working for a company but this involves doing odd jobs that usually only run for two days a week. Her home language is Xhosa but she has an excellent English proficiency. Maleka is a Christian. She describes her married life as being a constant move from one town to the next as her husband got relocated as a result of his job. Her relationship was characterized by her abuser having constant affairs which would often manifest themselves overtly by other women phoning him or him supporting other women financially. She describes the utter humiliation that she felt when her husband's girlfriends would dictate the amount of finances that she, his wife, could receive. Her husband was also extremely jealous and would control her movements outside of the home. Her married life was extremely patriarchal with her home life being structured around Maleka 'doing her duty' to serve her husband's needs. Her husband also had a serious drinking problem. Maleka describes her mother as being a stable source of support during her relationship as well as supporting her in her decision to leave.

### **Participant 6: Jolynn:**

Jolynn is a coloured, Muslim woman who is 36 years old. She has 4 children who are all staying with her at the shelter. Her home language is Afrikaans. Prior to coming to the shelter she lived in Mitchell's Plein. She has received her matriculation certificate. The duration of her relationship was 11 years. She has four children who are all staying with her at the shelter. At the time of the interview she had been staying at the shelter for approximately nine and a half months. This is her second time at a shelter. Four years ago she ran away to another shelter in Cape Town and then subsequently went back to her partner. She is currently employed as a

beader. A significant turn in Jolynn's life was when her parents died; this signified the end of the emotional support that she received from them. Her narrative describes a husband who was pathologically jealous and who constantly falsely accused her of sleeping with other men. He also constantly threatened her and used the young child to manipulate her. Her husband abused the drug tik. Jolynn expressed a deep gratitude at the end of the interview. She felt amazed that she was able to express something that she had not told anyone before (even after having been at the shelter for 10 months). This was a relief for her as well as an inspiring experience for us both.

### **Participant 7: Shaida:**

Shaida is a 36 year old coloured woman. Her home languages are both English and Afrikaans. Prior to coming to the shelter she stayed in the Manenberg area. At the time of the interview she had been at the shelter for nine months and two weeks. She was married to her abuser for 20 years. Shaida has five children, four of whom are currently staying with her at the shelter. She went to school in Manenberg where she received her matric. Prior to the shelter she was employed at a shop. She is not currently working. She does however do part time jobs that the shelter may organize for her. Shaida is a Moslem. Her abuser has a serious tik problem. Her narrative discussed disturbances and violence throughout the night for days at a time. Emotional and physical abuse was a consistent feature of her life. Her sister was her main source of social support during her process of leaving.

### **Participant 8: Noleen:**

The interview was conducted on the day that would have been Noleen's 17<sup>th</sup> Wedding anniversary with her husband. They were courting for three years before they got married. She is 44 years of age. She has two boys of 10 and 11 years old. She has an education level of grade nine. She had to leave school to go work as her mother died when she was 15 years old. The shelter organized Noleen a job at a food factory. At the time of the interview her stay at the shelter had almost reached three months. Her narrative describes a lifelong exposure to abuse. Her mother was abused by her father and Noleen was also abused by a number of male family

members. Infidelity was a common form of abuse described by Noleen. She also experienced many 'wild' fights with her partner and in one incident he almost killed her. She is a Christian. She converted to Islam for her husband but has now gone back to Christianity. Her narrative of her life prior to the shelter depicts a world that was dominated by others. She had to care for the very men that abused her when she was young. She also had to look after her abuser's mother for years while she was suffering from the consequences of a stroke. Noleen describes having no time for herself as she was always, for years, at the service of others. Noleen also describes a long battle with depression that began shortly after she was sexually abused by her father.

### **Transcript 9: Beth:**

Beth is a 30 year old coloured woman from Mitchell's Plein. She was not married to her partner but was in a relationship for 4 years. She has one child who is a year old and she is pregnant with another baby (At the time of interview she was seven months pregnant). She achieved a grade 10 education level. She is not currently working. Before coming to the shelter she was working at a children's crèche. At the time of the interview Beth had been at the shelter for approximately three months. This is her second time at a woman's shelter; a few months ago she stayed at another shelter in the area for approximately eight months. Her abuser abused drugs and alcohol and Beth describes that he often became violent when he did not have money for drugs. She has been cut off from her family for years and thus does not have any immediate forms of social support.

### **Participant 10: Kim:**

Kim is a 25 year old coloured lady from a low income area in the Southern Peninsula. Her home language is English. Kim was not married to her boyfriend and she describes this as a relief as she did not have to deal with the additional stresses of a divorce. She was in the relationship for five years. She has three children and the oldest child is from a previous relationship. She had been staying at the shelter for seven months at the time of the interview. She went to school up until the end of grade nine. Kim is currently not working. Prior to the shelter she worked as a waitress at a well established restaurant. Kim and her children live in the flatlets at the second-

stage division of the shelter. She found out about the shelter through a homeless shelter worker who referred her to the current shelter. She is a Christian. In her narrative, Kim discusses her partner's drug and alcohol problems and how his constant antisocial behaviours had a negative impact on her life and her children's lives. A major concern for Kim was her children's behaviour at the shelter. They often used to fight and bully the other children. This made life at the shelter extremely stressful for Kim as it resulted in arguments with other women and disciplinary meetings with the shelter staff. It also meant that Kim had to forfeit any job opportunities to stay at the shelter and watch her boys at all times. Her relationship with her children has however improved dramatically since she has moved into the shelter.

### **Participant 11: Mia:**

Mia is not married to her partner. The duration of her relationship was five years. She is 24 years of age and she has two children. The boy is six years old and the little girl is one year. The boy is from a previous relationship. Her narrative reflects her lifelong history of abuse. Her previous partner was also abusive and tried to kill her. Her most recent partner was highly physically violent and often stabbed her with knives. She was also raped by a stranger when she was 12 years old. She began to use drugs at a young age to help her cope with these traumas. She has received counseling for her addiction and describes herself as a recovering drug addict. She also suffers from severe anxiety and panic attacks. This is her second time at the shelter as she went back to her partner. A crucial component of her narrative is her struggle to deal with her son who has been severely emotionally disturbed as a result of witnessing the abuse and experiencing physical abuse at the hands of her most recent partner. She finds it difficult to connect with him and is destroyed by the fact that she feels he does not trust her. Her son's behavior problems are an issue of concern for herself and the shelter. She is currently working looking after the children at the shelter's crèche.

### **Participant 12: Rochelle:**

Rochelle was married to her abuser for 13 years. She is 36 years old and has three daughters. All of the girls are living with her at the shelter. At the time of the interview she had been living at

the shelter for just over five months and was based in a flatlet in the second stage housing. Rochelle has achieved a matriculation certificate. She was currently employed at the time of interview. She worked as an administration assistant at a government institution. Rochelle is a Christian. Her home language is English. She had a very negative initial conception of shelters. Her narrative reflected her acute sensitivity towards social stigmas regarding shelters and sheltering. She speaks of her past relationship as one that involved constantly leaving and going back to the abuser. She describes her relationship as being physically and emotionally violent, often with the children experiencing physical abuse at the hands of her partner. She also describes many incidents of forced sex. A common theme in her narrative was that of being thrown out of the house in the middle of the night and having to sleep on the streets. She discusses a lengthy battle with depression and anxiety, and suicidal tendencies that have arisen as a result of the violence. Her husband also had a serious drug problem and she discusses her concerns about exposing her children to this drug abuse.

**Participant 13: Farzana:**

Farzan has been married to her abuser for two years. They were courting for two years prior to their marriage. She is 33 years old and has two children. The youngest one is a baby of a few months old who is staying with her at the shelter. The baby is suffering physical consequences as a result of being beaten when Farzana was physically abused during pregnancy. This is a concern throughout her narrative as the baby has been in and out of hospital during her early stages at the shelter. Her level of education ends at grade 11. Prior to shelter she was working as a cleaner for the City Council. Currently she can't go back to work as her baby is too ill. Her religion is Moslem. She is very religious and finds meaning in religion which acts as the lens through which she interprets her experiences. At the time of the interview she had almost reached her three months mark at the first stage of the shelter and was worried about where she is going to move on to. Her home language is Afrikaans but she has a good English proficiency.

#### **Participant 14: Altoise:**

Altoise is a young coloured woman who was married to her abuser for seven years. This was her first abusive relationship. She has two children; one from each relationship. She is 44 years of age. Her narrative fluctuates between telling the story of her first abusive relationship and her most recent abusive relationship. She speaks about other (nonabusive) relationships that she has had in her life and how her utter lack of trust for men has turned these relationships sour. She describes her more recent abusive relationship as being characterized by severe jealousy and control on the part of the abuser. Altoise often got locked in her own home when the abuser went out by himself. She is currently working as an au pair. This is her second month at the shelter. Her education level extends to grade nine. She also suffered from severe depression in her abusive relationships; often thinking about attempting suicide. She describes leaving out of fear that her partner would kill her.

#### **Participant 15: Lillian:**

Lillian had to leave school in grade five to go and work. The duration of her relationship is 12 years. The fact that she was not married to her partner was a prominent concern in her narrative. She has three children, the first one was from a previous relationship. Verbal abuse was a common experience for Lillian with her partner often degrading her in front of other people. She also experienced extreme financial abuse as her husband limited the finances she obtained. This was so severe that she was often not even able to pay the children's school fees. Echoing through her narrative is her past feelings of loneliness and being cut of society when she was in the abusive relationship. This is her second time at a shelter. She stayed in a shelter a few years prior. She had been at the current shelter for almost a month at the time of the interview. A main concern for Lillian was the fact that she had to hand the children over to the abuser when she left as she did not have the finances to support them by herself. Her intense longing for her children reflects throughout her narrative. The fact that the children are staying with the abuser has resulted in him still having a level of control over her life. She is struggling with the abuser's presence that continues to hang over her life at this post-separation stage. Her narrative also

reflects a concern with trying to understand social dynamics and she examines herself in a reflexive way.

**Participant 16: Catherine:**

Catherine is a 26 year old white woman who comes from a low income area near Fishoek in the Southern Peninsula. She has a matric education level. At the time of the interview Catherine had been staying at the shelter for three and a half weeks. She has one baby of six months old who is with her at the shelter. She was with her husband for a year and a half before coming to the shelter. She stopped working when she got married to him and has not worked since. She occasionally works a temporary job at the shelter but these only last one or two days. Her religion is Christian. Her narrative indicates that her abusive marriage was characterized by economic, emotional and psychological abuse. Catherine describes her husband as being extremely controlling and a workaholic who pressurized her to always excel in her 'wifely duties'. She reflects a lot on her parent's relationship which was characterized by her father being extremely controlling. She also describes having a good friendship base that served as social support during time of need. She is a very religious person who also drew a source of strength and encouragement from her relationship with God.

## **Appendix F:**

### **Interview questions:**

#### **Biographical information:**

- Married/unmarried (If not married, are they living together?)
- Duration of relationship
- Age of participant
- Age of husband/partner
- Number of children
- Children currently living at shelter
- Area where living (before arrival at shelter)
- Participant level of education
- Current employment
- Current employment of husband/partner
- Home language
- Other languages
- Religion

#### **Interview questions**

The central research question of this study was how do women residing in a shelter experience leaving abusive relationships?

Theory Question 1: What are some of the challenges that women deal with when they go through the process of disengaging from an abusive relationship?

### **Interview Questions:**

1. Could you tell me about what brought you to the shelter?  
-how did you come to be here  
-why are you here?  
-what, do you think, is the main reason that you are here?
2. Could you tell me a bit more about your relationship with your partner?
3. What were the two most difficult things about leaving him?
4. How do you think you have coped with these challenges?  
-(ppt) could you give me an example of this?

Theory Question 2: Do the women experience any kinds of personal change/growth at this particular stage of their life?

### **Interview Questions:**

1. Overall, how do you feel about yourself now that you have left your partner?  
(ppt) can you say something more about that?
2. What would you say to help other women who are trying to leave abusive partners?

Theory Question 3: What role has the shelter played in facilitating this process of disengaging?

### **Interview Questions:**

3. Could you speak to me about your life at the shelter?  
(ppt.) paint me a picture.

4. What does being at the shelter mean for you?
5. How has being at the shelter helped you stay away from him? (if not directly answered by IQ7)
6. Would you do anything differently now that you have been at the shelter?  
(ppt) Do you have any more examples of this?

## Appendix F: Transcribing Conventions:

( <u>text</u> )	Name of person or place that has been omitted due to the respect of both the participants' and the shelter's right to anonymity.
<b>Bold Text</b>	Indicates a vocal emphasis made by the participant.
<i>(Italics text)</i>	The interviewers description/explanation.
(Plain text)	Additional word so that the reader can better understand the sentence/paragraph.
.....	Indicates a pause in speech. The longer the ellipses, the the longer the pause.
....<	Indicates that the line of speech has been interrupted by the other speaker.
(inaudible)	A word cannot be deciphered for transcription. This could due to auditory obstructions, soft speech or a poor quality sound patch.
(inaudible patch)	a few words cannot be deciphered for transcription. This could be due to auditory obstructions, soft speech or a poor quality sound patch.
(I: text)	Indicates a brief comment made by interviewer that occurs simultaneously with the participant's speech.

Fockin  
Wanna  
gonna

Certain words have modified spellings. This is due to the variation in pronunciations spoken by the participant.